
Jewish Education: Some Recent Research

Jonathan Sacks

Much has been written, and many more words spoken, about the need for Jewish education to ensure Jewish commitment and survival. The cause goes to the heart of the Jewish experience. No faith, surely, has valued study higher or invested more of its energies into the activities of learning and teaching.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was acting on a deeply engrained impulse when he predicated the Jewish future, after the fall of the Second Temple, on the academy of Yavneh and its sages. There are many good deeds, said the rabbis, for which we are rewarded in this world and more so in the next, but the study of Torah equals them all. Jewish priorities are accurately reflected in the Siddur. Before we pray, on Shabbat morning, for the welfare of the congregation, the Royal family and the state of Israel, we say a prayer, *Yekum Purkan*, for children who will not interrupt or cease from the words of Torah (a proposition the force of which is somewhat obscured by the Singer's Prayer Book translation).

The *Shema* itself, after setting forth the great commands of the unity and love of God, projects a stunning ideal of educational discourse between parents and children: "Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your house, when you walk on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up."

The growth in modern times of universal compulsory education has tended to make us forget that such an institution existed in Jewish life almost two thousand years earlier. Already in the late Second Temple period, according to the Talmud (*Baba Batra* 21a), Joshua ben Gamla had ordained that teachers be appointed to each district and town and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven. In a discussion elsewhere (*Shabbat* 119a) the Talmud gives voice to a series of remarkable statements about education. The world only exists for the sake of the breath of school-children. Children may not interrupt their lessons even for the building of the Temple. Every town in which there are no school-children will be laid desolate.

The tragedy of Jewish life over the last two centuries is that on the one hand Jewish education was the first and greatest casualty of emancipation — Jews seeking to acculturate set a priority on *secular* education above all else — while on the other hand, Jewish education had become doubly important, since Jewish observance could no longer be enforced by communal sanction, and Jewish values were now competing with powerful cultural alternatives.

Ironically the Jewish passion for education has remained. Research into the American Jewish community shows it to be far and away the most highly educated of all ethnic and religious groups. But passion for *Jewish* education is low and falling. Fully one-third of American Jews receive no formal Jewish education whatsoever, and the proportion is rising. We may well have arrived at the stage where the most educated generation in Jewish history is at the same time the most Jewishly illiterate.

The great architects of post-emancipation Orthodoxy fully understood the nature of the challenge, and their most substantial achievement were the educational institutions they created. Samson Raphael Hirsch, newly arrived in Frankfurt, insisted on building a school before constructing a synagogue. It was to become a model for the *Torah im Derekh Eretz* day school, treating girls and boys, Jewish and secular subjects, equally seriously. It was his most successful experiment in his battle against Reform.

To the east, where the strategy for Jewish continuity took the form of opposition to secular culture, a different vehicle was evolved: the modern yeshivah. The pioneers here were R. Moses Sofer (Pressberg) and R. Hayyim of Volozhyn, both in the early nineteenth century. The Jewish day school and the yeshivah have remained the most powerful instrumentalities yet devised for securing Jewish commitment in an open society, as the current strength of Orthodoxy throughout the Jewish world testifies.

The United Synagogue's newly formed Board of Education marks a new phase in Anglo-Jewish educational policy, as do the recent initiatives of the Jewish Educational Development Trust in personnel recruitment and development. But how much do we know about the impact of Jewish education and the relative effectiveness of its various forms? The recent visit of Dr. Alvin Schiff, Executive Vice-President of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, to address educators associated with the United Synagogue, brought home once again the richness of American-Jewish as against Anglo-Jewish research.

Some of those research findings are summarised here. Research is important in all aspects of communal planning, nowhere more so than in Jewish education, in which so much of our communal resource is invested and on which our collective future so heavily depends.

Part-time Jewish education

The Jewish day school is a relatively recent phenomenon in Anglo- and American Jewry. For the first half of the twentieth century, the aspirations of Jewish parents lay in the direction of acculturation and social acceptance. That militated in favour of the state school as the institution that would give Jewish children the experience of social mixing with other groups, and an education in the dominant cultural values. Jewish education was relegated to supplementary schools: part-time classes on Sundays and mid-week after-school instruction.

The pattern has changed dramatically in the last two decades. In Anglo-Jewry in 1967, the part-time system accounted for some seventy per cent of Jewish pupils and the day schools one-quarter. By 1982, day-school enrolment had almost equalled that of part-time classes. In America, between 1962 and 1982, supplementary

school enrolment declined by 58%, while Jewish day school enrolment increased by 95%.

The part-time system is in decline. But it still deserves close attention. Of those children who receive some Jewish education, some half in Britain and seventy per cent in America, will receive it through supplementary classes. Does it achieve results?

The New York Board of Jewish Education recently completed a massive research exercise, under the direction of Alvin Schiff, into just this question. It examined forty supplementary schools and interviewed their principals, teachers, pupils, parents, synagogue lay leaders and rabbis. It conducted classroom observations, examined curricula, tested the Jewish knowledge, involvement and attitudes of almost four thousand pupils within the system, and held post-finding consultations with a series of interested experts. The results are summarised in *Jewish Supplementary Schooling: An Educational System in Need of Change*, published by the Board in June 1987. As the title implies, the findings were devastating.

Attendance was a problem: on one of those days that research was being done, some thirty per cent of pupils were absent. Motivation, too, was difficult to sustain once the children were beyond the age of ten. "Between ages 11 and 13 their goals are to become Bar/Bat Mitzvah and rid themselves of the extraneous burden of supplementary schooling." Parental attitudes were unsupportive. Most parents sent their children to classes to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Beyond that they had few ideas as to what would constitute a good Jewish educational experience. Home life — unobservant in the main — did not cohere with what the children were being taught. The home itself was fraught with its own problems: as many as 40% of children are from broken homes, and up to 30% from families where one parent is not Jewish.

There were problems, too, in maintaining a professional approach to teaching in the part-time system. The research team found teachers lacking in sufficient Jewish knowledge and pedagogic training. They spend few hours within the system (on average, six per week), there is a rapid turnover (most teach for two years or less in the same school), and relatively few have long experience (most are under 35 years old). Being a principal of a part-time school is no longer, as it was in the 50s and 60s, a full-time profession: only 37% of principals now devote themselves to it full-time. The rest have other jobs. They often arrive just before classes begin and leave immediately after they have ended. The interviewed principals expressed their frustration at lack of parental and synagogue support. The entire system, it seems, is becoming de-professionalised.

Two decades ago rabbis were often able to delegate education to other professionals. Necessity has now forced them to become involved in the supplementary system. But research found the rabbis untrained for this role, and often relatively uninterested. Their task is synagogue-centred, so their main concern, like the parents', is that the children perform well at Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The classes are often marginalised in the synagogue's agenda, too. The lay leaders of congregations are not generally members of the education committee, and they tend to see education as a relatively low-priority area.

Testing pupils' Jewish knowledge, involvement and attitudes revealed that they knew significantly less than principals expected. The part-time system seems to do a poor job on all criteria. There is little increase in Jewish knowledge from year to year, and in some cases a

decline. "Pupils in Hebrew school grade six ... know less, are less Jewishly involved, and have less positive attitudes to Jewish life than children in Hebrew school grade five." There is no relationship between the number of classroom hours and the effectiveness of instruction. The one positive finding is that pupils who stay on after Bar/Bat Mitzvah do exhibit progress.

The part-time system is particularly weak on curricula. There is a conflict between, on the one hand, parents, rabbis and lay-leaders who are interested in the children acquiring a narrow range of synagogue skills, and on the other, teachers and principals, who are interested in communicating a much broader base of Jewish knowledge. Hours of classroom contact are low and contracting. In their first six years of instruction, pupils will receive some 540-1260 hours of Jewish education in the part-time system, compared with 4320 hours in the day-school system and 6480 hours of secular education. Also, hours are spent on Jewish studies homework in the day-school but not the part-time system. Much of the time in supplementing schools is spent on non-learning activities. Given the broad scope of principals' educational objectives, the report found them trying to accomplish too much in too little time.

In education, as in everything else, we tend to get what we want. Between the lines of the report is the implication that parents who send their children to the part-time system have low levels of interest and involvement in, and only the vaguest conceptions of, their children's Jewish education. Yet of all factors, parental involvement is probably the most significant determinant of the effectiveness of schooling. "Taken together with the inadequate preparation of synagogue school personnel and their lack of expertise in curriculum development, the lack of parental involvement creates a condition of crisis proportions."

A new approach to the part-time system

An outstanding feature of the report is that it does not stop with the problems: it recommends fundamental changes. It cautions against sudden and wholesale revolution — this too can be destructive — but suggests instead careful experimentation, pilot projects, monitoring, and a continued search for alternative solutions. Nonetheless it sets forth a clear programme of reorientation along four axes.

First, it suggests that the whole educational philosophy of the synagogue should be changed from supplementary education to seeing the synagogue as the context of *Jewish family education*. Instead of targetting education at children, it should be focussed on families. This will involve a re-education of lay-leaders, parents and rabbis into the new philosophy. It will mean organising all the synagogue's professionals — rabbi, cantor, principal, teachers and youth leader — into a 'family education team'. It may involve special programmes to re-train the professionals, and it will certainly mean including family education as an element in the training of rabbis and teachers.

Second, it recommends innovative thinking about ways of increasing educational exposure, co-ordinating formal and informal approaches, and integrating classroom and synagogue, children and parents. Among the report's suggestions are: intensive family education programmes for parents of children aged 5-7 (when parents tend to be most receptive); parallel programmes for parents in Hebrew language and basic Jewish skills; integrating into class curriculum summer educational camping and synagogue youth programmes; eliminating

part of the mid-week programme in favour of regular monthly *Shabbatonim* in which pupils spend the entire weekend in the synagogue, sleeping overnight in sleeping-bags, and sharing Shabbat meals and cultural, religious and recreational activities; training rabbinical students to act as Shabbaton leaders; and making an Israel experience part of Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations or teenage education. Many of these ideas have been tried, with great success, in Anglo-Jewry, and perhaps our greatest need is for the pooling of information between communities and institutions. The report stresses the need for an overall plan which defines essential goals for each year and shapes the curriculum accordingly.

Third, it stresses the need for intensive training and retraining at all levels. Teachers and principals may themselves need to deepen their Jewish knowledge. They need guidance in curriculum development and co-ordinating informal with formal instruction. Principals may need in-service training in instructional supervision and staff development. Synagogue professionals need training as family educators. The report comes down heavily in favour of full-time appointments: at least the principal of the synagogue classes should be full-time, plus one teacher for the first fifty students, and one more for each hundred thereafter. Again it emphasises the need for the rabbi, chazzan and youth director to work with the principal and teachers as a family education team.

Finally it argues for a proper career structure within the system: making as many positions as possible full-time, providing a viable salary structure, adding incentives and time allowances for teachers to increase their Jewish knowledge, training skills and curriculum planning expertise, and establishing a career ladder that rewards long service and excellence.

These are radical proposals, but they are firmly grounded on research, experience and expertise. It would be good to see some of these suggestions experimentally adopted in a segment of the London Jewish community which has had problems with education, with a complete before-and-after analysis made available to other communities, their lay-leaders and rabbis.

National educational research

Some years earlier, in 1984, Alvin Schiff and Chaim Botwinick conducted another fascinating research exercise ('The Relevance of the Recommendations of Major National Studies on Education to Jewish Schooling', *Jewish Education*, Summer 1984). During the early 80s, there was a spate of studies about general educational provisions in America. They resulted in a long series of recommendations for the improvement of the quality of educational experience. Thirty-two of these recommendations were sent as a questionnaire to people involved in Jewish education, both day-school and part-time. They are asked to rank items in a scale of relevance to their particular field. Over a thousand replies (an 80% response) were received, dividing roughly equally between day-and supplementary-school principals, teachers, and parents and lay-leaders in the two sectors. The result provided an unusually clear picture of what those in the field regard as the critical issues confronting Jewish education.

Heading the list by a clear margin were four recommendations relating to increased funding for education and higher salaries for teachers: the 'dollar issues'. Until teachers are paid a salary comparable to

that in other professions, recruitment of talent into education will remain an insoluble problem.

No other issue was considered 'extremely relevant'. Three were considered 'very relevant'. One was improving academic leadership and supervision, a concern particularly stressed by the lay respondents. Research into general education has shown the key role of the head-teacher in maintaining effective schools. The New York Board of Jewish Education has developed a Principals' Centre to improve head-teachers' supervisory and administrative skills, help them think in long-range terms about school development, improve their status and self-image, and extend their inter-personal skills in dealing with teachers, lay-leaders and parents. The other 'very relevant' recommendations were freeing teachers from administrative burdens, and 'devising ways of honouring teachers'.

Under the heading of 'somewhat relevant' came: improving textbooks, teaching study skills, improving pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes, finding better ways of recruiting principals, upgrading curricula, and introducing moral values into classroom teaching. At the other end of the scale, most respondents felt that there was no need to raise graduation requirements or lengthen the school year or school day.

Reflecting on the findings, Alvin Schiff concluded that there were four imperatives to be derived ('Public Education and the Jewish School', *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Summer 1985). The first was that education had simply not been a priority of the organised Jewish community thus far. National interest in education as a whole should be utilised to lift Jewish education to its rightful pace on the communal agenda.

The second relates to the roles of professionals and parents. The message to emerge is: "raise salaries, recognise teacher achievement, reward meritorious performance, elevate the social status of Jewish school personnel, and provide full-time employment with opportunities for professional advancement." If this were done, other opportunities for professionalisation would arise: more rigorous entry requirements, supervised induction, and peer-defined standards of practice. Parents must be made aware, too, that their commitment is a key factor in influencing the effectiveness of their child's educational experience.

The third imperative is to have clear goals. A school succeeds if all those involved in it know exactly what they want to achieve. Schiff stresses that for many Jewish schools transmitting knowledge is not the sole overriding objective. Encouraging children to know how to live Jewishly and to want to do so is equally important. If so, schools should give greater attention to the affective as well as the cognitive domain. They should focus on doing and feeling as well as knowing.

Finally, there must be greater funding for Jewish education. Education must be seen as the community's investment in its own future. It needs greater financial input, from parents, synagogues and communal bodies.

The Anglo-Jewish educational agenda

The American-Jewish community is asking itself tough questions about its future, and about the educational structures needed to secure a new generation of committed Jews. One community – the Orthodox – has virtually guaranteed its future growth by the remarkable success of the day school programme, which began in earnest in the 1940s. Its commitment to the day school is out of all proportion to its numbers. Although Orthodoxy is estimated to represent the



affiliation of only ten per cent of America's Jews, eighty-five per cent of Jewish day-school enrolment is in Orthodox-sponsored schools, with the Conservative movement accounting for a further ten per cent, Reform two per cent, and non-affiliated schools the remaining three per cent.

Part of the success of the Orthodox day school is due to its clear sense of objectives, the strong support given by parents, the intense identification of teachers with the school's philosophy, the time allocated to Jewish studies within the school and the financial sacrifices the community is willing to make — collectively and individually — for Jewish education. The model may not be directly transferable to mainstream Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy, which embraces a vastly wider range of practice and commitment. Indeed, the Kosmin-Waterman survey of Anglo-Jewry (*British Jewry in the Eighties*, Board of Deputies, 1986) highlighted the problematic impact of Jewish secondary schooling on children from non-observant families. Hence the importance of Dr. Schiff's multi-levelled suggestions for incorporating family and informal education as part of a more holistic approach to schooling.

This is surely no temporary swing of the pedagogic roundabout. It marks a return to classic Jewish values. The Torah consistently speaks of the family as an educational context. The Pesach seder is built on this idea. So too is the command of *hak'hel* — surely the prototype of all family education seminars — when men, women and children gathered to hear the king read Torah during Sukkot of the post-*shemittah* year. Rabbinic thought stressed *chinukh* — learning by doing — alongside *talmud torah* — learning by studying. It laid great weight on family support — a role usually attributed by the sages to women — in the learning process. The synagogue, especially on Shabbat, was a centre of continuing education, and the *derashah* was expected to mix aggadah and halakhah, or in today's categories, affective and cognitive components. The best place to pray, said the rabbis, was in a house or study.

Can we incorporate these ideas into Anglo-Jewry? There are many questions to be asked. Can salaries and the status of the teaching profession be raised? Is there an effective career structure? Can our mainstream synagogues undergo the philosophical reorientation needed to turn them from providers of services into loci of family education? Can we undertake the necessary dialogue between synagogue and educational lay-leadership, teaching professionals and rabbis? How do youth groups, adult education and residential retreats fit into the pattern? Is co-ordination possible between the wide variety of competing interest groups in this fragmented field?

American Jewry is vast, almost twenty times the size of Anglo-Jewry. Not everything that is possible there is workable here. Yet in principle, the very compactness of Anglo-Jewry could work to its advantage. Pooling of information, the sharing of successful experiments and collaborative diagnosis of failures, the evolution of community-wide objectives, and a rationalisation of programmes and resources should be possible, without impeding independent initiatives and open debate. We believe that *L'Eylah* itself has a role in this process, and we take this opportunity of inviting teachers, rabbis, lay leaders and parents to share with our readers their experience of educational experiments that have worked, ideas they would like to see tried, or problems they would like to see addressed.

The messages that emerge from recent research and from the Jewish historical experience are that education is the most potent guarantor of Jewish continuity, that Jewish education works best in closely orchestrated harmony with the other key institutions of Jewish life — the home and the synagogue — and that there is no short-cut to its proper resourcing. The question-marks hanging over Diaspora Jewish survival are sufficiently strong to make a coherent, collective, community-wide educational strategy our most immediate priority.