

group believes the state should provide support for the teaching of Torah or Jewish studies of any kind. Nor do I. While I have not agreed with the ACLU on all issues, I have been, and remain, a member of the organization. I consider myself deeply committed to the preservation of church/state separation.

In my judgment, we live in a unique democratic society. However, neither the separation of church and state nor our security have been undermined by New York State's funding every needy child in parochial schools with transportation, lunch, or special ed. Nor do I believe either would if state funding was extended to additional areas as outlined above. It is time for us to seriously revisit these policy issues.

Related ideas worthy of serious consideration include the Arizona tax credit for scholarships, plan and types of charter schools, and other public/private partnerships. Each represents additional areas that must be seriously explored.

If we are serious about the challenge of funding Jewish day schools, it is time to revisit positions understandably forged at a different moment in time. For while we must do everything we can to increase Jewish philanthropic support for all areas of Jewish education, only public funding has the capacity to enable the quantum leap that is needed to both reduce financial barriers to participation in Jewish day schools and to substantially raise the quality of Jewish day schools throughout our system.

It is my hope that this entire area of public support will receive the necessary consideration.

In sum, I applaud the AJC for convening this forum. While single approaches are attractive, the challenge and opportunity at hand is nothing less than the strengthening and renewal of the fabric of the entire Jewish community. This will require multiple strategies to increase participation in the most powerful Jewish educational experiences, to upgrade the quality of

Jewish education and to attract the highest caliber Jewish professionals. Similarly, on the funding front, multiple strategies will be required. New initiatives and experiments need to be tested. New partnerships among private philanthropy, federations, foundations, and even public sources need to be considered so we will be able to look back at this moment in Jewish time and say, together, that we did everything possible to capitalize on this precious moment and to mobilize all resources to strengthen and renew our community. This is the challenge and opportunity before us.

1. Remarks delivered at a consultation on Jewish Education and Public Policy convened by the American Jewish Committee on June 7, 2000.

2. "To Create Inspired Communities," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 72 (1995).

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The American Jewish Committee's Statement on Jewish Education makes a welcome contribution not only to the contemporary discussion concerning Jewish continuity and renaissance, but also to the larger debate over the allocation of Jewish communal resources and the direction of the American Jewish community as a whole.

The statement appears at a critical moment in American Jewish life. As the twenty-first century dawns, we find that the great causes that once energized and invigorated American Jewry—immigrant absorption, saving European Jewry, creating and sustaining a Jewish state, and rescuing Soviet, Arab, and Ethiopian Jews—have now been successfully

completed. Today, for the first time in historical memory, no large community of persecuted Jews exists anywhere in the world. Nor will twenty-first-century American Jews gain the kind of meaning from helping Israel, keeping alive the memory of the Holocaust, and fighting antisemitism that their twentieth-century parents did; indeed, these major themes of twentieth-century American Jewish history are essentially behind us.

In response to this new situation, the American Jewish community has turned inward. The so-called “continuity agenda” reflects a growing sense that the most important issues in Jewish life are now domestic rather than foreign and cultural rather than political. The community’s renewed focus upon Jewish education forms part of a larger concern—born out of fears over intermarriage, disaffiliation, and shrinkage—that American Jewry’s future is imperiled.

In fact, two simultaneous but opposite trends characterize contemporary American Jewish life: assimilation and revitalization. Evidence for both is well documented. Indeed, every Jew knows somebody whose children have become far more religiously observant than they were raised, and every Jew knows somebody whose children have intermarried and are drifting away from Judaism altogether. The obvious question in response to these two contradictory trends operating simultaneously—assimilation and revitalization—is which one will turn out to be the dominant trend, and which will we look back upon as an epiphenomenon, an historical sideshow. The answer, in traditional Jewish parlance, is *lo bashamayim hi*—that question is not going to be decided in heaven. Instead, it is being decided by American Jews themselves: individual by individual, family by family, and community by community. Just as in the past, when similar situations prevailed, communal policies and actions will decisively affect what happens. ¹

Against this background, the AJC’s Statement on Jewish Education takes on heightened significance. In what follows, I want to comment on several critical assumptions that underlie the statement and make it particularly important for our day.

First, the statement assumes that Jewish education is a decisive factor in the assimilation-revitalization debate. “Efforts to enhance Jewish education are critical to [the] continuity agenda,” it asserts. “A literate Jew is simply far more likely to become a committed Jew.” In fact “far more likely” is precisely the right formulation. It should be clear from the outset that Jewish education offers no *guarantee* against assimilation or intermarriage, any more than proper exercise provides a guarantee of good health. Yet both do very much affect the odds. Educated Jews are far more likely to draw upon their tradition in making life choices, and even if they do decide to rebel and disaffiliate (as numbers of well-educated Jews throughout history have), at least they have a very clear sense of what they are rebelling against.

Second, the AJC statement privileges formative experiences over transformative ones (“transformative experiences, no matter how well executed, may never substitute for formative Jewish education”). Here I particularly applaud the statement, for I fear that too many communal leaders have become seduced by high-visibility programs like Birthright Israel and have forgotten that such emotive experiences must be followed up by long-term formative ones if they are to endure. Everything we know about revivals and mass conversions teaches us that, absent such follow-up, “backsliding” is inevitable. Moreover, the formative experiences exemplified by a rich and rewarding Jewish education need not await the stimulus of a transformative moment in order to be effective. Jews who are well-grounded in the sources of their tradition are more likely, even in the absence of such “transformations,” to

participate actively in Jewish life and to want to pass that life on to their children.

Third, the AJC statement assumes that Jewish education is a life-long commitment that nobody is too old to make. This assumption is well-grounded in Jewish tradition and history, and my own twenty years of experience in the academy fully supports it. Yet Jewish communal policy in America has always focused upon the need to educate young people; that is where the bulk of the community's educational dollars go. Adult Jewish education, and even university-based Jewish studies, have never stood as high on the communal agenda, and the AJC statement properly suggests that this is a mistake.

Fourth, the statement asserts that the most important age group to educate consists of adolescents, and that in the absence of sufficient communal funds, money for adolescent programming should take precedence over funds geared to any other age group. Educational theory and AJC-sponsored research support this assertion. Our Catholic neighbors have also followed such a course recently, focusing upon Catholic high schools even when this meant closing parochial elementary schools. Nevertheless, it would, for the following reasons, be a mistake in my view to privilege adolescent education too much: (a) At least in my experience, students who enter Jewish high schools with solid Jewish backgrounds from elementary school succeed far better than those who do not. (b) The Hebrew language is easier to master in elementary school than in high school, and is best started young. (c) It is not clear to me that high school is more influential than college in shaping Jewish identity. Indeed, a good case could be made that communal funds should be spread over the entire "long adolescence" of American Jewish youth, stretching from bar/bat mitzvah to their entry into the work force. (d) Finally, nothing could be more destructive of morale within the field of Jewish education than internecine warfare

over the question of what kind of Jewish education—preschool, elementary, high school, college, or adult—is "most important" for promoting Jewish continuity. Far better for each group of Jewish educators to believe (if I may paraphrase the great Jewish thinker Simon Rawidowicz) that the whole Jewish future rests upon its shoulders. Each group of educators should strive to teach as if it alone were responsible for Jewish education, even as we know that history will later come and say that no group alone revitalized American Jewry but that all did so together.

Fifth, the AJC statement states that "no single model of Jewish education will work for all Jews," and that the community needs to create "a variety of successful models" so as to "maximize parental choice" and to "best fit the Jewish needs of particular children and families." At the same time, the statement recognizes that some models of Jewish education work better than others, and that Jewish supplementary school education (with some important exceptions) is not working well at all. All of these assertions, to my mind, are demonstrably correct. History has taught us time and again not to place our trust in magic formulas, be they educational programs or other patent medicines that promise to preserve and revitalize American Jewish life. In the past, every panacea, by itself, has failed to live up to its advanced billing; all of them fell short. Diversity and competition, by contrast, have succeeded wondrously well—not just in Jewish education but in Jewish religious life as well. In the case of education, we know that people learn differently, and that they respond to different educational strategies and settings. Our goal, therefore, should be to promote a wide variety of formal and informal Jewish educational options (just as we have a wide variety of synagogues and temples), so that people of every age and temperament can find the one that best suits their needs. At the same time, however, we need to explore new ways to

measure the effectiveness of each of these options so that we maximize the potential for making informed and well-founded decisions. Just as we now have helpful and informative guides to colleges and hospitals (not to speak of restaurants), so we need reliable guides to Jewish educational institutions and programs around the country. Market forces may then be relied upon to produce improvements where necessary.

Finally, the AJC statement claims that funding for Jewish education should be the responsibility of the “entire Jewish community.” It recommends the creation of a communal endowment for this purpose, but opposes either direct government funding or government vouchers. There is no question in my mind that Jewish education should constitute an overriding communal responsibility: our tradition mandates this and the greatest Jewish communities in the world have always upheld this tradition (which, in part, is what made them great). Nor is there any question that the proposed communal endowment for education should in time ease the burden of paying for quality Jewish education—a burden, it might be recalled, that often falls disproportionately on young couples least able to bear it. Greater federation funding for Jewish education would also help. As fewer communal dollars flow overseas to Israel, more should certainly be freed up for these kinds of domestic needs.

It does not, however, follow logically from any of these recommendations that government funding, especially in the form of vouchers to cover secular education, should be opposed. After all, every Jewish community takes responsibility for aiding the poor, the elderly, and the infirm, but nobody opposes government funds flowing to any of these areas! To the contrary, we know that government and faith-based organizations, in partnership with one another, have created effective programs that have done much (if not yet enough) to ease the plight of the needy among us. In the case of

education, what we really need is greater research into *how* the government can responsibly support the secular part of private, parochial, and Jewish day school education without intruding impermissibly into matters of faith. Many of our partners in interfaith relations, as well as some African-American leaders, have done a great deal of work in this area, and it behooves the American Jewish Committee to enter into dialogue with them instead of dismissing their proposals out of hand. Given AJC’s welcome recognition of the effectiveness of day school education, its position on vouchers as expressed in this statement seems especially weak-minded. Those interested in a more sophisticated and thoroughgoing exploration of the issue are encouraged to read Marshall J. Breger and David M. Gordis (eds.), *Vouchers for School Choice: Challenge or Opportunity?—An American Jewish Reappraisal* (1998).

For the most part, though, the AJC Statement on Jewish Education represents both a thoughtful analysis of the state of American Jewish education and a persuasive set of recommendations for communal action. At this critical moment in American Jewish life, when priorities are shifting, the community’s agenda is being rewritten, and the community’s future—assimilation or revitalization—hangs in the balance, it is a statement that richly deserves to be read, studied, and pondered.

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It is comforting to know that after a century of day schools on these shores, a corner has finally been turned and American Jewry is prepared to embrace these institutions by providing them with the spiritual, intellectual, and—hopefully—financial resources they require. There are good reasons for optimism, for