

Jewish Education: Crisis and Vision

Jonathan Woocher

Imagine:

- The Samuels family is finishing its preparations for Shabbat dinner. The Kaplans and the Grants, their regular study partners in the synagogue Family Learning Experience program, will be arriving shortly. Nine-year-old Tammy is busily reviewing the worksheet on this week's Parashat Hashavuah, which the family worked on together Wednesday evening after supper. Twelve-year-old Brian is rehearsing the Kiddush, which he will chant this week. He also checks the notes he took on Tuesday at the community "Judaic learning center" at the JCC on the concept of *kedushah* in Judaism. The "Torah tutor" there had been a real help in suggesting some interesting questions he could ask about the different prayers and rituals that all have "KDSH" as part of their title. He hopes that his father's weekly class with some of the other lawyers and businessmen downtown hasn't covered this. In fact, he thinks he has enough interesting material to lead a minilesson at one of the monthly retreats where all of the families in the Family Learning Experience program come together. The doorbell rings and the Kaplan and Grant families come in, with Jessica proudly carrying the challot she baked at the synagogue after-school program.
- Steve Rubenstein looks up from the papers he's correcting. His 11th-grade class on Government and Politics will be arriving any minute. Today the class will be dealing with the clash between majority rule and minority rights. The excerpts from the *Federalist Papers*, several U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the Talmud, and two early medieval responsa are all ready to be distributed. There are a few phrases from the responsa that he may have to translate for the students, but otherwise they should be able to handle all of the texts fairly easily. When the new integrated, bilingual curriculum for social studies, literature, and *machshavah* (that really sounded better than "philosophy") was introduced four years ago at the Bernstein Hebrew Academy, there was a lot of skepticism, but Steve was a true believer. Of course, it wasn't easy for him

to learn how to teach it well. But when the Academy recruited him (after he received his M.A. in political science), they promised that the special training program supported by the Kravitz Foundation would provide both the academic background and ongoing supervision he needed, and it had. Being part of a team with other teachers in other cities using the curriculum, and spending the whole summer together with them in Israel, also made a real difference. The school was certainly pleased; enrollment was at an all-time high.

- When Betsy, Shoshana, Nancy, and Rina are settled on the bus they begin to jabber, mostly in English, but with a little Hebrew thrown in. Three weeks ago they didn't even know each other, other than through computer messages sent back and forth between youth groups. This trip to Israel was working out just as the group leaders had hoped. The kids were mixing well, though it was a shame the American teenagers didn't speak Hebrew better. But meeting face to face and traveling through Israel together certainly made the "twinning" project come alive. The Israeli teenagers are full of questions about American Jewish life that are challenging the American participants. They give as good as they get, however, thanks to the seminar they all took on Israel and Contemporary Jewish Identity. Of course, nothing could compare to the impact of Israel itself, and the Israeli and American *madrichim* were all skilled at maximizing that impact. The American youngsters would have a lot to contribute when they returned to their community service assignments, and they were already looking forward to working on the program for the visit the Israeli teenagers would be paying them during winter break.
- Jeff Siegel dumps his schoolbooks and sits down in front of his computer, with its attached videodisk player. He has only 45 minutes before soccer practice, but he wants to finish the "trip" they started in Rabbinics class at the day school today. The class is studying *mishnayot* dealing with Sukkot, and the teacher has started them looking through the material stored on the videodisk showing how the holiday has been observed throughout the ages. Jeff is especially interested in the pictures and stories about the sukkah itself. When his family puts up this year's sukkah next Sunday, he will have lots of improvements to suggest. Even though he is far from the hardest-working student in the class, he has to admit that the new "hypermedia" system almost makes studying fun. This disk on the holidays has so much information, he could never explore it all: There are passages from the Bible, Midrash, Talmud, and other rabbinic writings, including commentaries, of course; pictures of all sorts (even cartoons); stories, games, quizzes—the best thing being that he can control it all! Or maybe it is controlling him? Last night he'd wanted to review some of the laws of the lulav and etrog for the test on Friday, and before he knew it, he was looking at pictures of beautiful etrog holders from different countries where Jews had lived. It was like having a museum at home.

—The synagogue parking lot looks almost like the High Holidays. It's the first Sunday of the month again, and that means Community Day. The congregants and their children are familiar with the routine. The different corners of the auditorium are marked with signs: the cantor will be teaching a new tune for *musaf* in one; the rabbi will be telling a Hasidic story in a second; one of the congregants is preparing the projector to show slides from his trip to Eastern Europe and Israel; in the fourth, materials are set up to make challah covers. Adults and children intermingle, picking a corner for the day's first activity. Forty minutes later the announcement is made: it's time to go to study groups. Now the participants divide up by age groups—the children and adults have their own “classes,” though they often study the same material. Today, the theme for Community Day is Tzedakah. Later, it's time for the community meetings. Although the younger children aren't involved, everyone age 12 or above is entitled to attend one of the meetings. Today, as usual, several of the synagogue committees will be meeting. There will also be a special meeting of the synagogue Tzedakah collective to discuss how to allocate the money it has collected this year. Having the meeting as part of the Community Day gives everyone a greater sense of involvement, and having young people there seems to make the discussions “a lot more Jewish.” As the parking lot empties again, the Community Day planning committee sits down to lunch to ask, “What do we do next?”

Are these visions of the future of American Jewish education? Fragments, perhaps, yet these fragments and others we might add to them point toward a vision that is more than the sum of its parts. It is the vision of a holistic pattern and structure of lifelong Jewish learning, a seamless continuum of educational experiences that fit naturally into the life of the Jew and of the Jewish community. In this vision Jewish education is not merely an instrumental means toward some other end, such as Jewish survival, but what Jewish tradition has always seen it to be: a self-validating goal, an intrinsically rewarding activity that constitutes the very core of Jewish living. In this vision Jewish education takes place not only in schools, but in the home, the synagogue, community centers, in Israel, alone in front of computer screens, and with others at meetings and on trips.

This vision is not unfamiliar today. Yet we must admit that we are still far from fulfilling it, at least in the lives of most American Jews. Jewish education is for the majority an intermittent, indifferently pursued avocation of uncertain impact. We invest in it heavily, yet are skeptical in valuing and evaluating it. It mostly serves the young, and only occasionally their elders. Jewish education is by no means the abject failure it is sometimes presumed to be. Indeed, I would argue that the quality of education available to American Jews—young people and adults—has never been higher. Yet Jewish education is not the shining beacon of success it might and should be, given the dollars we spend on it, the creativity of the people involved in it, or our professions of commitment to it.

If there is a crisis of Jewish education today, it is a crisis of unfulfilled potential. Many today do have a glimmering that Jewish education could be, should be, something much more than it is. I am not among those who believe that American Jewish education stands on the brink of catastrophe. But I am very much among those who feel the frustration of the “not yet” and the “what might be.” The fragments of a vision that I shared above are within reach. The question is, How do we reach them? What will it take to transform present vision into future reality?

Three things are required: First, there is the vision itself. It must be sufficiently clear, broad, and compelling for us to mobilize our energies around it. “Without vision a people perishes.” Without a shared vision of what we want Jewish education to be, Jewish education will remain sadly ineffectual, with islands of excellence surrounded by a sea of uncertain achievement. Second, there must be an honest analysis of where we are and what holds us back from reaching our vision. What accounts for the variegated landscape of Jewish education today? Why do we continue to fall so far short of our potential? Finally, there is the need for a strategy of change. Even a cursory reading of the literature of American Jewish education confirms Koheleth’s observation: There is nothing (or at least little) new under the sun. Both the cries for change and the elements of a vision of where to go have long been with us. How, this time, do we make sure that change actually takes place?

Though I cannot provide definitive answers to all these questions, I offer some observations, primarily about where we are in Jewish education today, in the hope that others can tie them securely to a powerful vision and a potent strategy for change.

All three requirements—vision, analysis, and strategy—are interwoven, because what we are really talking about are the body, mind, and soul of contemporary American Jewry. If we can understand ourselves—who we are, why we are what we are, where we can go—we will have our answers. It is perhaps a truism, but worth stating clearly: The problems of Jewish education in America today are primarily problems of American Jewry itself. In its strengths and weaknesses, Jewish education is a reflection of Jewish society, of how American Jews define themselves and of what they want for themselves and their children. Not Jewish education alone, but the Jewish community must change if any bold vision of what education might be is to be realized.

Is there, can there be, an American Jewish community and culture in which Jewish education “makes sense”? That is the central issue for Jewish education today. Education cannot function in a vacuum. It requires a community and a culture to nurture and sustain it with more than the provision of material and financial resources, though they are surely important. Education also requires a community and a culture from which to draw its mandate and goals. Who empowers our teachers to teach? Who will tell them what is important to transmit, and will guarantee that they will not be embarrassed (if they are successful) by

students who conclude that what they have been taught is in fact worthless? Education requires a living community that can share with it the dual tasks of enculturation and instruction, of initiation into a group and its way of life, and of transmission of the knowledge, skills, practices, and attitudes that enable one to function effectively and satisfyingly within the group.¹ Education requires a community and a culture in which one lives out and tests what one has learned. Where the testing reveals a gap between the ideal and the real, education requires a community prepared to be critiqued and transformed, to say, as we are told God once did, “My children have bested me!”

It should be obvious that what Jewish education most sorely lacks today is precisely the vibrant community in which visionary education can be meaningfully and successfully pursued. There is nothing original in this diagnosis. Yet I am not sure that we take it seriously enough as we examine the litany of shortcomings in our educational system today. Virtually all of the oft-cited symptoms of the contemporary “crisis” of American Jewish education are attributable largely to the lack of a vibrant Jewish community. Whether it be the lack of clear educational goals, the confused state of curriculum, the absence of standards for achievement, the short span and limited hours of instruction, the persistent shortage of quality personnel, or the self-destructive fragmentation of the educational system itself—all of the ills besetting Jewish education today can ultimately be traced back to the fact that it too often floats in a vacuum, with no community prepared to embrace it, shape it, use it, and be permeated and transformed by it in order to pursue *its* Jewish vision and vocation as a community.

Confused Educational Goals

If Jewish education is vague, unfocused, and often over-ambitious in its goals, it is primarily because those concerned—parents, professionals, institutional leaders, religious authorities—can rarely agree on what is important to achieve. What do we want our educational efforts to produce: A Jew who prays? One who can speak Hebrew as well as an Israeli? One who can read a *blatt* of Gemara? One who will give to the UJA? One who won’t intermarry? All of the above, or none of the above? Without consensually validated goals education becomes a medium of mixed messages, and nothing gets accomplished.

Curricular Confusion

Since we are not sure why we teach, it is no wonder that we are not sure what to teach. The day is short, and the work is great. Shall we try a smorgasbord approach, a little Hebrew, a little Bible, a little history, and a few religious concepts and skills? Shall we aim for mastery of one area? But which one, and how to do it in a few hours a week? What will truly serve the needs and wants of our students, of their families, of our institutions? Are those needs and wants the same for each group?

Low Standards

What expectations does the community set for an “educated Jew”? That he or she be able to perform at a bar or bat mitzvah without causing embarrassment to self, family, or community? That expectation, virtually the only one ever enforced, is usually met. But the lack of any other expectation means that there is no effort to measure achievement. Hence, Jewish education operates without standards.

Short Span and Limited Hours

Jewish education is by and large elementary education because apparently nothing further is needed to function as a Jewish adult. Jewish education is important, but so are many other things that seem to relate far more directly to being a mature, competent, fulfilled human being. Since adults seem to get along quite well without much involvement in Jewish education, the closer we get to adulthood, the less of it we evidently need.

The Personnel Shortage

One can make a decent living as a full-time Jewish educator, but why would one want to? Educators are not community leaders; they appear rarely on podiums; their advice is not sought on important issues; they work all day with children. Meanwhile, too many educators cut themselves off from the community they serve. They are knowledgeable Jews; the community is comprised of *am haratzim*. Best to be left alone to do one’s job, free from the meddling of board members and parents. Until one finds oneself being asked to leave.

Institutional Fragmentation

Jewish education belongs not to the Jewish community, but to the institutions that provide it, and they can be jealous owners indeed. In a fragmented community, Jewish education cannot help being fragmented, too. Countless opportunities for reinforcement, for sharing, for creating a powerful “plausibility structure,” a social base for Jewish education are lost because we cannot get our act together.

To be sure, the fraying of the thread that should tie Jewish education to the active life of a sustaining community is not the sole problem. But the weakness of that link, and especially the inability of Jewish education to ally itself with an adult world in which education is visibly valued, is the Achilles’ heel of Jewish education today. “The crisis in American Jewish education,” writes Sheldon Dorph, “consists in this very loss of an educated adult Jewish community and life-style. . . . Without such an image of cultural and communal Jewish adulthood, the direction, purposes, and methods of Jewish education—schooling or otherwise—become unclear.”² Barry Chazan suggests “there is no general con-

ception of what a graduate of American Jewish education should know or do, beyond the sense that he/she should 'feel Jewish.'³ The Jewish community provides no clear, consensual model of Jewish adulthood that embraces more than this same minimum.

This is perhaps too harsh and too general an accusation. Positive examples of Jewish living can be found outside the school's walls, and it is to Jewish education's discredit that it has failed to take greater advantage of them. And there are subcommunities in which Jewish education is tangibly valued, and even rewarded. There are places where the ethos and worldview that Jewish education seeks to instill receive validation and support. But these contexts are frequently limited, isolated, and at times lacking in respect for one another.

Until recently, the settings for Jewish living—the home, the synagogue, communal institutions—have either failed to acknowledge or lacked the competencies to undertake an educative mission. Thus Jewish education has been thrown back on its own resources, and these inevitably have proven inadequate to fulfill what must ultimately be the task of an entire community and a thriving culture. As a result, Jewish education remains a kind of stopgap, thrown into the breach by a community uncertain of its future in order to stem the tide of assimilation, but never able to exert its full life-transforming, life-enriching potential.

But isn't this just what most American Jews want? The answer is largely yes. As Susan Shevitz has argued in analyzing why there is a perpetual personnel crisis in Jewish education,⁴ and as Ronald Reynolds has demonstrated in assessing the effectiveness of supplementary schools,⁵ the Jewish education we get is more or less the Jewish education we want—unthreatening to accustomed values and life-styles, institutionally sustaining, a benign endeavor limited in its impact. Nor is this analysis applicable only to the supplementary school. Are people eager to see the day schools produce dramatic behavioral and attitudinal changes? How many parents want their child's trip to Israel to result in a commitment to aliyah? For all of the popular denigration of Jewish education (it is difficult to find Jewish adults with anything nice to say about their own Hebrew school experience), surveys indicate that the vast majority of parents are pleased with the Jewish education their children receive.

Does this mean that there is no hope for substantial change? We have suggested that the reform of Jewish education rests on the transformation of Jewish society. But how else can we initiate and steer a self-conscious process of social transformation except through education itself? The limitations of Jewish education—especially the fact that it is largely pediatric and divorced from the realities of community life—define the very conditions that education must itself change. The community and culture that Jewish education needs to be effective do not yet exist; hence, Jewish education must create them. Yet, afloat without the necessary community and culture, education lacks the power to be a generative force. We seem to have come to a Gordian knot we cannot cut through.

Perhaps. But the ends of this knot are already beginning to unravel. For the paradox I have described—that the transformation of Jewish education can be effected only by a Jewish community itself transformed by education—is becoming increasingly evident to many in positions of educational and communal leadership. The diagnosis is now readily accepted, and even the desired treatment is widely agreed upon. What is required to initiate the therapeutic process is a suspension of disbelief, an act of faith, if you will. We must act as if there were a vibrant community and culture ready to support a visionary model of Jewish education. We must behave as if Jewish education were an unquestioned end in itself, a multifaceted, never-ending spectrum of experiences, taking place wherever Jews are working, playing, or living. We must, in short, act as if we already are what we hope to become.

This is possible, I would suggest, because Jewish education already involves a massive suspension of disbelief for many American Jews. We will join synagogues in order to enroll our children in Sunday school, though we are confident we have no need of a synagogue for ourselves. We will start performing rituals at home we have never done before and aren't even sure we believe in, because we think our children should experience them. We will pay hefty tuitions to send our children to day schools to learn texts we can't understand and may not care to, because we think it makes them—and us—better Jews. To be sure, we rarely act out of pure motives. The reservations, hesitations, and limitations are there, but so too are the commitment, and at some level the openness, to yet further possibilities of engagement.

The American Jewish community of today is not the community of 50, 25, or even 10 years ago. It is a community with more Jewish day schools, more Jewish preschools, more JCCs involved in Jewish education, more young people traveling to Israel, more American-born and American-educated teachers, more federation dollars being expended on Jewish education. Perhaps these changes have taken place because of fear—fear of intermarriage, fear of assimilation, fear of loss of identity. Perhaps these changes are not even effective in fighting against those things we fear! What these changes do provide, however, is the spur for a communal and cultural transformation that may never have been consciously intended, but that might, with a little gentle prodding, acquire a momentum of its own.

There is a public agenda for Jewish education in America today. That agenda has not emanated from a single deliberative process, nor can it be implemented in a comprehensive, coordinated fashion. It is being articulated in diverse places by diverse groups and individuals: by professional educators, by federation study committees, by national bodies, and by local activists. The breadth of interest in this agenda in itself holds the promise of fashioning a public for Jewish education more encompassing than we have seen before. What is more, each of the elements of this agenda points beyond the Jewish education

enterprise in its narrow sense. It *is* an agenda for community transformation, not just educational reform. It cannot be effected by educators alone, and those who are advancing it understand this. Nor can it be effected solely by changing educational institutions—and this too is understood. If this agenda can be successfully implemented over the next decade or so, then what was imagined at the beginning of this essay might well become commonplace, and far bolder, more exciting visions can emerge to fire our imaginations and aspirations.

The agenda I see being widely articulated today has five components:

1. Expanding the educational canvas.
2. Extending the educational life-cycle.
3. Establishing educational accountability.
4. Developing new human resources.
5. Creating a true Jewish educational system.

Expanding the Educational Canvas

Education is not the business of schools alone. Today's agenda has embraced the concept of expanding the educational canvas to include a range of settings and methods. "Formal" and "informal" education are now widely accepted as necessarily complementary elements in a total educational experience. Increasingly, the educative potential even of institutions whose primary purpose is not educational—a Soviet Jewry committee, an old-age home—is being recognized and affirmed.

A by now commonplace effort is underway to broaden the scope of Jewish education and to involve more actors in its implementation. Though some may, not without justification, bemoan the loss of rigor implicit in defining almost any Jewish experience or activity as "Jewish education," the sacrifice will be worthwhile if education is again seen as part of the fabric of community life. Jewish education can take place at a ball game, or at a demonstration, or during the synagogue service, or at a museum, or through a film. As long as the unique contribution the school can make is also recognized and endorsed, Jewish education has far more to gain than to fear from an expansion of educational opportunities.

New settings and approaches need not undermine traditional educational forms and methods. In matters of Jewish identification, the rule in recent decades has been "the more, the more," that is, the more Jewishly identified and active a person is along one dimension (for example, in religious life), the more likely it is that he or she will be identified and active along other dimensions as well (for example, in support of Israel). There is reason to believe that the same holds true for Jewish education: the broader the educational canvas, and the more accessible the educational experience, the more likely it is that those who become involved in one rewarding experience will seek out others.

Extending the Educational Life-Cycle

Increasing the number of settings where Jewish education takes place will have its maximum impact only if the range of Jewish involvement in educational experiences also increases. This means, above all, extending the educational life-cycle—a primary objective on the current agenda for Jewish education. There are already signs of significant growth in early-childhood education, and a new emphasis on education programs for teenagers, families, and adults. The aim of this effort should be clear: to build a full continuum of educational experiences, utilizing the complete range of settings and methods available to us.

The development and expansion of programs for segments of the Jewish population that are rarely involved in Jewish education is a synergistic process. Each element can build on and reinforce the others. New options for young children can draw their parents into the educational system. Family learning can inspire adults to intensify their own studies. The model of adults who take Jewish learning seriously can give a new cachet to Jewish educational programs for teenagers. Building a cradle-to-grave educational system, and recruiting substantial numbers of participants for it, is a massive undertaking requiring unprecedented combinations of educational, Judaic, and marketing expertise. But even the acceptance of this as our goal represents an enormous step beyond the too-common conception of Jewish education as a vaccine given to the young to protect them against the disease of “assimilationitis.” As we struggle to extend the educational life-cycle, we will inevitably transform the institutions to which Jews of various ages are attached.

Establishing Educational Accountability

In recent years the American Jewish community has tended to invest Jewish education with the awesome responsibility of insuring the continuity of Jewish life. It has rarely, however, sought to hold educational institutions accountable for achieving demonstrable results in this respect. That is fortunate, since what is being asked of education is (at least today) far beyond its capacity to deliver. But the concept of accountability, which is now beginning to find its way into the vocabulary of Jewish education, should by no means be discarded. On the contrary, if a serious effort can be made to establish objectives for which educational institutions and programs will be held accountable, and if agreement can be reached on measurements of success or failure, Jewish education will have a far greater chance of achieving those objectives.

Accountability implies that there is a community prepared to set educational objectives and to insist on their realization. For any institution, undertaking a process of goal-setting and accountability is both a community-building and consciousness-raising venture. Educators should welcome and encourage such a process. It can only increase understanding of the problems educators face and validate their efforts to create quality programs with serious standards of achievement.

Developing New Human Resources

The fourth item on the public agenda for Jewish education has for decades been a staple of prescriptions for improvement: increasing the numbers and improving the quality of the people involved in education. Today we still hear of the need to recruit more teachers and administrators; the importance of enhancing professional training; the demand to provide better salaries and benefits; the call to restructure positions to create more opportunities for full-time employment in Jewish education.

All of these important components have proved frustratingly difficult to implement in the past. But now two other elements have been attached to the agenda that are, if not entirely new, then at least potentially newly significant. The first is a new interest in the role and contribution of the "avocational" educator. No one suggests that Jewish education can do without a larger cadre of talented, trained, committed professionals. Yet, if we are faithful to our vision of a far more pervasive educational endeavor, it is difficult to imagine how all the new roles could possibly be filled exclusively by professionals. Nor would this necessarily be desirable. The presence of those who are not professional educators can advance the goal of bringing education into a more organic relationship with the community it seeks to permeate.

Some, undoubtedly, will see this as a particularly suspicious form of lemonade making. Stuck with a shortage of trained professionals, we will now make a virtue out of the necessity of making do with amateurs. I would suggest, however, that we not rush to judgment. Amateurs who bring a genuine love of Jewish learning and teaching to their avocational work can also master the skills requisite for success without becoming full-fledged professionals. The challenge is to turn what is now indeed a sad necessity into a planned desideratum—the carefully structured and supervised involvement of large numbers of caring Jews in the work of teaching and guiding other Jews. Creating an educational system of, by, and for the Jewish people without sacrificing standards of performance will be difficult, but beleaguered professionals should welcome new allies.

The second new element is the creation of a lay leadership cadre for Jewish education. Lay people have, of course, always been involved in educational decision making and governance. An honest appraisal of their role and impact, however, must conclude that Jewish education has belonged primarily to its professional practitioners. Whether through abdication or disempowerment, lay involvement in Jewish education has been primarily custodial, rather than substantive. Those involved have constituted a relatively small elite, frequently isolated from other leadership segments in the community. The parochial atmosphere of much of Jewish education has further discouraged the involvement of many powerful and prestigious volunteers. Jewish education has suffered grievously as a result.

It is critical that lay leadership assume ownership of Jewish education—if not as sole proprietors, then at least as partners. To exercise a constructive role,

they too will need training. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the need to recruit a new group of volunteer leaders who will lend their energies and resources to that endeavor is not misplaced. For educators, this is a valuable opportunity to mold and mobilize a leadership cadre that will be truly conversant with educational issues and will assume responsibility for the achievements of the system.

Creating a Jewish Educational System

Jewish education today is a system without order, without interdependence, without coordination. That is to say, it is no system at all. It is a collection of parts that generally do not work together, that even at times work at cross purposes. The flow of resources is not planned or organized in a rational fashion. A child may attend a school, a camp, a youth program, and an Israel trip—even ones sponsored by the same denominational movement—and experience virtually no connection among them. The asystemic character of Jewish education is not limited to programming. There is no coordinated mechanism for dealing with personnel needs—recruitment, training, and placement; for disseminating educational information and resources; for funding or evaluating new projects.

In this, of course, Jewish education once again mirrors the community in which it is embedded. This dysfunctional state of affairs is now becoming evident to those fashioning Jewish education's agenda. Coordinated and systematic action is necessary if we are to expand the educational canvas, extend the life-cycle, establish accountability, and develop new human resources. Slowly but surely, those who have thus far been concerned with education only as it has been expressed within their individual institutions are beginning to talk to one another. They are recognizing that no single institution or set of institutions has the ability to carry out the full range of tasks required to reinvigorate Jewish education.

Plans resulting from new ventures in community-wide educational planning are not necessarily promising. The plans are noteworthy, but by themselves plans change nothing. Rather, it is the creation of a new community constituency for Jewish education that makes change conceivable. The effort to plan together can itself generate a more cohesive, united community, one which may discover that Jewish education is both the vehicle for its communality and the focus of it.

Are the ideas laid out here a vision, or pure fantasy? The historical record of Jewish educational reform in America warrants a healthy skepticism about the prospects for genuine transformation. Clifford Geertz has compared maintaining religious faith to hanging a picture on a nail driven into its own frame. Perhaps my suggestion that current efforts to strengthen Jewish education can induce the communal and cultural transformation that in turn can enable the educational changes to take hold is such a vain hope.

I am convinced that at least two major caveats are in order: First, major transformation is impossible unless we recognize explicitly the depth and dimen-

sions of the transformation required and accept no less as our goal. We can initiate a process more far-reaching than we intended, but luck and good intentions cannot complete it. The character of our community will determine the effectiveness of our education—it is the community, and not the educational system alone, that must be changed.

Second, the process of transformation must eventually touch many thousands, perhaps millions of Jews who today have no part and little interest in the efforts under way. I don't believe that we shall ever see the day when all, nearly all, or even a substantial portion of American Jews live what we might define as full Jewish lives. But there will have to be a solid minority of Jews actively participating in the community and culture of American Jewry. I do not pretend to know how many are required—how many families must study together, how many students must attend day high schools, how many synagogues must revitalize their educational programs, how many young people must experience Israel in a profound way—but I know that it is many more than we have today. We should not, however, despair at this prospect. Three-quarters of our children already receive some Jewish education at some point during their youth. That is surely a base large enough on which to build.

Despite these caveats, I remain cautiously optimistic. I believe that having successfully fought the struggle for adjustment and (thus far at least) the struggle for survival, American Jewry is ready for a new challenge, the challenge of creating a true Jewish community and culture. What we envision for Jewish education and what we do to realize that vision are at the heart of this challenge. If we will it, it need not remain merely a vision.

A Response

Kathy Green

In responding to Jonathan Woocher's essay, I would like to focus attention on two obviously interdependent areas. These constitute the overarching concern of all of us who think about Jewish education: first, the absence of an ideology, philosophy, or theology to provide a *raison d'être* for non-Orthodox Jewish education, and second, non-Orthodox Jewish education's relationship to the larger Jewish community of which it is a part.

The vignettes that introduce Woocher's essay bring home the sense that Jewish education may well wither in the 21st century as a result of boredom. The problem is lack of passion. Involvement in Jewish educational experiences is nice, professionally structured, and generally child-centered. Woocher details experiences that reflect tremendous achievements in competence, albeit without passion. One never has the sense that, to recall some past models, learning or study can be an expression of intimacy (as in the *yeshivahs* described by Samuel Heilman), an act of subversion or defiance (either of ancient Rome or modern Russia), a manifestation of communion with the sacred (as described in rabbinic and kabbalistic sources), or even a strategy for repairing the universe or bringing messianic redemption (as seen in kabbalistic and Hasidic sources). Woocher's vision of 21st-century Jewish education, though practiced with profound professional *élan*, seems emasculated, bereft of significant root meaning, devoid of passion.

Perceiving a need for rationale, we search for passionate meaning. We realize that orthodoxies (whether religious, Zionist, secularist, communist, or whatever) benefit from the ability to evolve systems of logical consistency. Orthodoxies, whether led by a Lubavitcher rebbe or Vladimir Jabotinsky, have the advantage of being able to supply ready answers to questions that begin with "why." Such systems tend to provide a critique of the present situation, offer a method for salvation, and identify enemies who stand in the way.

We who stand outside of orthodoxies are both the beneficiaries and the victims of our embrace of ambiguity and ambivalence. As Jews we are challenged to create nonfundamentalist ideologies, to evolve a sense of nonfanatical mission that includes our commitment to the Jewish educational enterprise.

We are sometimes told that funding agencies understand Jewish education as a tool, an instrument for Jewish survival. Let us be very clear about what such

a phrase means. Were we to try to list the five most powerful agents for survival of Jews as Jews, Jewish education per se might very well not find a significant position on the list. Surely anti-Semitism would. Though obviously not recommending anti-Semitism we wonder: at its most cost effective, is Jewish education the most efficient tool for Jewish survival?

It seems clear that this Jewish survival is cultural and that what is being sought are Jewish schools that socialize children to communal norms and traditions, thus trying to insure the survival of cultural symbols and institutions within the community. That is why our schools tend to reflect mainstream social values and why, as Norman Newberg and others have observed, our schools aim for mediocrity and achieve it.

It is currently in vogue to speak of schools as agents for change. This potential mandating of educators as change agents is fraught with difficulty and imbued with exciting potential. As Sherry Israel has pointed out, our teachers' professional training has not prepared them either as change agents in the adult community or as family educators. In fact, Israel has noted, teachers often self-select because of their talent in interacting with children, not because they are skilled in talking to adults. Even if the problems of recruiting and training change agents could be overcome, an even greater challenge would remain: change to what? Surely we can advocate change to increased Jewish (and Hebrew) literacy, for such advocacy is about as controversial as was advocating motherhood and apple pie in the 1950s. Given the effort necessary to achieve basic literacy, such advocacy is merely lip service, not unlike sedentary people's commitment to exercise. If the basic change we advocate is to increase commitment, is that commitment to Judaism? to God? to the Jewish people?

What we seek is passionate vision, which, of course, need not necessarily be "religious" or find expression in theological language. Of course, we are acquainted with secular dreams of Jewish renewal (from Yiddishists, Hebraists, Socialists, Labor Zionists, and so on), but it seems much more likely that Jewish secular vision can survive in Israel than in the United States.

Those of us who stand outside of orthodoxies in the United States seek redefinition, new visions, renewed connections to old passions. We look to our collective past for inspiration. Our rabbis taught that the world survives on three pillars: Torah, *avodah* (prayer), and *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). The genius of this statement becomes apparent when we realize the social context from which it emerged. While seeing themselves as receivers of Torah, the rabbis were confronted by the need to redefine Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and the termination of temple sacrifices. While in no way negating the importance of *avodah* and of *gemilut chasadim*, they located the central devotional act of Judaism in talmud-Torah. I would venture that in different historical periods, one or another of these three pillars has dominated as the metaphor defining the age. Very recently in America we were defined as a religion, one of the three great denominations: Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. The

larger American society told us that the most acceptable mode of expression for our Judaism was prayer, worship in the church of our choice.

Even more recently we have seen our sense of extended peoplehood and of our somehow extended citizenship in a Jewish state manifested both in our concern for Israel in 1967 and in our intense reactions to the Law of Return and who is a Jew issue in 1988. We have also seen the development, so well catalogued by Woocher, of American Jewish civil religion most readily found at home in our federations, where we hear articulated commitment to values of *gemilut chasadim*.

What do these observations about American Jewish life tell us about our relationship to Torah, *avodah* or *gemilut chasadim*? Ironically enough, our communities' commitment to supporting Jewish education even at its worst reflects our primal, residual memory of the importance and power of learning, of talmud-Torah.

Also ironically, some of the strongest elements of our heritage serve to create barriers for Jews today. We are a people of memory, of tribal memory, but the tales and wisdom of our ancestors are no longer passed on primarily by communal elders. They are preserved in print. The history of our triumphs and tragedies, our encounters with the sacred, our responsibilities and our techniques for fulfilling our obligations, our poetry and our pilpul, all have been written down. This vast treasure trove is closed to most American Jews because they cannot read Hebrew. This barrier leads Jewish adults to express their Jewish commitments where their education and talents can be appreciated and where their Jewish literacy is not an issue: in the board rooms of federations, in *gemilut chasadim*.

We are currently witnessing the growth of non-Orthodox day schools. There is not yet enough data to allow accurate speculation as to the potential influence of this small but better-educated element of our population. We must acknowledge that day schools are plagued by problems in recruiting qualified Jewish studies teachers. We might dream, however, given this cadre of day school graduates and given immigration from Israel to the United States, of a growing, bilingual segment of our population, a segment capable of dreaming in Hebrew.

We are not pressured to develop a learning theory; Piaget and others have done that for us. We *are* compelled to develop an ethic for Jewish living that includes study. We are compelled to evolve a new theology of talmud-Torah, paralleling the creativity with which the rabbis responded to the end of their hopes of rebuilding the Temple in 135 C.E. Gershom Scholem has told us that these early rabbinic thinkers reinterpreted their relationship with revelation to include all new rabbinic dialogues and debates as somehow having been revealed at Sinai. Thus they understood themselves not as creating new interpretations, but rather as discovering old. They forged a living link with Sinai that was solidified in the process of study as sacred act. Our task is to redefine, to articulate

a new theology of talmud–Torah, not purely as an instrument for survival, but as a response to our adult needs. Only when the passion for Jewish learning and participating burns in adults can there be a flame to pass to our children. Understand that the educational needs of children are very different from those of adults, but the need for passion spans the generations. We respond in developmentally appropriate ways to the needs of children, but our task is not simply to develop more effective techniques for socializing our children. The future of Jewish education rests on our dreaming of new ways of standing in dynamic relationship to our heritage and the sacred while seeking to be most fully human.

Our task is not saving Judaism but rather saving ourselves as Jews. Our task is no less challenging than that which confronted our ancestors in the first and second centuries of the common era.

For us to imagine Jewish education in the 21st century means that we must dream, and out of our dreams weave myths that give meaning to our learning and studying.

A Response

Joseph Reimer

At the heart of Jonathan Woocher's convincing presentation lies his linking of the problems of Jewish education in America today with the problems of American Jewry and the insistence that "the Jewish community must change if any bold vision of what education might be is to come to realization." For, as Mordecai Kaplan once argued, it is not schools, but communities that educate. Jewish education can be only as powerful and effective as the sponsoring community allows and wishes it to be.

Central to formulating the Jewish education of the future are the questions, for what and for whom? As my fellow respondent, Kathy Green, addresses "for what," I will address "for whom." Who are the "students" whom Jewish education addresses? How broadly shall we conceive the clientele for these educational services?

Woocher argues elegantly for why we need to abandon a "pediatric" conception of Jewish education in favor of a "life-cycle" conception. What I wish to add is some background to his argument and some consideration of what it means to adopt that conception.

One salient fact about the clientele is the concentration of students in the 8–13-year age range. Jewish education is primarily education for the young; it is pediatric in that sense. And while it is a blessing that a majority of American Jewish children get some form of Jewish education, it is alarming to realize how precipitously participation in any form of Jewish education falls off from age 13 through the rest of the life cycle.⁶

Of the many reasons for this pattern of participation and withdrawal, I wish to focus on two. The first is a historical factor: the origins of the supplementary school movement in the earlier part of this century during the period of the great migration. Following Margaret Mead,⁷ I wish to suggest that it is common in immigrant society for education to be identified with schooling for the young. The assumption behind this identification is that whereas adult immigrants will remain as they are—part foreign and part new world—the children represent the future. They are the ones who can become more wholly assimilated into the new culture, and insofar as that is a desired outcome, schooling is viewed as the means to the end. Since the parents cannot embody the new world for their chil-

dren, they look to the schools to play that role and support the schooling process even though its values may differ from their own.

For most American Jewish immigrants, it was the public schools that played this role. But the supplementary schools, modeled on the paradigm of the public school, also played a role. They could teach children an American rather than an East European Judaism. Insofar as the parents wanted their children to practice an Americanized Judaism different from their own *yiddishkeit*, these schools made sense as agents of socialization into the new world of Jewish living.

What made no sense in the immigrant context was for the parents to see themselves as clients of Jewish education. They had their Judaism, and though they realized their children would practice differently, they were on the whole comfortable to remain immigrant Jews. Since Jewish educators had their hands full contending with a second generation of quickly assimilating Jewish Americans, they were also content to leave the parents to the Jewish ways of the old country. To everyone's immediate benefit, there arose an understanding or conception of Jewish education in America as giving children the minimal knowledge they would need to function religiously as Jews in America. The rest they could learn at home or in the neighborhood.

We clearly are past the immigrant moment in history and no longer live with an old-world Judaism in our homes. Yet the resilience of the initial conception of Jewish education—an imparting to children of minimal knowledge—is surprising. To understand this resilience, I suggest we change frames and consider a psychological dimension that may be operating to keep Jewish education pediatric in concept.

In most American Jewish families today, the children coming for a Jewish education are the children and grandchildren of American-born adults. These adults themselves received only a minimal Jewish education, and that during their childhood. Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and Grandpa are not much more Jewishly knowledgeable than are Joshua or Jennifer. Then why are the adults sending Joshua and Jennifer to learn while they remain in their relative state of ignorance? Given no old-world *yiddishkeit* to preserve, why are they not also part of the future, of the learning community?

Some observers respond that sending children to Jewish school has become a regular, ritualized part of the Jewish life cycle. Jewish families tend to respond to the children's coming of school age by looking for some Jewish education for them that will culminate in a bar/bat mitzvah. This ritualized activity does not "by tradition" include adult education, so there is no inherent cultural push for the parents and grandparents to ask "why not us, too?"

Though there is power to that explanation, I wish to suggest a parallel possibility that I learned from systems theory in family therapy.⁸ I put it forward as a hypothesis aimed at describing a dynamic that may operate within our Jewish educational system.

From this perspective we might ask: What is the meaning or function of the decision to keep investing so vast a majority of our energies in servicing only the childhood stages of the life cycle? Does this decision represent an over-investment rather than a wise investment? Could it be that this over-investment in children's education serves as a collusive technique to avoid notice of the adults' issues? Could it be that the really embarrassing issue for us adults is that we do not know how to handle our own conflicts over being Jewish, and that instead of facing the pain of that conflict, we turn our attention to our children and worry about their Jewish identity?

What worries us most about our children is often what remains least resolved for us as adults. The dilemma of the American Jewish family is that the adults do not know how to resolve their own Jewish identity issues: Ambivalence remains the dominant emotional tone. How can parents transmit what they love about being Jewish without also confronting what they hate or resist? How can they transmit knowledge that is only dimly remembered or even happily forgotten? Parents want to transmit "Jewishness" to their children, but do not know how to work through their feelings about Judaism and their lack of Jewish knowledge. Being stuck over this dilemma, they turn to the Jewish school for a solution, but they present their dilemma as if it were the children's problem. My question is why the school and community buy into the deal.

When Jewish families present their children to us as having the problem of needing a Jewish education, why do we routinely respond, "Send us your child, and we will treat the problem"? Why do we allow them and ourselves to believe that we *can* treat that problem? Would it not be better to respond by saying, "We are very happy that your family wishes to learn more about being Jewish and we are ready to serve the family's need to know more"?

When I pose this question to Jewish educators, many agree in theory; they know schools cannot transmit an identity unless the family is integrally involved. But some ask, "What about the many parents who will say thanks but no thanks?" When the idea of life-cycle learning or family education meets resistance, when parents refer back to their pediatric conceptions, educators often feel defeated. Why does familial resistance feel so defeating?

One answer is that we are still working with a historic conception of Jewish education as Jewish public school. The public schools also strive to involve parents in children's education, but they do not insist upon parental involvement or remove the child when parents are not involved. So how can the Jewish school take a stand stronger than theirs?

Here is where the analogy to the field of mental health may be helpful. Though Jewish education is not to be equated with the search for mental health, it may be helpful to follow the lead of that field in terms of a shift in paradigm. For as long as we continue to think of ourselves as being in the business of educating children, and of simply asking the parents to partner our efforts, we will find their resistance defeating. It may be that only when we reconceptualize our

task as educating the family at every point of its life cycle can we begin to develop a new understanding of our work and our contract with our students.⁹

This reconceptualization must emerge from the leadership: from the rabbis and the lay leadership of synagogues, federation, and other communal agencies. What is at stake is not the definition of Jewish education in its narrow sense of school for children, but its broadest sense of life-cycle education. Only to the extent that the community, through its leadership, seizes upon communal participation as an occasion for Jewishly educating people of all ages will we let go of the collusive aspects of the pediatric conception of Jewish education and embrace a wider vision of education as that which the whole community engages in as part of its *raison d'être*.