

# The Dilemma of Jewish Education: To Learn and To Do

ISA ARON and DAVID ELLENSON

JACOB KATZ, IN *TRADITION AND CRISIS*, HAS pointed out that the process of socialization in European Jewish society at the end of the Middle Ages was such that what was taught and learned in the formal classrooms of the community was practiced and believed both in the public institutions of that society and in the Jewish home. Family, synagogue, *heder*, and *yeshivah* combined to present a similar view of the world to community members and each reinforced the system of practice presented by the other.<sup>1</sup> With the onset of the modern world this situation changed. The Jew's life became fragmented. No longer did the public institutions of society support the beliefs and praxis of traditional rabbinic Judaism. Indeed, the Jew, anxious to participate in the life of Western society, often eagerly cast away rites and beliefs of traditional Jewish life which would retard his entry into the contemporary Western world and its institutions. As a result, the Jewish family itself seldom served as a repository for traditional Jewish ideas and behaviors. The unity between public and private spheres which had previously marked European Jewish life had been torn asunder.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of this, many Jews in the Western world still want to affirm their sense of Jewish identity and, in addition, desire to transmit that identity to their children. However, as Judaism came to be localized in the synagogue, the burden of transmitting this identity has largely been placed upon the Jewish religious specialist — i.e., the Jewish educator. The educator's task in the modern Jewish world is thus a staggering one, for he/she often labors without the support system which existed in pre-modern Jewish society.

In this paper, we would like to reflect upon the nature and dimensions of this dilemma by considering a responsum written by Rabbi David Hoffmann (1843-1921) of Berlin, the leading Orthodox rabbinical authority in Germany during his era.<sup>3</sup> It illustrates the complex nature of

1. Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1961), pp. 183-198.

2. For an excellent account of the impact of modernization on Jewish life in the West, see Joseph L. Blau, *Modern Varieties of Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 24-25.

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the challenge confronting the Jewish educator in the modern period and addresses the related and knotty issue of Jewish identity. We will consider Hoffmann's understanding of these issues, describe his solutions to these problems, and, finally, in light of his comments, we will examine the tasks and goals of Jewish education in the contemporary period.

## I

In the case which came before Hoffmann, a rabbi asked what should be done about a nine year old boy — who had a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father — whose father desired that the boy learn about Judaism during the hours assigned to religious instruction in the German school system of the early twentieth century. The boy, the rabbi noted, was uncircumcised and the non-Jewish head of the school informed the rabbi that the boy was *konfessionslos* (without religion). However, the father wanted the boy to learn about Judaism rather than Christianity during the four hours a week that were designated for religious instruction. The rabbi, who was also the teacher of this class on the Jewish religion, told Hoffmann that he was unsure as to what to do with the boy. Was it desirable to convert such a youngster to Judaism, for he would certainly be non-observant. On the other hand, if he refused to teach the boy, the father might leave the community or might cause an argument to ensue. Therefore, the rabbi wanted to know, "What, according to the religion, should I do?"

Hoffmann replied by stating that the rabbi was correct in not wanting to convert the boy. No benefit, Hoffmann felt, could accrue to the community by converting such a child to Judaism. However, he realized that such a stance did not resolve the issue. For, Hoffmann continued, should Jewish knowledge be imparted to this boy? The question, he admitted, was a complex one. On the one hand, *Hagigah* 13a forbade the teaching of Torah to a gentile. On the other hand, examples abounded in Jewish history where sages of Israel had taught Torah to non-Jews. Hoffmann contended, though, that in the latter case the rabbis had done so only in instances where it would ultimately benefit the community of Israel. Otherwise, it was never done. Thus, he felt that if the father could be dissuaded from sending his son for such Jewish religious instruction, "Behold, it is good." The rest of Hoffmann's responsum reveals his reasoning on this matter.

The Torah of Israel (he wrote), is not only a song and rhetoric which one studies only to understand the religion of Israel. Rather, the purpose of Jewish religious learning is *lilmod v'laasot*, to study and to observe, and one who learns and does not observe, it would be better if he had not learned.

In other words, Hoffmann maintained that Jewish religious study has praxis as its ultimate goal. To study about Judaism, without intending to

3. David Hoffman, *Melammed L'Ho-il* (New York: 1954), *Yoreh Deah*, no. 77

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practice it, was, for him, a perversion of Jewish religious learning. Thus, the father should be asked to remove his son from the class, as the boy certainly would not practice the laws that he would be taught in the school.

However, if the father refused to do so, Hoffmann said that there was another way. It was permissible for a gentile to study the seven Noahide laws which forbade idolatry, incest, murder, tearing a limb from a living animal, robbery, and the profanation of God's Name. In addition, they called for the establishment of courts of justice in society. All of these commandments were seen by Jewish tradition as having been commanded by God to all humanity. Precisely because all humanity was obligated to observe them, Hoffman felt that it was permissible, in this case, for the boy to learn them along with the other children. In other words, Hoffmann was totally consistent in his notion that religious learning involved both study and deed. As the child was obligated to perform these seven commandments from God, there was no violation of the dictum of *lilmod v'laasot* which characterized Jewish religious learning. In addition, Hoffmann believed that it was possible to teach this child selections from the Prophets and the Writings, as well as narratives in the Torah which warn against idolatry, for all of these would aid the lad in fulfilling the first of the Noahide precepts, as they would teach him about the wonders of God. Thus, in a practical vein, Hoffmann suggested that two hours a week be devoted to instruction of this type and two hours to instruction in Jewish ritual law which the boy was not required to observe. He could attend the first two hours, which he would be expected to obey, and be excused from the latter two, which would be "of no benefit to him." Hoffmann stated that if the father were not satisfied with such an arrangement, then the rabbi, assuming that he had the power, should simply remove the boy from the class.

Hoffmann's particular ruling in this case aside, it is crucial to note the larger implication which can be drawn from this ruling. As noted above, the ties between family and community which had marked the Jewish world in the pre-modern era had been torn asunder. Hoffmann was saying, in effect, that such a situation was to be lamented, but his own recommendation was that if what was taught in the school was going to be ignored at home, then it would be best not to attempt to educate the child at all. While we might disagree as to whether it might be desirable — in spite of the child's *halakhic* identity as a non-Jew — to educate him as a Jew, Hoffmann's larger point is the crucial one in this context. Should the teacher have the burden of attempting to instill Jewish knowledge and identity in a child when such efforts would probably be ineffective because of a lack of support in the home and the community? In viewing the tasks and goals of Jewish education, Hoffmann obviously felt that the answer was no. The remainder of his responsum makes this point clear.

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Hoffmann wrote, "is not taught for the sake of knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) alone, but in order to do." Thus, if one who does not perform or is not obligated to perform these teachings is taught in such a setting, then "it is a profanation of God's Name and of the Jewish religion." Furthermore, Hoffmann observed that Christians would not want their religion taught in such a manner in their school for they, too, he believed, would object to Christianity being taught in a religious setting to one who intended to learn about it only for the sake of knowledge. Rather, in a religious setting, the purpose of religious instruction, for a Christian, is to impart Christian faith and practice. Here, then, Hoffmann makes his point as explicit as possible. Religious education is not *Wissenschaft*, i.e., it is not knowledge for knowledge's sake. Such a method is entirely appropriate to the university setting. It is not appropriate to the religious one, where the teacher must realistically take account of the praxis that is likely to evolve from his/her teachings. Furthermore, the implication is that if such praxis is not likely to emerge, then he/she is not obligated to, and, indeed, ought not, teach what will not be practiced.

## II

As liberal Jews involved in many aspects of Jewish education, as faculty members with responsibility for the training of Jewish professionals, as creators of educational programs for children and adults and, not in the least, as parents, we find Hoffmann's responsum provocative and illuminating well beyond the particular case of a child born to a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father. Although Hoffmann himself did not refer to Jewish children, his statement that "one who learns and does not observe, it would be better if he had not learned" poses a challenge to us in every one of our roles. For all but the most stringent and insular of Orthodox Jews, there is a disparity between the teachings of the tradition and our observance of that tradition. Though Jews may differ greatly regarding their particular practices, there are few American Jews (indeed, few contemporary Jews) who have not compromised some of the traditional *halakhah* for the sake of the exigencies of the modern world. Thus, for most of us, Hoffmann's injunction that *lilmod* is only for the sake of *laasot* poses a dilemma: how do we deal with those aspects of the tradition that we do not practice? For those of us who are teachers and educators of other people's children the problem is compounded: how do we teach Jewish values and norms to an audience which is likely to disregard or reject them? Should we accept Hoffmann's principle and refuse to teach children whose parents have no intention of practicing the traditions that we will be teaching?

For the individual Jew there exist a number of different methods for adjudicating between the demands of tradition and the facts of contemporary life; all of modern Jewish thought is, essentially, an attempt to respond to this central problem, which has faced Jews since their emanci-

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pation. Indeed, Franz Rosenzweig, in his opening address at the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus* in 1921, observed that Jewish study in the modern period had to begin with where the individual Jew was — at the periphery of Jewish life — and bring him back toward the center. Thus, Rosenzweig produced a system of Jewish thought which taught that the process of God's revelation to the Jewish people was a dynamic one which necessitated an encounter with Jewish sources and history. Nevertheless, as a modern, he insisted that the task of the Jew was to transform Law — which he understood as being impersonal and static — into commandment, which he saw as a personal address by God to the individual Jew as well as to the Jewish community. In this way, individual autonomy — a modern concept — could be retained while yet maintaining a sense of commitment to both the tradition and the community.

Rosenzweig's solution to the problem that modernity presents to Jews and Judaism is echoed in style, if not in content, by all of the major philosophers of modern Jewish thought — from Mordecai Kaplan's rationalistic Reconstructionism at one end to Joseph Soloveitchik's and David Hartman's existential Orthodoxy at the other. All of these persons, as well as others not mentioned here, have responded from an essentially personal perspective to the challenges that modernity has presented to our people and our religion.

The endurance of the writings of these thinkers and the following that they have attracted is evidence of the fact that their proposed solutions have, at least partially, met the needs of some contemporary Jews. However, due to the compartmentalized and individuated nature of the modern world, these solutions work only for individuals and for very cohesive groups. Modern Jewish thought cannot entirely transcend its autobiographical origins. Its strength comes, indeed, from the fact that it grows out of each individual thinker's personal situation and represents the attempt to resolve that personal dilemma. Thus, it is entirely possible that a certain philosophy will have deep resonance for some, while it will leave others indifferent. An answer which is satisfactory to one person may not be so at all to a spouse, children, friends or neighbors.

*Al ahat khamah v'khamah* (how much the more so) in the case of one who teaches other people's children. However a teacher may have resolved his or her own individual conflicts, it cannot be expected that this resolution will satisfy others, especially when the people in question live in very different circumstances and hold different values.

Some recent research in Jewish education has confirmed what many have long suspected: that the values of the majority of students in religious schools are somewhat dissonant with those of their teachers and are in outright conflict with what is taught in the curriculum. *What was presented to Hoffmann as an isolated incident has become the norm in most Jewish schools, not because the children's mothers are not Jewish (although this, too, hap-*

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5. Ibid., p.



*pens often enough), but because both parents, although Jewish by birth, have only a minimal commitment to living Jewish lives.*

David Schoem, a sociologist who undertook a participant observation study of the afternoon religious school of a suburban Conservative congregation, found that, for the majority of the parents of the school, "their Jewishness, particularly in terms of behavior, was a facet of life that was increasingly less time consuming and kept distinctively separate from their normative routine."

Parents who claimed to observe Jewish holidays, it was found upon further elaboration, often did not attend services, did not have special meals, did not light candles, or do any *action* that could be described as "observing." Observed attendance at Friday night and Saturday morning services showed that gathering the required minimum of ten people was not to be taken for granted except for special events such as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or a school presentation.<sup>4</sup>

In situations such as the one described by Schoem, the educator must confront directly the issue raised by Hoffmann's responsum: Is it possible that it is better not to learn at all than to learn and not to observe? Interestingly, the apparent answer of individual educators and of the institutions in which they teach, does not differ according to religious ideology or affiliation with a particular movement. Based upon our own (admittedly impressionistic) observations, it would seem that the majority of Jewish schools, be they Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, do not abide by Hoffmann's dictum. Although they have ample evidence of the foreignness to their students of the concepts, norms and practices that they are teaching, they seem to ignore this fact. Schoem cites the following example:

In what was a typical classroom lesson, a seventh grade teacher asked the students to describe in what ways the Sabbath differed from the other days of the week. In response to a student's answer that "on the Sabbath we pray," the teacher said, "But you pray every day." In this case not only was the teacher's response completely detached from reality, but the student who answered was also speaking in theoretical terms. Many of the students in the class had not been to a prayer service on the Sabbath for up to six months or more. When the teacher, who managed a restaurant on Friday evenings, then began to speak about "why don't we work on the Sabbath" students giggled incredulously because of the question's absurdity. Clearly, this lesson that was being discussed in first person terms, was, in the students' minds, about a people that was far removed from their own reality.<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that the students in the school studied by Schoem found their Jewish education irrelevant.

The students learned that while being Jewish had some value and held some importance, certainly enough for their parents to be willing to fight

4. David Schoem, *Ethnic Survival in America: An Ethnography of a Jewish Afternoon School* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, UC Berkeley: 1974), pp. 61-62.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

with them every week to attend, their experience at the school told them that its value relative to other activities and institutions, etc. was not so great. As such, they knew that Shalom school was important enough to attend, but not important enough to take seriously.<sup>6</sup>

Related to, but still separable from, a principled objection to teaching Judaism to those who have no intention of practicing it, there is a pragmatic question of whether Judaic instruction under such circumstances will have any effect. In the field of secular education there is a substantive body of research which demonstrates that, when the values of school conflict with those of home, students will, by and large, adopt the values and attitudes of their parents.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the small amount of empirical evidence available to us in the field of Jewish education is consistent with this finding:<sup>8</sup> in a conflict between the home and the school, the school rarely wins.<sup>9</sup>

One possible exception to this generalization is worth noting, because of its significance in both the Conservative and Reform movements, and this is the potential influence of the camping experience on adolescents. The philosophy of several Jewish camps has been to create for the camper a self-contained environment which is entirely Jewish and explicitly in conflict with that of the camper's home. The hope, in this case, is that once the adolescent begins to question his or her parents and to rebel against their life style, Judaism, as practiced at camp, will serve as an attractive alternative. There has been considerable speculation as to how frequently such "Jewish rebellion" has actually occurred. Certainly everyone knows individuals whose lives and values were, in fact, changed by the camp experience; the rabbinical schools of both the Reform and Conservative movements are filled with such people. What is, as yet, unknown is how the majority of campers were influenced by their experience. A longitudinal study of Camp Ramah is currently being planned and should provide some very useful information on this question.

With respect to religious schools and, in some measure, day schools

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

7. For example, see the work of James Coleman, et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: 1966), and Harmon Ziegler and Wayne Peak, "The Political Functions of the Education System," *Sociology of Education* 43 (1970): 115-142.

8. See Steven Martin Cohen, "The Impact of Jewish Education on Religious Identification and Practice," *Jewish Social Studies* 36 (1974): 316-326; Geoffrey E. Bok, *The Jewish Schooling of American Jews: A Study of Non-Cognitive Educational Effects* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Harvard University, 1976); and Harold S. Himmelfarb, *The Impact of Religious Schooling: The Effects of Jewish Education on Adult Religious Involvement* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: University of Chicago, 1974).

9. As Robert Gordis has pointed out to us, there are always exceptional cases. There are some children whose elementary Jewish schooling is a positive enough influence to outweigh their non-observant family environment. Without minimizing either the importance of these cases, or the obligation of the school to provide these children with information necessary for functioning as observant Jewish adults, we feel it would be unwise for a school to base its policies on such exceptions.

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as well, it seems clear that ignoring the conflict between the home and the school is not a productive strategy. What alternatives remain? What solutions have various educators tried? Some have taken an approach which is an extension of Hoffmann's dictum and have made parental involvement and support a prerequisite for the students' enrollment in the school or, at least, in certain special programs. Among these are the Havurah School in New York City and, also, some religious schools which are otherwise more traditional. At the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York City, for example, students may celebrate their Bar/Bat Mitzvah only if one of their parents attends class with them. Programs and schools of this sort are too new and too few for us to know if, in the long run, their students will live more Jewishly than their counterparts in other schools. The impressionistic evidence at this stage seems to be that both children and parents at these schools take their Jewish education more seriously and that some parents have, at least temporarily, incorporated Jewish practices into their homes. It must be pointed out, however, that this can hardly serve as a remedy for the majority of the student population. If all Jewish education were established on this basis it is likely that many parents would be unwilling to participate and that many children would, therefore, be excluded.

At the other end of the spectrum lie those schools which have tailored their curricula to be more consonant with the values of the parents. Examples of such schools are the Yiddish *folk-shules* of 30 or more years ago, which stripped traditional Jewish celebrations such as Pesah and Yom Kippur of some of their ritual practices and transformed them into socialist celebrations of values such as freedom and justice. Today there exist schools which, on a less principled basis, have down-played certain rituals and certain thorny and particularistic subjects and have focussed their curricula on universalist ethical principles and on the arts. Here again, our evidence as to the success of these schools is only impressionistic, but it does seem as though their students enjoy classes more and do not perceive them as totally alien and irrelevant. The problem with this approach, of course, is that in the process of tailoring the curriculum to the mores of the times, some of the most basic and timeless elements of our tradition are left out. If all Jewish schools were to develop along these lines, it would not be long before their various students would cease to notice any unifying features that would make them all Jewish.

In between the two extremes, of denying instruction without parental involvement, on the one hand, and expunging those parts of the traditional curriculum with which parents are uncomfortable, on the other, lies a rather large and empty territory, the exploration of which is only just beginning. Clearly, parents must be encouraged, though perhaps not coerced, to become involved with the school; clearly, they must be educated themselves so they can deepen their own Judaic knowledge. Conversely, the Jewish tradition must be presented to students in such a

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The task before the Jewish educator is one of entirely new dimensions. Rather than merely being a conduit for traditional knowledge and values, he or she must become an agent of change. The successful educator must serve as an advocate for, and facilitator of, the Jewish involvement of the parents and as an interpreter and transmitter of contemporary Jewish thought. And those of us who are in ancillary positions of support must move beyond bemoaning the sad state of Jewish education to creatively exploring the ways in which we may help ease the educator's burden.

## *Stratagem*

EDMUND PENNANT

As scientists disintegrate germs  
with ultrasonic machines  
to use as antitoxins

so too, the Holocaust  
may be disintegrated and injected  
subtly into all of us. Then  
the particles would provoke  
a healing fever of forgetfulness.

It is against this reaction  
we must strike out, lest immunity  
prevent us from early alert  
to the next cholera of hate.

How strike out? With the elegant  
weapons of art, enabling us  
to learn by heart  
that death which is death  
to forget.

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EDMUND PENNANT *teaches part-time at Adelphi University.*

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