

JEWISH SCHOOLING AND JEWISH SURVIVAL IN THE SUBURBAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY¹

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This study examines the conflicts and dilemmas that the Jewish people in America face as an ethnic minority group, in their attempt to survive and in their struggle to balance ethnic authenticity with societal integration. Employing the assumption that schooling serves as an agent of cultural transmission, and that it clearly reflects the society in which it exists, a Jewish school and its community were used as the focus of this study. The study reveals that in the case of this school and community, the most pressing problems facing American Jews were the loss of a substantive and meaningful Jewish identity and the dissolution of their Jewish community.

Research Setting and Methodology

The type of school chosen was an elementary school operated under the religious-congregational auspices of a Conservative synagogue. This type of school was desired because it is statistically typical of a large percentage of Jewish schools in America.²

1. Portions of this paper were published previously in *Jewish Education*, XLVIII, (Spring, 1980).

This paper is based on the dissertation by the same author, entitled *Ethnic Survival in America: An Ethnography of a Jewish Afternoon School*, (University of California, Berkeley, 1979).

2. Gerhard Lang. "Jewish Education", *American Jewish Yearbook*, LXIX (1968), pp. 370-383.

As was the case with this school, the largest percentage of students attending Jewish schools nationally (44.4%) were enrolled in 2-5 day a week supplementary schools.³ Also, the largest number of Jewish schools appears to fall within the range of 100-299 students, as did this school with its approximately 250 students.⁴ Finally, the greatest number of Conservative congregations which had such schools had a membership size of 100-249 families,⁵ as was the case in this study in which the congregation had approximately 200 families registered as members. The school met two afternoons (1½ hours each) and one Sunday morning a week. The written curriculum of the school conformed, in general, with the standard curriculum of the Conservative Movement. The school was located in a suburban neighborhood (average 1978 home value was \$70,000-\$120,000) outside a large metropolitan community.

This study was an ethnography, a description and analysis of some social condition, phenomenon, or setting. It is typically open-ended, with the specific research problem being formulated during the study rather than prior to it. It stresses understanding rather than measurement, and is frequently used to generate hypotheses. Ethnographic research attempts not only to capture the specifics of detail and the integration of parts, but also to capture the whole of what is being studied. While it has been widely used by structural-functionalists, it is also highly amenable to use by interactionists. Finally, the ethnographic report is commonly in-depth, quotative, and rich in descriptive detail.

As an ethnography, the study was conducted using qualitative methods. The study utilized research on the staff, students, and parents outside the school walls as well as within the school, so as to afford a more complete picture of the culture of the school.

3. Murray Rockowitz and Gerhard Lang. *Trends in Jewish School Enrollment In the U.S. 1974/75* (New York: American Association for Jewish Education, 1976).

4. Data comes from preliminary statistical sample to be used in update of Rockowitz and Lang, *Trends in Jewish Enrollment in the U.S. 1974/75* (1976).

5. Ahuva Friedman. "Memorandum Re: Size of United Synagogue Congregations", United Synagogue of America (April 25, 1979).

The researcher used the role model of participant-as-observer.⁶ This role affords the researcher the opportunity to ask questions about people and events, to conduct interviews, to work with informants with a degree of openness, and to give full attention to observations. For a period of ten months, one full school year, the researcher was present at all school sessions as well as at other school and community-related events. Students in grades four through seven were the primary focus of observations rather than younger students, because of their better developed verbal abilities and greater awareness of the world about them. High school aged students were not chosen because most students in Jewish afternoon schools discontinue their studies at age thirteen.

In-depth interviews were conducted with students, school staff, school board members, and parents. These eighty interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two hours. Theoretical sampling was used to determine who would be interviewed, employing the techniques of quota sampling, snowball sampling, and deviant sampling.⁷ Informal interviewing was also used frequently as a part of the researcher's role as participant observer. Finally, the researcher also collected and analyzed various school and synagogue documents that were made available to him, such as curricular materials, budget reports, memos, etc.

Identity and Community

An important distinction existed in the minds of the school community between Jewish identification and Jewish identity.

These people identified themselves as Jews but were without any substantive Jewish identity. Dashefsky's definition helps to distinguish the two, stating implicitly that while identity refers to

6. Raymond Gold. "Roles in Sociological Field Observations", *Social Forces*, XXXVI (1958).

7. Earl Babbie. *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1975), pp. 202-203; Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967) Chapter 3.

something within an individual, identification refers to the presence of an outside source in addition to the individual.⁸ The Jews of this Hebrew school felt proud of their identification as Jews, particularly out of deep concern for Jewish survival and a great hatred of anti-Semites. As one parent said:

We have the feeling we belong — a sense of responsibility; a special little group that has to cling to each other otherwise you might not exist; feeling a part of the six million, Israel. You know you are special because of persecution and it could happen to you.

What stood out as the most important attitudinal factor in the Jewish identity of the people at this school was the fact that they were not non-Jews. Almost as a process of elimination, many understood their Jewish identity as meaning only that they belonged to a different religion than others. As one parent said:

It's a sense of individuality. Especially around here where everybody is Christian. It doesn't matter what kind of Christian they are — Catholics, Protestants, just that they are Christians. And since you are not Christian — you are Jewish — it makes you unique.

Many people spoke of their Jewish identity in behavioral terms. What they actually did behaviorally, however, was less than they imagined, and was rarely incorporated into their daily routine. For the great majority of the school community, their Jewishness was a part of life that was increasingly less time-consuming. In fact, perhaps the most frequent and consistent Jewish behavior in the lives of many of those associated with this school was the school itself, by way of attendance and chauffeuring. Even those few who regretted the fact that they were not as behaviorally Jewish as they would have liked recognized their submission to perceived pressures not to behave Jewishly.

The Jewish community of the people of this school represented something far different from that with which the adults or their

8. Arnold Dashefsky. "And the Search Goes on: The Meaning of Religio-Ethnic Identity and Identification", *Sociological Analysis*, XXX (New York, Winter, 1972).

parents were familiar. The structure of suburbia necessitated that people live a greater distance from one another and from the synagogue and Hebrew school. The secular schools that other children attended were comprised largely of non-Jews. However, even though families wished to be within driving distance of a synagogue, and to have schools with a great percentage of Jewish children, their choice of neighborhood was dependent on where they could find the biggest house in the wealthiest locale they could afford, regardless of the religion or ethnicity of the community.

In the business community, either as students, consumers, or professionals, Jews studied, shopped and worked with few fellow Jews about them, and cited considerable concern about anti-Semitic attitudes. One parent noted the troubling effect that being a Jew in the non-Jewish workplace had had on her:

I have been looking for a teaching job for four years. I never bring out in an interview the fact that I am Jewish. If I am asked, it is a different story. I am not ashamed to be a Jew, but I am really aware of a lot of anti-Semitism; and there is so much prejudice around. When I was asked about my volunteer work, I answered that I worked for a non-philanthropic organization. I would not say I worked for B'nai B'rith Women. I didn't want it to hamper my chances. I thought that was a shame, but you have to be realistic. Especially as a substitute teacher — if I was bad, the kids would say, "What a bad Jewish teacher."

On a personal level, members of the Jewish community felt detached and conflicted. Teachers and parents were angry with one another; Conservative Jews disliked and ridiculed Reform, Orthodox and non-Jews; and internally, organizational arguments were common.

The Jews were ready to come together when the question of survival was at stake. Yet, in the interim, their days were consumed by the non-Jewish people, events, businesses, and neighborhoods in which they lived. They may have belonged to Jewish organizations, but they expected the organizations to do work, not themselves. They supported Israel but preferred not to have anything to do with Israelis. They had Jewish friends, but they didn't do anything Jewish with them. They had good memories

of things being different when they were young, but they were unwilling to let those memories be anything but in the past.

Perhaps it was because of their awareness of the growing problems for themselves as Jews and for Jewish community life that prompted the Hebrew school community to hold on to Jewish schooling as a significant element in their Jewish identification. Nevertheless, even as the school provided an important focus for these problems, what occurred at the school was more a reflection of those problems than a ready source of easy solutions.

School Assumptions

Underlying much of what took place at the Jewish afternoon school was the assumption that an authentic and all-embracing Jewish "Way of Life" was a viable, actual, and desirable style of life for Jews in America. The rabbi and principal developed the curriculum, the teachers conducted their classes, and many of the parents sent their children to the school with the implicit understanding that underlying what was learned in the classroom was a Jewish culture and "Way of Life" for which that learning could be used, experienced, developed and enriched. In addition, the staff and many parents of the school approached classroom instruction with the full belief that in their own lives they embodied this Jewish "Way of Life".

The Jewish "Way of Life", although never explicitly defined, suggested some practice beyond the mere capacity to identify membership in one's ethnic group or to acknowledge one's historical roots. It implied a continuity of the historical into the present, so that one acted and thought in an ongoing and encompassing cultural present. It stated that one formed feelings, beliefs, values, and thoughts according to a framework of Jewish knowledge and understanding. The staff and many parents of the school assumed, therefore, that what was taught was actual, not historical, that it was relevant to students' lives, and, most importantly, that it was representative of the lives of many Jews in their community and throughout America.

Despite the encompassing presence of the Jewish "Way of Life" assumption within the school, the Jews of this community were unable to be more explicit in defining a Jewish "Way of

Life” because they had only the vaguest notion of the content of a “framework of Jewish knowledge and understanding.”

In practice, however, neither the staff nor the parents did, in fact, embody the Jewish “Way of Life”. It is not surprising, therefore, that in maintaining such a posture at the school, their inconsistency would be glaring.

In what was a typical classroom lesson, a seventh grade teacher asked the students to describe in what ways the Sabbath differed from other days of the week. In response to a student’s answer that “on the Sabbath we pray”, the teacher said, “But you pray every day.” In this case, not only was the teacher’s response completely detached from reality, but the student who answered was also speaking in theoretical terms. Many of the students in the class had not been to a prayer service on the Sabbath for up to six months or more. When the teacher, who managed a restaurant on Friday evenings, then began to speak about “why don’t we work on the Sabbath”, students giggled incredulously because of the question’s absurdity. Clearly, this lesson that was being discussed in first person terms, was, in the students’ minds, about a people that was far removed from their own reality.

Alongside the Jewish “Way of Life” assumption, there existed the Jewish “Community” assumption. The Jewish “Community” assumption held that despite the fact that individual families might not be observant or actively involved Jewishly, there still existed a personal, active, vibrant, and supportive Jewish community. The staff still assumed that Jewish families gathered for holidays, that the children had Jewish friends, that as a whole the community still had a strong feeling about the Sabbath day, and that people were actively involved in Jewish organizations. This image of community was comprised not of individual persons or families — but of a general faceless impression that such a community did exist.

As a result, issues of community were not even addressed by the curriculum, because it was assumed that the community was in good order, and that students were participating in other community-oriented organizations.

The few hours that the school met represented that time when Jews of this community “stepped out” of their daily lives to be and to act Jewish. In time, money, attitude and commitment, the Hebrew school was a part-time endeavor. Being Jewish, except

for their survival fears, was indeed a part-time concern. So, too, were most people only concerned about the school in terms of maintenance and survival, while putting it out of their minds most other times. In an important budgetary discussion, an influential member of the congregation board gave an oft unspoken but widely supported answer to a disturbing question:

Does the congregation really want quality education? Maybe we just want the kids to make it through their Bar Mitzvah.

When students talked about “school” among themselves, the reference was always to their public school, never the Jewish school. One student who no longer attended this Hebrew school explained that, “when I went, Hebrew school didn’t really count — oh, it’s just Hebrew school.”

The Curriculum

At the school under study, the rabbi and principal were very proud of the printed curriculum that they had developed. However, they thought of it, primarily, in its ideal, printed form. The teachers, on the other hand, were responsible for operationalizing the curriculum in their individual classrooms, and thus had different interpretations and viewpoints regarding it which were often reflected in their instruction. The students, who were the intended recipients of the substance of the curriculum, further affected the curriculum by bringing to the classroom their own life experiences and youthful perspectives. The parents, too, viewed the curriculum from their own perspective as outside but interested observers; they were just responsible for funding the school and sending their children to it. In this broader sense, as it was played out by all parties in all its facets in the day-to-day classroom experience, the curriculum was not just a printed document but was a multi-dimensional configuration. It was in this form that it illustrated and brought clarity to the dilemmas, pressures, and difficulties that being an ethnic minority in a pluralistic society entails.

Both the principal and rabbi realized, at times, that what they wrote into the curriculum did not necessarily make its way successfully into the students' hearts and minds, despite their belief that it was the best Hebrew school curriculum in the entire metropolitan area. Indeed, despite their enthusiasm for what they had developed, they sometimes spoke of the difficulty in achieving all of their goals. The failures that they did recognize, however, were always attributed to people, circumstances, and events external to the school. Nevertheless, in recognizing problems facing the school, there was no attempt to alter the curriculum to meet changing needs, other than in superficial ways. It seemed that the prevailing attitude of the rabbi and principal was that their curriculum was excellent, but, unfortunately, they were lacking the proper circumstances, community, and type of students to whom to teach it.

The curriculum underwent major changes in its transit from the printed page to the teachers' instruction. There was not only disagreement and re-interpretation of what was written, but there was also considerable unauthorized individual curriculum development and goal-setting within classrooms. One teacher remarked:

The written down curriculum has no relation to what is being taught and the kids know nothing of what they were supposed to be taught in the years past.

A factor that made learning difficult, according to some parents and teachers, was that the content itself was superficial and too repetitive from year to year. One senior teacher said:

We're getting more concerned with rattling off prayers than with understanding the meaning. Hebrew is too surface. The other (the values of Jewish identity) is harder.

Another teacher went so far as to say that she believed students were being disruptive in their behavior precisely because of the vacuous content of the curriculum. She stated:

I think the kids are justified in misbehaving. Their feeling is that they are getting the same stuff again and again. And it is useless. There really is no continuity to the program.

“Boredom” was one of the most commonly expressed emotions used to describe the student’s experience at the Jewish school. Although it was primarily students who talked about being bored, a few teachers and parents accepted their talk as accurately depicting their feelings. One parent with two children in the school sadly commented, “I think the school is just plain boring for the kids.” The students themselves were quite certain that they were feeling bored at Hebrew school. One student, who blamed the boredom on the repetition of instruction, explained how he and his friends experienced the school:

Pre-K is the only important class. After that they just teach you the same thing over again and over again and over again and over again. That’s why everyone is bored. Like today, nobody answered the question because we all knew it and it’s the same thing. We’re just bored of it.

Other students felt that part of the problem lay with the teachers’ inability to present their material in an interesting manner. One girl said:

Everyone talks and laughs and talk among themselves and don’t listen; because the teacher is boring. He doesn’t do anything that we would want to listen to.

This study tends to confirm Ackerman’s report that startlingly little cognitive material is being learned in afternoon schools.⁹ Although this research did not utilize any standardized tests, it was difficult not to recognize the immensity of the problem. Students in the sixth grade did not know words being taught in the second grade, and the basic vocabulary of holidays, historical

9. Walter Ackerman. “Jewish Education — For What”, *American Jewish Yearbook*, LXX (1969), p. 22.

events and religious observance were forgotten year after year and from week to week. Teachers were frequently surprised in class by student ignorance of a core of the most elementary cultural information. On top of that, they quickly found that students neither studied nor did homework, that only a small percentage of students paid attention during class, and only a very few participated. Finally, the teachers and students recognized and admitted that students were not learning the cognitive material to any acceptable degree or standard.

Students expressed disappointment, anger, and rebelliousness at not learning; teachers spoke out of a deep sense of frustration, hopelessness, and despair. One of the bright, rebellious students revealed her confusion and ambivalence about the school in evaluating her experience there. She said:

We don't learn to read. We haven't learned anything since third grade. We don't know what anything means. It's nice to be able to follow the service, but I don't know what it means. I think Hebrew school is dumb. I mean, we don't learn anything. Like right now, me and my friends are sitting back there writing notes to one another and talking and the teacher is just having a conversation with herself.

Perhaps most indicative of the classroom experience and curricular failure was the emotional comment of one devoted teacher. Exasperated, she exclaimed:

Everyday I came back from the school I had a heart attack because I hadn't accomplished anything.

In the affective domain, too, the curriculum in practice proved to be much different from the printed document indicated. In class, the teachers attempted to present to their students an image that indicated a normative standard in approach to things Jewish within Conservative Judaism. The teachers also implied to their students that as individuals each teacher lived according to those normative standards. While allowing for some minor exceptions, they also implied that as a group there was a high degree of uniformity both in opinion and behavior in these matters.

In actuality, however, the teaching staff was as a whole a diverse group in Jewish terms. It included some who were not religious (even to the point of being anti-religious), some who were quite confused about their Jewishness, and some who were observant in a very traditional and religious manner.

It was difficult for students not to notice the teacher's aide with the transistor radio who periodically walked out of class on Sunday mornings to listen to the latest football information. In one case, a senior teacher even left school early on certain Sundays in order to arrive at football games before kickoff time. In addition, students were never far away during recess when teachers would excitedly describe the concert or movie they had been to on Friday evening, the Jewish Sabbath.

Despite the attempts of the administration and the school staff to convey a certain image and feeling about being Jewish through the affective curriculum, and to teach knowledge, values, and skills through the cognitive curriculum, their efforts were often at odds with one another; what the students experienced in class was most often different from what either intended. In fact, the desire to create some change and greater involvement in Jewish life through the school curriculum was not successful. Rather, what the students did learn about being Jewish was vague and ambiguous, and the feelings they developed were marked by ambivalence. Indeed, that image was a more accurate representation of the true condition of the Jews in this community than the picture their teachers had unsuccessfully attempted to present in class through the curriculum.

Implications for Change

Given the understanding that schooling is a mechanism for cultural transmission, one would expect that in studying a school, some notions of what cultural information and experiences were being transmitted would have come forth. Indeed, that was the case in this study. However, what was learned was not any clear statement about Jewish life and tradition, but rather that the Jewish people in this community were anxious, confused, and deeply conflicted about their Jewish identity, their Jewish community, and their dilemma of being Jewish in a non-Jewish America. The

underlying issues facing this Jewish school, within the school as well as without, were ones of cultural conflict and ambiguity.

In order for change to occur in this setting, it seems appropriate that the Jewish people must directly confront these conflicts and dilemmas in all of their complexity, ambiguity, and harsh reality. The condition of the Jewish school, in respect to these problems, was one of antipathy, ambivalence, confusion, and isolation. If it is the desire of the Jewish people to rise above a way of life dictated by and limited to survival and identification, it appears for this community, at least, necessary to confront openly the issues that face them and to appraise honestly the extent to which those issues may pervade all ranks and levels of the Jewish community in America.

In addition, Jewish educators must begin with the assumption that an authentic Jewish identity for life in modern America is not understood either by the masses of Jewish people or by its educators and leaders. It would seem that one of the major goals of Jewish education must be the constant pursuit of authentic Jewish identity for modern times. In turn, that goal is closely tied to what must be a second major goal of Jewish education — the strengthening and rebuilding of Jewish community. Once achieved, attempts at change in the domain of more traditional school problems, such as curriculum, learning environment, administration, social structure, and social developments, will produce much more successful results.