

THE JEWISH EDUCATION PROGRAM AT PLEASANTVILLE COTTAGE SCHOOL

By HENRY I. SELVER *

PLEASANTVILLE Cottage School has had from its beginning a Religious Department with a rabbi in charge. Until 1940, the program consisted mainly of religious services and a Sunday School. Participation by the children was obligatory. Since 1940, a resident rabbi and his wife have been in charge of the department. The Sunday School system has been abolished, instruction provided throughout the week, and participation by the children made voluntary.

The organizational scheme and its history actually tell the story of religious education at Pleasantville Cottage School. Religious education has always been considered such a basic essential of the institutional program that a special department was established, but as such it has always suffered from the handicaps of being "departmentalized," of being a special and isolated, and not an all-pervading and well integrated influence in the life of the agency. The name of the department is also significant. It is the Religious and not the Jewish Education Department and it thus reveals the basis of our education in Jewishness.

No factual or interpretive report on the Jewish program could overlook the

* Formerly, Assistant Director, Pleasantville Cottage School; now, Director, Marks Nathan Hall of the Jewish Children's Bureau, Chicago, Ill.

fact that it has to function for the children and within the setup of the institution. The ages of the children, their length of stay under our care, our school system and recreational program, the staff we have available for living with the children in the cottage, and the function of the case worker in our agency—all these factors have, as a matter of course, a determining influence on our Jewish program, its content and its methods, and have been the basis for the continuous flux of this program, particularly during the last five or six years. Reality factors create special problems which call for careful experimentation and do not allow the acceptance of simple solutions.

The basis of our Jewish program is religion and the religious form taught and practiced is reformed, in a very liberal sense. It aims at teaching the children Jewishness as "a way of life." How does this find expression?

There is, first, in the cottage, the daily prayer before and after meals. There is, second, the weekly services in the synagogue on Friday night. These services are for our entire community and attendance is mandatory. For the twenty-five people in each cottage, the week culminates in the Friday night celebration. This is also the only night in the week when all children in the cottage, together with their cottage mother and frequently some guest from

PROGRAM AT PLEASANTVILLE COTTAGE SCHOOL

outside, after the lighting of the candles and a festive meal, join in some special program of entertainment of their choice. Friday night is the home night in our weekly program. Even our non-Jewish neighbors know that the children of Pleasantville Cottage School are not available on Friday night for any ball games or gymnasium programs, on the grounds or in the village.

Similarly, the entire year in the institution follows the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. The Jewish holidays become the highlights of the life of our small community. The entire population gathers for special services in the synagogue or, according to the nature of the festival, for an appropriate communal affair such as a play, singing and dancing in the auditorium. Each unit also celebrates the holiday in the more intimate environment of its cottage. One need not enumerate the various holidays to demonstrate how they lend themselves to the enrichment, artistically and spiritually, of the life of the population in and outside of the cottages. It is in the area of holiday celebrations that we have succeeded in establishing the largest extent of cooperation between the rabbi, the cottage mothers and the group workers. The latter include not only the choir teacher but also the teachers of sewing, dramatics, arts and crafts, dancing and others. Each one of them may be called upon to make a contribution to the religious program of the institution. Since our school is a public school, maintained by the Board of Education of the City of New York, the teachers as a rule do not participate in the joint efforts of the agency staff. On the other hand, I should like to mention as an illustration of integration between the work of the various people of the staff, the fact that the prizes for outstanding work on the farm are given

out on Succoth in the Sukkah built and decorated with the help of the children. Similarly, Shavuoth is the time when the administration gives prizes to the winners in an annual essay contest on a Jewish subject.

All this, of course, may have very little, or superficial meaning to a good many of our children. Teaching of religion in modern times is extremely problematical, at best. This is particularly true of children in placement who as a norm have not only experienced the breaking of family relationships in their early lives, but have seldom seen religious, cultural, ethical values function as binding forces in their own environment. The daily blessings and the attendance of services may constitute to most children one of those routine duties for which no one particularly cares. Pleasant social experiences around holiday celebrations may not leave any Jewish connotation in the child's memory and may not lead to meaningful group identification with the Jews as Jews. The Jewish educator coming to a children's institution should further not overlook the fact that the religious program, outside of the services and classroom instruction, has to be carried out by the agency staff. However Jewish the individual staff member may feel, his religious feelings, in the majority of instances, are undoubtedly burdened with as many question marks as the children have; in some instances, they are eased by an inarticulate indifference.

During recent years, with the cooperation of the Jewish Education Committee of New York, we have therefore attempted to modernize our services and, simultaneously, to widen the religious program to a Jewish education program, comprising all aspects of Jewish life. Towards this end, an effort has been

PROGRAM AT PLEASANTVILLE COTTAGE SCHOOL

made, more or less organized, to get the rest of the staff vitally interested in the program. The residence of the rabbi and his family has been of real help. It was under Rabbi A. Soltes' leadership that we broke away from the Sunday School system and the children were encouraged to write their own prayers for our services. Emphasis was placed on things close to the child's life and environment, and ethical values such as loyalty, cooperation and honesty were stressed. In this manner, the children's active participation in the services was developed.

Jewish current events were presented to the congregation, and the children and staff mobilized to participate in the life of the Jewish community at large and to concern themselves with the problems of the Jews all over the world. There is hardly any Jewish drive in the community which does not lead to a concentrated effort on the part of children and staff in the institution and to which they do not make their contribution. The school "adopted" a European child, collecting \$25 a month for his support; a single cottage sold products of its own making to help the United Jewish Appeal, etc., etc. Jewish cultural achievements are presented in various forms and by various means. In 1945, for instance, the whole week of Hanukkah was devoted to Jewish education; there was an exhibit of Jewish books, an evening for Jewish art, and a play with Jewish content. Jewish films are shown on proper occasions, Jewish books and magazines have their place in the library and in the cottages. There are forums on Jewish questions to which all the older children are invited. A number of outside speakers participate. There is the essay contest on a Jewish subject mentioned before. By these and other means, the attempt

has been and is being made at Pleasantville Cottage School to turn Jewishness into a cultural experience for the child and into an integral part of the life of the community, so as to strengthen the group consciousness of the children and enrich it with positive values.

However, I must at this point touch on a dilemma which, on the basis of my experience at the Pleasantville Cottage School, I feel the Jewish educator is facing. In a report of the Jewish program in 1941, I read a vivid description of the conditions found then: the restlessness, the noise, the jolly spirit of the children at the services, their indifferent or plainly cynical attitude towards the religious program as a whole. In view of that, the rabbi was somewhat surprised by the interest he found among the children in registering for the Confirmation class. Looking for the reason, he discovered that the children were attracted by a gift made to them at Confirmation. Some of the children did not even try to hide the ulterior motive for their participation. In view of such experiences, I can understand why a rabbi may think it necessary to talk in the synagogue about the contribution of Jews to sports, rather than continue to teach children religion in forms which may leave them either indifferent or make them cynical. On the other hand, however, to take again an extreme case, we find little Sam, who after participation in several Friday night services, asked his cottage mother, "Don't we ever pray in our synagogue?"

The desire to make Jewish religion understandable and to stress the ethical meaning of religious forms has led to a tendency to explain, to relate historically, to interpret almost apologetically, so that services at times differ very little from a lesson in Jewish history. The child may be stimulated intellec-

PROGRAM AT PLEASANTVILLE COTTAGE SCHOOL

tually but he is hardly affected emotionally. There also has been the tendency to bring in the most recent political problems of Jewish life and to discuss controversial issues in a manner bordering on propaganda—all this at the expense of religious ceremonials and rites. The rabbi may share, with the modern thinking lay person, the recognition that the Jews are not God's chosen people. But there cannot be a neglect of the historical fact that the Jews have chosen God as the central topic of the culture they have developed and that his demands have been the central idea and dream of their lives for many centuries.

We in Pleasantville deal with relatively young children, only about 25% of our population is thirteen years and over. The children are with us a relatively short time. In a study of our population made last year, we found that the average stay of our children is one year and ten months. How can we successfully teach or train children of such young age and during such a short period in Jewishness? How can we make Jewishness not just an intellectual possession of light weight, but an emotional force of lasting effect on the child's inner make-up? That this can be achieved without a basically religious approach seems to me an open question. In our seminars evaluating the Jewish program, the question was raised, and I think rightfully so: Where lies the difference between Jewish education and just ethical education for good citizenship? I think that the modern Jewish educator will have to give us the answer.

I now turn briefly to that part of our Jewish program which consists of teaching and learning in the strict sense of classroom work. We have classes in Hebrew, Bible, Jewish History, Jewish Current Events. We prepare boys for

Bar Mitzvah, and for a while we even prepared girls for Bat Mitzvah. We prepare children for Confirmation. Both events, Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation, are personal festivals in the child's life which are celebrated in the synagogue by the entire community and in the cottage by his group together with the child's family. Since the abolition of the Sunday School system, participation in Jewish instruction has become voluntary and thus an activity among other activities, or better, in competition with other activities. We thus gave up a fixed system, which certainly was not always successfully administered, for the hazards of personal attraction, namely, the attraction which the teacher's personality is able to exercise on individual children. At the same time, as mentioned before, the children sent to us have been younger and younger, and correspondingly less and less prepared for sustained intellectual effort or learning, which Jewish instruction always requires. Attendance at the various classes has been fluctuating—it was surprisingly high at first and has decreased almost without interruption for the last three years.

We are not satisfied with this state of affairs. Traditionally, Jewishness has always been not only a matter of "shared experiences" in the sense of Dewey's definition of religion, but also a matter of individual learning and knowing. We intend to reform our Jewish program and to make it mandatory that each child devotes at least one session a week to Jewish instruction. In what form this will be organized, whether we shall make use of released time in the school system, what kind of curriculum we shall develop in view of the short stay of the children in our institution—all this will be worked out in due time.

PROGRAM AT PLEASANTVILLE COTTAGE SCHOOL

I do not propose to dwell here on the integration between Jewish education and case work service in the institution because I do not want to give the impression that there is such integration in a well established form. There have been discussions from time to time, even beginnings of closer cooperation between the rabbi and the social worker, but on the whole the case work done in our agency is not influenced by the fact that it is done in an institution for Jewish children. The only exceptions have been cases where emotional tensions between child and parent are expressed as cultural differences, or when a child's insecurity is accentuated by the experience of anti-Semitism. Whether Jewish values can and should have a place in the case work process is a controversy among the professionals. We believe, however, that with the coming clarification of our Jewish program, its philosophy, its content and organization, it will be well within the function of our case workers to take it up with each child as part of his institutional experi-

ence and handle all the problems which might arise from it for the individual child. This may open the way for an effective inclusion of the child's Jewishness into the case work treatment.

We expect similar results from the planned reorganization of our Jewish program insofar as the rest of the agency staff is concerned. The efforts mentioned before towards making the program an integral part of the children's life in the institution will be greatly strengthened by better planned and more systematic cooperation between the cottage mothers and the Jewish educator. While the program will continue to be administered by a special department, Jewish education in its broad religious and cultural aspects cannot be the concern of just that department. For its ultimate success, it is essential that the adults living with the children are as much concerned with the Jewish program as they are with the fact that they and the children are Jews—Jews of our time.

JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE

By PRESTON DAVID

*Federation Employment
Service, New York,
New York.*

A SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE SESSIONS

AT the 1946 National Conference of Jewish Social Welfare, the Jewish vocational service agencies sponsored four sessions to discuss problems within their own functional field.

Eleven papers presented at the first three sessions, and a round table discussion at the fourth session, are summarized below.

SESSION I

Chairman: ALBERT COHEN
Jewish Vocational Service,
Detroit

TECHNIQUES OF VOCATIONAL COUNSELING*

BY ROSE W. GOLDRICH AND
BERTHA NEWMAN
Jewish Vocational Service,
Cleveland

The formula for vocational counseling is non-existent. Text book material and research reports do not focus upon vocational counseling as done in an occupational adjustment service. There is no single formula, pattern, or blueprint concerned specifically with career planning, job counseling, or placement.

The basic philosophies of counseling are clear and in dealing with many people and their vocational problems,

*The majority of this paper was devoted to case presentation, omitted here except for some of the principles drawn from the material.

every suggested approach is used consciously or intuitively. A combination of approaches is recommended as most expedient. The technique is eclectic and not simply defined.

At the Cleveland Jewish Vocational Service, the objective is to help an individual achieve a practical work plan. Sometimes the problem is simply that of evaluating training or job skills in terms of the present job market. Service here is direct and brief, involving few contacts. With academic students or job beginners, assisting in the preparation of a career is a longer, more gradually developing plan. Because of the inherent complexities of the individual, the changing and increasingly involved socio-economic factors, the handling of each case is often done on a trial and error basis.

Cleveland is particularly social agency and counseling minded, and the J.V.S. is increasingly used by junior and senior high school students, frequently for college course planning. The majority of applicants in 1945 and 1946, however, were veterans, and the approach to them as a group has been no different than to a civilian group other than the focus on certain veterans' benefits utilized in carrying through career plans.

Adults are frequently as unrealistic as youngsters and take no time to determine occupational requirements. In working with adults, the vocational process is essentially the same regardless