

**THE IMPACT OF JEWISH EDUCATION ON RELIGIOUS
IDENTIFICATION AND PRACTICE**

by
Steven Martin Cohen

Reprinted from
Jewish Social Studies, Vol. XXXVI, Nos. 3-4 (July-October 1974)

**THE IMPACT OF JEWISH EDUCATION ON RELIGIOUS
IDENTIFICATION AND PRACTICE**

by
Steven Martin Cohen

Reprinted from
Jewish Social Studies, Vol. XXXVI, Nos. 3-4 (July-October 1974)

The Impact of Jewish Education on Religious Identification and Practice

by Steven Martin Cohen

While cognitive development is generally regarded as the primary goal of secular education,¹ the distinctive purpose of parochial education is to develop and maintain favorable attitudes toward the values and practices of a particular religious group. The desire to ensure a strong commitment to religious norms is a key determinant in the decision of parents to send their children to parochial schools. Concern with the effectiveness of public schools has spawned a virtual social science industry devoted to measuring students' intellectual ability and achievement. However, little empirical research has been devoted to the question of the religious schools' effectiveness in their own area of emphasis. Though theoretical works abound, there have been few attempts to collect data and analyze the effects of parochial schools in general, much less Jewish schools in particular.

The few studies to date tend to agree that two of the most important factors in the development of religious attitudes are the home and the religious school. However, few researchers have discussed the relative contribution of these factors. Almost all those who have, have failed to substantiate their conclusions with empirical data. A recent study of Jewish school students in Australia, for example, reports: "Full-time education at a Jewish Day School has little effect on the child's religious attitude unless the home environment promotes the acceptance of the norms taught."² While the conclusion appears to be a reasonable one, no corroborating data is offered. The investigator simply assumed that students in the more traditional schools came from more religious homes. Another study has claimed

I express my gratitude to the American Jewish Committee for its support of the collection and processing of the data for this study. I thank Leonard Fein, Donald Treiman, and Richard Alba for helpful comments and suggestions and revisions of the manuscript.

¹ A recent study of the goal preferences of mothers of school children showed that more than two-thirds of the women sampled preferred a school emphasizing purely intellectual development over these three goals: (1) emphasis on "social things like . . . how to get along with others"; (2) concern "with the personal development of students . . . seeing that they possess a sense of right and wrong"; and (3) stressing "the more practical things like helping students choose the right occupation." An even greater proportion (70 per cent) perceived their children's school as operating as if its "most important task . . . is primarily intellectual, that is, to provide children with information, teach them reading, writing and arithmetic." David Wilder *et al.*, "Actual and Perceived Consensus on Educational Goals between School and Community" (Bureau of Applied Social Research, New York 1968), pp. 44-45.

² John Goldlust, "Jewish Education and Ethnic Identification: A Study of Jewish Adolescents in Australia," *Jewish Education*, vol. xi (1970), pp. 49-59.

that "the percentage of fully observant families is very significantly greater in the all-day school than in the Hebrew school."³ Yet no precise inferences about the relative impact of the home and the school can be safely drawn without data bearing upon all of three relevant variables for each individual: the religiousness of the home, the intensity of religious education, and the religious attitudes of the students.

Greeley and Rossi's study⁴ of Catholic schools is unique in the relevant literature in that it does consider the effects of home religiousness and religious school attendance simultaneously. The researchers concluded that Catholic schools have a measurable impact upon the development or maintenance of religious attitudes. However, the observed effect was limited almost exclusively to those students who were reared in religiously observant homes: "It appears that a school cannot be expected to carry out a religious socialization process for which there is little sympathy at home."⁵

In the field of secular education, the classic *Equality of Educational Opportunity* study focused, quite naturally, upon verbal and mathematical achievement.⁶ The oft-cited major finding of the report is that the schools studied had little effect on these cognitive variables, while family background characteristics, especially social class, were highly influential.

With regard to another area of secular education, a review of the literature of the impact of high school curricula designed to change political attitudes, concluded: "With few exceptions, the formal education of youths makes no difference in regard to their image of the political world."⁷ Researchers cited in the review "found . . . no association between being instructed formally in civics and any attitude (e.g., tolerance) which might be expected to result from such instruction." Even more interesting are the reasons ascribed to the ineffectiveness of the civics curricula: "Such courses are redundant; they are largely symbolic reinforcements of the 'democratic creed'—a liturgy heard by most students so many times that sheer boredom probably would allow for . . . slight increments in loyalty, patriotism and other virtues presumed to be the goal of such courses."⁸

Since characterizations of Jewish education as "boring" and "redundant" are typical of complaints voiced by students, their parents, and even educators, one may reasonably expect the Jewish schools, like the civics courses in public schools, to be relatively ineffective in shaping students' attitudes. Moreover, since

³ Eric Willner, "A Comparative Study of Home Background Factors of All-Day School and Afternoon Hebrew School Students," *Jewish Education*, vol. xi (1970), pp. 30–35.

⁴ Andrew M. Greeley and Peter H. Rossi, *The Education of Catholic Americans* (Chicago, 1966).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶ James Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C. 1966).

⁷ Harmon Ziegler and Wayne Peak, "The Political Functions of the Educational System," *Sociology of Education*, vol. xliii (1970), pp. 115–42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126; the study cited by Peak and Ziegler is Kenneth P. Langston and M. Kent Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum," *American Political Science Review*, vol. lxii (1968), pp. 852–67.

a child's religious orientation must be at least as intimately bound up with his family as his intellectual achievement, we may expect the Jewish schools to have as little impact on religious attitudes as the public schools have on level of academic performance. Finally, we may expect Jewish schools to bear a strong similarity to their Catholic counterparts in having a very limited influence—as compared with the home environment—on religious commitment and observance.

All the foregoing evidence, then, leads us to hypothesize a specified and minimal influence of the Jewish religious school upon the religious attitudes of Jewish students, once the religiousness of the home is taken into account. The purpose of this study is to subject this hypothesis to a thorough empirical test.

Sample

The data were collected in the spring of 1969 from a mailback questionnaire answered by 626 Jewish undergraduates of Columbia College (all male), Barnard College (all female), and the Columbia School of Engineering (predominantly male). The return represents 46 per cent of the total number of 1,364 questionnaires which were sent to all undergraduates in the three schools who identified themselves as Jewish on the registrar's religious preference cards in the fall of 1969.

Sampling bias toward students who were more concerned with their Jewish identity might be expected. However, a Jewish identity study of undergraduates at Brooklyn College and the University of Pennsylvania, has thoroughly tested the assumption that those who are either strongly committed to or strongly antipathetic toward Jewish norms might tend to respond more frequently than others.⁹ In the case of the University of Pennsylvania (like Columbia, an Ivy League university located in an Eastern metropolis), the same type of sampling list was used as in the present study—the university's religious preference cards. The questionnaire was administered to groups of nonresponding and previously nonsampled Jewish students at both schools, drawn from a random sample of all students, excluding those who identified themselves as non-Jews. Despite the fact that the response rate reached only 20 per cent, there were no significant differences between responding and nonresponding students at either school.

Another check of possible sampling bias is provided by a secondary analysis of a national sample of college graduates in a study which yields a Jewish apostasy rate for Columbia of 16 per cent.¹⁰ Likewise, 16 per cent of the present study's respondents, all of whom were raised as Jews, gave a "non-Jewish" response (e.g., "none," "agnostic," or "atheist") to the question, "What is your religion now?"

⁹ Mervin Verbit, "Referents for Religion among Jewish College Students" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1968).

¹⁰ David Caplovitz *et al.*, *The Religious Dropouts* (forthcoming). Questionnaires included the following questions: "In what religion were you raised?" and "What is your religion now?" The apostasy rate is the proportion of those raised in a given religion who do not currently identify with that religion.

A final check on possible sampling bias showed that there were no substantial differences between early and late respondents in the frequency distributions of any of the variables analyzed in the study. If interest in the subject matter of the questionnaire had been a significant factor affecting its return, one would expect such differences to appear.

Though far from conclusive, these three checks lend weight to the assumption that the respondents are reasonably representative of undergraduate Jewish students at Columbia in 1969. It must be stated, however, that they are not necessarily representative of all Jewish young adults. In general, they are more academically talented, have wealthier social origins, and originate more from the New York metropolitan area than other Jewish youth of college age.

Methods

For the measure of parental religiousness, respondents were asked to report whether each of eight Jewish religious practices was observed in their home when they were high school seniors.¹¹ The rituals selected serve as indicators of parental commitment to Jewish norms, expressed in ways visible to the respondent. For the purposes of analysis, respondents were divided into three groups: those reporting one to three parental observances were classified in the "low" group; respondents reporting four to six rituals were considered as from "moderately" religious homes; and those reporting seven or eight were assigned to the "high" group.

For the measure of the respondents' level of Jewish education, the several types of Jewish religious schools were readily classified according to the amount of time they demand of their students. The "full-time" schools are the yeshivas and day schools, which are total educational institutions giving their students both religious and secular training. The "part-time" schools are the Hebrew schools, afternoon, continuing Hebrew high schools, and a few Yiddish schools, which meet more than once a week and limit their curricula to Jewish subjects. The Sunday schools, by definition, meet once a week, usually for no more than two hours of classes.

Respondents were asked which of these institutions they had attended. Those who had had any yeshiva or day-school instruction made up the "full-time" Jewish education group. Those with no full-time but some part-time training comprised the "part-time" category. Respondents with only Sunday school education and those with no formal religious education were found to be generally undifferentiable in religious background and current attitudes, and were thus grouped together, under the classification "minimal."

The measure of the respondents' attitudes toward religious ritual was some-

¹¹ The eight rituals were defined as follows: (1) "Candles were lit on Friday night"; (2) "Candles were lit on Chanukah"; (3) "There were two sets of dishes for meat and dairy"; (4) "Kiddush was said on Friday night"; (5) "There was a mezzuzah on the door"; (6) "There was a Seder for Passover"; (7) "At least one member of the family usually attended Sabbath services"; (8) "At least one member of the family usually attended services on Yom Kippur."

what problematic, since many Jewish religious practices are suitable and typical only within the home and/or in the context of a Jewish family.¹² It was therefore inappropriate to ask students living in dormitories or off-campus apartments to report religious practices they were currently performing. Aware of this limitation, yet desiring a scale of respondent ritual orientation comparable to the parental scale, I asked each respondent to indicate which rituals, of the eight queried for the parental scale, he intended to observe when he raised a family. Levels on the respondent scale were tabulated in the same manner. Though not necessarily an accurate predictor of behavior in years to come, this scale nevertheless served as a useful indicator of the respondent's present attitude toward religious ritual.

Since a major mode of religioethnic identification among American Jews is sympathy for Zionism, a measure of Zionist orientation was devised. Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale ("Agree strongly," "Agree," "Undecided," "Disagree," "Disagree strongly") with a series of statements. Responses to four statements¹³ expressing commitment to Zionist ideology manifest high intercorrelations. Assigning respondents a score on an interval scale ranging from 1 to 5 for each item, and summing the responses, yielded the measure of Zionist orientation. Those whose score on the four-item scale indicated agreement or strong agreement constituted the "high" Zionist group for purposes of analysis.

Survey analysts are sometimes criticized for imputing definitions for their measures which do not correspond to what they actually measure. In other words, the content validity of many sociological and psychological instruments is lacking. In part to anticipate such a critique, particularly for the ritual and Zionist orientation scales, I included two subjective measures of religioethnic identification which, in a sense, allow the respondents to speak for themselves. Respondents were asked to rate their own commitment to Judaism and to Israel. Those describing their commitments as "very high" on these items constitute the "high" groups in these categories. (As it turns out, it makes little difference whether we use the subjective or objective measures. High correlations between corresponding measures indicate strong agreement between the analyst's and the respondents' evaluations of their commitment to Judaism and Israel.)

The endogamy norm is often quite strong among religious and ethnic minority groups, concerned with survival as distinctive entities. American Jewry is no excep-

¹² Asking students living in a dormitory without kitchen facilities whether they maintain separate dishes for meat and dairy meals, is clearly inappropriate. Lighting Sabbath candles, according to Jewish law and custom, is technically required of every household, including a student living alone. In practice, however, the woman of the house typically performs this ritual. Other rituals (including lighting Chanukah candles; saying Kiddush, the blessing over wine at the Sabbath meal on Friday nights; and attending a Passover seder or ritual meal) are intimately bound up with the active participation and presence of the family. Again, though technically and legally required of the solitary individual, they seem more likely to be performed in the presence of others, particularly children.

¹³ The four statements are (1) "Israel is the best place for Jews to live"; (2) "Every Jew is obligated to settle in Israel"; (3) "My first political loyalty is to Israel"; (4) "I consider myself to be a Zionist."

tion. Consequently, the proscription against dating non-Jews is often implied, and sometimes explicitly invoked, in many Jewish homes, schools, and social circles. To measure adherence to this norm, respondents were asked how often they had dated a non-Jew. Those answering "never" constituted the "high" category for the in-group dating measure.

Finally, respondents were asked to describe their fluency in Hebrew, on a five point scale. Those reporting that they could read Hebrew "with ease and almost total understanding" constituted the "high" group here. This is the only cognitive, rather than affective, variable used in the study.

Findings

If Jewish education affects Jewish identification, one would expect those who attended religious schools to score high more frequently on the several religioethnic identification variables. Moreover, one would also expect former students of the most intensive full-time Jewish institutions to score high more frequently than those who attended only part-time schools, and that both groups would have larger proportions of "highly identified" respondents than those who had little or no formal religious instruction.

As shown in Table 1, the degree of correlation between Jewish education and identification differs with the variable examined, but the patterns are remarkably consistent. Those with full-time training score high more often than those with only part-time instruction; and both these groups score high more frequently than the group with little or no religious education. More important, there is, consistently, a rather small increase in the proportion of "highly identified" respondents from the "low" to the "part-time" education group, followed by a dramatic jump to the proportion among the "full-time" group.

TABLE 1
Percentage of Respondents Scoring "High" on
Jewish Identification Measures by Type of Jewish Education

	Jewish Education			[All respondents]
	Minimal	Part-time	Full-time	
Jewish Identification				
Ritual Orientation	8	22	70	27
Zionist Orientation	8	14	52	19
Subjective Commitment to Judaism	12	18	47	22
Subjective Commitment to Israel	11	15	47	19
In-group Dating	7	17	51	29
Knowledge of Hebrew	3	6	57	14
Number of Cases	(147)	(373)	(106)	(626)

TABLE 2
 Percentage of Respondents Scoring "High" on
 Jewish Identification Measures by Religiousness of Parents

	Religiousness of Parents			[All respondents]
	Low	Moderate	High	
Jewish Identification of Respondents				
Ritual Orientation	0	11	72	27
Zionist Orientation	5	11	44	19
Subjective Commitment to Judaism	6	16	43	22
Subjective Commitment to Israel	8	11	41	19
In-group Dating	11	11	42	20
Knowledge of Hebrew	2	4	40	14
Number of Cases	(153)	(286)	(187)	(626)

Table 2 presents the proportion of respondents, in each of the three parental observance groups, who scored high on the Jewish identification questions. As expected, the group of respondents with highly observant parents had the greatest frequency of "highly identified" individuals for each of the dependent variables. Quite logically, those with parents in the "moderate" group followed. Those with minimally observant parents scored high least frequently on the identification variables. Interesting are the magnitudes of increase in the proportions for the dependent variables. In a pattern similar to that noted in Table 1, those in the "moderate" group score high only slightly more frequently than the "low" group—in no case do the differences exceed 11 percentage points; and in one instance, in-group dating, there is no difference at all. On the other hand, comparisons of respondents from the most observant homes with those in the "moderate" group reveals rather large differences on the Jewish identification measures, ranging from 27 to 61 percentage points.

It comes as no surprise that there is a strong relationship between parental religiousness and the intensity of a child's religious education (see Table 3). Whereas only 6 per cent of the most observant parents failed to send their children to either part-time or full-time schools, over half (52 per cent) of the least observant parents did so. Similarly, only 2 per cent of the least observant parents sent their children to yeshivas or day schools, while nearly half (44 per cent) of the most religious parents gave their children some form of full-time religious instruction.

The final step in the analysis was to examine simultaneously the effects of parental religiousness and religious education upon the six dependent variables. Table 4 indicates the proportion of respondents—in seven of the nine groups created by cross-classifying Jewish education and parental religiousness¹⁴—who scored

¹⁴ Unfortunately, only 11 of the respondents with observant parents reported little or no Jewish education, and only 3 of the respondents who attended yeshivas or day schools reported having minimally observant parents. Since the low base figures for these two groups yield unreliable statistics on the dependent variables, the groups are not reported in Table 4.

TABLE 3
Type of Jewish Education by Religiousness of Parents

	Religiousness of Parents			[All respondents]
	Low	Moderate	High	
Jewish Education				
Minimal	52%	20%	6%	24%
Part-time	46	73	50	60
Full-time	2	7	44	17
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Cases	(153)	(286)	(187)	(626)

TABLE 4
Percentage "High" on Jewish Identification Measures by Type of Jewish Education and Religiousness of Parents

Jewish Education:	Religiousness of Parents								
	Low			Moderate			High		
	Min	P/T	F/T	Min	P/T	F/T	Min	P/T	F/T
Jewish Identification									
Ritual Orientation	0	0	—	7	12	15	—	62	86
Zionist Orientation	4	6	—	12	10	15	—	30	63
Subjective Commitment to Judaism	6	4	—	14	16	20	—	32	54
Subjective Commitment to Israel	8	7	—	12	10	25	—	31	53
In-group Dating	8	14	—	5	12	15	—	29	62
Knowledge of Hebrew	3	1	—	2	3	20	—	17	68
Number of Cases	(79)	(71)	(3)	(57)	(209)	(20)	(11)	(93)	(83)
Total:									(626)

high on each of the Jewish identification variables. Given that a particular group of respondents were raised in homes with roughly equal levels of religious observance, are there any differences in religioethnic identification which might be attributed to the nature of their religious education? Among respondents with the least observant parents, there are only small and somewhat inconsistent differences in Jewish identification between alumni of part-time religious schools and respondents with little or no formal religious instruction. This general similarity between the two education

groups is repeated among respondents from moderately observant homes. That is, when we make allowance for differences in parental religiousness, there is no consistent difference in the level of Jewish identification between those who attended some sort of part-time religious school and those who had only Sunday-school training or no Jewish education whatsoever. The small differences in Jewish identification which are demonstrated between the "part-time" and the "minimal" groups in Table 1 may be explained largely by the more religious home environment of the former group.

Turning to a comparison of the full-time and part-time students, somewhat more intriguing observations are possible. First, among respondents from highly or moderately observant homes, those with full-time religious education more frequently score high on the six identification measures than the part-time group. More significant, though, is that the differences between respondents in the two educational categories are rather small for the group with moderately observant parents (averaging about 8 percentage points), but much larger within the most observant group, averaging over 31 percentage points. It seems that the impact of the yeshivas and day schools is substantial only for students raised in very observant homes. As for the full-time students not raised in such homes (over one-fifth of the total number of full-time students), their attitudes are hardly different from those with less intensive religious education.

Secondly, within the groups from moderately and highly observant homes, the differences between the full-time and part-time alumni is greater for knowledge of Hebrew than for any of the other dependent variables. Of those with observant parents and part-time religious education, only 17 per cent report fluency in Hebrew, compared with 68 per cent of the respondents with full-time Jewish education. The same comparison of the two education groups within the moderate parental observance category shows an increase of 17 percentage points. Though a smaller difference than the one previously noted, it is nevertheless the largest of all the differences within that group.

We now turn our attention to the effect of parental religiousness, which is decisive for the influence of education. Among respondents with minimal formal religious instruction, we can compare those whose parents are least observant with children whose parents fall in the moderately observant category. On two of the measures, in-group dating and knowledge of Hebrew, there is a surprising, though small, decline in the proportion scoring high from the "moderate" parental group. However, on the four other measures—ritual orientation, Zionist orientation, subjective commitment to Judaism and to Israel—those with moderately observant parents score higher than those in the "low" group.

As for those with part-time education, there is a small increase in the tendency to score high on the identification variables among those with moderately observant parents as compared with the low parental observance group. However, the increases within the part-time education group between the "moderate" group and those from the most observant homes is much more substantial: the average dif-

ference over the six identification variables exceeds 23 percentage points. The conclusion is inescapable that, for the part-time alumni, parental religiousness retains a powerful impact upon commitment to Jewish norms and practices.

Among those who attended yeshivas or day schools, the religiousness of the home is even more potent in determining the level of religioethnic identification. Full-time graduates from observant homes scored high on the identification measures an average of 46 percentage points more often than their counterparts from moderately observant homes.

Conclusions

The foregoing analysis yields four major conclusions: (1) When we control for parental religiousness, there is little difference, in the frequency of strong Jewish identification, between those who attended some form of part-time religious school and those who reported only Sunday-school or no formal religious training. (2) Those who have attended a yeshiva or a day school consistently, score higher on Jewish identification measures than those who did not. This relationship is maintained even when we control for parental religiousness. (3) The effect of full-time religious education is most pronounced among those respondents whose parents are the most observant. (4) Though the effect of yeshivas and day schools is substantial for all identification variables, the greatest increment over the part-time respondents is in knowledge of Hebrew—the one cognitive variable measured in this study.

The first three conclusions parallel those of Greeley and Rossi in their study of Catholic education: part-time Catholic schools were found to have little effect upon religious attitudes; full-time parochial education did influence such attitudes, but the effect was highly specified for respondents from more religious homes.

It seems that, in general, the religious attitudes of children resemble those found in the home. Even if a totally parochial educational setting is provided, the school cannot succeed in imparting religious attitudes not found in the home. The effect of religious education upon children from a religious home environment should be viewed more as attitude maintenance than as attitude change; that is, the full-time school seems to stem a falling away from high levels of parental religious commitment, a phenomenon which is fairly common among those without a full-time religious education. A part-time religious school stands even less chance of influencing a child's religioethnic attitudes than the full-time institutions, since it commands fewer hours of the student's time and must compete with the secular schools for the child's interest. It is likely to lose in the resultant competition, and even to engender hostility, in some students, to the very norms and values it is trying to inculcate.

The fourth conclusion above, pointing out the efficacy of the yeshivas and day schools in teaching Hebrew, indicates one area in which religious schools may exert some real influence. To understand the full significance of this finding, one must recognize that a knowledge of Hebrew is essential for the mastery of Jewish religious

and historical studies. Almost all full-time Jewish schools begin instruction in Hebrew in the first year of classes. Hebrew's centrality to the curricula of yeshivas and day schools suggests that respondents who report fluency in Hebrew would score higher than other respondents on questions evaluating knowledge of the Bible and Jewish history. This supposition is admittedly tentative, since the generalizing from a knowledge of Hebrew to the whole sphere of Jewish studies taught in the full-time schools may be questionable. However, such a supposition and generalization finds support in the previously cited research on Catholic education: "Respondents educated in Catholic schools may not score very high on the religious-knowledge test, but they do much better than those who did not have such an educational background."¹⁵

In summary, among students from highly observant homes, full-time religious education can serve as a powerful buttress against the secularizing pull of society. However, in general, parochial schools do not seem to change religious attitudes. Such attitudes seem to be formed primarily in the home, and schools are classically poor institutions for altering religious (or secular) beliefs. On the other hand, religious schools can be expected to succeed as much or as little, with all their students (not just the highly religious), as their secular counterparts in teaching intellectual material—in the case of the Jewish school, intellectual material of a particular religioethnic group.

¹⁵ Greeley and Rossi, *op. cit.*, p. 62.