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THE STUDY OF JEWISH EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

IMPLICATIONS FOR JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICES*

by Albert P. Schoolman, Ph.D.

Executive Vice-President, Cejwin Camps, New York, N. Y.

THE status of elementary Jewish Education in America at the end of half a century of development is presented in the national study completed a year ago by the American Association for Jewish Education. During fifty years, Jewish educators and laymen have endeavored to focus the attention of the organized Jewish community on the education of children and youth as a primary commitment in the program of Jewish communal services. The findings of the study would indicate that the stone so assiduously and contemptuously neglected by the servants of the Jewish Community is now being placed as a corner-stone in the communal structure of American Jewry by the will and activity of the people themselves. This will become clear as we examine the findings of the study.

The character of the study as a survey of organized Jewish education from a national community standpoint, rather than from an institutional point of view, suggests a brief word on the development of communal Jewish education in America. Jewish education on a community basis had its start in this country some fifty years ago with the establishment of the New York Bureau of Jewish Education by the late Judah L. Magnes and

Samson Benderley. The original motivation at that time was to give Jewish youth a religious orientation as a potential antidote against the development of criminal tendencies. The Jewish community of New York had become painfully aroused by false anti-semitic charges by the then police commissioner, that Jewish youth were involved in juvenile crime to a degree disproportionate to their number in the community. The falsehood of the charge was thoroughly demonstrated; but, at the same time the Jewish community bestirred itself to take note of the existing forms of Jewish education—Jewish religious education, as it became designated.

Fifty Years Of Progress

During the fifty years, the motivation for Jewish education has evolved from anticrime medicine towards a process of dignified Americanization, then into a weapon against ignorant assimilation, and finally, to its present intrinsic worth for creative intellectual, artistic, and spiritual expression and self-fulfillment for the individual Jew and for the American Jewish community as a whole. A considerable volume could be produced on this evolution of motivation for Jewish education during the half century.

Many earnest attempts have been made during these fifty years to evolve a

^{*} Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Atlantic City, N. J., May 20, 1960.

ish life would come to an end. Of course that did not happen in his life time, nor ever after, to this day.

Nevertheless, much-very muchprogress has been achieved on all aspects of the problem. Structurally and organizationally, Jewish education changed from private lessons and the cheder to communal schools, bureaus of education, country-wide denominational commissions on education, and finally, an American Association that has just recorded twenty years of fruitful work on the national scene. Functionally, Jewish education has changed in the fifty years from the private melamed to a profession, with trained and licensed teachers and principals, a curriculum with defined objectives, methodology, and textbooks. Similarly, there was developed substantial communal responsibility for the financing of Jewish education as well as for the guidance and control of the operations.

Thus, considerable progress has been recorded in the fifty years; but it still does not add up to any fair balance between the minimum of declared aims and objectives and the maximum of recorded achievement. Nevertheless, we must not over-play this differential between aims and achievements in Jewish education. In the survey, Dr. Dushkin and Dr. Engelman make the very telling point that, educationally and culturally reviewed, the past generation of American Jewry should be regarded not as the "lost generation," so often depreciated, but rather as the "bootstrap generation"; an immigrant generation that had to lift itself up by its own bootstraps, so to speak, from the bottom of the economic, social and political ladder in a totally strange land, to a place of sufficiency, status, and creativity. Such a generation was not negligent towards its cultural duty and opportunity; it did what it could, and for more it had to bide its time, which is now.

Indeed the survey shows how much has been accomplished during the half century under most difficult circumstances; and again to describe this achievement, Dr. Dushkin and Dr. Engelman chose the very apt and intriguing phrase of Mark Twain: "a river that is a mile wide and an inch deep." We will later refer back to this arresting metaphor.

Mechanics of the Survey

The survey was launched in two stages. First, several pilot studies were made, then a 10% national sampling study was projected. The survey was organized objectively under a national committee representative of ideological and organizational interests in Jewish education. It took two years to see the pilot studies through; another three years to do the national survey: two more years to collate and organize the vast statistical data, with the aid of IBM processes, and then to abstract the findings and the trends and to formulate the recommendations. Close to half a million dollars shall have been invested in the study during the decade from its inception to next year when all the significant data shall have been published in several volumes. At present we have a summary volume of 270 pages. and also a brief abstract in a 33 page pamphlet. Altogether the survey now is, and for a long time will remain a monumental social-communal achievement that will redound very greatly to the credit of the American Association Journal of Jewish Communal Service

for Jewish Education, which was the prime mover in it from start to finish. We should bear in mind also, that during this period an effective survey was made of Jewish education in New York City where about half the Jewish population of the United States is located. This survey was made by the late Dr. Israel Chipkin of the Jewish Education Committee of New York. It took five years to complete this study at a cost of about a quarter of a million dollars. Together the two studies present a well documented picture of the status of Jewish education in the United States.

Let us then address ourselves to the findings of the survey. We shall not delve into the individual community studies. The communities providing large samples received individual reports, evaluations of findings, and recommendations. All such communities have had opportunity to deal locally with their specific problems as well as with the more generalized situations. But apart from, and beyond local conditions and problems, the essence of the study lies in the overall national findings and recommendations. In the report of the survey, findings and recommendations are presented in great detail. There are some 78 specific findings and correlate recommendations. These are followed by seven major recommendations. However, for purposes of this paper, the survey report can be effectively summarized around four central elements: the pupil, the teacher, the curriculum, and the Jewish community, including, of course, the parents of pupils.

Concerning the Pupil

The Survey reveals that in 1958 some 550,000 children (about 45% of all Jewish children of school age) were in Jewish schools, and that 80% of all children attend a Jewish school during some part of their school years (5

through 17). This in itself is phenomenal. It is as close to universal enrollment within a voluntary system as one could possibly expect. Here we have a first indication of what is meant by the phrase that Jewish education is like "a river a mile wide." But, when we examine the nature of the attendance. we discover the shallowness of this wide river of enrollment; it is only an inch deep throughout its flow, with only rare spotty foci of greater depth. Eight per cent of the pupils receive an education in some depth in all-day schools; of the remainder, half are in one-day schools and half in week-day schools, (with some adjustment for New York City). The vast majority of pupils attend only three to four years, and the average attendance is less than three sessions per week in New York City, and less than two sessions per week in the remainder of the country. Unhappily. also, this wide and shallow river of enrollment becomes critically and dangerously constricted when it approaches its estuary, the upper classes of the elementary school, and particularly the high school level. Eighty-two per cent of all pupils are under thirteen years of age, only six per cent of the week-day pupils are registered in high school classes, and of these only two per cent remain to graduation. Remedies for these ills are obvious even if not yet readily attainable. Parents and community must realize that it requires more time in school years and in weekly attendance to achieve even the minimum goals set for Jewish education. Particularly precious is the period of junior high school and high school, the years of emergence of greater intellectual capacity and effort, sustained by emotional drive and social interest. Happily, there is evidence of a tendency in recent years to extend the flow of the vast river over the years of enrollment and to deepen the current of weekly attendance.

Yet, very significant is the finding that the vast majority of pupils accept favorably their Jewish education, and most of them like their schools and would attend voluntarily if given free choice. Similarly, pupils do not mind much the interference of attendance in Jewish schools with their public school studies and free time activity. Three quarters of the pupils report such interference, but only one in four complains about it.

What, then, impedes the continuity of attendance beyond the three years in week-day and four years in Sunday schools? The survey could not document this finding statistically, for it concerns those who left school, and adequate records were unavailable.

The writer has a considered conviction, based on forty years of close contact with this problem "on the inside." that the chief reasons are a sense of lack of progressive achievement on the part of the pupil and parent after an initial spurt and insufficient relevance of the matters learned to the functional Jewish life of the child outside of his Jewish school. The things learned in the Jewish school do not figure progressively and significantly in the personal, family, and group life of most pupils, as they emerge from childhood into adolescence, and as they extend their activity away from home and into the wider community. These are the main reasons for disinterest in continuing Jewish school attendance. And, of course, there are other contributory reasons, such as Bar-Mitzvah, competitive activities in public school and outside, and change of neighborhood residence; but all these are rather minor causes. The major task for Jewish education here and now is to lay the twin ghosts of lack of achievement and of irrelevance. Of one thing we can be very certain, there is no problem of initial enrollment of pupils in Jewish schools.

On the Position of the Teacher

There are 17,500 teachers in the Jewish schools of the country, 8,000 in weekday and 9.500 in one-day schools. This great reservoir of teachers is another indication why Jewish education may be compared to a river a mile wide. But, it dries up to an inch deep as we note that Jewish teaching is predominantly a parttime occupation. The shallowness of it all becomes even more apparent when we explore the professional training of all the one-day school personnel and of many of the week-day teachers. The survey does find that the majority of teachers in the week-day and all-day schools are reasonably well prepared and qualified for their positions. The ineffectiveness of personnel is greatly exacerbated by the disorganized and insecure status professionally, economically, and socially of nearly all ranks of the profession. Under these circumstances, it is remarkably commendable that Jewish education personnel has been able to bring Jewish education up to its present levels of development. Yet when we seek reasons for the lack of a sense of achievement in Jewish education by pupils and parents. we can find one very good reason in the low professional and economic status of the teaching personnel.

Details of the inter-relationship between a sound status for the Jewish teacher and effective teaching, and how to achieve both, are spelled out fully in the survey. Mainly it devolves into the task of making Jewish teaching a full time profession, with security of tenure on a progressive level of economic subsistence that will compare well with conditions in the better sector of public education. To attain such status for the profession requires a community effort on a national scale. It would then be possible to effect wider popularization of Jewish teaching, resulting in more ex-

tensive recruitment, and in higher standards of qualification for teaching. It could provide also for extensive and liberal scholarships and fellowships to attract and to retain in the profession in larger numbers intellectually gifted as well as dedicated individuals. Only this kind of national community effort can give Jewish education the professional status and human dignity that will attract enough men and women to make it their main occupation in life. something which only one in four does now. Fortunately, a beginning in the direction of its attainment is being made through a National Commission on Teacher Training and Welfare, sponsored by the American Association for Jewish Education. Meanwhile, we can be certain that the levels of Jewish education in the United States can and will rise only simultaneously with, and parallel to, basic improvement in the overall professional status of the Jewish teacher.

Relating to Curriculum

We come now to consider the substance of Jewish education, the curriculum of the Jewish school. The survey documents statistically what we well know, that the curriculum consists generally of the classical subjects: Hebrew and Bible, prayerbook and history, religious folklore, and ethics, enlivened sometimes by such current subjects as Zionism and Israel, Karen Ami, institutional organizations, the performing arts, and some crafts associated with festival observance.

In all but the Sunday schools, the hard core of the curriculum, at least in aim, is the Hebrew language. The hours and years of schooling are insufficient to achieve even a bare minimal base in Hebrew, and this retards greatly and practically precludes the study of Bible in Hebrew (or in English). The priority given to Hebrew also leaves minimal

time for the other subjects in the curriculum, and a competitive pressure for subject-time ensues, to the detriment of a balanced course of study. Once more we are confronted with a "river a mile wide" in the extensiveness of subjects and subject matter to be studied, and a shallowness in time for opportunity of achievement, that is but "an inch deep."

Only in the day schools might there be enough time to follow through on the extensive subject matter that is contained in the curriculum of the Jewish school. In these schools quantitative achievement is indeed substantial and impressive. But these schools are still very limited in number, accommodating seven to eight per cent of the 550,000 registered pupils. And it is a truism, I believe, that on the American scene the Jewish community is committed to the public school system and to supplementary Jewish schooling, except, of course. for a limited number of children under special circumstances. Our basic concern, therefore, must be with the schools for the ninety per cent of our children.

The survey indicates that pupils like best subjects related to functional activity and to current Jewish living. Interest recedes for linguistic subjects and those of classical content. Thus, Bar Mitzvah and holiday observances, and the performing arts are at the top; Israel, Bible stories and Jewish history rank high; while Hebrew, Bible and the Prayer Book are lowest in pupil interest. It is apparent that pupils like subjects that are related to the life of the child, to that of his family, and to the activities of the Jewish community as a whole.

The survey does not find any basic differentiation in curriculum that might preclude operation of a community school system for the several ideological denominations. Desired curricular adjustments for variation in denomina-

tional emphasis and to foster congregational attachment could readily be made through congregational supplementation.

All this does not come as a surprise. It has been felt by teachers, rabbis, and thoughtful parents that the curriculum of the Jewish school is too much a carryover from the Old World scene. The same subject matter has been placed in attractive textbooks and made palatable by progressive methods. But the subject matter itself is not sufficiently related integrally to the personality of the child, to the group life in his family and in the community. In the profession it has been said that we aim at, and succeed in teaching better, some things that should not be taught at all.

In particular, there is great need for differentiated curricula and courses of study adapted to intellectual capacity and special interests of pupils, and to years of enrollment and weekly sessions of attendance. The study makes out a convincing case for the need of basic research in all aspects of the curriculum in order that Jewish education may be more functional and more meaningful in the life of the child, as well as to serve the cause of indigenous forms of Jewish group life in America. The recommendation of a National Curriculum Research Institute is basic to progress in Jewish education at this stage.

On Community Interest and Activity

The survey records the existence of 3,400 schools, 1,800 week-day, 1,400 one-day, and some 200 day schools. Eighty-eight per cent of the pupils are in congregational schools of the various ideological denominations; sixty per cent of the schools (fifty per cent in New York City) have less than 100 pupils, and eighty per cent less than 150. Thirty thousand persons serve on school boards; larger communities have coordinating

bureaus: three of the denominations have National Commissions on Education for their own school system: and there are several less ambitious national organizations. Mostly they operate independently on the national scene, with a noteworthy exception in New York City where the Jewish Education Committee does effect substantial coordination, even though there is independent institutional operation and denominational influence. P.T.A. groups function in about half the schools, but there is no interrelation among them. Financially, Jewish schooling costs sixty million dollars a year: half is supplied by parents, eight per cent comes from community funds, and forty per cent from schnorerei in various forms that costs a great deal to collect.

When we consider this vast interest and activity in behalf of Jewish education—the numerous institutions and individuals, school and bureau boards, commissions and denominations, P.T.A. interest, and the sixty million dollar budget—we are certainly impressed by the mirage of a "river that is a mile wide." The mirage lies in the eighty per cent of schools with less than 150 pupils, in only eight per cent of support from community funds, in the lack of integration or coordination among the dozen local and national Baalei-batim groupings that direct the schools, in the infinite variety of curricula, of standards and of procedures in the various schools, even of the same "system" or denomination. There is a strange anomaly about all this. Superficially Jewish education seems over-organized. But, functionally, each institution, each board, each denomination and commisson acts independently and without much reference to the needs of the Jewish community locally, regionally, or nationally.

This abundance and variety of in-

terests in Jewish education is not to be deplored. It can become the greatest asset for Jewish education if it is unified to a degree, coordinated beyond that and correlated where neither is desirable or feasible. To achieve this, it is necessary to bring to Jewish education the same kind of top level community consideration that has already been achieved in other community services. It is necessary that Jewish education become a direct concern of federations and welfare funds with regard to large scale planning, financing, coordinating, and evaluating—all on the level of the national Jewish community. Such top community interest would in short time affect favorably most aspects of the problem of Jewish education in this country. There need be no concern for local autonomy and external interference. Confidence can be reposed in the democratic awareness of the entire Jewish community, its top leadership included. and in the articulate interests of parents of pupils, of local communities, and of ideological denominations. What is envisaged here is not a monolithic, closedcircle system of Jewish education, but rather a centralized community process of planning, financing, coordinating, and evaluating, with all institutional operations under local community and institutional supervision.

It is indeed significant that the survey, in its every aspect, points to the need for top community concern with the problem of Jewish education in its entirety. The functions of the American Association for Jewish Education nationally in its way and of the Jewish Education Committee of New York in its area of activity are suggestive examples of what can be done when the community takes a larger view of an important aspect of Jewish life. Certainly, Jewish education deserves such concern, for it affects the very survival of Jewish communal life in this country.

Meaning of the Survey for Communal Workers

We have now reviewed the bold findings of the survey, grouped around the four elements in the Jewish education process: the pupil, the teacher, the curriculum, and the community. Let us then consider the meaning of the survey findings and recommendations, and their message for community workers in Social Service, in group work, and in Jewish education. This writer associates himself with the "positivist" point of view toward Jewish communal work as summarized in critique by Charles Miller last year.1 This viewpoint is developed significantly in articles by Saul Hofstein in 1948,2 Judah J. Shapiro in 1956.3 Donald B. Hurwitz in 1959.4 and Isaac B. Berkson in 1959.5 Reference can be made also to the extensive writings of such intellectual luminaries in American Jewish thought as Mordecai M. Kaplan, Horace M. Kallen, and Salo W. Baron, on the present and potential meaning and place of Jewish Community in our American environment.

The "positivist" view affirms the existence of an American Jewish community that is aware of its historic many-faceted culture, with elements of philosophic and religious, ethical and social, artistic and aesthetic involvements, that endow it with the characteristics of an ethnic civilization. To

¹ Charles Miller, "Towards a Philosophy of Jewish Communal Service," this Journal, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, 1959, pp. 37-44.

² Saul Hofstein, "The Jewish Heritage and the Social Agency," This Journal, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, 1948, pp. 259-267.

³ Judah J. Shapiro, "The Jewish Community and the Synagogue in Perspective," this Journal, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, 1956, pp. 25-35.

⁴ Donald B. Hurwitz, "The Jewish Community—A Social Worker's View," this Journal, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, 1959, pp. 14-21.

⁵ Isaac B. Berkson, "The Community Theory and the Jewish School Curriculum," Jewish Education, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1959, pp. 24-33.

facilitate the total functioning of this way of life in all its relationships, here and now, the Jewish community has established a multiplicity of organizations, of social agencies, and services. Some of the services are ameliorative and temporary, others are sustaining and continuing, and at least one such agency and service must be regarded as fundamental and absolutely indispensable. That one is the service of Jewish education, for on it depends the continued existence of the Jewish community in any form and of any character.

A "positivist" view of the Jewish community such as this is affirmed by Jewish educators of all groups, though with modification in detail of concept and of application. On the other hand, over the past sixty years of social work history, social workers have passively ignored or actively rejected this affirmation. Nevertheless, as of now, there is a very substantial number of social workers who do identify themselves with this viewpoint, and who render great service in developing both the theoretic and practical aspects thereof.

Challenges Implicit in the Survey

1. The Jewish community of America definitely wants Jewish education, as witness there are over half a million children in Jewish schools, 18,000 teachers engaged in practice, 30,000 community people involved in its communal management through a variety of boards of directors, \$60,000,000 expended annually on operations. With such demand in evidence, the "pragmatist" and the "integrationist" among social workers should now cease to "wait and see" how the grassroot winds blow and how the top lay leadership inclines. It is time to resolve to

help the community attain its deeply desired goals.

- 2. The message of the national study for the Jewish educator is that the results of the educative process, as it now functions, are not sufficient quantitatively nor good enough qualitatively. This is the definitive finding of the study, whatever be the reasons for the deficiencies.
- 3. There is still another message in the findings of the study, this time for the community itself, and especially for its leadership; not enough that is positive, and too much that is negative, has been done by the community and its leaders to make Jewish education fully effective.

The study emphatically presents this three point indictment against social worker, educator, and community leader; it spells out equally clearly remedies for purging the indictment.

- 1. The study implies that the social work profession cease equivocating on the sidelines and place its great skills, its vast experience, its irresistable dynamism behind the program of Jewish education, the service which is the very life stream of the Jewish community, and without which it cannot live long. Certainly, without an active flourishing Jewish community, the profession of Jewish social service itself will wither and die. Happily, there are signs that this "positivist" point of view is gaining ground in Jewish social work, even as the urge for Jewish educational experience increases among parents and children.
- 2. Questions on substantive matters in the national study are addressed to the Jewish educator.
- (a) How do the broad aims and objectives of Jewish education today relate to the experiences of the American Jewish community, of the family, and of the child?
 - (b) How relevant and functional is

the substance of the curriculum to the interest and activity of the child himself everywhere outside of school?

- (c) What theory and practice does the school curriculum provide toward integrating for the pupil the opportunities, attractions, and compulsions of The State of Israel with the realities of the American Diaspora?
- (d) Does the Jewish school curriculum take into account the shrinking world in which the pupil of today will tomorrow be beset by worldwide forces that will strain and test his Jewish personality to the limits of endurance, and perhaps beyond?
- (e) How can we reconcile the grossly limited time schedule of the pupil with the generous, even exorbitant, need for Hebrew language study, and the equally compelling requirement of time for substantive content in the curriculum?

These are challenging strictures for the Jewish educator, boldly carved into the findings of the national study. Already the parent organization, The American Association for Jewish Education, has established a National Institute for Curriculum Research that will delve fundamentally and on a long-term basis into all these and into many parallel questions that affect the quality of Jewish education of children.

- 3. Finally, the national study points up some challenging recommendations for the attention of parents and of the community at large.
- (a) Parents must allow more time for attendance at school if adequate achievement is to be attained by the pupils.
- (b) The limited resources devoted to education must not be dissipated by denominational fragmentation of the educative process. The study shows no appreciable difference in curricular substance that should prevent the operation of a community school system for the vast number of our children.
 - (c) Jewish teaching can and must be

made a full time profession that will command life-time commitment by creative personalities.

(d) The most challenging recommendation in the entire study is that Jewish education should become the concern of the entire Jewish community, at present through the agency of federations and welfare funds, in similar manner and extent as are the other services of the Jewish community. Effective implementation of this recommendation would assure quick and substantial progress on most of the other aspects of the great and ever expanding problem of education for the continuation and enhancement of Jewish group life in America.

Recent evidence of such progress is the establishment of the Jewish Cultural Foundation by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, under competent professional guidance.

In Conclusion

These, then, are the challenges of the National Study of Jewish Education and the recommendations for meeting them effectively on a plane commensurate with the material resources, the imaginative vision, the intellectual attainment, and the communal maturity of the largest Jewish community that ever existed, and that now lives in prosperity and in tranquillity in the midst of the greatest democracy the world has known. During three millennia of history, replete with world stirring cataclysms. the Jewish people, living in hostile environments, successfully resisted the corrosive forces that assaulted its collective soul. Today there is a new and relentless struggle abroad for the soul of man. We are under the compulsion of historic Noblesse Oblige to impregnate the minds of our children with the ideals of our prophets and sages, ideals that still form the foundations of western civilization. Jewish education is the means to that end.

⁶ Samuel Dinin, "The National Conference for Jewish Social Service—Its Sixtieth Anniversary," Jewish Education, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1957-8, pp. 3-5.