JEWISH EDUCATION AND JEWISH CONTINUITY

An Essay Book Review

Succeeding at Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made it Work by Joseph Reimer

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The notion "Jewish education is the key to Jewish continuity" has a certain common-sense appeal; it seems obvious (even tautological) to say that learning about a tradition is a necessary ingredient for continuing it. As invoked repeatedly by federations and Continuity Commissions, however, this phrase suggests something more ambitious—that in the face of the many social forces that pull Jews away from Judaism, Jewish education can exert an opposing, centrifugal force. Used in this way, the phrase, "Jewish education is the key to Jewish continuity," has become a slogan, evoking an image of Jewish education as an effective vaccine, a miracle cure, or, at least, a strong magnet.

The reality, of course, is much more complex. What does continuity really mean? Is it the same as in-marriage? affiliation? active participation? If, as Mordecai Kaplan argued and contemporary sociologists have documented, Jewish belief and practice are continually evolving, which aspect of the evolved civilization is the continuous one? As for Jewish education, which kind of Jewish education are we talking about? Formal? Informal? Cognitive? Affective? Knowledge of Jewish texts or of conversational Hebrew? Practical skills of Jewish observance or abstract ideas related to Jewish mysticism? Finally, what does it really mean to say that Jewish education leads to Jewish continuity? If Jewish education does not function as simply as an inoculation, how *does* it function?

Anyone interested in these questions, which should include any and every Jewish communal professional, would do well to read Joseph Reimer's newly published book, *Succeeding at Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made It Work.* Winner of the 1997 Jewish Book Award, the book is an ethnographic account of Jewish education in action at a large, urban Reform congregation. Reimer, professor at Brandeis University and past director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service, takes us on a tour of the synagogue's educational programs, including Torah study on a Shabbat morning, a panel discussion prior to *Slichot* services, a variety of Hebrew school and religious school classes, and a family education program. At every step, we are given an account of what is happening from the perspective of both teachers and students. We hear professionals' and lay leaders' reflections on their aims, their struggles, and their achievements. And, above it all, we hear Reimer's analysis, reminding us of the challenges of congregational education in a liberal setting and pointing out what success in such a setting entails.

Reimer's book is indicative of two important sea changes in the field of Jewish education: a focus on success, rather than failure; and a view of education as the purview of the congregation as a whole, rather than the religious school in isolation. Rather than studying a "typical" congregation (assuming, for the moment, that such an entity exists), Reimer deliberately looked for one with a reputation for excellence in education. Rather than limiting himself to an account of what goes on in the religious school, Reimer cites examples of excellence in education throughout the synagogue. Both of these choices distinguish Reimer's work from earlier studies, such as David Schoem's (1989) *Ethnic Survival in America* and Samuel Heilman's (1992) "Inside the Jewish School," ethnographic accounts of typical synagogue schools, which focused largely on problems, failures, and incongruities within the schools.

Like the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education's Best Practices Projects (Holtz 1993), in which an earlier version of a chapter from this book appeared, Reimer assumes that one can learn much more from studying success than from critiquing failure. As for the notion that congregational education is broader and deeper than schooling for children, Reimer himself (1990) was among the first to promote this view, which has since become commonplace. Thus, whereas the reader of Schoem's and Heilman's work was likely to come away wringing his or her hands, the reader of Reimer's work emerges with a more hopeful perspective. Succeeding in Jewish education takes hard work, and its course is rarely smooth. Nonetheless, the book paints a convincing portrait of a congregation that transmits knowledge, skill, a love of Jewish learning, and a sense of the big Jewish questions. Above all, this congregation is important in the lives of its members and serves as a primary influence on their Jewish identities. Whatever else it might mean that Jewish education leads to Jewish continuity, surely these are important components.

Like Schoem and Heilman, Reimer employed the methodology of participant observation. He spent a year at Temple Akiba (the pseudonym he gives to the congregation), observing programs and classes, attending services and committee meetings, interviewing staff members at length, and taking extensive field notes. He writes, "After a time I felt I blended into the environment." Participant observation works best when the researcher has both commonalities with and differences from the group being studied; Reimer's reflections on the commonalities he shares with the members of Temple Akiba and the differences he perceives are candid and helpful:

> Because of my own Jewish background (growing up in an observant home and attending a Jewish day school), being in Reform congregations was for me like entering a new culture. Not that the people were unfamiliar, but the assumptions that governed the religious behavior of the synagogues were....[I]t was an important part of my learning, particularly when I had to wrestle to balance my subjective reactions with my professional perspective as a researcher (p. 19).

His perspective as an outsider enabled Reimer to focus on the delicate balance that the synagogue maintains—between upholding the Jewish tradition and representing that tradition, on the one hand, and, on the other, meeting congregants "where they are at," a place that is both lacking in and, at times, incompatible with, the tradition.

> Temple Akiba rabbis have moved in two directions simultaneously. They have built community by reaching out to diverse constituencies and incorporating them within the synagogue community. They have also worked to educate that community to become increasingly knowledgeable about Jewish tradition...to understand how Jewish tradition can be a valuable resource to them (p. 69).

Succeeding in Jewish Education takes care to place this conflict in historical context, from the most general context of the changes in American Jewish life over the centuries to the specific context of the history of Temple Akiba. But the bulk of the book is devoted to a close description and analysis of this conflict in action, through the recounting of several "social dramas." *Social drama* is the anthropologist's term for group conflicts that are the result of a clash between fundamental values. Quoting the anthropologist Victor Turner, Reimer writes,

> Often [the drama begins] when someone in the group violates an important rule or custom. The mechanisms that operate to contain or dispel a conflict fail and the difficulty spreads, drawing in more and more members until it constitutes a real crisis (p. 22).

In the primitive societies studied by Turner, the conflict is eventually resolved. In contemporary societies, which are both more complex and more pluralistic, resolution is

not always possible, since the underlying conflicts are an essential part of the culture. For example, Reimer describes a family education program in which a group of parents discusses with the congregational educator the traditions related to death and bereavement. As the representative of the tradition, the educator feels obligated to delineate precisely who, according to *halacha,* are the mourners who are to say *kaddish.* Several of the parents, whose family configurations are less traditional, are upset to hear that certain people whom they consider part of their immediate family do not count *halachically,* as mourners. The educator (who is an ordained rabbi) states clearly, "When I do my work as a rabbi with a family, I immediately expand the definition of mourner and family.... In liberal Judaism I feel it is important to extend that.... But you do have to say what the tradition says. I can't put 'significant other' in the mouth of the tradition" (p. 65). This social drama and others described in the book are the result of the synagogue's perennial attempt to accommodate both the tradition and the contemporary situation of its members. As Reimer points out, the importance of the social drama, in the context of a contemporary institution like a synagogue, is not that the drama is resolved (which rarely happens), but that it serves as a mechanism to discover, develop, and declare the institution's collective identity.

> Synagogues develop reputations among their constituents and within the broader community by the actions they take.... The synagogue's reputation—or collective identity—is often challenged by changing realities such as the financial exigencies the synagogue faces or the conflicting demands made by diverse membership; but before long it is likely that some of the features that define the synagogue's collective identity will be called into question. When this happens these days, there is *not* likely to be a consensus on how to proceed. Some leaders will suggest that the congregation move in one direction; others will suggest moving in varying directions. Some debate and conflict will ensue. At that moment...the members of the congregation—whether they think in these terms or not—are doing more than choosing a course of action. They are also choosing to define themselves by articulating for themselves and others what their congregation really values and hence who they are as a collective unit (p. 23).

To me, the most fascinating social drama is found toward the end of the book. It occurs at a parent meeting that follows a decision made by the Religious School Committee (after careful deliberation) to make a nationally acclaimed and highly successful biblical Hebrew program mandatory for all students enrolled in grades 3 to 7. Though the majority of students in these grades were already enrolled in the program and though a tutorial option was available for those unable to participate, the announcement of the change in policy sparked an angry response by a vocal minority of parents. As Reimer's account indicates, what seemed to the Religious School Committee like a straightforward decision based on the merits of the program was interpreted very differently by some of the parents. These parents saw the decision as a rejection of one or more of the following: the classical Reform Judaism in which they were raised, intermarried families in the congregation, or democratic processes. As the committee strove both to reassess its decision and explain it to the parents, the values of the congregation became clarified:

> There is no doubt that the foremost value for which the Religious School Committee (RSC) stood firm was the synagogue's commitment to provide all its children with a quality Jewish education. Given the "distinctive Torah" that the rabbis have been teaching and the educational approach that Temple Akiba has adopted, Hebrew has become a core value of the curriculum. Tested by the fire of protest, the RSC made accommodations to the protesting parents, but affirmed through dramatic action their and the board's commitment to this core value. The social drama left unresolved a key conflict within the culture of the synagogue.... Can Temple Akiba embrace a

> more traditional approach to Judaism and at the same time remain open to a diverse population of Jews who expect affirmation for their contemporary values and lifestyles? (p. 156–157).

This brings us back to the questions about Jewish education and Jewish continuity raised at the beginning of this review. Jewish education can involve a variety of subject matters and a range of learning modalities. Not all of these sit comfortably with the values and lifestyle choices of either adult learners or the parents of children enrolled in the school. The same might be said about Jewish continuity, which is defined very differently by people with different religious affiliations and different levels of Jewish observance. Successful Jewish education (at least in a liberal synagogue), Reimer argues, is education that does not shy away from the gap between the tradition and our contemporary lives; it is education that is inclusive without being spineless, which maintains standards, but applies them flexibly.

Although I would certainly agree that this is one important element of success, I found it interesting and somewhat perplexing that Reimer dwells only briefly on some of the more conventional criteria for success in Jewish education, such as skilled teaching and student engagement in learning. Reading Reimer's transcriptions of several of the adult study sessions and classroom discussions in the religious school made me question how successful Temple Akiba really is in terms of these more conventional criteria. For example, in a class that "typified much of what I had observed in the religious school," an entire session of a seventh-grade class on Israel was devoted to the preparation and presentation of skits on six tourist sites. As Reimer notes, "It is a series of rushed performances of mixed quality" (p. 96).

> By the time the pairs had prepared their skits, thirty minutes had elapsed and there remained only fifteen minutes for all six presentations. No wonder the pace of presentation was rushed and there was no time to either explore interesting questions...or to conclude the lesson with an appropriate summary of the learning (pp. 97–98).

Discussing the session afterward, the teacher notes that her primary objective "is to get the kids to feel good about being Jewish, and there isn't much opportunity for learning" (p. 96). Granted, religious schools are beset by many confounding problems: poorly trained teachers, inconvenient time slots, and little in the way of external motivation for student achievement. Nonetheless, educators all across North America have struggled with these issues and have devised a variety of creative learning modalities that combine the formal and the informal and succeed at both engaging the learner and educating at a high level. It was a disappointment not to find any examples of this type of learning in Reimer's book.

On the other hand, Reimer's account of a more formal classroom setting, a seventh-grade class that is studying the book of Jonah in the original, is positively inspiring. The proficiency of the students in translating the text, their skill in interpretation, and the insights they have as they delve into the important questions raised by the text stand as living proof that students *can* learn a great deal in religious school and can be quite engaged in their learning, if the goals are defined carefully, the resources provided, and the teachers well trained.

Reading about the real-life struggles of the professionals at Temple Akiba to connect the synagogue and the school, to maintain high salaries and abundant resources for their staff, to work with their staff, to reach out to adults as well as to children, and to make the synagogue a center of Jewish learning, we get a close-up view of the battle for Jewish continuity. No matter how visionary the leaders, committed the staff, and abundant the resources, the battle will never be easy, nor will it be won once and for all. *Succeeding at Jewish Education* is required reading for all funders and commission members, indeed for all who care about the future of Jewish educa-

tion, because it reveals the ambiguities and complexities of the task.

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