Jewish Education in a Time of Change: Response and Reaction

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. . . young educational professionals now entering the field are better trained Judaically, thanks to the Jewish studies departments in colleges and universities and to the growing attractiveness of degree programs in schools under Jewish auspices. By all means, let's put our house and houses in order, but let's not dynamite the foundations while we're at it.

How distressing that our Conference President wants us to sit *shiva* for Jewish education! However, while Bernard Olshansky's excoriation (this journal, June 1979) may be excellent homiletics, it does not describe all of reality. To assert that Jewish education "is a disaster" with "weak" administration, devoid of "scope and perspective," carried on under "futile" conditions by students whose origins are "bereft of hope" is a generalization that profits no one and obscures seminal issues. More significantly, it conveys inaccurate pictures of what's actually going on in the vineyards. As for "ideological differences" and the state of funding as these impinge upon Jewish education, more anon.

The Jeremiah genre of education-critical articles reflects a serious misreading of cause and effect and gets us into the same pitfall which, we are discovering almost too late, stands fair to wreck the American education system. We should know by now that it is a misleading and dangerous presumption that all social ills are attributable to failures in education; or that by perfecting education, social ills will evaporate.

Insisting that educational failure is the cause of what ails the Jewish community, and that we can transform reality merely by making education "better," arrogates to that discipline an omnipotence that no social system merits. It is no more valid to fault Jewish education for NPG (alas, not only ZPG) intermarriage or high divorce rates than it is to blame our family services, which deal directly with these issues, for the same diseases. We do not declare our casework efforts disastrous simply because the tide of family break-down and break-up is not contained despite intensive staff contact with clients; nor do we recite *Kaddish* over our social work system just because more Jews stay away from the Centers' varied and rich cultural programs than participate in them. It's time to place a moratorium on simplistic cause-finding for complex social phenomena.

Unrealistic expectations for Jewish education in 20th century America is one reason for Jewish education's bad name. Its eyes are sometimes darkened also by those of us in the profession who tend to be highly self-critical because we want more, ever more, regardless of how much we achieve: there are no end points in the life-long pursuit of Jewish wisdom; each achievement is a goal to further learning. Perhaps educators need to be more explicit when criticizing amongst themselves; perhaps we should define success or failure in terms of the more yet to be accomplished in deepening Jewish knowledge.

While critique has to relate to what ought to be, it also has to be grounded in what is. For this reason, I offer brief commentaries on some of the critical issues Olshansky has addressed.

1. It is not the case that "When we talk about Jewish education today, we generally refer to formal education of children." When those at the cutting edge of what's going on in Jewish education talk about Jewish education today, we mean in addition to formal learning opportunities for children, such common programs as youth groups, summer camps, year-round leadership training camps, con-

claves for high school youth, study programs in Israel for all ages including college, synagogue family education programs, small study groups in synagogues (including the Havurot-type programs which Olshansky later notes), pre-schools of various kinds, and a variety of adult or continuing education programs, formal and informal, in synagogues and colleges of Jewish studies. Note, for example, that the three-year curriculum development project of one of our major ideological groups includes pre-school age to the oldest persons amongst us, and allows for both formal and informal learning programs in classrooms, in homes and in any place where learning can occur—which means, anyplace. Finally, should Olshansky's "we" visit even the formal, school-structured education programs, they would soon learn that these are no longer made up of the lock-step, boxed units familiar to his and my generation; even the structurally formal programs provide informal, creative, open and optional learning experiences as integral parts of their educational efforts, and include parents as well.

2. Since when are "ideological differences" pejorative? Diversity is not necessarily divisive, a truism which Olshansky himself invokes at a later point. Moreover, ideological difference in the Jewish educational community is responsible for a rich publications program, a variety of creative teacher education efforts, constructive cross-fertilization of educational ideas and materials and a place for every choosing Jew. We should be seeking ways to strengthen our ideological groups, not bemoaning their existence. We should encourage and support their educational efforts, not wish them away.

3. The "fragmentation" Olshansky describes did not occur quite as suggested. In fact, community-congregational school "connections" were never sufficiently strong or pervasive that we can speak now of their having been "relinquished;" not "on the way to the suburbs" or anywhere else. What has happened, as he accurately describes, is that a variety of sociological and economic forces—all external to the merit or failure of Jewish education—are converging to produce a new crisis in the education delivery system, a crisis that calls for bold responses. However, if we become burdened by the concept of "fragmentation" we'll lose sight of the real issue in community planning: How to deliver quality education effectively and efficiently while safeguarding the principle of diversity in Jewish life. Put this way, school mergers represent but one possible solution. Others might include administrative consolidations that retain the integrity of individual schools; new relationships, still to be discovered, among and between communal and synagogue schools; direct funding of synagogue schools or greater indirect funding by expanding and intensifying the services of a central education agency; staggered hours and twelve-month scheduling for schools. It's too bad that Olshansky stops short of suggesting "communal sponsorship of all of Jewish education," for that's another option. None—daring as any might seem—can be relegated to some "future time." Olshansky's own thesis impresses a sense of urgency.

Let me add a word about this spurious dichotomy: synagogue-community. Olshansky puts it well: "The Jewish people (read 'community') is a collectivity of many institutions." That collectivity includes the synagogue. Why then do we continue to fund, from community resources, some parts of the educational collectivity but not all? The issue is on the agenda of many communities. Federations and central education agencies, with the synagogue, are already addressing the challenge. We cannot presume, as Olshansky does, that communal sponsorship of all Jewish education threatens "diversity." On the contrary, educational institutions now supported by community funds run the entire spectrum of educational and ideological diversity.

4. The effects of the Americanization of Jewish values are not limited to family, career, and geographical distribution patterns. The stature and status of education and the teacher

have suffered as well, having nothing to do with the successes or failures of teachers or teaching. We measure priorities by where the dollars go. In Cleveland, for example, nine of the twenty Federation-funded agencies are educational agencies, yet their aggregate share of local allocations is just under 23%. If we add synagogue adult and children student populations to the communal school figures, over 6,000 clients are being served by that percentage of dollars, and over 300 teachers and support personnel. It's a better picture than it used to be; but it's not yet good enough with respect to what the community claims it prizes as a high value.

5. Olshansky and Grad are quite correct: we must address the problem of teachers. Some communities have begun to move in the very directions suggested. Yet, while attractive, the idea of a corps of full-time teachers is flawed. For the foreseeable future most of our Jewish education programs will be synagogue-based. That means that most of our Jewish pupils will require teachers during the same limited time span. A full-time teacher will have to scramble to fill out a full-time teaching schedule. It's a total community challenge to find other Jewish things for such persons to do, perhaps in Center work, work with adults or para-professional work in other agencies. Or alternately, the total educational establishment will have to reexamine its use of time to accommodate the availability of full-time master teachers. Finally, the community must be ready to pay for their training and to guarantee their salaries.

6. Educational participation in and with other Jewish communal service agencies is not theory—it's practice. In Cleveland, for example, not only have "educators and family service people" joined forces, but educators and other communal workers as well have joined to create an inter-locked approach to meeting community needs. Thus, the Bureau of Jewish Education and the Jewish Family Service Association jointly provide family experts for teacher education programs and reach-out services in the synagogues and communal schools; the Bureau and the Jewish Community Center work together to assure Judaic and Hebrew excellence in the Center camps; many agencies, including synagogues, collaborate to develop funding proposals for such programs as family education, scholarships for study in Israel, Jewish camping and aid to Russians.

7. It's a broad brush that asserts, concerning Jewish professionals: "few of them are very literate Jewishly." I would hope that Olshansky has access to data to support so sweeping a thesis as, "We need not fear any overdose of Jewish content among today's young professionals." If that means only that we all need to learn more, no one could object. But why dismiss, out-of-hand, the young professionals who are grounded in both Judaic studies and social work? Moreover, young educational professionals now entering the field are better trained Judaically, thanks to the Jewish studies departments in colleges and universities and to the growing attractiveness of degree programs in schools under Jewish auspices. By all means, let's put our house and houses in order, but let's not dynamite the foundations while we're at it.

The quality of Jewish education, as the quality of all aspects of Jewish life, cries for improvement not only because we are commanded to be *or lagoyim,* but because Jewish survival hangs in the balance. However, the "bit of assistance" that faith in survival requires must emanate not from generalizations, popular misconceptions or uninformed critique. Our professions must begin to listen to and respect one another, and to become knowledgable about one another. The stakes are too high to suggest that any of over several disciplines either carries all the blame or has all the answers. Our President's article opens the way to a dialogue already late in coming. Now we should begin.