

JUSTICE, JUSTICE SHALL YOU PURSUE: RE-ENERGIZING JEWISH EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Ruth Messinger, Executive Director American Jewish World Service
August, 2006

Introduction:

I approach the Foundation's question with a passionate interest in education and a perspective on the value of social justice, service and service learning programs. These programs have a dramatic impact on their participants—raising awareness of the challenges they face in the world, preparing them to cope with those challenges, providing them practical opportunities for values clarification, helping them develop leadership skills, and, importantly, increasing their understanding of and interest in Judaism and preparing them to use their Judaism to face life's challenges. The Jim Joseph Foundation should invest in the development and spread of these programs, making them a central element of Jewish education, not an "add-on". But they are only a part of the whole; first, some thoughts on the whole.

Improved Jewish Education for Whom: The Target Populations

A critical first step is to consider who we hope to reach with these new investments. The Foundation's mandate is to improve education for children and youth, but learning is life-long, not limited to an age cohort or a particular time or place. We can enhance the quality of education for young people by planning family and community programs, developing materials that can be shared by people of all ages. Similarly, we need to consider why girls last in programs longer than boys and understand those programs to which boys would respond with more enthusiasm.

I see four broad groups we should be thinking about. First, those young people who are naturally involved in Jewish education programs. They begin in a congregation or JCC nursery school, attend day or supplementary schools [recognizing that there are dramatic differences between these], go to Jewish camps, participate in Hillel, travel to Israel and often study or live there. Families choose these programs for various reasons and have different assessments of how well the institutions are doing, but their children stay in the educational institutions because that matters most to the family. When these programs are not of top quality the educational experience leaves students wanting more.

Second, there are young people who were connected to one of these institutions for some time, but drifted away because they or their parents lost interest, were disappointed in the quality of the program, saw better secular options, and viewed Jewish education as something you need some of but do not need to stay connected to. Many of these young people are only in supplementary schools, stay until they are b'nei mitzvah and then opt out.

Third, there are those whose families are comfortable "being" Jewish without involving their children in any educational program, who move on in their high school, college and post-

college years with this same attitude. This group is sometimes attracted into a new or different program because of its high quality, its external success or its innovative nature, but will not necessarily participate beyond that.

The fourth group also does not have a significant connection to any Jewish educational institution, but will not be attracted even by an unusual program. They pride themselves on being outside the fold and are only going to be reached by educational approaches that use new media and similar types of education in the public square.

What Kinds of Change Do We Need?

The Foundation should use its resources to reach and provide significant improved Jewish learning opportunities for all of these groups and social justice and service programs should be considered essential. Before discussing those programs let me briefly make three other points about language, teacher education and new media.

The Foundation should rethink the terms “formal” and “informal” education. This is not a valid distinction. In the most “formal” day school setting students will learn much outside of their classrooms—from each other, from adult role models, or from the way in which the school engages or fails to engage family. And “informal” education not only includes having a drop-in Chanukah party or a camp hike, but the intensive text based study that good Jewish service programs provide which is “formal” in every way except that there are no desks in the field in Guatemala. This language change is critical because too many have attached to this distinction a demeaning assumption that “informal” Jewish education is less substantive; is “fluff” only for those who won’t learn elsewhere.

American education suffers from its failure to attract and retain the best people as teachers; from its poor system of teacher education; and from schools and districts that focus few resources on professional development. I speak with the perspective of my husband who runs educational improvement programs. The Foundation should allocate significant resources to attract individuals to Jewish education, prepare them better, compensate them sufficiently, and design quality professional development for them. This might include apprenticing with good teachers, inviting skilled mentors into their classrooms, having supervisors who can promote teaching and learning. It should also include developing new models for family education and helping parents become partners in their children’s learning. This work must be done not just in day schools but in the supplementary schools which too often set the bar far too low, do not enliven the minds of their students, and do not provide opportunities for them to do serious Jewish work. And we must consider what ways exist to reduce the cost of these various school programs so that more families that want to enroll their children can.

The fourth group, the most peripherally involved Jews, cannot be written off. Improving Jewish education for all requires having at the table not just those for whom the existing system worked. To woo back those Jews who are searching for meaning in their lives but do not expect to find it in Judaism, the Foundation needs to research who they are and how they can be reached and to explore what types of art programs, websites, new media and films

might allow them to connect in ways that are comfortable for them. Information about Jewish holiday and ritual should be included in ways that this group can take hold easily.

Social Justice and Service

Both solid Jewish education about social justice and service programs that give young Jews a chance to act on the teachings of our faith are essential elements for 21st century Jewish education. Both of these elements, now found most often in new programs with limited resources, need to become integral to our work in all Jewish educational institutions for all cohorts.

Service programs give young people a chance to work over time in urban poverty agencies, in Israeli organizations, and with grassroots groups around the world. What counts is that they are doing hands-on work with and for people in need. The Jewish Coalition for Service, founded by five such programs, now has over fifty affiliates and is doing marketing and setting standards for the field.

At American Jewish World Service, the example I know best, we take young adults into an intensive summer program of service and study in the developing world, run short term school break programs with Hillels and offer similar experiences for some schools, teen groups and camps as well as for rabbinic students. All programs are over-subscribed. Participants are from every denomination and level of Jewish knowledge—students who never would have walked into a Hillel without a chance to go to Central America and students from the modern Orthodox community excited to have a chance to put their faith into action.

Program participants work and live alongside the other, building relationships across lines of culture, class and race. Through authentic encounters with real people they discover a sense of shared humanity that permanently alters how they interact with others. Doing something real for people in need—whether helping them plant forests or build a community library or put back roofs lost to an earthquake or hurricane—is satisfying, gives young people looking for meaning in their lives a clear indication that they have the capacity to help and make a difference. When this work is done with a Jewish group, accompanied by pertinent Jewish study, it suggests for some and reinforces for others the idea that this is obligatory Jewish work and that our faith-based precepts have value in the world.

Program participants see people with few tangible resources committed to building community. They have a chance often to be in a place where community and solidarity are held in much higher esteem than they are in America. The sense of community is in the air around them, and they see how it sustains the people they are helping. They get a strong sense of why the Jewish value of community exists and have a personal experience of the ethic of responsibility toward the other that is sometimes more preached than practiced. They move away from a too prevailing attitude in the communities in which they live of “what’s in it for me?”

Students in our and other service programs are taught in groups that require participation, move learning to an ever higher level and assume they will learn not only from text and teachers, but from each other and from being in a different place, looking at a different culture and doing hands-on work. The curricula regularly and consistently ask participants to connect up the experiences they are having in the field to Jewish texts and Jewish values. They are asked to consider what the Jewish ethic of responsibility requires them to do to make change in the world. Program group leaders have experience as Jewish educators, are trained for this work and use materials that work off basic Jewish texts and give them new meaning and relevance. They are eager to lead programs that visibly engage young Jews and transform their lives.

In sum, Jewish service programs seek to operate in harmony with Jewish text, traditions and values and build for young adults a practical experience in the pursuit of justice. Living and working with others of a different faith and culture, understanding that they are also made in the image of God, learning about their struggles, understanding that they need help and thinking about how it might best be offered lets students learn very quickly about themselves, their culture, their beliefs and the communities they may want to build throughout their lives. As ethics are put into practice the benefit of one's actions are seen, and Judaism becomes a real organizing principle for life, not a set of institutional concerns. Follow up retreats and newly developed alumni programs are being designed to help participants with "re-entry" and encourage them to be active change agents and leaders in the Jewish world and in the larger community, using their faith to help them find meaning in the world.

In addition to ensuring that service programs are run by all educational institutions for all cohorts, the Jewish commitment to social justice should be at the heart of our education system, an essential part of day and supplementary school curricula. We should teach with the goal of instilling in our students an ongoing obligation to work for justice.

Our identity as a people has been shaped by years of exodus, by experiences of exclusion, by situations of persecution and oppression. How do we teach these and translate them for today's children and young adults? How do we help young adults in the 21st century understand Jews' historical experience of being the other, learn that there are places in the world where Jews are still victims of persecution, and begin to get to know those who are today's other—often people in their own communities as well as people around the globe who are victims of injustice? How do we convey the idea that Jews from our history must learn what it means to be the other and help address the pain, poverty and oppression that we see around us? How do we teach today's young people to become the leaders of a community that must continue to ensure its own future but must also be "a light unto the nations", must also act in the prophetic social justice tradition that is our inheritance and work to change the world?

We have known suffering so we must identify with those who suffer today and intervene to make a difference for their futures and to help them pursue justice. This will help us become the kind of people we want to be, produce graduates of our various education programs who will take their Judaism seriously, and become leaders in their Jewish communities and inspire others to put faith into action.

Text should be used as a lens through which to view and debate current global challenges, to give students a way to provide meaning in their lives and to build a new connection to Judaism. What does text teach us about how to conduct a war? What does it mean that we are not to stand idly by when others' blood is being shed? What does it mean not to refuse to participate? What are our contemporary responsibilities to pursue justice? How might we apply Jewish teaching about workers, debt, or care for the ill and the elderly to the situations in our schools, in our communities, in our country, and in the world?

The questions are plentiful and easy to raise. The challenge is to design courses and train professionals to present these issues thoughtfully, to allow participants to argue different positions, and to debate text freely. Teachers must be able to handle open debate, tolerate ambiguity, and urge students to reach their own conclusions about what Judaism recommends as a course of action in contemporary times.

The results are dramatic. Text comes alive when the question is not whether what King Solomon did is right but what Judaism has to say about current child welfare issues, or how Judaism views contemporary problems of fair trade or global debt or genocide. We at AJWS are one of several organizations producing such materials, beginning to share them with each other, presenting them to rabbinic students in special evening courses, and offering them in schools and JCCs. This material should be developed further for use in various educational settings and both prospective and experienced teachers should be taught how to use it.

In many parts of the contemporary Jewish community we have been grappling for years with the challenge of assimilation and the problem of continuity. We have asked what will keep Jews attached to Judaism? How can we command new attention from lapsed Jews? What role will Judaism play in the lives of our people in 21st century America? Remaking our educational institutions to offer a justice oriented and activist Judaism is an essential part of the answer. This is because the universe in which today's young people live is broken, because working on these problems directly gives them new tools with which to understand the situations they confront and provides a new level of meaning in their lives. These programs provide a valuable entry and re-entry point for many young people to a Judaism that will work for them over time.

In conclusion I urge that we think about education for all categories of Jews, in various settings, with a particular new focus on family education. I urge that we work to make our educational programs of higher quality and easier access and that we invest in improving the quality and capacity of teachers. We must also strive to develop and offer new learning opportunities that put students in passionate struggle with core Jewish teachings, allow them to put prayer and study into action, thus connecting them to Jewish life in tangible, meaningful and sustainable ways and bringing them along not only as individuals but as families and as a community.

This paper was written with the thoughtful advice and commentary of members of the AJWS staff: Aaron Dorfman, Director of Education, Aleza Summit, Education Program Officer, Ilana Aisen, Service Learning Coordinator, Riva Silverman, Director of Development; and Brent Chaim Spodek, rabbi, AJWS group leader and writer; and Sally Gottesman, board member, AJWS.