FORUM IV

Family Jewishness and Family Education

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WHAT IS JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION?

To understand Jewish family education (JFE) and its role in Jewish life it is useful to clarify what it is and what it is not—that is, its basic function in the Jewish community; who is attracted to its programs and why; and what a model program looks like. This article first analyzes the assumptions underlying JFE and then describes in detail how they are embodied in the Detroit program, Jewish Experiences for Families. This analysis is based on an examination of these concepts: instruction versus enculturation, programs versus social movements, and Jewish education versus Jewish Revival.

JFE programs stem from two sources: Jewish education and the Jewish Revival movement. Jewish educators have come to believe strongly that congregational schools need to enlist families in their children's education. Many JFE leaders, though clearly concerned about education, wish to focus on areas outside and beyond the school curriculum. Both foci are desirable and not contradictory, but result in different organizational forms: a program placed inside and linked to a school curriculum or one led by congregation laity or staff and offering programs with loose ties to the school and its schedule. In this article, I argue that JFE programs will realize their promise more clearly if allowed to cooperate with but not be limited to the needs of congregation schools.

This argument is based on an analysis of the problem toward which JFE programs are directed. In her review of Jewish education research, Fishman (1987) notes that home background is more influential than formal education in the development of Jewish identity. Yet, she observes that most Jewish education is pupil focused, occurs before the age of 13, and stops at that point. Only about 10% of adults are currently enrolled in any sort of Jewish education.

Meanwhile the Jewish home seems increasingly unable to provide the informal unplanned education that could buttress formal education or compensate for its absence. Isa Aron (1987, 1989) develops this point in her analysis of instruction versus enculturation. Briefly defined, *instruction* provides knowledge, skills, and values within an organized framework, such as a school. *Enculturation* in most societies consists of learning about a society and stimulating strong feelings of attachment to its values, practices, and people. Enculturation is the responsibility of the home, neighborhood, and workplace. Schools are asked to supplement these powerful social processes by providing instruction, i.e., knowledge about and skills in history, values, and practices. If students come to school without the cultural base upon which the curriculum builds, then the school's impact is much weaker. Students from such homes and communities are considered to be "culturally deprived." In this sense many Jewish children are culturally deprived, with a very thin base in Jewish values, history, and customs.

It is almost impossible for after-school education to provide both instruction and enculturation. This is a central problem of Jewish education. Fishman (1987) points out that education leadership has long noted these problems; hence, their interest in JFE, which involves and influences the home. Their hope is that schools can in part at least make up the deficits. Aron (1987, 1989) notes that schools can do so only if they shift their methods from those

appropriate to instruction to those appropriate to enculturation.

It will be difficult and perhaps impossible for many schools, *as organizations,* to make the shift in focus and structure that may be required. For this reason I recommend that JFE programs be organizationally separate from congregational schools (Bernard, 1989).

Can changes in schools affect enough homes with enough impact to make a substantial change in the status of the Jewish community? Such a question does not yield a strict scientific answer. Some leaders in Jewish education expect that these programs will help make the family the vital center of Jewish life in America (Aron, 1989; Fishman, 1987; Schiff & Botwinik, 1988). In contrast, I argue that a **major** change in Jewish family behavior will not be created by formal or informal adult education. These new forms must grow from the demands of Jewish families. For this reason it is advisable to consider Jewish family education as a part of an existing social movement, the Jewish Revival.

To clarify this point, contrast programs and social movements. *Programs* are formally organized, repeatable, and predictable. Schools are formal programs, with curricula, entrance and graduation requirements, etc. *Social movements* are vast, inchoate, constantly changing, and inherently unpredictable. Feminism with all its passion, commitment, and variety of attitudes and orientations is a social movement.

Jewish family education should go beyond programs of instruction in Jewish knowledge, practice, and values to be part of a social movement, the basic goal of which is enculturation. Its leaders wish to use JFE programs to recapture the experience of being Jewish within an all-encompassing Jewish culture. It is not clear that all or even most participants share these goals. They seem to wish for more modest benefits, such as building stronger, more tightly knit families and friendships, but within their existing levels of Jewish involvement.

A third contrast applies here. Many JFE participants want to find or build their *own* or rather their own family's version of Jewishness. They are seeking what being Jewish means to *them,* not just the definitions and patterns proposed by rabbis, scholars and federation leaders. They are looking for ways to feel better about, and find joy and pride in their Jewishness. Often they want feelings of satisfaction, more than pride in expertise. Family education's use of and emphasis on experiential learning make it a useful vehicle for the development and enrichment of these feelings.

The distinction between school or movement is captured in two contrasting definitions of Jewish family education. The broader is that of Ronald Wolfson (1983): a method for achieving *Jewish self-sufficiency in the home.* The other major definition sees the program as a tool of Jewish schools. As Alper (1987) states, schools involve the child's family through parallel educational experiences so that home activities reinforce the school's efforts.

The program described in this article followed Wolfson's definition and focus: creating home skills in Jewish living.

THE PROGRAM: JEWISH EXPERIENCES FOR FAMILIES (JEFF)

Sponsorship and Administration

JEFF began in 1982 under the auspices of a large Conservative synagogue in Detroit. In 1986, the program was adopted by the Detroit Jewish Welfare Federation to serve the entire community. The Fresh Air Society, the community's primary agency for camping and informal education, was then given formal authority and responsibility for its administration. Sponsorship is shared by the Jewish Community Center and the United Hebrew Schools, the central agency for Jewish education. Major funding is provided by the federation, stimulated by a matching grant from a local philanthropist. The basic concept of community-wide federation sponsorship for Jewish family

education has since been adopted by at least two other major communities, Cleveland and Boston.

In 1990, about 6,000 people participated in one or more of JEFF's programs, which for the most part are jointly sponsored by individual congregations. All eight Reform and Conservative synagogues in the Detroit area now participate in JEFF. Other programs are co-sponsored with *The Jewish News,* the independent community newspaper, and various community groups.

Programming is highly decentralized. JEFF is led by a full-time program director, but most programs are planned by small lay committees of the individual congregations. Most of the funding for these programs is provided by the congregations, with partial subsidies for resource people, such as storytellers and the like, provided by JEFF.

Because JEFF is so decentralized, the quality and availability of lay leadership, congregation staff participation, congregation funding levels, and program effectiveness vary widely. Each rabbi's approval and support, which are vital to the success of each program, also varies (Reimer, 1989).

Goals

The program is aimed at enhancing the involvement of the "under-affiliated," who are defined as those who are members of, but are uninvolved with, the participating community organizations. Steven Cohen's (1989) recent national survey of attitudes toward Jewishness and toward Jewish organizations divides the Jewish community into three broad categories by depth of commitment: about one-quarter are "more" involved, one-half "marginally" involved, and one-fourth are "peripherally" involved (Cohen, 1989, pp. 84–88). The middle group—the marginally involved or in our terms "under-affiliated"—claim deep commitment to Jewish continuity but less so to a particular Jewish movement or institution. They relate to other Jews through family and friendship. They affiliate with organizations for this relationship value, placing less importance on the organization's goals or ideology. JEFF is designed to attract this group: to strengthen their commitment to Jewish institutions and their own intrafamilial Jewish attitudes and practices.

Federation agencies and congregations participating in JEFF share the goal of increasing communal involvement. Congregations expect to attract new members and strengthen the involvement of current members. The sponsoring agencies and the federation expect that in the long run these programs will enhance their membership base, fund-raising ability, and status in the community. Both the congregations and the agencies recognize, however, that these results will be demonstrated only in the long run.

For the most part, the participants do not share the goals of the program sponsors. They tend to have more personal goals related to their family life and friendship group.

Program Activities

Experiential education is designed to increase participants' Jewish commitment and thus strengthen their Jewish identity. Participants credit the experiential activities as the reason for the program being "fun, pleasurable, exciting, involving, unembarrassing, hands on, and with few skill-requirements." Interactive group participation stimulates the creation of friendship groups, which as noted, is a key goal for many participants.

Programs tend to center around the holidays or life-cycle events. They explicitly include both children *and* parents. A typical year's programs for a congregation would include three or four large family Shabbat dinners at the synagogue, family programs marking each holiday, and life cycle programs, such as for about-to-be marrieds or newlyweds or grandparent-grandchildren programs. One High Holiday program

called "Teaching Your Children to Say 'I'm sorry' " paired a rabbi and a psychologist in a discussion of the effect of *t'shuvah* (repentance) on family relationships. Family-based premarital or pre-childbirth educational series emphasize group discussions and other participatory techniques. A program called *Sefer Safari* enlisted 158 families in 13 congregations in reading at least ten Jewish books to their children. It involved families and synagogue libraries in making Jewish learning an important family activity.

Programs try to transmit tools and skills that the participant will soon carry out in their homes (Wolfson, 1983). At one congregation's Shabbat dinners, for example, Shabbat home practice kits are distributed that include an audiotape of the home service, file cards of the service keyed to the tape, and recipes. The audiotape is sung by the couple who led the congregation JEFF committee, who taped it late one evening in their home. In contrast to audiotapes produced by professional cantors, its amateurish quality may well have eased its acceptance and use. At each dinner a gift of Shabbat candles serves as a program signature.

Some programs are offered community wide by the Jewish Community Center, the United Hebrew Schools, and *The Jewish News*. One such activity is an imaginative Purim program in which community members provide *Mishloah Manot* gifts to be distributed by youth group members to home-bound and institutionalized elderly. In addition, *The Jewish News* prints a monthly four- to eight-page insert on JFE topics.

Family weekend retreats are a powerful means of experiential education. In 1990, about 90 families attended one or more retreats, which are all held at the Fresh Air Society's adult camping facility. A typical retreat begins with a Friday evening dinner service in the Dining Hall. A Saturday morning service is usually highly participatory and may be led by either a congregant or a rabbi if present. Afternoon activities combine recreation for children and adults. Some kind of learning and discussion activities are planned for the late afternoon or evening. Sunday morning is devoted to recreation and evaluation of the weekend experience, which ends after lunch. Although the retreats vary in their balance of ritual, educational, and recreational activities, they are all characterized by highly effective programs for children, which may involve parents or be parallel to the adult programs. Much time and opportunity exists for meeting old or making new friends and for family recreation.

STUDY OF THE JEFF PROGRAM

Methodology

To determine whether JEFF was indeed reaching its target group—the under-affiliated—and how closely it was satisfying their needs, a research project was undertaken. Data were gathered through interviews with participants, staff, and administrators; through participant/observation in various programs; and through surveys of participants in family weekend retreats. For comparison I also surveyed participants in two Fresh Air Society Retreats offered to the general community that emphasized recreation, family time, and fellowship.

The interviews with program staff and board were formal and semi-structured. A set of common questions was asked, but no single questionnaire was used. All were asked about the program's goals, structure, and activities and their perception of its impact and future. At the point these interviews were carried out JEFF had not yet been formally placed within the Fresh Air Society.

Semi-structured interviews were held with ten lay participants. All were members of JEFF committees in a Reform and a Conservative congregation. Those interviews focused on the formation and current expression of their Jewish identity. They were also asked about the JEFF program: their motivations and satisfactions and their

perceptions of those of others. The individual interviews were supplemented by a joint interview with all eight members of one Conservative congregation's JEFF committee.

Additional observations were made through attendance at various JEFF programs: two Friday Shabbat dinner programs at the Conservative synagogue, a six-person premarital class led by a rabbi, weekend retreats, and various mass attendance parent-child activity programs.

A structured questionnaire was administered to all participants on the last day of four weekend retreats. They were asked about their goals for attending the retreat and the impact of various aspects of the retreat's program. In addition, they were asked to describe their level of Jewish observance, number of Jewish friends, and organizational memberships.

It was not feasible to create a sample of membership or of participation in JEFF programs, which varied from setting to setting and from event to event. This report on one community is thus limited by its unrepresentative study group. Since it describes only one community's program, it cannot be considered representative of all Jewish family education programs.

Findings

Program Design

Participants, congregation staff, and program leadership all praised the design of JEFF programs, particularly their "stimulating and fun" experiential activities and decentralized structure, which facilitated both lay involvement and flexibility. Congregational leaders claimed that the JEFF program invigorated their synagogue, stimulating a wide range of other congregational activities. Community-wide programs offered by the JCC, United Hebrew Schools, and *The Jewish News* spread the impact beyond congregational membership.

Authority for the JEFF programs was not placed within the congregation's school program, as it is in other communities. Placing such authority in a separate lay committee yields many benefits in flexibility and in providing a group whose primary commitment is to this program itself.

Participant's Motivations

"If the program didn't involve my whole family I would not take part." This flat statement from a highly committed volunteer leader and participant summarizes the strengths and the challenge of Jewish family education and the JEFF program.

My initial assumptions about the program were that it would attract and have the greatest impact on people who: (1) are family oriented; (2) are beginning to be interested in increasing their Jewish practices but whose current level of practice, knowledge, and skill is limited (I assumed that the very knowledgeable or the very disinterested would not be attracted; (3) feel somewhat lonely and need a group who share their interest in Jewish practices and will help them develop and maintain their family's Jewish lifestyle; and (4) share middle-class family and ethnic identity values. I therefore expected that participants would attend in order to deepen the Jewishness of their family and home practices.

The interview findings challenged these assumptions. Although the participants were indeed interested in strengthening their family's Jewishness, they did not see performing home rituals as the means to do so. Rather, joint attendance at Jewish events was seen as the way to strengthen their family's Jewishness.

Participants, as well as the JEFF lay leaders, clearly indicated that their priorities lay with building ties with family, friends, and congregation. Many interviewees stressed that they felt that they did not have enough "family time," citing the time pressures of daily life. Most were two-earner families, and few felt that they had escaped the familiar pressures that kept both parents and children actively engaged in separate activities. Finding family time within a Jewish program met

two vital goals: (1) expressing their Jewishness while (2) building ties, inside the family and outside, to friends and congregation.

Most JEFF program lay leaders expressed interest in home practices, but felt comfortable with their current level of ritual. One of their motivations was to help other participants achieve higher levels of practice.

Observations of participants in JEFF programs suggested that, for them, spending time with their children in a Jewish setting was important. Many attend congregational Shabbat dinners in order to enjoy an outing with their children in an unmistakably Jewish setting. They did not appear to be oriented to adult education or learning skills for home practices. When formal educational programs were offered, they often chatted with their table companions.

Responses of participants in the four weekend family retreats reinforced these observations. The participants were asked to rank their motivations for attending and to indicate the extent to which each was satisfied. In general, rankings of satisfaction matched the ranking of motivations.

The highest-ranked motivation was family time, followed by the wish to deepen links to friends or to synagogue. All three motivations outranked learning about home practices, synagogue rituals, Jewish values and history, tzedakah, and social justice.

This de-emphasis of home practices did not characterize all participants in these programs. Even among retreat participants a strong minority (25%) reported that exploring their roots and learning home and synagogue practices were important parts of the experience. In general, participants in the two synagogue-sponsored retreats were more oriented toward "Jewish" programming, although in no case did that interest outrank family/friend motivations. Yet, even in the two retreats that were not synagogue sponsored, the participants' level of observance still exceeded that of the typical American Jew. For example, although only 5% of all Jewish families attend services at least once monthly (Cohen, 1987), 30 to 40% of the noncongregation retreat participants did so, as did 80 to 90% of the congregation members.

Another avenue to understanding the participants and their goals is to review their responses in the unstructured interviews. They were asked to describe the source and nature of their own Jewish identity and their reason for involvement in JEFF.

It is not surprising to find that, in most cases, wives are the driving force behind family involvement. However, there were few other common threads in their responses. Many could not clearly articulate either their Jewish identity or their motivations for participation beyond saying that Judaism tapped a "warm spot" in them. When asked to explain why they participated and others do not, they explained that they were more family centered and that others, whom they perceive as more affluent, were less so. Yet, all were unsure about what the actual differences between them and nonparticipants might be.

An interesting sidelight on the issue of relative affluence is provided by a recent study of interethnic adoptions of Hispanic children (Andujo, 1988). Half had been adopted by "Anglos," and half by Hispanics. In sharp contrast to the Hispanic families, the Anglo adopting parents tended to de-emphasize the children's Hispanic background. The children were "just human." This universalist, anti-ethnic attitude was shared by upper-income Hispanic families who had also adopted Hispanic children. Perhaps ethnic identity may be inversely related to income. If this observation is accurate, Jewish identity is more likely to be a concern of family-oriented middle-class families, rather than the more affluent.

Impact on Participants

It is too early to speak of success in strengthening the Jewish identity or affiliation of the participants. However, short-range effects of program participation can be

identified. Many participants do offer positive postmeeting responses, do continue to participate in other programs, and do wish to share the experience with friends and family. All reported that the impact on the family was satisfying. In one weekend retreat an adolescent said that the family retreat was the most powerful Jewish experience of that year. Observation at these events confirms a rabbi's conclusion that the combination of "Jewish themes and ceremonies, intergeneration events, and experiential activities" was a powerful change agent (Rabbi Paul Yedwab, personal communication, March 1988). The fact that lay leadership is often drawn from the previous year's participants indicates the program's capacity to inspire involvement in the congregation. Leaders speak of their wish to pass along to others the benefits they received.

Not all programs were experiential. One participant stressed the value of a lecture-discussion for both teens and parents in which each teen talked to another teen's parents. Its impact is probably too brief to measure, but it serves as an example of programs that can make some impact at a more adult and cognitive level.

Some participants and leaders reported that their continued involvement in JEFF led them to seek more formal adult education. No single activity in itself inspired a wish for further study. Rather, as they worked on the programs and felt their attachments deepen, they found themselves asking questions for which they lacked answers.

Few participants but more lay leaders reported an increase in their home practices. A few synagogue lay leaders who were deeply involved in the program indicated that deepened home practices was an important outcome of **their** participation. This may be a result of their being in a Conservative congregation and, from my observation, their being among the more observant in their congregation. Larger numbers reported increased involvement in the congregation. Few participants reported an impact on their "spiritual" practices.

Program leaders did expect that participation would lead others to adopt some home practices, as it did for some of them. Some holiday programs did provide ritual objects for children to take home, and they were indeed used. However, this effect did not extend beyond the holidays to Shabbat or other occasions for home practices. Some participants said that they would like to light Shabbat candles or perform other rituals but did not have time.

Very few participants indicated that the programs would affect their contribution to or participation in tzedakah or social action. There is little in the participant's motivation or program activities that might stimulate this interest. It may not be appropriate or feasible for fund raising or social action projects to draw on family-time-oriented motivations. These brief experientially oriented activities are not good venues for conveying a deeper understanding of Jewish values.

It is wise not to expect too much from these programs. "Impact" implies a power and continuity that these programs cannot deliver. Most programs were one time or a brief series of events. Even a weekend retreat had little time devoted to cognitive/affective activities, such as lectures or discussion.

Although many retreat participants found the religious services to be powerful and important, each was experienced only once during the weekend. The Friday night Shabbat table service was enjoyable, but offered little opportunity to learn or gain confidence in any new activities. One post-retreat Havdalah service for participants in a retreat held 6 months earlier was well attended. However, participants reported that their satisfaction was as much in renewing friendships as in the "religious ritual," for all that they enjoyed and appreciated its beauty. Nor was this service designed to enable participants to do Havdalah at home.

In sum, these programs allow people to express Jewishness in a family setting. Most are satisfied with a passive role in Jewish activity except as it involves family and friends. Improving skills and gaining knowledge are important subthemes for only a minority of participants. For most, being with their family in an audience of congenial fellow Jews is as much Jewishness as they are prepared to accept.

Participants also wanted opportunities to strengthen peer and congregational ties. Most were well satisfied with the programs in this respect.

Therefore, a successful program would be one that produced family time *and* - Jewish time *and* synagogue time *at the same time*. Any combination of family time and/or synagogue and/or Jewish time will attract participants and satisfy sponsors.

Two interpretations of this finding are possible. Participants may share all these motivations but with slightly different rankings, or the program may attract two divergent types. One group—the majority in these weekend retreat programs—may primarily wish to strengthen their family and social linkages. Another smaller group may place more emphasis on gaining Jewish knowledge, skills, or values. If this two-type theory is true, it is important to decide which group is the primary target and then to devise ways to identify and attract them. We are continuing this research in order to clarify these issues further.

CONCLUSION

Will or Can Jewish Family Education Save the Jews?

Will these programs attract enough people and influence them enough to effect a change in the life of the American Jewish community? The analysis so far suggests that the conventional two-parent middle-class family, strongly motivated to form and strengthen links to its synagogue and friends, may be the group most strongly attracted to these programs. It can be argued that demographic changes now in place make the program's primary audience—two-parent households—a dwindling segment of the community. The community is increasingly composed of singles, small families with few children, two-career families, and families with relative wealth who are geographically dispersed into wealthy scattered suburbs—family types that are not attracted to Jewish family education.

However, most Jews do eventually marry and do have children. At that point about 80 to 85% will join some Jewish organization for some period of time (Cohen, 1987, p. 31). They do so for family reasons, typically for their children's Jewish education.

This marginally affiliated group is the program's primary target. They are not an easy market to attract. Critics argue that they are not strongly motivated to deepen their identity. Jewish educators have rather bitterly related to me their feeling that parents want them to "make my children Jewish—but not too Jewish."

Cohen's portrait of the marginally affiliated clearly fits the group attracted to the JEFF program. They share these characteristics:

- are committed to Jewish continuity but less committed to or concerned about any particular expression of Jewish life or ideology
- are proud of their Jewishness and of Judaism
- celebrate High Holidays, Chanukah, and Pesach, and are especially fond of the family activities and special foods associated with them
- have as their primary Jewish goal for their children to maintain family closeness and the Jewish identity of the children and grandchildren
- affirm their right to select Jewish customs they find meaningful. Celebrating the Judaism they choose, affiliating with the institution of their choice, makes them "good Jews." They resent rabbis and fund raisers whom they feel "reproach

them for failing to fulfill Jewish norms"
- affirm broad Jewish values, but do not support the requirement that they study them or intensively educate their children in Jewish Day schools
- are more attached to congregations than to federations or Jewish Community Centers

This picture of a deep commitment to relationships but not to any particular movement or belief may be what is meant by being Jewish (relationships) but not too Jewish (ideologically committed). This group wants to be strongly Jewish at home but not so Jewish outside as to create tensions with the non-Jewish world.

On Enculturation and Social Movements

Jewish family education programs as a whole and this program in particular are well designed to satisfy and reinforce the goals set out by the marginally affiliated. They can broaden and deepen their commitment to family, people, and the fellowship aspects of congregational life. Those who want more will look elsewhere. There are other avenues for learning and action.

The programs may be best seen as an expression of a social movement that is now two to three decades old. It would include the Chavurah movement of the 1960s, the "do-it-yourself" Judaism of *The Jewish Catalogs,* the arts and craft revival now in process, Jewish Feminism, New Age Judaism, and the Ba'al T'shuvah trend. Family education fits into this mosaic as its participants seek to recreate the warmth and closeness of membership in an enculturating community.

Family education can operate as an agent for social change within the broader Jewish community. Clusters of strongly identified families could achieve leadership positions or be role models for less identified group (congregation) members. As magnets attract iron filings in concentric rings moving out from a powerful center, the leaders' example and the groups they help create will spread their message.

On a small scattered scale these families are building a nourishing community, the "warm spots," which make it unnecessary to provide an answer to the question: Why be Jewish? It is enough to know that it is a source of pride and is emotionally rewarding for family life and for group participation.

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