

# TODAY'S CHALLENGE

## Training Jewish Family Life Educators

RABBI JACOB I. HALPERN, PH.D.

*Dean, College of Jewish Studies of Greater Washington, Rockville, Maryland*  
and

RABBI MARK H. LEVINE

*Senior Synagogue Consultant, Board of Jewish Education of Greater Washington,  
Rockville, Maryland*

*For Jewish family life education to succeed in its goal of liberating Judaism from the exclusive domain of the synagogue, it must be comprehensive and encompass not only skills/experience but also family life issues and ultimate questions. The training of Jewish family life educators is critical to the effectiveness of this field, and an instructional program that culminates in the granting of a Jewish Family Life Educator Certificate is described in this article.*

Educators in public and private school settings have begun to realize that without parental involvement, schooling cannot be successful (*Proceedings*, 1992). Unfortunately, the growing recognition that parents must become partners in the educational process has come at a time when the family, which should be a child's protector, advocate, and moral anchor, is itself in a state of decline.

The Jewish family has not been immune from the social upheavals of the last quarter-century. The Council of Jewish Federation's 1990 National Jewish Population Survey provided a glimpse into the identities, attitudes, and behaviors of the American Jewish community. Two findings in particular have influenced the process of school reform: (1) the startling statistic that in all Jewish households counted (3,186,000), only 14% contain a Core Jewish<sup>1</sup> married couple with children<sup>2</sup>, and (2) the highly publicized statistic that 52% of the born Jews who married chose a spouse who was born Gentile and decided to remain so. The inevitable conclusion drawn from this information is that the home will neither be an automatic partner in educating

Jewish children nor will it routinely provide an environment where Jewish learning and practice will be appreciated.

The deterioration of the normative Jewish family has undermined the effectiveness of the congregational school precisely because the supplementary school system is dependent on support from the home environment. The recognition of this dilemma has been at the heart of a reform movement within the ranks of professional Jewish educators. Advocates of reform, buttressed by work in the field of identity formation by such researchers as Perry London, have concluded that the school will never be successful teaching the intellectual activities of Jewish living because "the base of group identity (the family) which must underlie it is weak" (London & Frank, 1987).

Adding fuel to the reformist argument was the publication in 1988 of a study conducted by the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York entitled *Jewish Supplementary Schooling — A System in Need of Change* (Schiff & Botwinik, 1988). The New York study unequivocally condemned the supplementary school system, concluding that "schools do a poor job increasing

<sup>1</sup>The term "Core Jewish" includes born Jews who identify themselves as Jewish by religion, Jews by choice, and those born Jews who do not identify themselves as Jewish by religion.

<sup>2</sup>This statistic does not show the percentage of Jewish children living with two Jewish parents since not all households contain children. It does, however, indicate the general trend.

Jewish knowledge in all subject areas; they show no success in guiding children toward increased Jewish involvement and demonstrate an inability to influence positive growth in Jewish attitudes" (Schiff, 1988). The task force that directed the 3-year study recommended nothing short of a transformation of the synagogue school. A greater emphasis, it was argued, needed to be placed on family education.

### **IDENTITY VERSUS CULTURAL LITERACY**

For some, however, the phrase "family education" has been viewed primarily as a euphemism for identity training (read minimalist) and therefore a threat to formal classroom schooling. After all, the curricular impact of the identity approach to religious education has been to emphasize the affective domain at the expense of the intellect. Indeed, as London observes, Jewish identity "is a quality first of the heart, and only then of the mind" (London & Frank, 1987). In contrast, educators who favored instruction over enculturation claimed that there was nothing wrong with the synagogue school that could not be corrected by better teacher training, more organized curricula, and closer supervision of the teaching process.

To accommodate the tension caused by the debate between cultural literacy and identity formation (Aron, 1989), an increasing number of synagogue schools have tentatively placed one faltering foot in each curricular camp. This type of indecision about curricular goals threatens to weaken the overall effectiveness of the school and risks creating an educational system that achieves neither identity nor literacy.

For example, since acknowledging the important role that the family plays in identity training, many schools have started scheduling family educational programs. Unfortunately, these high-profile, isolated events are often extraneous to the curriculum and are not integrated into the classroom. Sadder still, the vast majority of

family programming is also extraneous to the critical issues facing families in today's society. For example, even though most demographic profiles of American Jews indicate that a majority do not consider themselves Jewish primarily because they belong to a religious group, congregational schools persist in focusing family education programs on teaching religious skills. The marginally affiliated families with which we work must first see that a Jewish lifestyle can help them solve the daily dilemmas of modern living; then, and only then, will they have an appreciation for the symbolism at the basis of religious ritual.

Another illustration of how an ill-conceived approach toward family programming ("Let's do it because it's fashionable") can dilute a religious school program is the presumption that the school principal is the best qualified professional to coordinate it. This might not always be the case. Depending on the educational administrator's training and skills, this time-intensive process may divert his or her attention from the curricular and supervisory work that needs to be done to keep the academic program functioning effectively.

We fear that the inevitable result of climbing aboard the family education bandwagon without a solid curricular foundation will be the creation of a generation of Jews who neither identify with their Jewish heritage nor are able to function literately within it.

### **THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN JEWISH FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION**

Our work in Jewish Family Life Education is grounded philosophically in the idea that the purpose of this field must be to liberate Judaism from the exclusive domain of the congregation. This idea is not as revolutionary as it might sound. Craig Dykstra (1986) correctly observed that "when the religious community uses its language simply for its own self-perpetuation, then God has been captured as the god of the religious cults and is no longer the God of all of

life.” Therefore, the goal of Jewish family education must be to demonstrate to our clients that Judaism is relevant to every aspect of their lives. Hence, we insist on referring to the field as Jewish family *life* education and not simply Jewish family education.

A three-tiered framework for Jewish Family Life Education has emerged out of this rationale: it includes skills/experiences, family life issues, and ultimate questions.

The skills/experiences component needs the least amount of explanation since it currently dominates the programmatic scene. All too often, it has been mistaken for what Jewish family education is all about. These activities focus on teaching families “how to” Judaism. Although conducting a Pesach seder, building a Sukkah, and celebrating Shabbat and Havdalah are essential skills of Jewish living, by themselves they hardly provide answers to life’s daily dilemmas that the marginally affiliated family desperately seeks.

The second element in our approach to Jewish family life education might well be the most controversial because it involves a content area that heretofore was the specialty of social workers. In our design, however, a religious education model is applied to the topics of family life education that have been outlined by the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). In an effort to clarify the definition of family life education and also to articulate its basic content, members of the NCFR Committee on Standards and Criteria for Certification developed a framework that serves as our family life issues curriculum. This subject matter includes family interaction, interpersonal relationships, human development and sexuality, education about parenthood, family resource management, ethics and family and society (Arcus, 1987).

The challenge to the Jewish family life educator is learning how to create programs that demonstrate how the images, values, stories, laws, rituals, and language of the Jewish people can be applied to these real-life situations. This example should help

clarify the point.

The issue of how to deal with our emotions is a subset of the interpersonal relationships category. Anger is an emotion experienced in all families, and a family life program that deals with coping strategies would be helpful. From a purely social work perspective, the group might focus on learning skills that help people manage their anger. Congregants might be trained to recognize their own angry feelings and to learn to identify physical signs that are early warnings of an impending outburst. Role-playing activities might be designed to teach group members how to empathize with each other’s perspective. The social work model, however, is not intended to teach families how a Jewish lifestyle can help them to manage anger.

The Jewish family life educator would approach the matter quite differently. The task is to shatter the prevailing mind-set that ghettoizes Jewish knowledge as something that is only pertinent to ritual behavior or the holiday calendar. Many of our congregants will be surprised to learn that there is a uniquely Jewish perspective on how to cope with anger.

Our sages taught that anger frequently comes from arrogance. One who is filled with feelings of self-importance might easily become angry at others when they fail to do as he or she wishes. The Jewish family life educator might therefore focus the program on the value of humility — *avanah*. There is a wealth of aggadic (legendary folk tales) and halachic (legal) material available on this subject.

In addition, biblical and talmudic images can be used to present the Torah ideal of being slow to anger. Certain ritual behaviors might also be analyzed to see how they influence the development of humility or cultivate the ability to be slow to anger.

Unlike the social worker, who is trained in a clinical approach to treating family life issues and therefore must remain objective, the Jewish family life educator must be subjective. He or she hopes to give Jewish eyes and ears to congregants in order to reshape

the way they find meaning in life.

The third and final element in our approach to Jewish family life education is what we have called ultimate questions. James Fowler (1981) has observed that "we do not live by bread alone, sex alone, success alone, and certainly not by instinct alone. We need purpose and priorities; we must have some grasp of the big picture." And the Torah actually preceded Fowler by stating that "Man does not live by bread alone" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Ultimate questions can be illustrated in many ways and in different situations. Many who have experienced tragic events of great magnitude are challenged to delve into such questions as who we are and to where are we going. Some who suddenly experience the beauty and awesomeness of nature may ask ultimate questions: Who are we? What is our role and purpose in all this? Why are we here? Who is the creator? What is our relationship to Him? When we were recently in Yosemite National Park, we recalled Maimonides' words:

And what is the way that will lead to love of God and the awe of God. When a person contemplates God's great and wondrous work and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of God's wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love God, praise God, glorify God, and long with an exceeding longing to know God's great name....And when a person ponders these matters, he will recoil affrighted, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of God who is perfect in knowledge (Mishneh Torah, 2:2).

A Jewish viewpoint can enhance such experience and place it in the proper perspective. The sages captured these sights and sounds of beauty and wonder in nature in special coined blessings: "Blessed...who makes the work of creation. Blessed...who made the great sea. Blessed...who has such in his universe. Blessed...for nothing is lacking in

this universe and He has created in it good creatures and good trees to cause mankind pleasure with them." Dr. Joseph Hertz (1957) notes:

These benedictions are specially remarkable. Those who were excluded for ages from the life of nature, thanked God for everything inspiring, beneficent and beautiful in nature — thunder, lightning, spring, blossoms, aromatic plants and fruits. A non-Jewish theologian remarks, "Natural phenomena move the pious Jew to praise, thanksgiving and adoration. The realm of nature is to him nothing distant, ruled by this beneficent will."

Human beings are meaning makers. Every person who walks through our doors, young and old alike, is seeking meaning in their lives. Many of them, unfortunately, have not thought to look within our cumulative tradition. The role of the Jewish family life educator therefore must be to design programs exploring the metaphors, symbols, and concepts of the Jewish tradition that might enable our clients to find something of transcendent value within a Jewish lifestyle.

#### TRAINING JEWISH FAMILY LIFE EDUCATORS

No educational program can be developed and implemented without a continuing supply of well-trained personnel. Pivotal to our concept of Jewish family life education therefore is the development of a corps of competent Jewish educators who can work side-by-side with school principals, rabbis, cantors, instructors, and laity. To that end, our agency has designed an instructional program that culminates in the granting of a Jewish Family Life Educator Certificate (JFLEC). The program is structured in conjunction with the cooperative graduate program of the College of Jewish Studies and the George Washington University.

Candidates for the JFLEC must successfully complete four graduate courses and a 12-month practicum. The course work in-

cludes the following:

1. *The Dynamics of Family Intervention: Theory and Practice* — The purpose of this course is to present students with theoretical foundations and techniques necessary to successfully work with and support parents and families. The instructional experiences are designed to provide students with knowledge of the theories and supporting research of family systems, developmental stages of parenting, social and family support, and stress and coping.
2. *Foundations of Curriculum Development*—This course covers curriculum research and design theory, issues and trends in curriculum development, comparison of curriculum patterns, curriculum development in Jewish schools, and consideration of current field-related problems. Attention is also given to programming for and teaching adults. A solid grounding in the components of curriculum development is essential to ensure that all family educational programming is integrated into the formal curriculum.
3. *Psychology of Learning and Teaching* (candidates who have taken this course on an undergraduate level are exempt) — This course investigates the principles, theory, and nature of the learning and teaching process. It examines the elements of effective instruction, as well as effective thinking. Strategies to improve student motivation and retention are analyzed.
4. *Human Development* — The human development course presents an interdisciplinary approach to human development and behavior throughout the life span. It emphasizes the practical implications of research into those disciplines that contribute to the knowledge of human development.

In addition to the 12 credits described above, candidates for the JFLEC are required to participate in a field-based practicum that meets once a month for 12

months. The practicum is organized around the three components of Jewish Family Life Education outlined above and has the following objectives:

- serve as a forum for the exchange of program ideas and problem solving among family educators
- provide an opportunity for guidance and supervision from family education professionals
- enable participants to gain experience developing family education programs

After participating in the practicum and completing those four courses, students should be able to:

- discuss the fundamentals of the moral, spiritual, and faith development theories and apply them to the planning and execution of family education programming
- apply the knowledge of human development theory, curriculum development theory, and family dynamics to the planning and execution of family education programming
- know the composition of today's Jewish family and learn to apply that understanding to synagogue programming
- understand how the make-up of the contemporary Jewish family affects ritual observance, life-cycle events, and holiday celebrations
- be familiar with Jewish and secular laws pertaining to the family
- develop a community resource support network
- understand the decisions that families make about allocating resources (e.g., time, money, material assets, energy, friends, and space), interpersonal relationships, sexuality, beliefs and traditions, and how all these matters relate to Jewish values
- understand parental rights and responsibilities using both Jewish and general sources
- understand parental roles throughout the

life cycle using both Jewish and secular sources

- understand the relationship between Jewish values/beliefs and family life education areas
- encourage the establishment of a family education program in the synagogue
- prepare units with emphasis on skills/values, family life education, problem solving, and ultimate questions
- understand the adult learner, in addition to the younger learners
- field test *Shalom Sesame* programs and come up with suggestions

Since the coursework required for the JFLEC is part of an established graduate program culminating in a Masters in Education and Human Development granted by George Washington University and the College of Jewish Studies, students in the JFLEC program who qualify may choose to complete a full masters degree.

#### TRANSFORMING THE SYNAGOGUE INTO A BET MIDRASH

Our training program is designed to create a Jewish family life educator who can integrate family education into every aspect of synagogue life. The mechanics of doing so, however, will require some fundamental changes in the current structure of most synagogues. The family life educator must be a member of the synagogue professional staff. He or she might coordinate the activities of a family education committee that is composed of representatives from other standing committees, such as youth, school, sisterhood, men's club, adult education, or the like.

The Bet Kneset (synagogue) must become a *Bet Midrash* (house of study). In his classic work, the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides argues that the sanctity of a house of study exceeds that of a synagogue. A Bet Kneset may be turned into a Bet Midrash, but a Bet Midrash may not be converted into a Bet Kneset because objects may be raised to a holier use but not de-

graded to a less holy use.

The preference of attending a house of study over a synagogue can be seen in the behavior of our eminent sages. Despite the fact that there were many synagogues in their own towns, they only prayed in those places where congregants were engaged in the study of the Torah.

Our conception of Jewish family life education will help congregations ascend to the level of a Bet Midrash. In our design, Jewish knowledge will not be held a prisoner within the walls of the religious school. Parents will become more involved with their children's studies and serve as a living model of Torah study. There will be a greater integration between the religious school and every other education committee of the synagogue. Then the phrase, "a holy community," that traditionally is placed in front of a name of a Jewish congregation will be once again well deserved.

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