Mountain High, Valley Low: The State of Jewish Education Today

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FOR THE PAST several years, American Jews have found themselves at the center of an intriguing academic and, at times, popular debate. Arrayed on one side are a variety of distinguished observers, domestic and foreign (often Israeli), who point to declining birthrates, rising intermarriage, eroding affiliation and observance, and a host of other demographic and social variables to demonstrate that the American Jewish community is in serious decline. On the other side, an equally impressive group of researchers points to American Jewry's continuing social cohesion, comfortable place in the mainstream of American life, persisting manifestations of Jewish commitment, and sparks of cultural and religious creativity as indicators of the basic good health of the Jewish community.

Surprisingly, Jewish education has received relatively little attention in this debate. The state of Jewish education in America has rarely been cited as proof either of American Jewry's ongoing vitality (the community does, after all, maintain an enormous voluntary, private, ethno-religious educational system) or of its spiraling decline (Jewish education is rarely—at least according to conventional wisdom—seen as a particularly effective or attractive enterprise).

Yet it would seem almost axiomatic that the state of Jewish education relates to the larger debate. Jewish education reflects and helps shape the quality of Jewish life. Jewish education is profoundly affected by broad trends in American Jewish life. If Jewish education is indeed not especially healthy today, does this not say something important about the social and communal setting in which it re-

sides? If education is prospering, would that not be evidence of an underlying stability and vitality? Also, Jewish education affects the quality of Jewish life through what it does and how well it does it. In American Jewish life today, Jewish education is presented and organized as a tool for enhancing Jewish identification and commitment. If Jewish education is in fact "failing," such failure adds authority to the case of those who are pessimistic about prospects for long-term American Jewish survival. If it is "succeeding," then the case for Jewish continuity—perhaps even a Jewish renaissance—in America becomes more persuasive.

I will not attempt to address directly the large questions of the present condition and future fate of American Jewry. I will, however, examine the state of American Jewish education, both as a reflection of the kind of community we are today and as a force which will necessarily play a role in shaping the community of tomorrow. Such an approach may suggest how Jewish education has come to be what it is, and what we may legitimately expect from and for it in the years ahead.

Thirty years ago, in a study conducted by the American Association for Jewish Education, Jewish education was described as being like a river "a mile wide and an inch deep." Today, I would suggest another geographic (or perhaps geological) metaphor: Jewish education is a landscape of high mountains and low valleys. That is, the state of Jewish education is complex, confusing, at times contradictory. (This may indeed be why Jewish education does not figure prominently in the current debate on the American Jewish condition.) There are notable "peaks"—indicators of success and achievement—and clearly visible "depressions"—signs of deep trouble and future problems.

What are some of the "peaks," the high points on the Jewish educational landscape? First, American Jewry invests enormously in Jewish education. Today, we spend close to three quarters of a billion dollars on Jewish education in all of its forms and all of its settings, from early childhood through senior adult. Jewish education is proclaimed nearly universally as a communal priority of unchallenged importance, an assertion that is backed up with financial resources. Federations, the "public treasury" of the Jewish community, now channel close to 30 percent of their local allocations, totalling over $60 million, to Jewish education, more than double the amount that was allocated a decade ago.

Second, recent community studies indicate that Jewish education

does reach a substantial portion of our youth. Between 70 and 80 percent of all Jewish young people will receive some Jewish education before they reach adulthood. Given the entirely voluntary character of the educational system, this is not an inconsiderable achievement.

Third, more young people are receiving an "intensive" Jewish education in Jewish day schools than ever before. It is estimated that there are now over 100,000 children in these schools, constituting 28 percent of all those currently enrolled in Jewish educational programs. This is an unprecedented figure for an American Jewish community which only a few decades ago was highly ambivalent (at best) toward Jewish "parochial" education. Today, even the Reform movement is on record as supporting day school education, and in fact sponsors ten day schools of its own.

Fourth, and in some ways related to this development, is the decline of the one-day-a-week Sunday school. Today, the Sunday school is giving way to multisession-per-week programs, which means that the average number of hours per week for those at the less intensive end of the spectrum of educational options is rising.

Fifth, the phenomenon of expanding Jewish educational opportunities has come to embrace Jewish preschools and early childhood programs. This may in fact be the single most rapid growth area in Jewish education. Existing nursery and day care programs under Jewish auspices are focusing new attention on the Jewish content of their activities, and new programs are being developed in response to growing demand for quality child care and pre-elementary school education.

At the other end of the educational life cycle, we are seeing a sixth significant development: innovations in adult Jewish education which extend its reach and impact. These innovations range from new programs for developing Jewish cultural literacy among the marginally affiliated, to intensive Jewish educational programming for community leaders. Scholar-in-residence programs at Jewish community centers (or indeed in whole communities), Jewish elderhostels, adult retreat programs, day-long text-study institutes, classes held in law offices, brokerage houses, and hospitals, Hebrew language ulpanim, all prove that adult Jewish education is now far more than a smattering of classes and a few lecture series.

Seventh, educators are using Israel as an educational resource far more widely and effectively than in the past. A recent study has shown that more than 40,000 Jewish young people from North

America participate each year in short- or long-term educational experiences in Israel. Perhaps equally important, there are plans to expand these numbers, reach out to new target groups, and upgrade the educational quality of the programs as well as the pre- and post-trip programming which should (but often does not) accompany them. Today, the Israel experience is regarded as among the most successful educational tools in our arsenal—an experience that reaches thousands of young people of high school and college age who might otherwise have no Jewish education at all.

An eighth "peak" on the Jewish educational landscape today is the entrance of Jewish community centers into the Jewish educational arena. Although concern for the "Jewishness" of JCC programming is nothing new, the current thrust of the center movement to emphasize the JCC's educational role represents a quantum leap beyond previous efforts. The JCCs bring substantial resources—financial, human, and programmatic—to this endeavor, and their avowed commitment to "Jewish educational effectiveness" both reflects the priority status which Jewish education has achieved on the communal agenda and promises to aid traditional educational institutions, such as synagogues, in reaching larger segments of the Jewish populace.

The traditional cornerstones of American Jewish education—the denominational movements—have also produced significant new achievements. Both the Reform and Conservative movements have written sophisticated new curricula for their affiliated supplementary schools, which are still the major providers of Jewish education in the United States. These reflect a contemporary approach to curriculum design, incorporating insights and methodologies drawn from the field of general education. In the case of the Reform movement, the curriculum development process aims not merely at schools, but at a complete, thematically integrated, lifelong learning program.

The landscape of American Jewish education is dotted with hundreds of examples of creative teaching, programming, and materials. The annual conferences of CAJE, the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education—a grass-roots organization of educators—has become a Jewish education festival, featuring exchanges of ideas, techniques, and resources across the entire spectrum of Jewish education. Moreover, this vitality at the grass-roots level is recognized and supported by those at the apex of our

communal institutions, thereby reinforcing their own commitment to the Jewish educational enterprise.

Finally, the landscape of Jewish education is marked by a new energy at the communal level. There have been several major community-wide planning initiatives, embracing the full range of local institutions. They identify the most promising areas for institutional cooperation and communal investment in Jewish education, and develop strategies to mobilize the financial and human resources necessary to implement a community educational agenda.

Thus, there are many high points to be noted on the Jewish educational scene. Yet we cannot claim that Jewish education in America has reached a high plateau of achievement, since the "valleys"—in some cases chasms—are equally evident to the honest observer.

If it is true that close to three-quarters of all Jewish young people will receive *some* Jewish education at *some* point in their lives, it is also true that fewer than 40 percent of the eligible young people are being educated at any given point in time. Further, the vast majority of those receiving an education are concentrated in a narrow age range, between eight and thirteen, with an enormous drop-off during the adolescent years. Most Jewish education is, therefore, "elementary" in both the technical and the more general meaning of that term. At any moment, the majority of Jewish youth are receiving no Jewish education, and of the minority who are, most are involved at a rudimentary level.

Even the statistics concerning day school enrollment mask two problems. First, the rise in the percentage of children receiving their Jewish education in day schools is at least partially due to the drastic decline in the numbers of those enrolled in supplementary programs, a decline greater than can be accounted for by day-school growth and the declining numbers of Jewish children of school age. Second, there are some signs that day school enrollments themselves may have peaked among non-Orthodox Jews. The rapid growth over the last few years may be ending (as may be the growth in federation funding), and difficulties in recruitment, finances, and educational effectiveness may well ensue.

Similarly, the decline of the Sunday school has been paralleled by a decline in the intensive (6–8 hour) supplementary school program. Once, community Talmud Torahs offered ten hours a week or more of supplementary Jewish schooling. But over time, synagogue and community Hebrew schools gradually reduced their hours, and

schools are now finding it difficult to maintain even six-hour minimums per week.

These trends in enrollment reflect an underlying weakness: tepid parental support for quality Jewish education. Outside the Orthodox community and elite circles in other Jewish movements, there simply is not a profound commitment on the part of parents to the priority of Jewish education. Jewish education is perceived as one among many "worthy" leisure-time activities. When conflicts arise between it and other activities—music lessons, family events, sports, and clubs—it is by no means certain that Jewish education will get priority. And when adolescents no longer wish to participate, or when Jewish education seems to interfere with "real" schooling as college admissions time looms, few parents stand in the way of their children's withdrawal from the Jewish educational system.

Nor is that educational system itself immune from criticism. One of Jewish education's "valleys" is its fragmentation and the persistent tensions among its several components and advocates. Institutional parochialism, rivalries among educational providers (which often stand in the way of consolidation of programs), mutual suspicion between federation and synagogue, arguments between proponents of day schools and supplementary schools over the allocation of communal resources, debates between advocates of formal and informal educational approaches, add up to present an unappealing image to the larger Jewish population.

Even when fragmentation does not lead to division, it does hamper coordination on the curricular and programmatic levels. Sadly, the elaborate work done by the denominational movements to develop sophisticated curricula is largely wasted because few of their own schools actually employ these curricula. And interinstitutional collaboration hardly exists.

Even within individual institutions, Jewish education is often poorly planned and haphazardly implemented. There is rarely a clear consensus on basic educational goals, especially in supplementary schools. This vagueness frequently masks an unstated conflict between the educational goals espoused by parents, teachers, principals, lay school leaders, and religious authorities. While teachers and principals may wish to inculcate a basic Jewish cultural literacy and commitment to practice, parents may be far more interested in their children having a "positive Jewish experience" without strong

cognitive or normative components. The absence of explicit goals makes educational accountability impossible.

Perhaps the deepest chasm on the Jewish educational landscape today is the problem of recruiting, training, and retaining quality personnel for all settings and levels of Jewish education. There are not enough teachers, administrators, and specialists to staff existing positions adequately, and there are no positions for the types of educators who will be needed to implement the bold educational agendas now being projected. Jewish education is at best a marginally attractive career even for committed and knowledgeable Jews, and thousands of positions are filled by individuals who lack the formal training and skills needed to surmount the built-in difficulties of being a Jewish educator in a less-than-supportive environment.

Lying beneath this highly variegated landscape is what might be characterized as a hidden fault line, presently obscure, but potentially cataclysmic: the uncertain impact of Jewish education itself. When all is said and done, does Jewish education in fact "make a difference" which justifies the enormous hopes, aspirations, and resources currently invested in it? In truth we know little about the impact of Jewish education, and even less about which types, settings, and modes are most effective and why. While earlier studies suggesting that only the most intensive Jewish education produced a measurable impact on Jewish identity are now viewed with some skepticism, it is by no means clear that the kind of Jewish education the vast majority of American Jews experience can (by itself) deliver what the community appears to want from it: an assurance of Jewish continuity across the generations.

Thus, we are led back to our starting point: the connection between Jewish education and the larger conditions of American Jewish life. Why is the state of Jewish education so complex, with high peaks and low valleys, massive investment and uncertain results, tremendous creativity and marginal attractiveness?

The answer may lie in a simple thesis: The Jewish education we get is the Jewish education we want. That is, Jewish education reflects the fundamental realities of American Jewish life, including the limits American Jewish culture places on Jewish educational aspirations and achievements. Most American Jews believe in "Jewish continuity"—the maintenance of a distinctive Jewish group identity in America—and want their children to feel likewise. Hence, as we have seen, a substantial majority *do* provide some form

of Jewish education for their children. However, most American Jews also believe that Jewish continuity must not bring estrangement from American society and culture. They insist that their Jewishness, and the means of cultivating that Jewishness, be "comfortable" and "nondisruptive" of their participation in American life, and, if possible, actually reinforce their successful integration into the larger society. Even the recent growth of day-school education does not contradict this thesis. The popularity of such education reflects the greater openness of American society itself to expressions of ethno-religious particularism. Also, it indicates how secure American Jews feel about their integration that they "can afford" more attention to the agenda of group continuity. Finally, day schools have often been preferred because they appear to offer a superior *general* education, and where they do not do so, student recruitment is far more difficult regardless of the Jewish content of the program. Thus Jewish education in general must operate within narrow parameters: good enough to "create Jews" (often in the absence of extensive home support), not so good as to foster a sense of estrangement or threaten most American Jews' secure adjustment to the society around them.

A second factor shaping the variegated landscape of American Jewish education is the domination of American culture, and American Jewish culture, by a utilitarian, pragmatic, consumer ethos. "What's it good for?" is a pervasive, if at times unspoken, question applied to almost everything. Jewish education is indeed generally accepted as "good" for several things, minimally for that characteristic American Jewish phenomenon, the bar/bat mitzvah celebration. It is also supposed to be a source of values and character education, perhaps even a reinforcement of the discipline of learning. But for most American Jews it is certainly not an absolute good, and hence commitment to Jewish education is affected by the pursuit of other goods which are sometimes less and sometimes more immediately compelling. Jewish education must compete in a marketplace of "valued experiences," with all the positive and negative implications that carries for "product development," "packaging," "positioning," and "salesmanship." While this competition may stimulate creativity and concern for quality, it may also distort the environment in which Jewish education must function, and place burdens upon the enterprise which may be impossible to meet.

The culture of American Jews influences Jewish education in other ways as well. The focus of organized Jewish life on "Jewish

continuity" has undoubtedly helped elevate Jewish education to its current priority status on the communal agenda. But it also subtly reinforces an underlying theme of popular American Jewish culture often noted by sociologists: its child-centeredness. Jewish education both benefits and suffers from the subtle message that "Judaism is for the children." It benefits because American Jews will do a great deal for their children, often much more than they would do for themselves. It suffers because something which is *only* good for or done for the sake of "the children" cannot be of ultimate value in a world which is, after all, a world of adults. As a result, Jewish education is treated as a form of vaccination: it is important to receive the appropriate injections while young in order to ward off "assimilationitis," but once inoculated, one can get on with the business of "real living" without paying the vaccine much further attention.

Finally, one could argue that American Jews get the Jewish education they want, with its rough landscape of peaks and valleys, because they really do not know just what they want. Jewish education can be no more focused, no more goal-directed, no more attuned to achieving those goals, than American Jews are themselves. Various "elites" among American Jewry, of course, have powerful visions for Jewish life. These visions have produced our pluralistic American Jewish culture, with its multitude of educational expressions, many of which constitute high points on the Jewish educational landscape: the Orthodox day-school movement, Conservative and Reform educational summer camps, the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, and CLAL (Center for Learning and Leadership), the High School in Israel program.

Yet contemporary American Jewish life lacks a vital "center"—a focus that could give Jewish education a "mission" and a scope that would inspire passionate commitment and a drive for achievement and impact. Without such a center, the multiple visions Jews have of the Jewish future do not cohere. There is no shared vision to complement and complete the particular visions, other than the pallid and contentless concern for continuity itself. The lack of a vision scatters and dissipates American Jewry's educational energies, so that even the educational successes which justifiably thrill some Jews do not excite the many who remain untouched by them.

Does this mean that the landscape of Jewish education will not change, or worse, that the peaks we note today will gradually erode? Does it imply that Jewish education has no capacity to influence

Jewish culture, to transform and shape the Jewish future in accord with a vision seen, not from its canyons, but from its mountaintops? There are factors and forces at work in Jewish education, in American Jewish culture, and in American society as a whole which make positive change possible, which suggest that new hills and peaks may emerge on the educational landscape, and that these, in turn, will have an impact on the future of the American Jewish community as a whole.

One reason to believe that change is possible is the fact that significant change has *already* taken place. As American Jewish culture has become more oriented to "survival" over the past few decades, we have seen shifts in the educational climate. The radical reorientation of attitudes toward day schools and the dramatic growth of Judaic studies on the college and university level could not have been predicted thirty years ago. Further, American society in general is greatly concerned about educational quality. National commissions, private and foundation initiatives, surprisingly widely read publications like the Department of Education's *What Works,* all have focused attention on the need for more societal investment in effective education. This intellectual climate naturally influences Jews to show a comparable concern for effectiveness and accountability in Jewish education. Also, the mounting evidence that adults are taking Jewish learning more seriously and the development of community-wide planning initiatives for Jewish education could very well generate a spiraling process of improvement in Jewish education.

Above all, the landscape of Jewish education is open to transformation because room exists for substantial qualitative improvement which would not threaten the basic parameters of American Jewish identity and culture. The valleys and canyons of Jewish education are not the sole or inevitable products of American Jewish culture. The peaks on the landscape are equally expressions of that culture: its genuine concern for Jewish continuity; its almost excessive respect for the power of learning; its pluralistic vitality; its family-centeredness; its generosity; its organizational genius; its capacity to absorb the best (as well as, at times, the worst) of the surrounding culture. These characteristics can be harnessed by educational and community leadership to generate a stronger, more cohesive, more attractive and responsive educational system. Today's visible successes demonstrate what Jewish education can be—a stimulating, rewarding process that enriches the individual and the community,

deepening Jewish identity, broadening one's vision, and expanding one's humanity. Such a Jewish education represents no threat to American Jews. Indeed, if they can be persuaded that this is in fact what Jewish education can provide, they will support it—and experience it—far more enthusiastically than they do today.

The achievements and limitations of Jewish education will not, by themselves, determine the future of American Jewry. But just as the landscape of Jewish education today reflects who and what we are as a community, so too the potential transformation of that landscape suggests how the community and its culture can change. The mountains and valleys of Jewish education will persist for many years to come, but there is reason to hope that the landscape will come to be dominated by the peaks and the hills, and that from these, American Jewry will look confidently toward the future.