

DISCUSSION: JEWISH EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY *

by EZEKIEL PEARLMAN

*Director of Fund Distribution, Federation of Jewish Agencies of
Greater Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

IN his remarkable, vital paper, Dr. Kaplan tried to synthesize a lifetime of experience in Jewish education. Dr. Kaplan is quite right when he observes the uneasiness in the area of Jewish education, for many in communal service share a malaise and air of uncertainty. A generation ago, the problem was simply arithmetic, for the field had not yet succeeded in enrolling the mass numbers of today. Now that we have the numbers—and *Kain Yirbu*—we don't quite know how to serve them most effectively. A generation ago, most federations were removed from the problem and while they were not hostile, neither could federations then be regarded as warm advocates of Jewish education. Today a new climate is evident and federation sponsorship of Jewish education is bigger than a cloud the size of a man's hand, but at the same time it is doubtful that most federations are truly zealots in this area.

The federation movement has been eminently successful in moulding local health and welfare services into a comprehensible entity which by and large is acceptable to the Jewish community, to the United Funds and Chests, to the agencies and to public sources, federal, state and local. Duplication in local

health and welfare services is virtually non-existent and the battles of yesteryear on merger and consolidation are behind us. Latterly the field of Jewish education is receiving more attention from Jewish federations—strong or weak though it may be from city to city—and we do not quite know what to do with this new *enfant terrible*. Under the umbrella of *K'lal Yisroel* the educators appear to be envious of what was accomplished for social welfare services and they would like federations to apply themselves with the same zeal and energy in moulding local Jewish education into one harmonious whole so that the constant cry of fragmentation should also be a memory of yesteryear. The objective may be laudable but it is not consistent with the pattern of Jewish life in the United States.

Jewish educators appear to stress the parallels with the field of social welfare and feel that what was possible for the one should theoretically be possible for the other. The differences, however, are swept under the rug. Federations on the other hand cannot sweep away ideological differences. On the contrary we accept and try to work cooperatively with them. Historically, the "Daughters of Our Helping Hands" in its broadest sense became the Jewish family service agencies of today and the differences of a generation ago were primarily

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Philadelphia, May 31, 1965.

social, not ideological. The same is true for the foster home, juvenile aid and orphanages which became "Associations for Jewish Child Care." This is not to suggest that such mergers were easy or natural. They had to be fought for out of a deep sense of conviction. But at no time were the issues then ideological.

Jewish education in America presents the federations, perhaps for the first time, with issues which are deeply and consciously ideological. If federations were to attempt to merge or consolidate ideologically separated sectors, they could quickly be torn apart with conflicts which are beyond the capacity of any one federation. In Jewish education, federations accept fragmentation as a reality and we are indebted to Dr. Kaplan for his clear acceptance of the same. The concept of *Ichud* for Jewish education in America is an impossible one so long as we affirm a pluralistic society. Tradition dictates that the whole of the law, the written and oral, stems from Sinai and while the words have remained inviolate, the meanings and interpretations are in a constant state of evolving. Is there any doubt that the *Shema* had different meaning to a Hillel, a Maimonides, or a Buber? In this space age the wonderment about the Father of us all is stretching our concepts to limits which would have been unthinkable to the editors of the *Mishna* and *Gemara*. It would appear that those educators who stress federation centrality for Jewish education may have overlooked the admonition of knowing whence we came and where we are heading.

There are among us many who long for the Talmud Torah of our youth and some lament the congregational development of more recent decades. With few exceptions, notably Detroit and Minneapolis, and perhaps one or two other places, the Talmud Torah movement, which in its finest sense was truly a com-

munity school, is fast becoming vestigial. Despite the dramatic change of circumstances there is room for doubt whether education under congregational auspices is as rich, as meaningful and as influential as we would like it to be. Whether children are subject to three- or six-year rules for Bar Mitzvah, and despite the large numbers of pupils, there is still doubt about the effectiveness of Jewish education under congregational auspices. The vapidness of such education has been noted by our previous speaker. For the moment, until better instruments and concepts have been devised, the best we can do through our local federations and bureaus is to provide expert consultation to all congregational schools in the hope that standards may be raised, that teachers be taught how to teach, that content become more meaningful. Is this enough? Clearly the answer is "no!"

Research unquestionably can be helpful but there is pitifully little of it. Secular education is notably in a state of ferment and there is a reason to believe that out of this bubbling of ideas a new and better vintage will be forthcoming. Jewish education is not similarly affected. It seems strange that not even one percent of annual expenditures which are in excess of 65 or 70 million dollars can be set aside for research.

It has been said that the congregational curriculum is a much watered-down version of that of the Talmud Torah, but under denominational auspices. Hebrew, for example, is taught in practically all congregational schools but on a less intensive basis. A Talmud Torah product of a generation ago could *daven* with *Kavohnoh*, but with few exceptions, the products of congregational schools struggle to keep pace at an adult service. A Talmud Torah product could read and understand the simpler poems of Bialik and he could follow a short story of Peretz; not so with the congregational pupil who terminates his Jew-

ish education at the traditional thirteenth year. What then may be tried to avoid the shallowness of much of our teaching?

A review of congregational curricula would show undue emphasis on the rudiments of Hebrew. A fair ability to follow the prayer, an abbreviated Hebrew version of several chapters in Genesis, a hazy understanding of Jewish history, and the ability to perform well on the Bar Mitzvah day is not an atypical result.

Dr. Solomon Grayzel, in a recent address before the Philadelphia Committee on Jewish Education, suggested that the time perhaps has come to develop parallel Jewish schools: one for the Hebraically gifted, and the other for those who have language difficulties. At the latter type of congregational class, in the absence of Hebrew emphasis, much could be done Judaically through English texts with translations from the original. To give some illustrations: Our children are taught to revere the Talmud as a sacred text, but since they know nothing of its content, how can they truly revere something of which there is no understanding? If a twelve-year-old in an all-day school can be exposed to a tract of the Talmud, thousands more can have somewhat the same experience in using the Soncino text. If it is important to understand our past experiences—and in my view the whole of Jewish experience is relevant—it is more sound to expose a class to "Tevye's Daughters" for a fuller understanding of life in Eastern Europe than just a chapter or two on the shtetl in a history text. In a similar vein it is not educationally sound to expose a child to the felicitous translations of Judah Ha-Levi by Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen, rather than have our children totally ignorant of the man and his era? Enough has been cited to show how exciting this may be. The time has perhaps come when Jewish educators should

boldly experiment with this approach in the hope that through such schools we can truly bring our Jewish children to the love of Torah and through study in depth and understanding, more of them may be impelled then to study the texts in the original. I have reason to believe that if Jewish education can present federations with bold new exciting experiments, its appeal may fall on receptive ears. Adult Jewish education has long since accepted this approach and it is time for Jewish educators to develop a comparable educationally sound graded curriculum along these lines for children.

One of the main emphases by Dr. Kaplan is on the need for focussing on the related areas of secondary, collegiate and adult Jewish education, with a decreasing emphasis on the elementary level. The congregational schools are now preeminent in their respective roles for elementary Jewish education. We should accept this situation, and as noted, federations and bureaus can be helpful on this level through the consultation process. More significantly, in Philadelphia, as elsewhere, the emphasis is shifting to the collegiate, secondary programs at Gratz College, regional high schools which are geographically located in centers of Jewish population, and the barest beginnings of consultation and programming for adult Jewish education. In the larger cities, in particular, such an emphasis appears to make sense, for as more and more of our youth become college-bound, they will be attracted to a Jewish collegiate program which is both imaginatively designed and intellectually rewarding. While Dr. Kaplan sketched a broad framework, he deliberately did not touch on many of the specifics of such a program. One such ingredient is the manner in which the organized community, through the federation or bureau, can relate to the congregational ideological systems. The

Philadelphia device of subventing regional high schools through Gratz College may or may not be valid for others: what is significant is that there must be a cooperative educational relationship between a central body for Jewish education and the organized congregations. Another ingredient relates to financing: secondary and collegiate training is expensive, and development if this is to be the main thrust can only come slowly. The average annual cost for congregational elementary training approximates \$110 per pupil whereas that for regional high school is \$150 or more; and as for the collegiate level the annual cost per capita may well range from \$600 to \$1,000. The housing of such programs also is a costly factor which cannot be minimized. For example, the Gratz College cost including land, building and equipment approximated one million dollars and while the building is but three years old, we already face expansion requirements costing at least another half-million dollars. Planning along the lines suggested therefore inevitably must take into consideration the ability to begin and to maintain the facility.

Finally in spelling out these new emphases it will be necessary to re-evaluate the roles of central bureaus of Jewish education. In some cities a bureau may well be the sponsor of a college of Jewish studies; in others, it may be more desirable to provide for an independent

college and an independent bureau; in still others it may be desirable, as in Philadelphia, to place major emphasis on the college and develop bureau services as a part of a network of educational services sponsored by a college. In the past, central bureaus may have served their function well and ably and we have reached the point where we take bureaus for granted. In the light of evolving circumstances which Jewish education faces in America, there can be no sacred cows and we should not hesitate to take another look at central bureaus to determine whether they are the best instruments we can devise to serve our growing educational needs. In the main federations will have to assume not only fiscal responsibility for education, but planning responsibility as well—just as they traditionally do for the welfare field. The bureaus have heretofore been somewhat of a buffer between federations and educational agencies, with some planning for education being delegated to local bureaus. If more educational planning is to be shifted to the federations, the planning role of bureaus will have to be re-examined. If this calls for change, we should not hesitate to meet old problems with new and better tools. The new is not always necessarily better, but in view of the malaise which faces Jewish education, the time has come to forge new paths and new directions.