

The Shifting Paradigm: A Case for Jewish Day School Education

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Rabbi Joshua Elkin

Why are we living through such a rapid increase in attention to day schools? I believe that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. Thomas Kuhn wrote a very seminal work in the field of the history of science entitled The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. In that book, he detailed that at certain points in the development of science, there is a radical shift in the way people think. In the Jewish community, when most immigrants arrived at the turn of the century, the paradigm of acculturation, Americanization, melting pot, and acclimating to a new society was all powerful. Public schools were the setting of choice. Day schools were not viewed as an option. This paradigm held sway for half a century, and within the non-orthodox community it still has considerable power.

What we are seeing today, however, is the unfolding of a substantial paradigm shift away from Americanization to one of Judaization, where we celebrate differences and where we revel in our particularism. There is no longer an Americanization thrust. This new paradigm makes day schools more acceptable and even desirable. Given the success of integration into American society we are faced with the challenge of integrating Judaism into our lives which are filled with unprecedented freedom and opportunity. If Judaism is to capture the minds and hearts of the next generation, we need intensive exposure and deep experiences. Day schools are indeed the institution of choice for this challenge, as they provide a vibrant gateway into Jewish life for all who come through its doors – students, parents, faculty, and members of the broader community.

Furthermore, Michael Zeldin has pointed out so eloquently that the support of day schools is not incompatible with continuing to value the role of public education. Zeldin writes “There is nothing incompatible about Jews supporting American public education and at the same time providing avenues for significant Jewish learning for those Jewish children whose parents place a high priority on Jewish learning. There is also little support for the idea that individual children who attend day schools are not prepared to participate in American society.”

We are all part of this paradigm shift, especially the many parents who never attended a day school, but who are providing this education for their children. To help fuel this paradigm shift and to validate not only your choice of day school but also to make the day school option more alive to the thousands of families who are not yet connected to it, I offer these reasons for offering our children a Jewish day school education.

1. Day schools offer a strong and integrated knowledge base. They provide deep literacy and a rich academic environment for both general and Judaic education. This is a setting that allows for critical inquiry, that teaches an additional language which conveys skills and competencies and that enables graduates to move forward with tremendous academic strength into some of the best universities in the country and on to success in their careers. In many day schools, the learning experiences extend beyond the students to include parents, teachers, board members, and administrators.

2. Day schools provide an opportunity for extensive individual attention. Day schools fuss over each student. A recent anecdote from a sixth grade transfer into a day school underscores exactly how powerful this transition can be; even students notice the vast change in the way they are treated within the walls of a day school. There is a commitment to excellence in all spheres, including the attention to individuals. Smaller schools attend to children's needs more effectively, and day schools are on an average considerably smaller than their public school counterparts.
3. There is an attachment to *Klal Yisrael* (to the Jewish people). Israel Sheffler talks about continuity and attachment to a culture. Joseph Schwab talks about a sense of linkage and an awareness of lineage not only to Jews in a local community but to Jews around the country, to Jews in Israel, and to Jews around the world.
4. Day schools foster a strong sense of identity. Most eighth grade graduates from day schools report a very easy adjustment into a new environment. They are confident in who they are as Jews.
5. Day schools offer an extensive peer community where Judaism is naturally integrated. Day schools become, in fact, the neighborhoods for their children. Within these neighborhoods, students, together with their teachers, administrators, and parents who frequent the school, are actively engaged in recreating a community that once was the Jewish neighborhood. The Jewish day school is the place to hang out, and the people become a defining community. One can see this most extensively in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year where students spend vast amounts of time with each other at services and at celebrations which become an extension of the social community that exists within the school during formal and informal time. The smallness of many Jewish day school cohort groups contributes to the cohesiveness of the peer community.
6. Day schools offer this sense of community not only for the student peer groups but also for the adult community. Parents meet their best friends at the day school. Individuals who are substantially alienated from their communities find a sense of connectedness within the day school. Robert Putnam in his seminal work, *Bowling Alone*, speaks about the loss of social capital. Within the confines of a day school, this social capital can be rejuvenated and rediscovered as people meet each other in informal car-pooling opportunities, as well as through planning programs, attending events with children, and learning and socializing together.
7. Day schools provide authentic opportunities for the practice of *Tzedakah* and *Gemilut Hasadin*. The environment is value-packed. It is possible to cultivate the habit of doing good things and to nurture and find an ethical value system and code of conduct.
8. Day schools afford an opportunity to foster relationships among students and adults. Deborah Meier has pointed out how important this is. Given that day schools are relatively small schools and given the fact that so many adults inhabit those schools on a per student basis (both paid staff as well as volunteers), there is an opportunity to forge this kind of intergenerational relationship.

9. There is an opportunity for building a home/school partnership. Day school staff recognize that the goals of an intensive Jewish education can be achieved more consistently with active parent support.
10. This is a setting where future leaders are being trained. We find evidence at Hillel Foundations on the campuses, in federation leadership ranks, and in other Jewish and civic organizations. Day school graduates are disproportionately found in key leader slots.
11. Judaism becomes second nature and not second best. It is integrated into the fabric of students' lives. The rhythm of the Jewish year is more organically threaded throughout the program.

We must continue to track the paradigm shift and to strengthen the case for this vibrant setting for Jewish and general education. Everyone connected to a day school must accept the challenge of introducing prospective parents and donors to the excitement and excellence of the Jewish day school experience.

Frequently Asked Questions About Jewish Day Schools
Prepared by Rabbi Joshua Elkin, Ed.D., PEJE Executive Director

1. How many day schools are there in North America? How many students attend these day schools?

There are currently approximately 700 day schools in North America with an enrollment approaching 200,000 students.

2. What is the denominational breakdown of the day schools?

The breakdown is roughly as follows:

21 Reform Jewish Day Schools

70 Conservative Day Schools

75 Community/Unaffiliated Day Schools

75 Modern Orthodox Day Schools

250 Centrist Orthodox Schools affiliated with Torah U'Mesorah

The remainder are more right wing Yeshivot, many of them in the New York area.

3. What trends are evident in the growth of day schools over the last 20 years?

The growth of day schools [in all aspects of the community] has been very noticeable during the last two decades. In 1980 there were approximately 450 day schools with an enrollment of just over 100,000. In essence, the day school movement has doubled during the last twenty years.

4. Why is the number of day schools and day school students growing so rapidly?

Up until the middle of the 20th century, it was considered to be un-American for religious groups to educate their children within their own schools. The way into American society was deemed to be through the melting pot of Americanization. Hence, most of the Jews who arrived in the early part of the 1900s received their education in public schools. As we moved into the 1950s and 1960s, there was a cultural shift which moved in the direction of affirming cultural religious and ethnic pluralism within the United States. This shift redefined the relationship of religious groups to American society and opened up the door for rapid proliferation of Jewish day schools across the entire country, initially among the Orthodox, but eventually within the Conservative movement as well. In Canada, where there never was a melting pot ethos, day schools were established immediately upon the arrival of the Jews to those communities. The United States is still very much playing catch up to the kind of pattern that exists in the major Canadian cities.

The second answer to this question is that Jewish parents are seeking a high quality education both generally and Judicially, and one that will yield a comfortable and deep literacy for the next generation of young people. Day schools, through the intensity of

their program and through the quality of the education that is being delivered, have become attractive places to find this literacy.

5. Why are Jewish parents choosing day schools?

Parents are eager to provide their children with a deeper grounding in Jewish life and practice than what they received. The day school setting is the option that can best deliver that kind of grounding in a natural and integrated surrounding.

Day schools are seen as institutions which provide substantial and individualized attention not only to academic needs, but also to social and emotional needs. The day school environment is seen as a tight community embracing shared values, thereby enabling people to connect with each other on both the student and the parent level. Many families view the day school as the Jewish neighborhood of decades gone by. Students enjoy hanging out naturally and comfortably in the Jewish environments of their day school, in some cases from an early morning drop off at 7:30 a.m. right through an extended day program until 6:00 p.m. at night.

6. What kind of parents send children to a Jewish day school?

It is impossible to generalize about the kinds of parents who are sending children to day school. With the enormous growth of the day school population, the group of parents is large and varied. There are parents from every denomination of Jewish life. With the exception of the Orthodox community, most of the parents have not received a Jewish day school education themselves. In fact, many day school parents consider themselves very poorly educated as Jews. Given that the day schools have strong scholarship programs, there is a powerful economic diversity among the families who send their children to a Jewish day school. In some cases, parents within the non-Orthodox community are drawn to a day school initially by the quality of the general studies program, with little if any thought to the Judaic studies program. The enrollment in the school becomes, therefore, a journey not only for the students but also for the family.

The common denominator among the parents appears to be those who are interested in the high quality of education, as well as a strong grounding in the richness of Jewish life.

7. How do day school graduates fare after graduation?

Most of the data that we have points in the direction of a very positive adjustment both at the high school and college levels. For the most part, day school graduates report that they feel confident in the Jewish identity as they adjust to a new school (either high school or college) where they meet and learn with non-Jews. All of the evidence that we have about college acceptance (and also about some of the patterns of day school graduates as they finish their schooling and move out to the work world) points to the fact that this is a highly educated and well-adjusted group who are already beginning to assume various leadership positions in the general community and within the Jewish community.

8. How are day schools able to teach general and Judaic subjects in one day? Doesn't the general studies program get short changed?

There are a number of responses to this question. First, the quantity of material taught has been shown to be an insufficient measure of what students are actually learning. The push to cover large amount of material plagues American education. One commentator on schooling recently wrote "A mile wide and an inch deep is what already characterizes too much of American education." In many Jewish day schools there is a careful selection of material to be studied, as well as an opportunity for students in small classes and with many nurturing attending adults, to explore topics in greater depth. Second, in a number of day schools there is a conscious effort to create links across the curriculum between general and Judaic subjects and also within each domain. These integrative links help to create a more efficient delivery of the program, and in ways that are powerfully reinforcing and focused.

Many day schools do administer rigorous standardized tests, and in some cases tests that are administered largely to private school populations. The results have been very positive. It appears that the teaching of Judaic subjects, including the learning of a second language, the analysis of texts and commentators, the following of complex Talmudic reasoning are all beneficial for the growth of a sound and active mind. There appears to be some evidence that the Judaic studies program in fact enhances the academic learning of young people.