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SOE 405 Contributing to the Field

Jewish Family Education as the Personification of *L'Dor V'Dor*

Despite the many educators who bemoan the state of supplementary Jewish education, there are a fair number of parents who will tell you that it is functioning just as it should. According to Jack Wertheimer's *Jewish Education in the United States*, more than a few parents extolled the usefulness of a congregational school where they were able to leave their children for the morning or afternoon and have little else to do with the place.¹ In many of America's Reform supplementary schools that is exactly what they get, but most educators in the field today will readily tell you that that is not enough. The question then becomes, what is enough? For those who see that this question only barely scratches the surface, we would do even better to ask, "What is our ultimate goal?" For many, one answer is continuity. Even for those who are less invested in their child's Jewish education, the moment when they pass the Torah to their child as that child becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah is deeply moving and indeed indicative of the importance of the idea of *L'Dor V'Dor* in Jewish education.

How, then, are we to achieve continuity, especially in such a diverse community in which continuity can mean so many things? As generations come and go the Jewish story becomes ever longer and more diverse with more to remember. At the same time, the American Jewish child grows ever more invested in the America around him or her. Isa Aron, professor of Education at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, believes that the crux of the matter lies in the current trend of education toward factual information rather than enculturation. With the typical American Jewish child spending only three to five hours a week in a Jewish educational setting, it is impossible to expose the child to all of the vast corpus of Jewish knowledge before he or she reaches the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Aron's

¹ Wertheimer, Jack, "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," American Jewish Year Book, Vol 99, 1999: p. 10.

position is that we should instead focus upon Jewish identity formation and instilling the value of lifelong Jewish learning in our children. She contends that the former is certainly impossible in the cultural milieu in which most American Liberal Jews live today, while the latter may be possible. Aron further believes that supplementary schools today are producing “culturally deprived children,” with this misguided focus on facial information.² If this is true, it is hardly surprising; it is impossible to achieve enculturation in five hours per week. In short, supplementary schools cannot do the job alone. It must truly be *supplementary* to something more. Because enculturation often begins in the home among family, one logical solution is to combine family with congregational education.

It has often been argued that perhaps the greatest difficulty facing Jewish education today is the gap between the family and the school.³ There is no doubt that parents play a tremendous role in the habits of children. We encourage parents to model good eating and physical health habits, so it stands to reason that we would also encourage them to model good spiritual health habits, as well. Jewish family education facilitates just that. In a family education setting, not only are parents, guardians and other family members given the opportunity to acquire new Jewish knowledge and practice to model for their children, but they are also - by their very presence - modeling the value of lifelong Jewish learning.

Admittedly, there are those who are hesitant to attempt any modification on supplementary Jewish education, feeling that it is broken beyond repair.⁴ Jewish educational thinker and policy maker, Jonathan Woocher, has contended that American Jews maintain a “love-hate relationship” with Jewish education.⁵ While they feel that the current educational system is flawed, they also feel that a Jewish education of some kind is absolutely necessary for their children. Despite this ambivalence, the fact remains that scores of children are

² Wertheimer, Jack, p. 37

³ Wertheimer, Jack, p. 10.

⁴ Wertheimer, Jack, p.40

⁵ Wertheimer, Jack, p. 4.

enrolled each year and the love-hate relationship endures. The task of improving such a fractured relationship may be daunting, indeed, but as is often quoted from Pirkei Avot, “It is not upon us to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it.”⁶

There is substantial research indicating that Jewish family education is a viable way to revitalize supplementary education. One study found evidence that parents will, given the opportunity to learn with their children in supplementary school, feel the experience to be valuable to their children as well as valuable to themselves⁷. This has particular significance for two reasons. The first is utilitarian. If parents find the learning experience to be valuable, they are more likely to engage in it. Parents committed and invested in the process, rather than simply the carpool as the common stereotype suggests, is a huge step toward eliminating the gap between family and school cited above.

The second significance has equally impressive implications for Jewish family education. Statistics indicate that a parent’s level of Jewish education positively correlates with their child’s Jewish education⁸. If one of the main goals of Jewish education is continuity, this statistic suggests that Jewish family education, with its emphasis on “*L’Dor V’Dor*,” is a useful tool. This harkens back to Aron’s point about enculturation. A school whose goals are Jewish continuity from generation to generation as well as on the intrinsic value of lifelong learning is likely to be one in which the goal is enculturation rather than simple instruction.

No doubt there are difficulties ahead for a school that chooses family education. Not only is there a paucity of curriculum designed for multi-year longitudinal use, it is also rare to

⁶ Pirkei Avot, 2:16.

⁷ Shevitz, S. & Koren, A., It Planted Seeds: a retrospective study of Jewish education’s impact on families.” *Journal of Jewish Education* Vol. 70 No. 3, Fall 2004: p. 40.

⁸ Wertheimer, Jack. “Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues,” America Jewish Year Book, Vol 99, 1999: p. 49.

find teachers who are equally as comfortable teaching adults as they are teaching children⁹. The curriculum, however, does exist and, with some effort, a dedicated education staff can surely find or create a multi-year curriculum from what already exists in cyberspace and books. The issue of teacher competence and confidence is also surmountable with teacher training, as has been demonstrated in Shevitz and Koren's study¹⁰. The rewards, according to many studies, are invaluable. Shevitz and Koren found that participation in Jewish family education often led not only to increased Jewish observance at home, but to higher enrollment in Jewish high school¹¹. In addition, parents serve as role models for their children, enabling the education process to change behavioral patterns in the home, thus reaffirming and supporting what continues to be learned in the school¹². This is the very essence of Jewish continuity.

Bibliography

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⁹ Wertheimer, Jack, p. 81-82.

¹⁰ Shevitz, S. & Koren, A., It Planted Seeds: a retrospective study of Jewish education's impact on families. Journal of Jewish Education Vol. 70 No. 3, Fall 2004.

¹¹ Shevitz, S. & Koren, A., p. 43

¹² Wertheimer, Jack. P82.