FORUM II

Jewish Family Education: Evaluating Its Course, Looking to Its Future

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As programs in Jewish family education began springing up in many different parts of the American Jewish community, a number of prominent Jewish educators heralded its advent and sought to articulate its vision (Alper, 1987; Appelman, 1985; Kelman, 1989; Schiff, 1986; Schiff & Botwinik, 1988; Wolfson, 1983). Arising from the realization that it is simply ineffective to teach Jewish subjects to children in isolation from the realities of their home lives, Jewish family education (JFE) is an attempt by educators to reach out to family members and invite them to join with their children in learning the joys of Jewish living.

JFE achieved prominence during the 1980s as a popular response to the changing needs of the American Jewish community. Although many practitioners in synagogues, bureaus of Jewish education (BJEs), Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), camps, and Jewish family service agencies sense that the JFE agenda—Jewish outreach to parents and other family members—is appropriate to our times, there has been little effort to step back and reflect on where JFE came from and where it is leading. This article is an attempt to place JFE in context by seeking its roots in the societal crises of the 1960s and 1970s, evaluating its goals and objectives, and looking ahead to what challenges this movement faces as it moves into its next phase during the 1990s.

THE ORIGINS

The 1970s was the decade during which the family surfaced as a matter of great debate in American society. The turmoil of the 1960s, the rise of the women's movement, the increase in divorce, and the change in abortion laws all contributed to a sense that American society no longer shared a single vision of the role of the family (Berger & Berger, 1983). Some observers thought the family might disappear as a unit of organization; others who disagreed with that gloomy assessment still predicted that the family of the future would look very different from the family of the past (Bane, 1978; Keniston, 1977).

The American Jewish community also experienced a family crisis in its midst. Young Jews were delaying the timing of marriage and having fewer children. In seeking a marriage partner, they were more attracted to non-Jews, increasing greatly the number of intermarriages. Divorce was rising in incidence almost as fast as in the general American population. The vaunted Jewish family seemed to be coming apart at the seams (Cohen, 1983).

There were many different responses within the Jewish community to the perceived crisis in family life—from increasing counseling and outreach services to putting day care on the agenda and setting up Jewish dating services (American Jewish Committee, 1979). However, for the Jewish educational community the crisis in family life was joined to a second crisis, the decline of the synagogue supplementary school.

The 1970s saw a dramatic decrease in the number of students attending supplementary schools, which was offset only partially by a substantial increase in attendance at day schools (Dubb & DellaPergola, 1986). Furthermore, two academic studies published in the mid-1970s called into question the effectiveness of supplementary education (Bock, 1977; Himmelfarb, 1977). It seemed that at the moment when the capacity of the average Jewish family to

pass Judaism on was being called into question, the school could no longer be relied upon to fill the gap. Surely both pillars of Jewish continuity could not be allowed to crumble at once.

This anxiety led in part to an increase in federation and communal investment in the field of Jewish education (Fox, 1989). Among some Jewish educators working in synagogue schools, there arose a feeling that the best hope for improving the supplementary school lay in involving the family in that education. In their view the supplementary school was failing primarily from a lack of emotional investment on the part of parents whose children were enrolled (Schoem, 1982). If families could be drawn into their children's education and develop Jewish interests of their own, the whole system would receive a vital motivational boost (Schiff, 1986).

The move toward family education has coincided with two demographic trends that have proved significant: (1) the "baby boomers" becoming parents in large numbers and (2) increasing numbers of intermarried couples joining synagogues and becoming a part of the school's parent body.

As many who in the 1970s delayed marriage and childbirth began having children in the 1980s , there arose a new generation of parents and children to join synagogues and seek Jewish education (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989). Many of these parents have gone through childbirth classes, read the extensive literature on raising children, and are in general more ready to be involved in their children's education. They also, on the whole, have weak Jewish educations that need refreshing if they are to keep up with their children's Jewish learning. Among this generation is an increasing number of parents who are Jews-by-choice or non-Jews who are raising the children as Jews (Fishman, et al., 1990; Tobin, 1991). In their childhood they did not experience the cycle of Jewish holidays, rituals, and family events and thus need to learn how to live as Jews if they are to be active in their children's Jewish upbringing. Together these parents' diverse Jewish needs have created a fertile ground for JFE.

The Communal Case for Jewish Family Education

Although the literature on JFE is written by educators, the case for it has been made most powerfully by thinkers in communal and federation circles, such as Jonathan Woocher (1988) and Barry Shrage (1988). In sociological terms, Shrage makes the case clearly.

> Since the 1971 National Jewish Population Study, planning in the field of Jewish education has been based in part on very low estimates of American Jewish affiliation and of the proportion of youngsters receiving a Jewish education . . . . More recent studies in most major Jewish urban areas . . . have shown a "family life-cycle" pattern of affiliation that produces very high affiliation over time . . . . These kind of demographic facts suggest far different strategies. Since nearly all families with children affiliate with a congregation at some point, outreach may not be the most cost-effective or highest priority strategy for strengthening Jewish commitment . . . . In reality, few of the institutions with which Jews affiliate are structured or staffed to take advantage of the high rate of affiliation we currently enjoy in order to significantly strengthen and upgrade the level of Jewish identification of the families that pass through.

Following the work of Cohen (1988) and others, Shrage notes that the data indicate that a vast majority of Jewish families send their preadolescent children for some form of Jewish education. These findings suggest higher levels of affiliation than had earlier been assumed.

From Shrage's communal perspective, preschool programs at JCCs, supplementary schools at synagogues, and Jewish summer camps are not simply providers of educa-

tional services to children, but are also "gateway institutions" that families belong to or pass through in the years when there are young children at home. The gateway institutions have an important communal function to play. Jews on the periphery of the community are likely to turn first to them to seek educational services for their children, and if these institutions can provide quality, family-oriented service, they may motivate the families to seek greater, ongoing participation in the Jewish community.

What is new in this message is "family-oriented" service. Providers of child care, summer camps, and religious education have traditionally seen their role as educating children. In contrast, the logic of Shrage's argument leads to a balanced focus on the children and the families. If the children's school years (perhaps expanded recently to include the preschool years) constitute the period of most-likely affiliation for the whole nuclear family—when, for example, they are most likely to become members of a synagogue or JCC—then the community through its agencies has to take fullest advantage of that contact. Exclusive focus on the children becomes counterproductive; the client, newly defined, is the family.

In a more traditional cultural system than our own, in which children's education is but one of many points of sustained contact between the community and the family, planned deliberate family education is unnecessary. The family and the community are already working together over a sustained period of time to transmit the culture from one generation to the next. Yet, when the contact is condensed into one time period and the family and community's cultural rhythms or values are not synchronized, there needs to be a deliberate effort to coordinate acts of cultural transmission. JFE can be seen as the community's attempt to reach in and make contact with family members so they can begin to work together to ensure some level of Jewish continuity, a goal the family has implicitly endorsed when it sought to enter the gateway institution.

THE GOALS OF JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION

A review of the literature yields five common goals of JFE that can be ordered in a sequence from simple to more complex. The literature focuses most clearly on synagogue-based JFE programs. I adopt that focus and assume that these are goals for bringing family members, but particularly parents, into greater touch and involvement with the culture of the synagogue and its school.

1. Involve Parents in Their Children's Jewish Education

In a survey of congregational schools in the greater New York area, the Board of Jewish Education study (Schiff & Botwinik, 1988) found that parental involvement in the schools is virtually nonexistent. Parents rarely are in contact with the teacher or principal of the school and have only a vague idea of what to expect from this education. Neither do they evince much desire to get more involved.

Involvement as a first goal entails the school and the synagogue welcoming parents, sponsoring get-to-know-you events, and creating opportunities in which parents can contribute to classroom life and assignments that can engage parents and children in joint Jewish activities in the home. Involvement, although still child-oriented, is a big first step beyond where many congregational schools have been in establishing open relations between school and home.

2. Establish Contexts for Parents' Jewish Learning

Most programs in adult Jewish education are populated heavily by senior adults, leaving a vacuum in programming for

younger parents who feel a need to know more about Judaism in order to participate in their children's Jewish education. There have been attempts to fill the vacuum with parallel education in parent education programs, holiday workshops, and intensive courses in basic Judaism (Wolfson, 1983). Yet, few are the congregations that communicate unequivocally the expectation that child and adult learning have to proceed along parallel lines.

3. Establish Programs for Joint Family Involvement in Jewish Learning

In addition to parallel learning, there is value in family members spending quality time together in Jewish pursuits (Bernard, 1989; see article by Bernard in this issue). There is available a widening repertoire of activities that involve parents and children in fun, interactive learning about the Jewish yearly cycle, life cycle, history, and culture (Alper, 1987).

4. Build Community Among Families

Families joining congregations, especially large ones, may not have much connection to their fellow members. JFE programs can create an arena in which families can get to know one another and begin to join together for Jewish celebration and other activities (Appelman, 1985). There is a close connection between the JFE movement and the notion of family clusters or *havurot* (Elkins, 1976).

5. Adapt Jewish Learning to the Home

The ultimate goal of JFE is to provide families with the motivation and skill to support their children's Jewish education by enriching the Jewish ambience of the home. Although how that is to be done is a matter of debate, all authors agree that parental involvement and learning are not only ends in themselves but also are steps toward practice and, it is hoped, practice in the home.

PUTTING JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION INTO PRACTICE

Although in the literature we find no linear attempts to put the goals of JFE into practice, we do find two descriptive pieces on how synagogue-based JFE programs have been implemented (Appelman, 1985; Kaye, 1989) and one blueprint for how they might be adopted in a larger metropolitan area (Schiff & Botwinik, 1988). Based on these reports from Detroit, Boston, and New York and my own experience in implementing such programs (Reimer & Jaffee, 1989), I put forth a possible model of implementation.

In the Detroit and Boston areas, synagogues' interest in JFE programming was stimulated and made possible by initial grants from the community. A partnership between federation and synagogue is an excellent basis for JFE insofar as it expresses Shrage's (1988) vision of bringing marginally affiliated families closer to the center of both religious and communal activity.

Within the synagogue a team of the rabbi, the educator, and the lay leadership is involved in conceiving and implementing the plans for JFE. In different synagogues, varying members of the team may play more prominent roles. In the Detroit area, lay steering committees were formed to play a central role in overseeing the programs, marketing them to the membership, and advocating for them within the synagogue structure. In the Boston area it is more common for the rabbi and educator to be the lead players and for the lay leadership to support and encourage, but not be actively involved. In both cases, however, the educator working alone could not have successfully launched the programs and kept them afloat without help from the other partners.

JFE typically involves several types of educational programs. Appelman (1985) suggests three models of education, which I adapt here to reflect the Boston area experience.

1. *Adult education:* Parents at all levels of Jewish knowledge, observance, and commitment come to these programs. They need to be met at each of these levels and be made to feel welcome whatever their background. For many parents the unspoken question is, "Given my background, can I ever find a comfortable place in Judaism?" As the family educators provide the beginnings of a Jewish re-education, they need to put parents at ease, answering their questions and modeling the synagogue as an accepting community.
2. *Experiential learning:* Families come to these programs looking for opportunities to spend quality family time together (Bernard, 1989). Providing interactive experiences with Jewish content for parents and children is not only supportive of the families' wish to be together but also enabling of their learning that Jewish activity can be both fun and family-oriented.
3. *Life-cycle learning:* Families are more receptive to new information around life-cycle events (Friedman, 1980). When a child is to be born or adopted, schooling is about to begin, adolescence is approaching, or a marriage is being planned, the family realizes it needs help from the community. At these moments Jews often turn to the rabbi and the congregation and ask for direction in structuring the life-cycle event. These are also moments for JFE. A group of prospective parents or of parents planning an upcoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah can meet with a leader over several weeks in a synagogue and learn a great deal not only about the life-cycle moment they share but also how Jewish tradition gives shape to the moment. Such groups provide a logical bridge between the need for support, sharing, and acceptance and the provision of Jewish content and experience.

Beginning JFE programming with a specific cohort of parents and children—a group receptive to these interventions—tends to generate more demand if the initial programs meet the needs of the clientele. In both the Detroit and Boston areas, the initial success of JFE bred more demand for JFE programs, probably because word spread that the programs were both fun and educational and parents are looking for these kinds of opportunities.

Reflecting specifically on the Boston area experience, Joan Kaye (1989) points to the adoption of JFE programs by 22 congregations in the span of several years as partial evidence that JFE is more than a passing fad. However, she is cautious in drawing conclusions because of the stimulus of the community grant. What will happen after the seed money runs out is a better long-term indicator of synagogue commitment to provide JFE.

WHAT ARE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION?

When JFE programs are put into place in synagogues, what can we realistically expect them to achieve?

Given the absence in the literature of evaluation studies, the above question cannot be given a definitive answer. However, based on the Detroit (Bernard, 1989) and Boston area (Kaye, 1989; Reimer & Jaffee, 1989) experiences, we can begin to see the outlines of reasonable expectations for outcomes that can be achieved.

1. *When programs are designed carefully and marketed appropriately within a receptive congregation, parents respond positively, come to the activities, participate eagerly, and ask for more such programming.*

Within this encouraging message, certain cautions need to be noted. (1) To be successful, JFE programs require careful design because they must appeal to more than one generation and to families with varied backgrounds. (2) JFE programs should grow out of the life of the congregation and not simply be imported from another site. The professionals and/or lay leaders must read accurately the needs of families

in each congregation, design programs to meet those needs, and market the program to the targeted group of families. (3) Given the voluntary nature of JFE programs, one should expect that not all parents will initially be interested. It is better to begin with pockets of interest and let the word spread, realizing that interest is not likely to be universal. (4) Even among interested parents, it is to be expected that many will approach JFE tentatively. Given that some parents have had little positive experiences in synagogue or, in the case of intermarrieds, very little experience of any kind in a synagogue, they are likely to be internally resistant until they feel welcome, accepted, and comfortable. Parents, as do children, need to be won over.

In congregations in which there has been little recent outreach to parents, the task of beginning JFE programs is more complex. It often takes time and constancy of approach for parents to feel they are truly welcome. A certain level of communication and trust needs to be established between the congregation/school and the parents to make JFE feasible. Where that has been absent, it may prove helpful if the rabbi and educator work together in approaching families so the families feel they are receiving a cohesive and consistent message of welcome.

2. *In congregations with well-attended JFE programs there have been reported significant fringe benefits.* These benefits include (1) more parental participation in the school (such as greater volunteering in the school and contributing more input into the children's learning); (2) more participation in other synagogue events (services, adult programming, etc.); (3) more demand for adult Jewish education; and (4) closer working relations between the rabbi(s) and educator(s) who collaborate in JFE programming. However, caution is needed in evaluating these reports since there has been no objective verification of these claimed benefits.

3. *In some JFE programs, parents have voluntarily expanded the bounds of the program to include Shabbat or holiday dinners for families in members' homes.*

These may be seen as attempts to adapt the learning from the synagogue-based programs to the homes. The transfer to the home seems to work more comfortably when combined with the urge to create some form of community. The celebratory meal shared in people's homes by several families is quite reminiscent of the synagogue-based *havurah* movement of the 1970s (Elkins, 1976; Reisman, 1977) and speaks to the need to find a bridge between the synagogue and home experience.

EMPOWERING THE FAMILY

Finding the bridge between synagogue and home is a crucial, but elusive goal of JFE. A synagogue-based set of programs can successfully bring families to the synagogue and involve them in Jewish activities and learning in that context, but will that success motivate the families to similarly increase the Jewish experiential level of their home lives?

The urgency of this question goes back to one of the root assumptions of JFE: in Jewish education, the "chances for effectiveness are extremely limited without sufficient home support and involvement" (Schiff & Botwinik, 1988, p. 124). Although coming to the synagogue to pursue the family's continuing Jewish education certainly constitutes a form of home support and involvement, most authors in this field, going back to Himmelfarb (1974) and Bock (1977), argue that the involvement needs to be *in* the home for the family members to view Jewish practices as part of their personal lifestyle.

In a penetrating piece Wolfson (1983) has questioned whether synagogue life is set up to help families learn how to be Jews in their homes. Wolfson sees the modern American synagogue as having

encroached more and more deeply on the domain of the family to the point where a dependency cycle has developed.

> Like any good provider, the synagogue entices its members into greater and greater involvement with Jewish life, most of it synagogue-based . . . continuing to feed the family's dependence on it as the central vehicle for Jewish expression while failing to significantly move the family towards Jewish self-sufficiency in the home (Wolfson, 1983, p. 6).

JFE programs can also serve to increase the family's dependence if their message becomes "you need to come to the synagogue in order to lead a Jewish family life." Yet, they can break the dependency cycle if their primary goal becomes giving the family—and particularly the parents—the knowledge, skill, and confidence to lead Jewish lives in their own homes.

Wolfson as well as Schiff (1986), advocates family education *for* the home and *in* the home. This involves a two-step process. First, in addition to providing Jewish experiences, synagogue programs need to provide the tools for adapting these experiences for home use. Second, either professionals or trained laypeople need to be available to go into the home and model how Jewish observance is practiced at home. This modeling can be done in the form of a cluster of families celebrating together, a more knowledgeable family inviting a novice family to its home, or a professional educator helping one or more families plan their own home celebrations.

There is not yet a literature that describes in any detail the envisioned home education, but it does seem like a possible next step. The crisis of the Jewish family ultimately cannot be solved by the synagogue or any other Jewish institution. The community institutions can lend support, provide materials and media, and teach Jewish skills, but the crucial steps have to be taken by families themselves to educate and empower their members.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By 1990 the JFE movement had achieved recognition within the organized American Jewish community, as an impressive number and variety of JFE programs had been established not only by synagogues but also by BJEs, JCCs, camps, family service agencies, museums, national organizations, and schools of higher learning (JESNA, 1989).

The rapid spread of such programs attests to JFE being a populist movement that has sprung up more in response to local needs than as a result of central planning or communal decision making. As a populist movement, JFE has grown more by inspiration then by direction. Educators, rabbis, and social and communal workers hear about programs from one another and adapt the basic concept to their setting. That process results in a variety of programs, but also in a rather diffuse definition of what constitutes Jewish education for the family.

As a movement, JFE seems poised to enter a next phase of development in the 1990s. The creation of the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life at The University of Judaism is the most extensive of several efforts to bring together theorists and practitioners in this field to give greater definition to the enterprise and provide leadership for a more systematic dissemination of JFE programs across the American Jewish community.

Yet, a number of serious challenges face the JFE movement as it moves into its next phase. The challenges are those typically encountered when a popular-based educational movement attempts to consolidate its gains and plan for a more systematic penetration into the educational market.

1. JFE lacks a curricular base (Keller, 1990). At present, educators are inventing

programs as they go along and are learning from one another how these programs are run. There has been a generous amount of sharing of programs, but very few programs have been written up and distributed widely. There has been a dearth of discussion beyond the few articles cited of what the goals of these programs should be and whether the available programs are capable of providing family members with the experiential base to achieve these goals.

For example, an educator who wishes to begin a family-oriented educational program for parents of kindergarten children can turn to the local BJE or fellow educators for ideas on how to run such a program. However, there are few written guides available on how to plan the program, session by session, in ways that are likely to result in the achievement of particular educational objectives. There are few widely accepted standards of how often the group should be meeting, nor is there a guide as to how to keep this parent group together over the course of the several years that they will be parents in the school.

2. Existing JFE programs aim not only to provide adult Jewish education for parents, but also to provide experiential learning for the family as a unit. Yet, little systematic attention has been paid to the question of how to capture simultaneously the interest of children and adults in ways that not only allow everyone present to have a good time but also to learn at his or her level the basic information about Jewish living. There is a sense in the field that the two generations can fruitfully learn together (Kelman, 1989), but how this is achieved and what is actually learned remain unexplored.

3. JFE programs are primarily attracting parents and school-aged children. The literature thus far has treated these family members as if they were all one population. However, recent demographic trends indicate that American Jewish families have grown more diverse in shape and include single-parent, blended-parent, and interfaith families (Cohen, 1989; Fishman, 1990). Very little attention has been paid to the diverse populations and learning needs among the parents' groups.

Consider the recent experience of interfaith families in JFE programs in the Boston area. Among many Reform congregations in the Boston area it has been estimated that perhaps one-quarter of the families with school-aged children are intermarried families (Dr. Paula Brody, UAHC Northeast Council, personal communication). In certain of these congregations JFE programs have become contexts in which these families come to learn about Judaism. They are in no way singled out; on the contrary, they integrate well into the whole group of parents. Yet, they do have special questions and concerns that stand out in the group discussion. Little thought has been given to how—within the general context of a JFE program—to service the specific needs of this group of parents.

4. Not all, or even most, Jewish families have school-aged children at home (Fishman, 1990). Within the family life cycle there are periods in which the couple lives together before having children and after the children have grown and left the home. Also, many Jews live as single adults.

The meaning of the term "family" within JFE has yet to be defined carefully. Is JFE to become a form of parent education, or is it to reach out to the Jewish family at different points in its life cycle? If the latter is to be the case, there will need to be some careful thought given to how best to reach out to these different populations and what a family-oriented approach will offer that differs from existing forms of adult Jewish education.

5. The continued growth of JFE programs is likely to require the training of professional Jewish family educators (Schiff & Botwinik, 1988). The training probably will need to blend the skills of the Jewish educator and the family-oriented clinician (Reimer, 1987). Currently, there are no degree programs in the Jewish community that offer this type of training. Creating such training opportunities—in both degree

and continuing education programs—will be needed if the conceptions of JFE are to be realized over time in meaningful educational practice.

6. Currently there is almost a total absence of objective knowledge of what works in JFE programs. We do not know if any of the goals cited above are achieved and, if so, by what type of programming for which type of clientele. JFE as a field remains in a stage of trial and error. Finding the means and personnel to begin evaluational research in JFE will be essential for providing this field with valid feedback as to what is working and why. Until current experiential programs are monitored and evaluated properly, it will be very hard for family educators to learn from mistakes and build confidently on successes.

CONCLUSION

JFE grew as a popular response to the dual crises of changes in American Jewish family life and decline in synagogue supplementary schools. The quick spread of this programming across the community attests to the presence of the need and the vitality of the response. Yet, to secure its future, the JFE movement will need in the 1990s to progress from offering a potpourri of untested programs to offering a menu of regular programs that have proven their worth as educational vehicles for moving families toward a richer and more engaged relationship with Jewish tradition and communal life.

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