

In sum, whether or not the cost of living Jewishly is regarded as affordable depends on at least three key factors: 1) the cost of the service or affiliation in question; 2) the level of available discretionary funds (which is, in turn, dependent on income, taxes and the standard of living described; and 3) the rate at which discretionary funds are used to meet the cost of living Jewishly as opposed to other purposes. The last two factors obviously involve matters of choice including the setting of priorities and the making of trade-offs. Indeed, they are matters of choice for institutions as well as for families. When determining who is to receive assistance, a Jewish institution too must determine, explicitly or implicitly, what standard of living it is willing to support among recipients of aid and at what rate discretionary funds can reasonably be expected to be spent for living Jewishly. Should such standards be set at unreasonable levels, then participation in Jewish institutions will be restricted only to the most committed and/or the most affluent. Unfortunately, their numbers may not be sufficient to insure that such institutions survive and thrive. In any case, not only the cost but the value of living Jewishly, both to the individual and to the institutions involved, will determine if the price of living Jewishly is to be paid.

This paper has sought to provide some useful information to Jewish institutions faced with such choices. The information provided is clearly merely suggestive and not definitive. Only estimates have been used. However, the steps involved in making the required choices have been outlined. First, the costs in question must be identified. Second, family income and the level of discretionary funds available to them

must be determined. Finally, some decision must be made as to the rate at which discretionary funds can be expected to be used to meet the cost of living Jewishly as opposed to other purposes. When these steps are taken, the institution will be in a position to make an informed decision as to who cannot and who can "afford" the cost of their contribution to living Jewishly.

References

1. One other attempt to estimate the cost of living Jewishly has been made in Gerald B. Bubis, "Evolving Community Policies to Serve the Jewish Elderly," in *Strengthening the Jewish Family Through Community Support Systems*, General Assembly Papers, New York: Council of Jewish Federations, mimeo, 1980, pp. 20-21. However, Bubis uses figures for the western region of the United States only, rather than national data, as does this paper. Moreover, Bubis derives his total budget estimate from the cost of housing, which he assumes is one-quarter of a total budget, rather than on data on each component of a budget as are used here.
2. Bureau of Labor Statistics: Autumn 1981 "Urban Family Budgets and Comparative Indexes for Selected Urban Areas," USDL 82-139, U.S. Department of Labor News, April 16, 1982.
3. Such a family may not now be typical, of course. Tables to adjust figures for various family compositions and for regional variations may be found in the Bureau of Labor Statistics report, *ibid.*, pp. 5 ff.
4. Paul Ritterband and Steven M. Cohen, "Will the Well Run Dry? The Future of Jewish Giving in America," *National Jewish Conference Policy Studies*, 1979, mimeo, January, 1979.
5. *Ibid.*
6. More complete comparisons are found in: J. Alan Winter, "A Preliminary Study of the Cost of Living Jewishly," Center for Jewish Studies and Contemporary Jewish Living, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, mimeo, 1984.
7. Steven M. Cohen, "The 1981-1982 National Survey of American Jews," *American Jewish Yearbook: 1983*, Volume 83, 1982, pp. 89-110.
8. *Ibid.*

Judaism as a Support System for Orthodox Jewish Parents of Mentally Retarded Children

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Parents of mentally-retarded children have to cope with many pressures. This article outlines a number of aspects of Judaism that can provide strength and comfort for Orthodox Jewish families that have mentally-retarded children.

THE birth of a mentally retarded child is a severe trauma that every parent hopes to avoid experiencing. The term "mental retardation" is very broad, covering a wide range of intellectual development from the mildly retarded child who may eventually be literate and numerate, to the profoundly mentally retarded who may never even be able to utter any words. Whatever the severity of intellectual retardation, the effect on the child's family is extensive and the parents in particular have to cope with many pressures. However, the Orthodox Jewish family with a mentally retarded child is in a unique position insofar as Judaism has a number of explicit principles to support them through their crisis. In this article I will explore some of these concepts.

Self-Acceptance: A fundamental principle expressed in the Talmud is that of self-acceptance. The Talmud asks: "Who is rich?" and the reply is "He who rejoices in his portion." (Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 4). This is generally accepted by rabbinical scholars to mean fulfillment comes from acceptance of one's circumstances and one's self. This idea of Divine Providence is an integral part of Judaic philosophy. The Jewish family is thus obliged to accept and welcome their mentally retarded child in the same manner as they would their non-retarded child.

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Crisis as Challenge: Judaism also considers that any form of personal crisis is a challenge that has been constructed by God, and that strength of character is built by regularly dealing with a crisis. The family with a mentally retarded child are faced with a long-term challenge which requires deep commitment for them to manage. The Orthodox Jewish attitude is that the family in these circumstances will gain a higher level of spiritual purity.

Furthermore, Judaic philosophy contains the premise that God does not give a challenge to anyone who cannot meet it. So the Orthodox Jewish parents will feel they have the strength to cope or else they would not have been put in that situation by God. In practise of course it does happen that there are instances where an Orthodox family construe their mentally retarded child as being too awesome a challenge for them to meet. The Talmudic sages taught that nobody should judge another person until they are in his situation, with his strengths and weaknesses.

Loving-Kindness: According to Judaism, an essential component of a successful parent-child relationship is *chesed* (loving-kindness), which is described as occurring when a person gives something from himself knowing that he will get nothing in return. Coping with children in the context of the family is one way for parents to achieve *chesed*, by acting unselfishly. Loving-kindness is thought to be the highest

spiritual goal to which one can aspire. However, raising a mentally retarded child affords a greater opportunity for the parents to develop *chesed*, for two main reasons. Firstly, the retarded child will be even more dependent and demanding on his parents. Secondly, the parents of such a child are less likely to be basing their action on selfish motives because he is unlikely to reach the higher standards that his non-retarded counterparts might reach. Parental expectations are likely to be more realistically geared to the actual needs of the child.

Respect: The Talmud specifies that the mentally retarded individual is entitled to the same respect as everyone else. Indeed, the duty to honour one's parents does not lessen even if they are retarded. The instance is given of a non-Jew, whose mentally retarded mother would often embarrass him in public with her simplistic child-like behaviour: "He was the president of the city councillors. Once his mother smacked his face in the presence of the whole assembly, and the slipper with which she struck him fell from her hand. He picked it up and handed it to her, in order that she should not be troubled to bend down for it." (Peah 15c). Even under this provocation, her son exercised great restraint and did nothing that was disrespectful. The Talmud refers to Dama elsewhere; "On another occasion he was wearing a silken robe embroidered with gold and was sitting in the company of certain Roman notabilities. She came and tore it from him, struck him on the head and spat in his face, but he did not put her to shame." (Keddushim 31a).

In certain ways, the Judaic outlook is that the mentally retarded child should command even deeper respect than the child of normal faculties. On one occasion the Chason Ish surprised everyone by standing up to greet a mentally

retarded child. He explained this act of respect by stating that an individual is placed in the physical world by God in order to correct himself, and he does so by following the *mitzvot*. Yet because intelligent choice and intention are needed to fulfill a *mitzvah* a mentally retarded person generally cannot perform a valid *mitzvah* (though there are some exceptions). The Chason Ish reasoned that since everybody is to strive for higher spiritual achievements, and since the mentally retarded do not have this means of self-correction, then this must mean that the souls of such people are already pure. Therefore he stood up in the presence of the mentally retarded child as a mark of respect for a soul which was so pure it did not need further correction.

Education: Acceptance of a situation and respect for the purity of mentally retarded people does not imply that parents should have no goals for their retarded child. Parents still have the Judaic obligation of raising the child according to Torahic and Talmudic guidelines. Biblical advice with respect to the education of children applies to all, irrespective of their intellectual level. The Torah includes the following directives: "And Moses called into all Israel and said unto them: 'Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I speak unto your ears this day that ye may learn them and observe to do them'." (Deuteronomy 5:7). Elsewhere it is written: "As water is free for all, so is the Torah free for all." (Yalkut Isaiah, 55).

Yet Judaism recognises individual differences in student's abilities to learn. Although everyone can learn, some are more capable than others: "There are four qualities in disciples; he who quickly understands and quickly forgets, his gain disappears in his loss; he who understands with difficulty and forgets with difficulty, he has a good portion; he who understands with diffi-

culty and forgets quickly, he is an evil portion." (Aboth 5:15). A slightly different description of the various types of scholars is given at a later point: "There are four qualities that sit before the sages; they are like a sponge, a funnel, a strainer and a sieve; a sponge which soaks up everything; a funnel which lets in at one end and out the other; a strainer which lets the wine pass out and retains the lees; a sieve which lets out the bran and retains the fine flour." (Aboth 5:18).

In his thirteenth century text, *The Book of Pious*, Rabbi Judah ben Samuel Ha-asid stressed that each pupil needs a curriculum tailor-made to suit his own abilities: "If he sees that he succeeds in the study of the Bible but not in the study of the Talmud he should not force him to study Talmud. He should teach him that which is suited to his knowledge. As soon as a man sees that his son is not deemed worthy (or rather cannot grasp) Talmud, he should teach him important laws and Midrash and bible." Meeting the special educational needs of the mentally retarded is an important Jewish educational principle.

Self-Help Skills: The Talmud is clear regarding the aims parents should have for their mentally-retarded child in terms of self-help skills and personal independence. Parents may feel it is pointless for their child to strive for independence because of his intellectual limitations. This type of sentiment would be in conflict with the Talmud. The sages placed great importance on self-reliance: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (Aboth 1:14). Rabbi Akiba felt strongly on this issue: "One should treat *Shabbath* like a weekday rather than having to rely on people." (Pessachim 112a). Elsewhere it is written: "He who is dependent on another man's table has all the world dark for him. His life is not a life." (Beitza 32b). Therefore, Orthodox Jewish parents

are obliged to strive for the highest degree of independence for their mentally retarded child.

Ritual Practice: Most mentally retarded individuals remain at a relatively primitive level of intellectual development where they do not have the capacity of abstract thought, and can only cope with real situations that are actually in front of them. Given this feature, Judaism has a special relevance as it involves a great number of practical rituals that demand physical activity from participants. The principle of practical involvement is an essential part of Jewish religious education. The Talmud states: "Which is greater, study or doing? Rabbi Akiba answered: study. The majority agreed that study is greater, for study leads to doing." (Kiddushim 40b). Practical activity throughout Judaism is one of its unique qualities. Judaism has a whole succession of festivals throughout the year which give the participant an action to do, such as the hiding of the *afikomen* on Pesach, the shaking of the *lulav* and the *esrog* during Succoth, the lighting of the *menorah* on Chanukah, to name but a few. The *Haggadah* read during Pesach contains vivid stories that can easily capture the imagination of the mentally retarded listener. The Talmudic view is that this concrete aspect of Judaism should be used to stimulate the child's interest initially, and then to lead on to more complex issues if appropriate.

Prayer: Lastly, it is fitting to remember that prayer is an integral part of Judaism. The Talmud says: "Prayer is more efficacious than good deeds, for there was no one greater in good deeds than Moses our teacher, and yet he was answered only after prayer." (Berachot 32b). Judaism holds that no matter how distressed parents are, they should never allow themselves to be discouraged from praying to God for help and guidance. The Talmud emphasises this:

"Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck, he should not desist from prayer." (Berachot 10a). Therefore, parents of a mentally-retarded child can, through prayer, express their anxieties without any personal feelings of guilt at doing so.

Conclusion: Clearly Judaism places a very positive construction on the family with a mentally retarded child and contains a number of principles that can provide support and comfort for them. For Orthodox Jewish parents, this can be a tremendous source of emotional and religious strength.

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Twenty-five Years Ago in this Journal

But we can—and unless we lose all perspective of the gravity of our plight, must—do the only possible thing: strengthen the personal element in our public institutions. It is imperative that our communal services should realize even more emphatically, that they are dealing not with the amorphous public, nor with some anonymous representatives of that public, but with human beings yearning to be recognized as such. This stress on the personal is, it is true, practiced to some extent; but we still indulge in the belief that, compared to the pragmatic, material services rendered, the personal element is a trivial matter.

We live in an age of transition; many of the principles that we apply to our communal work stem from the period of a strongly cemented family when the so-called "cases" were peripheral phenomena. Such an attitude will not suffice in the age we are confronting. The expanding mechanization of our lives and increasing loss of the personal element grow ever harder to bear. In the not so distant future practically everyone will be in dire need of "personal" attention.

NAHUM GLATZER
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Readers' Letters

To the Editor:

My retirement and subsequent infirmity have in no way diminished my own personal interests in the activities and in the aspirations of the American and world Jewish communities. Ever since the National Council of Jewish Education affiliated with the NJCS, in my active years, I have always felt that the move was appropriate and necessary. For a number of years I served on the Executive Committee of the NCJE, and was also honored to have been elected treasurer of that organization. My primary interests understandably have always been, and hopefully, will continue to be, to do all I can, to eradicate ignorance of Jewish knowledge from our Jewish masses. This is why I chose Jewish education as a profession. As a matter of fact, it was much more than just a profession to me. It was an ideal to be realized not only during my own lifetime, but also one to be perpetuated in the generations after mine. At this point in time I cannot be certain that during my own life much progress has been made. However, we are living in a very difficult and precarious period in which any prognostication may eventually be proven false. Prophecy is now the occupation of fools, according to some scholars, and I would hate to be placed in that category.

My primary reason for writing to you is to react to David Dubin's rather interesting paper, and to Bruce Karp's equally delightful and very encouraging progress, as reported in the Fall 1984 issue of the magazine. Dubin's paper is excellent as far as it goes. Unfortunately, it seems to emphasize the peripheral types of Jewish education to the detriment of the specific goals, so sorely needed for the structuring of a viable

Jewish future. My own experience as a Jewish educator brought me in contact with a number of Jewish Center workers, some of whom were bitterly opposed to good Jewish schooling, while others were, in some measure, cooperative. I am fully in agreement with the amalgam of thoughts expressed at the meetings of the Jewish Welfare Board Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness in Jewish Community Centers. It all sounds like a dream come true, on paper, but it does not touch the needed intensivity in Jewish education. Often, in my experience, the Jewish center with its brilliantly devised activities, served as a 'competitor' to the Jewish school, in which a process of 'learning' took place. I stress 'learning' because this is precisely the area in which there has been an abysmal failure. I feel that we developed a great deal of *Am-aratzut* in our Jewish population in America. We have very few Jews who have any idea of what is meant by the term 'Jewish knowledge'. Let me cite just one contemporary example. A group was playing the currently popular game "trivial pursuit" in which one of the questions appeared; namely, "What is the Hebrew for so be it?". The entire group consisting of Jews had no idea that the word was 'Amen'. And this was a highly intelligent group.

Dubin's program involving experiential, interventive, and ethnic counselling is quite sensible, but it needs a cadre of men and women who have acquired more than a modicum of Jewish knowledge. People who do not know the meaning of Jewishness cannot, and should not, be in a position to produce reliable and efficient results. People with a rich Jewish background will have to be recruited for this purpose. Unfortunately, most of those have chosen