

# In My Opinion

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## Moving From General Education to Jewish Education: Some Personal Reflections

ARNOLD ZAR-KESSLER

*Educational Director, Temple Israel,  
Natick, Massachusetts*

Is there a difference between the world of Jewish education and general education? Is it simply that the curriculum of the Jewish schools includes different, extra subjects? Are the two systems the same, except that one has a lot more Jews? Dr. Yehuda Wurtzel presents, in his interesting paper, "Towards an Anthropology of Jewish Education" (1985), an anthropological approach to what distinguishes the Jewish educational system. There are other ways to address the distinguishing characteristics of the two educational systems as well. In this article, I present a somewhat anecdotal analysis of the two systems from my position as standing with a foot in both worlds.

### BACKGROUND

After completing a 2-year fellowship as a Jerusalem Fellow, a program sponsored by the Jewish Agency to develop leadership in Jewish education in the Diaspora, I began working in the field of Jewish education as Educational Director of Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts in the summer of 1990. This was my first full-time position in Jewish education, after having spent close to 15 years in public education. Most recently I had managed a program of teacher training for a partnership of 22

school districts in western Massachusetts, the State Board of Education, and the Board of Regents of Higher Education; its mandate was improve the math and science teaching in roughly 100 schools. Before that position, I had taught high school science at all levels for 11 years.

In making the career shift from public education to Jewish education, my aim was to bring my professional goals more in line with my evolving personal goals. After having taken a sabbatical in Jerusalem in 1983-1984, where I was involved in research in the department of applied microbiology at the Hadassah Medical School, I began to increase my participation in Jewish communal life and informal education. I also realized that I was not professionally serving the community in which I was most interested. Further, I became aware of the limitations of public schooling and felt that the influence it could bring to bear on students and the community was too restrictive. I felt that public schooling had become (and in the case of science education in particular) entirely too vocational, that it was understood as essentially a place where people were trained, from a very early age, to obtain better, higher-paying positions. I felt that schooling could accomplish more than these limited aims, and Jewish schooling attracted me because I felt it held the promise of being able to do more.

I was fortunate enough to be among those selected for the seventh group of Jerusalem Fellows. Along with the four others selected for the 2-year program in Jerusalem, I studied Jewish texts with such remarkable teachers as Nechama Leibowitz, Michael Rosenak, Seymour Fox, David Hartman, and Barry Chazan.

### WHAT THE FIELD LOOKS LIKE FROM HERE

I want to share with you what the field of Jewish education looks like to someone just coming into it, one who has some notion of educational organizations and structures but is relatively naive in the mechanics of this particular set of institutions and individuals.

My view of Jewish education in North America is rather limited and is as much a result of chance as it is of design. I have met with a number of individuals involved with Jewish education in North America through my contacts as a Jerusalem Fellow. Also, during my fellowship, I read many journals and books on Jewish education.

As an individual with experience in the secular educational world who has a commitment to the continuity of the Jewish community in North America, I am a member of a "target" population: a group that might be ripe for recruitment into Jewish education (Jewish Education Committee, 1987). If so, then I hope my views may help in developing a more effective outreach to this population.

### THE GENERAL LEVEL OF ORGANIZATION

The most striking feature of Jewish education when contrasted with the general educational system in North America is its lack of coercive power. Everything that goes on in Jewish schools is handled through agreement of the parties concerned. No one must send his or her children to Jewish schools in North America. Indeed, just about everyone who chooses to send their child to Jewish schools must pay for it. In contrast, parents and children in public schools feel that they must attend, and by force of law.

This lack of coercive power in Jewish education creates an educational system that is more sensitive to the marketplace. Although administrators and teachers in

public schools must be cognizant of the political climate, they seldom need to base their decisions on whether the parents of their community will pull out their check-books to support their institution or pull out their children to indicate their disfavor. In contrast, there is a pervasive sense that teachers and administrators in Jewish schools must not only make themselves aware of the political world around them but must also be sensitive to economics of their operation and its appeal to their "customers."

When the system works, and by and large it does, most parents feel quite satisfied that they are indeed getting their money's worth. It seems that the more parents spend on their children's Jewish education (i.e., the day schools), the more content they are with the quality of education. Of course, a constellation of factors are involved in determining parental satisfaction. However, it is intriguing that, in contrast to the public sector, where the selection of curriculum, teachers, texts, and the like is essentially determined by a political process (school boards, state boards of education, etc.), there is greater satisfaction with the Jewish educational system in which decisions are primarily governed by an economic process.

Note should be taken that this differing process does not guarantee greater educator satisfaction. Working to please the customer does not make the educators striving to help the schools any happier. I noted about the same levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the Jewish school teachers as in those in the public schools. The one distinguishing feature is that the supplementary schools seem to be succeeding significantly less often than the day school programs.

Marketplace considerations apply to issues of control as well. Whereas public school administrators often complain about the "state" and its idiosyncratic requests, Jewish educators mention parents and parents groups. Public school administrators view their constituents—the actual families of children in their schools—almost as inter-

esting artifacts of their work or at worst, thorns in their sides, but seldom as the focus of their efforts or a group that is central to the workings of the schools. This is in sharp contrast to Jewish school administrators, who are constantly in contact and sensitive to the wishes of the families of the school community.

It is interesting to note that these two features of Jewish education—a free-market educational system based on choice and greater parental involvement—are often mentioned among more progressive platforms for change in American public schools. Jewish schools are already there!

More interesting, though, is the general state of isolation in which the Jewish schools live in relation to the larger school systems. It is not the rule that Jewish education looks outside itself for new ideas, for ways to improve pedagogy and curriculum. Rather, the smallness and warmth of the individual institutions occasionally result in situations in which change, even when necessary, is terribly difficult to implement.

The organizational bodies that assume responsibility for a number of schools—local bureaus of education, offices in federations, national organizations—are significantly weaker in Jewish than in public education. Indeed, the bureaus of Jewish education (BJEs) often seem like poor relatives in some of the communities I visited. Individual institutions have little or no coercive power themselves, and the coordinating bodies have even less. The individual schools thus often guard their own independence stringently, seldom showing a willingness to let outside bodies tell them what to do. On the other hand, funding bodies for BJEs have a constant struggle maintaining the sources of income for the BJEs. Subsequently, BJEs find themselves in positions where they must “sell” themselves in two directions—to the schools that feel that they can do the job just fine without any outside interference, and to the funding sources that see education as one of many community needs and the BJEs as a means of furthering the goals of

education, but perhaps not the best way.

This is all in sharp contrast to the public system, in which schools can feel secure that they have the strength to follow through with their programs and this strength is magnified as one moves up the ladder to the larger and larger organizations. One need only compare the administrative power of the federal regulations on education with recommendations from national Jewish education agencies. This is not to minimize the struggles involved with developing policies for public education, but only to recognize the limits at this time of implementing any sort of “across-the-board” change in Jewish education.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

Although it might seem jejune to start a section on the participants in Jewish education with the observation that just about all of them are Jewish, the meanings or lack of meanings in that statement do reveal quite a lot about what goes on in Jewish schools. The most striking feature of the Jewishness of the participants in Jewish education is the great diversity of meanings that they place on it. Although one might accept that just about all the Jews who are involved with Jewish education—the leaders, the teachers, the parents, and yes, even the students—identify as Jews and want to help ensure the continuity of the Jewish people, one is hard pressed to make sense of where the common ground is in this identification.

I have spoken to people in Jewish education—even in the same “stream” of Jewish education—who express such widely diverse views about what the goals of Jewish education are that it is remarkable that they can work together. For example, many parents see the goals of their children’s supplementary school education as basic familiarity with the texts, history, and rituals of the Jewish people so that they “will know that they are Jews.” Yet, many of the staff of supplementary schools

have as their goal that their students should practice Judaism, something that often the parents do not.

Further, there is an increase in the political agendas of religious schooling. Many teachers feel that it is appropriate to discuss such topics as Israel's domestic and foreign policy, nuclear war, environmental issues, feminist issues, and the like (Ingwer, 1990). It is clear that the Jewish community has little consensus on these issues, let alone on whether the Jewish classroom is an appropriate place to discuss them.

By and large, it seems that of the three "participative elements" in the Jewish educational process—the teachers, the community, and the children—there is a continuum of commitment to things Jewish, with the greatest commitment coming from the educators, then the community, and then the students. Therefore, teachers often find themselves either leading the community, as well as the children, or feeling isolated. By itself, the idea of teachers helping lead the community is not problematic. However, it is of interest to note that this situation more closely resembles that in the poorer socioeconomic communities in public education. In the more affluent Jewish suburbs, parents do not have to be convinced of the importance of public education, as they do in the inner cities. Yet, they do need to be convinced of the importance of Jewish education. Thus, Jewish educators find themselves in the awkward position of selling their material to people who think they do not need to be sold on education per se.

Perhaps the basic issue is that many of the parents of Jewish schoolchildren are not too sure just what it is they want for their own Jewishness or for their children. Most Jewish families in America feel torn to a greater or lesser degree about their Jewishness in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish but yet terribly attractive environment.

### THE CURRICULUM

The central premise of the Jewish school as a member of a marketplace continues

in the consideration of the role of curriculum in Jewish education. There are a great many different curricula taught in Jewish schools. Many are produced and sold by organizations with a strong reputation for quality. Some publishers are for profit, others are not. Some of the companies operate on a shoestring, whereas others are affiliated with larger institutions.

One effect of this variety is that parents often find themselves with some choice of approaches in the schools they consider for their children. Yet, what so often happens in the free and open market happens in Jewish education. That is, rather than having a very large array of interesting, serious curricular approaches, one sees often a trivialization and limiting of the choices available. As I have mentioned, there are many high-quality curricular packages available for Jewish educators. Yet, much of curriculum production has begun to resemble clever marketing and packaging enterprises that make the product look good when one leafs through a catalogue, but often do not satisfy the practitioners and the educators who have to use the materials. The "loop" of the market tends to push the serious curricular materials, rich in content and usually not terribly attractive, to the edges and the very slick, often less content-rich material to the center.

This problem can likely be traced to the lack of mandate with which educators function in the market; it is just not clear what sort of curriculum parents want. In the day schools, it seems that many families want to ensure that their children will receive a strong secular education, and this desire often plays a greater role in their choice of schools than the nature of the Judaic curriculum taught there. Thus, savvy administrators will make sure that the general studies program will be outstanding and will devote the necessary resources there.

There is also the issue of the presentation of texts. When Jewish education did, or does, occur with an absence of competing "texts" to hold the child's attention and

imagination, the educator is better able to convince the child that the stories, issues, and lessons of the text are crucial to the child's life. That is, with a clearer field, a case for our sacred and classic texts is more easily made.

In general education, teachers face the same problem: students now have an enormous choice of texts from which to choose—not simply what might be good books to read, but which stories are the important stories. Yet, there are two main differences between secular education and Jewish education in the matter of text. One, the general culture in which children find themselves, if it reinforces any “story” at all, will reinforce the one that can be more easily integrated into the general studies curriculum. Whether the prevailing cultural myths are of Horatio Alger or gearing up for global trade warfare, public schools can weave and alter their curriculum to fit the dominant meta-themes of the culture. Consider for a moment the meta-narratives of the Super Bowl, a secular religious holiday for the modern age if there ever was one and a major text of American culture. It can be linked to secular classes in history (wars of domination), science (resultant forces and vectors), math (scores, statistics), business, and even dance. Whether some of the implied goals of schooling—to advance, make a lot of money, impress members of the opposite sex, dominate someone else—or the subjects of schooling (the history of wars of dominance, manipulation of numbers, and skills in the physical world) are connected concretely or just understood as connected as students pass through schools is not the issue. The point is that general education reproduces culture, both explicitly and implicitly. This is one of its strengths and a source of its covert coercive power.

This connection stands in contradistinction to the overriding themes of Jewish texts, and ultimately, Jewish education. Where can we Jewish educators, in good conscience, make connections, either explicitly or implicitly, with the Super Bowl? The central element that distinguishes the

texts and thus the curriculum of Jewish education from that of secular education is that the Jewish texts must remain hopelessly irrelevant to the secular world of a child, at least in a superficial way. The challenge of Jewish education is to explain to children why the texts of Judaism matter. Teachers in public schools, when all else fails, can let children know that they must do their work because, if they do not, they will not be able to participate in the ongoing story of the culture (you won't pass, you won't graduate, you won't get a job). These are among the dominant cultural stories in the world of children, including Jewish children. Failing to participate in the ongoing Jewish story is, unfortunately, not a terribly threatening concern to most Jewish children. They simply do not relate to the significance of the text or its subtext.

To Jewish education's lack of physical coercion, therefore, must also be added a lack of psychic or cultural coercion. Jewish education must constantly defend and explain itself, even as it educates—something that secular education rarely if ever is forced to do.

#### ON THE FIELD'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ITSELF

In general, the people who work in Jewish education are dedicated and work hard, yet they have an overriding sense that the mission is beyond the scope of the individuals and institutions responsible. They wish to see someone come in and resuscitate the process, yet they doubt whether anyone is capable of doing so. Educators in the general educational system share a similar sense of needing to achieve a Sisyphean task. In a culture, such as that of the United States, which has a well-documented history of anti-intellectualism, teachers of academic subjects have always had to wage a steady war with the larger community, trying to convince them that the training of minds is a useful and appropriate endeavor. By and large, educators have succeeded only when they have used the argument that academic training is appro-

appropriate because it is useful; that is, it can be translated into skills or aptitudes that are useful in the marketplace. Historically (and universal Jewish education has a much longer and grander history than American universal education), Jewish educators have not had such an intense battle to sell the idea of the value of education to the community. It is probably indicative of the influence of the larger secular community that Jewish educators have now been forced, like secular educators, to sell their product. The concomitant loss of self-respect might come from the realization that Jewish education cannot be packaged for application in the marketplace, as say science can.

#### WHAT DRAWS ME TO THE FIELD

Having painted this colorless or at least wearying picture of Jewish education, one might ask what draws someone out of general education into Jewish education. This question is asked not only knowing the elements described above but also understanding that in Jewish education salaries are generally lower, room for advancement more limited, and prestige even lower than in general education. So then, why?

First, I believe that it is in religious education where more significant impact can be made on students, and, in turn, on communities. I feel that many families see the greatest limitation of general, secular schooling to be not in its academic programs per se but in its lack of commitment to build decent human beings who can understand the difference between right and wrong and can act upon the basis of that understanding. I left general education not because it was failing to teach science and Jewish schools were doing a better job (although a case for that might be made), but because general schools were hamstrung; they could not find the appropriate vehicles to transmit a culture of values. And those feeble attempts to include values in the curriculum often

showcased values that, personally, I found foreign. It is not simply a "coming home," an attempt to work with a population closer to my roots, that brings me to Jewish education. It is an attempt to serve communities from a mutually agreed-upon base of understanding. This base has the capacity to reach and to teach, and to teach me in turn. The base, of course, is Torah.

Jewish education maintains its roots in the transmission of a culture of values, and the community can work from that base in building educational goals and institutions. Despite a Constitution and myriad laws built upon that framework, the general culture simply does not have such a foundation upon which to build educational goals and institutions. Much more to the point, it has even less of a consensus on how to proceed in such a building process.

A second reason for my move to Jewish education is that I believe that the tide is rising and will continue to rise against general secular education as it now is constituted. In North America, families with the capacity to give their children a stronger education, both academically and morally, have been choosing to leave the general school system in greater numbers. I believe the trend will continue as more families find the resources to move, as the schools become more accessible, and as the movement for parental choice takes deeper hold, expressing itself in a variety of ways, perhaps including, but not limited to, the experimental implementation of a voucher system. Jewish schools, along with other institutions that have strong foundations based on the transmission of values and tradition, will be prominent among the constellation of educational opportunities to which families will turn.

#### WHAT COMES NEXT

My years of work in general schools have made me a realist, with a realism that extends to the nature of schooling in the abstract—schools can only do so much.

Yet, my exposure in Jerusalem to Jewish texts and Jewish thought and to committed Jewish educators both in Israel and in North America has renewed my hope that the "only so much" is really quite remarkable.

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Editor's Note: Corrected figure for the article, "Can Communal Services Be Classified and Evaluated," by Uri Yanay, Ph.D., in Volume 66 (4) Summer 1990, p. 355 of this *Journal*.

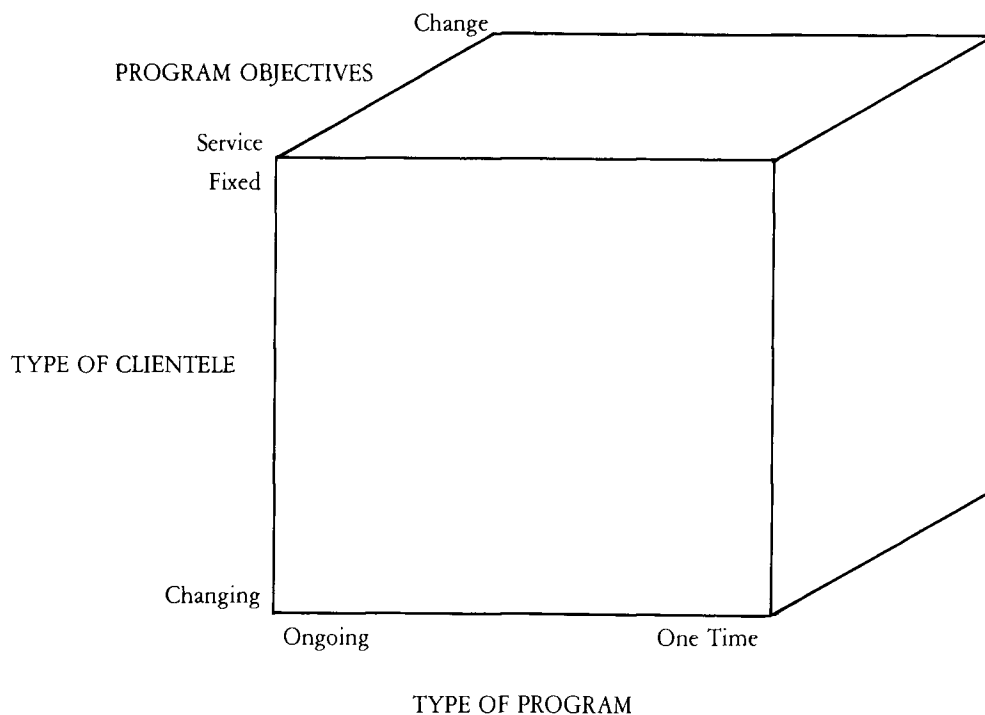


Figure 1: A three-dimensional presentation of a classification of communal services.

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