

Proliferating Hebrew Language Charter Schools

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The Jewish Week has two separate stories on Hebrew language charter schools today, covering **one in Bergen County** and **one (proposed) in Harlem**.

It is easy enough to find reasons for being concerned about this trend; how can Jewish religion be kept from creeping into the curriculum, tearing down the wall between church and state? If, on the other hand, that wall is somehow well-maintained, then will not Jewish children whose parents choose the schools as free alternatives to Jewish day school find that their children's education is far less complete than that offered at a day school, bereft (as it must be) of Jewish values, ideas, messages and meanings?

In **an exchange in the Forward in February 2010**, Richard D. Kahlenberg raises precisely the former objection: "Using public funds for schools that cater to specific groups dangerously undercuts the unifying purpose of public education," he writes. In **the same exchange**, Rabbi Irving Greenberg raises the latter objection: "The problem with charter schools," he writes, "is that to qualify for government funding, the community must strip out the Jewish content, religion, values and advocacy from the educational program. I fear that such schools will fail to transmit Jewish identity." Rabbi Greenberg does concede that these schools might "succeed when supplemented with Hebrew school education or Jewish camping. Therefore, I favor this experiment." Still, he concludes, "the most likely outcome is that charter schools will teach language but lose the identity battle."

Peter Deutsch, founder of the **Ben Gamla Charter School**, writes (in **the same exchange**) that

A Hebrew-English charter school education is not a day school education. However, a student completing a K-12 Hebrew-English charter school would have a strong, deep and intellectually based Hebrew language, history and culture education. That student would also have had the opportunity to easily enhance his or her religious education outside the public school setting.

I think these schools are tremendously exciting. Jewish education has many components, but if one component had to be chosen as the keystone and crown jewel, surely Hebrew language skills must be it; Hebrew opens the door to the vast majority of all other Jewish learning. Rabbi Greenberg is right that a Hebrew education would be an incomplete Jewish education, but think what texts could be presented in a supplementary school (or camp) if the students came in with solid, practiced Hebrew reading skills. That there is a significant trade-off cannot be denied, but life is full of such choices. Different families and sectors of the community will face them differently, which is one more reason to include this new choice on the menu of options.

Consider also the benefits to the Jewish community of having a significant number of non-Jewish students learn Hebrew and Jewish history and culture. Non-Jewish parents, meanwhile, will have the opportunity to see their children learn a legendary language

with a fascinating literature, the classical form of which is of massive importance to Western history – a language which was once (in earlier, stuffier eras) *de rigueur* for the complete education, alongside Latin and Greek. The idea that such schools, as Kahlenberg puts it, “cater to specific groups” is certainly true in the sense that Jews are primarily advancing such schools, and Jews might primarily take advantage of them. But non-Jewish students would have their academic and intellectual lives enriched just as surely by such schools as would Jewish students.

Another aspect of the potential benefits of these charter schools is indicated by the work of BJPA Director Steven M. Cohen and Judith Veinstein of Tel Aviv University in a chapter in the new **volume 5 of the International Handbook of Jewish Education**. The chapter, entitled *Jewish Identity: Who You Knew Affects How You Jew*, argues

that Jewish education, like all forms of education that take place in a social context, exerts its impact in part by creating, sustaining, and reinforcing Jewish friendships. And we need to recognize that Jewish friendships, apart from Jewish education, exert an independent effect upon adult Jewish identity outcomes... The impact of Jewish education can be augmented by the creation and sustenance of strong Jewish social networks. If so, then mere Jewish association... can play a valuable role in building Jewish social networks, Jewish community, and lifelong Jewish engagement... These circumstances, then, argue for a broadening of the very concept of “Jewish education” to embrace the formation and bestowal of Jewish social networks.

If Cohen and Veinstein are correct, then the mere fact that Hebrew language charter schools will attract substantial numbers of Jewish students will have positive effects not only upon Hebrew skills, but upon Jewish identity as well -- even if Jewish identity is studiously never “preached.” Furthermore, Jewish parents who want their children to have a genuinely diverse group of friends would be able to choose a school that included substantial numbers of Jews, and substantial numbers of non-Jews, serving the students’ Jewish and American/democratic identities simultaneously.

What do you think? Can Hebrew language charter schools satisfy the demands of living in a diverse democracy? For Jewish families, will these schools supplement Jewish religious education, or destroy it by being treated as a replacement?