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Are you ready to say ‘Shalom’ to a Jewish day-school education?

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Concerns about the Englewood Hebrew-language charter school

Last week, New Jersey approved a Hebrew-language charter school in Englewood. Nationally, Shalom Academy will be the first Hebrew-language public school in a densely populated day-school area. Hebrew charter schools in Florida, Brooklyn, and East Brunswick are in districts with smaller day-school enrollments. As a result, Shalom Academy is likely to test parents' interest in choosing free Hebrew and general studies over a more comprehensive but expensive Jewish day school. Both local Solomon Schechters (enrolling approximately 500) and the modern Orthodox schools (enrolling 4,000+) could be affected.

A community meeting about the school's concept two years ago attracted hundreds of people, many Orthodox. Some parents said they were curious but did not plan to remove their children from day schools. Others were more open, hoping to combine free charter school with after-school, high-quality Torah education at a fraction of the cost of day school. This seems to be the agenda of the organizer of the new school, Raphael Bachrach, whose interest in attracting students away from local day schools was one reason that the National Center for Hebrew Language Charter Schools distanced itself from the effort.

I believe that 1) Hebrew language public schools plus after-school religious education cannot approach the benefits of day school education, and 2) Englewood/Teaneck is the wrong place for a Hebrew public school. Here's why:

History teaches that supplementary schooling cannot get the job done. Sixty years ago, part-time Hebrew schools provided the Jewish education received by most Jewish (including Orthodox) children. In that "golden age" of supplementary schools, students learned about Judaism every day after their public-school studies. The result? Judaic abandonment by hundreds of thousands of young Jews, including the Orthodox. The strength of American Orthodoxy today, and the new source for young Jewish leaders outside of Orthodoxy, lies in day-school education.

Some argue that after-school programs for Shalom students will succeed in producing literate and committed Jews because the students will come to their study reading and speaking modern Hebrew. This view is based on the assumption that an after-school program can match the Judaic studies offered at a day school. But as parents and educators know, after-school contexts are better suited for experiential education than for academic study. In fact, the most innovative supplementary schools today have shifted from academic study, which was the bread and butter of the old Hebrew schools, to the experiential side of Jewish education. It is contrary to human nature to believe that most children will thrive in a day school-level program of Jewish texts and skills in an after-school context.

Some argue that Orthodox children will fare better in the combined charter school/after-school structure than 60 years ago because of the vibrancy of American Orthodox communities. However, modern technology and 21st-century culture make it more challenging than in the past to raise children committed to a set of values different from those of the popular culture. Pulling children from day school is surrendering our best weapon in the effort.

Jewish youth need strong, integrated American Jewish identities, which they will not be able to develop in a Hebrew-language charter school. Day-school parents know how much their children benefit from the sense of self and belonging gained from being immersed, with their Jewish peers, in Jewish calendar, songs, texts, celebrations, and values. Once these traditions become part of children's identity, day-school graduates can constructively and confidently join their fellow Americans on college campuses and in the professions, bringing their full selves — their American identity and the richness of Judaism — to the public square.

This inculcation of beliefs and values cannot occur in a charter school. If the Shalom school promotes itself as legally required, it will attract a diverse student body, including non-Jews seeking an alternative to weak public schools. When a Jewish day-school teacher says "we," she might be referring to all Americans, all Jews, or American Jews — all these are parts of the American Jewish identity shared in the room. But in charter schools, "we" can mean only Americans. The message to Jewish children in the room is that "we" are Jews at home and Americans in public.

While Hebrew-language charter schools might play a positive role in American Jewish life, this is not the case in Englewood or Teaneck. There are hundreds of thousands of Jewish children in public schools across America. A Hebrew-language charter school is surely a step up for Jewish children who would otherwise be in public or secular private schools, because of the Hebrew-language education and some exposure to Israeli culture. Add a tailored religious after-school program and appropriate summer camp, and the result could be a substantial improvement over the children's current Jewish education. Bergen County has many Jewish families who could similarly benefit from a Hebrew-language charter school. Serving these students would be an admirable goal — and would require placing the school in districts that have many Jews but low day-school enrollment. Englewood/Teaneck does not fit that bill.

The challenge of day school affordability is real. In Bergen County, Jewish Education for Generations initiated a collective fund that

has begun to gain steam (thus far 1,500 donors have agreed to contribute a total of \$650,000 annually). The schools, both Orthodox and Conservative, have been working with experts at Yeshiva University to study their financial data to find the best ways to lower expenses and increase fund-raising. Others are planning an effort to increase constitutionally permitted government funding for nonpublic schools. More needs to be done, but progress is being made.

In the short term, any families lost to Shalom will generate higher day-school tuitions, as expenses are spread over fewer families. However, my primary concern is the cost to families who choose the charter school. I worry that Shalom parents will be betting their children's Jewish future on a losing hand.

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