

Jewish Family Education

Jewish Family Life Education Programs

Stephen G. Donshik

The Jewish Family Life Education (JFLE) program is active in most of the 220 organized Jewish communities in North America. It has a dual focus on strengthening the family unit and Jewish identity. It has an expanding role not only among affiliated Jews, but also among the unaffiliated and marginal.

Family life education is informal, based on small group behavior and group dynamics. One of its foundations is the theory of growth and behavior, the idea of the stages of life. The second foundation is the theory of small group process, which allows individuals to share their own experience. And the third aspect is Jewish identity, in the North American sense: how one feels about oneself, and how one's knowledge of Judaism impacts on the way one lives one's life. Another aspect of JFLE is the way the structure of the program fits in with that of the community. It is a community-based rather than exclusively university- or synagogue-based program. There is cooperation in the federation structure of the Jewish community and the delivery agency, and the sponsoring agency is usually the Jewish family service. The agency may also cooperate with the Jewish community center and with synagogues. JFLE programs began to develop about twenty-five years ago, in major cities such as Cleveland, New York, and Chicago, and other communities continued to develop them in the last 15 years.

Often the Jewish family service is interested in developing a family life education program, and will either organize the program itself or develop one in coordination with another organization. A staff member will prepare the curriculum. Anyone who wants to, affiliated or not, can join the course, which is held if enough people sign up. The leader will be a professional social worker, perhaps in conjunction with a rabbi or teacher. The issues raised and the depth of the discussion depend on the group itself. Seminars of several sessions might be held on such

issues as Jewish marriage or Jewish parenting; on being a Jewish father or mother for the first time; or the meaning of Bar and Bat Mitzva for parent and child.

The crucial issues are not those of some abstract curriculum, but those which the participants are currently dealing with in their own lives. The organizers use these as an opportunity to introduce the Jewish aspects of those issues. For example, participants who did not have a Jewish content in the home in which they grew up are encouraged to introduce such content into the new married life on which they are embarking. Since there is no aspect of human growth and behavior which does not have its Jewish correlate, the way to develop Jewish identification in the informal system is to raise the issues of growth and behavior. As social workers are often the people organizing the seminars, a professional institute for social workers emphasizes Jewish content in its courses. Also many programs are now being run by synagogues and led by rabbis. In this way, we are creating Jewish family life education, and not just family life education programs.

Organizers of such programs try to attract the unaffiliated through thought-provoking advertisements which involve parents with their own children's learning in preparation for Bar Mitzvah, for example, or on what intermarriage means to those concerned and their families. Though controversial, as they may appear to some to condone intermarriage, the latter seminars would be worth examining for their results, through a follow-up study.

Jewish family life education is an exciting development. Educators who had undergone training recently stated in a survey that they would like to see more Jewish content in future training seminars, the same finding as social workers make when they conduct sessions in the community. Jewish family life education programs are intended to be an addition to other programs, but they can constitute the spark which illuminates a parent or child's interest enough to continue with Jewish education after Bar Mitzvah, and strengthen their own Jewish way of life.

How Do We Change the Statistics and Get the Jews?

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Historically speaking, it has always been understood that Judaism is first and foremost a life-style, a human and familial experience, which is the outgrowth of a literature. If the life-style is to be properly understood, it must be studied. In the past, the experience of Judaism was provided by the family. The learning background, in order to better understand the life-style experience, was given by the school. A tragic split has occurred in the development of Judaism in America. The home is no longer a vehicle for the Jewish experience. It no longer breeds Jewish values, nor expresses the Jewish life-style. As a result, the school is imparting knowledge which is totally separated from the life of the individual. In addition, we have poured most of our resources into elementary school education, whether Hebrew school or day school, in order to emphasize preparation for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The problem is that, if the home does not buttress what the student is learning in school, whatever is learned is of very little value. Moreover, Judaism has a philosophical message to teach, and that can hardly be appreciated by a youngster between the ages of eight and thirteen. Hence, the focus of Jewish education has to be shifted to the realm of the experiential even more than the realm of the cognitive. In other words, the experience is crucial. It must deal more with those who are adult, or entering into the adult years, and are therefore in a stage of life in which they can experience and appreciate the philosophy behind the Jewish experience, and put into practice a changed life-style which they do not necessarily know from their home.

Teachers and rabbis should try to deal with the questions which are bothering the people whom they are teaching, and should relate to them on the level of their problems and concerns. Informal education can, from many points of view, become more important than formal education. The late teen years, college years, and adult years, are probably more important than the early years in Jewish education.

Shabbat and the festivals should be emphasized in particular as times which provide a special structure for family togetherness. They enable families to overcome the inherent conflicts which often lead individuals into collision. An institution such as Shabbat can both bring singles together and reinforce families. The Pesach Seder and the other holidays as well provide similar opportunities for bringing people together and bringing Jews back to Jewish cultural traditions.

Family Education and Jewish Survival

Hertzel Fishman

Family education, a relatively new discipline in the social sciences, is rooted in psychotherapy. This is a relatively recent therapeutic attempt to treat an individual in the total context of his or her family. *Jewish* family education is so new that it barely exists, despite all the talk and publicity about it. In most instances, it refers to lectures about ceremonial aspects of Judaism or about interpersonal relationships within a family. It has little to do with a daily home culture for Jewish families, or with providing meaning and purpose to Jewish family life. What the contemporary use of the term lacks is an articulate appreciation of the worthwhileness of being Jewish. This is indispensable, for there is no longer a conscious will among Jews to survive as a people.

One must differentiate between being a 'Jew' and being 'Jewish'. The former term, a noun, does not entail any specific mode of behavior or commitment. Anyone can be called a Jew – Cardinal Lustiger of Paris, Bishop Montefiore of Birmingham, Brother Daniel of Haifa, Jews for Jesus; all of these were born of Jewish mothers and, halakhically, are Jews. The problem of Jewish survival revolves around the adjective 'Jewish'. The question which needs addressing is not 'who is a Jew', but rather, 'why is it eminently worthwhile to remain Jewish in an open, exciting, luring Western culture'. That is the issue which affects intermarriage and Jewish survival, loyalty to peoplehood, and participation in Jewish historic destiny.

A Jewish education in childhood does not necessarily make one Jewish, nor does studying Hebrew, Jewish history, the Bible, or about the State of Israel. Education must reflect a goal, not only a process. What makes a person Jewish – besides the daily practice of *mitzvot* – is a sense of ideological purpose, commitment to implementing the Sinai covenant, and an unflinching belief that the Jewish people has a special destiny, namely, to become a light unto the nations in practicing and spreading sanctity to mankind. Such a purpose can excite young people who are idealistic by nature, for it expresses an ideology of improving the state of the world (*tikkun olam*). But the world begins with an individual. The Midrash explicitly asserts that the purpose of all the *mitzvot* is to refine human nature (so that one will learn to treat the other person as a 'thou' rather than as an 'it' – because that individual has been created in the divine image). Jews are assimilating

everywhere because they have forgotten the historic commitment made at Sinai to be a special kind of society – a *goy kadosh*, an *am segula* (a holy and treasured people).

Young people would readily rally around such a purpose, but very few educators are teaching this ideology. Instead, we tend to substitute gimmicks for substance. Israel is not just a place to visit, but a national framework in which to create a model society, a new type of Jew. The Sinai covenant was meant to be put into practice by a national Jewish community; it was not acknowledged by individuals, but by an entire people.

The essence of Jewish peoplehood is Jewish culture – not only learning about it, but practicing it. Family education must reflect this culture, which happens to be religious in nature. However, the kinds of Jewish religious culture practiced today, perhaps with the exception of Orthodoxy, are anaemic and unexciting, because they lack a daily home environment conducive to commitment and purpose.

There is no viable culture of a people without a daily home implementation – language, customs, values, songs, stories, etc. Parents normally convey culture to their children from the moment they are born, but there are no daily Jewish cultural elements in most homes. Giving children beautiful Hebrew names at birth strengthens their Jewish identities, for they hear their names every day of their lives. Listening frequently to Israeli songs at home becomes part of one's cultural heritage. While it is not realistic to expect all Jews to speak Hebrew at home, they can at least use Hebrew value concepts in daily speech (*rahmanut*, *tzaddik*, *shalom*, *yosher*, etc.). Stories can center around Jewish themes and Jewish heroes, including the *halutzim* of the Zionist renaissance. Every person needs heroes. Jewish homes can be filled with Jewish artefacts, books and pictures. Discussing current Jewish and Israeli issues around the dinner table invariably makes Jewish peoplehood relevant to the participants. Friday and holiday eves can be planned as cultural-religious 'happenings' with the active participation of adults and children alike.

The meaningful core of Jewish education emanates from the family. When youngsters begin to imbibe the uniqueness of Jewish culture from childhood, such experiences become second-nature to them. One can reasonably expect them to remain Jewish all their lives – and hand down this exciting heritage to their children.

Individual families may find it difficult to create a special kind of Jewish home culture for their children. Youngsters need peers to share and legitimate their experiences – as do their parents. Parents can more easily convey Jewish culture to their offspring in small groups of

families, within the framework of an ideological *bavurah* of common values and practices, so that adults and children can support each other like an extended family. A world network of such *bavurot* would contribute substantially to ensure the viability of Jewish peoplehood.

Jewish Family Heritage and Education

Yitzhak Halbrecht

In 1970 I created the Jewish Family Heritage Institute, with a view to coming to grips with the problem of developing Jewish awareness in millions of people who are already quite alienated from Judaism and in no way willing to learn about either the foundations of Jewish faith or culture, or even to hear about Zionist ideology. The first project is genealogical: the search for roots, an attempt to arouse the curiosity of people by asking: Who are you? Who were your parents and your ancestors? These questions of searching for roots should gradually lead to essential questions, not only who were my parents, but also what were they, and what was the content of their Jewishness.

This kind of approach has the capacity not only to bring back those who are alienated, but also to attract the children of mixed families whom we do not wish to lose.

The second stage was through the Jewish Oral Family History Project which was initiated in schools in Canada and Montevideo, and in many kibbutzim in Israel.

The objectives of the project are to bring the grandparents, who are generally well versed and closely bound up in our tradition, to be active within the Jewish family; firstly dialogue with and closeness to the grandchildren, and at the same time perhaps an inter-generational dialogue taking in the children. Reestablishment of the status of the grandfather and grandmother in the family nucleus in which they have almost lost their role, as a means in Jewish family education, and the questioning of the grandfather and grandmother by the grandchildren, provide the family with a great deal of material on the history of the family as a Jewish family.

The third stage is the creation of *ulpanim* for Jewish parenthood and grandparenthood: even where profound Jewish roots and knowledge of what Judaism is exist, it is doubtful whether many parents and grandparents know how to transmit this to the following generations. To be a Jewish parent and grandparent is a task that must be learnt. The

idea is to create in every community an ulpan for teaching and subsequent ongoing guidance, which will be assisted by educators, psychologists, sociologists, rabbis and other professionals, in order to teach and guide the grandparents and parents on what to transmit and, just as importantly, how to transmit Judaism and Jewishness to children and grandchildren.

A model two-course ulpan, one course operating in various languages for the Diaspora and the other in Hebrew, was created in Israel in recent years.

Emunah, the Religious Women's Organization

Guggy Graham

World Emunah is now centered in Jerusalem, and has organizations in twenty-two countries, an increase from the nine countries of ten years ago. This impressive growth was achieved by the organization of one country working closely with that of another to help it get started, on a one on one basis.

Emunah is based on the principle of *abavat Israel*, love for the land and the people, of all Jews without distinction; Emunah thus maintains neutrality and does not get involved in social schisms, such as that between religious and secular Jews. The second basic principle is Jewish religion as a way of life, Jewish values in everyday living. Halachah provides us with a frame, a discipline within which to conduct our daily lives and to exercise our free will.

On the basis of these two principles, Emunah women concentrate their efforts on traditional Jewish education in Israel and the Diaspora for women and children, and on social work in Israel. The second effort is largely supported by moneys received from Emunah sisterhoods abroad. Our projects form an important support for Israel's social and educational programs. We take care of children from babyhood up to advanced training, and we provide programs for adult education, and support services, including family counseling, for mothers and their families.

The special ingredient in all our projects is traditional observance. Little children learn how to light Shabbat candles and say *kiddush*, often receiving their first religious experiences, which become more meaningful as time goes on, and even influencing the parents. We help working mothers by looking after their children, and we particularly try

to help mothers of large families, as part of our effort to improve quality of life for people and their families in Israel. World Emunah produces materials on religious observance aimed at women and children in English, French and Spanish, and they are available free of charge. There is enough material for running a school, and such a school has indeed been opened in Barcelona to supplement the main Jewish school. In Sweden, and other Scandinavian countries where assimilation is very high, study groups using our educational materials are now flourishing.

Emunah programs in Israel have helped the children of immigrants, from Holocaust survivors to Ethiopian Jews. In particular, Emunah helps problem children from disadvantaged backgrounds to become integrated.

British Emunah has its own program in Britain, but appreciates the material from Jerusalem. It runs twice-weekly study classes conducted by rabbis, and clubs for mothers and toddlers. The babies are taken care of by volunteers, while the mothers attend talks and discussions on a variety of topics, such as religious subjects and Israel. Many of our members are businesswomen and professionals, some of whom have become more observant as a result of joining Emunah. We are proud of our day school, which takes children aged four to eleven, and provides a religious Zionist education. Many of our young people belong to the Bnei Akiva organization, visit Israel for work or study, and eventually settle in Israel, often followed by their parents. The Emunah organization puts its trust in its youth, and in the future of Israel.

Approaches to Jewish Family Education in Latin America

Ines Lumir

In Argentina, a major problem faced by all the institutionalized Jewish organizations – AMIA, DAIA, the Zionist Organization, the Aliyah Movement, Urim and the women's organizations – was how to teach the parents to send their children to Jewish schools. (The Jewish education system in Argentina embraces kindergarten, elementary and secondary school and college.)

The Argentine Jewish community numbered over 300,000 in the 1950s, and from that time, over about twenty years, some 50,000 members made aliyah to Israel. The community had difficulty in

contending with the ideological dimension of Jewish education, namely with the parents' fear that as a result of education in a Jewish school their children would make aliyah on completion of their studies.

In the course of time the idea was conceived of a kind of "Parents' Federation", whose members were the parents of the pupils in the Jewish education systems. These parents worked to persuade young Jewish couples that the Jewish school can teach their children first and foremost Jewish cultural values and history, and provide a basis for them to deliberate on the question of aliyah to Israel, on reaching adulthood, out of free choice.

In the space of a few years, as a result of this activity, the Aliyah Movement was created from graduates of the Jewish education system: this is a self-fulfilling group whose leaders come to Israel within a period of three years.

The answer to the question of family education and teaching Jewish awareness to the young generation in South America lies in the strengthening of the formal and informal Jewish education frameworks in Latin America, and in the teaching of Jewish history, contemporary Judaism and Israel studies, throughout the whole age range, from early childhood to senior citizens.

Likewise, the number of "Israel Experience" programs must be increased, in particular delegations of young people, young couples and the middle-aged, so that they can form impressions and transmit the message on their return. Volunteer programs on kibbutzim, such as *Tapuz* and others, have also proved most effective in this direction, and must be developed and expanded. An idea which seems to have commenced and which should be developed, is that of preparatory courses for married life and establishing a Jewish home for young couples about to be married, in which they will learn the contents of a Jewish home and Jewish family life.

A parallel idea which should be developed, is a school for parenthood, concentrating on the topic "Partnership in the Family" between the husband and the wife, from presence at childbirth, along the entire road of responsibility for bringing up and educating the children, and all that this involves.

In all events, it will be difficult to advance in these topics in the countries of South America if the many organizations working on a parallel there do not accomplish general coordination, an achievement which will benefit the issue as regards allocation of financial and human resources and effort.

Educational and Other Activities to Assist Families in Transmitting Jewish Identity to the Younger Generation

Michal Zmorah Cohen

The discussions centered on three dimensions of Jewish identity: the what, the how, and the for whom, or the contents, the form, and the consumer. I shall begin with the consumer, and proceed backwards.

As far as concerns the consumer, the excellent point was made that since Judaism is a deep philosophy of life, we should not consider our primary consumers to be children between ten and twelve, who cannot really grasp it. We should thus shift our primary target to the teenager, which is the right time to approach young Jews, before they consider marriage and when they are ready to deal with the philosophical side of life.

There were many different approaches to the question of form, or how to do this. Various voluntary organizations, particularly women's organizations and informal *chavurah* groups, were held up as examples of good approaches to the problem. Another approach is to emphasize the young Jew's role as a link in a genealogical chain, playing one's part in the survival of one's family. Other federations which bring Jewish organizations together in countries such as Argentina were indicated as successful instruments.

There was no real consensus on the subject of the contents of Jewish identity. There were no differences regarding exactly what a Jewish education should be. All agreed that the education has to be based on our Jewish heritage. But what that heritage is, whether Halachah in the strictest sense, or whether it includes a more pluralistic interpretation adapted to the twentieth century, revealed a gulf between the participants.

Agreement was unanimous, however, on the point that joint action, the pooling of efforts for a common goal, would vastly improve the effectiveness of our work.