

Re-Schooling American Jewry

MEIR BEN-HORIN, Ph.D.

Dean, Graduate Division, Herzliah-Jewish Teachers Seminary, New York

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A QUARTER of a century before the turn of the twentieth century, the revitalization of the Jewish school, on all levels, requires that we move vigorously and unerringly toward three goals. To begin with, the essential meaning of the school as a unique institution needs to be thought through once again. Second, the school's social environment must be rendered supportive. Third, the school's teaching needs to be reconstructed along genuinely novel lines.

There can be little doubt that the creeping devitalization of Jewish education, in America and elsewhere, will not halt before lesser responses by the Jewish education profession and by the Jewish community. The conclusion cannot be escaped that the history of twentieth-century Jewish education has reached the flashpoint of crisis, the point, that is, where it needs to be recognized that *the conventional solutions are the problem*. Gradually the crisis gained on them and now is in the lead. It will not yield to answers whose correlative questions simply are no more. These questions were: how to modernize, how to Americanize, and how to "progressivize" our schools, and how to erect large and larger administrative structures for the support and guidance of Jewish education.

1. The Meaning of the School

No longer productive of worthwhile education is the conception which views the school as basically a service agency for other institutions such as the state, the political party, the relig-

ious establishment or movement, a philosophical or economic persuasion, and so on. In a free society such a notion is woefully obsolete. In Jewry that today creates its own modernity for the full freedom of the Third Jewish Commonwealth and the survival-bound communities of the Dispersion the idea of education as *ancilla populi* or *ancilla regis* or *ancilla theologiae* is the source of untold—and rarely perceived—harm.

The new Jewish school, the one that is not only revitalized but vital and vivid, must be built on the conception that the school, related as it necessarily is to all other survival agencies of the Jewish people, is not subordinate to them. To be sure, it responds to its sister organizations and structures. But it has a unique function which no other agency can perform. That function it holds in common with the schools of all peoples and cultures. I refer to the school's exclusive mission of releasing and cultivating the human capacity to think freely and creatively and to love deeply, selflessly, and responsibly. Under this evolving conception of education, the traditional and conventional mission of the school, namely, that of transmitting the heritage through effective indoctrination of the upcoming generation by means harsh or subtle, becomes inoperative. This is to say that under the educational philosophy here pointed to the transmission-of-culture activities are so redesigned as to make for the release and cultivation of the mind-love powers inherent in the Jewish people. All cur-

ricula and courses of study, therefore, need to be sharply revised to meet this supreme requirement of education qua education, of school as such. By the same token, all administrative operations and structures need to be revised in line with it. All preparation for educational service needs to be redesigned so that competencies match purposes.

2. Creating a Supportive Environment

At the very core of the current crisis stands the large fact that adult Jewry exhibits a frightful and deepening ignorance about things Jewish, about the very meaning of Judaism. By implication, adult Jews hold Jewish education unimportant for themselves, for their thinking and doing. This attitude is easily absorbed by their children who, of course, try to achieve adult standing and understanding as quickly as possible and, when congenial, as fully as possible. In this context this means that Jewish education at best is for children and must be left behind along with childhood. Adult indifference to knowing Judaism is one of the great and enduring lessons learnt by Jewish youth.

Two conclusions follow:

First, it is no longer in the interest of Jewish survival to stress elementary and secondary Jewish education. Without a new supportive environment, Jewish education in any serious sense of the word cannot be revitalized. The alternative to ongoing emotional weakening, intellectual disaffection, ideological bewilderment, and moral confusion is massive adult education or, as it may come to be known, *Jewish Survival Education*. With regard to the consumers of education, the first priority for the Jewish people's communities throughout the world, for all Jewish religious movements, and for all the organized forces of Jewish survival should be: *Jewish Survival Education*

for Adult Jews. In their claim on resources and personnel, secondary and elementary education should occupy second and third place. Only the education-consuming and education-applying community of adults can create its own fruitful future. Thomas Jefferson's dictum applies: a nation cannot long remain ignorant and free. For Jews this means that the Jewish people cannot long remain ignorant and alive.

Secondly, linked to the re-ordering of the educational consumer orientation from children and adolescents to adults is the need to revise the organizational structure of Jewish education in the United States. For half a century and more, "communal agencies," notably bureaus of Jewish education, have served useful purposes. But today they are unable to stem the rising tide of ignorance, alienation, apathy, educational impotence, not to speak of the staggering intermarriage rates and a new spirit of assimilation. Bureau-type agencies, whether local or national or even international, ought to be studied objectively and impartially yet critically to determine the quality of their leadership and stewardship, the nature and effectiveness of their services, the real difference they make in the lives of learners.

If economy of resources imposes choices, I submit that existing post-secondary schools of Judaism and Jewish education need to be strengthened and new ones established and with priority over our bureaus. Our college-level schools should not be adjuncts to bureaus but bureaus, research agencies and service departments of various types should rather be adjuncts to the old and new Jewish colleges and especially their schools of education. Above all, a *National Graduate School of Jewish Education* is a requirement of Jewish educational revitalization of first institutional priority and urgency. It

alone, when properly conceived, adequately financed, competently staffed and administered, can muster the authority and mastery of educational philosophy, methodology, psychology, administration, history, sociology. It alone can coordinate and focus specialists in statistics, survey-conducting, consultation, supervision, and genuine experimentation whose orchestration is needed to bring new life into the Jewish school. While the bureau cannot function as a college, a college can and should perform the functions of the bureau. Only the schools of Jewish education can restore unity and harmony to the theory and practice of Jewish education without which theory is "academic" and practice is nothing but routine performance.

3. Reconstructing the School's Life

Vast consequences for the curriculum, or for the school's planned life, flow from the recognition that the school is not a subordinate transmission agency for prescribed social or historical values but the chief authority for releasing and refining a people's creative powers of intelligence and compassion. Such a definition of education calls for a school design which differs sharply from the familiar subject matter model that is characteristic of educational essentialism—history, literature, language, art, science, religion etc.—and from the popular "activity" or "project" or "open classroom" pattern of a refurbished progressivism.

Such a design avoids the core weakness of intellectual conservatism and its concomitant imposition of conclusions preferred and imposed by this or that extra-educational authority.¹ It also avoids mere "excitement," entertainment, and disconnected dabbling

in various fields styled "innovative learning experiences." Instead, it deliberately engages faculty and students in the organized and well-planned search for the most defensible answers to the central questions of their lives as Jews:

- (1) What kind of a person am I because of the fact that I am a Jew? How did I come to be what I am? Where, as the Jewish person I am, should I go from here?
- (2) What kind of a people do I belong to that is called the Jews? How did we as Jews come to be what we are? Where as the Jewish people do we want to go?
- (3) What kind of a world do we inhabit as Jews? How must we relate ourselves to it? What may we expect from it and what may it properly expect from us?²

The search, needless to say, is lifelong. Yet the school's chief responsibility is to steer its charges into the richest mines of knowledge about the roots, the quality, and the possibilities of man and Jew, of Israel and the nations. At the same time, it is the school's solemn obligation to teach what it can about the ways wherewith to achieve reasonable consensus about the issues involved in these questions that go to the heart of the Jewish people's being and becoming.

Only such a conception of school and such a daring and thoroughgoing reconstruction of the school's life may be expected to turn the tide in Jewish education. They alone are likely to bring about a rebirth of Jewish education which, after all, denotes nothing less than coming to know why and how to go into the Jewish future and how to conduct ourselves like intelligent and compassionate human beings.

²See my *Common Faith—Uncommon People* New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1970, pp. 161-163.

Shabbat Programs: Can We Tell the Difference?*

STEPHEN L. BAYER

Director of Adult and Senior Adult Services,
Jewish Community Center, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

"Far more than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel." With these words Achad Ha'Am signified the importance Shabbat has for the Jewish people. Others have suggested the Sabbath "might be considered the most vital integrating force in Judaism" (Sabbath Manual, p. 3). Keeping these words in mind we turn to the Center field for a declaration about Shabbat.

AN OFFICIAL position was taken by the National Jewish Welfare Board in its adoption of the following resolutions at its annual meeting of May 10-12, 1947, in Pittsburgh:

- (1) On the Sabbath, Jewish festivals and Jewish Holy days, Jewish community centers shall conduct only such activities as are in consonance with the dignity and tradition of these days.
- (2) Where no special programs can be maintained the Jewish community center should be closed on the Sabbath, Jewish festivals and Jewish Holy days.

Since 1947, Centers have been faced with the rather paradoxical position that unless programs are "in consonance with the dignity and tradition of the Sabbath" they should close their doors on Shabbat and thus render no contribution to the continuing development of a key force in Jewish life. Although a number of Centers chose the latter (in many cases the choice of not opening had much more to do with local community influences than with an inability to find programming that was "in consonance" with Shabbat) there has been a growing group of Centers which have instituted "Shabbat" programs. Our intention is to come to some conclusions, however tentative, about whether these pro-

grams are really "different from" activities offered during the rest of the week.

Shabbat Programming: Evaluatory Criteria

Our question about whether Shabbat programs are "different from" other programs follows from the philosophical belief that the Shabbat is a unique day having a very special place in Jewish life and from the JWB's resolution urging that activities be in consonance with the dignity and tradition of the day. In more general terms we are interested in determining whether activities held on Shabbat signify a change from other activities offered at the Center.

When looking at Shabbat programs we will ask whether the activity:

1. Makes the participant aware of the values of Shabbat. (These values generally denote a belief in or attitude toward Shabbat as a time of marked change in the pace of life from the rest of the week and a time to seek opportunities for enjoyment, learning and pleasure; also the day is marked off by the cessation of activities that involve strenuous work, manual labor, organized competition or the general conduct of business).
2. Assists participants in developing increased awareness of and appreciation for the value(s) of Shabbat.

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Grossinger, New York, June 10, 1975.

¹Theodore Brameld, *Patterns of Educational Philosophy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, Parts 2-5.