

A Different Kind of Voucher

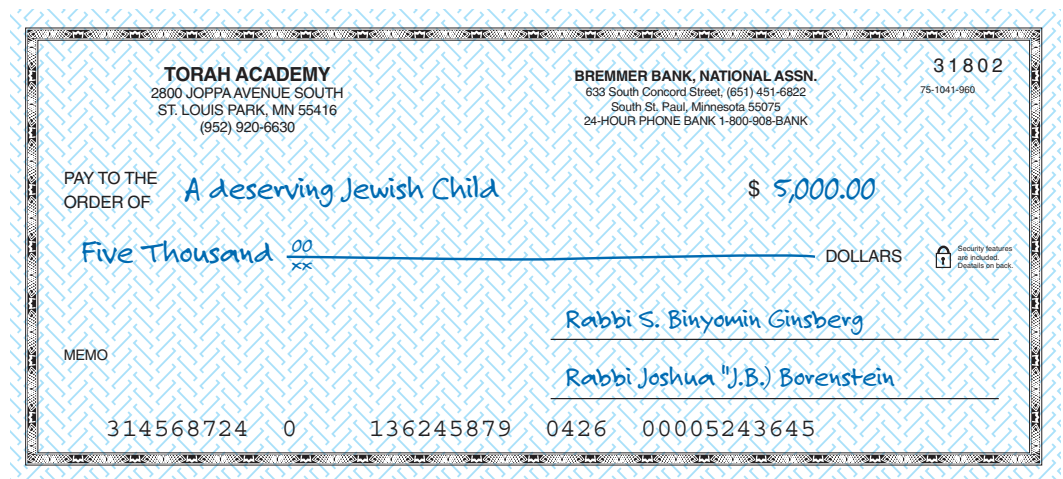
BY S. BINYOMIN GINSBERG

There are a number of reasons why Jewish parents may choose not to send their children to a Jewish school. Tuition cost should not be one of them.

According to the findings of the *2004 Twin Cities Jewish Population Study*, sponsored by the Minneapolis Jewish Federation, 24 percent of Jewish children in Minneapolis aged five to twelve attend a Jewish day school; 65 percent attend a public school and 11 percent attend a non-Jewish private school. Among those who do not send their children to a Jewish day school, tuition cost was the second major reason parents cited. (The number one reason was their belief in the superiority of the public school system and their commitment to a diverse educational environment.)

When the issue of funding day schools is discussed, invariably someone makes the following suggestion: cut costs. On the contrary, we must raise costs. Jewish educators are among the lowest-paid professionals, and we expect them to perform miracles. Moreover, parents have certain expectations when they send their children to a private school. Cutting costs impacts on the quality of education, and thus, the benefits of private education may be lost. Decreasing costs would also affect class size. If we demand excellence from our schools, we must be willing to provide the funds for it. Similarly, pointing a finger at the local Jewish federation

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is not the answer. Federations don't have a single mission for their support, and their limited dollars must be directed to many programs and needs. Moreover, some federations are doing more than their share in supporting Jewish education, yet one still finds children in those communities who are not attending Jewish day schools due to the high costs.

The Minneapolis Jewish Federation, one of the most generous supporters of Jewish education, is a perfect example of how federation support will not solve the crisis in Jewish education. Torah Academy, one of the three Jewish day schools in Minneapolis, received an allocation of almost \$500,000 during the 2004-2005 school year, which amounts to almost 25 percent of its operating budget. Nevertheless, as the report cited previously indicates, there are hundreds of Jewish children in Minneapolis who are in public schools because their parents can't afford day school tuition.

Torah Academy, which was founded in 1945 and is the oldest Jewish day school in Minnesota, is a community day school under Orthodox auspices. Many of the more than two hundred students in the school, where I serve as dean, come from non-Orthodox homes. Students, from kindergarteners to eighth graders, enjoy a rich program of Judaic and general studies and are taught in a warm and caring environment. In 2004 Torah

Academy received the prestigious School of the Year award from Torah Umesorah, the National Society of Hebrew Day Schools.

The findings of the Federation study were a wake-up call for the Minneapolis Jewish community in general and the Torah Academy community in particular. Alarmed by the dire statistics, the school administration decided that something had to be done. Despite the fact that the school is under constant financial strain (it receives only \$700,000 in tuition dollars out of an operating budget of almost \$2 million), Torah Academy resolved to lure more public school students to the school.

How could we get these children to join our school if the families can't—or won't—pay? The administration proposed a voucher plan that would grant a child from a public or non-Jewish private school an automatic reduction of \$5,000 in tuition costs for the first year. (Annual tuition amounts to about \$7,000.) The tuition reduction would

continue in subsequent years, with an annual decrease of \$1,000 (a \$4,000 reduction in tuition costs in year two, a \$3,000 reduction in year three, et cetera).

The plan would allow low-income families to apply to the school's scholarship committee for an even greater

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reduction. At the same time, even well-to-do families would be eligible for the \$5,000 reduction.

How could the school afford to offer such generous tuition breaks? Simple. We came up with a way to accommodate additional students without incurring additional expenses. The maximum number of students in many classrooms is twenty-five, a number also cited by Maimonides in *Hilchos Talmud Torah* (2:5). In small Jewish communi-

ties such as Minneapolis, however, the average class size is usually fifteen. Even if we were to limit each class to twenty students, we would still have an average of five empty seats per classroom. Thus, we realized that we could easily accommodate an extra hundred students without incurring any significant new expenses such as hiring more staff or adding classrooms.

Before launching the plan, we presented it to the leadership of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation and the school's board of directors. While it was clear that there wouldn't be any additional financial support from the Federation to fund the plan, the idea was

strongly supported. The school's board members discussed the plan at length. There was significant skepticism, and many lay leaders doubted there would be any takers. They voiced other concerns as well: "How will our current

There are 205,000 students enrolled in 759 Jewish elementary and high schools in the United States. A little over 80 percent of these day school students attend Orthodox schools.

Fact

parents feel knowing that there are some parents enjoying a cheap ride?" and "How will we bring a student with a public school background up to speed?" Ultimately, the board decided to go with it.

We then discussed the initiative with the parent body. Instead of feeling resentment that other parents will be



Article in Minneapolis newspaper describes Torah Academy's "startling offer" to cut tuition by \$5,000.

paying less, parents were overwhelmingly encouraging and understanding of the obligation to provide a Jewish education for all. With our board of directors and our parent body on board, we introduced the plan to the community at large at a school banquet in March 2005. Without even requesting financial support for the initiative, donors came forth with pledges.

With a limited budget for advertising, the school had to seek creative venues to get the word out. The school was successful in attracting the attention of the local secular media (our prime target). In March, two Minneapolis newspapers, *St. Louis Park Sun Sailor* and *Star Tribune*, published extensive

lies (a significant number considering that there are 110 families in the school) have visited the school to consider Torah Academy for their children.

Hundreds of Jewish children in Minneapolis are in public schools because their parents can't afford day school tuition.

As of the end of May 2005 five new “voucher” students were enrolled for this school year.

This program will require close evaluation, and adjustments may need

to be made to meet the needs of the new students. The school is ready for the challenge.

While “The 5 Percent Answer” championed by Chicago businessman George Hanus and other initiatives to address the tuition problem have not produced the results we need and seek, perhaps every school should accept upon itself a goal of absorbing the cost of educating just one public school student next year. This could result in another few hundred Jewish children attending Jewish day schools.

There are hundreds of vacant desks in many classrooms that can and should be filled with children currently attending public school. We can easily incorporate many of these children into our schools without causing too much of a financial strain. Even if our efforts result in only *one* additional child receiving a Jewish education, wouldn't it have been worthwhile? **JA**



Torah Academy's tuition voucher program attracted the attention of the local media.

articles on the offer. In April, *Education Week* ran a story.

Immediately after announcing the program, the phones started ringing. Parents called to request more information, and tours of the school were scheduled. The response has been overwhelming—both from parents considering the school for their children and from individuals interested in supporting this effort. More than a dozen fami-