

Teacher Shortages Should be a Problem of the Past

“Why would you want to be a Jewish educator? Is that even a ‘real’ job? Isn’t that the same as just being a Hebrew school teacher, but all of the time?” Finishing up my last year at Brandeis University, I was both excited and nervous to apply to Hebrew Union College’s New York School of Education. I have always known that I wanted to be a Jewish educator in one setting or another, and whenever faced with the question, “Leah, what do you want to be when you grow up?” the answer was always the same: a Jewish teacher. During the application process for HUC, my friends were fascinated to discover that a graduate school even existed for such training, and furthermore, that I was nervous that I would not be accepted. “I don’t even know one person (besides you of course) who would want to go to graduate school for Jewish education; I don’t think you will face much competition.” After many of these conversations, I was left a little discouraged. The majority of my friends were Jewish (we did attend Brandeis after all) and knew that I taught religious school for a local Massachusetts synagogue four days a week- and to that end, they also knew I greatly enjoyed teaching. Why would it come as such a surprise that I would want to pursue this career on a more administrative level? By the fact that my Jewish friends, all of whom have been a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and therefore attended religious school, did not recognize Jewish education as a field of

study, and more importantly, did not take this profession seriously, suggests that we seem to be facing a serious problem.

As a religious school teacher for the four years I studied at Brandeis, I slowly recruited more and more of my friends to also teach at the same synagogue in the afternoons. For those who were proud of their Judaism, loved being around children of different ages, desired to be more connected within the Jewish world, had extra time on their hands, and didn't mind getting paid high hourly wages, teaching religious school was great fun and a very rewarding experience for all who participated. This was a unanimous feeling among my friends, and I was thrilled that I could share my passion for Jewish education with them. Given this situation, one can only understand my confusion as to their less than positive reactions to my desire to pursue this love as my lifelong career.

Before we go further, we must be clear about the definitions we are using. What is a "Jewish educator?" Should this be a blanket statement that includes everyone working professionally in the Jewish world? Should rabbis and cantors also be considered "Jewish educators?" In my perspective, all of those involved in "doing Jewish,"¹ from leadership positions in the Jewish field to religious school teachers, B'nai mitzvah tutors, early childhood educators, youth group advisors, and camp counselors have the ability *and* opportunity to educate children, in addition to families and adults. Even in more "informal"² settings, camp counselors and youth group advisors are

¹ I first heard this term as a confirmation student instructed by Rabbi Jeffery Sirkman.

² Barry Chazan, "The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education" found at http://www.infed.org/informaljewisheducation/informal_jewish_education.htm#examples copyright: Barry Chazan 2003. Chazan provides many examples of what would be considered Jewish "informal education," "Jewish youth movements and organizations, camps and retreats, Jewish community centers, Jewish travel."

presented with numerous “teachable moments” that could and would simply infuse a love for Judaism and Jewish practice all the more in a natural manner. Rabbis and cantors are Jewish educators in the most pure sense; they serve as leaders of the community based on their Jewish knowledge, ability to perform Jewish life cycle events, and their own modeling of ethical and moral Jewish behavior and living. Religious school directors and principals also fall under this more administrative title, and function as the “lead educator” of their synagogues. Frequently their job description focuses on the education of young students; however, many are also involved in family and adult learning as well. “Jewish educator,” as an umbrella term, includes many individuals and also gives those in other professions the opportunity to become involved in our next generation’s learning and future- in any definition and time frame. Because this term is open for interpretation and holds different perspectives, it should be expected that there be institutions of higher learning to train those whose life interest lies in the education of our people.

This sentiment of becoming “just a Hebrew school teacher” is not a new response to Jewish professional opportunities. In past decades, the reasons for a lack of interest in becoming Jewish educators has been studied and documented. The “crisis in Jewish education”³ and teacher shortage⁴ is not a new concept or concern. During the nineteen-fifties, sixties, and seventies, several reasons surfaced helping to explain the lack of interest in teaching religious school. Active and influential Jewish leaders⁵ took a stance against this troubling problem and the issue was also recorded widely in circulating

³ Susan L. Rosenblum Shevitz, *Communal Responses to the Teacher Shortage in the North American Supplementary School*, 34. Shevitz highlights in her article a number of Jewish leaders and publications that spoke and wrote on this very subject. This particular quote was stated by A.P. Schoolman in 1957

⁴ *Ibid.* 34-35.

⁵ *Ibid.* Shevitz highlights Alpert P. Schoolman, Philip Lown, Hyman Chanover, Menachem M. Edelstein, Alexander M. Dushkin, Oscar Janowsky, and Walter I. Ackerman in addition to many other Jewish leaders.

periodicals.⁶ Shevitz highlights many of the unappealing rationales responsible for causing religious school teachers to be scarce in North America during this time period.⁷ Shevitz's article emphasizes that religious school teachers were not paid well, were not offered health benefits, did not need higher education to be hired (thereby decreasing the prestige of this career), and few prospects for future advancement existed.⁸ With this list of disadvantages, I would have to agree with my friends' opinions, why *would* anyone want to become a religious school teacher, or be a Jewish professional in general?

Rather, the question we *should* be asking is, why would anyone *not* want to become a Jewish educator (remembering our umbrella term)? How can we, as a progressive Jewish movement, afford to not make teaching a beneficial and worthwhile opportunity for any professional? What will become of our greater community if this problem of teacher shortage persists? Teaching and shaping young minds is one of the most critical and essential roles one can take in their community. So the question then is, how can religious schools encourage those who are qualified to become involved in this process?

In my experience, having taught in four different religious schools, there have been many wonderful approaches that have directly addressed the issues brought forth in Shevitz's article. High hourly wages, acquiring a sense of accomplishment and respect from students, parents, and the synagogue's clergy, teacher meetings, staff development

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-37. The publications included: *Jewish Education*, *Congress Weekly*, *American Jewish Year Book*, and *The Jewish Digest* as well as others.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35. In reference to Chart I on page 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-39. Shevitz recorded Philip Lown's ten reasons for the teacher shortage, "Ten causes of the personal crisis were examined at the conference: (1) inadequate social and economic status, (2) limited opportunities for satisfying work, (3) poor recruitment procedures, (4) inadequate supply from which to draw new teachers, (5) insufficient correlation between teachers' preparation and subsequent work, (6) improper placement machinery, (7) limited growth opportunities, (8) few chances for advancement, (9) growing enrollment, and (10) unduly large turnover."

and support sessions, dinners, and other incentives (either in the form of monetary stipends or delicious treats) have attracted young adults like myself and my college friends to help improve this “shortage” situation. Happy teachers not only continue from year to year, but also encourage their friends to get involved and help make a difference.

Other methods of redressing the problem of teacher shortages would be to “market” this occupation to those who are *already* involved and get them *more* involved. One is never too young to at least be aware of the possibilities of continuous Jewish active participation. NFTY youth group leaders, alumni of the Eisendrath International Exchange (EIE) Program to Israel, camp counselors, college Hillel members, confirmation students, sons and daughters of synagogue presidents, Sisterhood, Brotherhood, and Hadassah members should be contacted and be made aware of the kind of positive influence they can have on their generation of young Jews. Young adults who have already chosen to be a part of the Jewish world should be presented with the opportunity to make a profound difference. Such individuals should also be informed that Jewish educational institutions exist and provide the necessary training to become the most effective Jewish leaders and teachers enabling one to make a lasting and valuable change. And what about those who love Judaism, and do not desire to teach religious school? We must expose enthusiastic Jews to other positions of leadership beyond the classroom setting. Camp counselors, youth group advisers, chaperones, and tutors can make a profound impact on their participants; one of my first inklings that I should become a Jewish professional came from my favorite Eisner camp counselor.

There exist two main issues here: 1. Choosing to become involved in the Jewish professional world in any capacity, 2. Choosing Jewish education as one’s sole

occupation. Perhaps it is crucial to advertise the notion of simply *becoming involved now*. If a college student has always dreamed of becoming a lawyer or doctor, why can they not be encouraged to participate Jewishly for any amount of time, and look to other Jewish opportunities in the future, even if they chose another field as their sole occupation? Because this commitment has varying degrees of involvement, it allows one to enter and exit (and hopefully reenter) this *professional* arena in any capacity throughout their lives. For example, if one desires to teach religious school for only one year, be a camp counselor, staff a NFTY Summer in Israel trip, or work as a youth group chaperone, they are serving as Jewish educators. With regards to my friends who aspired to become professionals outside of the Jewish field, working as “just a Hebrew school teacher” or in the other capacities as mentioned above, was actually one of the more appealing “occupations” available for a Jewish college student or part-time worker. Becoming a religious school teacher, for any length of time, requires Jewish knowledge and study, therefore, should this not be a job encouraged for all who qualify? Every Jewish person should be aware that the career of lifelong Jewish learning and teaching exists, and furthermore, that it is a serious, academic, and competitive field of interest and prestige. At the same time, however, we should continue to encourage participation in any form or circumstance.

When I received my acceptance letter to HUC’s New York School of Education, my friends were not surprised. This is not (unfortunately) because they had faith in my abilities and knowledge of my passions, but because they were under the impression that anyone who applied to this graduate school would be accepted. This is simply not true! The population of applicants is self-selecting; however, there are high standards for

becoming a Jewish educator. There should not be a “shortage” of qualified Jewish educators, especially with the numerous areas and settings where we can reach and encourage enthusiastic Jews to help promote their apparent love and passion for Jewish life. Get involved now!