

The Jewish Day School and the American Fabric

Our attention to this issue at this time is occasioned by a recent piece in *The Atlantic Monthly* by Peter Beinart that criticized the growth of Jewish Day Schools as an abandonment of the American public square.

Below are four responses:

Vanessa Ochs:

I sent my two daughters to Jewish day school almost by accident. One year, we were living in a town that had terrible public schools, so we sent them to day school. The next year, we lived in Israel. When we returned to the States to a new town, I put them in day school so they could keep up their Hebrew, which was important to me, as we were then teaching and researching in Israel frequently and taking the girls with us.

As it turned out, the best thing that happened to them Jewishly was when they left day school and went on to public high school. (Granted, the day school did have several extraordinary teachers with Jewish souls so deep that their teachings will always stay with the children and with the parents, too.) I hated the environment of the day school--the wealth, the awful behavior of the students and how it was tolerated, the sense of entitlement. When my girls went to public school, they gravitated toward religious friends of different faiths and nationalities. Finally, they were among people whose values were closer to our own.

Granted, as an academic involved in Jewish studies, I have an alternative way of educating my children Jewishly (and that would not be supplementary school, another institution that can do a great deal to sap a kid's Jewish desires). Still, even if I couldn't study with my children and even if we didn't live in college towns where they could study privately with other Jewish scholars, I still think I would have felt that Jewish school endangered my kids' Judaism.

Robert Rabinowitz:

A sentence towards the end of Peter Beinart's article claimed that the aim of the New Jewish High School is 'to correct the troublesome aspects of Jewish integration -- pervasive intermarriage and religious illiteracy -- without accepting even the slightest diminution of the opportunities that full integration brings.' This sentence seems to be suggesting that there is a minimal fair price to be paid for integration. The benefits of full integration, such as equal opportunity and the removal of ethnic or religious barriers to participation in all areas of civic and commercial life, come at the cost of weakened group bonds and greater ignorance about group culture and tradition. To try to gain the benefits of integration without paying the price of intermarriage and religious illiteracy is somehow not fair. Thus, it appears, equality is something that members of all distinctive groups have to earn, by weakening their coherence and identity.

Two interesting assumptions underlie this view. First, that while the Constitution talks of "inalienable" rights, in practice, many of our constitutional rights, such as the right to an attorney or to an education, only come at a cost. They therefore become subject to utilitarian calculations about the costs and benefits of realizing them. The fact that some of our inalienable rights are not fully realized is lamentable. But, in light of limited resources, it is also both inevitable and not unjust. It is not, therefore, objectionable to talk about the price that one must pay to earn certain rights. The second assumption is that there is what economists call a "zero-sum game" between religious (or ethnic) group identity and full social integration, i.e. one can only be increased at the expense of the other. If these assumptions are true, then it seems quite reasonable to demand a quid pro quo in terms of weakened identity from any religious or ethnic group seeking to secure full social integration for its members.

It seems to me that CLAL is wagering that the second assumption is not correct, that Jewish identities can be, and are being, constructed which do not depend for their strength and coherence on barriers to full civic and economic integration. In light of the wonderful gift of freedom, which enhances the dignity of its recipients, this wager is also the most moral. The rabbis say that, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven, save for fear of Heaven." Heaven leaves individual conscience free since there is nothing that can be gained religiously and morally by constraining individual freedom of thought. So too, we should renounce policy proposals that seek to preserve Jewish identity by restricting individual options. If we are to reject Peter Beinart's views on the basis of his zero-sum approach, this has implications for every aspect of day school life for we must also be sure that the Jewish identities being built in our schools also repudiate that approach.

This will be especially challenging in light of the fact that we do not yet know what a Jewish identity rooted in freedom really looks like. Almost certainly it will be compatible with certain behaviors, beloved of demographers who take the zero-sum approach, that were previously beyond the pale of acceptable Jewish expressions. This will be both exhilarating and profoundly uncomfortable. It also means that we all need to engage a little bit in constructing our own theologies, for if we are to judge the success of Jewish schools in helping to build the Jewish identities of our community's youth, then we must have criteria which will differ from the conventional criteria of an earlier age. And the only way to generate those criteria will be through thinking about what Judaism is for, so that we can know if our day school graduates are likely to advance that goal. If any school is undertaking this process, it seems that the New Jewish High School, headed by a former CLAL Fellow, is it.

Brad Hirschfield:

For a rabbi who is himself the proud and grateful graduate of more than one Day School, and whose children are currently enrolled in day schools, the following sentences may seem a bit shocking. But, the words of Samson Benderly ring as true today as they did when he first uttered them ninety-one years ago. The

Jewish people does not need, and would be poorly served by, a "parochial system of education". Or, as the American Council for Judaism declared in 1956: we must not train Jewish children to lead "segregated lives". Implicit, however, in both of these statements that a Jewish Day School education is incompatible with full social and civic integration. But as American Jews living at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we need not be bound by a false dichotomy between self-segregation and social integration. Hence the real issue before us today is how to create schools that shatter this dichotomy, schools that are at once deeply Jewish in curriculum and orientation, with students who are taught to understand and appreciate the sacredness of their participation in the larger American context in which they live.

The challenge here is real. It is far easier to impart thick Jewish identity or thick American identity than to impart an identity that is thickly constituted from both. But as American Jews or as Jewish Americans, this we must aspire to do - for our own sake and for the sake of the larger American community in which we live. For America's strength lies in this unique synthesis that its particular ethnic and religious communities have striven to realize. We are at our best when our particularity becomes the basis upon which we build an ever-widening sense of human responsibility. Real integration of our American and Jewish selves can only occur if both are brought together to create whole human beings.

Ironically, the American Council's advocacy on behalf of public education was no less segregationist in its assumptions than the type of Day School it opposed, it just drew the lines differently. It assumed a conception of both religion and citizenship in which each necessarily encroached upon, rather than enhanced, the other. But, in a healthy society, civic and religious (or ethnic) commitments will not be treated as mutually exclusive. Identification with the members of the narrower circle will form the basis for identification with the members of the wider circle.

One hopes that the move by an increasing number of Jews in recent years to send their children to Day Schools does not represent an attempt to withdraw from the larger society into intermarriage free and gilded ghettos. If this were the primary motivation, I would have to question their worth. For my part, however, the growth of the Day School movement should be seen as something else entirely. For the day schools at their best can foster a generation of Jews who actively embrace their Jewishness because of its ethical and spiritual gifts. And if they do so, this will be of benefit not only to the Jewish people, but to all those who hope to build an American future in which the good of multiple communities can be pursued simultaneously. The real question is not whether the day school is a good idea or a bad idea, but what kind of day schools should we really be building and why?

Andrew Silow-Carroll:

This is the internal dialogue that keeps me up at three a.m.

Head: You were a product of suburban public schools, and regret that you'll never have the fluency in Jewish learning that comes from a day school education. You also have dark memories of synagogue supplementary school and vow never to inflict that on your children. By sending your three kids to a Jewish day school you are giving them a gift of Jewish literacy.

Heart: You are the son of a public high school principal, and spent your summers at a bungalow colony whose entire clientele was Jewish public school teachers. The connection between your Americanness, Jewishness, family history and public schooling runs wide and deep. Jewish day school is a vote against one of the most important institutions of American democracy.

Head: Public schools are not like they were even 20 years ago, when you could go to run-of-the-mill suburban high school like your own that was safe, staffed with competent caring teachers and bright, middle class kids from Jewish, Italian and Irish homes. You are not willing to sacrifice your kids and their education on an altar labeled "democracy." And searching out the affluent suburbs with the better public schools is every bit as segregating as Jewish day school.

Heart: Anything worthwhile is worth fighting for. Between school and synagogue, you have all but eliminated opportunities for your children to interact with families of different classes, nationalities, religions and races - a loss to your children, and a loss to the friends they could have made and influenced.

Head: You were lucky enough to find a Jewish school that puts values ahead of rote learning of text, takes pride in its secular curriculum, is tolerant towards a variety of Jewish home practices, and treats children as individuals. It's the kind of school you'd want your kids to attend whether it was Jewish or not. And you know what? You love Judaism. The devotion to learning. It's love affair with words. The way dialectic and argumentation are the means for ordering the world. It's affirmation of life, in this world, at this time. And the idea, more important than ever as we rush into the 21st century at the speed of the latest Pentium chip, that ancient voices matter.

Heart: Judaism is not a curriculum. It is a way of engaging with the world. Your children will achieve their "Jewish literacy," but to what end? You think you are quarantining them against the disease of assimilation, but what you are really doing is replacing one malady with another: parochialism.

Head: You read Neil Postman's *The End of Education*, and agree that children need a master story that provides "moral guidance, a sense of continuity, explanations of the past, clarity to the present, hope for the future." Even if they end up rejecting all or parts of that story, they will at least be able to make

choices against a background that provides perspective, balance, contrast, and scale. Although Postman's book is intended as an antidote to the malaise in public schooling, you are not willing to wait until his suggestions for new secular master stories take root. You feel the inherited Jewish tradition fits George Santayana's description of a healthy religion: "Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life."

Heart: Bias is right. You talk of a "master story" and I hear "chauvinism." And you hear it too in the attitudes of other parents and their kids. You and they are afraid of something. You point to statistics and call it a fear of intermarriage (sorry, "continuity"), or the potential for drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and violence in the public schools, or a general lack of guiding values. But what you're really afraid of is what your bubbe would call "goyische naches"--the idea that what they do is messy, rootless, tacky, other. That's the "inherited Jewish tradition" you want to pass on to your kids?

Head: Listen, it's getting late. And I need to devote a few of these sleepless minutes to my anxiety over the cost of sending three kids through day schools and college.

Heart: That's something we can both agree on. Good night.