

Jewish Education in a Time of Change*

Bernard Olshansky

Executive Director, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, Massachusetts

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We call ourselves the people of the book. The *Torah* tells us, "These words which I command you shall be upon your heart; and you will teach them diligently to your children." So powerful is our acceptance of this doctrine that it has become a central element of our faith. We allude to it every time we recite the *Sh'ma*.

The Talmud instructs us, "And all your children shall be taught of the Lord." We are directed to think of them not merely as our children, but as our builders. It is through learning that our people is to gain its strength.

And lest we think that education is to be restricted to children, Maimonides tells us, "Every Israelite is under an obligation to study *Torah*, whether he is poor or rich, in sound health or ailing, in the vigor of youth or very old and feeble."

This is our tradition. What has been our performance?

The overwhelming majority of Jews in the United States has enjoyed education at the college level. A very large segment of our community has earned advanced degrees. Academic awards, professorships and international recognition have been granted to Jewish scholars to such an extent that veneration for learning has become widely accepted as characteristic of the Jews. At the same time, for much of American Jewry, knowledge of Judaism and understanding of Jewish experience are shrinking to the point of obliteration. Even if there were no propensity

* Presented at the Lown Conference on Jewish Education, Hebrew College, Boston, December 4, 1978. This presentation will also appear as an article in the proceedings of the meeting.

for assimilation and no failure to reproduce ourselves through marrying later and having fewer children, our future might still very well be jeopardized by our diminishing knowledge of Jewish forms and our shrinking ability to carry out Jewish commandments.

Let me pause to enter a disclaimer. I am normally guarded in my public remarks. As the executive head of a major Federation, I know that my remarks often are attributed to my position. What I say is heard as the comments of an "official" of the Federation and represents the "Federation position."

I should state that I am generally in agreement with my Federation's policies. I have no problems of intellect or conscience in accepting its decisions. But I am making this statement solely from a personal perspective. I regard the issues of Jewish education to be so profound and so significant for Jewish survival that a straightforward statement is required. The views expressed here are not to be attributed to anyone else.

Jewish education today is a disaster. The quality is poor. The administration is weak. Its funding is inadequate. It lacks scope and perspective. It is divided by ideological differences. The atmosphere from which students come to learn is bereft of hope. The conditions under which they study are futile.

This should occasion no surprise to some readers who have heard it from others, even more colorfully and graphically expressed. Yet the condition is shocking. This is intended as an objective, not emotional, statement of fact, describing a set of conditions which currently exists. It must be recognized that there are important exceptions to which I have not

referred.

When we talk about Jewish education today, we generally refer to formal education of children. We talk about schools, classrooms, text books, and curricula. For the most part, we are referring to elementary, rather than secondary or advanced, education. In all of these areas, we are losing ground rapidly. We have fewer children of school age, and fewer of these children are enrolled in Jewish education.

In Boston, for example, in the ten years from 1965 to 1975, the number of children of school age dropped from roughly 42,700 to about 36,700. The number of children enrolled in all types of Jewish schools—day schools, afternoon Hebrew schools, Sunday schools, etc.—dropped from 14,700 to 10,500, from 34 percent of children of school age to 28 percent. Two years later, the number enrolled in schools had shrunk by another 400. Why is this?

The fact that we have fewer children is a matter for major concern. We have attained ZJPG—zero Jewish population growth. Our community is better educated than ever before. Its members, male and female, increasingly are engaged in professional employment, which requires more years of preparation. In such circumstances, life patterns and family patterns inevitably change.

Young men and women involved in professional careers have different attitudes toward one another and toward themselves. They are inclined toward more mobility, and their material needs are becoming more important to them. Early and frequent child-bearing and the burdens of child-rearing are not readily compatible with such a life style. The resolution of this incompatibility is toward fewer children, if any, more widely-spaced.

Add to this the uncertainties of marriage, the increasing rate of divorce and interchange of families, intermarriage, assimilation, and mobility. Note that institutions traditionally were supported by families that stayed together in one place, over a period of many years, that

families rarely remain in one place for very long today.

Throughout most of Jewish history, Jews tended to live together in *shtetlach*, ghettos and ethnic neighborhoods, thereby creating a total Jewish environment. It was expected that every child would have some form of Jewish instruction. This has changed.

All these factors, together, inevitably reduce the number of potential enrollees in programs of Jewish education. They certainly account for fewer actual enrollees.

Shifting numbers and reduced size of student bodies affect quality of education. Even if the household from which the child comes were committed to an excellent education—which often is not the case—the quality of education would suffer. Even if the teacher were an outstanding one—which too often is not the case—the quality of education would suffer.

Furthermore, the mission of Jewish education is now different. Jewish schools once were expected to impart knowledge and sharpen skills. Now they must also create Jewish atmosphere, convey Jewish feeling, teach Hebrew, and see to the observance of Jewish holidays and ritual. They must give knowledge of Jewish history and tradition and provide Jewish social contact. For most Jewish children this must be done in six hours per week, or less.

Let us turn to the teacher. I do not associate myself with those who heap the woes of Jewish education upon the shoulders of the teacher. "If only the teacher were competent, then my child could be educated properly." Teacher competence may sometimes be the issue; often it is not. Many of today's teachers have outstanding educational qualifications. The field of general education has made advances in the years since World War II, many of which have been applied in the field of Jewish education. Teachers have been exposed, through workshops and courses of study, to the implementation of such activities.

I do believe, however, that the problem of the teacher is a major problem of Jewish

education. There is no professional corps of Jewish educators in the United States today. There are a few first- and second-generation American Jews who come out of rich Jewish backgrounds and who are Judaically knowledgeable. There are small numbers of graduates of programs of intensive afternoon or day school education, people who have studied in Israel, people who have benefitted from university programs in Judaica. Many of these are knowledgeable Jewishly and competent professionally.

But for the most part, we are dependent on a shifting base of inexperienced neophytes, harried veterans, and part-time something-elses. The classroom is not an entry point for a career, but a way-station and a temporary haven. Supervision is sporadic. Professional opportunity is negligible. Compensation is meager. Salaries, which on an hourly basis seem fairly generous, are inadequate to provide a dignified living. Fringe benefits, health coverage, retirement policies are absent. The introduction of such issues is regarded either as anarchy or extravagance.

Is it any wonder that we have no pool from which to draw principals, education consultants, directors of central educational agencies? Is it any wonder that quality education for most students is virtually non-existent?

To my mind, a major problem of Jewish education is the fact that the system has become fragmented. Jewish education should be a communal enterprise. The community should be committed to life-long Jewish education of high quality. It must seek to accomplish this objective in a manner which makes most effective use of limited communal resources.

But an interesting thing happened on the way to the suburbs. As Jews left their old neighborhoods, spreading out to new areas, their institutions lagged behind.

One institution tried to keep pace: the synagogue. In one enclave after another, new synagogues were formed. The synagogue sought to vitalize its traditional functions as house of worship, house of learning and house

of assembly.

For a while, it appeared that the experiment might succeed. Many fine congregational schools emerged. The community relinquished its connections with the congregational school and the system became more fragmented.

The synagogue was on the front line, and it became isolated. Acting on behalf of the Jewish people, it tried to be all things to all people, but it failed. *We failed. We forgot that the Jewish people is a collectivity of many institutions, all of which have a part in maintaining Jewish vitality.*

In permitting the isolation of the synagogue, the community undermined not only the synagogue's educational function, but its larger religious function, as well. Relationships with adults as well as children have been disrupted. And the community has been the loser.

Viewed in educational terms, the synagogue has been faced with shrinking enrollments and a narrowing base of human and fiscal resources. As its membership and financial base have shrunk and as its enrollments have become smaller, it has had to cut expenses and reduce costs to the point of no return. Unable to afford professional career educators, it has turned to part-timers and temporaries. Lacking sufficient enrollments, it is unable to group students by levels of ability and interests. It cannot afford specialists to enrich the quality of the educational experience.

Yet, separate and costly administrative structures are maintained. Schools which are not viable continue to be operated in the vain hope that they will draw new members and strength to the synagogue. What happens, instead, is that the losses accelerate and the damage is increased.

Institutions which are struggling for their very existence are not going to provide generous salaries, excellent fringe benefits, or exciting opportunities for professional growth or advancement. They become hold-the-line operations. The product they buy is worth what they pay for it. But the Jewish community and the Jewish people are penalized.

Grim words? Frightening words? Shall we give blast to the Shofar and let the whole structure crumble around us?

In spite of my dismal tone, I believe there is room for hope. The Jewish community has the capacity to find solutions to these problems. It rests upon a readiness to define objectives together and to make more effective use of existing resources. It assumes that new resources may be generated, but that they will be finite not infinite.

We can not undertake an exhaustive discussion here of all aspects of the educational system, but I do have some thoughts which I believe might point a direction. Perhaps we can begin an evolutionary process that can improve our educational product.

Let us start with the teacher: the teacher as a professional, and the development of a career line in the field of Jewish education.

In the words of Eli Grad, President of the Boston Hebrew College, "Ultimately, the quality of Jewish education reflects the status of the *profession* of Jewish education. There will be no quality education until there are career opportunities for qualified professionals."

A profession requires entry level positions, the availability of good supervision, jobs at competitive salaries, fringe benefits, opportunities for growth in scope and responsibility. It needs middle-level practitioners, principals and specialists. It is from these that top-level administrators will be drawn. The cause of Jewish education will not be served by recruiting its top leadership from other fields. This may sometimes be effective. But, in the long run, leadership must be developed from within.

The splintering of school units and of available resources will not promote career opportunities. It is here that the community must assume its role. Educational systems must be created under auspices with the resources to provide adequate support. Only then can a profession of Jewish education develop.

It is in this respect that I believe the Federa-

tion should assume responsibility. I say this with full recognition that the support by Federation of Jewish education has been the fastest growing aspect of Federation involvement in the past decade. I acknowledge, too, the intensified Jewish component of programs in other fields of endeavor.

To my mind, the time has come for the community, with Federation support, to sponsor a corps of professional teachers, at all levels. The idea is not mine. I heard it from Louis Newman, Director of Boston's Bureau of Jewish Education. But it is a good idea.

This corps should be able to provide quality Jewish education whether in day schools, afternoon schools, or other educational entities. It means the development of entry level positions at competitive starting salaries and fringe benefits. It also means opportunities for professional growth and advancement; the establishment of positions for model teachers; middle-level administrative jobs; the top-level professional assignments, organized and compensated as though they were in fact top-level positions.

In order to accomplish this, the educational structure may have to be reorganized. It may be that synagogues, except for a very few of the largest institutions, will have to give up the maintenance of separate schools. But this cannot be dictated. There is no authority in public life or in Jewish life that can tell a given institution that it must close down a program or cease an activity. The only way this will come about is through voluntary action. It may be that positive and negative inducements can be offered. The positive inducement may be the promise of something better; the negative inducement could be the prospect of failure.

I am aware that there are those who have called for communal sponsorship of all Jewish education. This is not my purpose. Although it may have to be considered at some future time, I do not believe it is practical now. Nor do I consider it desirable. There is value in diversity in Jewish life.

What I would prefer to see is a joining of

forces; a combination of school units. Three or four schools, of similar ideology, within the same geographic area could join forces, thereby making their schools more efficient and their education more effective. In such a joint venture, the professional teacher corps could provide excellent classroom teachers. They would instruct classes properly organized for maximum learning. The corps could provide specialists to add richness and excitement to the educational environment.

The community, through its Federation, might help in other ways: subsidies for transportation; centralized administrative functions, such as bookkeeping, data processing, printing, and group retirement and health coverage. The Bureau of Jewish Education would obviously serve as a vehicle for much of this.

Who would pay for such a Utopian scheme? Is it likely the major amount of money will become available for Jewish education? Probably not. Federation funding, by its very nature must be handled incrementally. It is possible that Federation subventions could increase, but only over a long period of time.

The funding must come first from within the system itself. The kinds of administrative savings I described could represent a beginning. The teacher corps offers a second possibility. Schools could pay the sponsoring entity fees for the services of the teachers they use. The fee could be based on an hourly charge covering the total cost per teacher. The Federation might subsidize the system by paying the cost of administration. Additional funds, if available, could be used to lower unit charges or provide desirable extras.

Even schools which do not join forces with it might benefit from such a system. If a congregation prefers to maintain its own school, but cannot afford to pay its teachers at a professional level, it may be willing to buy portions of its teachers' time. Teachers would be paid by the sponsoring agency. Their services would be made available to individual schools, which would purchase as much time as they could afford to pay. Control of the

teachers' time and assignment would be with the sponsoring authority. Determination of curriculum and ideology would be the responsibility of the school itself.

The strengthening of Jewish education will not result only from improvements in the school system. Other areas of concern have an impact on education. One of them, the family, could profit from the creative attention of educators.

I noted earlier some changes in characteristics of the Jewish community: more professionalism, greater prosperity, later marriages and fewer children. We are confronted with a crisis in Jewish family life which may well threaten the very existence of the Jewish people. The Jewish community must be concerned with enhancing the quality of Jewish family life. Is this objective not one to which Jewish education can contribute?

I have been among those who have called for a return to classical patterns of Jewish family life: the mother at home, at least while the children are young; the father at work; more children; more family interaction. But it is not going to happen.

Let me, therefore, suggest that new forms of family life must be explored and developed, that we seek ways in which satisfying careers can be joined together with gratifying and productive Jewish family life. I would like to see the agencies of the Jewish community direct their efforts toward this end. Two illustrations may help clarify my point.

The family agency heretofore has been concerned largely with helping people in trouble. This has been a worthy function, entirely consistent with Jewish values and traditions, and there is much that still must be done. But the role of the family agency has been shifting. Increasingly, it has been concerned with strengthening of Jewish family life. This means going beyond the realm of counseling and assistance to families and individuals. It suggests an approach entirely compatible with the objectives of Jewish education.

Is this not a time for educators and family service people to join forces? Is this not an

opportunity for seeking innovative approaches to strengthening Jewish family life by exploring old forms and testing new ones? Is it possible that creative approaches to parenting might help establish new adaptations which are Jewishly valid and effective? I won't argue for one method or another. Some have talked about *Havurot* or extended families. Others have talked about instructional programs on aspects of Jewish life: the life cycle, the observance of holidays and rituals.

Perhaps a new approach to the family can be taken through the day care center. I have been disposed to resist day care for very young children, on the basis that no substitute can give them what their mothers can. However, if their mothers intend to pursue careers, I do not believe the solution is to make mothers out of fathers. Therefore, why not try the day-care center? But with a twist. The day-care center could be designed to offer a Jewish educational experience.

Such a program might seek to develop the whole child, with full attention to his or her physical and mental growth. The child's emotional stability is precious to us. But we should not stop there. We should also commit ourselves to the child's development as a Jew, providing an atmosphere for Jewish living

which will supplement and perhaps even stimulate the home environment. Parents would be drawn, through appropriate parental activities, to relate to Jewish purposes and methods. Perhaps even a supplemental program of adult education might be designed to accompany the enrollment of a child in a day care center.

We need not fear any overdose of Jewish content among today's young professionals; few of them are very literate Jewishly. The inducement to such enrollment could be the quality and vibrancy of the programs in which their children are involved. Perhaps we might even be creative enough to plan and execute programs of adult education which they will find exciting and attractive in their own right.

A noted scholar in the Boston community, Isadore Twersky, once said that he has no doubt about the survival of the Jewish people. Its survival, to him, is a matter of absolute faith. But Rabbi Twersky would join me, I am sure, in asserting that faith would not suffer from a bit of assistance. To the extent that we are able to improve the quality of our educational enterprise, we strengthen the likelihood of our survival as a people. And if truly we are to be a light unto the nations, then our obligation is to do no less.