

Lev Metz
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Contributing to the Field - Reform Participation in Day Schools

Recently, I sat in a conference room at the Union for Reform Judaism building in New York. I had been invited to join a Task Force whose mandate was to explore and encourage the participation of Reform Jews in day schools. Other people around the table were high-ranking representatives of the URJ, HUC-JIR, the CCAR, as well as several seasoned professional and lay leaders who have been involved with the day school movement for many years.

This Joint Task Force had first convened in May 2007 in order to develop and begin to implement a Strategic Planning process. Having received a grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation, they wanted to collect data and articulate a number of strategic thrusts which would encourage the continued growth of day school participation among Reform Jews. What soon became clear, however, was that the embedded culture of Reform communities - long-time support for the American public school system coupled with a supplementary, congregationally based Jewish Education for a majority of students - was a mountain to climb, and even those of us around the table could not agree exactly where the summit was, or what it would look like when we got there.

The Reform Jewish community in America has had an inconsistent relationship with day school education. In the late 19th century Isaac Mayer Wise was a strong proponent, and he labored throughout his career to establish a day school at his synagogue in Cincinnati. His colleague Max Lilienthal launched such a school in New

York - the Hebrew Union School - which enrolled several hundred students in its heyday. This and others like it were seen as the ideal option for keeping community ties and maintaining cultural values (including rigorous study in German) for the German Jewish American population.¹ But with the public school system seen as the primary tool for integrating into American society, many Reform Jews flocked to demonstrate their sense of American pride and civic participation. Day schools came to be seen as sectarian, and that they would contribute to the re-ghettoization of the American Jews.²

During the 1950's, as the Jewish community moved from urban centers to suburban sprawl, population density decreased dramatically. At the same time, a new ethos began to take hold: the increasing desire to demonstrate one's cultural and religious background - not against the American milieu, but rather as a part of it.³ Accordingly, between 1955 and 1975 a large number of day schools were established, mostly catering to the Orthodox and Conservative communities, as well as a small number of community-based non-denominational schools. The Reform movement, loathe to abandon its patriotic support for the American public school system, did not begin to open its own schools until the 1970s. Still, from its inception, Reform community support for the idea of day school education has been inconsistent at best.

With both the increased affluence of the Reform Jewish community and the decline of the quality of the public school system, independent (or "private") schools are

¹ Zeldin, Michael, "The Promise of Historical Inquiry: Nineteenth-Century Jewish Day Schools and Twentieth Century Policy," *Religious Education*, Vol. 83; No. 3, 1988, pp.438-452

² Elkin, Joshua, "The Growth of the Day School Movement: Trends and Challenges," *Jewish Education News*, Vol. 24; No. 2: Spring 2003 pp. 22-24

³ *ibid*

increasingly becoming the norm for Reform Jews across the country.⁴ But this does not mean that a Jewish day school is anywhere on the Reform Jewish family's or community's radar as a potential avenue for Jewish education, let alone a top choice. When looking at first-class academic program that is Jewish day schools need to be competitive with the most prestigious secular private schools. Research conducted by the TCC group in late 2007 as part of the Joint Task Force's mandate suggests that there is a hierarchy of needs when finding the appropriate school to send your child - location, cost, and only then ideology. Above all, parents look for a school that promotes excellence in all subjects and will help their children to succeed in secular society. According to Michael Zeldin, "The venue of excellence seems to be less important to parents than the perception that their children are receiving the finest secular education possible."⁵ If Jewish day schools cannot provide an excellent secular education, most Jewish families will not consider them as a worthwhile investment.

The last successful - financially viable and educationally excellent - Reform-affiliated day school was started in 1997, while a number of such schools have closed.⁶ There are currently twenty Reform day schools in North America (loosely coordinated under the auspices of the Progressive Association of Reform Day Schools [PARDeS]), with an enrollment of approximately 6,000 students.⁷ The number of students from Reform-affiliated families attending community, Conservative or Orthodox day schools is currently unknown. Given a total population of approximately 1.5 million Reform

⁴ Joint Task Force internal documents

⁵ Zeldin, Michael, "The Promise of Historical Inquiry: Nineteenth-Century Jewish Day Schools and Twentieth Century Policy"

⁶ Joint Task Force internal documents

⁷ www.pardesdayschools.org/news.php

Jews in North America, the discrepancy in day school enrollment is staggering. If just 30% of the total number of Reform Jews - 450,000 - are of elementary, middle or high school age, why are only one out of 75 choosing to make day school education a part of their Jewish lives?

One of the reasons for such a discrepancy became clear as I attended the Task Force meeting - even these advocates of day school education were unsure as to how their ideas would be put into action. To do so would require both an enormous shift in the culture of Reform Jewish life, revolving around the congregation, as well as a massive coordination effort on behalf of all of the organizations involved. Among the participants of the Task Force, a dichotomy revealed itself - there were those who favored devoting time and resources toward the development of PARDeS, and through that, to grow and sustain the number and quality of Reform Jewish day schools. But there was another camp, which favored encouraging the participation of Reform Jews (as students, faculty and administrators as well as lay leaders) in community day schools. Though there is an overlap between these views, clearly it revealed issues that needed to be resolved.

Proponents of the first perspective seemed to want a Reform answer to a Reform problem - the ineffective supplementary school experience, as shown in decreasing numbers of participants post-Bnei Mitzvah. They worried about what effect a community-based day school education might have on a single Reform family or the larger Reform community. Wanting to preserve their ideological and cultural integrity, they balked at the proposition of having the movement's next generation schooled in an environment that did not align with their own values.

On the other side, proponents of community-based day school education wanted to utilize any and all of the resources available for a rigorous Jewish education. Recognizing that some dissonance might come up in conversation or conflicts through issues such as kashrut and Shabbat or holiday observance, these people wanted to encourage the Reform families and their congregations to participate in the debates and to help shape the school's policy. Looking to the future, they believe that a strong Jewish education - such as is more often a product of day schools - can only serve to strengthen the Jewish people, and the Reform movement along with it.

When it comes to community support for participating in a Jewish day school - Reform or otherwise - there are a number of stakeholders who come into play, all wanting something specific. Families want a strong, positive Jewish (and secular) education for their children; local synagogues do not want competition for their supplementary schools, often a major source of funding; and the Reform Movement (the URJ and CCAR) wants to influence how such a mandate is carried out, so that it does not compete with their major successes over the course of the last 30 years - NFTY and Israel trip participation. In order to get them on board, each of these stakeholders needs to hear a consistent pitch, targeted towards their needs and desires. It turns out that the Task Force, and those who will implement their findings, will have their work cut out for them.

So why go to all the trouble of trying to invest our precious community resources in day school participation - Reform or otherwise - in the first place? First, there is a growing realization by professional Jewish educators and leaders in the Reform community through anecdotal evidence that supplementary school education does not consistently produce either a strong Judaic background or positive Jewish identity. Many

schools, their participants and administrators decry the “B’nei Mitzvah Machine” that indoctrinates students to think of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah as the end goal of their Jewish education. Giving significant time and weight to Jewish learning has proven to do a better job of transmitting the depth and breadth of Jewish tradition - whether at camp, in Israel or at a day school.

Additionally, the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey shows that that between 23-29% of those who studied in a part-time Jewish environment are likely to intermarry - a hot-button issue for the Reform community. This should be compared to the 7% of those who attend day school who are likely to intermarry. Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that the graduates of day schools play a disproportionate role in the leadership of every sector of our community. In short, investing in day school could reap increasingly large dividends for the Reform community - socially, spiritually and in terms of greater Jewish continuity.

To those who follow the trends of Jewish communal life, nothing I have outlined here is seeing the light of day for the first time. Journals such as *Sh’ma*, *Moment*, and *Jewish Educational News* have all reported on these trends and challenges. But as I sat around the Task Force table with many leaders of the Reform and day school movements, I recognized my own unique position - having grown up in a Conservative household and educated at a Reform graduate institution, I could clearly see the tension playing out around the room. Unlike many of the participants, I was (and still am) an educator at a Reform supplementary school, and I often witness the opportunities lost when neither the participants nor their parents are strongly invested in Jewish education. Before entering the Jewish Education and Communal Service programs at HUC-JIR, I had worked with

youth groups, camps, Hillel and supplementary high school programs. But I was sitting in that conference room because I heard that there was a clear need for trained educators and administrators at Jewish day schools.⁸ I was there because I decided to heed the call.

When confronted with the sizeable task of shifting the culture and ethos of the Reform movement and its members toward a higher value being placed on a rigorous Jewish education through day schools, many of the Task Force members sagged in their chairs. Still, I heard a voice echoing the words of Rabbi Tarfon from Pirke Avot: “It is not your responsibility to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Nothing less than the growth and renaissance of the Jewish people is at stake.

⁸ Elkin, Joshua, “A Vision for Day School Excellence,” *Sh’ma*, Vol. 31; No. 575: October, 2000, pp. 1-3