

Teach Your Children When They Are Young: Contemporary Jewish Education in the United States

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From: Bisd Hemed, vol 9-10 - 1994

INTRODUCTION:

"It was the best of times and the worst of times." While Dickens was not describing Jewish education when he wrote this famous line, it is perhaps the most accurate description of Jewish education in America today. More children have more options for Jewish education than ever before; lay leadership has begun to accept the key role that Jewish education plays in Jewish continuity; and more money is spent on Jewish education than ever before. Yet, despite all of these accomplishments, Jewish identification is in jeopardy, Jewish supplementary schooling is in crisis and the overall effectiveness of Jewish education in America is in question.

While the answers to many of these problems should be available through research, few studies have been completed that provide anything more than a regional or local assessment of Jewish education, causing Walter Ackerman, to note "Most writing on Jewish education is hortatory and informed opinion at best."

In order to increase the understanding of the relationship between Jewish education and Jewish identification and continuity, the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies of Brandeis University and the Jewish Education Service of North America commissioned a two-part report on Jewish education, based upon data collected as part of the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990.

The first study, entitled *When They Are Grown They Will Not Depart Jewish Education and the Jewish Behavior of American Adults*. (Fishman and Goldstein, 1993) revealed the strong association between more extensive formal Jewish schooling and greater Jewish identification. Adults who had received six or more years of formal Jewish schooling scored higher in every measurable index of Jewish identification; they were more likely to belong to synagogues and Jewish organizations, to donate money to Jewish causes, to marry another Jew, to seek out a Jewish milieu, and to perform Jewish rituals in their homes.

The second report, *Teach Your Children When They Are Young. Contemporary Jewish Education in the United States* (Fishman and Goldstein, 1993) focused on levels of formal and informal Jewish education among American Jewish children today. It related the amount of formal and informal education which Jewish children receive to the denomination of the homes in which they are being raised, the religious composition of the household, the level of ritual practice in the home, and the Jewish education of their parents.

The following are excerpts from the second of these studies and reveal much needed information about the current state of Jewish education in North America.

Formal Education

Enrollment Statistics: Based upon information provided in the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 there are approximately 1,084,000 Jewish children age 6 to 18. 46 percent are being raised as Jews. The large majority of children being raised Jewish have been exposed to some kind of formal Jewish education between the ages of 6 and 18. Of all children, 38 percent have ever been enrolled in a program of Jewish education, but this varies from 73 percent of the Jewish children to only 8 percent of those identified as non-Jews.

The percentages vary by age as well. Among the Jewish children, about 55 percent of 6 and 7 year olds have ever received any Jewish education. Among the older children, the percentage rose to just over three-quarters.

The branch of Judaism with which the family identifies does make a significant difference in the extent of education among Jewish children. Almost all of those being raised in Orthodox households have had some Jewish education. The percentage is lower for those living in Conservative or Reform households, 79 percent and 77 percent, respectively. In households that consider themselves "just Jewish", only 46 percent of the children have ever been enrolled in programs of Jewish education...

As expected, years of schooling clearly increase with age, and boys and girls in the pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah age groups are the most likely to be currently enrolled. Most important, with age and gender controlled, children whose households identify as Reform have had significantly fewer years of Jewish education than children from either Orthodox or Conservative families, and those from families who consider themselves just Jewish are characterized by much less Jewish education than any of those identifying with a specific branch of Judaism...

Of the 372,000 children who had ever received Jewish education, 71 percent were currently enrolled. Current enrollment was seen in at least 90 percent of the children prior to age 13, but the percentage dropped precipitously thereafter, to 60 percent of the 13 to 15 year olds, and to below one-quarter of the 16 to 18 year olds. Jewish education for children still seems to peak heavily at the elementary school level and be oriented towards Bar/Bat Mitzvah - after which it comes to an abrupt halt.

Type of Schooling: For those currently enrolled, the survey also determined the type of schooling - full-time, part-time, Sunday-only (one-day only), or tutor. Based upon the data, full-time schools are retaining youngsters longer than part-time programs. They also confirm the importance of branch of Judaism with which the household identified: The most intensive type of schooling was given to those children from Orthodox homes.

For all ages together, full-time school involved some 27 percent of the children; about 35 percent were in part-time programs, and 30 percent enrolled in Sunday school only. Fewer than 10 percent of the children used a tutor, and these were concentrated among the 8 to 15 year olds, no doubt primarily for Bar/Bat Mitzvah training. Enrollment in the three other types of programs varied considerably by both age and gender.

To some extent, the distribution of enrollment by age reflects the availability of various kinds of programs of Jewish education. Thus, it is not surprising that of the youngest children (age 6 to 7), a majority are enrolled in Sunday-only programs and another 38 percent are in full-time programs. Those age 8 to 15 are more likely to be in part-time schools - the kind of Jewish education offered by congregational schools of all three branches of Judaism. Nonetheless, about one in five of these elementary school children are enrolled in a full-time program and about an equal percentage attend Sunday only. At the older ages (16 to 18) those still enrolled in programs of Jewish education tend to be in full-time schools (44 percent), with the remainder about equally divided between part-time and Sunday-only programs. Day

schools are clearly retaining youngsters in their programs for longer periods than are the part-time schools.

Even more than was true of years of Jewish education, the type of school in which children are enrolled is determined by the branch of Judaism with which the household identifies. The vast majority of Orthodox children enrolled in Jewish education attend full-time schools. Among Conservative families, some 57 percent of the children go to part-time programs and about one in five attends a full-time school. Reform youngsters are most likely to be enrolled in Sunday-only programs (three-fourths), with most of the remainder in full-time Jewish schools. Parents who consider themselves just Jewish and have children currently receiving some kind of formal Jewish education are most likely to employ a tutor: 69 percent of children in this group are receiving such training. Since the families are likely not to be members of a congregation (such membership would imply identification with a specific branch of Judaism) and therefore not eligible to send their children to a congregational religious school, a tutor may be the only option many have for providing formal Jewish education to their children, especially for Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Interestingly, however, one in five of the youngsters from "just Jewish" households are enrolled in full-time Jewish schools...

Informal Jewish Education

Organized Informal Activities: Of those children being raised Jewish, 38 percent had been involved with at least one youth group or camp experience; among those not being raised Jewish, only about 5 percent had ever been to a Jewish camp and virtually none had ever joined a Jewish youth group.

Among the Jewish children, the percentage ever involved in these informal activities rose with age, from about one-fourth of the youngest group to half of the oldest. Among the older groups, many more were reported as having participated in youth groups than having gone to camps. The reverse characterized the younger groups, and especially the very youngest, among whom 24 percent had already had a camp experience, but only 3 percent belonged to a youth group. Again, this pattern largely reflects the availability of programs for young children; many youth programs are geared specifically to teens...

Not only is age related to informal educational experiences, it is also directly correlated with years of Jewish education and, for those who are currently enrolled in a formal Jewish educational program, type of school. Only 15 percent of those being tutored and 35 percent of those in Sunday-only programs have ever participated in a Jewish youth group or camp; in contrast 55 percent of those in a part-time program and 66 percent of those attending full-time schools have participated in youth groups or camps. Focusing on teenagers reveals that the vast majority of teens who have had no formal Jewish education have also failed to participate in informal activities. The percentage participating rises sharply with increasing years of education, so that over half of teens who have had three or more years of Jewish schooling have also been active in informal programs. Informal programs of Jewish education therefore are not being utilized as alternative forms of education. Instead, formal and informal experiences strongly augment the more formal experience. Together they form an educational cluster that is undoubtedly a key to understanding the role of education in enhancing Jewish identity.

Home-based Experiences: Perhaps even more important than formal and informal programs of Jewish education outside the home for establishing firm and strong patterns and identity among children are the activities to which the child is exposed at home. In addition to the message such activities at home convey to the child about the importance of Judaism to parents, such behavior may be intrinsically critical since much of Jewish observance is home based. It is also possible that home ritual increases in response to children's Jewish education...

REASONS FOR NON-ENROLLMENT

The analysis so far has concentrated on the factors that enhance enrollment in formal and informal Jewish education. Given the high percentage of youngsters who are not enrolled in any Jewish school at any given point in time, it is also important to understand the phenomenon of non-enrollment. National Jewish Population Survey asked the reasons for non-enrollment, and the answers suggest a variety of reasons that largely reflect a subjective evaluation about the lack of importance of Jewish education.

Among those respondents who gave a specific reason for their child's non-enrollment, one in five cited factors having to do with the available school - that it was of poor quality, too far away, or too expensive. One in ten indicated the child was too young or too old. The remaining two-thirds indicated that they thought their child had already had enough Jewish education, or that they or their children were not interested. These sets of reasons suggest that such parents place only limited value on Jewish education and do not consider it an essential element in their children's upbringing beyond some limited point.

The reasons for non-enrollment vary by the age of the child. After age 12, lack of interest on the part of the child is the most often cited reason, while problems with the school and disinterest among parents become less important. Surprisingly, for all age groups from 8 to 12, about one-fourth indicate that the child has had enough Jewish education. Parents of 16 to 18 year olds are also somewhat more likely to suggest that the child is too old to enroll in a program of Jewish education.

Although the number of cases is too few to allow for extensive analysis of reasons for non-enrollment by Jewish education of parents, data not presented here indicate some clear differences. Where both parents have had no Jewish education, most indicate their child has had enough or they are not interested. Parents who have both had 6 or more years of schooling overwhelmingly indicate the child is of an inappropriate age. In those families where one parent has had more Jewish education than the other, well over half indicate that either they or their children are not interested...

CONCLUSION

In terms of Jewish education, we have three types of contemporary Jewish families. One type of family is typified by multi-generational extensive Jewish education, and a combination of formal and informal Jewish educational experiences. This group tends to begin Jewish schooling at an early age, and often remains in Jewish schools through the teen years. For two-thirds of this group, these extended years of formal schooling are accompanied by participation in youth groups and camps, especially in the teen years.

A second, much more prevalent type of American Jewish family has a more modest Jewish educational profile. One or both parents have received one to five years of Jewish education, and children in the household also receive one to five years of formal schooling. This enrollment in Jewish schools almost always takes place in the years before and in preparation for the Bar Mitzvah ceremony at age thirteen, and children seldom receive Jewish schooling either as very young children or as teenagers. Moreover, only one-third of these children ever participate in any type of informal Jewish educational experiences, such as youth groups or camps.

A third type of American Jewish family has received almost no Jewish education. Either one or both parents were never enrolled in Jewish schools, and their children are not now enrolled and have not ever received Jewish schooling. According to the data, children from these households seldom go to Jewish camps or participate in Jewish youth groups.

The contrast between the Jewish educational profiles of these three types of families is vividly reflected in their household's measures of Jewish identification. First, and most dramatically, where both parents have received six or more years of Jewish education, the children are universally being raised as Jews. Where both parents have received one to five years of Jewish education, 88 percent of the children are being raised as Jews. Where either parent has received no Jewish education, slightly over half of the children (54 percent) are being raised as Jews. But in households in which neither parents received formal Jewish education, only 16 percent of the children are being raised as Jews. Since these households disproportionately contain non-Jews and persons who were born Jews but now identify as something else, this

patten is understandable, although disturbing...

Many factors enter into choices about Jewish education. For some families, choices are limited by geographical location and by the institutional structure of the community - parents cannot send their children to schools which do not exist, or which are beyond a realistic commute. Nevertheless, Jewish education does function as a kind of window through which we can view the Jewish identity and commitment of households, and make some judgments about continuity of Jewish identity...

Barring unforeseen developments in American life, it seems likely that although the day-school movement may continue to grow, part-time programs will continue to be exclusive venue for formal Jewish schooling for the majority of American Jewish children. Programs which can bring larger numbers of children into Jewish educational environments early and provide them with attractive age-appropriate Jewish educational environments for teenagers as well seem highly desirable.

Evidence of change among some elements in the population is seen in the fact that among 16 to 18 year olds, more than three-quarters of children from Conservative households had received six or more years of Jewish education, as had almost half of the Reform teenagers (49 percent), but only eight percent of those identified as "just Jewish." Indeed, at ages 16 to 18, the mean number of years of Jewish education for both Orthodox and Conservative youths was a little over 6 years. Moreover, almost one out of five Conservative Jewish children receiving formal Jewish education are enrolled in full-time programs, as are over 90 percent of Orthodox children, and eight percent of Reform children.

The growing popularity of full-time programs among the non-Orthodox population, the extensive use of six or more years of supplementary school education among Jewishly active segments of the Conservative and Reform population, and the successful and creative combinations of vigorous Jewish and secular education within modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, and community schools across the country all point in hopeful directions. Each of these trends suggests that patterns in Jewish education can be changed and improved.

There is, however, no reason to believe that such positive changes will occur without systematic and targeted efforts. In order for Jewish education to fulfill its positive potential in the American Jewish community, the clustering on Jewish educational experiences must be expanded to include larger segments of the American Jewish population. Informal Jewish educational experiences such as youth groups and camps were often the pivotal - and sometimes the most salient - Jewish events for Jewish children and teenagers in the past, according to extensive anecdotal evidence. At one time, even boys and girls who did not get much formal Jewish schooling may have belonged to Jewish youth groups or attended Jewish camps. Today, primarily those who also receive extensive schooling have Jewish camping and youth group experiences with Jewish peer groups. It is critical that Jewish youth groups and camps today be utilized by others in addition to those students who are already the most Jewishly educated.

Informal Jewish educational experiences can be extended to larger segments of the population in several ways. First, Jewish communities can enhance youth groups and camping programs which are already in existence by offering subsidies and assisting in marketing techniques. Second, specialized informal educational experiences can often be built into supplementary school programs and into synagogue calendars. These activities require cross-institutional cooperation, of course, but the Jewish community has demonstrated in the past that it is capable of such cooperation when assisting or rescuing Jews in distant lands. The vitality of American Jewish life is surely a cause deserving of similar intermural efforts...

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey data have shown us which clusters of Jewish education are associated with the most vital American Jewish living. Now we must work toward expanding these clusters for all. To the extent that the Jewish community can commit itself to discover the most effective means of educating Jews of all ages, can create and implement such programs, and can extend effective educational programming to more American Jews, Jewish education can become even more of an effective tool than it is already. Today we cannot afford for Jewish education - both formal and informal - to belong primarily to an elite group. The "trickle-down" theory does not work for Jewish education. The vitality of the Jewish community in the United States will depend increasingly on our ability to extend the powerful impact of Jewish education to an ever-broader spectrum of the population.



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