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AMERICAN JEWISH EDUCATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In this paper, I want to offer some preliminary thoughts on the history of American Jewish education and how it might be reconceived and reconceptualized to transform it into a useful history — one that sheds light on issues of significance to contemporary Jewish educators. In surveying this literature, I find myself somewhat in the situation that historian Bernard Bailyn did when he reviewed the history of American education for his influential volume entitled *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (1960). What he said then seems to me to apply in great measure to American Jewish education today:

> The role of education in American history is obscure. We have almost no historical leverage on the problems of American education. The facts, or at least a great quantity of them, are there, but they lie inert; they form no significant pattern (p. 4).

Add the word "Jewish" to this analysis, and the situation is one that anyone who attempts to study the extant literature on the history of American Jewish education will easily recognize.

Just as Bailyn found in his survey, so too in American Jewish education, there is no dearth of books and articles for scholars to read. Norman Drachler's remarkable *Bibliography of Jewish Education in the United States* (1996) boasts almost twenty thousand entries! Revealingly, though, only about two percent of those entries deal directly with the history of American Jewish education, and that number includes primary sources. Sadly, even those two percent consist for the most part — significant exceptions notwithstanding — of parochial and narrowly conceived studies, long on facts and short on analysis.

No full-scale history of American Jewish education has been attempted since 1969, when two significant volumes appeared: Judah Pilch's *A History of Jewish Education in the United States* and Lloyd P. Gartner's *Jewish Education in the United States: A Documentary History*.[1] Pilch described his volume as a "brief survey" and hoped that it would stimulate further historical research (pp. xi–xii). Gartner dismissed earlier writings in the field as "largely inadequate" and called for "serious research, within the double framework of American and Jewish educational history" (pp. 33, 40). Neither summons, nor a subsequent one by Michael Zeldin (1988), was subsequently heeded. As a result, the revolution that transformed the historical study of American education scarcely impacted upon its American Jewish counterpart.

Two unstated assumptions underlie much of what passes for the history of Jewish education in the United States and may be considered the field's regnant paradigms. The first, which might be labeled the Rodney Dangerfield paradigm, holds that Jewish education has always been the stepchild of the American Jewish community. Throughout American Jewish history, so the argument goes, it "got no respect." According to this trope, the American Jewish community was beset by so

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many other urgent concerns — immigration, the battle against anti-Semitism, Zionism, etc. — that nobody paid due attention to Jewish education and it consequently languished from neglect. "American Jewry has given abundantly of its thought and wealth to the care of the sick and the aged, to the relief of visible distress and suffering, but it has done nothing, if we except a few attempts, toward grappling with the problem of Jewish education," the journalist-educator Isaac Unterman charged in a typical expression of this point-of-view (Unterman, 1944, p. 33).[2] At that time, as at other times in American Jewry's past, there was some truth to that plaint, but as a paradigm for understanding the history of the field it is grossly inadequate. Presupposing that what we don't know didn't happen, it completely overlooks the enormous attention paid to Jewish education by those who viewed it as a medium for effecting communal revitalization and social change. Far from neglecting Jewish education, many through the years imbued it with near miraculous power, as if it could single-handedly save the American Jew. Isaac Unterman himself was such a believer: "The Talmud Torah," he enthused, "must accept the burden of the future; it must rescue all that the Diaspora tends to rob us of... our language, our customs, our traditions, our culture, and even our soul. The Talmud Torah must be an anti-toxin for the noxious poisons of the foreign atmosphere (ibid, p. 79)."

A second unstated paradigm that shapes the way the history of American Jewish education has been perceived holds that, over time, the condition of Jewish schools in America improved while the state of Jewish education grievously declined. Facilities, teachers and textbooks got better and better but American Jews grew more and more ignorant. As Lloyd Gartner put it in his survey, "Jewish education was better established and financed... than ever before. At the same time, the level of Jewish knowledge among American Jews lagged further and further beneath their general educational attainment" (Gartner, 1969, p. 33). This familiar paradox is the educational counterpart to the traditional Jewish view of America as a land good for Jews (materially) and bad for Judaism (religiously) — which may be why on the surface it appears so attractive. The observation also parallels what we believe to be true of general public education: it costs more and more even as less and less is achieved. For all of its surface persuasiveness, however, the paradox begs a critical question, by no means confined to Jews alone, which is *why* there should be an inverse relationship between investment and results in contemporary education?[3] In terms of Jewish education, moreover, the paradox may be far more apparent than real. A good case, after all, could also be made for the opposite premise: that the community has achieved significant returns on its educational investment resulting in ours being the *best* Jewishly educated generation of native-born American Jews in all of American Jewish history. Day schools, university-based Jewish studies, and high level adult Jewish educational programs have all achieved unprecedented levels of success. Yet even where it does hold true, the paradox that some see as defining the history of American Jewish education actually forms something of an interpretive strait-jacket. Confining the analysis to narrow questions of quality (however that is measured) inevitably constrains scholars from asking what may be far more productive questions concerning the content of American Jewish education, the relationship of American Jewish education to American Jewish life, and how both have changed over time.

A better premise with which to begin to study the history of American Jewish education, it seems to me, is with the realization that schools serve as a primary setting, along with the home, where American Jews confront the most fundamental question of American Jewish life: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, part of the larger American society and apart from it. This question, a variant on one that all post-

emancipation Jews face, is what Jewish education in America is all about, and always has been. Ultimately, *Jewish education serves as the vehicle through which we train successive generations of Jews to negotiate their own way, as Jews, in the American arena.* Schools are the place where this training formally takes place, and, consequently, where this central drama of American Jewish life is introduced and rehearsed. When we study the history of American Jewish education, we analyze how this process has changed over time — how in different eras and different kinds of classrooms Jews have received a wide array of different messages concerning how best to negotiate their way in American society. Conceived in this way, the history of American Jewish education yields very practical lessons, not only for contemporary American Jewish educators but for everyone concerned with American Jewish life.

In what follows, I outline only selected chapters in this history.[4] My aim is threefold: (1) to highlight themes that illustrate the relationship between American Jewish education and American Jewish life, (2) to shed light on issues of continuing relevance, and (3) to point to topics that merit greater research and study.

In the colonial and early national periods of American Jewish history, most Jews — their numbers never exceeded a few thousand — studied either in common pay (private) schools that assumed the religious identity of their headmaster; or in charity (free) schools supported by religious bodies with financial support from the State. In 1803, New York's only Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel, established a charity school under its own auspices named Polonies Talmud Torah. The school enjoyed equal footing with Protestant and Catholic schools in the city and received state aid — a reminder that American Jews understood the relationship of religion and state differently in those days than we do today (Sarna and Dalin, 1997, pp. 85–89).

American Jewry's earliest educators believed that the best way to appropriately train American Jews was to provide them with a full secular education — "English, Reading, Writing and Ciphering [arithmetic]" according to one early curriculum (Pilch, 1969, p. 12) — plus a modest Jewish education. Setting a model that many still follow today, they insisted that being an American Jew meant emphasizing the secular world over the religious one. They also believed that Jewish education should emulate the pattern of the general community's schools, so the Jewish schools covered the same secular subjects as their Protestant counterparts. Most contemporary Jewish educators take this kind of emulation for granted, but it is well to remember that Jewish educators in Eastern Europe at that time followed an entirely different path, largely because they aimed to shape an entirely different and more culturally separatist kind of Jew.

Finally, and this point parallels one that both Bailyn and Lawrence Cremin have made in their works, Jews at this time did not assume that schools were society's only educational settings. If one follows John Dewey in distinguishing *intentional* education as provided in school, from *incidental* education, absorbed from the world around (see Cremin, 1976, p. 4f), then it is clear that early American Jews considered incidental education by far the more significant form of education, particularly when it came to acquainting their children with the practical requirements of their faith. Not one of the early Jewish schools that we know of, for example, taught classes in "how to be a Jew" or "Jewish holidays" or "Jewish identity." Instead, they taught critical skills — like Hebrew reading — just as secular schools taught the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The rest was learned outside of school — at home, in synagogue, or through an apprenticeship. Only later did this kind of incidental education decline (or at least people did not value or rely on it as much as they had done), and intentional education came to play a much more dominant role in

education, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, so much so that today the Jewish educator is assumed to be responsible even for family education. This represents a sea-change in Jewish life. Where once Jews learned to negotiate the challenge of living Jewishly in America incidentally, informally, and largely by example, today many of these same lessons are provided intentionally through formal educators and curricula. The implications of this change are worth pondering.

The creation of the state-supported non-denominational public school spawned a revolution in American education, and affected American Jewish education profoundly. In 1825, New York cut off payments to religiously-sponsored charity schools and in the middle quarters of the 19th century a whole new world of American education took shape that totally transformed the context in which Jewish education functioned. Broadly speaking, American Jewish educators now had to choose between two emerging and bitterly contested models of religious education that, for simplicity's sake, we might label the Protestant model and the Catholic model. The Protestant model held that morality, universal values, patriotism, civics and critical skills all should be taught in state-funded public schools to a mixed body of religiously diverse students, leaving only the fine points of religious doctrine and practice to be mastered by members of each faith in separate denominationally-sponsored supplementary schools. The Catholic model, by contrast, insisted that such public schools really preached Protestant values and that the only way to maintain a minority (dissenting) religious tradition was through a separate system of religious schooling, which they organized on the parish system (the word "parochial" comes from the same Latin root as "parish" and refers to a school established and maintained by a religious body). A very important internal Jewish debate took place between supporters of each model (Gartner, 1976) — appropriately so, since each reflected a different conception of American Jewish identity and a different strategy for maintaining Judaism in the American setting. For a time in the nineteenth century, in opposition to the mainstream Protestant schools, many significant private Jewish day schools existed: Max Lilienthal operated one in New York (Merowitz, 1974), the Misses Palache School, also in New York, educated Jewish women (Grinstein, 1945, pp. 225–259), Emanuel Nunes Carvalho operated a school in Charleston (Engelman, 1952, p. 53) Talmud Yelodim educated young Jews in Cincinnati (Sarna and Klein, 1989, pp. 42–43), the Washington Hebrew Elementary School operated in Washington, D.C. (Kaganoff, 1985), and there were many more (Rauch, 1978, pp. 30–76; Zeldin, 1988, p. 441; Sarna & Dalin, 1997, p. 17). We know all too little about these schools, forerunners of contemporary day schools, and one especially wishes that we knew more about how they integrated general and Jewish curricula. What we do know is that by the mid 1870s, most Jewish day schools had closed, replaced by Sabbath, Sunday, and afternoon supplementary schools. Public schools had by then became more avowedly secular and religiously sensitive, and Jews flocked to them for they were free, convenient, often educationally superior and usually far more commodious than their Jewish counterparts. "It is our settled opinion here," Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the great Cincinnati Reform Jewish leader reported to the US Commissioner of Education in 1870, "that the education of the young is the business of the State and that religious instruction…is the duty of religious bodies. Neither ought to interfere with the other" (Gartner, 1969, p. 86). This represented the triumph of the Protestant model of education in American Jewish circles. Pragmatism, widespread hostility to Catholic separatism, and an apparently conscious effort to involve Jews in the shaping of urban education[5] had succeeded in winning Jews over to the public schools.

Once made, this decision rapidly became enshrined in ideology. To attend public schools and to guard them from sectarianism became

not just a matter of Jewish communal interest but, as Jews now insisted, a patriotic obligation as well. Indeed, Jews came to look upon the public schools as bastions of American democracy, "temples of liberty," in the words of a Cincinnati Jewish leader, where "children of the high and low, rich and poor, Protestants, Catholics and Jews mingle together, play together and are taught that we are a free people, striving to elevate mankind, and to respect one another" (Gartner, 1976, p. 180). As such, the public schools came to have an insurmountable advantage over "sectarian" schools: Jews perceived them as an entrée to America itself and supported them as a patriotic duty. Thus, while the Catholic church looked upon the public school as a symbol of much that was wrong with America, and therefore set up its own system of parochial school education, Jews wholeheartedly supported and even idealized public education as a symbol of America's promise. This explains both the longstanding Jewish love affair with the public schools (the schools were a synecdoche for America itself), and the passionate feelings generated by the post-World War II move toward day school education.

Long before any of these developments, even before public schooling had completely won the day in America, Jewish leaders became increasingly concerned about the numbers of Jews around them (precise numbers are unknown) who received no Jewish education at all. They feared that these Jews might be lost to their faith, and worried particularly about their falling prey to Christian missionaries. Missionary threats have long served as the Jewish community's early warning system, signaling areas where the community has failed and prompting its leaders to do better (Sarna, 1987; Berman, 1954, pp. 253–254). Indeed, fear of missionary schools and of conversionism generally has, from the early nineteenth century onward, been a significant spur to Jewish educational and communal reforms. In this case, the fear of losing Jews provoked a crisis, out of which emerged a new Jewish educational institution, the Jewish Sunday School, founded in Philadelphia in 1838 by Rebecca Gratz (Ashton, 1997).

Contemporary American Jewish educators view Sunday schools as an obstacle to quality Jewish education, and have little good to say about them. Perhaps as a consequence, there is no full-scale history of the Jewish Sunday school movement in America, although the movement's historical importance can scarcely be questioned. My aim here is not to defend the Sunday school, but rather to explore the reasons for its rise and popularity. As we shall see, many issues initially raised by the Sunday school movement remain significant to American Jewish educators today.

First, the Jewish Sunday school, founded to "follow the example of other religious communities" and in the very city where the Christian Sunday School movement was centered (Rosenbloom, 1958, p. 71), openly sought to adapt the Protestant model of American education to Judaism. It resolved the problem of how to be American and Jewish by symbolically separating the two realms, in what may be seen as the educational counterpart to church-state separation. On weekdays, Jews studied with non-Jews in a commonly-funded public school; on Sunday, with Jews alone in a privately-funded Sunday school. The imbalance ensured that religious education would be decidedly secondary. Jewish Sunday schools also tacitly accepted the Protestant division of learning into universal morality (taught in public schools) and particularistic forms (reserved for supplementary schools). While they reinforced the former, they understandably focused on the latter which they saw as their exclusive domain. Finally, in Judaism as in Protestantism, the public school and the Sunday school became complementary institutions, each seen as correcting important deficiencies of the other. Anne Boylan, in her study of Protestant Sunday Schools, observes that for devout Protestants, Sunday schools "helped make common school 'tolerable' "and that without them the 'common school ideal'... would never have worked" (Boylan,

1988, p. 58–59). The same might be said with respect to Jews.

Bible stories and catechisms dominated Sunday School Jewish education. Memorization was central, as it was in so many nineteenth-century American classrooms, and years later thousands could still recite such lessons from Mrs. Eleazar Pyke's *Scriptural Questions, for the Use of Sunday Schools for the Instruction of Israelites* (1843) as: "Who formed you child and made you live? God did my life and spirit give" (Rosenbach, 1927, p. 24). Between the lines, Jews also learned to distinguish their faith from Christianity and to defend themselves against the importunities of missionaries. In the early years, Jewish Sunday school textbooks starkly portrayed the differences between Judaism and Christianity since they were actually Christian Sunday School textbooks with "the objectionable passages blotted out or pasted over" (Rosenbach, 1927, p. 19; Marcus, 1955, vol. I, p. 283). Later, these lessons were taught somewhat more subtly, but remained an important curricular subtext. One popular textbook, composed in Germany "for Jewish schools and families" and subsequently translated into English, taught that "God is but one...we do not worship any being besides him." It also warned that "should any designing persons...attempt to seduce us from our religion, we must resist such temptation with the firm resolution to live and die in the religion of our forefathers" (Herxheimer, 1874, pp. 17–18, 54). Some later textbooks, however, resisted this approach. An 1883 *English School and Family Reader for the Use of Isrcelites,* for example, boasted that it contained "no sectarianism," and "although intended for Hebrew institutions" would also "prove of great value to the Christian student" (Abarbanel, 1883, preface). Much more research needs to be done on this theme, as well as on the broader question of how Christianity was (and is) portrayed in American Jewish textbooks.[6] Impressionistic evidence, however, suggests that as interfaith relations improved Jewish educators left off teaching children the distinctions between their faith and Christianity and stopped inoculating them against "designing persons" who sought to convert them. Again, the implications of these changes, both for educators and for American Jewish life generally, are well worth pondering.

Beyond their textbooks, Jewish Sunday schools reinforced the same solid middle class values that public schools and Protestant Sunday Schools stressed: punctuality, obedience, cleanliness, self-discipline, economy, and order (Marcus, 1955, I, pp. 282–288; Boylan, 1988, pp. 22–52). Rich and poor studied together in these schools. Education, like much of nineteenth-century religion and social reform, was motivated by the desire to perfect equality and democracy (Robertson, 1980, p. 259; Sarna, 1991, p. 194). This points to a theme that has attracted surprisingly little notice from historians of Jewish education, and that is the study of class. How, one wonders, have distinctions based upon wealth and social position affected Jewish education? What assumptions have Jewish educators made concerning the economic status of their students, and what are the implications of those assumptions? Should Jewish education account for the real life economic differences among Jews, or, like the Sunday school, should it pursue an idealized version of Jewish life? These are precisely the kinds of questions that carefully-conceived historical inquiries might help us to answer.

Outside the classroom, the Jewish Sunday school movement initiated a highly significant and still unresolved American Jewish communal debate concerning the governance of Jewish education. Akin to the contemporary debate between supporters of centralized and decentralized (community-based) public education, the Jewish debate pit advocates of communal control against those who believed that Jewish education should be the province of the synagogue. Rebecca Gratz, although a devoted member of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Synagogue, always insisted that the Jewish Sunday School should be governed by an independent communal body. Against the

wishes of Mikveh Israel's leaders, the city's Hebrew Sunday School Society was separately incorporated in 1858, with herself as president (Rosenbloom, 1958, p. 77). Sunday schools in other cities did come under congregational control. Later, the Reform Movement's Hebrew Sabbath-School Union (established 1886) sought to bring many of these schools under centralized leadership, complete with a uniform curriculum. Today, four basic models govern American Jewish education. There are schools under congregational control, schools under communal control, schools governed by particular religious or ideological movements, and schools that are completely private and independent. The pros and cons of these different modes of educational governance have been lustily debated, but to my knowledge never adequately studied. Here again, a well-conceived historical analysis might be able to shed light on a longstanding but still unresolved educational dilemma.

A final and particularly current theme introduced into Jewish education by the Sunday school movement was gender. Initiating what might be described as the great battle of the sexes in Jewish education — a battle that has yet to find its chronicler and is by no means resolved today — Rebecca Gratz specified back in 1838 that "young ladies" were to serve as teachers in the new Hebrew Sunday School that she was establishing (Rosenbloom, 1958, p. 72). The Jewish Sunday School movement as a whole was thus from the start a women's movement (see Engelman, 1952, pp. 58–59): women founded the schools, directed them, taught in them, and insisted that their daughters be free to attend them on a par with boys. Even where men subsequently participated in the Jewish Sunday school movement, it remained, like its Protestant counterpart, primarily the domain of women, and as such contributed to the redefinition of women's role in American society.

Religious education proved at once ennobling and liberating for women; it also legitimated their becoming better educated Jewishly than they had ever been before. At the same time, however, it also brought women into conflict with men. In Philadelphia, this conflict was symbolized by the rival Hebrew Education Society, founded in 1848 upon the initiative of the notable American Jewish religious leader Isaac Leeser, with a membership constitutionally restricted to "any male Israelite of twenty-one years of age." In a thinly veiled critique of the Sunday School, the new organization described itself as "penetrated with the conviction of the necessity of a thorough religious education of all Israelites," and deplored "the absence of proper schools where the same can be imparted." It advocated intensive Jewish education, created a Jewish preparatory school, and even as it admitted female students and teachers into its school, it was at all levels dominated by men (*Fifty Years' Work of the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia*, 1899, esp p. 9). The symbolism could not have been more clear: the Sunday School, created and maintained by women, provided only a weak and vapid Jewish education, according to its critics. Anything stronger and more intensive demanded the exertions of men.

The great Jewish educational reform movement of the twentieth century associated with Samson Benderly and his disciples carried forward this battle of the sexes. At the leadership level, it was totally male-dominated — so much so, that the group came to be known as the "Benderly *boys*." Female disciples like Rebecca Aronson saw their identity submerged. As part of their effort to upgrade the professional status of Jewish education, the "boys" ensured that they controlled the Jewish educational enterprise as principals and directors of the newly formed bureaus of Jewish education. Where they did make room for women was in the classroom. They trained and employed large numbers of young Americanized women to replace the discredited immigrant *melamdim* — embittered, poverty-stricken, weak and sometimes sadistic men — whom the Benderly boys cast as the villains of Jewish education. As the male-centered *heder*

gave way to the female-centered Hebrew school (or Talmud Torah) classroom, Jewish education came to mirror the gender assumptions of American society at large: men governed and maintained control and women educated the children.

More than is generally recognized, however, the training of a cadre of full-time women Jewish educators — paid professionals, not volunteer women like the Sunday School teachers — carried far-reaching implications. Thanks to the training that they received at Jewish teachers colleges across the country (Gratz College, the Teachers Institute, Hebrew Teachers College, etc.) women achieved, for the first time, access to advanced Jewish learning. As a result, once feminism caught up with Jewish education, Jewish women possessed the knowledge and the skills to claim an equal role in the governance of Jewish education, achieving positions of leadership in the field not seen since the heyday of the Jewish Sunday School. [See now David Kaufman's illuminating history of the Teachers Institute (1997) which greatly expands our understanding of this theme.]

The late nineteenth century witnessed new developments in the history of American Jewish education. Concerned about assimilation, intermarriage, the growth of Ethical Culture (the liberal non-Jewish religious movement founded by Felix Adler, the son of a prominent Reform rabbi), and also a sharp rise in anti-Semitism, young Jews in the late 1870s lost confidence in the liberal assumptions of their day — the hope for a "new era" of universal brotherhood — and concluded that Judaism and Jewish education needed to be revitalized in order for the community to be saved. The subsequent onrush of East European Jewish immigrants only heightened American Jewry's sense of crisis and foreboding. I have described the resulting "great awakening" in American Jewish life at length elsewhere (Sarna, 1995). What is important here is the fact that this revitalization movement resulted in the strengthening of Jewish education, particularly among age groups that Jewish educators had previously neglected: young adults (in their late teens and twenties) and older adults. Raising the level of adult Jewish knowledge became a prime objective of those who concerned themselves with the era's crisis of continuity, and their response was to create an unprecedented array of new and carefully targeted educational undertakings. These included educational programs for Jewish singles at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Associations; the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886), the Jewish Publication Society (1888), Henrietta Szold's Baltimore Night School for Russian immigrants (1889), the American Jewish Historical Society (1892), the Jewish Chautauqua Society (1893), the National Council of Jewish Women (1893), and Gratz College (1893); the creation of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–6); the movement to bring Solomon Schechter to America; and the founding of an array of Jewish library collections across the United States for native Jews and immigrants alike. All of these developments — and this list is by no means complete — reflect an extraordinary moment, perhaps unmatched until our own day, when adult Jewish education stood at the top of American Jewry's communal agenda and was seen as vital to its future. This chapter in the history of American Jewish education gives the lie to those who contend that Jewish education was never respected by communal leaders, but is also worth recalling for at least two additional reasons. First, it shaped many of the institutions central to twentieth century American Jewish education, and explains the context out of which they emerged. Second it provides many parallels to the events of our own day, when Jewish education has again been entrusted with the responsibility to ensure Jewish continuity, and thus offers historical perspective on the challenges that contemporary Jewish educators face, suggesting perils to avoid and possibilities to nurture.

This brings me to the final era in American Jewish education that I want to consider, one

that my colleague, Professor Alan Mintz, has been researching for years and that many of the rest of us personally remember, though we have not taken the time to understand, evaluate and learn from it. I refer to the Hebraist-Zionist takeover of American Jewish education in the twentieth century, "the story," in Mintz's words, "of how a small band of committed Hebraists 'kidnapped' the Talmud Torah movement and retained control of it for several decades" (Mintz, 1993, p. 64).

The roots of the American Hebraist movement lie in Europe and Palestine, where the revitalization of Hebrew served as a symbol of enlightenment (*Haskalah*), and of the kind of cultural activity that Ahad Ha'Am, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and their followers all considered essential to the success of Zionism and the related movement for diaspora Jewish renewal. The *ivrit be-ivrit* ("Hebrew in Hebrew") educational method, also known as the "natural method" of teaching Hebrew, was named and described in 1898 by Izhac Epstein (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 6, col. 826–827), but its roots lay in the late nineteenth-century European Jewish educational reform movement that produced the new and improved Jewish school known as the *heder metukkan* (Scharfstein, 1943, pp. 211–219). Several of these educational reformers subsequently immigrated to America, where they established Jewish schools on this same model. The earliest is usually dated to 1893, when Zvi Hirsch Neumann began the innovative Shaaray Zion School in Brooklyn, reputedly the first American school where Hebrew was taught as a "living language." In 1898, Samson Benderly, born in Safed, began teaching Hebrew the "natural" way in Baltimore with great success. By 1905, America's Hebraists had organized themselves, and in a conference dedicated to "the survival of the Jewish people" they resolved "to introduce *ivrit be-ivrit* in the schools and to improve Jewish education in general" (Goelman, 1971, pp. 73–82). The Hebrew language, they fervently believed, would promote Jewish group loyalty, prevent assimilation, and bring on a new world. In short, Hebraism functioned as a form of Jewish secular messianism, parallel in many ways to other redemptionist movements that attracted Jews at that time, including Socialism and Communism. The revolution that the Hebraists sought to effect, however, was a Jewish *cultural* revolution. To this end they infiltrated the Jewish supplementary (*Talmud Torah*) schools, and made them their vehicle for effecting change.

Hebraism might easily have remained a peripheral or underground phenomenon in American Jewish life had it not been for the widely publicized "Community Survey of Jewish Education in New York City," prepared by Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson. Presented to the first convention of the Kehillah, the organized Jewish community of New York, in 1910 (see Kaplan and Cronson, 1949), the report demonstrated in a scientific way that between seventy-five and eighty percent of New York's Jewish children were receiving no formal Jewish education at all,[7] and many of the rest faced educational conditions so poor as to be counterproductive. The stunning impact of these findings — comparable to the impact of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study's findings on intermarriage in our day — shocked the Jewish community and galvanized it into action. Once again, communal attention became focused on Jewish education, this time at the primary level. The stage was set for new solutions "to preserve Jewish life in this country" (Dushkin, 1918, pp. 102–104; Goren, 1970, pp. 88–92).

The genius who did more than anybody else to provide these solutions (demonstrating, in the process, that Jewish education in America did not inevitably slope downward) was Samson Benderly, whose success in Baltimore and vast intellect now brought him to the fore. Benderly was by his own admission "a dreamer" (Winter, 1966, p. 159) and he possessed one of the most original minds in the whole history of Jewish education. He understood, first of all, that Jewish education in the United States had to be "built upon principles underlying the life of all American

Jews."[8] He opposed day schools fearing ghettoization (though others at the time, including Judah Magnes, had expressed new interest in the Catholic model of parochial education [Goren, 1970, p. 98]) and he opposed religion in the public schools, fearing Protestantization. But rather than living with the Protestant model of public school plus Sunday school, he championed what he called "the double school system." Condemning Sunday schools as insufficient, primarily defensive, and doomed to failure, he called for "a system of Hebrew schools which our children can attend *after* their daily attendance in the public schools." With this, he provided the ideological basis for the supplementary school system that came to dominate American Jewish education in the 20th century (Winter, 1966, pp. 47–49).

In addition to supplementary schools, Benderly also brought the *ivrit be-ivrit* program into American Jewish education. He justified it not on the basis of its cultural program, which would have made it controversial, but rather on the basis of its pragmatic value as "the shortest and most attractive road to the Bible and the Prayer Book." Since the traditional word-by-word translation method of teaching Hebrew reading was widely viewed as "unpedagogic" and had in any case "utterly failed, particularly in this country," he argued that it was "worthwhile to give the Natural Method a thorough and extensive trial" (Goelman, 1971, p. 79). Later, Benderly championed graded textbooks, educational camping, high schools, pre-schools, a non-Hebrew-centered curriculum for those who could not learn Hebrew (the plan, considered heretical by most Hebraists, never took off) and a great deal more. He was always full of vision and inspiration, though sadly his lack of business sense and mediocre administrative talents cut some of his achievements short (see Scharfstein, 1956, pp. 151–180).

What is important for our purposes is that Benderly and especially his followers, who seem to have been more single-minded about this issue than he, succeeded in spreading the *ivrit-be-ivrit* gospel throughout American Jewish supplementary education (Honor, 1952). Thanks to Benderly's disciple, Emanuel Gamoran, it penetrated into Reform Jewish education as well; the proportion of pupils studying Hebrew in Reform religious schools nearly doubled between 1924 and 1948 (Meyer, 1988, p. 298). As a result, American Jewish education became Hebrew-centered and Zionist-oriented. This had enormously important implications — and not just for Jewish education.

First, the curriculum of Jewish education came to focus on Hebrew, so much so that the schools themselves came to be known as "Hebrew schools." This was an accurate but revealing change from Talmud Torah, the more traditional Jewish term for community school. Where before, Hebrew served as the means for gaining access to Jewish texts now Hebrew itself became the primary aim and Jewish texts provided the means for language acquisition. This transformation accurately reflected Hebraist ideology. Modern Hebrew, they believed, was the key both to the survival of Jewish life in the United States and to the creation of a Jewish homeland in Zion.

Second, Jewish education came to define success largely in terms of Hebrew mastery. Those who became fluent in Hebrew succeeded. Those who did not, came away with virtually no Jewish education at all. Believing as they did that Hebrew was critical to Jewish survival, the failure of those who never mastered it seemed to them to follow naturally. By contrast, a non-Hebrew centered curriculum seemed to them both unnatural and foredoomed.

Third, Jewish education, as Benderly and his students conceived it, focused on the training of a gifted elite — those who could master Hebrew and cope with the "double school system" that they championed. East European (and especially Lithuanian) Jewish education had reflected this same hierarchy of values, as did much of American education of that time. Much more research into the place of elitism in American Jewish education need to be done

(see Reimer, 1995; Mintz, 1993, pp. 62–64), but here we have the roots of a conundrum that would in time challenge all of American education, Jewish and general alike. The question, as framed by Lawrence Cremin, is whether the primary goal of education should be "cultivation of the most talented... nurturance of the average, or the compensatory encouragement of those long discriminated against" (Cremin, 1988, p. 13)? A look back on the *ivrit be-ivrit* era offers historical perspective on both the benefits and the liabilities of the first of these choices.

Fourth, *ivrit be-ivrit* contributed to the professionalization of Jewish education in the United States. It limited the ranks of teachers to those who had mastered modern Hebrew, received training in one of the new Hebrew teachers colleges, and been officially certified. Requiring educators to be able to speak modern Hebrew effectively eliminated traditional *melamdim*, Sunday school teachers, and even highly educated (but non-Hebrew speaking) rabbis from the professional teaching ranks. Only those conversant with the requisite body of esoteric knowledge (i.e. Modern Hebrew) could henceforward win professional status, and since their numbers were limited their salaries rose and their working conditions improved.

Finally, the *ivrit-be-ivrit* movement raised the self-esteem of Jewish educators. Just as the labor movement empowered lowly workers and made them feel more important, so *ivrit be-ivrit* elevated lowly teachers making them feel part of the most significant movement in Jewish life. Devoted Jewish teachers believed with all their heart and soul that the future of American Jewish life depended upon them. In their own eyes, theirs was no longer merely a job. It was a vocation, a calling, and a sacred mission.

The *ivrit be-ivrit* movement in Jewish education collapsed in the 1970s. Its downfall was as swift and complete as the fall of Communism in the decade that followed, and little — perhaps far too little — remains of its dream. We do not yet fully understand why and how that collapsed happened. The factors enumerated by Alan Mintz — "the brute force of Americanization and the hostility of American society to foreign languages; the runaway success and dominance of Hebrew literature in Israel; the inability of the essential secularity of Tarbut Ivrit to respond to the postwar search for religious values; the movement of Jews to the suburbs and the ascendancy of the synagogue; [and] the displacement of religious Zionism in the Mizrahi mold by right-wing Orthodoxy" (1993, pp. 18–19) — explain much but by no means all. What is important for our purposes is that the educational reformers who promised in 1910 to save American Jewish education by rebuilding it upon the "principles underlying the life of all American Jews" created a movement — *ivrit be-ivrit* — that, in time, fell completely out-of-touch with the needs of American Jews. Having ceased to provide young people with the tools to negotiate between the two worlds that governed their identity, its demise was inevitable. The wonder, perhaps, is that the movement lasted as long as it did.

In recent decades, American Jewish educators have been busy writing new chapters in the history of American Jewish education (Ackerman, 1972, 1978; Kelman, 1992). The Jewish day school movement and university-based Jewish studies programs seem by far the most important of these. But there are others — the "back to the sources" movement, family education, intensive Jewish learning programs for adults, and more — that suggest that ours is something of a "plastic moment" in the history of American Jewish education, an era that sees abundant innovations, an unlimited number of potential directions, innumerable theories, and vast uncertainty.

As so often in the past, so again today much of the ferment in Jewish education is occasioned by a sense of crisis — the so-called crisis of "Jewish continuity," the fear that "the weakening commitment to Jewish life, which can already be seen in the lives of the current generation of young adult Jews, may become

even more apparent among their children and grandchildren" (Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1990, p. 30). This is "a time to act," the Commission on Jewish Education in North America has declared. Yet again, Jewish leaders are looking to educators to help resolve the community's crisis and to ensure that American Jewish life continues.

Sadly, most of those planning the educational response to this latest crisis of Jewish continuity have learned nothing from the past, and have not even tried to learn from it. My purpose here has been to suggest that they should. For history, as we have seen, addresses themes relevant to the issues that American Jewish educators currently face. By carefully studying that history — analyzing past successes and failures, and examining the whole process of educational change (see Zeldin, 1984; Shevitz, 1992; Aron and Zeldin, 1996) — we would be in a much better position than we are now to build securely for the future.[9]

ENDNOTES

[1]Zevi Scharfstein (1947, pp. 155–366) published an earlier survey, in Hebrew. Subsequently, Rauch (1978) surveyed Jewish education in the United States from 1840–1920.

[2]*A Time to Act* (Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1990) similarly maintains that in the face of the "life and death issues" that confronted the American Jewish community in the twentieth century, "the needs of education have seemed to be less urgent, less insistent, more diffused; a problem that could be dealt with at some point in the future when more pressing problems had been solved" (p. 28).

[3]Lawrence A. Cremin, in his foreword to Gartner (1969, pp. ix–x), writes that this paradox "is not unfamiliar to students of American religious life" and "tells us much not only about the nature and limitations of education, but also about the character of life in twentieth-century America."

[4]Limitations of space and knowledge preclude me from dealing with a host of highly significant subjects including Yiddish schools, day schools, movement-oriented schools, Jewish camping and so forth. Jonathan Golden and Joyce Antler, in commenting on a draft of this paper, properly observe that we also lack (among other things) histories of curricula in various fields, regional studies, an intellectual history of American Jewish education, critical biographies of leaders in the field, comparative studies of Jewish and other forms of religious education (Protestant, Catholic, etc.), and a history of Jewish education for girls and women.

[5]Jews sat on school boards in many nineteenth-century American cities where Jews lived in numbers, including New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. In the latter, as early as 1855, the school board reportedly took account of Jewish sensitivities in shaping its policy on religious instruction in the public schools (Sarna & Dalin, 1997, p. 185).

[6]The historical study of Jewish textbooks also opens up a range of other important subjects worthy of study. See Elson (1964) for comparative purposes, and Rappel (1993) for a complete bibliography of American Jewish textbooks (1766–1919).

[7]Jonathan Krasner reminds me that the report examined only a single moment in time. Had Kaplan and Cronson investigated how many Jewish children had ever in their lives received some form of Jewish education the results would likely have been somewhat different.

[8]On the general theme of the Americanization of Jewish education, see Ackerman (1975).

[9]I am grateful to Joyce Antler, Jonathan Golden, Jonathan Krasner, Nessa Rapoport, Joseph Reimer, and Susan Shevitz for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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