

# In My Opinion

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## Celebrating Excellence: A Challenge To Jewish Educators

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### THE CONTEXT AND THE ISSUES

The struggle over the purpose of Jewish education today is both grave and great, given the often unshared values of teachers and parents. This is especially true for the supplemental schools, but unfortunately is also the case in day school movements, especially the nontraditional schools.

Educators must remember what the context is for their work. I put forth the following premises.

*Ultimately, a community gives the sanction as to what is to be taught.* None of us can teach that which transcends the boundaries of what is perceived as conventional expectations, except by nibbling at the edges of the conventional. Revolutionaries do not teach in Jewish institutions. Those in the Jewish community who teach have to be clear that there is an ambivalence about what Jews want to learn. That is often at the heart of the difficulty for a Jewish teacher. In North America, Jewish education for the most part is a system concentrating on the transmission of a series of

very limited preparatory reading and praying skills for Bar or Bat Mitzvah (Schiff, 1983).

Yet, educators should do more than just teach skills. They must penetrate and transmit the soul of Jewish values and knowledge as part of any conceptual approach to education, which includes skills as well. Sadly and unfortunately parents are often not clear about the interconnection of the three—skills, values, and knowledge—which reflects their own ignorance.

Inevitably, there is a very large gap between that which is taught and that which is learned, between that which is exposed and that which is absorbed and practiced in any ongoing significant way relating to lifestyle. Too often, there is total incongruence between the stated and the done.

*There is often a gap between what teachers teach and what they need to teach.* For example, I am aware of very few courses on what I call Jewish civics—the Jewish quality of Jewish governance, how Jews have governed themselves throughout the ages, and how they have dealt with hostile and friendly worlds in voluntary and involuntary situations (Blau, 1976).

In most curricula, the issue of the Jew in the West living voluntarily as Jews for the first time in history is rarely dealt with in a serious way. The sociology of the Jew is often not even understood by teachers. What is really happening to the contemporary Jewish family has very little meaning and very little resonance within the educational system (Bubis, 1987).

*We do not explore pluralism well — the adjectives that modify all of us, either secular, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, questioning, WIZO, hospital, occasional, or even “lapsational Jew”* (Blau, 1976). How does the curriculum fo-

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cus on these adjectives, and at what expense are they to the noun Jew? How much truly binds us and bonds us, and how much needlessly separates us? Are we truly capable or even desirous of being one people today? To what degree do curricular materials and teachers focus on the elements that bind Jews together? What is the teacher's responsibility to deal with these elements, not only with students but also with parents and with colleagues?

I give you a sad example of this issue at its worst. I have a colleague who was saying *Kaddish* for his father in Jerusalem. He is a Conservative rabbi who leads a Reform congregation and often *davens* at an Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem. He was told in the Orthodox synagogue that they would not say amen to his *Kaddish*. Think of it: a Jew no longer bound to other Jews and adjectives—Reform, Conservative, Orthodox—supplanting, separating and dividing Jew from Jew. Now, that is today's educator's context for work.

About 70 years ago Leo Baeck addressed the graduates of his seminary in Germany. He said to the (male) rabbis, "The message is not the sermon of the preacher but the man himself." I would recast this statement as "the message is not the teaching of the teacher but the person himself or herself." The teacher must not deliver a message, but must deliver him- or herself. This magnificent succinct synthesis highlights some paradoxes that a role model confronts. One paradox is that the teacher who is supposed to be the role model is sometimes not supposed to explore the dogmas that divide and bind Jews. Few wish that their children be taught to question and explore what the adjectives represent or why they exist. This suggests that the Jewish community pretends that unity means agreement about everything, always.

There is a second paradox as well. In the United States 89% of the funds for Jewish education come from nongovernmental sources, but the majority of this "Jewish" money comes from tuition — not the com-

munity. The people of the book are really now in truth the people of the buck, but the wrong people are being asked to come up with the bulk of the money — the parents, not the community.

On the secular level, education remains one of the highest values of the Jews, although for most parents, Jewish education is clearly secondary. In Jewish communities around the world, the percentage of Jews with a college degree is very consistent. In some 20 Diaspora communities between 75% to 90% of the Jews attend college. In these same countries, for the most part, those same Jews are Jewish illiterates, pediatric Jews with Ph.Ds. Except for traditional Jews, the people who nag and drive their progeny crazy to attend the university are the same who are most frequently ambivalent about those children having a Jewish education.

The challenge then is defining what is "Jewish" that is maintainable and transmittable to the next generation and determining how the varying understandings are accepted by the parents. There are no simple answers, yet the sad reality remains: "Being" and "doing" Jewish are of underwhelming importance to a substantial number of parents.

#### WHAT TO CELEBRATE?

What is there to celebrate in Jewish education today? One is the increasingly positive self-image of the educator. The educator of today is less and less likely to be the *nebish melamed* of yesteryear; he or she is now a member of a profession. It is important to remember the root meaning of that word—to profess something—and to recall that the word "vocation" means having a calling. These two words must balance together in ever-rising and resonating ways for the educator in a prideful way. The development of schools of education, of JESNA, of teacher's unions, of the status of teachers is something to celebrate. These are embers to be fanned into a flaming fire, a bush if you please.

Two are the Jewish community's changing priorities and the realization finally that there is more to Jewish life than disease and dis-ease, up to now the classic way of looking at how to be a Jew. Traditionally, the community either took care of the sick or of people who felt uncomfortable because of their perceptions of the Jews' status in society. List 20 problems of Jewish life in North America today. I would place anti-Semitism in 20th place, but pressing that "fear" button will raise more money than most of the other 19 items combined.

Press the "hope" button of Jewish education and that will get you ambivalence. Fortunately in the highest levels through which money is raised in the community *kupah* (the federation system), the change in priorities is absolutely miraculous compared to 20 years ago. Look at the number of children in day schools today compared to 20 years ago. The increase is miraculous. Who could think of the Reform movement having an Association of Reform Jewish Day Schools? That would be enough to make some of the classical Reform Jews spin in their graves.

Three is the Jewish community's changing understanding of the place and importance of Jewish education. At a national meeting of an American Jewish organization, I debated the use of tax funds for Jewish education in America. The organization is one of the leading proponents of public education and of the separation of church and state. After the debate, a famous constitutional lawyer stated privately, "I think we can get more government money too but we have to have the Koreans, Chinese and Japanese join us. Then I think we can make it." There are new attitudes that can be built upon on to continue to raise the status and priority of Jewish education. Reconsidering such a "sacred" position as church-state separation is in itself a measure of this change.

### THE CHALLENGES

What is there to challenge? The first is

family values. There is a growing obscenity in North America in the way many Jewish families live both as Americans and as Jews. One is lucky not to have to attend the obscenity of \$50,000 to \$75,000 Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah celebrations. The obscenity is compounded by that which is truly valued, which I measure by how Jews spend their money. The excessive money spent on Jewish life-cycle events must be fought by our educational system. Whether or not that will be a losing battle is too early to predict, but the community must fight against such excesses as being an affront to Jewish values.

The second challenge concerns community values. When a Jewish community feels that the economic elite is the only elite to shape the priorities of the community, the devaluing of other elites becomes institutionalized. If academic, intellectual, artistic, and creative elites are not valued in Jewish communal governance, how can education be a magnet to attract those they teach?

Third, the community must further determine how it sets priorities in distributing funds. In a time of limited resources, we must practice *Jewish triage*. Not all high-priority programs will receive needed support and we will have to make hard choices in distributing finite dollars. Consider that in the next 5 years Israel will need between \$40 and \$80 billion to resettle Soviet Jews, of which at least \$8 billion will be required from Diaspora communities.

Priorities will have to change. One cannot claim that it is the destiny and imperative of the Jewish community to underwrite Jewish education at a far greater level than is the case today *and* send \$8 billion to Israel *and* simultaneously respond to the ever-increasing needs of the elderly and single parents, to name but two groups in need of expanded service in North America. Ironically, there are Jews who have enough money to answer all or most of these needs. The problem is the lack of will to part with their dollars for Jewish purpose. Never has

there been a community as rich as the North American Jewish community. Never have there been Jewish multimillionaires in numbers so great that we are uncomfortable about the fact itself. In the United States the Jewish "gross national product" is probably in the area of \$500 billion, yet only 12,000 people give nearly 60% of the money raised in federated drives and that amount is less than a billion dollars annually (Bubis, 1988).

The fourth challenge is the unclear set of standards the community has about morality. What is that word supposed to mean today? What are educators supposed to teach about the values that they see reinforced or unreinforced in their community? If the man of the year is the "ganif" of the century, what message are young people to take away about what is truly valued and treasured and who is truly honored and given obeisance? (Bubis, 1987). What are the young to understand about whom they should emulate? Educators must ally themselves and work with lay people, professionals, rabbis, and communal workers who share their value system and fight for a set of practices that will reflect the Jewish values about which Jews from all denominations can agree.

#### COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITIES

The Jewish community must clarify what it expects of Jewish educators and Jewish education. The educators have received a series of mixed messages. What should be taught? Why? What are hoped-for outcomes? How must they differ?

The community must also sanction the measurement of outcomes. What are satisfactory achievement levels? What are the minimum levels to be learned before community dollars are to be used to fund schools? What other criteria are desired? Obviously not everything is measurable. The measurable must be separated from the immeasurable, the tangible from the intangible.

Three, there must be clearer sanctions

for professionalization. What does it truly mean when you say you are a Jewish teacher? How is it known that you have met the stated criteria? Are they a matter of standards, of certification, of content clarification? What is the reward and the benefit system? One can understand the anger of the Jewish educators who are being "celebrated" and praised on the one hand while their salaries are being cut to balance budgets on the other. One can understand how upset teachers are when salaries are suspended for 3 months in order to balance the budget and the lay people were not even told that it was happening. The Mandel Commission Report (1990) is now available in paperback. It must be put into the hands of decision makers everywhere as quickly as possible and extrapolated for local use accordingly. A blueprint awaits. It is time to build. It is time to act.

#### CONCLUSION

I had the honor of giving the commencement address at the School of Jewish Communal Service of the Hebrew Union College when I retired. I see communal workers, educators, and rabbis as *klei kodesh*, today's holy vessels, but vessels who need to be molded by reality and possibility. I chose to share with the graduates what I called clichés distilled from 40 years of practice wisdom. I hope they will help educators as they have helped me.

- Hope for everything, expect little.
- Do not be seduced by the power and wealth of those with whom you may be called upon to work.
- Remember that you do not own the communities or institutions in which you serve.
- Live a professional life of full disclosure, confident that once they have the facts, people will make the best possible decisions much more often than not.
- Do not try to achieve unity by insisting upon conformity.
- Respect and listen to the voices of dispu-

tation, difference, and dissent, for they may have tomorrow's solutions for today's problems.

- Do not destroy your own family as you attempt to save the Jewish people.
- Remember the holy and humane reasons that brought you to choose your vocation in the service of the Jewish people.
- Remember that if you truly touch and teach one other person in your life, you will have been blessed far beyond the level of most people in the world.

Let the quest continue.

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