

From Sunday School to Day School

I am honored to give the opening address on the conference theme which deals with 100 years of Jewish education in North America. The topic of this session, "From Sunday School to Day School," suggests that Jewish education has moved from a one-day-a-week enterprise to a full-time system of education. While there has been significant movement in this direction during the last half of the past 100-year period, this trend has to be placed in proper historical, religious, cultural and social perspective.

Moreover, the changes that have taken place in Jewish education over the years have to be viewed against both a paradox and a truism in Jewish life. The paradox was noted in 1969 by Lawrence Cremin, who stated, not without some wonderment, "with Jewish education better established and financed during the 1960's than even before, American Jews seem functionally illiterate with respect to their Judaism."

To understand this paradox we must appreciate a truism that the level of Jewish functional literacy is, by and large, a result of purposeful behavior. I maintain that while there always have been forces outside their control that influenced Jewish life and Jewish education, American Jews, from the time of their initial settlement on this continent in the mid-seventeenth century, developed those institutions of Jewish education that they perceived as appropriate and adequate to meet their religious, cultural and social needs. "Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets" went the

Broadway *Damn Yankees* popular hit song of the 1950's. To be sure, whatever kind of schooling American Jews wanted during the past three centuries they got. Basically, the system of Jewish education is a major dimension of the self-actualization of the Jewish community. In each generation and in each locale the pattern of Jewish schooling actually represented the Jewish and general educational aspirations of the Jewish citizens of this great nation.

Prior to the nineteenth century, Jewish education in the Sephardic settlements in America was sporadic and irregular. Although the early immigrants were not cultivated persons, they believed in the co-existence of Jewish and secular studies. Like general education in the eighteenth century, Jewish education was a private enterprise, first dispensed by private tutors and then centered in the colonial synagogue where the minister-teacher gave instruction in Jewish studies—comprising Hebrew reading, liturgy, selected biblical passages and ritual—and general studies—essentially, English reading, writing and arithmetic.

The early 1800's saw the continuation of this pattern. However, increasingly Jews sent their children to non-Jewish schools. Even though the decades immediately prior to 1881 witnessed the arrival of relatively substantial numbers of Ashkenazi immigrants—English, French, Dutch, Swiss and East European Jews—Jewish education between 1840 and 1881 continued to be a matter of individual or synagogue responsibility without any communal involvement.

There was one major difference between the pre-1840 period and the post-1840 years. According to Hyman B. Grinstein, noted authority on this era,

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The German Jew, on arrival in America, could not understand the position of the native Jew and often denounced him for sending his child to a Christian private school. He would build schools of his own, since in Germany he already had developed schools which taught both Jewish and secular subjects. But he had to bide his time. The early arrivals were not able to launch such schools for lack of numerical strength in each community. In the interim, he had his *hazzan* or minister teach the children privately at home or in the synagogue.

The 1840's, however, saw the German and Polish Jews take a leap forward. These years were indeed "roaring forties" for the immigrants. The handful of Jews in each community now was augmented by constantly arriving immigrants. And so the German Jew began to establish all-day schools in almost every community in which he lived in the United States.²

These communities were notably in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati and Albany.

The establishment of day schools in the mid-nineteenth century was not without controversy in the Jewish community. Some Jews vehemently opposed the founding of Jewish day schools. The opponents strongly supported the idea of the public school and rejected the opinion of those who claimed that the public school was permeated with Christian influence.

Listen to Isidor Bush, a Jewish '48er, abolitionist and editor, addressing a St. Louis audience in 1855, urging Jewish parents to send their children to public schools and not Jewish day schools.

Every good republican, whatever his individual religious views may be, will watch that no sectarian influence shall ever be permitted to control it (the public school). And *why* should we refuse to participate in the blessings of this grand institution, towards whose support we

contribute our mite, and to the benefits of which we are fully entitled?

And I do not hesitate to declare that, after mature reflection and due consideration of all its bearings, I am utterly opposed to all sectional or sectarian schools, nor would I change my opinion if our means were as ample as they are deficient.³

Bush attacked the "fanatics who want to separate the seed of Abraham that dwell among the gentiles, that their faith might never lose aught of its purpose."⁴ He sneered at those who feared to expose their children to religious ridicule in the public schools. Claiming that this fear is totally unfounded, he argued that

even if true, and not quite unfounded, would this separation be the proper way to cure the evil? Would the descendants of our Christian fellow-citizens be more liberal than their ancestors, or would they not rather be strengthened in their lamentable prejudice? On the other hand, let me ask you, which class of our children are in a better condition to meet and overcome the spectre of Intolerance: those whom we have thus excluded from all intercourse with the children of others, who, when they leave the Jewish school are wholly unprepared to meet "the spectre," or those who already learnt to know it, and under our guidance have been taught how to repel such indignity in this country of civil and religious freedom?⁵

Bush also dismissed another fear of the proponents of Jewish day schools — that Jewish children would be required to read the New Testament or recite Christian liturgy. In his words,

this is as futile an argument as the rest; for in most of the States this question has been fully discussed and finally decided against the admission of any Bible or religious instruction whatsoever.⁶

Finally, Bush made a strong plea for the supplementary school:

Having thus refuted the standing arguments for sectarian schools, I cannot think of any object to be attained by them, to which full justice could not be done by establishing good Sabbath, Sunday, and evening schools for religious and Hebrew instruction only.

I believe, (on the other hand) that by devoting our zeal, means and energy to an exclusively religious school, in the way we have proposed, sending our children at the same time to our public schools for the acquirement of other branches of learning, the result would exceed our most sanguine expectations: that thus our children will become good pious Israelites, and worthy American citizens, our pleasure in life, our support and pride in the eve of our days.⁷

Bush was not alone in his feelings. He represented a growing segment of opinion that eventually led to the almost total acceptance of the public school as the necessary and sufficient instrumentality for the education of American Jewish children. On the other hand, more traditionally minded Jews like Isaac Leeser, educator, journalist and communal leader, rejected Bush's arguments. Leeser opined that Bush

overrates the advantage of a public school education, and underrates the difficulties of evening religious schools. The mode of instructing children in Hebrew in the extra (afternoon and weekend) hours, has been tried and has signally failed. If the success in St. Louis will be more in accordance with the wishes of its advocates, let time show. We are content to let experience justify or condemn the efforts we have made and caused others to make, in establishing separate schools.⁸

Echoing Isaac Leeser's sentiments, Rabbi Bernard Felsenthal of Chicago, to the chagrin of virtually all his Reform rabbinic colleagues, strongly urged the founding of Jewish day schools.

We would be entirely against specif-

ically Jewish schools, if the body of Jewish knowledge which we consider desirable for our children could easily be acquired in Sabbath schools. But there is too large an amount of subject matter to master. The vast majority of Israelites here are of German stock, and nearly every Israelite father wants and requires — rightly so — that the children in school be taught not only English but also basic German and, secondarily, Hebrew. However, if the boys and girls are to be so advanced that at the close of their school years they have mastered two languages, English and German, and the third, Hebrew, and understand well enough so that the Hebrew portions of our liturgy do not seem alien and the easier books of the Bible are practically comprehensible in their original tongue, then we must establish for them such institutions in which this goal is attainable.

In a Sabbath school where the Jewish children assemble once weekly, this given goal cannot be reached, especially when, as is the case in the American cities on account of the Jews having settled en masse, these Sabbath schools are overcrowded and pedagogic personnel and facilities do not exist in adequate quantity. . . . Yes, Jewish day schools! Or many more day schools, in which the pupils will also have the opportunity to acquire for themselves the desirable Jewish learning.⁹

There was a significant minority of Jews that harkened to voices like those of Leeser and Felsenthal. They were the people who founded the day schools in the mid-1800's against the advice and pressure of super Americans like Isidor Bush. But, these institutions were short-lived. By 1870 they had all closed. The reasons for their demise are not hard to establish. In the first place, the public schools were secularized and were better managed. Secondly, the growing costs of Jewish all-day schooling, coupled with the lack of communal support, made tuition fees prohibitive even for many parents who prefer-

red to send their children to a Jewish day school. Moreover, as the school board chairman of a Chicago Jewish day school remarked at the closing meeting of the school in 1874, "The general aversion of scholars (pupils) as well as the indifference of parents for Hebrew education led to the decline of the day school."¹⁰

By 1881, Jews came to regard the tax-supported, non-sectarian, religiously neutral, universal public school as the absolutely essential preparatory institution for American citizenship.

As the day school declined, the Sabbath school and Sunday school gained prominence. While this form of supplementary education, established by Rebecca Gratz in 1838, has always enjoyed its share of advocates and avid supporters, the one-day-a-week school was never able to demonstrate that it was an effective instrumentality for the formation of strong Jewish identity and for the imparting of intensive Judaic and Hebraic knowledge. To be sure, it could not succeed to attain these objectives because parents did not want it to succeed. The Sunday school is an example of the community getting the kind of education it desires. Moreover, the one-day-a-week school (for that matter, and the two and three days-a-week supplementary school) simply could not combat the influence of the child's environment.

A penetrating statement in 1880 by Professor B. A. Abrams, Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Milwaukee, underscores the seriousness of this problem in the nineteenth century.

But even the activity of the best teacher cannot be fruitful if he has to fight against the indifference in the home. It is a strange fact that parents who take great care to see to it that their children attend public school regularly and punctually keep the very same children at home for nonsensical reasons, since it is only Sabbath School that they are missing. A mere whim of the child, a party, a music lesson, are often considered important enough to justify an absence from religious school.

Their mothers rarely realize that the child learns soon enough the subtle difference between public and religious school, that he uses it with the utmost cunning, and that, thereby, a certain indifference toward religion is being awakened. The fact that often, in the presence of the children, the value of religion in general, and of religious instruction, in particular, is being judged in a negative way, and that even jokes are being made on the subject, while the school at the very same day should enthruse the child with the religion of his parents, is still the most important obstacle which prevents a more efficient influence of the Sabbath School. If we could only convince the mothers that only an intimate understanding — cooperation of home and school — is able to arouse in the younger generation the true feeling for our ancestral religion; if we could only encourage them to increase the interest of their children by coming frequently to the classrooms or by finding out the progress of the child, then, a new, more successful activity of our Sabbath Schools could be brought about, and the future of Israel in this country would be assured.¹¹

This statement could as easily be made today.

It is for this very same reason that thirty years later, in 1910, Samson Benderly emphatically stated: "The main question of the Jewish school . . . is not so much the amount of knowledge obtained, as the creation of a Jewish atmosphere. The old method of Jewish education was in a way successful in preserving Judaism not because of the amount of knowledge conveyed but just because of its Jewish environment."¹² Yet, Benderly objected to the day school idea which he thought was un-American. While advocating supplementary education, he thought it was not possible to be effective with all Jewish children, but only with a small minority of Jewish pupils — "a remnant" as he called them.

In opting for the public school as a major vehicle of Americanization, the immigrants

of the 1880's and early 1900's gave little thought to the importance of Jewish education. According to Rabbi Moses Weinberger who gives a first-hand account of the disintegration of traditional Jewish life among East European immigrants in the late nineteenth century,

there are many learned, enlightened teachers, many possessing splended talent and pedagogical skill, but on account of the lack of schools and of desire on the part of many of our brethren to raise their children in the manner of the Torah, they cannot easily find steady work, and most of them, after moving about for some years as in a formless void, return to their native lands, humiliated.

. . . The thirteenth birthday is the greatest holiday among our Jewish brethren — from that day on, the youth will regard his teacher as a useless tool . . . Since the parents are from Poland, they know that such teaching requires no skillful pedagogue . . . so it makes no difference what kind of teacher they employ. They pay only the going price for the job, which is generally not enough either to live on or to die — and thus schoolmastering has become a low, despised trade which cannot support its practitioners. It is chosen only by a man who has tried his luck at every trade and skill, who sees that his stars of success are extinct and that lifelong darkness awaits him.¹³

The degrading level of Judaic instruction that was tolerated by the immigrants is poignantly demonstrated by the following sign on a heder establishment in the early 1900's.¹⁴

חדר

דא אין דער בערימטער חדר פון די בערימטע פעדאגאגן
מיסטער שאבסאוויטש און מיסטער קרימינסקי
עס ווירד אונטערזיכט פון אלף בית ביז בר מצוה מיט א
גרויסארטיגען ספיטש (בר מצוה דרשה) אין ענגליש
אידיש אונד לשון קודש. העברעעניש, אידיש שרייבען.
עברי, חומש, אין רשיי אין גמרת, תנ"ח, עברות בענגיליש
אדער באידעש און עברות בעברת על פי דיקדיק לויט נאר
פארלאנג אידישע היסטאריעס, רעליגיאן אלעס אונד
היימישע שטייגער מיט זעהר ביליגע פרייזען. קומט

אונד איבערצייגט איר.
איר ווערין היר אידישע און דייטשעשע לעטערס
געשריבען קיין יוראם. דא ווירד איר אבגעשאבאכען אין
געהילט א קאנסער וואס די גרעסטע פראקטעארען
קענין נישט אויסהיילען.

רעווערענד שאבסאוויש בארימטער
מוהל און מסדר קידישין

HEDER

Here is the famous heder of the famous pedagogs

Mister Sovsovitch and Mister Kriminsky

Here is taught from Aleph Bet until Bar Mitzvah with an outstanding speech (Bar Mitzvah sermon) in English, Yiddish and the Holy Tongue. Hebrew, Yiddesh [note spelling] writing, Ivri, Humash, with Rashi with Gemara [misspelled], Tanach [misspelled], Hebrew [misspelled] in English or in Yiddesh and Hebrew [misspelled] in Hebrew [misspelled] according to grammar [misspelled] as you require, Jewish history, religion all in a homey [traditional] fashion with very low prices. Come and see for yourself.

Also, here are written Yiddish and German letters to Europe. Here is also exorcized and healed a cancer that the biggest professors are unable to heal.

Reverend Sovsovish [spelled differently than above] famous Mohel and Marriage Performer [misspelled]

It is abundantly clear that Jews, rich or poor, who tolerated such poor teaching conditions subjected their children to woefully inferior educational instruction, the unfortunate results of which are all to well known to us.

Although a widespread form of schooling, the *heder* was one of many kinds of Jewish education. During the early 1900's there were many attempts by various individuals and groups of Jews to find the most appropriate form of Jewish schooling to respond to their perceived educational needs.

The now famous and oft quoted Kaplan-Cronson survey of Jewish education in New York City, which was commissioned by the short-lived Kehillah in 1909, noted six diffe-

rent agencies for Jewish education at that time:

"a) Talmud Torah schools, b) Institutional schools, c) Congregational schools, d) Sunday schools, e) Chedarim, and f) Private tutors."¹⁵

(a) The Talmud Torah, initially a communal school for poor boys, provided instruction Monday through Thursday from 4 to 8 P.M. to two different groups of children and on Sundays from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. (In 1910, Kaplan and Cronson reported that 11,000 pupils were enrolled in 24 Talmud Torahs staffed by 163 teachers.) Hebraic, national and traditional in approach, the Talmud Torah became the dominant Jewish school of the 1920's and '30's and faded rapidly thereafter as the synagogue schools multiplied. The Talmud Torah of Minneapolis is the single remaining Talmud Torah of that period. It, however, has changed from a five-day, ten-hours-a-week institution, to a three-day, six-hours-a-week school.

(b) The Institutional schools belonged either to orphan asylums or social work agencies. These schools were limited by the nature of their sponsorship. (The Kaplan-Cronson survey shows there were some 7,000 children, 151 teachers in 17 such schools in 1910.) By the late thirties they disappeared as a viable educational instrumentality.

(c) The growth of the weekday Congregational schools coincided with the rapid spread of the synagogue and temple between 1930 and 1960. The new American synagogue phenomenon accompanied the move of Jews to the new Jewish areas of resident in the larger urban communities and to suburbia. After peaking in the early 1960's the synagogue school, along with the synagogue, has experienced dramatic decline. In 1962 there were an estimated 250,000 pupils in weekday supplementary schools compared to 120,000 in 1982, a decrease of 52 percent.

(d) The fate of the Sunday school parallels that of the weekday Congregational school. Its decline has been even more dramatic as many of its former advocates began to realize the serious limitations of a one-day two-to-three-hours-a-week education. From about 270,000 in 1962, Sunday School enrollment

declined to 100,000 in 1982, a decrease of 60 percent in twenty years. The major reasons for the enrollment decrease in the supplementary schools are obvious — the decline in birth rate, and the growing apathy of Jewish parents regarding Jewish education for their offspring.

(e) The private tutor, the *siddur* peddler and the *heder* institutions all but disappeared by 1940. These really do not deserve more treatment here than a statement of their demise. As the Kaplan-Cronson survey indicated, these institutions were "for the sole purpose of eking out some kind of a livelihood which they (the *lo-yutzlach's*) failed to obtain by any other means."¹⁶

(f) Among the East European immigrants were many socialist, secular Jews. For the schooling of their children they chose the pattern of the supplementary school, outside of the synagogue setting. But they could not agree on the best ideology or curriculum for their schools. So we saw, over a period of fifty years (1910-1960), the rise and fall of the three-pronged system of Yiddish schools — the national-radical schools of the Idish-Natzionaler Arbeter Farband (The Jewish National Workers Alliance); the Sholem Aleichem Schools of the Poalei Zion; and the Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle) schools, known also as the I.L. Peretz Schools. During their zenith in 1930, the Yiddish schools enrolled over 20,000 students. In 1982, there are a few hundred children in a handful of Yiddish schools in the United States and Canada.

The Jewish Day School

The seeds for the development of modern Jewish all-day education were sown with the founding of the Yeshivoh Etz Haim in 1886, and the Yeshibath Yitzchak Elchanan in 1897. These schools merged in 1915 to form the Rabbinical College of America, a Jewish day high school and post-secondary yeshiva which eventually developed into what is now Yeshiva University.

The modern day school movement experienced five distinct stages of growth.¹⁷ The most rapid period of its expansion was from 1940 to 1965. The factors contributing to this development, are, essentially, the Holocaust.

the birth of the State of Israel, the rise of ethnocentrism, the deterioration of the public school and the active, unrelenting promotion of day school education by its adherents.

Even during the era of phenomenal growth, the opponents and doubters of the day school idea questioned its viability and potential for continuity. In 1945, no less an educational authority than Dr. Samuel Dinin, at that time Executive Director of the Bureau of Jewish Education in Los Angeles, said it would never exceed 2 percent of the school population.

As late as 1968 Dr. A.P. Schoolman, a leading Jewish educational figure for a half-century, felt that the Jewish community should throw its entire support to supplementary schools in combination with the public school. For him, the day school was an un-American ghetto institution.

Now, virtually all segments of the Jewish community recognize the need for and value of the Jewish day school. Initiated and spurred on by the zeal and commitment of Orthodox leaders, it is still, by and large, an Orthodox institution. Approximately 85 percent of the North American Jewish day school enrollment of 120,000 is in Orthodox sponsored schools. A significant percentage of these students are from non-Orthodox homes.

The Conservative movement began advocating and founding Solomon Schechter schools in 1957. They currently represent about 10 percent of the total day Jewish enrollment. Originally strongly opposed in principle to the idea of Jewish all-day education, the Reform movement now recognizes the usefulness of and need for the day school for its own continuity and growth. During the last decade ten Reform day schools have been organized. Some 2 percent of the enrollment is currently in schools under Reform auspices. Day schools with no specific ideological label comprise about 3 percent of the day school pupil population.

In recognizing the importance of Jewish all-day education in the 1980's we must be careful not to negate the past value of the public school to American Jewry — albeit at the expense of intensive Jewish education. Public schools made a critical contribution to the Americanization of the Jewish immigrant.

They gave Jews access to the professions and to the wider society. These needs no longer exist in the Jewish community.

If the Jewish school enrollment pattern since World War II is an indicator of Jewish cultural and religious trends, then it is clear that American Jewry is becoming increasingly polarized between the Jewish "haves" and the "have-nots."

It is unfortunate, indeed, that about 40 percent of Jewish youth of school age will have no exposure to formal Jewish education during their school age lifetimes. Certainly they will be functionally illiterate if they will remain Jews. It is even more lamentable that — for reasons of lack of community and family support systems — the vast majority of children going through our supplementary schools will also be functionally illiterate.

It must be noted that despite its inherent limitations, the supplementary school in the mid-1900's did manage to educate functionally literate young Jews, many of whom currently occupy leadership positions in the Jewish community. However, these persons represent a very small percentage of the supplementary school "graduates."

Given the current societal setting of the congregational school, the possibilities for even such limited results are now exceedingly slim. The viability of the supplementary school depends largely upon factors outside of its present two to six hours a week structure.

In sum, the theme "From Sunday School to Day School" tells the dramatic story of how seriously American Jews — individually and communally — take their Jewishness and Jewish education. The history of Jewish education in America, particularly during the last one hundred years, clearly indicates that those who have opted for the public school or private school for general studies, by and large, have not seen the urgent need for Jewish education or have only paid lip service to the Jewish schooling of their children.

On the other hand, one of the outstanding characteristics of the sponsors, professionals and parents of the day school is their fervent all-pervasive social, financial and religious commitment to Jewish education.

The same zeal and enthusiasm that day school proponents have for their schools must be exhibited by supplementary school sponsors — rabbis, congregation leaders, principals, teachers and parents — as they try to overcome the serious deficiencies of part-time Jewish schooling. It behooves the Jewish community to increase its assistance to the supplementary school. However, it must do so, realizing that the lack of home support and the minimal hours of instruction make it most difficult, for not impossible, to educate func-

tionally literate and observant Jews through this instrumentality.

Providing added hours, parental reinforcement and/or alternative environments are *sine qua non* preconditions for effective Jewish supplementary education.

Recognizing that over two thirds of the Jewish school enrollment is in supplementary schools, realism dictates that the Jewish community do everything in its power to guarantee the viability and effectiveness of both all-day and supplementary schooling.

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