

# Sh'ma

## *a journal of Jewish responsibility*

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### **New alternatives in Jewish education**

*Isa Aron, Joseph Reimer, Cherie Koller-Fox*

The excitement generated by the innovation and experimentation in secular education, which began in the late 1960's and spread throughout the country in the early 1970's, now seems to have subsided. Diminishing school-age populations, budgetary limitations, and skepticism over the outcomes of innovative programs have each contributed to the growing tendency for education to return to the familiar — to the "basics."

Jewish education is also faced with diminishing populations and restrictive budgets. Retrenchment is in the air; one can feel it at the board meetings of synagogues, federations, and parent groups. Yet in Jewish education there can be no return to "basics," for previous methods of education were rooted in a culture and setting so different from our own as to preclude a return. Thus, many Jewish community leaders are puzzled and disturbed: How can the tide of assimilation be stemmed? How can our links to the Jewish tradition be maintained and even strengthened? How, in other words, can Jewish schools change and grow, as they must, in a climate of caution and fiscal conservatism?

At the same time, quiet changes have been underway at the "grass-roots" level. A new generation of Jewish educators has come into its own, a generation dedicated to the Jewish tradition but also inspired by new developments in secular education. By linking up with members of the older generation these people have created a new climate within the field itself, a climate of hope and growth.

Indications of this new climate abounded at the two highly successful Conferences on Alternatives in Jew-

ish Education, held in Providence, R.I. in August, 1976, and in Rochester, N.Y. in August, 1977. Over 350 people attended the Providence conference; over 700 were at Rochester. A West Coast conference is being held this August in Irvine, Calif. The Rochester conference in particular surprised even its organizers by the excitement it generated. At the conference a new organization was created, the Coalition for Alternatives in Jewish Education (CAJE). It is in our capacity as members of CAJE that we have undertaken the "guest editorship" of this issue of *Sh'ma*.

### **Sampling Contemporary Creativity**

This issue consists of brief reports and analyses of seven recent projects and programs initiated at the grass-roots level in response to specific needs of students, parents, and teachers. In soliciting articles for this issue we tried to include a range of different sorts of programs in different settings throughout the country. No one issue can deal with everything, and certainly there are many programs worthy of attention which could not be included. The articles in this issue deal only tangentially with changes which have been made in the classroom itself, with innovative methods of teaching traditional subject matters, and with some of the philosophical issues facing Jewish educators, to name but three topics which deserve to be addressed. It is our hope that CAJE will be able to initiate its own journal which will serve as a forum for the discussion of these and other important topics in Jewish education.

The common element among the programs described in this issue is that all have gone beyond the traditional parameters of the classroom in some way, and have utilized Shabbat retreats, museum visits, the involvement of parents, or intensive workshops for students and teachers. All are concerned with improving the teaching of traditional subjects (Bible, Hebrew, Jewish history, the Siddur) in new ways (through games, assertiveness-training, "discovery" learning, and parent involvement) and in new settings (museums, weekend retreats, workshops, and conferences).

### **Out of The Schoolroom and Into the World**

These programs began with the assumption that an understanding of the subject matter is not, in itself, sufficient; that an understanding of the students, the teachers, the parents, and the social setting is required. On a more general level, both children and adolescents have needs which are a function of their age and developmental stage. As Piaget and others have shown, children do not have the same cognitive structures as adults, and special approaches and techniques are required to teach them certain concepts and values.

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Yet, the finest curricular material cannot be effective unless teachers (and, wherever possible, parents) are included in the process of their creation and implementation. Teachers cannot simply be handed a curriculum and told what to teach; they must, rather, be given both the opportunity and the responsibility for thinking through the problems and challenges of their task. Certainly they will need the help of consultants, subject-matter specialists, and curriculum writers. But they must be recognized as full partners in the planning process. For it is the teachers, ultimately, who must translate the abstract theories of the "experts" into practical activity.

### Being On The Way is The Only Way

The programs described in this issue are (with the exception of the Jewish Educational Workshop, which ceased operation in 1976) works in progress. Each has strengths and limitations. None is perfect, and none provides the final answer. We believe that there is no final answer, no panacea to cure the ills of Jewish education. Our organization is called the Coalition for *Alternatives* in Jewish Education because we believe that there are many legitimate and excellent approaches to be taken. Teaching and learning take place in a variety of settings, and are influenced by a multitude of factors; thus it is difficult to know, a priori, which factors make a program successful and which elements of a successful program are transferable to other settings.

It is difficult to know, as well, how viable an experimental program will be in the long run. Will a program survive once its initiators have left? Will new approaches and techniques lead back to central curricular concerns? Can museum visits, assertiveness training, and Shabbat retreats, in other words, ultimately strengthen the school curriculum? Will the teachers who were at the Rochester conference succeed in changing their classrooms? Can a process be designed whereby young educators can work together with established leaders of the Jewish community to secure proper funding for their programs?

Answering these questions and others like them will be a complex yet fascinating task, requiring research, dialogue, and debate. One of the purposes of CAJE is to stimulate an ongoing, reflective discussion of crucial issues in Jewish education. The following articles are simply the first steps in this discussion.

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*"Family education" has become one of the major concerns of Jewish educators over the past few years, reflecting their recognition of the fact that in a conflict between the home and the school, the school is, inevitably, the victor. Most attempts at Jewish family education involve either adult-education type courses or special family retreats; in both cases parents are treated as students, to be taught or programmed for. Several schools, however, have attempted to go much further, and have included parents as equal participants in the structure of the school and in curricular decision-making. The following is an account of one such experiment.*

### Maximizing parent participation

*Jerome Raik*

The *Havurah* Schools are a group of loosely associated parent-teacher cooperatives located on New York City's Upper West Side. Each *Havurah* School unit consists of about ten or twelve families, twenty children (ranging in age from six to eleven), and three teachers.

The parents in the *Havurah* Schools come from varied backgrounds, ranging from strictly Orthodox to anti-religious secularist, with all shades of belief and affiliation in between. Virtually all of them came to the schools with a deep ambivalence about Judaism, and serious questions about its role in their own lives and the lives of their children. Their yearning to touch or re-touch bases with their Jewish past was qualified by a distaste for and even a fear of the methods and at-