

# CONTACT

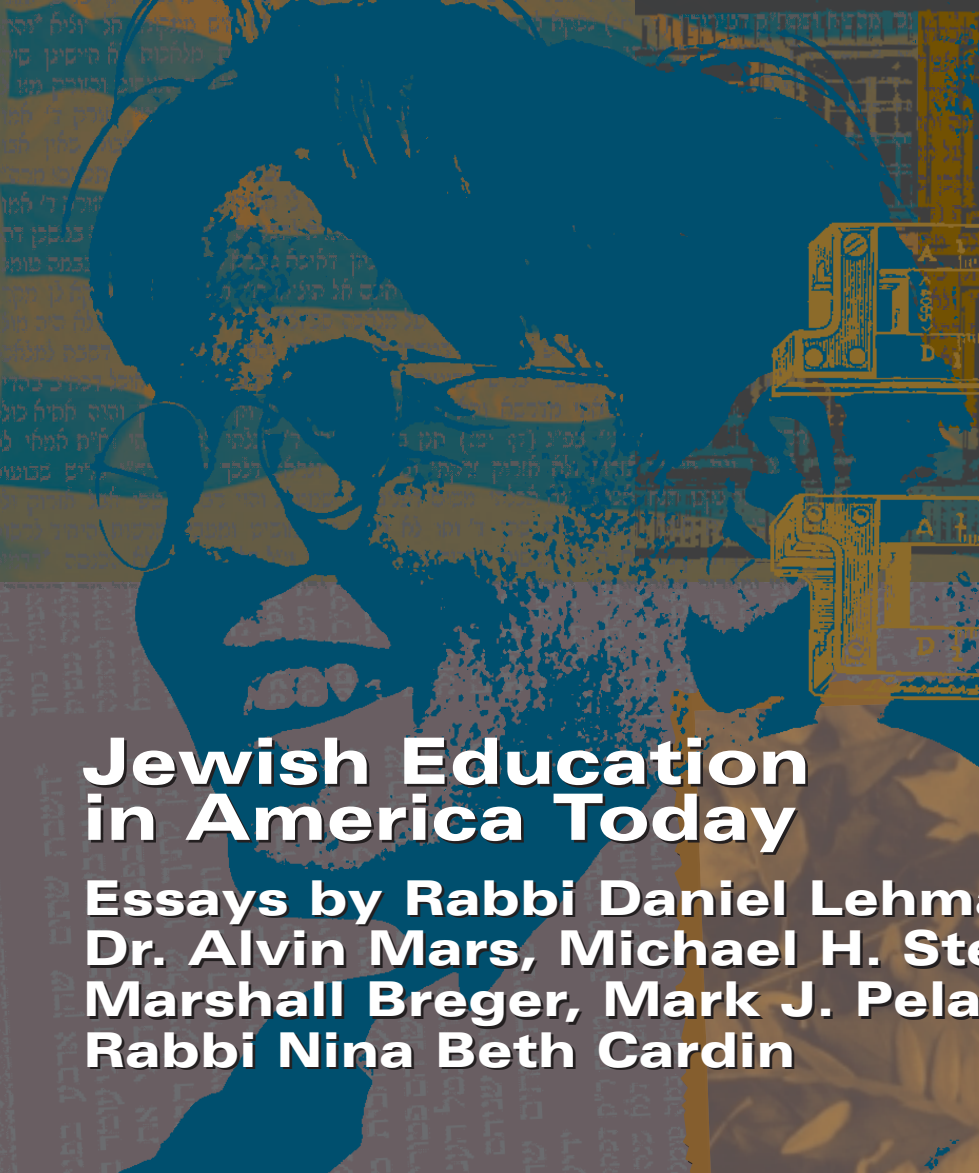
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THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE NETWORK / חברים כל ישראל

הוא בן זמננו, וזמננו הוא זה. המהפכה הטכנולוגית והחברתית שהיא גורמת לנו לחשוב על עצמנו בצורה שונה. אנחנו חיים בעולם שבו המידע זמין לנו בכל רגע, ובו התחבורה מאפשרת לנו להגיע לכל מקום בקלות. אנחנו חיים בעולם שבו התחבורה מאפשרת לנו להגיע לכל מקום בקלות. אנחנו חיים בעולם שבו התחבורה מאפשרת לנו להגיע לכל מקום בקלות.

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## Jewish Education in America Today

Essays by Rabbi Daniel Lehmann, Dr. Alvin Mars, Michael H. Steinhardt, Marshall Breger, Mark J. Pelavin, and Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin



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Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing, sustainable

community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

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Some photography in this issue is presented courtesy of ArtToday.

## F r o m t h e E d i t o r

### Forming Partnerships in a Time of Division

Since the Second World War, the State of Israel and the Holocaust have served as touchstones of Jewish identity in America. More recently, catchphrases such as “continuity” and “spirituality” have begun to play more prominent roles in the national Jewish lexicon. Today, more and more of our leaders and organizations are talking about the critical importance of Jewish education to both identity formation and the revitalization of Jewish life in the United States.

But what is the most effective way of imparting the Jewish tradition to American Jews? Are full-time day schools the answer, even at the high school level? Is utilizing a voucher system congruent with Jewish values? How does a school balance its commitment to Jewish as well as secular learning? Or does the whole notion of a Jewish parochial school undermine our community’s embrace of the American democratic system and pluralism? This issue of Contact will explore these issues, and examine several of the current educational alternatives—some of which are succeeding, and some of which have already failed.

This is my last issue as the editor of Contact. It has been a privilege to help develop what began as a small newsletter into a 12-page quarterly journal, and to provide a new forum for the multiplicity of (often conflicting) voices that exist within the Jewish community. I will be moving on to a new venture, trying to incorporate some of the lessons I have learned from many of you in these very pages as I build a new, multi-denominational congregation here in New York City. Let us continue to work hard on projects at the national level, but let us not forget that beyond the world of foundations and philanthropists are the individual members of the household of Israel—without whose talent, intelligence, and energy there would *be* no Jewish life.

Eli Valley, who has served with diligence and excellence as Contact’s copy editor, will be taking over as editor, and I wish him well. He will do wonderful things with the journal.

May each of you have reflective, meaningful and fulfilling Days of Awe, as well as a New Year filled with joy and peace.

Chazak v’ematz,

Rabbi Niles Goldstein



# the “New Jew” Experiment Tales Out of School

by RABBI DANIEL LEHMANN

**T**he first “New Jew” Graduation After three years, two buildings, and a great deal of hard work and imagination, the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston graduated its first senior class on June 18, 2000. Seventeen student pioneers received diplomas and heard commencement addresses from Professor Jehuda Reinharz, president of Brandeis University, and Rabbi Irving Greenberg, president of Jewish Life Network. It was a special moment as students delivered moving speeches about their experiences as founding students of the school and the educational moments that have shaped their vision of Jewish life. Five hundred people were present to witness this historic event in our community and to celebrate the accomplishments of these students who will continue their studies at places like Harvard, Brandeis, Swarthmore, the University of Chicago, JTS/Columbia, the Rhode Island School of Design, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and several institutions in Israel. The graduation gave us an opportunity to reflect on our mission to create an innovative high school that is dedicated to religious pluralism, rigorous text study, creative expression, and social activism.

The school opened its doors in September 1997 with 48 students enrolled. Later that year the number would grow to 50 students in the ninth and tenth grades. As we begin our fourth year, we are anticipating a total of nearly 210 students in all four grades. We have acquired a 20-acre parcel in Waltham, MA on which we will build a state-of-the-art campus over the next few years. More importantly, we have built a school culture with several distinct components that are worthy of description.

## **Religious Pluralism**

From its inception, the school developed a core commitment to religious pluralism. While we are not the first or only school to do so, NJHS placed pluralism at the center of its educational vision at the outset. We worked hard to attract students from Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular backgrounds. Nearly 25% of our students come to us from public schools or secular independent schools. Integrating the day school and non-day school students has been a significant part of our pluralist agenda. In addition, we have sought to connect our students to peers outside the Jewish community primarily through a program we have developed with an ethnically diverse Catholic high school.

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*Rabbi Daniel Lehmann is the founding Headmaster of the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston and the founding President of the North American Association of Jewish High Schools.*

Prayer is required, but we offer multiple minyanim and discussion groups to meet the diverse needs of our students. We chose not to refer to the prayer groups by denominational names in order to allow students to experiment and explore without labels that may not be a comfortable fit. We have been able to create vibrant, student-led prayer groups with names like “the mechitza minyan,” “the traditional egalitarian minyan,” “the liberal minyan,” “Jewish meditation,” and “the creative service.”

Pluralism extends far beyond the prayer experience. Our students have designed their own pluralistic Shabbatonim which allow for varied approaches to Sabbath observance. We have instituted “pluralism labs” which engage students in discussions of controversial issues in Jewish life from multiple perspectives. Our Jewish studies classes focus on close readings of texts that generate rich conversations about the different ways in which we read and interpret these common treasures of our tradition. Students are encouraged to challenge each other and the faculty while learning to listen with respect and appreciation to the views of others. Our faculty also reflects the religious diversity of the student body with Jewish studies and general studies teachers representing a wide range of affiliations.

While we can be proud of our achievement in the area of religious pluralism, it is becoming more difficult to engender the same passion for pluralism among the new students who enter the school. As with many other elements of the school’s mission, the challenge is to find ways to keep religious pluralism a fresh experience and a stimulating part of school life.

## **Jewish Education and the Arts**

We have also emphasized creative expression. It has been our conviction that students can become more than mere consumers of culture; they can become generators of culture deeply rooted in Jewish ideas, texts and values. Courses covering a broad range of artistic disciplines are a part of our core curriculum. We have encouraged students to produce original works in drama, music, and visual arts. The art faculty includes people who are

steeped in Jewish tradition and thus can guide the students in the process of creating art that draws upon their Jewish identities and experiences. We have erected art installations that are connected to Jewish symbols and texts, and have brought artists to the school to discuss their work. The integration of artistic modes of expression with other curricular areas, especially Jewish studies, has been a powerful tool for engaging the whole student. Adolescents have powerful ideas that are often most naturally expressed in artistic form.

## **Jewish Experiential Learning**

Our school has sought to tear down the barriers often erected between formal and informal education. By requiring that students participate in three school-sponsored Shabbatonim over the course of the year, we have enabled the school to provide ongoing opportunities for extending our Jewish communal enterprise beyond the school building. We begin each year with a three-day retreat at a Jewish overnight camp in the hills of New Hampshire to establish our school as a community of learners. Travel has also become a distinctive component of our experiential learning. Students and faculty travel to Israel, Europe, and throughout the U.S. on trips that create organic laboratories for Jewish living and foster the development of relationships that are not hindered by grades and homework assignments. Community service and social activism projects in which students and faculty work together have added another important dimension to our experiential learning.

## **World-class encounters**

High school students are capable of meaningful encounters with “the best and the brightest” in our communities. Indeed, they thrive on the give and take with people of international renown. We have endeavored to facili-

tate that process by inviting people who are leaders in their fields to learn with our students. For example, David Mamet has taught writing and literature in our school. Alan Dershowitz is a regular guest at our Beit Midrash programs. The students feel empowered by their interactions with people of this caliber, and they realize that we take our students seriously as thinkers and leaders. We have learned that high schools can effectively draw upon the rich resources available in the community, and can create an exciting atmosphere of intellectual exchange at levels rarely achieved even in college. Instead of a small Jewish high school being described by its limitations, it can be the window into a world few high school students have a chance to explore. The students will rise to the challenge, and will benefit immeasurably from the serious engagement with those on the cutting-edge of our society.

### **Lessons Learned**

Building the school from the ground up has not been without its problems. We are constantly struggling with our role as a community school, especially in the process of admissions. Our rapid growth has been a challenge to manage, and yet we have difficulty turning away students who sincerely desire this type of education. We have preferred an inclusive admissions policy to one that establishes strict criteria. However, our ability to adequately serve all who deserve the opportunity to have an intensive Jewish day school education is limited by our ambitious academic program and our high standards. The integration of Jewish and general studies also requires much more creativity and innovative thought. With the best intentions, we often fall short of realizing our vision of an integrated curriculum. Faculty development needs constant attention. The continued expansion of our faculty has challenged us to assemble the right team of professionals who can work well together and participate fully in the construction of the school's culture.

### **A Work in Progress**

Ultimately, schools are made and remade every year. Our task is to focus our creative energies on that process so that we strive to generate new models of educational excellence. Community Jewish high school education is just in the nascent phase of its development. We need to experiment, take risks, and evaluate our programs and structures to determine what works and what does not. One of our graduates put it well in a speech he gave (in Hebrew) at our graduation. He said to his classmates, "Every class needs to reestablish this place, add customs, jokes, insert its soul into the school. Renew yourselves every moment to investigate even deeper. The New Jewish High School should forever be new." 🌱

# **A Pioneering Vision The Jewish Boarding School**

by DR. ALVIN MARS

**W**e are witnessing a truly amazing resurgence of Jewish day high schools in the major cities of North America. Generations of Jewish students fortunate enough to live in one of these communities will have an opportunity to participate in an intensive Jewish secondary educational experience, which can play a significant role in shaping their Jewish identity and adding richness and depth to the quality of their lives.

Those of us involved in, or even just interested in, Jewish education must ask what will become of those students who are not fortunate enough to live in the major centers of Jewish population where these schools are being established. Will there be high quality Jewish high schools for them? Conventional wisdom dictates: probably not! It simply requires too many resources to establish a new Jewish high school, too large a Jewish population to generate enough students for such a school, and too many teachers within the community trained to teach in an academic Jewish high school to expect that top-quality Jewish secondary schools can be created in smaller towns across America.

The answer, of course, is a Jewish boarding high school. Before the idea is dismissed as mere fancy, let me note that this concept is the dream of a small group of pioneering visionary philanthropists who believe in anonymous giving and are deeply concerned about the lack of Jewish educational opportunities for teenagers in smaller Jewish communities everywhere in North America. More importantly, they are currently turning this dream into a reality.

There are many challenges. After all, what Jewish parent would send a child away for high school? It is difficult enough to separate from our children when they enter college. Furthermore, what family could afford such an education? Only wealthy ones is the conventional response. Lastly, how could a faculty of substantial Jewish teachers be found in this age of teacher shortages?

The creation of such a school is a unique endeavor, one that requires unbounded vision and unbridled commitment - to say nothing of substantial resources. It requires

pioneers who are prepared to break the bounds of conventional wisdom and dare to undertake the most difficult challenges based on their belief in the value of intensive secondary Jewish education.

The school of which I write is the American Hebrew Academy, which is presently being built in Greensboro, North Carolina. It is located on a one hundred-acre lakefront campus designed by a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright to look more like a small liberal arts college than a high school. The Academy's design incorporates the latest technology. Its staff is creating a curriculum that will challenge the brightest students. The Academy is intended to attract both those students who have had an intensive elementary Jewish education and those whose Jewish educational opportunities may have been very limited.

I have had the privilege of having been appointed the Academy's founding headmaster. Our initial coeducational classes for the ninth and tenth grades will commence in September 2001. Adding a grade each year, we will become a full four-year high school in September 2003.

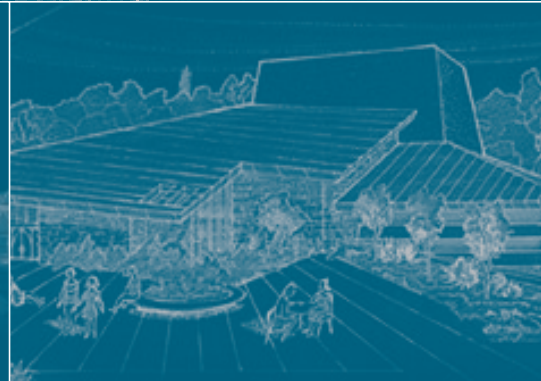
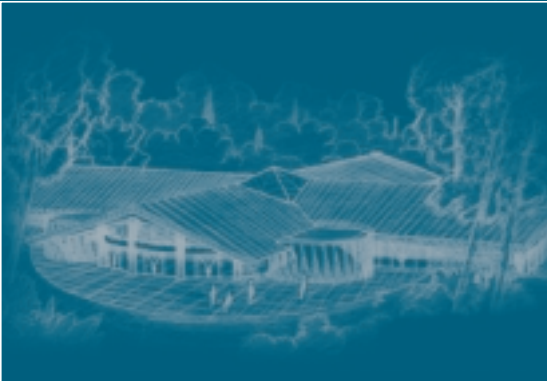
The American Hebrew Academy is not the answer to all of the problems and challenges presently faced by secondary Jewish education in America. It will neither be a school for every Jewish child, nor a comfortable option for every Jewish family. But it will create a new model of Jewish school—our nation's first liberal, pluralistic Jewish boarding high school. To date, only the Orthodox community has provided residential Jewish educational opportunities. Now families who are not Orthodox will have the option of a Jewish boarding school. That opportunity will be open to families who seek to provide their children with a high quality Jewish education regardless of whether they live within or outside the major centers of Jewish life.

Because the American Hebrew Academy will be a boarding school, it will provide an educational model that underscores the importance of a Jewish environment and a Jewish life experience in education. It will provide an opportunity to realize the full potential of Jewish youth by exposing them to a day school education and an informal Jewish experience in a setting previously available only in Jewish summer camps and programs in Israel.

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*Dr. Alvin Mars is Headmaster of the American Hebrew Academy in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

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Will Jewish parents send their children to a boarding school? They already send their children to such schools. Why else would some of the most famous non-denominational boarding schools of the Northeast establish chairs of Jewish studies, engage rabbis to teach and establish Jewish student groups, build Sukkoth in the centers of their campuses, or show Jewish students in religious services as part of their publicity videos? For the first time, Jewish parents and teens will have a Jewish boarding school option to consider.

Why is the school being created as a pluralistic school rather than affiliating solely with one Jewish denomination or movement? We do so because we are undertaking to build a community of learners for all those Jewish students presently without a Jewish high school option. They will join together to learn and grow as Jews within the living Jewish community we will be establishing at the Academy. Or Mars, a Jewish educational thinker and practitioner, wrote: "Ultimately, the answer to the question 'Why pluralism?' is a statement of belief about community and people more that it is about the nature of

truth... Pluralism is about people respecting people and therefore it supports the value of community."<sup>1</sup> This is the kind of communal environment we hope to establish at the American Hebrew Academy.

Which Jewish teachers will be attracted away from large urban centers to the American Hebrew Academy? Talented, creative, visionary teachers who want to participate in the creation of a new model in the world of Jewish education, and who want to help establish a first in our nation—a pluralistic community of Jewish scholars living together with their students throughout the school year. I believe we will attract the most enthusiastic and capable faculty.

What about the cost of this type of education for the Jewish family? The policy of the American Hebrew Academy will be to admit only the most highly qualified students. By virtue of their outstanding academic and personal qualifications as demonstrated in appropriate admissions testing, individual interviews, and recommendations, all students admitted during the Academy's initial years will be granted a full tuition scholarship. Students who remain in

good standing, both in terms of academics and deportment, will have their scholarships renewed for the full four years of study at the Academy. After the initial period, it is expected that a substantial scholarship program will insure that no qualified student will be denied admission to the Academy simply because his or her parents cannot afford the tuition charged by the Academy.

We are confident that the decades ahead will be witness to the success not just of the American Hebrew Academy but of the Jewish day and residential school movements as well. Our success will ultimately be measured by the contributions the Academy's talented young graduates will make to the Jewish people and the world, and by the number of times which our school, with its innovative programs, technology and methodologies is replicated in one form or another over the years ahead. The age of the pluralistic Jewish boarding school is upon us; let there be many more than one. ✿

1. Or Mars, "Toward a Working Pluralism in Jewish Educational Organizations," Unpublished final project, Jerusalem Fellows, 2000 p. 60.





# The Millennium School and Why it Failed

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

**E**ntrepreneurial philanthropy is driven by risk taking. If we hope to effect fundamental change in Jewish communal life, we must be willing to explore uncharted territories and risk failure in the pursuit of potentially great gain.

The Millennium School is a case in point. When I established Jewish Life Network in 1996, one of my main objectives was to meaningfully increase the number of non-Orthodox children who attend day schools. With this in mind, I sought to create a High School that would attract Jewish families who were most integrated into American life. The need for such a school was obvious: Although Jewish day schools run the denominational gamut through junior high (albeit predominantly Orthodox), once you get to High School there are only a handful of Conservative or Reform Jewish institutions in the entire country. Even amongst the Orthodox, there is a sharp drop in attendance from Junior High School to High School. It is precisely these years when children put aside their acceptance of parental values and seek their own lifestyle and identity. Instead of abandoning them at this impressionable age, we should do all we can to instill them with positive Jewish feelings. Why were there almost no high schools that met this need among integrated, non-Orthodox Jewish families in America?

Part of the problem was that a high school education is increasingly seen as a competitive launching pad for college. In order to recruit assimilated Jewish families, a Jewish high school must not only impart Jewish knowledge and identity. It must also boast a general studies curriculum that can compete with the best private schools in the country. I am convinced that a Jewish High School could potentially provide both a superlative secular education and enriched Jewish literacy. This would be the key to attracting the parents who are most integrated into American life, because they wouldn't have to choose between a quality education and a Jewish education. Instead, they would choose a Jewish education because it is the quality education.

Needless to say, we were aware of the challenges inherent in integrating Jewish and secular education. If we made the Jewish element too thick, assimilated Jewish parents would avoid it because they would fear it was too parochial. On the other hand, if we were to dilute the Jewish element excessively in order to concentrate on secular academic excellence, it would not have sufficient impact on the students' Jewish identity.

In our search to create a blueprint for a proposed new Jewish High School which could compete academically with the likes of Dalton and Horace Mann, we held a competition in which various parties designed academic models. One established day school offered a proposal that included a basic curriculum with high academic standards. A second proposal promised to model itself after existing quality Jew-

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**Michael H. Steinhardt** is Chairman of Jewish Life Network.

ish high schools, but with a non-denominational, pluralist approach. However, it did not include the kind of innovative coursework necessary to attract skeptical, less affiliated parents. We ultimately chose a 'dark horse' group helmed by Dr. Leon Botstein and sponsored by Bard College. This proposal offered the most exciting promise of an innovative atmosphere and creative curriculum. It featured a fresh approach to math and science education, and an emphasis on writing skills that is unmatched even at top private schools. We understood that this model was most likely to compete successfully for the attention of integrated American Jews who send their children to the nation's top non-Jewish schools. However, Bard College, as a non-sectarian school, insisted that any high school that it sponsor also be non-sectarian in its student population. This seemed workable on paper, but it ignored the issue of interdating and eventual intermarriage of the school's own student body. In addition, we were concerned with the way the group wished to present Judaism as a model culture for the students. The curriculum stressed the study of Judaism as a culture in history, but we believed that Jewish identity must also be accessible in some tangible, living form that students can emulate. Therefore, we gave substantial additional grants to enable the group to develop ways to impart Jewish identity to a more secular and more ambivalent student body.

After two years of effort, we found the final academic proposal to have serious problems. Despite repeated assurances to the contrary, the group did not address the challenge of routine interdating and intermarriage. Maybe we are not competent to tackle that at the moment. In addition, some of the Jewish curricular elements seemed to be gimmicky. The study of religion—and not just Judaism—as a live option was left out. Apparently it was too hot to handle for the architects of the proposal. We also feared that the learning environment would be particularly negative if the school was staffed by individual teachers who were not necessarily well-disposed towards Judaism and Jewish identity. Ultimately, we decided not to go ahead because we feared that the school would provide a marginal Jewish environment and a mixed message which would not prove strong enough to create and inspire Jewish identity at home in mainstream American culture.

Back to the drawing board. We were now approached by a visionary lay leader and professional educator who dreamed of creating a new Jewish school that was a

synthesis of daring creative learning in Jewish and general studies. After further research, revision, and refinement of the original model, the Millennium School Partners devised a curriculum that was at once groundbreaking in its academic approach and meticulous in its inclusion of Jewish content. Apparently, the organizers were not ambivalent about being defined as a Jewish school. The next challenge was to muster the funds to put the school in motion. The school had the merits of a breakthrough investment in the Jewish future because it tapped into a hitherto unmet need. We knew that many communities were considering starting their own new high schools, and we were confident that they would find the Millennium School an excellent model for their own curricula. If we had been operating by the rules of Wall Street, venture capitalists would have lined up around the block to invest in our promising new start-up.

But the organized Jewish community is not Wall Street. Once our program model was in place, we encountered a great deal of recalcitrance from people who were afraid to think in terms of large-scale innovation. In retrospect, I criticize myself for being too slow to offer the seed capital. But there were other inhibiting factors as well. Even after I offered a major challenge grant to attract donors, the Millennium Partners were fearful that they could not raise the matching money because the project had no precedent and the community philanthropists were not 'hungry' enough to invest venture philanthropic capital in a daring new experimental school. They were particularly concerned that there was no will to invest in a higher-cost, superior institution designed to reach the least committed members of the community.

Part of the problem was that the organized Jewish community lacked the infrastructure and vision to channel funds systematically into frontier areas of philanthropy. Instead, it preferred to prop up status quo institutions of yesteryear, no matter what their track record might be. Thus it was that the innovative nature of the Millennium School was paradoxically its greatest handicap.

But an even greater problem is that the community still finds itself bound by Orthodox parameters of Jewish education. The prevailing assumption is that a rigorous Jewish education can be had only within an Orthodox framework. When the organized community does reach out beyond the Orthodox, it continues to think in the denominational perspectives

***...the community philanthropists were not 'hungry' enough to invest venture philanthropic capital in a daring new experimental school.***

of Conservative or Reform. It has not occurred to enough people that the overwhelming majority of American Jews are so alienated by organized Jewish life that even labels like "Conservative" and "Reform" smack of the undesirable status quo. The American Jewish demographic is changing, and its population has spiritual and educational needs that defy denominational stereotyping. With this in mind, the Millennium School sought to unite Jews from all backgrounds and to teach in a language American Jews could actually identify with. Unfortunately, this model of education was unheard of in the hidebound community. Thus the Millennium School experiment was aborted by the accumulation of errors and structural weaknesses in Jewish philanthropy.

The exploration of new high school models was not a total waste. I have gone on to give a grant to the Heschel School for its proposed new high school. I believe the Heschel School will make an important contribution to widening the range of high school offerings, as it is non-denominational and pluralistic. The Heschel School stresses the integration of American and Jewish culture, and it is actively seeking fresh educational leadership. It is also heartening to note that around the country, the number of community-oriented, non-denominational high schools opening or on the drawing boards is remarkable.

If the plus side of entrepreneurial failure is that we learn from our mistakes, then I now see how vital it is that we press the cause of trans-denominational Jewish high schools. If the only way to do this is to look outside the organized Jewish community and the usual philanthropic suspects for assistance, then we must be prepared to do so. What this means in practical terms is that the time has come to recruit high-quality educators who are not bound by current denominational parameters in their thinking, and to organize philanthropic venture funds and partnerships targeted to push the envelope in high school education and elsewhere in Jewish life. 🌸

The debate over school vouchers has generated a great deal of heat but unfortunately very little illumination. Perhaps because the voucher issue serves as a pennant in the culture wars, it is too often debated in apocalyptic terms rather than as but one of a range of educational policies that promote the principle of parental choice.

I do not intend to deal here with constitutional questions about school vouchers, although I do believe that the recent Supreme Court case of *Mitchell v. Helms* (permitting public funds to be used to lend computers to private religious schools) suggests that a majority of justices would likely approve a voucher scheme should the proper case come before the court.

Instead, I propose to explore three core claims made by Jewish opponents of voucher schemes: the claim that only public schools are up to the job of teaching students civic virtue, the claim that vouchers are designed to destroy public education, and the claim that voucher schemes result in the abandonment of the poor.

### **1. Public Schools are Necessary To Inculcate Civic Virtue**

American Jews have long had a love affair with the public school, in large part because public schools served as the way station for assimilation for so many in the immigrant generation. Public schools not only taught English; they taught one to be an American.

Now that most American Jews have been successfully Americanized (with a vengeance, some would add), the role of the public school has been transmogrified into the incubator of common or civic values. This is Horace Mann's notion of a "common school" brought into the twenty-first century.

It is difficult to know, though, what Jews mean by a common school. If they mean a school integrated by class and race, geographically-based public schools often lack diversity of race and class. Indeed, Catholic schools are generally far more diverse than public schools (certainly suburban public schools) as regards race, class, and even religion.

It is likely that the term "common school" refers to the reaching of common values, or what we used to call, more quaintly, citizenship or civics. While it is correct that our society is fractionating and that our common values may be fraying, it is unfair to expect the public school system to repair the damage. Indeed, there is abundant evidence in the daily press that the opposite is true—that inner-city public schools today have very little to do with building a common culture or teaching civic virtue.

American Jews are right. We desperately need ways of affirming our common culture in an increasingly balkanized multicultural environment. Public schools may have ful-

# School Vouchers an Answer to Our Ills

BY MARSHALL BREGER

filled that function 50 years ago, but they don't do so today. The challenge is one for society at large to meet.

### **2. Vouchers Will Destroy Public Schools**

The teachers unions argue that voucher proposals are part of an effort to destroy the public school system. While it cannot be denied that there are some conservatives who want to get the state out of the school business, or as they put it, "separate schools from state," the goal of a voucher system is certainly not to destroy the public school. But it does aim to "destroy" what has effectively been a public school monopoly on education.

Ever since *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* in the 1920's, it has been black letter law that the state cannot require children to go to public schools. Still, the overwhelming majority of school children attend public schools. And, in the United States, unlike countries as diverse as England and Israel, little if any financial support is provided to private schools—the stated excuse being that most private education in the U.S. is religiously based. Whatever past reasons (and it was a combination of anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century and xenophobia in the early twentieth), there can be little doubt that today the driving force behind opposition to state aid to private schools is the political power of public sector unionism.

Anti-voucher groups advance with certitude the proposition that money for vouchers will in some way undermine public education. But they fail to provide supporting empirical evidence for this assertion. Given that inflation-adjusted spending on education in the U.S. increased by 50 percent between 1974 and 1991, reaching an all time high at \$300 billion last year, it is hard to see any diminution of funds for public education in the offing. None of the existing voucher proposals urge less money for public schools. I suppose if a third of the student body were to go to private schools, the public schools would receive a commensurate reduction in aid. But is this unfair? In any event, vouchers do not mean less money per capita for public schools.

More importantly, the claim that vouchers will mean abandonment of public schools is simply false. The viability of the public school system has little to do with vouchers. In upper-middle class areas where public schools are often first-rate, parents will likely still choose public education. Only in the inner-city, where schools have failed their students, and among religious groups with strong needs to provide an integrative spiri-

tual and cultural identity, are vouchers likely to significantly increase the numbers who switch to private schooling.

### **3. Vouchers are an abandonment of the poor**

Jewish communal defense organizations have made a touchstone of their opposition to vouchers the claim that vouchers hurt the poor. And if it did, they should oppose vouchers. But is this claim true?

Any ordinary citizen who looks at the school system in most urban environments knows that it has failed students. William Raspberry, an African American syndicated columnist for the *Washington Post*, has written that he used to oppose vouchers because he feared they would take money and support from the public schools. But recently he concluded that if vouchers might save 10,000 school children from the inner-city, that would be 10,000 more than at present. If the choice is helping a few or helping no one, Raspberry is prepared to jump in. Indeed,

***Jews should embrace vouchers as one of a number of educational innovations that increase parental choice. That is good public policy.***

polls make it clear that a majority of blacks support school vouchers.

What vouchers do is allow for competition among schools. Look at Florida. Governor Jeb Bush's A-Plus reform offers families vouchers when public schools flunk state academic tests twice in four years. Last year, only two schools got the voucher dance cap, but 78 more received their first "F." However, when this year's scores came out June 19, all 78 of those schools passed. The fact is that in middle class suburbs, where the public schools excel, most parents will choose public schools. Only in areas where the public schools have demonstrably failed will large numbers of parents seek other options for their children. And no one should keep them from choosing the best for their children, just as we would for ours.

### **Conclusion**

One more point. Jews should embrace vouchers as one of a number of educational innovations that increase parental choice. That is good public policy. But support for vouchers is also a matter of communal "self-interest." Vouchers will provide badly needed funds for the growing day school movement. And they will relieve the financial strain on many striving to live a fully Jewish lifestyle. These are arguments that Jewish communal leaders seem determined to exclude from their decisional calculus. That they do so so often is ironic. But that, I fear, is a subject for a separate essay. 🌸

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The American system of public education is under increasing criticism, much of it well-deserved. At the same time, American Jewish support for day schools is increasing, perhaps wisely so. It does not follow, however, that government-funded vouchers for private and parochial schools, the solution of choice for many day school supporters and public school critics, are sound public policy or a solution that merits support by American Jews.

Vouchers are a prescription worse than the ills they are being prescribed for. In seeking to solve pressing challenges—improving public education and improving Jewish education (and, thereby, improving Jewish continuity)—they would actually sow the seeds of even more extensive problems on each of those fronts. Specifically, vouchers would come at the expense of public schools and, by lowering the wall of separation between church and state, would erode the guarantee of religious liberty which has allowed the Jewish community to flourish in the United States as nowhere else in the Diaspora.

### **Public Education at Risk**

It is important to begin with some often unspoken threshold questions: Why is public education so important? What is the purpose of a system of public education? What is the Jewish community's stake in public education?

Although the most obvious purpose of public education—teaching children reading, writing, and other basic skills—may well be its

**By lowering the wall of separation between church and state, [vouchers] would erode the guarantee of religious liberty which has allowed the Jewish community to flourish in the United States as nowhere else.**

most important, it is not the only purpose. Public education shapes our society. As Horace Mann argued in 1848: "Education does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich; it prevents being poor... The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things to obliterate factitious distinctions in society."

Public schools are about more than reading and writing. As the Supreme Court noted

## **Vouchers for Private & Parochial Schools**

# **a Cure Worse than the Disease**

by MARK J. PELAVIN

in *Brown v. Board of Education*: "Education is the very foundation of good citizenship. It is a principal instrument in awaking the child to cultural values."

That function, the inculcation of fundamental values, is an area in which today's public schools have often come under attack, but it is an issue of special concern to the Jewish community, which is not too far removed, in time or emotion, from the immigrant experience. Historically, public schools have been the crucible in which a shared identity—an identity as American—was forged. In a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, the goal of "preparing students to be good citizens" was considered "very important" by more people than was any other goal. Surely our community, a small minority group, depends on the rule of law, and on the democratic institutions of our society, to maintain not only public order (although certainly that) but also to create the type of fertile soil which has allowed Judaism, like many other faiths, to take root here so firmly.

And whatever you think about public schools, and whatever choice we may each make for our own children, this fact is unmistakable: nearly 90% of American children<sup>1</sup> attend public schools. It is within the walls—the sometimes crumbling, often unpainted walls—of public schools that the future of our nation is being shaped. What type of victory would it be if we were to succeed in raising a generation of better-educated Jews, while so many others are worse off? Having reached the pinnacle of achievement in the United States, would we be so callous, and so short-sighted, as to pull the ladder up behind us? And if we did so, what kind of society would we leave to our children?

The questions about the role and purpose of public schools are relevant to the voucher debate because vouchers come at the expense of public school funding. The two leading plans, in Ohio and Milwaukee, specify the per-student amount to be deducted from public schools when students leave for private schools. Although funding is not the answer to all that ails public schools, it is clear that increased funding must be a significant facet of any serious attempt to improve them.

Some voucher proponents argue that

vouchers will be good for public schools. Competition, they argue, is the key to improving performance. But would voucher plans provide real competition? Even the most ambitious plans would provide only a modest percentage of the cost to attend private schools. Even the most ambitious plans, offering, say, \$1,000 per child, would make a real difference only to those fairly well-off families who can afford most of a private school education. They provide no meaningful assistance to the poorest families, to inner-city families who are unlikely to benefit from any increased competition. As the president of the National Education Association, Bob Case, recently wrote: "Voucher advocates blithely claim that quality private and parochial schools will sprout like mushrooms to accommodate the demand created by a large-scale urban voucher system. However, this claim requires a truly heroic faith in the distributive justice of the free marketplace—a faith that is mocked by the harsh realities of inner-city economics. Bear in mind, we are talking about poor, largely minority communities that are shunned by major supermarket chains, big-name hardware stores and the like. Yet voucher advocates would have us believe that the private marketplace—which long ago fled the inner city—will be willing to invest in thousands of high-quality schools serving underprivileged children."<sup>2</sup>

### **Religious Liberty**

Although most American Jews share an instinctive commitment to the separation of church and state, a principle which has been so central to our success within the American experiment, some appear willing to sacrifice that principle in pursuit of a myopic solution to today's problem.

It is a first principle of the First Amendment that government funds should not be spent for religious worship, instruction, or polarization. This principle grows out of the experience of the founders of our nation, and the framers of our Constitution, who believed that the best way to protect religion was to isolate it from the often stifling influence of the government. With government funds come, appropriately, government strings, and by accepting government funds religious institutions open themselves up to government oversight.

There are also community relations concerns implicated by the voucher debate. Who would be eligible for vouchers? Could they be used at any religious school? What about schools run, say, by the Nation of Islam or the white supremacist World Church of the Creator? Even among mainstream religious groups, is it wise to set up a competition among religions for federal dollars? Does that not foment exactly the type of religious divi-

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siveness the framers were trying to avoid by erecting the wall of separation?

Every court that has considered the constitutionality of voucher plans has stuck them down. It is true that the Supreme Court may, today, be disposed to uphold a voucher plan, but that is far from clear. In its most recent case on government funding of sectarian education (*Mitchell v. Helms*) a plurality (four Justices) of the court signaled support for even more extensive government funding of parochial schools than for the provision of computer equipment which was at issue. But not only did three Justices file a sharp dissent. Two others joined the plurality only in the result, writing separately to make clear that they did not view the case as setting a precedent for a larger program (such as vouchers).

### Conclusion

Vouchers are controversial and will lead to divisions in our society. There is the potential for a judicial system deeply split on the constitutionality of voucher plans; there is the likelihood of schisms within the religious community as various faiths and denominations compete for a limited pool of federal dollars; there is the probability of even greater distance between our society's haves and have-nots, as vouchers facilitate the well-to-do sending their children to expensive private schools and leave the less fortunate searching for answers as their children languish in further-impoverished public schools. Within our own community, there will be a difficult prioritization between the desire to aid our Jewish day schools and our long-standing commitment to social justice. What is less certain is the level of success vouchers might be able to reach in their ultimate goal. We simply do not know the extent to which private school vouchers could help students receive a better education. We do know that the results will not be favorable for those left behind in public schools further embattled, further belittled, and further depleted of resources.

It is in our community's interests and in our larger society's interests to pursue solutions to the problems our educational system faces that will provide enhanced opportunity to all of our children, that will leave intact the fundamental principles of religious liberty which have made America a land in which many faiths have flourished, and that will not exacerbate old wounds or inflict new wounds where we are already weak. Vouchers are divisive, dangerous, and uncertain. There are, quite simply, better answers available to us. 🌸

1. Source: U.S. Dept. of Ed, Digest of Education Statistics 1999, Table 5 (1997-98).

2. Bob Case, "Save Urban Schools by Bleeding Them," *Brookings Quarterly*, 7/15/98.

# a Tale of Many Day Schools

by RABBI NINA BETH CARDIN

Ideally, every Jewish child should have an integrated education, one that blends his or her particular brand of Judaism with his or her particular secular interests and abilities. Short of home-schooling, though, that ideal is generally not available. Therefore, those of us who choose to interweave secular and Jewish education in an effort to teach the whole child are delighted at the growth of Jewish day schools. Through these relatively new institutions, we parents hope to give the best of both worlds to our children. These two worlds will not merely co-exist side by side, but be integrated so that our children may learn how to live committed, unified lives.

If only it were easy. To take advantage of such schooling, we must first be blessed with living within reasonable driving distance of a quality Jewish day school. We must be blessed with bank accounts, jobs or (grand) parents who can help us foot the bill. And, we have to be comfortable with the theology and ideology of the day school that may be located in our area.

I am a Conservative rabbi (on the mid- to liberal-end) married to a Conservative rabbi (on the mid- to traditional-end). Clearly, we want our kids to grow up proud, comfortable Jews, and hopefully, though we don't openly say it, Conservative. What happens, then, when there is no Conservative high school but only an Orthodox school, or a community school run by an Orthodox synagogue, to continue the ten years of Solomon Schechter education our children have just finished?

We will go look at the school. Bottom line, we want our kids to have a powerful Jewish education. And we are willing to compromise somewhat to make that happen. But not anything goes. We would probably feel the same about a Reform day school but the par-

ticulars would be different. Before we would send our kids to a day school with a differing ideology, we need to be comfortable with answers to the following questions. How will our children be affected by the fact that:

1. they are the children of Conservative rabbis in an Orthodox environment?
2. their mother is a rabbi?
3. the davening (praying) at the school is non-egalitarian?
4. the way Torah is taught reflects a theology and methodology which differ significantly from our theology and methodology?
5. the school's understanding of Jewish law - more in its interpretation than in its practice - differs significantly from the way we understand Jewish law?

We have had to make this decision three times so far, in two different communities. The fundamental issue, despite our passionate desire for Jewish education, was always the same: what would be best for each of our children? We looked at each child individually, and weighed their needs and their personalities against the alternative choices before us. Those choices were: public school, private school, day school. We were lucky to live only three miles away from Orthodox high schools, whereas the closest Conservative high schools were 45 minutes away. We opted for the Orthodox schools because of their proximity, but more importantly because they both perceived of themselves as community schools and professed (and largely provided) a welcoming attitude toward non-Orthodox students and their families. Sometimes teachers would say things that were less than complimentary toward Conservative and Reform Jews; sometimes there would be ideological irritations. But for the most part, the blessings of having our children be a part of a vibrant Jewish community not ancillary to their daily lives but integral to them outweighed the deficits.

So far, it must also be told, our

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high school children have all been boys. And as much as I would like to deny it, it is easier for me to send my sons to Orthodox day schools than it would be to send my daughter. They can daven in a non-egalitarian minyan the same as they do in an egalitarian minyan; and their egalitarian experiences at home and at shul will, I trust, preserve their egalitarian spirit. Indeed, one can argue that experiencing davening in both places fosters healthy pluralism.

The same is not true of a daughter. She cannot have the same experience in an Orthodox day school as do her brothers. Her experience would not be one of pluralism but of exclusion. And while I endorse participating in Orthodox services to share in a happy event or to visit on occasion, I would not want exclusion to be the daily religious fare for my daughter. That, I imagine, is where I would have to draw the line. If the only local day school were Orthodox with no accommodations for egalitarianism or, short of that, a women's minyan, I would strongly consider sending my daughter elsewhere. The nagging question would always be, which is it easier to counter at home and later in life: her intimate exposure to an Orthodox ideology that is at odds with our chosen ideology, or a lesser engagement with Judaism due to a lack of intense Jewish schooling?

The complex question remains, of course, what is best for this child? This past year, we opted to send one son to a community day school run by an Orthodox synagogue, and another to a non-Jewish private school (and a dynamic supplementary Jewish high school), because that is what we and they thought would be best for each.

Ultimately, availability, finances, affiliation, ideology, and even gender are all a part of assessing the best school that can nurture the precious bodies and souls of our children. ❁







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