

**Remembering What We Never Knew:
Jewish Education in the 21st Century**

Founders Day Address

**Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion,
Los Angeles**

February 28, 2008

Dr. Michael Zeldin

Professor of Jewish Education

Director, Rhea Hirsch School of Education

As we gather here today to honor the two great founders of our institution, Isaac Mayer Wise and Stephen Samuel Wise, I can't help but note that only two days ago we witnessed another annual Los Angeles ritual, the Academy Awards and that we are in the midst of a tumultuous election season. I am reminded of one of Hollywood's finest political movies, in which Jimmy Stewart plays an idealistic newspaper publisher who is appointed senator by politicians who are confident that they can control him. You may remember the movie for its charming portrayal of Stewart's character staying up all night to filibuster. The most poignant scene for me is when Mr. Smith is on his way to Washington, talking on the train with the senior senator from his state. He relates the advice and guidance he received from his late father: The only causes worth fighting for are lost causes.

I wonder whether our founders would lie awake nights worrying that they were fighting lost causes. I wonder if Isaac Mayer Wise feared he might never overcome the odds to create a union of Hebrew congregations that would then create a college to prepare rabbis (and, generations later, other Jewish professionals). I wonder whether Stephen S. Wise was concerned that it would be impossible to create an institute that was Zionist in its orientation and which would serve all of the Jewish people not just the

Reform Movement. And I wonder whether those who led this school 60 years ago were afraid they might not be able to merge two institutions with such different orientations to Jewish life and to Israel, Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, into a single graduate school and seminary.

As we leaders of the Reform Movement and the greater Jewish community sit here today, we too face lost causes, none of which is more challenging, more vexing and more perplexing than Jewish education. In literature and lore, Jewish education is a much maligned endeavor. Too many parents still tell their children, “I suffered through it and so will you.” Jewish newspapers still publish stories with headlines like “Hebrew School Horror Stories.” And too many of our leaders, both lay and professional, still carry the view that except for summer camps and day schools, Jewish education is a dismal failure. They put too few resources into Jewish education, do not encourage enough of the best and brightest young people to pursue careers of service to the Jewish people through Jewish education, and lament the failures of Jewish education without being willing to take bold steps to change the status quo.

And the status quo is grim: No more than 40% of eligible Jewish children are enrolled in Jewish schools in any given year, and an even

smaller percentage of Jewish adults engage in Jewish study. There are never enough high quality teachers to fill Jewish classrooms, and leadership positions in congregations and day schools often go unfilled for years. The task facing Jewish education is daunting: to transform a generation of Jews, many of whom are 5th and 6th generation Americans who are so steeped in American culture and in American ways of life that Jewishness is not even a distant second in their multiply-hyphenated identities. Often they are American, male or female, Republican or Democrat, gay, straight or bi, movie fan, sports fan and music fan before they get to describing themselves as Jewish. The way Walter Ackerman described the knowledge levels of American Jews a generation ago rings just as true today: Our generation's knowledge of Judaism may be a mile wide, but it is only an inch deep. A few years back, my colleague Isa Aron captured the state of Jewish education in a single word: Malaise

To bring about the radical change in Jewish education that the times call for will require bold new thinking on the part of educators, rabbis, and lay champions of Jewish education. Doing business as usual will not work. And thinking like we usually do won't work either. As Albert Einstein is purported to have said, "We will never be able to solve our problems at the same order of complexity we used to create our problems." Despite

Kohelet's reminder that *ein hadash tahat hashamesh*, there is nothing new under the sun, we have no memory, either individually or collectively, of how to meet the challenges that face Jewish education in the 21st century.

I recently learned of a technique Buddhist philosophers use that may help us here. Rather than ask their minds to search for solutions to potentially impossible challenges, they simply remember the solutions. The presupposition that they once knew the answers creates a mindset that the answers must exist, thus eliminating the crippling notion of hopelessness. So today I will try a thought experiment, remembering three ideas about Jewish education we never knew. Remembering these ideas can create in us the mindset that answers must exist for the dilemmas facing Jewish education in the 21st century.

Let us begin by examining the metaphors we use to think about Jewish identity and Jewish education. Sociologist Stuart Charme suggests that the “drink your milk” metaphor has dominated our thinking for the past few generations. Children drink milk in their youth to produce strong bones, so that muscles can attach to those bones and can be exercised throughout life. According to this view, Jewish education is the milk of childhood that builds the bones of Jewish identity so that adults can exercise their

Jewishness. This pediatric view of Jewish education is supported by a long tradition of research into Jewish identity and Jewish education.

Starting around 1970, researchers began asking about the correlation between Jewish education and adult Jewish identification. In the most notorious study of the era, Harold Himmelfarb discovered that only people who had 3,000 hours of Jewish education were certain to have a strong Jewish identification (that is, do a lot of Jewish activities and have Jewish friends and neighbors and culture in the home). Geoffrey Bock countered that after only 1,000 hours Jewish education can have a significant impact on Jewish identity – at least on what Bock called public Jewishness, behaviors and activities that others could see, like going to synagogue and having Jewish friends. The famous – or should I say infamous – National Jewish Population Study of 1990 yielded a similar idea. “The more the more” was the slogan that emanated from that research: The more Jewish education one had as a child, the more likely it was that he or she would participate in Jewish activities and behaviors as an adult.

What is clear from all of this research is that in the late 20th century Jewish education was appreciated for its instrumental value: Jewish education was good, desirable and worthy of community support because at

some point in the future children who went to Jewish schools would be active, identified Jewish adults.

Recent Jewish identity research leads us to question the drink your milk view and ask: Is Jewish education today worthwhile only because it leads to Jewish identity tomorrow? Is Jewish education worthy of support only because it produces good Jewish adults? Or does it have some other value and rationale? The new research challenges the old paradigm on three counts: First, the old paradigm focuses on the “outsides” of Jews, that is, what they do; the new paradigm focuses on their “insides,” what meaning they ascribe to their Jewishness. Next, the old paradigm says that Jewish identity is static and can, as Tali Hyman suggests, best be seen through a still camera; the new paradigm says identity is always changing and can be viewed best through a movie camera. Finally and most importantly, the old paradigm says that what children do determines the type of adults they become; the new paradigm tells us that we are constantly creating and recreating our Jewish identities with each action we take, each person we meet, and each event we witness. In Bethamie Horowitz’s felicitous phrase, researchers used to ask, “How Jewish are Jews?” and now they want to know, “How are Jews Jewish?”

So maybe we need not see Jewish education only in instrumental terms. Maybe Jewish education is not just about producing results way down the line. Maybe Jewish education has intrinsic value, is worthwhile for what it is now, can be “lishmah.” John Dewey long ago taught that education should not be seen just as preparation for life; school, Dewey said, is life. That’s why the progressive educators who followed him paid so much attention to the quality of the educational experience itself, not just whether it produced results on standardized tests. And that is why Jewish educators can put aside the idea that we are educating for some distant future identification and begin paying more attention to now, to what the Jewish educational experiences children and adults have today is like. We might ask ourselves whether students in our schools, campers in our camps, and adults in our adult learning programs, are engaging in activities in which they find meaning, satisfaction and growth. Are they challenged so they can experience the cognitive emotions that come from solving a dilemma? Are they learning so they go home each day saying, “This was a great way to use my time”? Are they engaged in meaningful activities so they can know that their days have been enriched by taking part in Jewish learning. A 12-year-old philosopher I once knew suggested that at the end of each school day I should ask him three questions: “Did you have fun?” “What did you

learn?” “And how did you make the world a better place?” If every Jewish learner can walk away from every Jewish learning encounter with positive answers to those three questions, they will keep coming back because they will know that their lives are being enriched through their engagement with Jewish learning.

In describing the success of informal Jewish education, Joseph Reimer suggests that by having rich Jewish experiences something often “clicks” for people so that they choose to pursue some aspect of their Judaism or their link to the Jewish people. The Jewish educational task, then, is to provide intrinsically valuable Jewish experiences for Jews of all ages, experiences that “click,” experiences that provide what Elliot Eisner calls “a fertile field for personal purposing.” We can, for example, provide a rich Shabbat community in which children and adults learn by experiencing Shabbat rather than learning about Shabbat. It need not be called a school, as long as opportunities for formal and informal learning are everywhere. Jewish learning and Jewish living then become one and become significant in people’s lives because they add richness now. The future will take care of itself.

What, then, of the content of a Jewish education for now? Historian Jonathan Sarna suggests that the big question which Jewish education comes

to answer is “How do we train successive generations of Jews to live as Jews in the American arena?” Often we devote ourselves in Jewish schools to only part of this question. We do train the next generation to live as Jews...or at least we try to...but we do so in a vacuum rather than in the context of living in America. Indeed, our most successful form of Jewish education, summer camping, succeeds precisely because camps isolate children on Jewish islands and shield them from encountering America.

My sense is that if we took Sarna’s challenge seriously we would begin to think about the content of Jewish education in new ways. We would, I think, educate for resonance and dissonance. In music, resonant tones sound good together. In physics, resonance happens when a relatively small vibration causes a large vibration in a nearby system. Resonance also suggests the evoking of strong emotion. How do we get Judaism and Jews vibrating together? How can we get Jews to resonate with Israel, both the mythical and the real? How can we help Jews feel attached to their Jewishness, to other Jews and to God so that they feel connected enough to open themselves up to resonance? I don’t have answers to these questions, but I am convinced that these are the questions we ought to be asking ourselves. These are spiritual questions; out of our answers we can provide for ourselves and those we educate avenues of connection to matters beyond

ourselves, whether God, the transcendent Jewish people, the natural world, or the universe.

What then of dissonance? Musicians tell me that without dissonance, the ear cannot appreciate resonance. Without contrast, the world becomes undifferentiated. Without knowing how Jewish values differ from American values, why would anyone choose to live as a Jew; why not just live as an un-hyphenated American? Based on her research, Sylvia Barrack Fishman found that many American Jews see Jewish values and American values as a single, undifferentiated constellation which she terms “coalescence.” American Jews, she says, have come to identify any value they find appealing as a Jewish value. Kindness, charity, environmentalism and democracy are all Jewish values. Baseball is a Jewish sport and yoga is becoming a Jewish practice! Coalescence is the contemporary expression of a view articulate by Justice Brandeis when he said, “The Jewish spirit ... is essentially modern and essentially American.” But if being American and being Jewish are the same, we may wonder what value there is in being Jewish.

Elliott Dorff gives us the beginning of an answer when he quotes the foundational texts of the two civilizations to which we are heirs. Listen first to this: “These truths we hold to be self evident, that all men are created

equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” And now this: “See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of Adonai your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of Adonai your God...” The first text speaks of rights, the second of responsibilities. The first leads us to reify individualism, the second to elevate communitarianism. To acknowledge that we are heir to these two systems, these two world views, these two guides to figuring out how to live our lives, is to create dissonance, and to teach to these two value sets is to raise anxiety. But as long as the anxiety is kept to a moderate level, it remains motivating and not paralyzing; people work to resolve anxiety, just as pieces of music move towards the resolution of dissonance. As we strive to work out the tensions between our Jewishness and our Americanness, we come to understand how each can enrich the other. As Jewish leaders, we may be tempted to say that Jewish values should always prevail and that our task is to bring our Jewish values to the public square. If we approach life with this Jewish triumphalism, we miss the point: There are times when American Western values can trump traditional Jewish views. As David Ellenson has said, Western ideas of equality and human dignity trump very clear traditional

Jewish views about women's roles and about homosexual love and lead us to create entirely new religious values.

So far I have suggested that we see Jewish education as intrinsically valuable in the now and not merely instrumental for some future Jewish identity. I have also suggested that we educate for the resonance and spirituality that come from attachment to Judaism, Jewishness and the Jewish people as well as for the dissonance that allows Jews to experience the rationale for being Jewish. Now I get to the more pragmatic question: How?

We as a community have spent generations looking for a silver bullet, a magical solution to the problems of Jewish education. We have not found one and I'm not sanguine about us ever finding one. The quest for a single solution is quixotic at best, self-destructive at worst. Neither day schools nor summer camps nor family education nor birthright nor the latest catch phrase in Jewish education, linking the silos, will do the trick. The strategy of linking the silos was articulated by Jack Wertheimer as a way of acknowledging that no single institution of Jewish education can do it all. In a twist on the slogan of the 90s, "the more the more," Wertheimer suggests that the "more" Jewish education that people need cannot be experienced in any single type of institution. Our task as leaders of the Jewish community

is to provide seamless transitions from day schools to summer camps, from preschools to congregational schools, from institution to institution, rather than protecting our own parochial interests.

I agree with Wertheimer but I don't think he goes far enough. I believe that we have to link the silos that exist today, and those that haven't even been imagined. Indeed, I wonder if imagining doesn't have even more potential than linking. Take for example congregational education. The model we've inherited was developed soon after World War II, when the migration to the suburbs reached its apex. The afternoon Hebrew School coupled with Sunday morning religious school fit the new suburban lifestyle of the 50s, and it may have still been appropriate into the 60s. But as the 60s ballad suggested, the times they were a'changing, but Jewish education didn't. Congregational education is basically the same as it was even though the community around it and the very nature of childhood and adolescence have changed radically. When the Jewish community began to recognize that the old system was fraying at the edges, we first collectively put our hope in day schools. Conservative day schools spread in the 60s and 70s, Reform day schools in the 70s and 80s, and community elementary and high schools in the 90s and this decade. But at best, about 10% of the non-orthodox population receives its education in day schools. So the attention

in recent years has turned back to the congregational school in the hopes that we can find the “right way” to do religious school. But there is no one right way; there is not even one best way. And even if we find a model that works in one congregation today, we cannot be confident that it will be right for other congregations or that it will still be right for this congregation a few years from now. Rather than continuing to search for the magic bullet, we need to develop the courage to experiment, to innovate, to make change the only constant in Jewish education. We need to learn how to engage in a continuous process of inquiring, hypothesizing, trying new ideas, collecting evidence, and then inquiring again. Given how much people tend to resist change, you may say, how can we risk entering into this cycle of continuous change and innovation. As Robert Weinberg, director of the Rhea Hirsch School’s Experiment in Congregational Education, points out, people often see the risk of innovating, yet they rarely see the risk of not innovating. Or as the Roman philosopher Seneca put it, “It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.”

As I see it, we need to dare to embark on a constantly renewing cycle of experimentation and innovation, aware that we may never find the solution to the problems of Jewish education. As we do so, I urge us not to

see constant change as a sign of weakness or an indication that we are lost. The boldness to innovate is the ultimate sign of hope, not a wistful hope that we will find the answer, but a hope that we can bring ideas to life. As poet, playwright and president of the Czech republic Václav Havel has said, **“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.** In short,” he said, “I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere.’; It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.” Like Isaac M. and Stephen S. Wise, may we innovate with courage; like the Buddhist philosopher, may we draw confidence from remembering what we never knew; and like the Jewish people has done for generations, may we march confidently into the future inspired by *Hatikvah*, our people’s anthem of hope. Even if we never solve the problems of Jewish education, may we keep fighting the good fight for a cause that may not, after all, be such a lost cause. Ken y’hi ratzon.