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Day School For Reform Jews, Too

David Ellenson and Michael Zeldin - Special To The Jewish Week Special To The Jewish Week

The idea that a significant number of American Jewish children would come to attend Jewish day schools would have seemed unimaginable no more than 40 years ago, and the notion that thousands from Reform Jewish homes would attend such schools would have seemed even more fantastic. After all, the public school was the major institution that facilitated the entry of upwardly mobile immigrant Jews and their children into American life throughout the major part of the 20th century.

For the overwhelming majority of these Jews, loyalty to this school system was an absolute article of faith. And for Reform Jews, as for others, devotion to the public school system was a sign of fidelity to the United States. During most of that period, the exclusive norm for Reform Jewish education was the afterschool or weekend religious school.

Much has changed since those years. Reform Jews, like so many others, have embraced practices and displayed attitudes regarding a number of areas of Jewish tradition that would have been unthinkable decades earlier. The reasons for these changes are many. Foremost among them is that the American Jewish community is no longer predominantly an immigrant one, and traditional barriers that formerly discriminated against Jews have all but been completely destroyed. Jews have become full and accepted participants in every sector of American life.

On one level, this means that the public schools are no longer required in order to facilitate Jewish entry into American society. On a deeper level, we would point out that public expressions of ethnic pride and religious commitment are applauded in ways that would not have been possible in earlier decades. The complex shoals of an ethically unsure American landscape and an excessively individualistic American society where traditional roots of identity are shallow and where traditional religious-moral values are frequently called into question are the new challenges facing American Jews. Many Jewish parents, and we include ourselves, feel that an intense exposure for our children to the ethical-cultural-religious-national heritage that is Judaism constitutes an invaluable and unparalleled resource for educating and preparing our children for participation in a pluralistic and constantly changing and expanding world.

Viewed from this perspective, Jewish day school education does not reflect a lack of allegiance to the United States. Nor need such education embody a narrow particularistic exultation of Jewish tradition.

Instead, Reform day school education indicates that a significant number of liberal Jewish parents now regard our tradition as a precious source that will allow our children to anchor and explore their personal and communal identity as Jews in a meaningful way. Such education permits many of us as parents to express our confidence that the values and teachings of Jewish tradition that our children will learn from a liberal Jewish perspective in such schools will cause our children to contribute as Jews to the American public square in an authentic liberal Jewish voice.

The creation of an ever-growing network of more than 20 North American Reform Jewish day schools that educates thousands of Reform Jewish youngsters, as well as the decision made by hundreds if not thousands more Reform Jewish parents to send their children either to Jewish day schools under community auspices or to Solomon Schechter schools, indicates that a growing number of Reform Jewish parents resonate to the motifs and concerns we have outlined here.

We recognize that most Reform Jewish parents will unquestionably continue to send their

children to afterschool Hebrew and religious school programs, and we affirm the worth and importance that must be assigned these schools. Indeed, initiatives at our HUC Schools of Education in both Los Angeles and New York are helping congregations re-imagine their congregational schools and the educational leadership required to guide these schools to meet the challenges confronting today's children and their families.

At the same time, we are delighted that increasing numbers of Reform Jews are choosing the day school option for their children, and we would urge more to do so. Our hope is that larger numbers of Reform and other liberal American Jews will regard an intense encounter with Judaism as a desirable option for their children in a multicultural world, and that these same parents will understand that such an encounter does not represent a retreat from the larger world.

Instead, such choice indicates that more and more of us self-confidently affirm the worth and value of Jewish tradition within the context of a larger world.

In an open American society that thankfully embraces Jews so warmly, we do not believe that there is any simple panacea to the challenges that confront the creation of a vibrant Jewish community. Nevertheless, we would submit that the insight provided by our ancient Sages in the Talmud — "The world exists only on account of the breath of schoolchildren" — is as sure a recipe for meaningful Jewish life and ongoing Jewish commitment and values today as it was when our ancestors uttered these words almost two millennia ago.

If we educate our children in schools that allow for optimal exposure to Judaism, we will foster their maturation as knowledgeable and serious liberal Jews.

We know already that such day schools succeed. A number of studies shows that graduates of liberal day schools over the past 20 years play a disproportionate role in the leadership of every sector of our community — Hillels, synagogues, Israel advocacy groups and federations.

We are confident that more such day school children, along with others, will one day be the guarantors of a Reform Judaism that is vital and inclusive, a liberal Judaism that will address and attract broad numbers of Jewish adults and their children, and that will inspire both Jews and gentiles in the highest and most humane values of our tradition. n

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