

## Research on the Jewish Family and Jewish Education\*

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*... we should begin to think more seriously about Jewish education as serving the entire family rather than just the child ... in short we need to set aside a time to reconsider, retool and begin again from a zero-base of Jewish education.*

OUR most important question today is whether the Jewish community can withstand the assimilative forces of American society and maintain a unique Jewish way of life. We seek answers to this question in current research and in the most innovative and forward looking strategies we can devise. We need to see the problem of assimilation in terms of the communal changes that encourage it; we also need to clarify through research the most recent of these changes. In the light of both history and research undertaken by the American Jewish Committee during the last ten years, it is my contention that American Jewry's most promising response to the problem of assimilation will draw on the strengths of both the family and the school, to take into account the symbiotic relation between them, and to augment the power of each in the service of Jewish survival.

Of course assimilation is not a new phenomenon among us; in hospitable societies some Jews had assimilated. But in addition to the assimilationists, sufficient numbers of Jews always stubbornly clung to their own values and survived as a distinctive group. And in historical perspective we can see that their faithfulness depended largely on factors that no longer exist. Today, the small, legally autonomous, traditionally disciplined Jewish communities of the past have disappeared. In the modern, voluntary,

American-Jewish communities many Jews have left traditional observance or become secular—attenuating or abandoning altogether the authority of Jewish law; many have been socially, politically, and economically integrated into the general society, and their attitudes and behavior patterns have begun to resemble those of the non-Jewish, white middle-class. Indeed, American-Jewish political liberalism and Jewish universalist teachings have made Jews particularly susceptible to cultural trends that profoundly affect their chances of surviving as Jews. Cultural emphasis on individual freedom and on the pursuit of pleasure and “self-fulfillment,” for example, has not only subverted traditional Jewish values in the last twenty years, but has also eroded Jewish identity by drawing many young Jews into non-Jewish or even anti-Jewish activities.

In light of these changes, the Jewish Communal Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee conducted a three-year colloquium and in the last ten years supported a cluster of related research projects that dealt with the family, the school, and the problem of Jewish identity. Two projects in particular help us to see the family and the school as shapers of Jewish identity that remain potentially effective despite the disappearance of the traditional community.

To appreciate these findings, one needs to review the historical factors that have formed our assumptions about all three elements in this nexus. In

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the past, we took Jewish identity for granted. We assumed that the home, the neighborhood, the community, and outside pressures would maintain a Jew's awareness of himself as a Jew. We expected that a child's Jewish self-esteem would be internalized and emotionally conditioned by his environment, by an intimate communal network of personal relationships and practices. And we asked Jewish schools simply to transmit Jewish knowledge.

But today we cannot take for granted the positive, identity-building effects of the communal environment, for in the last twenty years the family—which has always been the cornerstone of that environment—has been significantly weakened by the penetration of counter-culture values into all facets of social experience. Family life, as we know, demands discipline, the power to postpone satisfaction, and a sense of social responsibility that transcends immediate personal desires. But when a culture exalts perpetual youth and promotes narcissism, when it justifies the pursuit of self-gratification, and when it vastly expands the boundaries of acceptable behavior, it becomes less congenial to the sanctity of family life. Thus, in the deterioration of the Jewish family—in the low birthrate, the high rate of divorce and intermarriage, and the increasing number of single parents who often lack the energy and time as well as the knowledge and commitment to transmit a viable sense of Jewish identity to their children, we are facing the consequences of a profound change in cultural values.

And in response to these consequences, we have begun to ask our schools to pick up the burden that our families now seem unable to carry; today we expect our schools not only to transmit Jewish knowledge but also to substitute for the home in Jewishly socializing our children.

Current research suggests, however, that schools will not be able to satisfy completely this expectation. According to Professor Samuel Heilman in a study just completed for the American Jewish Committee, Jewish schools do not offer substitutes for a family environment that no longer exists, but rather reflect the values and life styles of the families that actually surround and support the schools.<sup>1</sup> Like a too clear mirror on a sunny day, our schools show us, in the behavior of their students [our children] not what we would like to be, but rather what they and we, their parents, really are.

Another study by Professor Geoffrey Bock, finds that neither the family nor the school is sufficient in itself to fashion both a public and a private sense of Jewish identity.<sup>2</sup> Public identity, Bock says, is defined by belonging to a synagogue, contributing to the U.J.A., working for Soviet Jewry, etc. In building public identity, Bock found, the school is often as important as the home. In fact, because the generation in which an American Jew is born affects his identity to roughly the same degree as schooling, Bock believes that the generational decline in Jewishness might be offset by the effects of Jewish schooling.

Where private or personal identity is concerned, the school is less effective. Personal identity, according to Bock, resides in personal values, in self-image, in our daily behavior. The relative balance between public and private Jewishness has changed considerably in the last hundred and fifty years. During the early emancipation period in Eastern Europe, some *maskilim* advocated, "Be a Jew at home and a human being outside your home." Today, in the post-emancipation period, this practice has been largely reversed: we are Jews in public when we worship or go to meetings or raise money for Jewish causes. At home, our sense of ourselves as Jews

fades into the background, we are like the other peoples of the earth. This reversal has deprived our children in important ways for, as Dr. Bock points out, the home is almost twice as important a determinant as the school with respect to the formation of a personal sense of Jewishness.

The Heilman and Bock studies, then, indicate a significant linkage between school and family in the fashioning of Jewish identity and to the family's continuing role in this process. Since, as has been observed, families are more powerful shapers of personal identity than are schools, the partnership between family and school becomes crucial for the maintenance of Jewish self-awareness and self-esteem.

What are the implications of this assessment for Jewish education?

To begin with, because the family has a major role in transmitting Jewishness, Jewish education must play an important role in helping to maintain and strengthen the family. The schools can do this first by developing a curriculum on the family. Such a curriculum might serve two purposes, for it would work not only toward the preservation of Jewish identity but also toward the revitalization of the Jewish school experience for students. Jewish educators have always complained that it is difficult to make Jewish education relevant to life, that Jewish education suffers because it is largely art *pro artis*, lacking in vocational motivation and unrelated to the student's daily life. In teaching about the family, schools would be dealing with a subject that is existential and real, and in many instances of serious concern to students.

The Chicago Board of Jewish Education, in cooperation with the Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Family and Community Service, and with initial encouragement and support of the AJC, has begun to develop such a program of

teaching about the Jewish family for all age levels. This approach is value-oriented rather than being a simple objective transmission of facts. In this as in other ways, Jewish schooling needs to be significantly different from public and general education in degree and emphasis of explicitly teaching and inculcating values.

The importance of this effort cannot be overestimated. We have long assumed that family needs and problems can be met instrumentally by communal agencies that respond to specific needs by providing services such as day care and financial assistance. Although such services may fill immediate needs, they will not in the long run resolve the problem of the family. Sweden has created every imaginable instrumental support system, yet families in that society have not been strengthened. On the contrary, childbirth there has been below reproduction level, divorce has skyrocketed, drug abuse and youth suicide continue to increase, for support systems deal with the symptoms of the problem and not the causes.

The concerns we need to address in our schools are value orientation, ideology, a basic sense of identity, and a perception of meaning and purpose in life. Thus we need a carefully designed program to engage students, from nursery school through college, in thought and talk about the family, placing the immediate perceptions within the context of the traditional and the Jewish. In the process we can try to help our children to internalize images and attitudes, to develop values that support the sanctity of marriage and the family. We can try to provide these children with a sense of Jewish purpose as well as Jewish values. Our task is not simply to teach, but to touch, to engage, to counteract the erosive influences at work in the wider culture.

Three specific concerns are at the

heart of preserving Jewish family life and the future size and quality of the Jewish community. First, the issue of Jewish birthrate. The demographic trends are sobering. The Jewish community has the lowest birthrate of any religious or ethnic community in the U.S.A. Our birthrate is estimated at 1.7 per couple; we are obviously not reproducing ourselves. The National Jewish Population Study of 1971 estimated the Jewish population of the U.S. to be about 5.8 million. When non-Jews were not counted in the households, the figure shrank to 5.2 million, a decrease from over 6 million a generation ago. In that time, the percentage of Jews in the general population has fallen by over 30 percent. One of the foremost Jewish demographers, U. O. Schmelz and his associates, predict a further decline of at least 25 percent in Jewish numbers outside of Israel by the year two thousand.<sup>3</sup> This continuing decline is attributable to low birthrate, intermarriage, and assimilation.

Here, as in other issues related to the family, we face powerful forces in the general community, the media, and the schools, that turn public opinion against natality. The ZPG movement for example, argued against childbearing for ecological reasons; the feminist movement in its early phase argued that childbearing and raising children demanded the exploitation of women. Government departments and university institutes, moreover, periodically remind us of the rising costs of raising children; thus they create an image of childbearing that is cold and hard-headed, like the purchase of a house. The proliferation of sex clinics and sex counselling agencies, finally, reinforces one's sense of living in an orgiastic society devoted not to procreation but to the pursuit of pleasure.

The Jewish community has been ill prepared to respond to these powerful

forces. In fact, with respect to childbirth as to other family related issues, the Jewish community and its agencies tended, until recently, to accommodate themselves to prevailing trends. But we should now confront and respond to these tendencies if we want to insure our survival. Part of our response will need to be instrumental. The Jewish community will have to provide support systems and practical encouragements to couples to have children; we will have to think in terms of affordable day care, reduced fees for education, for camping, for help with housing, etc. Another part of our response will need to be ideological.

The American Jewish Committee with the co-sponsorship of thirty national Jewish organizations sponsored a conference last November on communal strategies to increase the Jewish birthrate. The AJC is also publishing a popular pamphlet to be distributed to Jewish high school and college students, describing the human and Jewish significance of having children. Through conferences and publications of this sort, perhaps a new way of looking at childbearing may be made attractive to young Jews.

The most important part of our response, however, will have to be educational, for the problem of low birthrate is not primarily economic but related to personal values and ideology. In a negative sense, the importance of non-economic factors appears in the conscious decisions of middle- and upper middle-class Jewish couples not to have children because they might interfere with career ambitions or personal pleasures.

In a more positive sense, a study which the American Jewish Committee did several years ago in Washington, D.C. of approximately 100 mothers of two paycheck families who had borne three or more children shows a strong correlation between Jewish values,

Jewish commitment and the decision to have children.<sup>4</sup> Even more positively, a study of 1200 Jewish college students, just concluded and not yet published, which was co-sponsored by the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations, found an apparent change in attitudes toward having and raising children.<sup>5</sup> An overwhelming majority of male and female Jewish students (more than 70 percent) expressed the desire to have two or more children. If these data are representative (and one needs to distinguish between expressed attitudes and actual behavior) they may indicate a positive, pro-family change in thinking that is promising for the future.

To encourage this change in attitude, we need to consider Jewish educational strategies that will counteract anti-natalist values and develop positive values in their place. I think that a pro-natalist educational program needs to reflect three convictions: that childbearing secures personal fulfillment for individual parents, physical survival for the Jews, and spiritual survival for Judaism. Procreation, one remembers, affirms the covenant, affirms both the worthwhileness of life and our role as partners with the divine to create, recreate, and perfect the world.

In all areas of education, we can convey symbolic messages in various ways. A teacher's life style and attitudes, for example, may say as much to his students as the text he teaches. Thus it is important that our teachers will share and practice Jewish values and commitments to family life: in a value-oriented education, there cannot be neutral teachers. Similarly, other important models—rabbis, synagogue or school lay leaders—need to reinforce indirectly the messages we intend to deliver to our children. And the ambiance of the school—photographs and other visual decorations—must accord with the general intention of the program.

A second major change in the family which threatens Jewish identity and to which Jewish education must address itself is the alarming increase in the rate of divorce. This phenomenon again reflects the self-centeredness of the cultural emphasis on gratifying immediate desires rather than encouraging maturity, self-discipline and social responsibility. Today, the number of divorces in the U.S.A. each year is half the number of marriages. "Serial marriage and divorce," a chain of marriages and divorces, not only tend to diminish the sanctity of marriage but also destabilize the family and confuse and hurt the children.

Our immediate concern here is the effect of divorce on the Jewishness and the general well being of children. We know very little about both these subjects, though we have all heard statements of a political or biased nature that do not rest on empirical evidence. We hear, for example, that it is better for children to live in a single-parent family than in an unhappy two-parent family. But my own considered judgment is that it is too early to assess the long term effect of divorce on the well-being of children. A body of research suggests that there are no victimless divorces and that the biggest victims are the children.

We know even less about the impact of divorce on the Jewishness of children. We do appreciate the tremendous burden placed on the single, primarily the custodial, parent to socialize children Jewishly in the grief, guilt, and confusion of a divorce. We are aware of the problems that single-parent families present to Jewish schools: it is hard to require weekend school attendance of children who must spend weekends with the non-custodial parent; it is difficult to know whom to invite to parents' meetings, who should receive reports, who should sign registration forms, etc. Misjudgments on any of these matters may cause psychological hurt to children.

About the deeper long-range effects of divorce we know virtually nothing. About two years ago Thomas J. Cottle did a pilot ethnographic study for the American Jewish Committee on the impact of divorce on the Jewish identity of the children of divorce.<sup>6</sup> While it was a limited pilot study and one cannot generalize from it, it did suggest significant areas for investigation and raised important issues for consideration. For our purposes I shall limit myself to a few issues illuminated by the Cottle study. All children (they were in the age range of 12–15) related divorce to Jewishness. Many saw divorce in terms of death, either death of the family or, by extension, death of Jewishness. As some children put it, to be a whole family together meant to be Jewish. One child said: "We were probably more Jewish at home than when we went to temple. When my father told me they were separating and would probably get divorced, one of the first crazy thoughts I had was, well, Allan old kid, you don't have to be Jewish anymore." Another one said, "I am not Jewish anymore. I mean, I am, but I am not. Maybe something will happen later on when I get married and have children, but there is nothing in it for me anymore. It was like an agreement I made with my whole family. I can't say I always loved it, but it did make sense because it made sense with the family."

On the other hand, a few children in their despair and discontinuity found meaning and support in the Jewish school and synagogue. When they felt suspended in the air and betrayed, they found some strength in the sense that the Jewish people and Jewish tradition were not temporary. For them, Jewishness represented continuity, faith and trust. One child said, "I don't hide the fact that I am angry. I don't think a kid has to sleep here for two nights, then there for two nights, then back here for

two nights. But you know what I do? I pretend I am one of those Jews in the old days who does not have a home anywhere and goes about looking for anywhere in the world to stay." Clearly, we do not yet understand the factors that shape any of these reactions. But we can assume that the availability of a sensitive rabbi or Jewish teacher might play an important role in a child's reaction to Jewishness as a source of comfort during this difficult time.

Acting on this assumption, we recently did an exploratory study of Jewish providers of services to the children of divorce.<sup>7</sup> We looked primarily at synagogues and Jewish schools, and we found that most synagogues are not equipped to handle this problem because of lack of personnel, or lack of interest, or both. In some synagogues, for example, administrators did not know which of their members were divorced. In part, this apparent indifference may be due to the simple acceptance of divorce as normative because of the large numbers of divorces. Then again, inadequate response may be due to the notion that Judaism has always been tolerant of divorce. This study indicates that Jewish day schools seem to have responded more fully than synagogues to the needs of children of divorce. All in all, however, we have not yet begun seriously to address this issue.

The human and Jewish dimensions of divorce within the context of values clarification and transmission need to be incorporated into our thinking about Jewish education. Resources need to be provided for a special outreach to children of divorce by way of supporting, comforting and counseling. Indeed, the special needs of single parent families and, in some instances, even intact families in which both parents are working, can create opportunities for Jewish schools. The schools can establish Jewish day-care centers, enlarge

present nursery school programs, and lengthen the hours that children spend there; for school-age children, who are often "latch-key children," afternoon programs might be increased from two to three or even four afternoons a week. Similarly, during public school vacations, Jewish schools might develop special educational programs that would both help working parents and enrich a child's Jewish experiences. Such programs might be developed by schools alone or in cooperation with Jewish community centers.

The third specific threat to the family and thus to Jewish survival is, of course, intermarriage. We all know that the rate of intermarriage has risen alarmingly during the last twenty years. Since the 1971 National Jewish Population Study, which indicated a rate of over 30 percent of intermarriage, the rate of intermarriages appears to be increasing. Like the other major changes in family life, intermarriage is rooted in a tangle of forces and influences. Chief among them are secularization, hedonism and the diminishing influence of Jewish cultural norms. Most Jews who continue to identify as Jews do so publicly rather than privately. And in the absence of a private commitment to Jewishness, intermarriage becomes a lively option.

Two recent studies by the American Jewish Committee help to clarify the consequences of intermarriage. One study of some 450 couples was completed in 1976;<sup>8</sup> the other, recently completed dealt with the children of the 1976 sample.<sup>9</sup> Both studies indicate that mixed marriages (without conversion) will lead in a generation or two to assimilation of most of the children of mixed marriages. The study of the children of both conversionary and mixed marriages shows a continuous attenuation of Jewish identity and participation. Ninety-two percent of the children of mixed marriages, studied, have inter-

married. Like a geometric progression, intermarriage produces higher rates of intermarriage. More children of mixed marriages belong to churches than to synagogues. Only three percent belong to the latter.

Children of conversionary marriages largely (85%) identify as Jews, and in terms of religious attitudes and practice, a great many of them are positive, although only 30% belong to a synagogue as compared with 86% of their parents. They see religion as a private matter and express negative attitudes towards religious institutions. Despite their sense of Jewish religious identity however, the children of conversionary marriages, by and large, do not have a sense of an ethnic-peoplehood identity.

Clearly, intermarriage is a very serious threat to Jewish survival as well as a sensitive, gut issue for Jews. Like the low birthrate and high divorce rate however, intermarriage has been accepted by a large number of Jews as almost normative behavior. The community has accommodated itself in some ways to intermarriage; the recent decision of the Reform movement to accept the patrilineal descent of Jewish children is only the latest and most drastic example of this accommodation.

Obviously intermarriage has far reaching implications for Jewish education. Articles in several recent UAHC bulletins consider the special set of educational problems faced by the Reform movement's schools, which accept children of mixed marriages. Most children of mixed marriages, however, do not attend religious school and are, thus, raised without a faith, mostly in ambivalence and often in confusion. For this growing population, conversion to Judaism within the context of intermarriage is desirable from the point of view of Jewish religious identity. This option presents a challenge to rabbis and Jewish educators: how can we reach

such couples both before and after they marry? and if we do reach them, how can we educate and motivate them toward conversion when we know that even young adults who attended Jewish schools are part of today's intermarriage statistics? The central question, then, is what can Jewish education do to prevent intermarriage or at least to slow its pace? That question is still open.

Finally, what conclusions can we draw from these studies of the present moment and our awareness of the past? We ought not conclude that Jewish education has failed us. Instead, we need to recognize that the community has failed its children in the course of historical change. Both the school and the family are in flux, and our data suggest that Jewish education needs to consider fundamental shifts in its objectives and its methodology. It should not attempt to replicate public education; even the public schools today are at arm's length from families. Instead, it needs to work toward the goal of recreating a Jewish cultural community that might, once again, inculcate values in the young and help to shape their life styles. First, we should begin to think more seriously about Jewish education as serving the entire family rather than just the child. Perhaps we should also consider a drastic and probably unrealistic proposal of closing our schools for one year and using that time for intensive and honest discussions with parents and children. Such discussions should involve consciousness raising, confronting the Jewish questions that we rarely find the opportunity to ask ourselves: what, for example, does being Jewish mean to us? how does Jewishness affect our lives? what kind of Jewish schooling do we want for ourselves and our children? In short, we need to set aside a time to reconsider, retool, and begin again from a zero-base of Jewish education.

At the very least, we should confront

parents and the community in general with the truth that Jewish schooling divorced from family education and lifestyle can have only limited results. In recent years we have been assuring ourselves that the opposite is true. Some bureaus of Jewish education, for example, put ads in daily newspapers that ask: "If you are Jewish, will your grandchildren be?" The implicit answer, of course, is that Jewish schooling will assure the building of Jewish identity. But we know that is not true. We should be telling parents that maintaining and transmitting Jewishness is largely a family responsibility. We should be offering help to Jewish families that need to learn how to live Jewishly. And we should be insisting on the difficulty of nurturing Jewish identity and on the importance of engaging in that crucial task the best efforts of both Jewish families and Jewish schools.

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