

*Joseph H. Lookstein*

The author of this article is one of the pioneers of Jewish education in the United States. The spiritual leader of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York City and professor of Jewish sociology at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Lookstein is the founder and principal of the Ramaz school, one of the nation's foremost Hebrew Day Schools on both the elementary and high school levels. Most recently his educational work has extended to the State of Israel. He is the President of the Board of Governors of Bar Ilan University. The present paper is a general perspective on the major goals of Jewish education and the means of achieving them.

## THE GOALS OF JEWISH EDUCATION

To reflect upon the goals of Jewish education is not peculiar to our day. Throughout the history of our people we have engaged in such reflections. During the First and Second Commonwealths, when Jewish national existence was relatively normal, prophets and sages were concerned with the problem.

When the Bible instructs us: "And this is the commandment, the statutes, and the ordinances which the Lord thy God commanded to teach you . . . that you might fear the Lord thy God to keep all His statutes and His commandments . . . and that thy days may be prolonged" (Deut. 6:1, 2), the Bible is in effect setting down goals for Jewish education. Similarly, when the Prophet asks: ". . . and what does the Lord thy God ask of thee but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8), he is in reality inquiring as to the goals of Jewish education. When the sages of the Talmud debate as to whether study is superior to conduct, or the reverse, and reach the conclusion that "study is superior because it conditions conduct" (*Kiddushin*, 40b), the objective of the

## *The Goals of Jewish Education*

debate is apparent.

In a later age, the schools of Babylonia, Spain, and the Provence were not uniform in their programs or curricula because, undoubtedly, they were motivated by different objectives. The yeshivoth of Eastern Europe varied in their methods because they differed in their goals. Volozin was poles apart from Slobodka and Mir was not Telshe. And all of them together had little in common with Lubavitch.

Educational institutions, like individual personalities, are not monolithic or uniform. The talmudic judgment applies alike to men and to their cultural enterprises—"Even as their complexions are not similar, so are their outlooks not similar." In our quest for Jewish educational goals for our day, we are, therefore, pursuing a historic pattern. Irrespective of what the outcome of our quest may be, the preoccupation with it is characteristic of traditional Jews.

Even a cursory examination of Jewish education through the ages does, however, reveal certain common strains and obvious qualities that were present in every period of Jewish existence. It would be profitable to identify these strains and qualities.

The first is the universality of Jewish education. The privilege of learning was never conferred upon a particular class or caste. It was never limited by economic station or social position. It was not the exclusive prerogative of the clergy. Priest and layman, aristocrat and commoner, affluent and humble, rich and poor, all could enjoy the inalienable right and opportunity of education. When one school of thought in the Talmud expressed the opinion "that instructions should not be given to everyone save to him who is gifted and of good family and possessed of wealth," the response was immediate and incisive. "To all shall instruction be given" was the declaration of the School of Hillel. It is this view that prevailed. Long before the days of endowed scholarships and public-spirited foundations, Judaism taught in the Talmud (*Nedarim*, 81a), "Be mindful of the children of the poor, for from them may issue forth the Torah."

The second strain characteristic of Jewish education through the ages is its insistence upon maximalism. The maximalism

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

was both quantitative and qualitative. It did not reckon with the limitations of time or space: "And thou shalt meditate on it by day and by night," and "And thou shalt speak them when thou sittest in thy house and when thou walkest by the way and when thou liest down and when thou risest up." Instruction began almost with the ability of a child to speak, and study did not end until the last breath of life. Laborer and merchant welcomed the rising sun with a chapter of the *Mishnah* and did not bid farewell to its setting rays without a page of *Ein Yaakov* or some similar tract. Each according to his capacities engaged in daily study. Small wonder then that, whether in the days of King Hezekiah in the seventh century before the Common Era, or throughout the lands of Europe and Islam of medieval times, or in the blank and tragic Pales of settlement of more recent days, illiteracy among the Jews was practically unknown, and advanced learning was more the rule than the exception.

The third strain that runs like a golden cord through Jewish education is its religious motivation. A Jew was expected to engage in Jewish study whether as child or as man not because of any compulsion that originated in some secular agency. The state did not command it. No public education law compelled it. It was God Who willed it. It was the Torah that required it. It was the Jew's adherence to all the foregoing that generated the response and that justified his pious obedience. A beautiful talmudic image portrays God as teaching little children. The Jew, prompted by a desire to observe the *Imitatio Dei*, followed God's example.

Among all the obligations of a parent mentioned in the *Mishnah*, there is the legal obligation to teach his child Torah. A divine compulsory education law more than two millennia before the rest of the world realized the importance of any education law! To be sure, there must have been some agency in ancient Israel that supervised the obedience to this law. It is indubitable, however, that the insistence upon the observance of this law was no different in character from that regulating the Sabbath, the dietary laws, the laws of prayer, or any of the other rituals that constitute the religion of our people.

There is no record in the ancient literature of our people of

## *The Goals of Jewish Education*

any government officials compelling our grandmothers to pawn their Sabbath candlesticks in order to pay the teacher's fee. But we are familiar with the tender lullabies, the theme of which was invariably Torah learning. The melody and the words, the tune and the accents, came from the hearts and souls of a people to whom education was a sacrament, study a form of worship, and learning the highest good.

It should now be obvious that a fourth strain is recognizable in Jewish education, and that is the uncompromising reverence for it. Not the rich but the learned man was the aristocrat in Judaism. Not the merchant prince but the teacher occupied the topmost rung of the social ladder. "Let the reverence for your father be like unto the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for the teacher like unto the reverence for God." A community may sell its synagogue in order to build a school! A holy Torah scroll may be sold for the purpose of providing education! When one meets a scholar, Jewish law requires that a special blessing be made over him. Indeed, the appreciation for learning is so deep that even when encountering one who is extremely learned in secular knowledge there is a benediction provided. With such reverence, no "gimmicks" are required to stimulate Jewish education, whether for children or adults. Where such reverence is lacking, God alone knows whether "gimmicks" will help.

One final strain present in Jewish education through the ages should be recorded: the practical consequences — religious, national, and ethical — of an educated life.

It is true that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake had important support in historic Judaism. The prevailing view, however, was more pragmatic. This view sought to make learning a vehicle for Jewish action. An ancient prayer, talmudic in origin, and which is part of the daily liturgy, expresses this view in the accents of piety: ". . . Put into our hearts to understand and discern, to hearken, learn and teach, to heed, to do and to fulfill in love, all the words of instruction in Thy Torah. Enlighten our eyes in Thy Torah, and let our hearts cleave to Thy commandments . . ." The implication is clear. A Jew learned in order to perform God's will. He studied in order to

observe God's law.

This behavioristic aspect of learning manifested itself in yet another way. Torah became the collective possession of the Jew, his badge of nationhood, the symbol of his divine election. "If you are told that there is wisdom among the nations, you may believe it; but if you are told that there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it." This judgment is pronounced with definitive finality by the ancient rabbis. It is echoed through the ages and appears in various formulations throughout our literature. It is perhaps best articulated by Saadia in the tenth century—"Our nation is a nation only because of its Torah."

The study of the Torah was regarded, therefore, not alone as a religious obligation but as a national duty. In that way the Jew expressed his identity with his people. "*A Yid darf lernen Torah*" became a folk lyric and virtually a folk instinct. Thus was the Torah preserved, and reciprocally it preserved the people.

In addition to the religious and the national objectives, Jewish education strove for an ethical objective as well. It was not enough to bring man nearer to God. Nor was it sufficient to bind the Jew closer to his people. It was necessary to mold the Jew into a better man. This, too, the study of the Torah could achieve. "I have created the *Yetzer Ha-ra*," the rabbis have God saying, "so I created the Torah as an antidote." Jewish education is concerned with character. The corrupt scholar is detested even if he is pitied. "The Torah of God is complete; it restoreth the soul," sang the Psalmist. Knowledge, in other words, does not merely sharpen the intellect; it quickens the heart. It does not only fill the mind; it also purifies the soul.

These then, are the strains and qualities that seem to have been associated with Jewish education through the ages.

Are they not actually the goals of Jewish education as our forefathers envisioned them through the ages? Did they not achieve the desired results? Have they not preserved a people, a culture, and a faith? Have they not withstood the test of time and the change of environment? Was not their validity demonstrated in the long saga of Israel from a millennium before the Common Era to our very day, and in the endless odyssey of

## *The Goals of Jewish Education*

our people from the banks of the Jordan to the banks of the Hudson? Is not, in the idiom of Justice Holmes, a page of history worth more than a volume of logic?

Might we not, therefore, with profit, consider these goals of Jewish education of the past as adequate for our day? It is true that the methods of leading to their realization might require revision. Adaptation and adjustment in all areas of life are not unknown to our people. Methods and approaches change, but substance and content remain.

Consider, for example, this matter of the universality of Jewish education. Can we reject that as a goal for our day? Can we afford to slacken in our effort to recruit more and more students for our schools and to bring increasing numbers of Jewish children under the wings of the *Shekhinah*?

Consider, too, the concept of maximalism in Jewish education as a goal for our day. How long can we sustain a generation on a starvation educational diet? Will the crumbs of a Sunday School, augmented even by two hours a week of supplementary education, provide adequate nourishment sufficient to overcome the peril of religious and cultural malnutrition? Will we be able to develop learned, positive, and creative Jews through the medium of a translated Judaism? Are we ready to banish Hebrew, which, as a language and as a medium of instruction, is possible only under a maximum program of Jewish education? How long will we be satisfied with the shibboleth that God understands any language? That is true. God does understand every language. But to understand God a Jew must know Hebrew.

It is the insistence upon maximalism that has been the primary motivation for the establishment and continual growth of the Jewish day school movement. The traditional Jew wants a *yeshivah*, not because he is opposed to the public school. He definitely is not. Nor does he favor the day school as an institution because he is in sympathy with segregation, whether on religious, cultural, or racial grounds. He favors the day school as an educational medium because it represents the opportunity for maximum Jewish education. If there is another medium to accomplish the same ends, he will be in favor of that too. In this respect, the traditionalist Jew paraphrases the Latin sage and says, *Ubi doc-*

*trina, ibi amor*—wherever there is learning, there is my love.

The maximalist approach should be reflected also in the extension of the period of schooling. The Bar Mitzvah dare not become the *terminus ad quem* for Jewish education. If it continues to be so regarded, then we might be called upon to abolish some of the ceremonial and celebrational aspects of that event in order to eliminate any notion that it is a graduation from Jewish education. After all, it is far more important to be a Torah Jew at fifty than a Bar Mitzvah at thirteen.

This leads us directly to the problem of adult Jewish education as an extension of the principle of maximalism. Here, too, we ought not to be content with crumbs and measured doses. One ought not to discourage the efforts made by individual congregations, by educational bodies, by seminaries and *yeshivot*, and by summer seminars that are seeking a solution to the problem of adult Jewish education. Laudable as all these efforts are, we must not rest content with them. We must strive to restore Torah study as a daily occupation of the Jew. It is true that the modern Jew is busy. Yet the modern Jew has time for gin and golf, for club and theatre. He can and should find time for Torah.

Now as to the religious motivation for learning as a desirable goal: it is true, other motivations are possible. There is the nationalist motivation and the cultural motivation. There are those who cherish Jewish learning because, by engaging in it, they are preserving the culture of their people and in that way contributing to the survival of the people itself. Let us acknowledge that it is a noble motivation.

Is it sufficient? In general, is the survival of a people and the preservation of a culture the result of any conscious act on the part of anyone? Is not survival, whether cultural or national, a by-product of living and doing, of observing and performing? When a collectivity behaves in a certain fashion over a long period of time, the end result will be that the collectivity will persist along with all its accumulated collective experiences.

The Jew through the ages did not keep the Sabbath and the Festivals in order to strengthen national solidarity. He did not pray in Hebrew in order to preserve the Hebrew language. He did not read the Bible, pore over the folios of the Talmud, read

## *The Goals of Jewish Education*

the medieval Jewish philosophers, and study the Codes in order to safeguard and secure Jewish culture. He did all of these things as a response to the will of God. He never stopped to think whether Leviticus was more beautiful literature than *Hamlet* and whether his liturgical melodies were superior to the music of Bach. Leviticus was God's Torah; *Hamlet* was great literature. When *Hamlet* fell to the floor, he picked it up and replaced it on his table. When Leviticus fell to the floor, he gathered it up reverently and kissed it. There is a world of difference between the religious and the non-religious attitude to matters of culture.

There are several hundred thousand Zionists, male and female, in the United States. All of them presumably are committed to the survival of Jews as a people and of Judaism as a culture. Do their numbers in any way match the number of children on the rolls of Jewish schools? How much of their culture do they know, and how much time do they devote to it? Is it not apparent that the will to survive can hardly compare with the will of God as a survival factor? The problems that we encounter in Jewish education are in no small measure due to the fact that religious motivation is lacking. We strive valiantly to bring children to school at a younger age and to keep them for a longer duration. We publicize and propagandize Jewish Education Weeks and Jewish Book Months. Our efforts are heroic, and our perseverance is praiseworthy. Let us, however, recognize in humility that what is needed to make our efforts more successful is a Godly spark and a divine compulsion. Alas, in this, as in all men's efforts, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."

We mentioned reverence for learning as a goal. Psychologically, of course, reverence is an attitude, and an attitude is more an effect than a cause. For our purposes, however, the cultivation of reverence for Jewish education must be transformed from attitude to positive action. Existentially speaking, reverence is only recognized by an act of reverence. The Talmud phrases it well: "These foolish Babylonians . . . rise for the Torah and fail to rise for a great man."

Examine the role and position of the Jewish teacher. What status have we given him in the Jewish community? How mind-



ful are we that, among the many occupations of God, our tradition portrays Him as a *Melamed Tinokot*, a teacher of the young? Have we treated our teachers as associates of God in their holy enterprise? Further: what are the educational budgets of our various committees? How do these budgets compare with the allocations made to hospitals, homes for the aged, and other welfare organizations? Do we labor for Jewish education with the zeal that we battle anti-Semitism? "Reverence is what reverence does."

If there is any validity at all to all the foregoing, then it must follow that our final goal, again in pursuance of the age old pattern of Jewish education, must be the cultivation of a religious and ethical Jewish personality. Simply and bluntly put, our schools must try to develop good Jews. Many definitions of a good Jew are possible, and one ought not to quarrel with any of them. A good Jew is one who loves his people and takes pride in being one of them. A good Jew is one who not only accepts but observes the faith of his people. A good Jew is one who seeks to live in accordance with the tradition of Israel; who believes in the God of his fathers and wishes to transmit that belief to his children; who is committed to democracy; who practices the ethics of Judaism; who can know no peace as long as his brethren are in travail and suffering. A good Jew is one who takes pride in the miracle of Jewish statehood and participates to the utmost in the effort to achieve peace, stability, and security for the land of his fathers. But above all, a good Jew, with a capital "G," is one who incorporates in his life as much as possible of all these definitions. When he achieves that he becomes in effect indefinable. His essence then can simply be expressed that he is one who is a member of the Kingdom of Priests and the Holy People.

There are various influences that are required in order to develop such a Jew—home, synagogue, community. All these are important partners. The major partner, however, is Jewish education.

We have outlined the goals of Jewish education and indicated possible avenues that may lead towards them. The goals are not easy to reach. The efforts must be heroic. But the prize is worth striving for.

## *The Goals of Jewish Education*

A beautiful Midrash describes Abraham walking with his son Isaac towards Mount Moriah. There are other companions on this journey. Abraham turns to them and asks, "What do you see?" Their answer is, "We see nothing but wilderness." He then asks of Isaac, "What do you see?" And Isaac responds, "I see a beautiful mount with a cloud over it." It is at that moment that Abraham abandons his companions and, clasping his son's hand, they walk together toward Moriah.

There are those who, when they reflect upon Jewish education, see in their pessimism only wilderness and desolation. There are those who see the beautiful mount beckoning in its grandeur even though enveloped by clouds of hardship and difficulty. It is with such as these that we can walk towards the educational Moriah of our hopes.