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Jewish Community Studies

The National-Cultural Movement in Hebrew Education in the Mississippi Valley

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The arrival of the mass migration of Eastern European Jews on American shores in the 1880s coincided with the heyday of the idea of the Mississippi Valley as an integral region -- the very heartland of the United States, the "real America" and the definer of the American spirit and way of life. The Mississippi Valley was a product of the nineteenth century. Even the eastern fringes of the vast territory from the Appalachians to the Rockies had hardly emerged from its frontier stage by 1880. The middle portions were principally populated by the sons and daughters of the pioneers and the region's western third was still being settled.

Jews had settled in the eastern half of the region during its first generation of settlement and were among the first settlers of the western half. Hence, though the region's Jewish population represented only 20 percent of American Jewry and, with the exception of a few major cities, was to remain relatively small even after the great migration, it did contain hundreds of thousands of Jews. Those Jews Americanized quickly throughout most of the region. In some places, like New Orleans, successive communities assimilated almost entirely. In others, like St. Paul, Jews remained separate yet integrated into the best clubs (Plaut 1959). In some, like Chicago, they went through the complete urban immigrant experience of the kind that has become the basic stereotype of American Jewish folklore. In some, like Denver, they were among the very first pioneers, yet at the same time some of them actually reproduced an American version of an Eastern European shtetl, complete with cows, goats and truck gardens. In some, like Minneapolis, Jews were relatively separated as a group and even confronted considerable "genteel" anti-Semitism, while a small number of Jews created so vibrant a Jewish community that to this day it stands out from the norm of American Jewish demographics (Gordon 1949, Kramer and Leventman 1961).

Hebrew and the National-Cultural School

Generally unknown, and certainly unrecognized, in this pioneering experience were the efforts of pioneer Hebraists and Hebrew educators who introduced the study and teaching, speaking and even writing of Hebrew in those communities. In the last analysis, they did not succeed in developing an indigenous Hebrew culture. No one really has succeeded in the United States in developing a serious Hebraic culture and constituency.

But they succeeded as well as most, longer than many, and had a significant impact on American Jewish life and culture. Consequently they deserve to be included in any history of Hebrew in America.

What was characteristic or common for all of these Hebrew educators was their strong commitment to the national-cultural view of Jewish history and peoplehood, and consequently of the purpose and content of Jewish education. In a very real sense, the champions of Hebrew education in the Mississippi Valley were maskilim or the students of maskilim. Virtually all of them were born in the Old World, most in Europe but a few in Eretz Israel. While we do not have figures at this point, it seems that the majority were Litvaks and indeed it was in the cities with heavy Litvak settlement that Hebrew education was most successful. As maskilim they were educated to see Hebrew as essential to Jewish peoplehood and culture -- as they would put it, to Jewish national existence. For most of them the study of Hebrew language and literature plus history replaced traditional Jewish textual study as the foundation for survival and what we would today call Jewish identity (a term that arose only after Jews ceased to feel their Jewishness in an unselfconscious way).

Almost to a person they were Zionists, seeing the national- cultural movement as integrally bound up with the restoration of Jewish national existence in Eretz Israel. In this respect they shared a common culture and orientation with their brethren who were involved in reviving the Hebrew language and culture in Eretz Israel at the same time. Indeed, many of the Jewish educators on both sides of the ocean had studied in the same schools in Eastern Europe or Eretz Israel and with the same teachers. (Even at the time, the presence of Eretz Israel natives in the Mississippi Valley educational community was of no little importance.)

In a sense, the national-cultural approach can be summed up as the head of a yeshiva in Detroit described it to the superintendent of the United Hebrew Schools in that city in the 1950s: "You represent hochmat Yisrael whereas I represent Torat Yisrael" (Albert Elazar, personal interview). Needless to say, the national-cultural school would not have accepted their exclusion from Torat Yisrael, but at the same time they did emphasize hochmat Yisrael.

In the American context, the national-cultural approach must be distinguished from the two other significant approaches to Jewish education in the twentieth century United States. One, the emphasis on the study of traditional texts in yeshivot katanot and in the more traditional Orthodox day schools, which was hardly present in the Mississippi Valley prior to the 1960s, and the other, the emphasis on synagogue skills, customs and ceremonies, and Jewish identity common to the non-Orthodox congregational schools, which became dominant in the region from the 1940s onward. The national-cultural approach was communal in its fundamental orientation, looking to strengthen clal Yisrael and rejecting efforts at denominational fragmentation. It was Hebraic. It was oriented toward the teaching of history, language and literature as the fundaments of Jewish culture.

The Communal Talmud Torah

The communal Talmud Torah was the unique creation of the national-cultural school. Taking an institution which in the Ashkenazic Old World was primarily for the education of poor boys (as distinct from the Sephardic world where it was the principal educational institution) whose name had a very distinguished pedigree going back to Mishnaic times, they built a new style clal Yisrael-oriented school organized in the name of the community and supported by it. A principal feature of the Talmud Torah was its existence as an independent educational institution, headed and staffed by professional educators and dedicated to modern methods of pedagogy. Not every Talmud Torah achieved this ideal; qualified personnel were few and communities not necessarily forthcoming. But a significant number came close.

The Talmud Torah was an intensive supplementary school fostered by a generation that believed fervently in the public schools as vehicles to foster the equality of Jews in the United States. In other words, the same people who pressed so hard for national-cultural education believe with equal fervency in the American vision and the American dream. Mordecai Kaplan was to give an American voice to their striving to create Jews who could live fully in two civilizations. Thus they did not seek to build day schools. Only one segment of the Orthodox community sought to do so at that time. Outside of Chicago there were almost no day schools in the Mississippi Valley until the late 1950s or early 1960s.

The Talmud Torah provided intensive supplementary education, often ten hours a week, on Sunday morning plus Monday through Thursday in the afternoon or evening. The better Talmud Torahs promoted school-related activities in the form of clubs and other informal educational activities. For example, the Minneapolis Talmud Torah organized an alumni association after its first graduating class which became an extremely cohesive group, holding annual reunions to this day. The more Hebrew-oriented alumni founded the Da'as group, a Hebrew-oriented club which continued to meet until the 1970s. In the following generation, a hug ivri was established for the younger Hebrew-speakers, which functioned in the 1950s and 1960s. Hebrew-speaking groups like this were founded in a number of communities. In Detroit the group was called the Kvutzah Ivrit and drew heavily on alumni of the United Hebrew Schools. For a number of years it published a Hebrew review, *Hed Hakvutzah*. The review survived some twenty years (1940-early 1960s) and over twenty issues were published. The group "aspired to maintain a living Hebrew movement in Detroit" (*Hed Hakvutzah,* title page 1959).

In the days when Jewish scholars functioned within the Jewish community, Talmud Torah faculties often included people of considerable scholarly ability who in another generation would have been professors of Jewish studies. Hence there was even a modest output of scholarship on the part of Talmud Torah faculty members.

While never dominant in terms of enrollment, the Talmud Torah became the normative institution for Jewish education in the United States for the first four decades of the twentieth century, losing that position in the late 1940s. With its decline came a serious decline in the number of hours devoted in Jewish education. The weekly norm for the congregational schools was four to six hours on two or three days.

Those who sought to replace the Talmud Torah with congregational or day schools often attacked it as a "secular" institution. This was very far from the truth since in fact part of the national-cultural approach was to maintain Jewish tradition, albeit in a non-Orthodox way. Traditional services and observances were carefully maintained and in many cases it was the alumni of the Talmud Torahs who founded the Conservative synagogues in the 1920s. For example, the Talmud Torah alumni who had been used to worshipping together while students in a modern atmosphere where the traditional service was maintained with new dignity, decorum, and understanding, continued to worship together and in 1924 founded Beth El, which became the leading Conservative congregation in Minneapolis. There was an irony here in that it was the Conservative movement that came into competition with the Talmud Torahs and led the assault on them on behalf of congregational schools.

Not only was the Talmud Torah the major product of these educators, the Talmud Torah flourished and reached its maximum strength in the Mississippi Valley, especially in the smaller Jewish communities of the Midwest: Superior, Wisconsin; Indianapolis, Indiana; Omaha, Nebraska; Akron, Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati and Cleveland, Ohio; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; and Detroit, Michigan. This was true as late as the 1970s. Where the Talmud Torah survived in the postwar generation as more than a fossil remnant, it was in the same medium-sized and smaller Jewish communities of the Mississippi Valley in which it had flourished earlier. Of the thirteen cities mentioned by Leon Spotts in his 1974 paper, eight were in the Mississippi Valley and they were by far the eight strongest on the list (Spotts 1974).

Internal and External Struggles

The struggle confronting these Talmud Torahs was two-fold. The first was a struggle between traditionalists and modernists among the national-cultural school of educators themselves, whereby the founding generation of the schools were firmly wedded to introducing and maintaining the Ivrit b'Ivrit method then becoming popular in the Eastern European schools that were nominally counterparts to the Talmud Torahs but were actually comprehensive all-day schools. The educators who came half a generation later saw this emphasis on Ivrit b'Ivrit for all subjects as stubbornness in the face of American realities where American children could not learn the Hebrew language sufficiently well in supplementary schools to be able to study all subjects in Hebrew. The two groups overlapped for most of the period in which the Talmud Torahs were important. This struggle became a nearly permanent one until the end when reality forced a decision in the direction of the younger group.

It was that second generation that often sought to change the name of the school from Talmud Torah to Hebrew School or, slightly later, to Community School. The former term reflected the Hebraic ideology of the school and the latter its communal ideology. Indeed, it was that generation that worked so hard to secure Jewish community federation recognition and support for the Talmud Torahs, in the most notable cases with considerable success. In Detroit, for example, the United Hebrew Schools was one of the six founding constituents of the Jewish Welfare Federation in 1926.

The second struggle was between the dedicated men in the schools themselves and the rising Jewish education establishment, mostly concentrated in the big cities on the East Coast, many if not most of them connected with the Jewish Theological Seminary and its Teachers Institute. The latter functioned in larger and more complex communities where no single set of schools could serve the entire Jewish population, hence they took the position that it did not matter under whose auspices the schools were as long as they followed the programs that these educators wanted, which were themselves varied. Thus they gave in early on to rabbinic demands to establish congregational schools and other fissiparous tendencies which may have been appropriate for their large cities but which they insisted on trying to export to the smaller communities of the Mississippi Valley in almost ideological fashion.

Since these Eastern educators were the ones who came to be recognized by the Eastern Jewish establishment as the "Jewish educational statesmen," they had an advantage over the men in the trenches. Among the educators themselves that advantage diminished when it was noted that the people involved were far removed from the classroom. Nevertheless, when called in by the community leadership in the Mississippi Valley, often encouraged by the new generation of American-trained rabbis, they frequently had considerable influence against the Talmud Torahs.

This took on many of the characteristics of an East-West struggle paralleling that in American society as a whole at the time. In general, the people of the Mississippi Valley, both in the Midwest and in the South, felt themselves treated as provincials in the eyes of the East, if not actual colonies. They fought back with a myth of special Midwestern and Southern virtue based upon the agrarian foundations of both sections versus the teeming urban ethnic industrial areas of the Seaboard. This view was shared by Americans from across the political spectrum, from the very conservative Colonel Robert McCormick and his Chicago Tribune to the very progressive Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin.

Midwestern Jews especially fit in to this pattern. It was reinforced by the realities of the East Coast-Midwest relationship in Jewish as well as general matters. The struggle between Eastern and Midwestern Jewish educators was real enough, especially in the minds of the Midwesterners, who on one hand wanted to help develop a countrywide Jewish education profession and community, but on the other wanted to preserve their particular institutional and professional frameworks.

The Midwest Federation of Hebrew Teachers

From the mid-1930s to World War II, the Midwest Federation of Hebrew Teachers epitomized this struggle. Founded in 1934, its first president was Dr. Shlomo Marenof, then in Chicago, a Russian Jew who had spent a number of years in Palestine before coming to the United States. His vice president and successor was Albert Elazar, a native of Jerusalem, who came to teach temporarily at the St. Paul Talmud Torah and stayed on once the Depression made it almost impossible to return to Palestine. Together with their colleagues, Marenof and Elazar developed the first strong Hebrew teachers union in the United States, one which sought to raise professional standards, provided placement services from Niagara Falls to New Orleans and from Denver to Pittsburgh, developed curricula materials, published a professional journal, *Bitaon*, and fought for the adaptation of the national-cultural approach to the American scene. At the peak of its strength in the late 1930s it had a network of Jewish educators from the Appalachains to the Great Plains, from Lake Superior to the Gulf of Mexico, most connected with the Talmud Torah movement.

The Midwest Federation of Hebrew Teachers was in constant struggle with the great "names" in Jewish education at the time, some of whom took positions in the Midwest at the new Bureaus of Education which they fostered, that were essentially in competition with the Talmud Torahs. At the same time the Federation insisted on being part of the national organization because its members' ideological goals were larger than regional.

Practically speaking, the coming of the war with its restrictions on travel and nonlocal organizational activities put an end to the Midwest Federation. In fact, what ended the Federation was that its members rose from the ranks of being teachers to becoming the educational administrators of the schools and bureaus in the region. As such, they turned to confront a different set of problems. Since the teachers who succeeded them were far from having the same background and were mostly part-time, they did not continue the struggle for a Jewish education profession committed to Zionism and Hebrew.

At its height, the Midwest Federation of Hebrew Teachers began to have influence with the Jewish community federations and other community leaders as well. In Indianapolis, for example, Daniel Frisch, who was very active in the Zionist Organization of America and later became one of its most notable presidents, actively supported Jewish education, and worked very closely with the local Talmud Torah. In Omaha, Paul Veret, the principal of the Talmud Torah, was also the executive director of the local federation. He was a highly respected person in the community and since Omaha was a small community, Jewish education was directly under the wing of the federation, sharing professional leadership.

Local Successes and Failures

What happened on the local scene was very much a product of chance. For example, both Duluth, Minnesota and Superior, Wisconsin, twin cities at the lakehead of Lake Superior, had modestly-sized Jewish communities in those days, when the upper midwestern iron ranges were booming and the twin ports had an active commerce. Duluth was the larger of the two cities in both general and Jewish population, but the best Talmud Torah was in Superior, Wisconsin. That was because Louis Gordon, who later spent most of his life as the educational director of the Talmud Torah in St. Paul, started in Superior, Wisconsin when he came to the United States. He went to St. Paul from Superior but he left something behind. Indeed, from St. Paul he used to go to Superior periodically to continue working with them and people from Superior used to come to St. Paul to get his help.

The situation in Superior was unusual. Normally, Jewish communities that small did not have enough children to maintain schools with their own educators. Instead they sought an individual who could be both a *hazan* and a Hebrew teacher, sometimes seeking someone who could be a mohel and a shohet as well.

The history of the St. Paul Talmud Torah was more typical. Its antecedants can be traced back to the Capitol City Hebrew Free School, founded as part of the Sons of Jacob Congregation in the 1890s. In its early years it met there and then later at the Sons of Abraham. In 1912 it moved into its own building and became an independent school. During World War I, the Temple of Aaron, St. Paul's Conservative congregation, established a congregational Talmud Torah and, in 1919, brought in Louis Gordon from Superior, Wisconsin as a teacher. He became principal of the Talmud Torah in 1921. In 1923 the first graduation was held. In 1930 the Jewish Education Center building was completed. The Temple of Aaron Hebrew School was transferred to it, detached from the congregation, and renamed the St. Paul Talmud Torah.

The 1930s were its golden years. Its teachers at that time in addition to Gordon included Albert Elazar, later to become Superintendent of the United Hebrew Schools of Detroit, and Zalesky, later to become the head of the Bureau of Jewish Education in Cincinnati. The student body included people like Marver Bernstein, who went on to become President of Brandeis University; Midge Decter (nee Rosenthal), one of the leading members of the New York intellectual establishment and wife of Norman Podhoretz, whose strong Jewish interests have influenced many in those circles; and Albert Vorspan, a major figure in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and champion of Jewish social action, and his brother, Max, a leading figure at the Los Angeles University of Judaism.

In 1956, following the westward movement of the Jewish community to Highland Park, it moved into a new structure on the banks of the Mississippi River, adjacent to Temple of Aaron. Since the Orthodox community of St. Paul, which was concentrated on the city's west side (actually the south bank of the Mississippi River), maintained their own Westside Talmud Torah, and the Reform families sent their children to Mt. Zion Sunday School, the St. Paul Talmud Torah was generally identified with those families that were neither Orthodox nor Reform, many of whom affiliated with the Conservative movement over the years, but the school was and has remained a community school.

Efforts to foster a Talmud Torah in Milwaukee ran into greater difficulty. There were several abortive attempts around 1900 to establish a proper Hebrew school but as late as 1923 "the number of children taught in private chedarim and by melamdim at home exceeds by far the number of children taught in established schools" (as quoted in Swichkow and Gartner, 1963, p. 264, from the Milwaukee Community Survey). Nevertheless, the Hebrew Free School did develop into the Milwaukee Talmud Torah which was essentially a bar mitzvah factory until 1915 when it moved into a better building and Ephraim Lisitsky became its principal (1916). At that time, the Federated Jewish Charities began to support the school and it shifted to the Ivrit b'Ivrit method.

Lisitsky stayed only until 1918, when he moved to New Orleans. After he departed, the school retrogressed to its former ways. A community survey of 1923 showed an enrollment of 55 girls and 90 boys. On the basis of that survey the Federated Jewish Charities agreed to take a more active interest and in 1925 took steps to remedy the situation.

In the last analysis, the Talmud Torah never developed and the congregations moved in to replace it. Still it tried to provide ten hours of Jewish education a week to its students using the Ivrit b'Ivrit method. Its best days were probably between 1925 and 1932 when Haim Margalit from Eretz Israel was principal. The Federated Jewish Charities pressed for the founding of a Board of Jewish Education in 1928 and Margalit became its director as well. The Beth Israel School merged with the Talmud Torah but the Board did not last. The Federated Jewish Charities helped stabilize the school's finances until the Depression which reduced its support and made it very difficult to collect tuition.

The Talmud Torah was housed in Beth Israel Congregation until 1944 when it moved to the Northwest to keep up with the movement of the Jewish population. In 1947 it merged with the Labor Zionist Folkshule as United Hebrew School and in 1957 the Workman's Circle School joined the union. Even with the union, the communal schools slowly lost ground to Temple Beth El's congregational school. In 1944 the Bureau of Jewish Education was renewed with a full-time director, Meyer Galin, again with the support of the Federation, now the Jewish Welfare Fund. The Bureau opened an Eastside Hebrew School for the Jews in that area.

The Minneapolis Talmud Torah and the United Hebrew Schools of Detroit: Two Case Studies

The Minneapolis Talmud Torah offers one case study of the best of the Hebrew national-cultural educational effort in the Mississippi Valley and indeed in the United States. The Jewish community in Minneapolis dates back to the 1870s. (Curiously, the first known use of Hebrew in what is now Minneapolis was the writing of a Hebrew-Dakotah dictionary by Presbyterian missionary Gideon Pond in 1834 to make the Bible accessible to the Dakotah or Sioux Indians living on the banks of Lake Calhoun.) In 1880 the community received an influx of Litvaks who settled on Minneapolis' North Side. They brought with them a strong commitment to Jewish learning. While the Jewish education system that developed in Minneapolis was not entirely developed by Litvaks, they unquestionably took the lead. Jewish education in Minneapolis was also strengthened by the fact that the Reform rabbi in the city, Dr. Samuel N. Deinard, a Litvak who had been raised in Jerusalem, was also a strong supporter of intensive Jewish education and actively participated in the establishment of the Talmud Torah, unlike so many other Jewish communities where the leadership of the Reform temple fought all efforts to introduce Hebrew-based education on the grounds that it slowed the acculturation of the immigrant generation (Gordon 1949, Plaut 1959).

In the fifteen years following the beginning of the Litvak immigration a number of small chedarim were organized on a private basis. From 1894, the best of these was taken under the wing of the community leadership and named the Hebrew Free School. The emerging community leadership came to the conclusion that they wanted a more systematic and quality Jewish education for the children of the community, one that would also be appropriate to the American scene. So in 1911 it was reorganized and in 1913 renamed the Talmud Torah.

The purpose of the Talmud Torah then as now was "to induct our young into the spirit and contents of the Jewish heritage and to prepare them for active and intelligent participation in Jewish life" (as quoted in Nahshon 1974). In 1974, Samuel Nahshon, the school's fifth executive director, described its character as follows:

It is a community school for all Jewish children. It is a supplementary school, uniquely suited to the needs of Jews living in the open American society. From its inception, it was rooted in the Hebraic and Zionist philosophy of Jewish education, and stressed the intensive study of Jewish source materials. In early decades the Talmud Torah was also the main center of youth activities. The Talmud Torah of Minneapolis has had an unusual number of outstanding Jewish scholars and pedagogues on its faculty (Nahshon 1974).

Beginning in those early years and continuing to the present, the Talmud Torah was organized into three divisions: a five-year elementary course, a three-year high school course, and a two-year Bet Midrash. Its curriculum was divided into five core areas: Hebrew language and literature, Bible, the Jewish people, Jewish thought, beliefs and practices, and rabbinics.

From the first the leadership of the school was in the hands of an extraordinary individual, Dr. George J. Gordon. Dr. Gordon was born in Neustadt, Lithuania in 1874 and educated at the Telz Yeshiva. He came to the United States at the age of 18 and to Minneapolis in 1893. In 1894, when he was twenty years old, he convened a number of leading members of the North Side Jewish community to try to improve on the heder system which was all that existed in Minneapolis at the time. His intention was to establish a school with better teachers and a more structured curriculum. As he put it: "In addition to knowing what we didn't like about the existing Hebrew schools, we also had a pretty fair idea of what we really wanted to include in our curriculum. We not only wanted our children to know their Bible and history, but we wanted them to know the Hebrew language, to be able to use it conversationally, to speak it naturally." It was too ambitious an agenda for the beginning but they did secure a room on Fifth Street North and brought in a Hebrew teacher from Fargo, North Dakota, who was paid $40 a month by the community. Dr. Gordon described him: "He really wasn't too good, but he was certainly better than what we had had until that time."

In 1898 the premises of the school were transferred to the Knesset Israel synagogue, the Litvak congregation. A new teacher was secured and, with the help of the synagogue officials who were also committed to Jewish education, the community built a four-room building in the back of the synagogue. "Really good teachers" were recruited and "some excellent results" were reported. Classes met from 4 to 8 o'clock in the evening Monday through Thursday for about an hour and a half per session. Approximately 75 students were enrolled. Dr. Gordon was not satisfied because he had to deal with too many people who opposed the kind of program that he wanted to introduce, so in 1910 he organized a revolt against the old Talmud Torah, using as its basis the refusal of the school to pay a good teacher a better salary. He swung enough popular support away from the old school to establish a new school with most of the same people and the old school simply disappeared. One of the principles of the new school was that good teachers could only be had by paying good salaries.

In February 1911, the new school, consisting of four classrooms, was opened. Approximately 115 children were enrolled and a group of North Side Jews who were themselves learned undertook responsibility for soliciting funds from the members of the community in order to keep the school in operation. The school grew to 264 students by 1913 when its name was changed to the Talmud Torah of Minneapolis. By 1914 their building was overcrowded. They built a new building which they dedicated on April 17, 1915 at the cost of $45,000. That same day the Talmud Torah graduated its first class of 17 boys and 3 girls. An alumni association was formed immediately. A high school department was organized in 1916 and 6 students were graduated from it in its first graduation in 1919. In 1920 the Bet Hamidrash was established.

From the first, the school used the Ivrit b'Ivrit method and all subjects were taught in Hebrew. Its classes met ten hours a day, five days a week, eleven months of the year, a regimen that lasted into the 1960s. The Talmud Torah followed the traditional Jewish school year, beginning its terms in Hol Ha'Moed Sukkot and Hol Ha'Moed Pesach.

In the interim, Dr. Gordon was trained as a medical doctor and he engaged in medical practice for many years, but in 1929 he left his medical practice to become the Educational Director of the school. Before he died in 1944, he left an indelible stamp on the community, one which endures to the present. Until the late 1970s, the voluntary leadership of the school were alumni who had been influenced by his personality.

While Dr. Gordon is the legendary figure of the Minneapolis Talmud Torah, in fact the principal who forged its character was Elijah Avin, a Litvak (from the same family as Abba Eban) who became one of the pioneer Hebrew educators in the United States. Avin came to Minneapolis in 1911 to head the school as part of the reorganization effort. He stayed until 1927 when he left the community for California. Mar (Mr.) Avin, as he was known in the school, was the one who first implemented what were then modern methods of education, including a systematic course of study entirely in Hebrew, and used the school to try to mold a new generation of dignified Jews. He created the Talmud Torah service whereby students came together on Sabbaths and holidays to worship in their own environment in a decorous way, paying special attention to the enunciation of the prayers in proper Hebrew, the classical Ashkenazic developed in Eastern Europe at that time which was to be the language of the *maskilim* until replaced by Israeli Sephardic pronunciation. In the years just prior to and during World War I, he developed the extra-curricular as well as the formal program of the Talmud Torah which was to become so influential in the Minneapolis Jewish community and, for that matter, in world Jewry.

The Talmud Torah graduations, alumni reunions, annual Purim banquet and annual dinner-dance became major events on the Jewish community calendar. For 25 years its Purim banquet was a very special expression of its own Jewish-Hebraic subculture. In its early years, its students produced a professionally printed literary annual, *San-San*, entirely in Hebrew. Its alumni remained faithful. To give but one example, in 1978, the 1938 elementary graduating class held its 40th reunion (in Los Angeles, to which many Minneapolis Jews migrated). In a class of over 40 members, only 3 of those who were still alive were not present. The Talmud Torah alumni continued to function as a major force for the first five decades of the school's existence and even established branches in New York, Los Angeles, and Israel. Alumni chapters met monthly, conducted athletic programs, sponsored continuing education, and, above all, for those in Minneapolis, provided leadership for the school generation after generation.

The school reached its highest enrollment of the interwar period in 1930 with 856 pupils. In 1943, 36 percent of the pupils enrolled in the Talmud Torah actually graduated, as against a countrywide Hebrew school record of only 5 percent. Unlike the situation in most Jewish schools where formal Jewish education ended at bar or bat mitzvah, well over half and sometimes as many as two-thirds of the elementary graduates continued into the high school, while between 70 and 85 percent of the high school graduates entered the Bet Midrash. The best of its products spoke Hebrew and had a basic familiarity with Jewish culture, although it should be noted that many of those who passed through were not better educated than the average Hebrew school student. Indeed, the Talmud Torah was one of the first Hebrew schools to introduce tracking to give its better students a more intensive program, while at the same time providing a way to enable its weaker students to continue to study with more emphasis on learning in English. So-called ability grouping, which enabled the best students to learn so much, but which tended to depress the morale of "regular students," even though they, too, ranked above the national average, was abandoned in 1970.

The Talmud Torah placed great emphasis on the foundation grades. Its most gifted teachers were assigned to grades Aleph and Bet where they concentrated on learning spoken Hebrew and were expected to acquire a vocabulary of up to 1,000 words so that when they began to read, the language was familiar to them. One of Dr. Gordon's greatest achievements was to secure the services of Aaron Kass, a brilliantly gifted teacher of Hebrew to very young children, who played a critical role in the Aleph classes for over 50 years, remaining as popular with eight-year-olds in his last years as he was in his first. Around him, the school succeeded in building solid foundations in reading and speaking Hebrew for a broad base of students.

The Talmud Torah had close relations with the Jewish Community Federation from the first and has been its number one local beneficiary almost since its founding, a status enjoyed by few if any other Hebrew schools. More than that, its voluntary leaders were leaders in the Federation as well. The entire community benefitted from similar involvements on the part of Talmud Torah activists and alumni.

In 1922 the Talmud Torah established a South Side branch in the Adath Yeshurun synagogue to serve the other Jewish neighborhood of Minneapolis. That same year they also established a branch at Beth El synagogue to serve those in the Homewood area. In 1956, the Fremont Avenue building was sold and a new building was erected on Russell Avenue in the Homewood district where the Jews were. Subsequently the Talmud Torah was to move to St. Louis Park after the Jewish community left the North Side and moved in that direction.

Dr. Gordon's vision was to make the Talmud Torah a center for social services for the community as well and a Social Service Department was organized in 1917. It sponsored clubs for Jews of all ages and English reading and writing classes for new immigrants. In 1920 the Talmud Torah even opened free dental and prenatal clinics and an infant welfare clinic to serve the neighborhood. The Social Service Department then had a full-time director. In 1922 a swimming pool and gymnasium were added in the Talmud Torah building. In the course of time, the Social Service Department was spun-off to become the Emmanuel Cohen Center in its own building which was the beginning of the Minneapolis Jewish Community Center. Thus, in Minneapolis the Talmud Torah actually gave birth to the community center and much of the Jewish community's social service system.

Between 1911 and the 1950s, the Talmud Torah had a group of great teachers, such as Menachem Heilicher, Simcha Gelb, and Solomon Zemach, who in our times might well have become professors of Jewish studies. Their contribution to their students was immeasurable through the standards they set and the love of Hebrew culture they conveyed along with their learning. The results of their efforts were visible in the number of their students who went on to become rabbis, teachers in Jewish schools, members of the Jewish communal service, and halutzim in Eretz Israel.

Despite this record of relative success, the standards at the Minneapolis Talmud Torah began to decline as they did throughout the country. While it remained relatively better than the other schools, by the 1950s it could no longer produce the same level of Hebrew literacy that it had in its early years. Even while it kept its long hours, it was forced to abandon its extra-curricular activities. From the late 1940s on it faced competition from the synagogues, the public schools, and other outside attractions for young people's extra-curricular time.

At the same time, its enrollment reached an all-time high of 1,240. In the 1960s its enrollment began to drop, in part because of a lower birthrate, in part because of the scattering of younger Jewish families to the farther reaches of the suburbs, and in part because of the shift of many younger families to Reform temple where they could send their children for bar mitzvah training for many fewer hours a week. Nevertheless, the Talmud Torah has fought back and continues to be one of the best, if not the best, afternoon Hebrew school in the United States.

The United Hebrew Schools of Detroit grew out of individual communal Hebrew schools founded before World War I. It was formally organized as a citywide communal system in 1919 and was one of the six Jewish agencies that founded the Detroit Jewish Welfare Federation in 1926. In the 1920s and 1930s it developed an extensive network of communal schools serving every Jewish neighborhood in the city. As one of the founding constituents of the Detroit Jewish Welfare Federation, it received communal funding from the first.

Its premier figure was Bernard Isaacs, another Litvak who was trained as an engineer but whose commitment to Jewish life was such that he abandoned engineering for Jewish education. He came to Detroit from the Indianapolis Talmud Torah. Detroit also had its special teachers, including minor literary figures such as A.D. Markson and H.A. Friedlander (who later went to Cleveland).

After World War II, the new leadership of the United Hebrew Schools, led by Albert Elazar, sought to adapt to the changing situation without abandoning its commitment to Hebrew-based education in the national-cultural spirit and communal control of the community's Jewish educational system. It began an aggressive program to establish new schools in the new suburban-like Jewish neighborhoods, a practice that continued through the 1960s out to the second tier of suburbs beyond Detroit.

In those years the UHS led the other community institutions in providing services to new neighborhoods. In 1948 it founded the Midrasha (College of Jewish Studies) to train a new generation of Hebrew teachers and to provide advanced Jewish study in the national-cultural mold. In 1950 it founded a library and bookmobile system to provide Jewish books to every branch. In time, the library acquired its own building and became a major cultural resource for the Detroit Jewish community as a whole.

During the 1950s it pioneered in establishing educational partnerships whereby branches of the United Hebrew Schools would be housed in the congregations on the basis of long-term agreements, provided UHS personnel and technical assistance for congregational educational add-ons such as junior congregation, teaching synagogue skills, and Sunday school. In the course of time, all but one of the Conservative congregations and several of the Orthodox congregations entered into this arrangement. A different arrangement was developed with two of the city's three Reform congregations that wanted a somewhat more intensive Jewish education program for its young people but were not quite willing to go for the full UHS program. Another variant of the program brought in the community's Yiddish schools, introducing Hebrew and religious studies into previously secular and Yiddish-oriented institutions. By the 1960s the United Hebrew Schools was the largest and most active communal Hebrew school system in the United States and its students consistently scored among the very highest in whatever standardized testing of the results of Jewish education attempted at the time.

At its peak in the mid-1960s, the United Hebrew Schools had over 4,000 students enrolled in its various programs. In addition to its own school buildings, it had branches at six Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, partnerships with two Reform temples, two Yiddish schools, and provided assistance to the afternoon schools of the Orthodox Yeshiva Ketana. The High School of Jewish Studies had an enrollment of over 300 students and the Midrasha over 60 students. It had a nursery school and assisted a Yiddish high school. It opened a Kfar Ivri, a month-long Hebrew-speaking summer camp on the premises of the Jewish Welfare Federation's community camp, for its older students.

The UHS and the synagogues of metropolitan Detroit had together established the requirement that bar or bat mitzvah candidates attend Hebrew school for five years. In 1966, the Detroit Board of License was established to set minimum standards for teachers in Hebrew schools. The Jewish education profession had been strengthened by raising salary levels and offering benefits comparable to those enjoyed by public school teachers. The UHS maintained a fleet of over 40 school buses with its own garage and service center to transport its students to and from its various branches. The Superintendent of the United Hebrew Schools, Albert Elazar, was on the first list of Shazar Prize recipients in 1972, a prize the Minneapolis Talmud Torah received the following year.

After Elazar's retirement that year, the UHS began to decline. Enrollments had begun to fall earlier for the same reasons as they were falling countrywide. None of Elazar's successors had the quality or the commitment to carry on with a communal school system of the same character and they began to pull back, reducing the number of branches and failing to keep the synagogues linked to the UHS as had been the case in the 1950s and 1960s. The especially rapid geographic mobility of the Detroit Jewish community made it difficult to keep up with the Jewish population in providing educational services. In addition, the rise of Jewish day schools, beginning in the late 1950s, offered real competition for the more serious students. In the tradition of the national-cultural movement, Elazar had resisted UHS involvement in day schools, remaining firmly committed to the public school plus supplementary Jewish education throughout his career. Thus the day schools grew up independently of the UHS and skimmed off much of the cream from its potential.

Who Taught in the Talmud Torahs?

One can more or less distinguish three generations of Jewish educators who fit into the national-cultural school. The first came onto the scene more or less between 1910 and 1920 at the historical beginning of the twentieth century. They were maskilim or the students of maskilim and were known as such among their associates. They were the founders of the Talmud Torah system described above. Their heyday continued until the Depression and many continued to be active as long as they could enter a classroom, until well after World War II, the last retiring in the 1960s.

The second group came on the scene in the late 1920s and 1930s. They saw themselves as a second generation, to some extent in conflict with the first over what they saw as unrealistic demands and expectations given the American Jewish reality. More of them were trained as teachers and they were influenced by the Progressive school of education and eager to introduce more progressive methods into Jewish education. This generation reached its full flowering after World War II when many of them became the educational directors of the surviving Talmud Torahs or the Bureaus of Jewish Education. While these men were as dedicated as the earlier group, they were more likely to take a modern view of retirement and hence did not stay on the job for half a century. By and large they left the scene during the 1970s.

The third group consisted of those students of the first, mostly American born or raised, who were the best products of the national-cultural approach and who themselves chose to go into Jewish education. They became teachers in the 1940s and 1950s when the Talmud Torah system was already declining and many of them were ultimately forced to move over into the congregational system or were fortunate to find places in community Hebrew high schools. Most of them retired in the early 1980s.

The intervals between these "generations" were in fact about half-generational, perhaps fifteen years, so that the last of them entered Jewish education in the early 1950s. Their students, who sought Jewish educational careers, went on to become professors of Jewish studies.

A few of these teachers were outstanding educators. Their students remember them with affection and respect to this day. Too many were immigrants who found their way into Jewish education because it was all they could do. One can imagine their suffering as they faced class after class of unruly, bored, dissatisfied children just waiting to get out of the classroom and into the sunlight of their normal American routines. Their pain was inevitably communicated to their students. Some were Hebrew scholars or litterateurs in their own right, in some cases able to convey that love of scholarship and literature to at least selected students, while others were doomed to be melamdim in the eyes of the world while they tried to keep up their scholarly and literary interests in the privacy of their homes during their free hours. Quite a few were trained in the exact sciences and came to Jewish education with a more systematic and orderly understanding of the world which they tried to introduce into the schools they served. In the early years at least, few were actually trained as pedagogues.

Secondary and Tertiary Education

The national-cultural movement had mixed success with higher Jewish education. The Hebrew teachers colleges, most of which later became known as the Hebrew colleges, were not founded by educators from the national-cultural school, although most were taken over by them after World War I. The first such institutions in the Mississippi Valley were started in Chicago (1924), Cleveland (1926), and Pittsburgh (1923). The first was the only one to develop as a serious institution and it was led by people associated with the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York who, while they had a strong commitment to Hebrew, were already looking for a different kind of American Jewish education. The latter two foundered. Cleveland made something of a recovery in the late 1950s and became the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. Pittsburgh tried to revive its School for Jewish Studies afater World War II, which also continued to have a checkered career.

At approximately the same time as the founding of those three, the Minneapolis Talmud Torah trained a few of its more promising graduates as Hebrew teachers and then absorbed them into the school but it did not found a permanent program. The Detroit Midrasha was founded in 1948 as part of the United Hebrew Schools. Only those in Detroit and Pittsburgh are direct outgrowths of the national-cultural school.

While these schools, particularly the Chicago College of Jewish Studies, produced several generations of alumni literate in Hebrew language, literature and history, they trained relatively few teachers. Until the late 1960s these teachers colleges emphasized teaching in the Ivrit b'Ivrit method and maintained a remarkably standardized curriculum divided as follows: Bible and Hebrew - each approximately a quarter of the curriculum; rabbinical literature and Jewish history - each approximately 15 percent of the curriculum; education - approximately 10 percent; and religion - the rest. This curriculum was standard for both denominational and nondenominational Hebrew teachers colleges throughout the United States, excepting only the most Orthodox institutions.

In the 1970s this curriculum fell apart as the colleges of Jewish studies sought to both compete with and connect themselves with the university-based Jewish studies programs. The previously fixed curriculum became a hodgepodge of electives with hardly a common core. While the number of students taking courses may have grown, the number graduating remained the same or declined. The percentage graduating declined drastically. The most appealing courses were those taught in English, dealing with contemporary Jewish subjects such as Israel, the Holocaust, or women in Judaism, while traditional subjects were increasingly neglected. The Hebrew language was virtually abandoned in most of the courses of these schools.

Reality dictated that much of the Jewish educational effort in the Mississippi Valley, as in the rest of the United States, was confined to the elementary years. As schools became systematized, it became the practice for children to start their studies at the age of 8 or perhaps a year earlier, to continue until bar mitzvah or until graduation from elementary school in their bar mitzvah year. With the exception of communities like Minneapolis, a very small percentage of the elementary school students went on to Hebrew high school.

The limited number of high school students led even the communities which did not have Talmud Torahs to establish communal Hebrew high schools. This was certainly the case in Chicago where the Bureau of Jewish Education and College of Jewish Studies sponsored a High School of Jewish Studies. It was organized into two divisions: the communal division, where the students who came from communal schools and the better congregational schools took a more intensive program, and the congregational division, designed for the average congregational school graduate, where studies were at a lower level.

In 1953 a study was conducted by one of the students at the College of Jewish Studies to try to assess the impact of high school in its alumni (Appleby 1953). Appleby examined five potential impacts: continued Hebrew studies, professional work in the Jewish community, voluntary association and leadership in the community, family identification with Judaism, and environmental factors affecting the relationship. The study sample consisted of 130 people, approximately one-third of the total alumni at that time: 68 male and 62 female ranging in age from 16 to 42. Ninety percent continued their Jewish education after graduating from Hebrew high school, 93 percent of them in the College of Jewish Studies and most of the rest in the Hebrew Theological College, a local Orthodox rabbinical training school. Over 60 percent of the total actually obtained degrees or diplomas from the institution of higher Jewish learning, and another 7 percent still enrolled in degree programs at the time of the survey.

More than one-third of the total were then engaged in some form of professional work in the Jewish field, mostly as teachers. Over 7 percent had published a work on a Jewish topic. Some 70 percent belonged to Jewish organizations and one-third held office in Jewish organizations. Fifty percent of the group attended religious services regularly or often, while the other 50 percent rarely or never attended. The same division was noted with regard to Sabbath observance subjectively defined, while 80 percent claimed to keep a kosher home and three-quarters light Sabbath candles, both figures slightly higher than the then-average in the total Jewish population (65 percent). Much the same pattern is evident among the marriage partners of those who were married at the time of the study.

During the heyday of these Hebrew colleges, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s in Chicago and from the late 1940s to the late 1960s in Detroit, they were the centers of much of the social life of their students and alumni, a self-selected group, highly motivated Jewishly and highly committed to Jewish study -- a postwar generation of literate and active Jews, many of whom subsequently became professors of Jewish studies. In Chicago, the College of Jewish Studies had an active alumni association from the 1930s to the 1950s based on a rather select group of Hebrew-oriented young and middle-aged people.

One of the principal vehicles for socializing in this milieu was the Melaveh Malkah, which was adapted from a similar institution developed in Israel to Hebraize Saturday night gatherings of alumni and friends of the institutions in question. In time, the Melaveh Malkah became a kind of ritualized event, worthy of further examination in its own right. Jewish holidays and important dates in Jewish and Zionist history were marked by Melaveh Malkah programs as well as ordinary monthly meetings.

In 1946 the Chicago College of Jewish Studies opened Camp Sharon as a summer Hebrew institute, in effect the college's summer school, in a pastoral residential setting close to the shores of "beautiful Clear Lake near Buchanan, Michigan, about 90 miles from Chicago." Camp Sharon was the first Hebrew-emphasis camp in the Midwest and during most of its over 20 years of existence was Hebrew-speaking. It was a study camp where young Jews from throughout the region had the opportunity to come and study with leading Jewish scholars from the Midwest and other parts of the country. Many young people seeking to pursue rabbinical careers came to Camp Sharon to acquire the necessary background in Jewish studies and many well-known figures in the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbinate today were partially trained at Camp Sharon.

In addition to Chicago, camper students came from Detroit, Kansas City, St. Louis, Buffalo, Cleveland, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Cincinnati, and Omaha (Primack, 1953). Scholars and students from outside the region taught and learned at Camp Sharon as well. No doubt for many of the scholars this was the only opportunity to teach advanced students and to escape from their lower-level educational responsibilities during the year.

Conclusion

In the end, the national-cultural approach did not survive. Hebrew language and culture did not flourish in the Mississippi Valley any more than they did elsewhere in the United States. The pioneer educators succeeded in developing one or two generations of successors. After that, for a variety of reasons, there was no third or fourth generation. The synagogues aggressively and successfully fought to take over Jewish education, killing or attenuating the communal schools in all but two or three communities. None but the very largest congregations could afford full-time professional teachers. They cultivated a profession of educational administrators with part-time teachers, usually poorly trained. Few were sufficiently proficient in Hebrew language and culture to begin with. Those that were tended to be textually rather than nationally oriented. The way of American Jewish life militated against the national-cultural approach. After World War II being Jewish became a matter of religious identification and after the 1960s a matter of sociology. In neither was Hebrew culture as such an important factor.

In the 1950s the communal Hebrew schools and Talmud Torahs that survived also had to adjust to changing circumstances in order to survive. Accordingly, they reduced their comprehensive programs, all but eliminated their extra-curricular school-centered activities, and shortened their hours of instruction to accommodate such new realities as suburban carpools, competition from the public schools for "after school" hours, and the decline of the Jewishness of the average Jewish home. In the lower grades, the best schools fostered innovations designed to cope with these changes and new directions were developed. While Hebrew remained central to their curriculum and they did not abandon all of their national-cultural aspirations to the "synagogue skills" trend of the congregational schools, they did diminish the extent of their teaching the language and Hebrew texts out of necessity as the number of hours were reduced. At the end of the 1950s very few of their students were learning Jewish history in Hebrew or reading advanced literary works before the college level if at all. Nevertheless there remained a small group in the community Hebrew high schools and colleges of Jewish studies who were capable of doing both.

Even as they failed to secure their Hebrew and national-cultural goals, those educators raised up the generation that founded the more serious institutions of Jewish life in their communities, from Hebrew-speaking groups, to Conservative synagogues, to agencies for Jewish education. Many of their students went on to become the pioneer professors of Jewish studies in the American universities. Indeed, for the whole United States it can be said that it was the national-cultural movement that provided the founders of the Jewish studies movement in the universities, people committed to Jewish culture and the Hebrew language but not necessarily to a religious vocation in the rabbinate or to Orthodoxy. Ironically, the rise of Jewish studies frequently sabotaged university Hebrew programs. Nevertheless, Jewish studies in the United States may be the lasting monument of those pioneer educators.

A Personal Note

Since the subject at hand is not really mine, I do not pretend in this paper to do more than present fragments for the history that needs to be written. On the other hand, my family and I lived through the greater part of the effort and were personally involved in it. Rose Goldman, my aunt, was in the first graduating class of the famed Minneapolis Talmud Torah. When she and her sister (my mother) were orphaned, Dr. George J. Gordon, one of the founders of that Talmud Torah and later its principal (he gave up his medical practice for Jewish education), was their guardian. My mother not only graduated from the Talmud Torah through Bet Midrash but was part of a group of Bet Midrash graduates trained as Hebrew teachers by Dr. Gordon at the Talmud Torah. She was one of the two original librarians of the Talmud Torah library, one of the first modern popular Jewish libraries in the United States and perhaps the first to emphasize Hebrew rather than Yiddish. Later she went into Hebrew teaching at the Talmud Torah and, still later, in Denver, Chicago, and Detroit. In the 1930s, she was principal of the Temple of Aaron Sunday School in St. Paul. Sometime after, my aunt became librarian, the position which she held for over 20 years, to become a legend within the Talmud Torah.

My father began teaching in the St. Paul Talmud Torah in 1929. He subsequently headed congregational Hebrew schools in Chicago and Denver (in Chicago, Bnei Israel of Austin and Anshe Emet and Denver, Beth Midrash Hagadol) and then became the superintendent of the United Hebrew Schools of Detroit, probably the most extensive communal Talmud Torah system ever to exist in the United States. In the 1930s he was one of the founders of the Midwest Federation of Teachers and his organization work took him to every community in the Mississippi Valley and its peripheries, from Buffalo and Pittsburgh in the East to New Orleans in the south, to Denver in the West. In 1947 my father was one of the founders of the first Camp Ramah, initiated by the Jewish educators, rabbis and concerned laymen of Chicago, over the doubts (and some objections) of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and he gave the camp its name. All told, he spent over forty years actively involved in the profession, all in the Mississippi Valley.

I was educated in those afternoon schools from Gan through the Detroit Midrasha and the Chicago College of Jewish Studies. I attended Camp Sharon, sponsored by the Chicago College of Jewish Studies, and Ramah, in turn. In 1950 I founded the United Hebrew Schools Library in Detroit and when I relinquished my responsibilities there after earning my Ph.D., my brother found his way into librarianship, ultimately became head of that library and moved on to a distinguished career in library leadership in Israel where he is today. I myself had the privilege of teaching in the Minneapolis Talmud Torah while I was teaching at the University of Minnesota in 1963-65. While a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I was head teacher of the religious school in Kankakee, Illinois (where one of my students was the child of one of my mother's pupils from Minneapolis). I personally knew most of the people involved in the educational activities discussed above.

In sum, the collective memory and records of our family go back to before World War I, to the very first generation of Hebrew education in the Mississippi Valley. I have drawn heavily on them as well as other sources for this fragment.

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Appendix A

Regions, States, and Cities Where the Midwest Federation of Hebrew Teachers Was Active

Northwest: Minnesota: Minneapolis, St. Paul
Middle West: Illinois: Chicago, Waukegan
Indiana: Indianapolis
Iowa: Sioux City
Michigan: Detroit, Grand Rapids
Missouri: Kansas City, St. Louis
Nebraska: Omaha
New York: Buffalo, Niagara Falls
Ohio: Akron, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo
Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh
Wisconsin: Milwaukee, Superior
South: Kentucky: Louisville
Louisiana: New Orleans
West: Colorado: Denver
Canada: Ontario: Niagara Falls