Current Issues in Israeli Education: II

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In the wake of the recent Israeli elections, Zevulun Hammer of the Mafdal party was appointed Minister of Education. Mr. Hammer has served in this position twice before and brings political experience and a definite educational philosophy to the office. In his previous terms of office, he emphasized concern for Jewish education as a central educational theme, and this was expressed in a variety of ways. He established a Department of Jewish Education in the Ministry for the first time in its history, and formed the Shenhar Commission to study the condition of Jewish education in the general-state school system. In both of these frameworks, Hammer included representatives from the broad Israeli public.

The Department of Jewish Education is staffed by professional educators from the religious and general divisions of the Ministry. This department develops curricula and provides in-service training in Jewish studies to the country's entire teacher corps. In both of these areas, there has been a clear policy of drawing on a wide range of resources and personnel. This includes sub-contracting curricula development and in-service courses to such disparate institutions as Tel Aviv University, Bet Berl (a secular teacher's college), and the Seminary for Judaic Studies (the Masorti-Conservative movement's academic institution.) Materials were developed and introduced to the general school system on the basis of their merit, without regard to the political or religious affiliation of the producer.

The Shenhar Commission also reflected Hammer's broad based-consensus approach to Jewish education. Professor Aliza Shenhar is a secular Israeli Jew and was, at the time of her appointment, the Rector of Haifa University. Members of the commission were drawn from the religious and secular educational communities with an eye to maintaining a fair and representative balance between the two sectors. The fact that the commission did most of its work during the administration of Amnon Rubenstein of the left-wing Meretz party underscores Hammer's balance of commission membership and philosophies.

Zevulun Hammer must be credited with supporting the development of the *Tali* schools (a Hebrew acronym for augmenting Jewish education) within the general-state division of the Education Ministry. They were

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initiated by a group of parents who wanted to give their children aspects of a Jewish education that was non-Orthodox, to include Jewish ritual in the school setting, and to provide a variety of approaches to textual study not available as a curriculum package in either the secular or religious schools. They desired that their children be exposed to traditional commentaries as well as to archeological findings and literary criticism of sacred texts. A home commitment to ritual observances was not required as a criterion for enrollment. (Such a requirement to a halakhic life style is a basic prerequisite for enrollment in the state-religious school system.) In his first two terms of office, Hammer also proved to be attentive and sensitive to the fact that over seventy percent of the Israeli public is in the secular camp, and strove to respond to their needs and feelings. There were always critics who cautioned against creeping Orthodoxy and the curtailment of intellectual freedom but their criticism does not seem justified.

The Education Minister of 1996 has again announced his intention to emphasize Jewish education and Jewish values in his third term of office. He has responded to the controversial issues of the day by declaring that the current school year would stress the teaching of tolerance, democracy and Zionism, and has appointed a special committee to relate specifically to these topics. It is to offer pedagogical recommendations that hopefully will be viewed as a convincing response to the post-Rabin era. Each of the topics in the Hammer proposal is an Israeli code word for a major social issue. Tolerance refers to the unease between ethnic groups, religious and secular camps, right- and left-wing political parties, Orthodox and non-Orthodox constituencies, and Jews and Arabs in Israel. Democracy relates to the tensions between halakhah and civil law. Hammer's Mafdal party has traditionally supported a synthesis of these two world views; Zionism is a masked meaning for emphasizing the state and its place in the lives of the citizenry. This is a response to the claims of a new group of Israelis that we are now in a post-Zionist era, and that Zionism is a provincial and outdated worldview. Tackling these issues head-on is a very complicated task.

Hammer has made Jewish values and culture a priority on his agenda. He told a reporter that he feels that these items are as central to Israel as are French values and culture to France, and hopes to develop curricula that will examine their nature and essence. He also told the interviewer that since he is not the Minister of Religions, he is not responsible for resolving religious problems and can explore Jewish civilization in an open and pluralistic way.

In considering Hammer's past record, it would seem that this newold educational agenda should have met with a warm and positive public response. The contrary has been the case. Hammer's critics have reacted as if he were an unknown person. They place him in the context of the recent Israeli elections as representing the augmented power of the religious parties. His opponents say that democracy is so basic a doctrine of the state that its principles require no clarification and Hammer's purpose is to question certain liberal interpretations of the concept. They also hold that the Minister's concept of tolerance is limited to tolerating different Orthodox groups. Neither of these criticisms seems to be valid, but reflects an inherent bias in Israeli society.

Hammer's promotion of Jewish values is the area that is the most cloudy of his recent proposals. Values clarification became a topic in world-wide education during the 60s and 70s as a result of the work of Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard. Kohlberg contended that values followed a pattern that paralleled cognitive and social development, and we projected the ways teachers could help children at different stages of their young lives to clarify values. What he did not advocate was teaching a specific set of values by which a child was to conduct his/her life. Kohlberg's theory is not what the Minister has in mind. Hammer has said that Jewish values are not only competitive with general humanistic values but are superior to them. He seems to imply that it is only ignorance of these values that have prevented teachers and schools from teaching them. A clear definition of what Hammer means by values is missing. His constant reference to the "Jewish book shelf" as a central "value" equates textual knowledge with values. In other contexts, he refers to ethical and moral behavior as values, while in yet other associations he seems to see ritual observance as central to his value system. This confusion could be the result of an undeveloped conceptual framework, or the use of the word "values" as an all-inclusive tag for broad Jewish knowledge and halakhic behavior.

The humanist opposition to Hammer and his values proposal is based on a very different worldview; namely, that individuals must be free and autonomous to fulfill their potential and that attempts to limit their freedom constitutes a barrier to achieving this goal. It argues that Hammer's commitment to truths that are divine and eternal impel him to promote his worldview as the only correct one, and his value system as the only valid one. This opposition reflects a fundamental difference between the religious and secular communities in Israel. It deserves to be articulated clearly, without invective and insult, as the heart of the basic secular-humanist approach to education. Unfortunately, this profound difference is being expressed by commentators in political terms that do not help Israeli society to face its problems. Zevulun Hammer did not create this problem nor did he go out of his way to exacerbate it.

The Minister of Education is a seasoned politician who has been, and continues to be, a pragmatist. He avoids indoctrination and moves to consensus and agreement whenever possible. However, he is not a philosopher of education who weighs the meaning of every word and phrase. Clarity of

concepts is not a high priority for him, but his general direction and points of emphasis are clear. The secular-humanist camp has a right to present its worldview but it should be done in a clear and cogent way. Its use of slogans and clichés does a disservice to the most serious cultural issue in Israel today. Zevulun Hammer, the political realist, knows that he does not represent the majority culture, and will continue to serve as an activist and positive Minister of Education. However, he must try to be more precise in terminology whenever possible. Perhaps he might make next year's central education theme "an understanding of the philosophies that divide us!"