

World Jewish Digest

Issue Date: April 2006, Posted On: 3/21/2006

Teach Your Children Well

by Jack Wertheimer



Jewish education in the United States has developed in new and surprising directions. The infrastructure of educational programs, both formal and informal, in quite a few communities has attained a new level of maturity, and offers children and their parents a range of attractive options.

Families, for their part, relate to educational institutions in far different ways than did Jewish parents of school-age children several decades ago. Together, these shifts require us to rethink our understanding of how Jewish education works—and ought to work.

Education is not a separate sphere of Jewish life; it is integral to how American Jews live today—in marked contrast to how Jewish education was experienced a generation, let alone two generations, ago.

Overlapping circles of learners, parents, members of extended families, fellow synagogue congregants, peer groups, educators and communal leaders all interact with one another in the activities of Jewish education. This means that beyond the cognitive knowledge and the skills they teach, Jewish educational settings are central to the way American Jews construct their lives and communities today.

Families and Jewish Education

Today, Jewish families and educational programs do not operate in two separate spheres, but rather mutually reinforce one another. Clearly, family engagement with Jewish education ranges across a spectrum from more to less intense participation, but it is no longer helpful to look at families as divorced from the Jewish educational process, any more than it is useful to imagine schools and informal education as operating independently of families.

Instead, there are multiple points of intersection between learners, their families and Jewish educational settings. To illustrate this mutual reinforcement process, we begin with the ways in which the Jewish education and informal experiences of parents affect their children's Jewish educational participation. This operates in two distinct ways: First, parents who themselves had received a more extensive Jewish education tend to enroll their own children in a broader range of Jewish educational settings than do parents who have not had those experiences. And second, in many families the particular educational experiences of parents repeat themselves in the next generation.

When we array the Jewish schooling of parents on a continuum from less to more intensive experiences in their own childhood and adolescent years, we find increased utilization of all forms of Jewish education—formal schooling and informal educational programs—among the children whose parents were educated more intensively, a pattern that is especially dramatic among parents who attended day schools for seven years or more.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the strong relationship between a parent having attended day school and his or her children's enrollment in a day school. Over 90 percent of parents who attended day schools through high school enrolled their own children in day schools; and 40 percent of parents who attended day school through grade 6 enrolled their own children in day schools. (We may surmise that when both parents had intensive Jewish educational experiences, these figures are even higher.) Parents who attended day schools also were most apt to send their children to programs of informal Jewish education, such as

summer camps, youth groups and trips to Israel.

At the other end of the spectrum, parents who attended one-day-a-week Sunday schools were far less likely to enroll their children in intensive Jewish education or in programs of informal Jewish education. And in the middle of the spectrum, parents who had attended supplementary schooling beyond the bar and bat mitzvah year tended to enroll their children in more programs of Jewish education than those who did not continue their education. While other factors, such as denomination, play an important role in these decisions, the educational experiences of parents significantly shape their aspirations for their children.

Similar patterns are evident when we examine the exposure of parents to various forms of informal Jewish education. Those parents who participated in Jewish summer camps, youth movements and Israel trips are more likely to enroll their children in such programs too.

Young People and Jewish Engagement

For young people, too, Jewish education reinforces Jewish engagement. This happens in two important ways: First, those who participate in more intensive forms of Jewish education tend to be more actively Jewish in their religious observances and [more] likely to befriend other Jews. They bring with them to the classroom, group, bunk or Israel trip higher levels of familiarity with and commitment to things Jewish, which, in turn, engage them in Jewish life far more than those who are exposed to less intensive forms of Jewish education. Various educational experiences can draw upon and build upon a cultural predisposition toward Jewish engagement among participants that derives not only from the home and community, but also from mutually reinforcing Jewish educational experiences.

Undoubtedly, the curriculum and educational staff play a significant role, but so do the social networks created by the cluster of programs of formal and informal Jewish education. Second, more intensive and extensive Jewish education of one type is also associated with other forms of Jewish educational activities. Participation in youth groups, overnight camps and Israel trips generally increases with the intensiveness of Jewish schooling. For example, merely 8 percent of Jews with no formal Jewish schooling report having attended a Jewish summer camp, compared to 31 percent of Sunday school attenders, 43 percent of supplementary school students and fully 77 percent of Orthodox day school students [that] attend Jewish summer camp. Moreover, participation in one type of program of informal Jewish education often translates into participation in other types of programs: for example, participants in youth groups were twice as likely as non-participants to attend a Jewish summer camp and to visit Israel. Jewish educational experiences frequently reinforce one another.

These and other findings suggest the need to think about Jewish education as a set of dynamic interactions. Parents and children certainly engage in much bidirectional interplay, with each shaping the other in important ways. And exposure to a range of educational settings also creates an interactive dynamic. We might wish to visualize Jewish education as a series of overlapping circles or layers, each having reinforcing effects upon the other. The dynamism of Jewish education today is further demonstrated by the complex ways parents think about Jewish educational choices, a subject to which we now turn.

The Day School Choice

Parents are moved by different sets of considerations when they choose a day school education, as compared to a supplementary school program. Using the data from our survey of JCC members who are both Jewish and parents of children who live at home, our analysis identified attitudes relevant to their decision to consider day schools for their children. (The practical issue of costs was not raised in this context, as we were concerned with perceptions.) The three most significant attitudes that emerged from this study were:

- The aspirations for one child's Jewish development—i.e., the extent to which parents hoped their children would develop a strong Jewish identity.

- The perception of day schools as effective instruments of Jewish education.
- The perception that day schools "ghettoize" their children, and the concomitant fear that children enrolled in day schools do not learn how to relate to non-Jews and that they turn out "too" religious.

All three attitudes exert moderate effects upon the decision to send one's child to day school, with the first two directly related to the decision and the third inversely related. In other words, the more parents aspire for their children to develop strongly as Jews, the more parents have confidence in the ability of day schools to educate and the less they fear ghettoization in the day school, the more likely parents are to send a child to day school, or at least to consider it seriously.

Certainly other factors are at play here. But our analysis was also able to dispose of certain considerations. Thus, while Jewish commitment on the part of the parents increases their preference for day schools, it operates solely by way of aspirations—that is, through the hopes one harbors for a youngster to be committed to living as a Jew. In addition, the analysis lent support to the notion that concerns over academic quality are not the sole consideration of parents. A "good enough" academic quality renders the day schools a plausible option. Other factors make them "desirable" and sometimes "necessary" choices. These other factors might include educational excellence, but will more likely include social and personal factors that make them a good fit.

As day schools of all stripes proliferate, the day school parent body becomes more diverse and parental motivations for enrolling children become more complicated. Increasing numbers of day school parents are not Orthodox, and many adults in the parent bodies of both Orthodox and non-Orthodox schools were not themselves educated in day schools. Frequently, their public and supplementary Hebrew school experiences are in fact the motivating factor in choosing day school. One couple [interviewed for this study] explained that their strong bias in favor of day schools was a result of the fact that both of them had gone to public schools and had "unhappy" Hebrew school experiences.

"My observation was that it hasn't gotten better; it had gotten worse since I was a kid. There were two or three options, the Reform and Conservative day schools (elementary schools), and the Reform school seemed too small and ideologically inconsistent at the time. The Conservative school seemed to work."

Logistics can also be a factor in the day school choice. The long school hours at day schools can seem advantageous to working parents who put in long days in the office. Practical considerations, and not only values, come into play. As one day school father explained:

"Besides the fact that both of us are committed to day school in concept, also logistically, Hebrew school isn't going to cut it for us because there isn't anybody to drop [the children] off."

Our interviews with parents yielded a range of specific items they sought when enrolling their children in day schools. While most day school parents express an interest that there be what they call "a fit" between their homes and the school, for Orthodox parents this is a primary concern. In fact, this aspiration surfaced unprompted in almost every interview with Orthodox parents. Some indicated that they only decided to move to a city after they had assured themselves they could find a school offering such a fit. One set of parents claimed that they would prefer a public school rather than send their children to a Jewish school where they do not fit. For many day school parents, then, their preference for day schools is tempered by their need to assure themselves that the school provides a good fit for the unique needs of each child and that the school's Jewish outlook is compatible with that of the family.

The Community and Education

By situating its research in a range of communities around the country, this project has confirmed the truism that Jewish educational arrangements vary greatly by community. Some important variations are

conditioned by local historical and cultural circumstances.

In some parts of the country, innovation is constrained by the heavy hand of traditionalism—i.e., “this is the way we do our business.” In other places, a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurial derring-do have produced a sense of forward movement. Communities with a significant influx of new arrivals have an advantage because newcomers seem less constrained. But sometimes even newer Jewish communities are hampered by a culture of indifference and weak civic engagement. All of these factors affect the extent to which new educational programs are established, whether they are properly funded and whether champions of Jewish education are likely to emerge in a community.

The commitment of key communal leaders makes a major difference too. In some communities, federation leaders have spearheaded new initiatives, whereas in others, much of what has been built has emerged despite the indifference of the federation.

Federations, in turn, are often at the mercy of the local “culture of giving” that has developed in each community. Some communities have a well-developed sense of communal responsibility, which in itself ensures significant levels of giving and also the accumulation of a large endowment fund that is especially helpful for launching new initiatives. In others, volunteering and civic engagement are not valued by the larger community, and local Jews seem reluctant to play a role in support of their own institutions. The efficiency of fund-raising in some Midwestern cities, for example, stands in marked contrast to the relatively low levels of giving in many sunbelt communities where there is no shortage of wealthy Jews but a serious absence of community mindedness. Our findings confirm the strong correlation between the general “culture of giving” in each metropolitan area and patterns of philanthropy among Jews in those areas. The insufficiency of financing, in turn, has a major impact on what communities can undertake in the educational realm.

The composition of a community also affects its commitment to Jewish education. Where Orthodox Jews are represented in higher percentages, they constitute a lobby for Jewish education. By contrast, communities with an inordinately large percentage of Reform Jews tend not to be nearly as interested in Jewish education. In some communities, Conservative Jews have created a range of day schools and other educational institutions; in others, they have been relatively insular, focusing mainly on their own congregational schools. In all cases, new interventions have made a difference, particularly in the form of adult education programs. Alumni of the Wexner Heritage Program have become lobbyists for improved Jewish education; and there is some evidence that adult students of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-Schools and the Meah program based at the Boston Hebrew College are also activated as champions of Jewish education.

Policy Implications

The hard work and investments of the past few decades have built a momentum in Jewish education. We do not have to create something from nothing, but rather to sustain and further build the momentum. The good news about Jewish education is that we can substantiate the cumulative effects of Jewish education and the powerful impact of informal Jewish education.

We know about the value of more intensive Jewish education—more years, more exposures, more time devoted to such enterprises. All of these factors engage young Jews and draw them into social networks that reinforce Jewish participation.

When communities invest in a range of programs and enhance educational efforts, they are making a long-term investment in the Jewish future. Those that do not are shirking their responsibilities to nurture a next generation. We need to find incentives to encourage communal investment in the range of programs. And perhaps we should find ways to pressure those communities that are remiss in not making such an investment in the future.

Excerpted from "Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today," an overview of research by a team of seven scholars under the direction of Prof. Wertheimer and funded by the Avi Chai Foundation.

The complete report is available online at www.avichai.org.

Jack Wertheimer is provost and professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

© Copyright 2005, The AVI CHAI Foundation