

FORUM I

Trends and Challenges in Jewish Family Education

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A TRADITIONAL CONCEPT

Jewish education involving parents and adult family members is an idea as old as the Jewish people. In Judaic tradition, life-long learning—Torah study, as broadly defined—has been a critical dimension of Jewish life, particularly for men (Talmud, *Peah* 1a; *Yoma* 35a; *Rosh Hashana* 18a; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* 1:10). Moreover, the role of the home in education is paramount (*Pirkei Avot*, 1:4). An adult man engrossed in the study of Talmud during an evening or Shabbat afternoon in his home was a common scene in the Eastern European shtetl, as was the practice of fathers reviewing the weekly Torah portion with their sons. Mothers and daughters were involved in Jewish family education through the home rituals and activities in which they engaged.

Judaic learning was considered so important that it was elevated to the level of prayer by the sages of the Talmud. Indeed, the prayer book contains numerous sections from the Bible and Talmud for which the reader merits the mitzvah of study as well as prayer when reciting them. The *Kaddish d'Rabbanan* was formulated specifically to follow a study portion of the prayers (Maimonides, *Nusach Ha-Kaddish*). A prime example of the interlacing of study with prayer is the inclusion of *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) in the traditional prayer book. Incorporated into the liturgy in the 9th century, *Pirkei Avot* achieved a prominent place in the prayer book of Amram Gaon. Group Torah study in the

synagogue after daily morning and Shabbat *minhah* services is still a common practice in almost all traditional synagogues. Moreover, daily learning, particularly the *Daf Yomi*—the study of a page of the Talmud each day, instituted in Lublin, Poland by Rabbi Meir Shapiro in 1923—is a regular occurrence in many segments of the Orthodox community.

When speaking about Jewish family education two decades ago, even to Jewish educators, my words, by and large, fell on deaf ears. Only a few educators and fewer lay leaders considered this subject worthy of serious deliberation. Now, Jewish family education is generating a great deal of excitement and interest. What has led to this avalanche of interest by the Jewish community? The answer to this question requires a retrospective look. In reality, involving Jewish parents in Jewish life and Jewish school activities and offering parent education programs are not entirely new subjects on the Jewish educational agenda. What is new is the universality of interest and the urgency and intensity with which Jewish family education is now being considered.

AMERICAN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

On a formal community-wide level in the United States, the earliest Jewish family education effort was sponsored by the Bureau of Jewish Education of New York in the early 1900s (Winter, 1966). At that time, the goal of family education was a combination of Jewish acculturation and Americanization. In 1927, Samson Benderly, director of the Bureau, inaugurated the Jewish Home Institute, a correspondence course for mothers of young children. Lacking sufficient funds, this creative project

Presented at the North American Network Conference of the Melton Senior Educators' Program, New York.

was abandoned soon after its initiation (Winter, 1966).

Since then, parental involvement in Jewish education has taken many different forms. For example, from the 1930s to the 1950s, emulating practices of the public school (which until recently, with the exception of isolated individual and group efforts, discouraged parental involvement), participation of parents in Jewish schooling was often in the nature of PTA activity. Parent involvement was expressed not by actual learning, but through service to the school, such as serving refreshments to children, providing financial support to schools by purchasing needed equipment, and providing scholarship aid.

After World War II, following the lead of American education, many Jewish early childhood educators began working with parents as part of their educational activity. As a rule, Jewish early child educators consider parent education a significant part of their instructional work.

As the modern synagogue grew in membership, adult education programs were organized by individual synagogues. These generally included courses in Hebrew reading, Hebrew language, Jewish history, Bible and prayer, as well as lecture series by prominent leaders and scholars. In both these courses and lecture series, only the highly motivated synagogue members participated with regularity. Both types of programs continue to be sponsored by synagogues and synagogue schools.

Each major ideological movement has developed its own form of parent education. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations of the Reform movement has had a longstanding interest in adult Jewish education, which has been expressed over the years in a wide variety of policy statements on the importance of lifelong learning and through the publishing of books on the Bible and Jewish history (Segal, 1972-73; Manuel Gold, personal communication, 1990).

In 1970, the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education initiated the Parent Education Program (PEP), a pro-

gram for parents of students in the first grade of afternoon Conservative schools. It had three basic elements: subject matter correlative with the religious school curriculum, with special emphasis on issues relating to parent-child relationships; the uniqueness and direction of parenthood as understood in Jewish tradition; and general Jewish knowledge and skills. An ambitious endeavor, PEP required parents to study a minimum of 2½ hours each school week. Soon after the beginning of PEP, the United Synagogue launched the Family Kallah program. Each Kallah was designed to provide intensive Jewish living experiences for parents *and* children as family units over a period of 5 days at Camp Ramah in Pennsylvania.

By the fall of 1978, three different study programs had been developed—PEP I for parents of elementary schoolchildren on formal subject matter, PEP II for parents of adolescents on societal problems involving teen-aged youth, and PEP III for pre-nursery and nursery school parents offering guidance on Jewish family living. In 1985, the PEP program was reconstituted as the Family Education Program. Although it has shown positive results in the participating synagogues, PEP never achieved wide popularity (Hyman Campeas, personal communication, 1990).

In 1949, the Community Services Division of Yeshiva University launched YUDAE, a program aimed at bringing Jewish learning to adults through their Orthodox synagogues. A unique feature of the program was its credit-bearing coursework that led to a university certificate upon completion. At its peak in the 1960s several thousand adults in the United States and Canada were enrolled in YUDAE.

In another vein, Yeshiva University organized Torah Tours in 1962. The purpose of this program has been to reach out to the more isolated communities and to strengthen the synagogue through family *Shabbatonim* for adults and children, separately and together; at these retreats participants use creative group techniques to plan and develop the activities themselves.

Staffed by Yeshiva University students, Torah Tours reaches some 30 communities throughout the United States (Mordecai Schnaidman, personal communication, 1990).

In the area of all-day Jewish education, Torah Umesorah, The National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, launched an ambitious parent education in Metropolitan New York in the 1950s involving hundreds of parents each week in serious coursework in Judaic studies. Currently, it is co-sponsored by the National Council of Young Israel as an adult education lecture series. For over two decades, beginning in 1950, Torah Umesorah's National Association of Hebrew Day School PTAs published *The Jewish Parent*, a magazine for families of yeshiva students. This publication served to inform its readership about various aspects of the Jewish day school and to strengthen ties to the day school movement (Joshua Fishman, personal communication, 1990).

In the late 1970s there developed a new interest in Jewish education for adults and families. In many communities, pre-breakfast and lunch-and-learn sessions were organized in professional offices and communal agencies. Among other indicators of the growing interest in this area was the mini-conference on Jewish family education sponsored in 1980 by the Conference of Alternatives in Jewish Education. At that conference, which convened several of the pioneers in the field, six categories of Jewish family education were delineated: celebration and observance, workshops, sederim, joint learning, ongoing learning experiences, and extended time programs.

During the 1970s and 1980s, a variety of creative education efforts for children and the Jewish family were launched in communities throughout the United States: in Baltimore, for example, the *Home Start*/Behrman House project by Dr. Hyman Chanover; in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the *Harvard-Hillel School* by Sherry Kohler Fox; in Detroit, the hands-on *Jewish Experiences for Families* and other activities by Harlene Applebaum (see article by Bernard

in this issue); in New York, the *Parent and Children for Education* synagogue-based program by Joan Kaye, and the *Mishpacha* program by the Early Childhood Education and Outreach departments of the Board of Jewish Education; in Los Angeles, the creative holiday materials, research and advocacy activities by Dr. Ronald Wolfson; and in Washington, the *Jewish Discovery Room* for hands-on-activity by the Board of Jewish Education.

By the end of the 1980s, most Jewish communities could point to some Jewish family education activity in their locales.

REASONS FOR UPSURGE OF INTEREST IN FAMILY EDUCATION

Two factors fuel the current interest in and development of Jewish family education programs. First is the increasing awareness of the growing bipolar state of Jewish behavior. A minority of the Jewish community is involved intensively in Jewish schooling, whereas increasingly larger numbers of Jews demonstrate little or no interest in Jewish life for themselves or for their children. This latter group—comprising, by far, the vast majority of American Jewry—is the product of the acculturation/deculturation syndrome of Jewish life as Jews became integrated comfortably into American society.

Jewish communal leadership now feels the urgent need to find ways to address the Jewish needs of alienated and marginally affiliated Jews and to involve them in the Jewish community. One way of doing this is through Jewish family education.

The second reason for the upsurge of interest in Jewish family education is the BJE of Greater New York's 1988 landmark study of the Jewish supplementary school, *Jewish Supplementary Schooling: An Educational System in Need of Change*. The findings and conclusions of this comprehensive 3-year effort, which used both normative survey and scientific measurement techniques, confirmed the worst fears of lay and professional leaders in Jewish

education. Supplementary school, is, with very few exceptions, not an effective instrumentality for the transmission of Jewish knowledge and values. The fact that 70% of the Jewish school enrollment is found in congregational schools makes attention to these findings all the more urgent.

A major reason for the noneffectiveness of the Jewish supplementary school is the lack of Jewish home environment and family support for Jewish schooling. The overwhelming majority of parents of Jewish supplementary school pupils have very little knowledge of Judaism and are very marginally affiliated with organized Jewish life. They enroll their children in the synagogue school solely for Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. They are unsure of what they want or should expect from the school and provide little or no support, encouragement, or reinforcement at home. Moreover, most parents feel that they have neither the time nor the desire to become involved in the school or the synagogue.

These findings remind us of George Bernard Shaw's biting comment, "There might be some doubt as to who are the best people to have charge of children; but there can be no doubt that parents are the worst." Just ponder this statement vis-a-vis Jewish upbringing.

The BJE study concludes that, unless Jewish education of the entire family becomes the absolute priority of the synagogue, unless the parents become more involved in the Jewish education of their children, unless the school program is geared to the needs of families, and unless all synagogue personnel are able to relate effectively to pupils and then parents, very little or no improvement in Jewish supplementary education can take place.

This conclusion is supported by research regarding education in the public sector, particularly the landmark studies of James Coleman (1966), Christopher Jencks (1972), and David Cohen (1971) in the 1960s and 1970s, and by the research of Andrew Greeley and Peter Rossi on Catholic education in the 1960s (1966).

The wide dissemination of the BJE study findings, conclusions, and recommendations has had a major impact on the Jewish educational community: the hiring by growing numbers of synagogues and communities of Jewish family educators, the intensification of extant Jewish family education programs, the launching of major communal and regional conferences on Jewish family education, the initial efforts by some synagogues to reorganize their program thrust and retool for Jewish family education, and the strengthening of the role and influence of the handful of Jewish educators who have been laboring with dedication in the vineyards of Jewish family education.

Over the past few years, a variety of national, regional, and local conferences on Jewish family education have taken place. The 2-day conference sponsored by the Principals Service/Resource Center of BJE of Greater New York at Columbia University in 1989 might serve as a model for bureau-based Jewish family education meetings (Schiff, 1989). A key element of this conference was the composition of the participants. It included all the stakeholders in Jewish family education—rabbis, principals, teachers, youth leaders, parents, and synagogue and communal lay leaders.

EVERYONE IS DOING JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION

The universality of Jewish family education (JFE) is a trend in itself. The list of sponsors of JFE programs in North America reads like an encyclopedia of Jewish organizations. It includes central agencies for Jewish education, family service agencies, synagogues, congregational schools, Jewish day schools, independent early childhood programs, Jewish Community Centers, federations, Jewish community relations councils, Jewish museums, schools of higher Jewish learning, national Jewish organizations and their local chapters, fraternal groups, ideological commissions of education, human relations agencies, and Zionist

organizations. In addition, there are many instances of interagency collaboration and co-sponsorship of Jewish family education programs.

Among the variety of sponsoring groups, it is clear that the synagogue is the primary agency for Jewish family education. The case for congregationally based Jewish family education can easily be made because synagogues most readily possess the combination of factors needed for Jewish family education to succeed. Synagogues can reach the largest number of families. They were established, in the first instance, to serve families. The three Hebrew terms used interchangeably for the word "synagogue" clearly convey this point: *bet kneset* (house of assembly), *bet tefillah* (house of prayer), and *bet midrash* (house of study). As a multifunctional agency, the basic synagogue structure lends itself to providing Jewish family education services for its members. Moreover, it has the staff for effective Jewish family education. Accordingly, the recommendations of the BJE of Greater New York Study emphasize the importance of the team approach to Jewish family education involving all synagogue professionals—the rabbi, assistant rabbi, school principal, cantor, teachers, youth leaders, and parent and lay volunteers.

TYPES OF JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION

Not all the activities promoted as Jewish family education by the various organizations are really Jewish family education. Some programs are planned carefully to include children and parents. Others are hip-pocket efforts. Some are developed out of the conviction of the absolute need for and value of Jewish family education; others are sponsored because "it's the thing to do" at this time. Some are programs involving the whole family; others are purely adult education activities. Some place great stress on the Jewish aspects of home life; others are family life education programs with little or no attention to the Jewish component of Jewish family living.

An analysis of over 100 projects publicized as Jewish family education demonstrates that there are essentially eight types of programs.

1. parallel education programs in which parents meet regularly or occasionally to study the same subjects and texts that their children are studying in school
2. shared experiences for parents and children in an institutional setting, generally centering around Shabbat and holidays, that lend themselves to hands-on activities
3. family learning experiences through actual celebration or observance of Shabbat, holidays, or special events
4. projects and/or materials *about* the Jewish family for home study or work by parents and children
5. education *for* parents: seminars, lectures, workshops, or discussion groups about Jewish themes
6. guidance concerning family life to individual parents and to couples
7. community-wide events for families, including Shabbat and festival meals, sederim, and special events, such as Yom Ha'atzmaut and Yom Hashoah
8. retreats and weekend *Shabbatonim* or week-long camp experiences for families

The most popular of these activities are education *for* parents, (particularly formal lectures), individual parental guidance, and shared experiences in institutional settings, usually hands-on activity about Jewish holidays and the Jewish life cycle. Do-it-yourself projects at home and museum activities are being promoted with more regularity.

Gaining in popularity are retreats and camp programs for families. Retreats are expensive and depend upon the availability of significant funding. In this regard, it must be noted that Israel experiences for families are not yet a serious consideration for most organizations because of their expense and time-consuming nature.

In view of the current variety of pro-

grams, the question emerges: which of these programs are the best or most effective? The answer, of course, must be "all of them," if they respond effectively to particular needs. Although some may be effective in producing specific results, the programs' effectiveness must be evaluated in terms of how they *enhance the Jewish living* of the families involved. Again, the answer depends on the participants' needs and the nature of their communities.

It is abundantly clear that much more well-planned experimentation with Jewish family education must take place before considering which approaches should be disseminated or emulated as most effective.

JFE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Any discussion on Jewish family education is incomplete without attention to needs and challenges facing it. Five needs require immediate responses:

1. the need to plan programs for single parents, a growing segment of our community
2. the need to address two critical target populations more aggressively:
 - a) young parents and their preschool children, as done by Mishpacha programs successfully piloted by the BJE of Greater New York and sponsored also by several other agencies
 - b) pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah youth and their parents via organized study experiences and self-study materials. An example of appropriate materials is *Coming of Age as A Jew* (Glatzer, 1989), the two-volume Bar/Bat Mitzvah manual and workbook for parents and children recently published by the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York
3. the need to harness modern technology—the videotape and computer—for family home study and activity by making available extant software, new software, arranging the materials in sequential order for home use, and developing guidelines for families
4. the need to develop training programs for Jewish family educators, such as the colloquium, "Educating the Jewish Family Educator," presented by the BJE of Greater New York in 1990, which included these components:
 - a) understanding the Jewish needs of marginal Jewish families
 - b) ways of conceptualizing change in Jewish family life
 - c) establishing the basic knowledge needs of Jewish family educators regarding Judaism and educational practice
 - d) exploring models of professional training
 - e) learning how teams of specialists can work together most effectively
 - f) learning how to develop JFE materials
 - g) developing evaluation techniques for Jewish family education
5. the need, given the plethora of Jewish family education efforts currently taking place, to define the elements of effective Jewish family education (Jewish family education means so many different things to different people), establish criteria for determining effectiveness, develop procedures for evaluation, and evaluate the effectiveness of current program prototypes

The final need stated above will help guide the future development of JFE efforts. As such, it takes precedence over all others.

Jewish family education faces a number of administrative and institutional challenges. The first is restructuring synagogues so that the emphasis of the congregational school is on education of the entire family—including the child—instead of schooling for the child only. This requires that all synagogue personnel be organized into JFE teams.

The second challenge is integrating formal and informal education programs, creating the necessary confluence of the cognitive and affective domains. The artificial division between formal and informal

instructional activities reduces the potential effectiveness of the education process.

Defining, empowering, and supporting the role of Jewish family educators are crucial to the success of any JFE enterprise. Support presupposes the provision of full-time career opportunities for at least one Jewish family educator in each synagogue.

Developing strategies to empower parents to teach, guide, and provide support to their children is a critical dimension of each family education effort if that effort is to take permanent root in the home life of the family members and is to help the children succeed in the synagogue and school. Parents must become involved in planning these strategies and all programs involving families. In doing so, they become vested in the programs and in Jewish life activities.

Finally, a major challenge is the development in each community of the means to sponsor Israel experiences. Well-planned total immersion programs in the Jewish State have had a remarkable influence upon Jews of all ages. As such, we must exploit Israel as an educational resource for families.

In sum, the Jewish community, spearheaded by the pioneering programs developed by forward-looking Jewish educators, has entered a new era of Jewish education. Since this phase of Jewish schooling emphasizes the education of the whole family

it augurs well, both for the future of the Jewish education enterprise and for the Jewish community.

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