

## Educational Schisms in Israel

Walter Ackerman

Two days before last Passover's school recess, a small group of demonstrators paraded on the large plaza that fronts the central building of the Ministry of Education in Jerusalem. The demonstration was sponsored by the recently organized National Council for State-General Education in cooperation with the newly established Network for State Humanistic Education; the demonstrators were mainly instructors from teachers' colleges and their colleagues at university schools of education. Though their number would hardly force a government to resign or even to reconsider its policies, the event warranted public attention.

The purpose of the demonstration, as detailed in newspaper advertisements and in flyers distributed at colleges and universities, was to protest the policies — actual, intended, and imagined — of hawkish (Orthodox) Mafdal leader Zevulun Hammer, a former Minister of Education, who was returned to that office following the recent elections. The specific points of concern were: 1) his plan to establish the "Authority for Values Education in State-General Schools,"<sup>1</sup> headed mainly by educators from State-Religious Schools; 2) restrictions placed on the independence and scope of activities of the Ministry's Unit of Education for Democracy and Co-existence, subordinating it to the Authority for Values Education, while eliminating budgets for civic groups engaged in fostering democracy in education; 3) closing university centers for the development of interdisciplinary curricula in Jewish studies, and replacing them with institutes throughout the country for teaching Orthodox Judaism — also under the aegis of the Authority for Values Education; and 4) releasing from National Service 250 young religious Orthodox)<sup>2</sup> women — none of whom had appropriate training, and reassigning them to teach "Judaism" in State-General Schools.

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1. The Hebrew — *Minhal L'hinukh Erki* — is no less forbidding.
2. *Datiot* = Orthodox. Israeli language usage does not acknowledge variant forms of Judaism. One reads or hears only of "Reformim" or "Conservativim."

The points of issue, according to the protesters, were not simply isolated instances of bureaucratic bungling, but rather important signifiers of a calculated retreat from implementing the recommendations of two key educational commissions — the Shenhar Commission, appointed by Hammer himself in 1991 during his previous tenure as Minister to examine the state of Jewish studies in general (non-religious) schools, and the Kremnitzer Commission that was charged with recommending changes in programs for citizenship education. Ever since the last elections, these two commissions have come to symbolize the “struggle” against the perceived “religious coercion” in public education. As is the case in Israel and other countries, schools often serve as useful settings for reducing complicated social problems to easily understood proportions.

The Network for Humanistic Education had begun to organize several months earlier as a voluntary association of individuals and institutions committed to safeguarding the secular character of State-General Schools and fostering humanistic values and traditions that provide the bedrock of their educational milieu. The first public meeting of the Network took place in January 1997 at *Tzavtah*, an auditorium in Tel Aviv associated with self-proclaimed avant-garde cultural events. Materials distributed on that occasion to an audience numbering several hundred participants detailed the assumptions guiding the organization — “...a world-view that melds together a commitment to a universal humanistic culture of moral and scientific values; a rich, open, and variegated Jewish culture; a just and democratic fulfillment of the Zionist vision, together with vigilant attention to equal rights and opportunities for national and religious minorities in Israel....” The hoped-for product of this intent would be “...an autonomous pupil possessed of a critical spirit and an authentic personality.” One is hard put to find a significant difference between these statements and others that have appeared over the years in repeated attempts to define the essential nature of State-General Schools. What was novel was the emphatic secular (i.e., non-religious) nature of the organization.

The drive to achieve an autonomous status for these schools that would render them less vulnerable to the vagaries of election results, and raise their governance to the independent status enjoyed by the State-Religious Schools and the autonomous network of ultra-Orthodox educational institutions, is the far more interesting aspect of the Network’s efforts. While it is unlikely that such a realignment will take place, the very fact of the endeavor is best understood as an example of the current shift in Israel away from highly centralized government planning and practice in the direction of greater freedom for private initiatives and individual preferences. The organizers of the Network can look to the example of the Tali<sup>3</sup> schools — within the State-

3. A Hebrew acronym for Augmented Jewish Studies.

General School System — first established over twenty years ago, as an example of parental activism for meeting particularistic needs and preferences. In contrast to the Network, the recently-organized National Council for State-General Education is intended as an advocacy group, not a body with programmatic prescriptions calculated to counter the activities of the Ministry.

Each of the two organizations stems from a different sector in Israel's educational milieu. The Network originated in teachers colleges; the Council is the initiative of university personnel. This reflects a division of duties in the country's academic institutions that prepare manpower for the public school system: teachers colleges train elementary school teachers, university schools of education train high school teachers, and both provide candidates for positions in junior high schools. The schools of education at universities do not, however, consider teacher training their major task; they gain their status from research activities and in working with graduate students. It remains to be seen whether the alarm raised by the projected Authority for Values Education and other Ministry policies — real and imagined — is threatening enough to general education to continue the differences in self-image, status, and style that divide the two kinds of institutions.

Not everyone who believes that the issue is one of religious 'Orthodox) indoctrination rather than one of teaching Jewish values, applauds the moves of the Network and the Council. The two groups have been accused of elitism, a lack of concern for education in development towns, and total neglect of the Arab school population. The following — as expressed by a journalist in *Ha'Aretz* — is an example: "[The humanists have given up on integration].... Who generally has time to talk about democracy and humanism in school? Those two-thirds of our society who have "made it" and don't have to worry about earning a living. Following the Thatcher model in Great Britain, is the new Network ready to sacrifice the poor one-third so that it can improve the lives of those who don't want trespassers on their turf? .... Why don't they go out to the poor neighborhoods of Netivot ... and try to teach the ... children of the unemployed about democracy, humanism and pluralism?"

#### EL HA'MA'AYAN

On the other side of the street, a family tells its story to readers of *Ma'ayan Ha'Shavuah*.<sup>4</sup>

4. A pamphlet dealing with the Torah portion of the week and related material, prepared and distributed primarily in synagogues by *El Ha'Ma'ayan*, the educational and social-service arm of Shas, the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi religious party.

*"Dear Parents ... Shalom Rav!*

We turn to you dear parents ... in the hope that you will learn from our experience. We sent our precious daughter to the school near our home even though it isn't religious. We thought we could make up at home what the school lacked, namely, tradition and respect for religion. Our daughter soon came home using dirty words and telling horrible stories. We heard about what happens in the higher grades; your ears would ring! And no one cares. In the meantime our son has reached school age."

The letter went on to explain that the family got in touch with an agency of *El Ha'ma'ayan* that specializes in placing children in schools that meet their needs and interests. After a number of meetings with a counselor and school principal, both the daughter and son were enrolled in the recommended schools. The letter concludes: *"We have a new daughter. She is well mannered, honors her parents, and uses respectful language – a [young woman] of refinement and deep faith. Would that all Jewish girls be like her! Our son too has started in the school suggested by the agency and we pray that he will bring us joy and satisfaction. We urge all parents to seek similar advice."*

Four years ago there were 100 pupils enrolled in Shas schools in Tel-Aviv. This year the number stands at nearly 1,100. The sharp increase reflects a country-wide phenomenon: a continued rise in the number of children attending independent religious schools, and a concomitant decline of registration in State-Religious Schools. The educators of *El Ha'Ma'ayan* work primarily in the poorer neighborhoods of Tel-Aviv and other cities and towns. Some attribute their success to the hot lunches, textbooks, and longer school day that *Shas* provides without charge. But one also hears a different explanation: "Most of the parents who send their children to such schools don't mind if their children are somewhat less educated in general studies; the important thing is that they be Jewish."

Public schools around the world are thought of not only as institutions that transmit knowledge and contribute to the development of the skills and competencies required for responsible citizenship, but also as places, particularly in heterogeneous societies, that weave a web of common attachment, loyalties, and meaning, for children who come from widely different backgrounds. Modern Jewish schools, first in Europe, then in Palestine and now in Israel, have not always performed this unifying function. The continuous fragmentation of the state school system, paradoxically legitimized by the State Education Act of 1953, is an extension of "choice" in education; at the same time, it provides an opportunity for transforming differences into bitter antagonisms. □