

***THE FUTURE OF JEWISH EDUCATION  
FROM THE REFORM PERSPECTIVE***

**BY**

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**A POSITION PAPER**

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The position of priority Judaism assigns education in its system of values is captured in the following statement from the *Shulchan Aruch*, the authoritative code of Jewish law compiled by Rabbi Joseph Caro in 1564. In section *Yoreh Deah* 245:6, it is written, “Teachers for children are appointed in every city, and a ban is pronounced upon the inhabitants of any city which does not have a teacher within it until they appoint a teacher for the young. And if they do not make such an appointment, they are destroying the city, i.e., they are undermining rather than sustaining the future existence of the city. For the world is sustained only by the breath of schoolchildren.”

Consequently, *Halakhah* (Jewish law) holds that the holiness of the house of study is greater than the sanctity of the synagogue, for in a time of need it is permissible to transform our synagogues into houses of study (*Orah Hayyim* 153:1), and in a time of emergency it is even permissible to sell our Torah scrolls if it is necessary for the maintenance of Jewish education (*Yoreh Deah* 270:1).

The rationale for these rulings was articulated in an 1873 responsum issued by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) of Frankfurt, and his reasoning remains as compelling today as it was when he first articulated his position. He realized that the cultural and political life of the West was open and accepting as well as attractive to Jews, and that they had more than one option available to them. He understood that education — the transmission of knowledge of Jewish values, religion, and history — alone could assure the future of a vital Jewish community. As Rabbi Hirsch observed, “Synagogues as well as all the other institutions of the community will lose all their value and prestige, and the glory of our synagogues and our scrolls of Torah, their significance and content, will be reduced to objects of scorn and derision if we are not concerned with establishing schools which will raise our children to be faithful heart and soul to Judaism.”

The true goals of Jewish education are thus deep and broad. For individual Jews, education provides access to the rich resources of the Tradition. These resources can add meaning to their lives and help them answer life’s most challenging questions. Beyond the personal dimension, the goal of Jewish education is enculturation — connecting individuals to the community’s way of life, to timeless Jewish values, and to the ongoing experience of the Jewish people, past, present and future. Finally, Jewish education must also be generative — inspiring Jews to create and support vibrant Jewish communities that sustain Jewish life, help repair a broken world, and insure the future of the Jewish people. Thus, the goals of Jewish education include both the cultivation of individual Jewish identity and the building of strong, palpable communities, in which Jewish values and aspirations are affirmed and enacted. Only in these ways can meaningful “Jewish continuity” be assured.

For the liberal Jewish community that I represent, Jewish education serves an additional purpose, one that is more complex but equally important. This goal is to prepare both individuals and communities to make informed choices about those aspects of the Tradition they wish to incorporate into their daily lives and those aspects of the Tradition that are open to re-interpretation and revision. Living outside the *halachic*

framework, without a universally acknowledged religious authority, liberal Jews must become innovators, rather than merely conservators, and they must take a leadership role in renewing and revitalizing the Jewish tradition. Certainly, this type of leadership requires a deep knowledge of the Jewish tradition, a lifetime of Jewish experiences, and a commitment to the Jewish present and future. It also requires vision, intellectual drive, and imagination, in order to shape communities that are compelling and flexible, able to adapt in response to changing circumstances. In short, one of the primary goals of liberal Jewish education is for *all* Jews to assume leadership roles in creating and sustaining robust Jewish communities. Yet, the problem the liberal Jewish community confronts in answering this challenge is that liberal Jews themselves are often those most removed from the wellsprings of Jewish tradition and the funds of meaning these sources provide.

What kind of education is capable of nurturing the kind of leadership necessary for inspiring liberal Jews to encounter their own heritage? Such an education must instill a reverence for the tradition. However, it must also foster inquiry and critical thinking, so that students can question and adapt the tradition in light of their own sentiments and situations. It must be values based, which means not only teaching values directly, but also creating an environment in which values are affirmed and lived. It must help students construct their own meaning in a world that at times seems devoid of meaning. It must help learners feel part of the larger American society, while fully appreciating their particularity as Jews. Above all, it must enable learners to make the leap from knowledge to commitment and action. After all, the purpose of Jewish education, as our Tradition states, is “*lilmod v’la’asot* – to learn and to do.”

With its great resources, the Jim Joseph Foundation is in a unique position to help the liberal Jewish community realize this goal. There are two avenues of formal education — the day school and the synagogue — and one path of informal education — the camp — that have the greatest potential to meet these ambitious goals for liberal Jewish education. The day school provides an optimal Jewish educational setting. No other Jewish educational venue has the capacity to provide the comprehensive content and program that the day school does for both students and parents. The day school offers an education that is sustained everyday, and those concerned with Jewish education must recognize the day school as a primary resource for fostering individuals who will promote future Jewish creativity and leadership.

At the same time, one must acknowledge that only a minority — no more than 15% at most and probably less — of non-Orthodox Jews in general, and Reform Jews in particular, will select day school education for their children and their families. This means that the synagogue and its schools will be the primary setting where liberal Jews will learn about and experience Judaism. The congregation will remain *the* institution that will touch the lives of the overwhelming majority of liberal Jews and any educational initiative aimed at introducing the heritage and values of Judaism to the Jewish people from a liberal standpoint in America today must focus in a significant way upon the congregation.

While there are obvious differences between the day school and congregational educational settings, both the day school and the synagogue have the potential to create strong, vibrant, long-lasting communities, where learners can see Jewish values affirmed and lived. In addition to influencing students, they can include parents and teachers as integral members of the community, offering them challenging educational opportunities, and involving them in all aspects of leadership. Students, teachers and parents have strong commitments to these institutions, because these institutions touch their lives in so many ways at so many critical moments and the Jim Joseph Foundation should fund innovative as well as established initiatives and programs in both these arenas.

While my remarks in this paper are focused on the formal educational settings that the day school and the synagogue provide, I do not want to neglect forms of informal Jewish education. Israel trips and other informal educational venues surely have an important role to play as complements to the experiences offered by synagogues and day schools, and I am surely supportive of them. However, the camp has the unique capacity among these informal modes of Jewish education to promote enduring commitments. The camps provide an environment of total Jewish living and they themselves serve as model Jewish communities for both campers and staff. Camps are unquestionably the most powerful informal extensions of the day school and the synagogue, and I believe they are especially worthy of consideration by the Jim Joseph Foundation as you consider your funding initiatives over the next year.

Having made this observation about camps, I return now to the synagogue and day schools, for without a focus upon and transformation of these core institutions, Jewish education and the American Jewish experience as a whole cannot be deepened and energized. In saying this, I do not mean to be critical of what synagogues and day schools currently achieve. Indeed, I am greatly appreciative of what they often accomplish in the face of extreme challenges. At their best, both synagogues and day schools are driven by a clear and compelling vision of their ideal congregant or graduate, and of their ideal Jewish community. They strive to embody this vision and seek to enact it in all of their activities. Nevertheless, while some truly excellent day schools and synagogues actualize this vision, far too many fall far short of this ideal.

The reasons for this are many. One is quite obvious. There is a dire shortage of Jewish teachers in both congregations and day schools. A number of innovative and successful programs have been devised to meet this shortage. The DeLeT programs at Brandeis University and HUC, and programs developed by the Davidson School of JTS, the University of Judaism, Edah, Pardes and other institutions come immediately to mind. However, these programs are neither large enough nor sufficiently dispersed to meet the ongoing need for creating more Jewish teachers and the attendant necessity of providing them quality salaries after their graduation.

While the dearth of qualified and available teachers is an undeniable challenge across the American Jewish spectrum, the liberal Jewish setting provides its own unique and additional tests and the Jim Joseph Foundation should take cognizance of them. As mentioned above, most liberal Jews themselves are far removed from the Tradition itself

and they zealously guard their own sense of autonomy. They are not willing to cede their own independence to an institution. Too many synagogues and day schools fail to recognize this and they operate with older, hierarchical models of leadership that are bound to limit their success in the current American setting. The mission of new programs should be to promote leadership models that are collaborative and/or distributive.

Since the culture of the typical organization is resistant to change, the transition from hierarchy to collaboration can be difficult. Thus, Jim Joseph should sponsor programs aimed at changing the culture of these institutions. Of course, institutions themselves sometimes acknowledge the need for this type of transformation and there are programs that currently exist that do foster such change. An example of one is the joint HUC-JTS Leadership Institute for Congregational School Principals. I would also draw attention to HUC's Experiment in Congregational Education as an exemplary program that has had remarkable success in helping congregations re-think and re-imagine their educational offerings at every level, from the religious school through adult learning. Such programs should surely be sustained and new ones encouraged.

In the case of liberal day schools, programs should also be encouraged that guide these day schools to become places whose parents, teachers and boards are committed to the twin goals of excellence in secular studies and Jewish studies, and to the interplay between the two. An emphasis upon the attainment of each goal — excellence is secular as well as Jewish subjects — is essential to the success of such schools. The Jim Joseph Foundation should foster the accomplishment of these goals by funding programs that would develop innovative approaches to preparing professionals and volunteer leaders who have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed in both these arenas and that would promote mission — and vision-driven schools. Here, as in the case of congregational schools, there have been some notable programs that have succeeded in achieving these aims. For example, JTS has developed through the support of Avi Chai a successful program for the education of day school principals, and HUC's day school projects have helped liberal and pluralistic day schools achieve new degrees of success in fulfilling their missions to create the next generation of literate Jews committed to Jewish life. Jewish Day Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (JDS-21) has helped day schools transform themselves into schools that are guided by Jewish values in decision-making and curriculum, and the Rhea Hirsch School of Education's post-graduate residency in day school education has launched highly-qualified professionals committed to continuous school improvement. Again, such programs need to be sustained and new ones encouraged.

However, none of this will happen magically. Actualizing the potential of congregations and day schools as well as camps requires a comprehensive strategy, a strategy that would combine research and action over a sustained period of time. True educational renewal is dependent upon vision, experimentation, leadership and teaching, and I would suggest that such renewal might be accomplished in the following ways.

First, I would place the lion's share of available funding into programs with a proven track record and into institutions that have already demonstrated success in creating vibrant and strong communities. I would invest heavily in them in the short and long terms. This would make them financially capable of focusing on their missions. I urge the Foundation to support endowments that will allow these institutions and programs to become financially sustainable in the long run. This would assure maximum and permanent impact.

Second, support should be allocated to the creation of an Incubator Fund to identify and support new approaches and change methodologies in broad areas of Jewish education — educational visioning, innovation in congregational education, day school education, leadership for Jewish education, and innovative teaching. The incubator could issue an RFP to solicit proposals for new initiatives, recruit institutions to participate in these initiatives, commission research and provide ongoing support to participating institutions through consultation and seminars. The key to an effective funding mechanism is to provide support over enough time to allow these new approaches to prove themselves and permit them to develop strategies to sustain themselves over the long term. In addition, the continuous cycle of research and action would ensure the flow of new ideas as well as maintain those programs that had proven successful with sufficient funds to make them financially sustainable.

In conclusion, I believe that these strategic investments can yield dramatic results. Their impact will change the stories our children and grandchildren will tell *their* grandchildren. Their stories will be rich with the memories of living the yearly cycle and the life cycle, within vibrant Jewish communities in which *Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Hasadim* are communal ways of life, and of experiencing first hand the ties that bind Jews throughout the world.

We can look to a future in which the lives of individuals and communities will be made meaningful through the lens of Jewish history, tradition and peoplehood, with moral decisions guided by the compass of Jewish values. Although the paths that individuals and communities take will be diverse, an investment in visionary Jewish education holds promise that these paths will be shaped by deep Jewish knowledge, significant Jewish experiences and enduring commitments to the Jewish future.