

# **The Educational Crisis in American Reform Judaism**

By Dana Evan Kaplan

## **The Situation Today—New Hope**

The American Jewish community has placed a low emphasis on serious Jewish education. This is one of the factors present in the increasing apathy of the Jewish community, which in turn has resulted in many Jews actively and passively choosing to disaffiliate from their religious communities. In direct contrast to this general apathy is the bright spark of the liberal Jewish Renewal movement which, by its very nature, encourages real participation of its members to study and learn Judaic texts. Even though a small group of American Jews have been involved in this growing movement over the past few decades, many more people have been losing interest in their Judaism over that same period of time. It has become impossible to continue relegating the Jewish educational agenda to a secondary status. In earlier decades, the lion's share of funds raised through the American Jewish federations went to local social services, with a very large percentage of those same funds designated for various projects in Israel. Now, most Jewish federations have been re-prioritizing and are committing themselves to allocating much greater financial

and other types of resources to both formal and informal Jewish educational programs.

There has been a growing understanding that without serious and widespread Jewish education, the number of American Jews might begin to diminish rapidly. Indeed, numerous factors strongly suggest that the long-term situation is fraught with difficulties, even under the best of circumstances. Plans for a Jewish renaissance have been drawn up, and a number of private foundations have been established so that wealthy individual donors might have a greater impact on the Jewish educational process. A "Birthright Israel" program was announced with the hope that by sending relatively large numbers of young Jews to Israel for short trips over the next five years, free of charge, greater enthusiasm would be generated and commitment to Judaism would grow among the young. The sponsors behind this huge marketing campaign of \$210 million believe that if the program can connect the "great silent majority" of Diaspora Jews to their history and culture, it may "halt the high rates of intermarriage, assimilation and drift among American and other Diaspora Jews" and inevitably "sell Jewishness to Jews" (Hockstader, 2000). It appears to be working well (Farrell, 1999).

## **Historical Background**

It is only in recent years that Reform Jews have discovered the possibilities of day school education, finding that there are new ways of approaching Reform

Judaism that differ from the Classical Reform expectations. It has been a revelation for those who have become aware that the Sunday school program is not the *only* option for Jewish education and may *not even be the best choice* for Reform Jewish children. In fact, when Central European Jews began immigrating to the United States in relatively large numbers in the 1820s and the 1830s, there was no public school system in place anywhere in America. Private individuals and communal organizations of different types were forced to organize educational programs privately. In many Jewish communities there were rabbis who administered educational programs, and many of these institutions included boarding facilities as well. These schools were not set up primarily to stress Jewish studies, but since they were run by Jewish educators for Jewish children they did include at least some Jewish studies. It may be one of the ironies of assimilation that the establishment of the public school system effectively drove the private Jewish-operated schools out of existence in the antebellum period in the mid nineteenth century, only to see them recreated a century and a half later, for reasons that are in many ways the opposite of the earlier motivation. Organized, mass public education was first introduced in the 1830s, and one of the goals of this educational system was to promote national solidarity. Becoming an American was an important and deeply held value. The success of democracy in this country was predicated to a large degree on the efficacy of the school systems to promote mutual tolerance. The large number of immigrants came from numerous European nations speaking different

languages and belonging to different religious denominations. The origins of universal American public education go back to the early seventeenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century most of the original colonies required townships to operate district schools open to all children from the age of six. The historical one-room schoolhouse was the most common structure for township education before and after the American Revolution. By 1815 almost fifty percent of all American children had been to school in various grade levels. A number of cities established school systems that reached large numbers of children. New York City established such a system in 1832 while Buffalo followed in 1838 and Rochester in 1848. Eastern states began to implement compulsory educational systems; Massachusetts instituted such a network in 1852, and New York in 1853 (Church, 1976).

Like other immigrant groups, Jews were eager to send their children to these public schools whenever possible. Like other new Americans they believed that such schools could teach their children English and enable them to succeed in American society. And this attitude had not changed until the recent controversies over multiculturalism (Brettschneider, 1996) and (Biale, Galchinsky & Heschel, 1998). One of the important by-products of public education was assimilation, which meant that immigrants would be welcomed into American society provided they would use English as their primary means of communication and would identify with America as both a country offering them freedom and opportunity, and as an ideal of justice and equality for all.

The process of assimilation was designed, according to some, to produce “a melting pot.” This phrase was first coined by Israel Zangwill (Zangwill, 1913), who used it as the title of his 1908 play, which was first performed in Washington D.C. and thereafter enthusiastically received in city after city. In this understanding the melting pot was a place where base metals representing different ethnic groups were melted down to form an alloy. Each base metal was represented in the alloy that was produced, but the alloy was obviously not identical with any one of the individual base metals (Salins, 1997). Throughout the twentieth century Jews as well as all types of other Americans have debated whether their assimilation into America necessarily involved jumping into a melting pot. In 1915 University of Wisconsin Professor Horace Kallen (Kallen, 1924) argued that American society was developing “cultural pluralism,” rather than a melting pot. Much later Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan published an update in 1963 entitled, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963). They, too, argued that the melting pot was not the only model for immigrant acculturation or assimilation. For committed Jews today the word assimilation conjures up extremely negative implications. One assimilates when one loses touch with one’s religious and ethnic group. One assimilates when one abandons one’s obligatory loyalties. One assimilates when one marries a non-Jew and raises one’s children as Christians or without any identifiable religion. Assimilation leads to intermarriage, which as Rabbi David

Einhorn stated in the nineteenth century, is “the nail in the coffin of the small Jewish race” (Einhorn, 1870).

But the previous statements do not cover the actual meaning of the word “assimilation” nor are they concerned with the sociological process. Assimilation into American society involves the process by which people of different cultural, linguistic, religious and/or racial backgrounds become part of the same national family. As such, it is an intrinsic part of America’s tradition of tolerance. All immigrants are expected to become American. They are not, however, required to surrender their ethnic heritage. And yet many people acculturate, accepting the dominant societal culture while letting go of their unique ethnic and/or religious identity. This process of radical assimilation is an implicit result of having “melted” into the “melting pot” of America. Such “products”—having been melted and reformed—would, of course, be culturally indistinguishable from each other. And everyone would be mixed up with everyone else, in a blending process very similar to that of a banana/strawberry puree whipped up in a modern blender set on high speed.

But now that American Jewish families are in their third, fourth or fifth generations in America, they are—for the most part—not nearly as concerned that they must prove themselves to be loyal and worthy Americans. They see themselves as Americans, and feel themselves to be Americans, and believe that most others share this perception of them. For these reasons it becomes far easier to reconsider the commitments that earlier generations of Jews made with

American society. It is no longer taken for granted that Jews must oppose parochial day school education on the grounds that it will retard, if not prevent, the Americanization of their children, and no one worries about this issue anymore. What some do worry about, however, is the *preservation of a commitment* to Judaism and the Jewish people. As the paradigm shifts, the standard arrangement of sending one's children to public school during the day and to *cheder* after school hours is no longer the only workable solution. Indeed, as the Hebrew school has developed a well-earned reputation as a failure, there is increasing pressure on Jewish communal leaders to move forward with alternative options.

### **The Afternoon Hebrew School—An Institution in Crisis?**

Afternoon Hebrew school programs in the Reform movement, for the most part, have had very unclear educational goals. Since there has been no certainty about what students should *know* and *learn*, firm curricula of subjects students should be *taught* have not been formulated. And without standard curricula for school programs, there is no objective means with which to evaluate whether the students are learning what they need to know about Judaism and secondarily, the Hebrew language. It has been assumed that Jewish children can, following their secular school day, go to afternoon Hebrew school one or two days a week. But because of the unfocused educational goals, lack of standards, and repetitiveness of the material, Jewish children in the Reform schools are simply

not receiving enough of the information they will need in order to grow up as Jewishly educated adults. Many of their parents are non-practicing Jews, and for most of them the real motivation for sending their children to the afternoon Hebrew school is to promote the experience of *feeling* Jewish. How can this goal possibly lend itself to establishing a clear-cut curriculum that matters? The parents want their children know that they are Jewish in order to develop an ethnic identity similar to that of their own parents. What makes this system so attractive to parents is that the afternoon school programs normally do not interfere with students' normal educational and extracurricular activities.

Janet Marder, the newly appointed senior rabbi of a large Northern California congregation and a former Regional Director for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), recalls that she was told that the afternoon school is "the castor oil of Jewish life," a burden passed from parent to child with this admonition: "I hated it, you'll hate it; after your bar mitzvah you can quit" (Marder, 1993). So, for many children and adults alike, Jewish afternoon education can be compared to the general dislike of castor oil. In the same way castor oil tastes terrible, but is supposed to be good for you, the afternoon Hebrew school is considered a rather distasteful experience that will nevertheless be good for the child in the long run. Marder brings a number of recollections from former Hebrew school students who unfortunately may be typical of how most adults remember their afternoon school experience. One recalled, "I remember sitting on uncomfortable chairs and day-dreaming a lot." Another

said, "The teaching materials were terrible; it was really corny stuff." A third spoke of the discipline problems. "It was a wild scene, the kids were running around the whole time. You could tell that they didn't want to be there and didn't take it seriously." And one simply stated, "I hated it, it was boring, a real turn-off" (Marder, 1993).

And yet, despite the fact that it is repeatedly cited as a negative experience by such a high percentage of adults, it continues to meet the needs of parents who want a nominal commitment of time and energy for an activity they view as just *one* of the many planned enrichment activities in which their children are involved on a daily and weekly basis. But this particular activity may very well cause more harm than good for the children involved in it. The Hebrew school may no longer provide even the limited goals it had set for itself in the previous generation. The process of Americanization has progressed to the point where the afternoon school no longer transmits the sort of residual identity to its children that it did for their parents twenty and thirty years ago. In today's America, a nominal attachment to Judaism is generally not sufficient to provide the sort of framework that is required to preserve an unambiguous Jewish identity. And without a clear-cut Jewish identity and without a deep commitment to Judaism as a way of thought and a way of life, it will be very difficult for the next generation to believe they should not marry someone of a different religious group. And if Jewish young people are marrying partners from other religious groups it will be very difficult for them to understand why, when they have

already become deeply ambivalent about Judaism, they should embrace their own religion.

## **The Jewish Day School and the Resurgence of Jewish Education**

The perception that the afternoon school is a very ineffective means of transmitting Jewish identity is one of the reasons that the Jewish day school movement has grown so dramatically throughout America in recent years. Many years ago the American Catholic Church set up parochial schools to provide an overall Catholic education for its children. The Church hoped the schools would serve to inspire their students with the beauty of Catholicism by teaching them a substantial amount of religious study during the course of their education. While this system has not necessarily been effective with *all* Catholic students, it has been in large part very successful in maintaining a status quo within the American Catholic Church. As with the Catholic schools, the Jewish day schools have been—on the whole—able to meet the needs of Jewish children's religious education.

There are other reasons for the upswing in interest in Jewish day schools, several of which have nothing to do with interest in Judaism itself. Changing neighborhoods and declining public school systems as well as other social and political factors have contributed in large measure to the change in attitude among Jewish parents. But there is also the realization that a day school

education provides a much deeper sense of Jewish identity than an afternoon school. But most Reform Jews have been very hesitant, since the traditional Reform stance has held that to segregate Jewish students all day would be a form of ghettoization. Before 1970, there was not a single Reform Jewish day school anywhere in the United States, but two were established in that year. Over the next twenty-five years, the number rose to about twenty schools with a combined enrollment of just under four thousand students. Although this is a very small number, it does not fully illustrate the sea change in attitude that the Reform movement has undergone. Most parents will still not send their children to day schools, but the reasons are now much more likely to be pragmatic. Nevertheless, far more families are willing to entertain the idea. In many cases where families are members of Reform congregations, they send their children to community day schools rather than Reform-affiliated day schools. Many communities have found that building a *community* day school is the most efficient way to provide this kind of education to the maximum number of students. Even though many of these day schools blend Reform and Conservative practice, they may also try to accommodate left-wing Orthodox students as well. But almost completely gone is the ideological commitment to public schooling. Most American Reform Jews feel sufficiently American and do not fear that when their children attend such a school, it will prevent them from feeling comfortable in American society. So this transformation in thought and attitude is very significant and it is extremely likely that as more Reform day

schools are founded and grow in size and academic reputation, more parents will consider them as viable options.

An example of this trend is the Milwaukee Jewish Day School in Wisconsin that was founded by a number of rabbis from Conservative and Reform congregations. It began holding its classes in the largest Reform synagogue in Milwaukee, but as it grew in numbers it was moved to the campus of the Milwaukee Jewish Community Center, where it now shares a building complex with a smaller Orthodox day school. The Milwaukee Jewish Day School has attracted the majority of its students from Conservative backgrounds, but has a very substantial representation from Reform families and some liberal Orthodox families as well. The future of the Reform movement may well be tied into how effectively these community day schools can transmit Jewish religious commitment. Michael Zeldin, Professor of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Los Angeles, states that the Reform day school came about in response to a growing disillusionment with supplementary Jewish education. Parents have become aware that it is impossible to teach children the Judaism they need in just a few hours a week, or convey the commitment so evident in past immigrant generations, or “even the most rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, an understanding of Jewish ideas, or a sense of their identities as Jews” (Marder, 1993).

## **Informal Educational Programs**

In an interesting contrast to the afternoon Hebrew school's inability to provide worthwhile structured Jewish education, some of the most successful educational youth programs are actually informal in nature. These are the youth groups, summer camps, trips to Israel, and "USY on Wheels" travel programs. Temple youth groups are the entry point for many young people into congregational life. The Reform movement has moved aggressively in recent years to help nurture the development of teen leaders as both youth group leaders and even congregational leaders. For example, a new program has been developed to take advantage of their tremendous enthusiasm by running a training program at the UAHC biennials for temple youth group leaders. This assembly aims to give participants an understanding of the Reform movement, how it operates, and the key role that congregations play in the "big picture." Secondly, it aims to teach teenage participants how to interact with adult congregational leaders, in order to effectively advocate their concerns and contribute to the development of not only the youth programs but also the congregation as a whole (Smith, Cohen & Hanover, 1997). The Leaders Assembly brings together youth group presidents and other youth movement leaders to help broaden and strengthen congregational service to youth on the local as well as national level.

This sort of innovative programming is of critical importance. Eric Yoffie acknowledged in December 1998 that the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) was "a shadow of its former self" (Yoffie, 1998). In order to build a structure that could be more effective at keeping young Jews involved in youth activities, particularly after their *bar-* or *bat-mitzvahs*, Yoffie announced a reorganization of NFTY, in which each of the UAHC's regions would hire a full-time professional to organize and develop youth programming in that particular region. Yoffie called the teen dropout rate in the Reform movement "appalling high," (Author not stated, 1998) and has committed himself to develop a range of new programs for teenagers who are not interested in youth groups. His ideas include a summer travel program focusing on social action projects, and a summer study program that combines SAT preparation and college visits with Judaica. There is no question that the Reform movement's summer camps have been among the most effective means of reaching the younger generation. For Jewish parents, summer camp is an opportunity to get a breather from car pools and the constant stream of errands associated with their children. For the children, it may be the very first time that they have lived in and experienced a Jewish environment twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It thus provides a short-term immersion in Jewish life similar to what the immigrant generations experienced naturally in both the old country and the new world. As journalist Jane Ulman puts it, Jewish overnight camps can provide "...a joyous,

invigorating and uplifting few weeks of total immersion in Judaism, with memories powerful enough to last the entire year" (Ulman, 1998).

Certainly, the NFTY conventions are impressive events. For example, during the 1999 conference held at the Westin LAX Hotel in Los Angeles, teenagers were packed wall-to-wall on the floor of the Westin's Grand Ballroom during the keynote addresses. During the workshops, there was standing-room only in the numerous meeting rooms. The convention brought more than 1,500 teenagers together for four days of discussion and debate. During this time, the youth have an opportunity to learn about a wide variety of subjects ranging from Judaism on the Internet to congressional laws and freedom of religion. One of the hopes is that the representatives will become enthused by the convention and take a palatable sense of excitement home with them to their local youth groups. Underlying much of their effort is the issue of interdating and intermarriage. Jeremy Rosenberg, NFTY President for the 1999-2000 year, referred to this connection. "NFTY teaches you to care about your Judaism. Most of the people here feel very strongly about their Judaism, and when you feel that strongly, you'll want to find someone who shares those feelings" (Levy, 1999).

The Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) issued an important report entitled, *The Teen Connection: Linking Jewish Youth in the Twenty-first Century* in early 1998. It argues that teenagers and adolescents have traditionally been a neglected group, and called upon "all Jewish

communities to attend more systematically to the needs of Jewish adolescents” for both formal and informal Jewish education (Vernon, 1998). The JESNA report pointed out that the number of Jewish youth between thirteen and eighteen years of age will increase over the next fifteen years from 325,000 to 450,000. It called on the Jewish community to act “quickly and decisively” to increase the level and the quality of programming offered to this age group (Gootman, 1998). Arthur Vernon, a rabbi and Director of Educational Development for JESNA, said, “There has been a renewed interest in teens around the country. It flows out of the concerns with continuity....clearly, teens are getting a lot more attention from the federation system than they were receiving eight years ago, or five years ago” (Gootman, 1998). The JESNA report predicts “unless the Jewish community acts quickly and decisively, there is a distinct possibility that the current cohort of Jewish adolescents will be far less connected to Jewish life as adults than any previous cohort” (Gootman, 1998).

Most of the youth movement leaders complained that they have received very little funding from local Jewish federations. Stephen Hoffman of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland admitted that, “As a community, nationally, locally, we are horribly neglectful of teenage youth groups. They are terribly underfunded. The lay leadership involved are wonderful volunteers, but they generally don’t have among their ranks leaders of the community” (Gootman, 1998). Hoffman is referring to the fact that most of the adults who are the strongest supporters of the youth movements are generally not rich and

influential community leaders; hence, they are not in a position to help the youth movements, to which they are so dedicated, to get the federation funding they need. And since most people tend to financially support the causes they know best, this has worked very much against the youth groups. Allan Smith, National Director of NFTY, echoed the complaint heard from other youth movement leaders. Local federations have "...never taken [NFTY] seriously up until now. They're beginning to see there's something there, but they're still not releasing the dollars" (Gootman, 1998). But NFTY is obviously not relying on support from the federation system since its primary means of support is through the UAHC.

Another very effective program is the Israel trip. It has been found that is possible for a teenager who spends from two to six weeks in Israel to come back with a level of enthusiasm that would be impossible to achieve in any other way. NFTY offers a variety of Israel trip experiences, including some that make stopovers in Europe as well. Many of the NFTY Israel trips combine time in Jerusalem with an archeological expedition and tours throughout the country. The participants visit a *kibbutz* and spend time in the Haifa area with Israeli teenagers. Many of the trips include a five-day *ulpan*, Hebrew immersion program, and gives them an opportunity to become part of the NFTY "*mitzvah* corps" which involves them in a range of service projects which could include building a playground, painting classrooms, organizing day-camp activities for Israeli children, or assisting the elderly (Author not stated, 2000).

## **Adult Studies—A Problematic Area for Reform**

Study has been a problematic area for Reform. In traditional Jewish thought, people see God as speaking to them through study. The UAHC leadership is trying to create a “synagogue of the future” which will be a place of learning for all. There is the hope that there can be an explicit connection made between emotional as well as intellectual growth and Jewish learning. Most adult education programs in Reform synagogues reach only a small percentage of the congregants. Frequently it is the same people who enroll and re-enroll in adult education courses, fall and spring, year after year. While these courses are often very valuable for those who take them, they reach only an infinitesimally small percentage of Reform Jews. There may be alternative approaches that can be used to rouse other types of congregants so that they, too, can be exposed to serious adult Jewish study as well as serious Jewish experience.

The study that takes place at the UAHC biennial and the other regional and national Reform conferences is seen by many Reform leaders as models for what serious Jewish study can and should be. Adult retreats, referred to by their Hebrew designation, *Kallot*, are particularly successful. Meeting originally on the East and West coasts, they now also include a *Kallah* (singular of *Kallot*) in the Midwest and one in Canada. Such a retreat generally runs for five days and includes a *Shabbat* experience. The courses range through a gamut of Jewish studies but concentrate on the subjects currently in vogue, which include topics

such as spirituality, prayer, mysticism and gender issues. There are courses such as Steven Weitzman's "Locating God: Jewish Perceptions of Sacred Space" (No author, Kallah, 2000), and Cantor Jeff Klepper's teaching on "The Rhythms of Worship" (Author not stated, Kallah, 2000). There are textual courses such as Lewis Barth's "Prayer and Worship in Biblical, Midrashic, and Talmudic Texts" (Author not stated, Kallah, 2000), and Peter Knobel's "The *Siddur* and *Tanach*, the Prayer Book and the Bible: A Conversation with God, about God, and about Us (Author not stated, Kallah, 2000). Those who have participated in the *Kallah* experience describe it as an intimate study experience that focuses the participants on serious textual study, while at the same time providing them with a spiritual encounter. The Canadian *Kallah* includes "meditation, twice-daily services, and a complete *Shabbat* experience with *Mikveh*, singing, optional workshops and study, and Israeli dancing..." (Author not stated, Kallah, 2000). The Canadian retreat also includes a "Kids *Kallah*" for the children of participants, aged 4 to 12. The children have a concurrent Judaica program that mirrors what the parents are doing. On *Shabbat* the children are encouraged to reflect, "...on how Jewish learning has touched their young lives" (Author not stated, Kallah, 2000).

This formula for adult education has been very successful because it brings together the more motivated Reform congregants into an intensive atmosphere that minimizes outside distractions. The teachers are mostly top scholars who are exceptional in that they also bring a deep emotional commitment to the

project. The hope is that as more and more people go through one or more *Kallot* and other similar programs, there will be a noticeable impact on the congregational experience. The Department of Adult Jewish Growth views this type of project as central to their mission.

The *Kallah* is designed to provide opportunities for “experimenting” with Jewish tradition. Eugene Borowitz has argued that Reform Jews should try various rituals and then, coming from a position of personal experience, they can decide whether it is a practice that is religiously meaningful to them personally (Borowitz, 1984). But asking Reform Jews to try new ritual activities on their own at home, when they are completely unfamiliar with them, is not likely to be very successful. They have to see it modeled, and they have to experience it in a communal context. So the *Kallah* can play an important role in giving participants a chance to see new rituals and to consider trying them out. The *Kallah* environment is both informal and non-threatening and this may encourage many to try out new forms of ritual expression.

It is not clear how much of an impact the informal adult activities will have on the movement as a whole. But it is certainly apparent that they are a laboratory environment where new ideas can be tried out and an appropriate setting for the transmission of new paradigms of Reform Jewish thought and living.

## Conclusion

Most American Reform Jews remain ignorant of Jewish tradition. They know little of their history beyond certain seminal events, and they are illiterate in the traditional literature. Nevertheless, larger numbers of them are turning to a uniquely American form of Jewish education, which—while it remains far removed from what would be considered a classical Jewish education—is attractive and satisfying. The impact of Eric Yoffie’s education revolution is only in its early stages. While it does not show an ability to radically transform the American Reform Jew, it has shown an energy that has invigorated substantial numbers of individuals. Combined with a series of parallel initiatives, the Reform movement may show more strength and vitality in the coming years. It will never develop into a learned form of religiosity in the sense of the lifestyle of the Lithuanian *Yeshivot*, but it may very well become a model for an American liberal religious movement.

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