

Jewish Identity in Public Schools? by Jackie Berman

The Jewish community in America has a long history of support for, and attachment to, public education. Most of our first-generation American parents or grandparents went to public schools and have been grateful for the opportunity they were given to travel this road into American mainstream society. The vast majority of Jewish students in America still attend public schools. They spend a very large proportion of their waking hours either in school, or engaged in activities related to school. It is therefore important to ask: What is the impact of public schools on our youths' sense of their Jewish identity?

As Education Specialist for the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), the public affairs umbrella for the organized Jewish community, in the San Francisco Bay Area, my daily work consists of addressing this issue in one form or another. Our Education Task Force considers public school issues ranging from supporting measures that will contribute to providing quality public education for all children -- such as school bonds to finance needed additional classrooms -- to issues of particular concern to the Jewish community. It is in this latter area that we take action to support the need for Jewish students to be treated in a manner that will not threaten their Jewish identity.

The Challenge of Being Jewish in a Public School System

Jewish supplemental school educators can play a major role in assisting their students to meet the challenges of being Jewish in a public school system in a way that will enhance, rather than diminish, a young person's Jewish sense of self. The supplemental school is the logical place to work through issues relating to time off for Jewish holidays and the "December dilemma." Unlike the public school, here the student is in the company of other Jewish students who are probably having similar experiences and feelings. Here, they do not feel "different" or isolated from their friends. Instead, they can be supported by peers and adults in dealing with the situation. In the case of the High Holidays, class time in the supplemental school should be devoted to discussing the students' anxieties and feelings about the situation. Teachers should not be judgmental; rather, they should encourage free expression, while leading the discussion to help students understand that, as Jews, they will be different in some important ways from their non-Jewish friends. Teachers can help students clarify their own responsibility at their own public school. How far in advance of the absence should the school be notified? How much time will be allowed to make up work missed? A form can be developed by the supplemental school informing the public school that the student is enrolled in the supplemental school and can be expected to be absent for the Jewish Holy Days on the dates specified. The form can request make-up work and explain that, because the student will be in synagogue, participating in a religious observance, a reasonable time is required for work to be made up. The form should be signed by the supplemental school principal or teacher and the parent. If any student is penalized for being absent, the local or national defense organization -- such as the JCRC or ADL -- should be contacted to assist in having the penalty reversed.

Similarly, discussions regarding the "December dilemma" should take place in Jewish supplemental schools early in the semester and well in advance of the Christmas season. Students can describe their past experiences, their expectations for the coming year, how they feel about it, and how they might deal with the situation. Again, the teacher should guide the discussion so that students understand why we, as Jews, do not celebrate Christmas. In this case, the supplemental school should not be prescriptive in dictating a particular

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celebrate Christmas. In this case, the supplemental school should not be prescriptive in dictating a particular approach. Instead, it can initiate a process through which the child and family decide how they will deal with the situation. Some may decide to sing the songs and color the candy canes in public school, with the child understanding that "it's not our holiday, but I can participate with my non-Jewish friends in their holiday." Other parents may decide to meet with the teacher early in the school year and offer to help create activities that are truly inclusive. Still others may decide to inform the teacher that the child will not participate in any Christmas-oriented activities, and ask that alternative activities be provided. These are difficult choices for young children, but if they are made unemotionally, in an atmosphere that focuses on how each can best maintain his or her Jewish identity while living in a non-Jewish society, I believe the result will be positive.

The Curriculum and its Effect on Jewish Identity

In addition to religious observances, public school curriculum has the potential of affecting students' Jewish identity. Two areas stand out in this regard: what is taught in public school about Judaism and its relationship to Christianity and what is taught about the Middle East conflict. Since the late eighties, elementary school curricula in many states have included study about world religions. In contrast to previous thinking, it was argued that it is academically unjustifiable to omit the role of religion in the history of civilization. Typically, the subject is taught during the sixth and seventh grades as a component of ancient history. Because the study of history has been unpopular with students who have considered it dull and boring, textbook writers have been instructed to produce materials that present history as "a story well told," instead of a recital of names and dates. Unfortunately, this assignment has caused some publishers to write books that paraphrase sacred texts to illustrate religious beliefs, instead of explaining them in a purely expository fashion. This results in mixing faith with fact. Thus, the first paragraph about Christianity in the first edition (1991) of Houghton-Mifflin's sixth grade text, *A Message of Ancient Days*, tells students that, "One day in about A.D. 36, a Jew named Saul was on the road to Damascus, a city in ancient Syria. He was tracking down Christians, the followers of the Jewish teacher Jesus. Saul was one of many Jews who believed these Christians should be persecuted, (the word is in bold type, because it is a vocabulary word), or punished, for their failure to obey all the Jewish laws." As a result of our efforts, this paragraph was rewritten and much improved in the 1999 edition. However, the story of Saul's conversion to Christianity, his name change to Paul, and his important role in early Christianity are retained in the 1999 edition. It relates that "Because he (Paul) had been a devout Jew, he could speak to fellow Jews." In fact, these sixth grade students are being taught about Judaism from the perspective of the New Testament.

Sadly, most Jewish students are woefully ill equipped to deal with the textbook material on early Judaism and Christianity that can negatively affect their Jewish identity. In my experience, most Jewish parents and teachers do not want their children to hear or speak about the "J" (for Jesus) word. But, they do hear it. It's spoken of everywhere, including in public school lessons and textbooks. Again, the supplemental school needs to step in and equip its students to understand, from a Jewish perspective, the information that will be presented to them in public school. The school must obtain the textbooks that its students are using in public school. Then, it should develop a curriculum for fifth or sixth graders in the supplemental school that will teach them the Jewish perspective of Christianity and other issues raised in those sixth grade textbooks. Students must understand that it is not their right or responsibility to convince their public school classmates that we are right and they are wrong. Nor is the opposite the case. Faith is a family affair, not a topic for classroom debates.

Study about the Middle East is included in most World History classes -- usually at the ninth or tenth grade. Some of the textbooks and supplemental materials present an inaccurate and/or biased history and analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, speakers may be brought in who address the subject from a very one-sided, anti-Israel perspective. Some teachers might express their personal anti-Israel opinions. We in the San Francisco Bay Area are particularly aware that anti-Israel materials and activities can be brought into public schools, because there is a long-standing culture of far left political activism here that includes strong anti-Israel sentiments. Unless they are well prepared, Jewish students in an anti-Israel school environment feel confused and demeaned. The JCRC has responded to this situation by developing curriculum materials and recommending commercial materials suitable for public schools that we ask schools to include when there is a lack of balance in what they are using. Cooperatively with the local Bureau of Jewish Education, we recommend and loan to public schools videos and other visual materials from the Bureau's media center. However, there is an inadequate supply of materials produced for public schools at all grade levels that tell the Jewish story. Unfortunately, no national Jewish organization exists that is dedicated to working with developers of public school educational materials and to promoting the interests of the Jewish community so that appropriate and accurate materials will be produced.

A Balanced Perspective in the Classroom and in the Assembly

Regarding assemblies and classroom presentations, we have communicated directly with every principal in our area, urging them to be aware of the atmosphere of fear, anger, and divisiveness produced on campus when schools become surrogate battlegrounds for the Middle East conflict. We further point out that such a topic as this, on which opinions are deeply divided and emotions run high, may not be appropriate for school assemblies. Rather, it can usually best be dealt with in the classroom where the teacher is knowledgeable about the subject matter and about how to promote desired educational outcomes and how to ensure that the subject is presented in an unbiased manner. Whatever the setting, we ask that care be taken to ensure that a balanced perspective on the conflict is maintained.

Consistency on University Campuses

At the college level, San Francisco State University and the University of California in Berkeley, both public institutions, have experienced numerous anti-Israel demonstrations and Jewish students find themselves in a campus environment that challenges their comfort in maintaining their Jewish identity. The JCRC is involved in these situations. We are concerned not only because our organization's support for close ties between the U.S. and Israel is being attacked, but also because we are aware that the students' sense of Jewish identity is also under attack.

At the college level, the JCRC, together with the campus Hillel organizations, are in touch with the President of SFSU and the Provost of UC Berkeley. We have obtained their commitment to exert leadership in what we believe has become an increasingly poisoned atmosphere. The most worrisome aspect of the current situation is that the focus of the anti-Israel activists is not only directed externally toward Israel and the American government, but also directed against a specific student constituency -- pro-Israel and Jewish students on campus. The officials, for their part, have acknowledged that these are difficult and challenging times on campus. They feel caught between wanting to allow free expression of political conflicts, and wanting to maintain an environment in which Jewish students feel safe, and have the same freedom to express their support for Israel as other groups have to express their opposition to Israel. Specifically, the JCRC is asking

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support for Israel as other groups have to express their opposition to Israel. Specifically, the JCRC is asking for consistency in the application of university policies; treating seriously -- and acting on -- any effort that has the intent or effect of intimidation inside or outside the classroom; commitment to the university's own exercise of free speech to condemn hateful speech, even if protected, forcefully and swiftly whenever it appears; creating a streamlined grievance process for students; using every possible university means to build a culture of civility and moderation through work with faculty and student groups; and, through good speech, pushing to push to the fringes the voices of extremism.

Helping Students Maintain a Positive Sense of Identity

Jewish educators can support efforts to help Jewish students maintain a positive sense of identity, in spite of anti-Israel educational experiences. It is essential that the curriculum in day schools and supplemental schools contain effective units of study about Israel. Jewish students who are not knowledgeable about their religion or their people's history are vulnerable to attacks on their identity, because they will be defined only by others. Youths who possess Jewish self-knowledge have the tools to define themselves, despite the many pressures of this pluralistic society to conform to the majority outlook.

What else is new?

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