

Jewish Educators: Broadening the Pool

by Michael Berger

The severe shortage of qualified teachers is threatening the renaissance of Jewish education in America.

Both supply and demand have contributed to this shortage. I'll begin with the good news, which is the demand: Over the last decade, larger and larger segments of American Jews have accepted the notion that Jewish education is essential for ensuring Jewish continuity. Existing schools have grown, more day schools have opened across the denominational spectrum, and formalized adult education programs such as *Derekh Torah*, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, and *Me'ah* have opened up in many cities across America. So the need has grown considerably, even as a steady percentage of the Jewish population entered Jewish education.

But the supply of quality educators has also been affected by social, demographic, and economic factors that pull potential teachers away from the profession. First, American society, in general, does not esteem the teaching profession (excluding university-level teaching). Second, as assimilation progresses, fewer Jews possess the deep Jewish knowledge necessary to teach many core Jewish subjects. Third, women, who traditionally made up the majority of teachers, have many more career options – and higher salaries – open to them. Lastly, as the cost of living (especially “Jewish living”) rises, the low pay and benefits of the field prevent many men and women from seriously considering teaching as their primary profession.

While it is true that administrators are filling the positions they need, the experience of the last fifteen years indicates that finding teachers who meet all the criteria of the ideal educator is becoming more difficult. Lowering the standards of teaching will not only weaken the quality of instruction, but also, in the long term, will weaken the case for Jewish education among

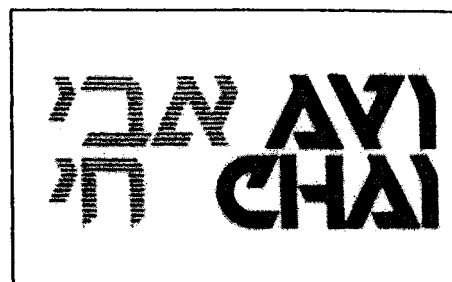
American Jews, effectively reversing the recent positive trend. It is, therefore, vital that we seek creative ways to expand the pool of qualified teachers.

DAY SCHOOL VS. SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOL

Before discussing how we might broaden the pool of educators, we should acknowledge at the outset the differentiated needs of Jewish schools.

Wherever one might stand on the issue of allocating communal resources between supplementary schools and day schools, it remains a fact that these two types of schools differ in many ways. For all their similar interests in educating Jewish children, the two remain distinct in terms of form and content. Structurally, supplementary schools are usually synagogue-based, strictly voluntary, and are limited to a few hours a week. Curricularly, coverage, both in terms of knowledge (Bible stories, holidays, life cycle, and Jewish history) but especially in terms of skills (Hebrew fluency, familiarity with prayers, and textual decoding and interpretation), is more significantly limited than in day schools.

Day schools, in contrast, are free-standing (even if movement-affiliated), offer Judaic studies in the highly structured context of a school, have available to them many hours for both formal and informal instruction, and frequently (although by no means always) instruct the children of families who have some form of commitment to Jewish values and practice. Thus, the day school has greater opportunity to reinforce many ritual behaviors in the course of the day, teach many components of Jewish literacy in a more expanded fashion, and help students achieve at least intermediate competence in the reading and speaking of Hebrew. For this, teachers must have a wider base of knowledge in Judaics, particularly for middle school and high school grades. They must be able to engage Hebrew texts in the original with some sophistication and, in



many cases, they must themselves be fluent in Hebrew. (Admittedly, in a departmental setting, these might not all need to be mastered by the same teacher.) In addition, while all teachers require some pedagogic training to be effective, the structured school environment of the day school teacher requires that she or he must have solid grounding in such skills as effective organization and communication, classroom management, planning a lesson, and how best to evaluate student progress. Lastly, the nature of classical Jewish texts, both Biblical and Rabbinic, requires a pedagogy which will enable teachers to help students develop the skills of decoding, understanding, and analyzing these sources.

LOOKING BEYOND TRADITIONAL POOLS

In light of the recent trend to endorse and build Jewish day schools in North America, the challenge before us is to nurture broader pools of teachers trained in four areas: Jewish knowledge, Hebrew fluency, general pedagogy, and Judaic pedagogy. However, even this is too general; there is insufficient data with respect to what sorts of knowledge and skills are needed by teachers in a day school with a text-based curriculum or in a school with an integrated curriculum. Whatever the Jewish community will decide to do in terms of near-term strategies, we need to support the research that will yield a better understanding of the process by which children are educated Jewishly. Only this will enable us to devise long-term solutions to the problem of teacher shortages in the day schools.

Teacher Recruitment: Day Schools

It is more important where people end up than where they start. As in all professions, a career in Jewish education will have many entry points. We need to create multiple routes that reflect this variety, and nurture those on each path accordingly. While efforts might, at some future point, be coordinated, at this point, I think multiple programs are desirable to simply increase the pool of teachers and even experiment with a variety of approaches to teacher education.

One model of teacher training, funded by the Avi Chai Foundation, was started this year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. It is a synthesis of the multiple components mentioned above, whereby students with one year of intensive learning (or its equivalent) take two additional years of courses at Pardes in classic Jewish texts and Jewish pedagogy while they are also enrolled in graduate courses in Jewish education at the Hebrew University's Rothberg School for Overseas Students. Students are required to reach certain a level of Hebrew proficiency (*ulpan* is offered to those who need it), and must undertake several short stints in the classroom at host institutions in North America to obtain some practical experience. Thus, at the end of two years, students receive an M.A. in Jewish education from the Hebrew University, achieve a level of Hebrew proficiency

and Judaic knowledge, and gain some field experience. In return for funding, students agree to return to North America and teach in a day school for three years. This year's cohort has fourteen students – comparable to existing Jewish teacher training programs in North America – and a similar number is expected for next year's group.

What is interesting is that the new educators' program attracted several individuals already studying at Pardes who had not been contemplating a career in Jewish education. In their initial year of exploring Jewish texts and tradition, often together with deepening their own Jewish identity, students found the idea of a life engaged in the study and teaching of these sources appealing, and the program was there for them.

Pardes is not the only viable model where we might find new teachers. Those studying for graduate degrees in Jewish studies could be ripe for considering Jewish education. Hebrew proficiency is generally a requirement of these programs, and many of these individuals are affiliated, and even committed, Jewishly. Approaching those women and men whose training is in the sorts of subjects taught in day schools (of varying stripes) with an offer of multi-year stipends in return for several years of teaching in a day school might attract some who were not intent on careers in research or higher education. Obviously, courses in pedagogy and field experience would have to be worked into the students' program, but this potential pool of teachers should be explored.

Indeed, once we have begun to look at the university, we see that another pool of teachers could be college students who have taken several Judaic studies courses. Over the same period of growing Jewish assimilation we have been examining, a counter-trend has been occurring on college campuses around the United States and Canada: the growth of academic Jewish studies. Many campuses, with or without large Jewish student populations, have developed Jewish studies programs or departments, which offer a wide range of courses on Judaism, Jewish history, the

Bible, Jewish thought, mysticism, and women in Judaism. Hebrew language instruction is also readily available on many campuses, and is often connected with these courses in some form. To be sure, their academic diet does not necessarily nourish them with what they will need to teach in day schools, but, given their interest in the subject matter, which

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is often part of a larger identification with their own tradition, they are an idealistic group who might consider Jewish education as a career. Clearly, significant supplementation will be required to prepare them for day school teaching, which requires more extensive knowledge of texts and traditions. Perhaps a program similar to the one at Pardes could be utilized to achieve this. But, approaching this pool of candidates – many of whom are still idealistic and not burdened with family responsibilities – with an offer of debt relief and/or a stipend in return for several years of teaching could enlarge the number of people available to teach in day schools.

Another area of potential recruits is the denominational seminary. Several teacher-training programs already are drawing students who have advanced in their Judaic studies in rabbinical school. With the inclusion of women in three of the four seminaries, the pool has grown. True, the rabbinate is currently a more attractive career in terms of status and pay, but once the students are engaged in serious Judaic studies, the idea of teaching for a career could be presented to them in return for stipends, loan forgiveness or other arrangements, and could

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Pardes seeks exceptional men and women eager for careers in Jewish education in North America to join the two year

PARDES EDUCATORS PROGRAM

leading to a Certificate of Advanced Jewish Studies from Pardes Institute and an M.A. in Jewish Education from the Rothberg International School and the Melton Centre for Jewish Education of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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increase the number of qualified people entering the field.

Lastly, one pool that should be tapped in some way is day school graduates themselves. We hope that the positive effects of the growth and expansion of day schools will yield more knowledgeable and committed young Jewish men and women. For the better students among them, proficiency in Judaic knowledge and in Hebrew will already have been achieved; getting them to con-

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sider teaching as a serious career option is the challenge. In targeting day school graduates while they are still in high school, many social and cultural obstacles must be overcome to help students see teaching as a noble and satisfying profession, rather than as what "those who can't" end up doing. But the Jewish community should not write this group off automatically as "not interested."

KEEPING THEM IN THE FIELD: ONGOING TEACHER EDUCATION

While the Jewish community may succeed in attracting more people to consider the field of Jewish education, it is equally if not more vital to do what it takes to keep them there. Given the extensive preparation required to be competent in the classroom, teachers have a right to demand on-going professional development incorporated structurally into their careers. It is generally acknowledged that the graduates of professional programs are not "finished products," and graduates of teachers' programs are no different. But, we must then translate that awareness into action and assist individuals to develop further, once hired. Creating these opportunities is essential to professionalizing the field,

attracting quality people, and keeping them in the field.

I would like to offer several suggestions that would help make teachers more effective in the classroom and raise the status of the field. Summers are an ideal time to supplement one's training, and new teachers should be given incentives to devote their two months off to making up the lacunae in their particular education and preparing for the next year. Generally, courses in specific pedagogy (*tanakh*, Hebrew, *talmud*) and even *ulpan* could be taken in the summer through local universities or teacher colleges, with tuition covered by the school in which they are teaching.

In terms of specific content, a setting like a community-wide *beit midrash*, possibly with paid study partners, could be created so that teachers could prepare the content for the coming year in a supervised way. Thus, if a teacher knows she/he will be teaching chapters 12-22 of Genesis (the story of Abraham), then she/he could be paired with someone who knows the text well. Each morning for a month, the text could be covered. Such a program could bring together many Judaics teachers in a community or city, and even allow for Jewish pedagogy classes to be offered collectively in the afternoon. Initially, enticements would need to be provided to incentivize teachers to dedicate this much time; some communities might prefer to target teachers in the earliest years of their careers, or create a mix of teachers from all levels. The field, overall, will benefit from the perception that it is a valued and investment-deserving profession, whose calendar is actually year-round rather than September to June.

These teachers also will need to have mentors designated to them in their first few years of teaching. Virtually every school has seasoned and exceptional teachers, whose value as mentors may equal, and possibly outweigh, their value as full-time classroom teachers. One-on-one as well as group mentoring could be arranged; aside from the very practical advice these new teachers will receive, they will also develop the bonds of community and collegiality essential

for the health of the profession and its members. The school, of course, must sacrifice for this, building in time for mentoring and meeting sessions, releasing new and veteran faculty for these conferences, and possibly offering salary incentives for the mentors, who no doubt will be investing more time than one or two class periods a week, if the mentoring is done properly. But if developing such programs nurtures young talent and stems attrition, this is a worthwhile investment for the school and for the community. Keeping teachers for as long as possible is essential for the raising of educational standards in day schools.

CONCLUSION

Given that the pool of qualified teachers grows smaller even as demand increases, we cannot afford "business as usual." Existing teacher training programs will not satisfy the demand. It is time to study and learn what sort of education quality day school teachers need. Then, we must look to new pools from which to draw teachers, and create the programs and institutions that will prepare them appropriately. If we want to inspire the next generation of Jewish youth to lead committed Jewish lives, we must provide them with inspiring and well-prepared teachers. The issue of appropriate compensation will also need to be addressed.

Foundations and philanthropic individuals are prepared to help. They seek a partnership with educational institutions and professionals who are prepared to take the initiative, to look beyond our current structures, and to invent new ones that will meet future needs. If we are passive or merely reactive to current realities, our grandchildren will look back upon the missed opportunity of the early 21st century, when Jewish day schools opened with promise, but closed their doors for lack of quality educators. ■

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