

AN EVALUATION OF THE  
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES  
and  
MIDRASHA INSTITUTE  
in  
PATERSON, NEW JERSEY

June, 1976

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on behalf of the

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## INTRODUCTION

All evaluation, with the possible exception of the limited area of objective testing, involves value judgment, and is therefore, by its very nature, not devoid of some subjectivity. The surveyor, a practitioner in the field of Jewish education, cannot make his judgments and recommendations without falling back on his own educational philosophy and on his preferences in practical matters of implementing a program in Jewish education. These considerations are the only limitations to the objective nature of this survey.

The surveyor was invited by the American Association for Jewish Education to evaluate the school's status, its administrative and managerial apparatus, and, above all, the quality of its educational offerings. The surveyor approached his task with objectivity, fairness and bearing in mind the broad considerations of the overall educational needs of the communities served by the Jewish Federation of North Jersey.

This report will consist of the following parts:

- 1) Description of visits and conferences
- 2)
  - a) General impressions of the school's status
  - b) General impressions of the educational apparatus
- 3) Observations on opportunities for strengthening the RHSJS-MI  
(Regional High School of Jewish Studies and Midrasha Institute)
  - a) Community relations
  - b) Curricular organization, educational policy
  - c) The instructional program
- 4) Summary of recommendations.

1. Description of Visits and Conferences

Prior to my visits in Paterson, Dr. George Rosenthal, Director of the Board of Jewish Education who also functions as the head of the RHSJS-MI, sent me materials dealing with the functioning of the school, specifically: school brochures, a curriculum guide, schedules of classes and other pertinent information. The May 4th visit began with a lengthy conference with Dr. Rosenthal in which the totality of the school's operation was discussed in detail. A dinner meeting was held with the special Ad-Hoc Committee on the self study of the RHSJS-MI. Visits to classes, then in session, followed from 7:00 to 9:00 PM. The visit was concluded with a meeting with faculty (only those instructing on Tuesdays). The May 9th visit was devoted to an overview, with Dr. Rosenthal's assistance, of the school's record-keeping and follow-up machinery, to visits in classes then in session (both high school & Midrasha levels), discussion with some teachers and a meeting with a group of students selected at random by the surveyor.

For June 2nd, the surveyor had conferences arranged for him by Mr. Robert Cohen of the Jewish Federation of North Jersey, with Mr. Schimmel, Principal of Beth Tikvah (Reform), one of the largest feeder schools of RHSJS-MI, with Rabbi Freedman of Barnert Memorial Temple (Reform) and Rabbi David Panitz of the Conservative Temple Emanuel. (A similar conference was held with Mr. Henry Ascher, Principal of Fair Lawn Jewish Center (Conservative) during the visit of May 4.) The surveyor then met with the Ad-Hoc Study Committee for a lengthy open-ended discussion on the school's needs and realities.

2. a) General Impressions of the School's Status

The general impression one forms after visiting the school and conferring with the RHSJS-MI leadership, both lay and professional, is that RHSJS-MI came into existence to meet a real need felt by a significant segment in the Jewish community. Sentiments of dissatisfaction or unhappiness about the educational achievement notwithstanding, only one person interviewed would prefer a return to independent educational efforts on the secondary level by individual congregations. All others, and that includes students as well, see in the RHSJS-MI a necessity. In fact, some leaders interviewed expressed dismay over the fact that only secondary education was being surveyed at a time when there is, according to these leaders, an urgent need to initiate steps for consolidating smaller rapidly declining elementary congregational schools. But, along with the firm conviction of the need for the RHSJS-MI there was also a strong undercurrent of uncertainty about the school's thrust and ultimate goals.

The school, founded in 1972, has presently an enrollment of 215 students . (The September 1975 term opened with 232, a modest attrition considering the situation in the supplementary secondary schools throughout the country.) Of the figure of 215, some 30 students are in the Midrasha Department which enrolls students who are juniors and seniors in their respective public high schools. The feeder schools of RHSJS-MI are congregational schools in the North Jersey area, mostly Conservative and Reform with a small sprinkling of students from Orthodox background. The school's constituency is thus very diverse not only ideologically

but also geographically, socio-economically and, most importantly, in terms of goals and expectations.

Children from Orthodox and Conservative backgrounds enter the school in their 8th grade. Children from Reform congregations join the school in the 9th grade. Students of the latter group, however, must also attend classes in their own temple through their sophomore year in high school. In fact, some of these youngsters are being bused, on Sunday morning, directly from their temple school to the RHSJS-MI. Only some 70 students attend twice a week (Tuesday evening and Sunday morning), all others attend only two hours (somewhat less on Sunday) per week.

A considerable number of youngsters attend RHSJS-MI classes in order to meet their temple-mandated confirmation requirements (grades 9 and 10). While attendance according to records shown to the surveyor by Dr. Rosenthal is good, (between 70-80% of the roster are present on any given school day), the attitude of many of these students, as manifested in work and behavior, leaves much to be desired. This is a source of tension not only to the faculty and administration but to the students themselves.

Despite these facts, the retention rate of the students through the 3rd year of the program is rather good: (50-60% for children from Conservative and Orthodox congregations, 90%+ for youngsters from Reform temples). The leverage of confirmation and the lure of a scholarship grant for a summer in Israel seem to be powerful factors in maintaining a relatively low rate of attrition.

b) General Impressions of the Educational Apparatus

One cannot be unimpressed by the smooth and orderly administrative functioning of the school. Attendance is carefully checked, cuts noted and followed-up, daily lesson plans submitted etc. The Principal is assisted by office aids (Midrasha students).

Course offerings consist of a few mandated courses and a wide array of electives, mostly half-year courses, ranging from Comparative Judaism to sing-alongs. For each course, classes meet only once a week and hence there is little evidence of actual mastery of material. The quality of teaching ranges from very good to very poor. Some classes appeared goal-directed, serious and involved. In other groups the gum chewing, cutting-up indifferent type of a student seemed to prevail. In all instances, however, it is evident that attendance-behavior-work standards are either non-existent or not enforced. Misbehaving students may be removed to the Principal's office but this would seem to be as far as enforcement of decorum will go.

This again is painful to the learning-oriented student who feels frustrated (the students interviewed estimate that 25% of students are learning-oriented) with the program.

Paterson Conservative congregations used to have, in the past, a fairly nice contingent of post Bar/Bat Mitzvah students who would be bused to New York City to attend Prozdor classes, the Seminary's High School Division. Parents are now reluctant to send youngsters to N.Y.C. for reasons of safety, one may

also surmise that there are fewer Prozdor (or Ramah) type graduates of the elementary Hebrew schools these days. In any event, however few in number, this type of student does not find a suitable program in the RHSJS-MI present offerings. This small minority of post Bar/Bat Mitzvah age students seems to have gravitated to the independent Hebrew study program for teen-agers maintained by Rabbi Yudin of the Fair Lawn Orthodox congregation. This is apparently a small but successful program operating outside the RHSJS-MI jurisdiction.

3. Observations on Opportunities for Strengthening the RHSJS-MI

a) Community Relations

Most community leaders, both lay and professional, want the RHSJS-MI to continue as the community-based instrumentality for secondary education. They, understandably, want the RHSJS-MI to be responsive to the particular needs of their congregational (or ideological) constituency. It is recommended that an Educators Advisory Committee consisting of educators and/or rabbis of the main feeder schools be re-established. This body, to be called into being by the Board of Education, should have its input and thus share in the formulation of educational programs of the school. Moreover, these educators and/or rabbis could interpret the RHSJS-MI policies and programs to their respective congregations. The criticism, unjustified to this writer, that programs are unilaterally "imposed" by the Principal would thus be removed.

It is furthermore suggested that a monthly or bi-weekly news bulletin (modest in format, preferably mimeographed) be mailed to the RHSJS-MI parents providing information on all on-going school activities including school policies, standards, expectations etc.

b) Curricular Organization and Educational Policy

The RHSJS-MI came into existence at the height of the student revolt throughout the nation. There was, at the time, a massive cave-in by the finest educational institutions in this country, on matters of standards and curriculum requirements. This factor, coupled with the desire on the part of the RHSJS-MI leadership to maintain a large enrollment, may account for the low priority given to attendance-behavior-work standards. The mood and temper in this country have long since changed and there has been a gradual return to reasonable standards in most institutions of learning. The Board of Education of the RHSJS-MI ought to provide the school administration and the faculty with the kind of policy decisions that would permit the Principal and his teachers to establish a climate of learning in the RHSJS-MI. This may, in extremis, involve the expulsion of a few students. Regrettable as this may be, this step will, in the long run, pay off in educational achievement and general image of the school. These policies should also set standards for graduation, guidelines for student accountability in terms of work as well as reintroduce a system of periodic reporting to parents.

As noted earlier there are diverse elements in the RHSJS-MI constituency. The present curriculum organization with one hour courses weekly seems to cater to the lowest common denominator of the student in terms of interest and attitude. It is strongly recommended that, as much as possible, courses of two sessions weekly be instituted.



c) The Instructional Program

The learning-teaching process involves the student, the teacher and the curriculum (content and organization). Much has been said about the student in the preceding sections. As observed earlier, the quality of teaching varied greatly. Dr. Rosenthal is aware of the problem and, it is my understanding that the weaker teachers will not be returning. In general, it is best that weaker teachers not be retained beyond the initial trial period if they can be replaced.

The curriculum content reflects a serious attempt to give the students courses that are relevant and exciting. The only recommendation I can make is that of effecting a closer articulation with what these youngsters studied in their elementary religious schools. The suggestions of the Educators Advisory Committee will be very helpful in this regard.

It is strongly suggested that the school attempt to offer a Prozdor type program with an emphasis on Hebrew (not necessarily Modern Hebrew Language but certainly the study of selected portions of Humash and/or Mishnah in the Hebrew original with translation).

In this connection, would Rabbi Yudin, perhaps, be amenable to teach his classes within the framework of the RHSJS-MI?

All schools point with pride to the select better groups among their students. These groups vindicate the school's efforts and underscore what can be accomplished with the right student, the good teacher and the fine program. It is

recommended that efforts be made to cultivate and foster classes of the able and willing who may thus become the model on which to build the school's image.

#### 4. Summary of Recommendations

This section merely recapitulates in outline form the various recommendations made in the main body of this report. The reader is urged to refer to the report itself for the rationale and analysis for each recommendation that follows:

- 1) It is recommended that an Educators Advisory Committee consisting of educators and/or rabbis of the main feeder schools of RHSJS-MI be re-established. This committee, a permanent body, should share in the formulation of the educational programs and interpret the school's policies to their respective congregational constituencies.
- 2) It is recommended that a monthly or bi-weekly news bulletin be mailed by the RHSJS-MI to all its parents providing a regular flow of information about the school.
- 3) The Board of Education, in consultation with Dr. Rosenthal, should formulate policies on school standards regarding attendance, behavior and actual performance by students. The policies on these matters must emanate from the Board so that the administration and faculty can implement them in the clear knowledge that they are carrying out Board policy.

- 4) **The school should embark on a serious effort to provide more learning opportunities for the student who is both willing and able.**  
**In this connection it is suggested that**
  - a) **As much as possible courses meet in two weekly sessions rather than one.**
  - b) **A Hebrew Content Program (referred to earlier as a Prozdor-type Program) be given serious consideration.**  
**In this connection the possibility of a joint venture with Rabbi Yudin's independent program should be explored.**
- 5) **The curriculum contents should reflect a closer articulation with the elementary school programs of the feeder schools.**
- 6) **Teachers whose performance and teaching style are below par should be dismissed without delay.**