

## A Statement on Jewish Education: Texts and Responses

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Making Jewish education more affordable is in some senses a "motherhood and apple pie" issue: Most Jewish leaders see this as a worthy goal and acknowledge that affordability is a particularly acute problem in the realm of day school education, where tuitions range from \$6-7,000 a year upward to nearly \$18,000 per child. Most Jewish leaders want to find ways of directing more financial resources to Jewish educational programs because they recognize it as a sphere of Jewish communal life critical to the vitality, let alone future viability, of the American Jewish community. The question is how?

Several plans are currently being floated, but they are painfully short on specific numbers. What would it cost to achieve our particular goals? How large an endowment would we need to generate the kinds of funds that would seriously aid day schools, or Hillels, or summer camps—let alone the stepchild of Jewish education, the supplementary school?

I don't have those figures; and I am not aware of any study that has crunched these numbers. But I want to illustrate the magnitude of the challenge we face with the following few figures. If, as one such plan proposes, we were to offer a Jewish community voucher for the sum of \$2,000 to each child attending a day school, the total annual tab for the 210,000 children currently enrolled in day schools would amount to \$420 million. To generate such a sum from endowments throwing off 10 percent interest, a fabulous return, we would need to amass an endowment of \$4.2 billion. The size of the endowment would have to be twice as large if we expected the more realistic return of 5 percent a year. Note the following however: First, only the current level of student enrollment would be sustained by these sums—not the increase many of us who view day school education as the ideal setting for Jewish education and socialization regard as critical to the American Jewish future. Second, this sum would provide modest assistance to parents, but would not help the schools themselves to raise teachers' salaries or pay for capital projects. Third, this sum would not help any other sectors of the field of Jewish education, especially not the supplementary schools that educate the majority of Jewish kids. Fourth, the \$2,000 per child would barely make a dent on family budgets when those families are paying tuition exceeding \$10-15,000 per child. And fifth, the \$420 million is equal to more than half of the money raised by the annual campaigns of all federations of Jewish philanthropy in the United States. Moreover, the endowment fund needed to sustain this effort dwarfs the current endowments of all U.S. Jewish federations.

I draw several conclusions from these few figures: If we are truly serious about day school education, the organized Jewish community must reconsider the role of government funding. Those costs of Jewish education are staggering and our internal resources are finite. Governments spend a good deal more than \$2,000 per child on the general education of young people. Why should day schools and other private schools that offer the same general education as public schools—and often a much better education—not receive financial aid to defray the costs of that general education? They are providing a service to the state by teaching reading,

writing and arithmetic—as well as many other subjects.

Thus far, the organized Jewish community has been almost uniformly opposed to any government assistance to religious schools or to families that send their children to religious schools because of the fifty-year-old policy of strict separationism endorsed by the key organizations of the Jewish community. But matters were not always such: In earlier eras of American Jewish history, the leadership of the community was prepared to accept breaches. I submit that if we truly wish to help day schools, we cannot exclude governmental funding as an option. I don't believe the Jewish community alone can muster the resources, despite the fine talk to the contrary.

At least four major concerns are raised by opponents of such funding: First, if we allow any breach in the wall of separation, the wall will crumble and the United States will become a theocracy. Such an extreme view, which allows for no flexibility, is simply a crude form of fear-mongering. The United States has lived with a constitutional barrier separating church and state for over 200 years, and that barrier will not crumble even if it contains some openings—for the simple reason that for most of those 200 years there were breaches in the wall, but the wall stood nonetheless.

Second, many Jews are fearful that if religious schools may receive some government funding, the public education will suffer. Unfortunately, public education in many states and cities has deteriorated to the point where Jews and many others in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Miami have for decades abandoned public schools in droves. The commitment to public education is a throwback to an earlier era. As a community, we can ill-afford a nostalgic dedication to an institution that in many parts of the country does not work. Just ask parents of kids in those failing schools where they would prefer to send their kids to school.

Third, some Jews fear that government funds flowing into religious schools will strengthen the Christian right, which presumably would teach a narrow curriculum. And yet, fourth, other Jews fear that by virtue of its funding, the government will try to influence education in Jewish day schools. These last two points are in some ways contradictory: if government funding will bring about intervention in Jewish schools, why would it not have the same impact on Christian schools? Let governments set standards for literacy in general education courses. No one is forcing religious schools to accept state funding; and perhaps governmental standards will raise the level of instruction at those schools. I, for one, think it would be healthy for Jewish day schools to be required to meet governmental standards in their general education offerings.

Now let me put you at ease: I have intentionally begun with my most radical proposal, knowing full well that to advocate for government aid to religious schools will offend you more than anything else I have to say. So the worst is over. But I repeat, we will not be able to make a serious dent in the prohibitively high costs of day school education without government funds.

Which brings me to my second point: It is not inconceivable that the American Jewish community could put together an endowment for Jewish education of some \$5-6 billion. Certainly, the challenge would be great and would take years to accomplish, but it might well be doable. What is considerably more doubtful to me is that the Jewish community would set aside

such a sum solely for day schools and ignore the needs of the majority of our children—those who attend supplementary schools. And what about the needs of young Jews who no longer participate in programs of formal education: What about the summer camps, the youth movements, the campus programs, the trips to Israel? Are we to ignore research that points to the critically important high school and college years in the formation of peer groups and Jewish identity? Will we not direct more funds to embrace young people during those formative years? The question of day school affordability, in short, is one piece of a far larger puzzle. How do we finance the full range of Jewish educational programs, let alone expand them so that informal educational institutions reach more than a quarter of all young Jews, as is presently the case?

Thus far, I have solely discussed the funding of programs. I have not even touched upon the "dirty little secret" of Jewish education, namely, the dire shortage of trained educators. The problem is twofold: we lack sufficient personnel who have a strong Jewish education and also a sound grounding in pedagogy; and as a community we are not fielding enough people to staff schools and programs of informal education. Put differently: Who will teach the teachers? And how will we recruit the teachers? Only the Haredi sector of the Orthodox community is fielding large numbers of Jewish educators—albeit many who lack pedagogical training. The rest of the American Jewish community, meaning the other 97 percent, struggles to find personnel. Anyone looking for day school principals and teachers outside of the Haredi and Hasidic worlds knows firsthand of this crisis. Just look at the ads in the Forward or other Jewish newspapers in which day schools vie with one another for personnel. Thanks to the energetic efforts of activists in many communities, ever more day schools are opening, especially in the non-Orthodox sectors; but those schools are struggling mightily to staff themselves with well-trained educators. The personnel crisis is acute and likely to get worse, as public schools, which themselves are facing a similar shortage, siphon teachers away from Jewish education.

And then there is yet one additional aspect of the field crying for attention and support: the coordinating arms—those that produce curricula and set standards for schools. Budgets for central agencies have been slashed; the denominations cannot produce strong curricula or set standards for schools in their own movements. And a major reason for this is that these offices are understaffed and under funded.

My large point, then, is that an ambitious program to underwrite the cost of Jewish education entails far more than tuition aid and even direct grants to day schools. We cannot strengthen Jewish education if we ignore the personnel who work at the front lines with young people or if we continue to under fund the offices that coordinate curricula and set standards. As a community we would do well to prioritize among these varying needs. We need to make hard decisions as to which families most urgently need help to enable them to send their children to day schools, because we cannot aid all families. We need to prioritize as well among the competing needs within the field of Jewish education. What is the point in helping families afford day schools, when those schools cannot recruit the teachers for additional students?

I can imagine that by itemizing these various needs, I may well overwhelm you with the sheer complexity of the challenge. The tasks are immense, but I believe there is more reason for hope today than in quite a while. The field of Jewish education, at least for now, has the attention of the organized Jewish community and has more outspoken and well-placed champions than ever

before. The very fact that the AJC is convening a consultation on "Jewish Education and Public Policy" attests to the preoccupation with strengthening Jewish education that one encounters in many quarters of the Jewish community.

Moreover, within the American Jewish community significant new resources are becoming available that potentially can be directed to tackling some of the challenges I have enumerated. The new partnerships between family foundations, federations, day schools, synagogues, JCCs and the like all bespeak a new spirit cooperation and seriousness of purpose.

I am concerned, though, about the pace of change. American Jewry stands at a particular juncture early in the twenty-first century. Jewish educational institutions and programs are teeming with young people as the children of the younger baby boomers are making their way through the system. We have an opportunity to provide this cohort with more and better Jewish educational opportunities than those afforded to the offspring of the older boomers, let alone of the boomers themselves. We will miss out on this opportunity unless we act with alacrity.

For this reason, I believe it misguided to focus primarily on the creation of endowments. We cannot wait for money that will come through bequests. The time for action is now, not when our generous givers depart from this world in five or ten or fifteen years. We need to create a different kind of philanthropic climate, one that emphasizes the satisfactions of watching our philanthropic giving at work now, rather than the satisfaction of knowing that our names will be attached to funds in perpetuity.

I believe the moguls understand this well. The Birthright program is a perfect illustration: rather than create an endowment that will gradually grow and enable ever more young people to travel to Israel, the funders of Birthright recognized the immediacy of the need and took action to facilitate the trips. I just returned from a trip to Europe in which I found the same mentality at work in the programs of the Lauder Foundation: young people from former communist countries are in desperate need to reattach to Jewish life now. So rather than establish endowments, the foundation is sponsoring programs to reach those young people immediately. In five or ten years, it will be too late.

We must act with the same decisiveness to address domestic educational needs. We need to convince potential givers that their largesse today will bring them the satisfaction of watching their own money at work and will insure a viable Jewish future. I am haunted by the fear that we may one day have extraordinarily well-endowed Jewish schools, synagogues, JCCs, and other institutions but few Jews to fill them.

This raises serious questions both for foundations and for Jewish educational institutions. Like foundations generally, Jewish family foundations often limit their giving to the minimum required under the law, 5 percent of their assets a year. If the goal of such foundations is to improve the world, let alone help the American Jewish community, then they should focus less on the preservation of assets and more on meeting the needs of today. Some far-sighted foundations are disbursing all their assets in a planned fashion over a ten- or twenty-year period in order to do the maximum good now. Given the enormous challenges in the field of Jewish education, family foundations with an interest in these types of issues should consider a similar

strategy. In turn, institutions that raise money must determine the best mix of fund-raising for current programming versus the growth of their endowments. The needs of the hour, in short, necessitate a rethinking of current philanthropic patterns in the Jewish community.

Finally, I wish to address an item that has little to do with affordability, but is central to the success of Jewish education, and that is our ability to influence the thinking of a great many Jewish parents, the people who place their children in Jewish educational settings. Parent bodies can serve as powerful allies in the process of Jewish education, if not as partners, and they can also serve as subverters of the process. In some schools, parents are passionate advocates for more and better Jewish education; in others, they thwart the best efforts of educators. In day schools across the country, parent bodies fight for high standards; and in other schools they pressure educators to reduce the number of hours devoted to Jewish education and seek to turn day schools into private schools that happen to attract Jewish kids. The same is true in supplementary schools: parents bring enormous pressures in many such schools to cut back on the number of hours devoted to Jewish schooling. This too is an issue of affordability, albeit not one affecting tuition: Are families prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to get their kids to the supplementary school twice or thrice a week? We have ample evidence of how disastrously ineffective a minimalist Jewish education can be. The sociologist Steven M. Cohen contended in one study that one-day-a-week Jewish education is less effective than no Jewish education. Contact hours matter; the acquisition of knowledge matters; cognitive learning matters. The Jewish community can ill afford the delusion that it can raise the next generation with only the most minimal knowledge of what it means to be a Jew, but that somehow feeling good about being Jewish will suffice. This is our Jewish analogue to the self-esteem movement in general education, which has wrought so much havoc.

Finally, I wish to conclude on a note of caution: Jewish education alone, without parental reinforcement, will have only a limited impact. What this means is that Jewish education is a necessary foundation for Jewish living, let alone continuity, but it is not sufficient if parents subvert the message of the schooling. I am haunted by the prospect that we will invest large sums of money in Jewish education and then discover to our horror that we will continue to lose many young people to indifference because the lessons of the school were not reinforced in the home. Permit me to cite the work of the sociologist Paul Ritterband, who contributed to a study of Conservative synagogue members that I oversaw. Looking at synagogue attendance, Ritterband concluded: "while school and home may share ultimate goals, they perform different functions. Schools and their informal analogue, educational camps, impart knowledge and skills. For the most part, they do not impart basic values and moral commitments. The latter come from the home and the family." (I am quoting from Ritterband's essay in a just-published book I edited entitled *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and Their Members*.) We must win over families as partners in the process of Jewish education, if we hope to succeed. And to accomplish such an end, we will need to invest in family education, and also new types of programs to reach individual adults in ways not yet available in the Jewish community.

I have laid out several sets of issues we need to consider as we remake the field of Jewish education. Some will cost more money; others will require us to do business differently. Admittedly, I tend to view the challenges in the field as quite complex and not subject to a straightforward financial solution—if only because the needs are so staggering. What I do

caution against is to view the challenges in black and white terms: either we raise x millions of dollars or we don't and fail. It is heartbreaking to contemplate the many young Jews who will be lost because we could not bring them into the kinds of compelling programs that speak to them and educate them properly. On the other hand, the remarkable initial success of Birthright suggests that the needs are so great, the hunger so profound, that even incremental steps can win over thousands of young Jews to more intensive Jewish loving and engagement. Much as I would like to see greater rationalization and planning in this chaotic field, the immensity of the task requires us to direct funding to its many sectors even as we prioritize our giving within each sector.

Ultimately, the challenges of Jewish education transcend economics. We need to change the thinking and beliefs of donors and of a great many Jewish parents. Our ability to influence the hearts and minds of these populations will have as profound an impact on the future of American Jewry as our ability to find creative ways to finance the high costs of Jewish education.

1. Remarks delivered at a consultation on Jewish Education and Public Policy convened by the American Jewish Committee on June 7, 2000.