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## A CRITIQUE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

Israel hardly seems to be the location from which to launch a critique of the Jewish day school in America. Yet, Israel provides a unique perspective on the subject. Israel houses five post-high school institutions which cater exclusively to the American Jewish day school graduate, as well as a number of other post-high school institutions with special programs for day school graduates. In one classroom in Jerusalem, it is possible to see a cross section of day school alumni from the better and the mediocre day schools in America on the West Coast, the East Coast, and in many cities in between.

The critique offered here does not stem from a scientific, controlled study, but from extensive personal observation as well as from discussions with deans and teachers in four of the five post-high school institutions for day school graduates. My observations dovetail with those of my colleagues (though I alone am responsible for the statements in this article). There is general agreement on the nature and the depth of the problems of the Jewish day school in America as measured by the quality of its graduates who study in Israel. Though I touch on some of the causes which beset the day school, my purpose here is to describe the problems themselves, to refer to causes and cures (a large topic beyond the scope of this article<sup>1</sup>) only insofar as they illustrate the problems.

The disastrous educational results described below do not apply universally. There is a consensus that the following critique, based on data gathered from institutions which deal only with males, applies to about 75 percent of the students, a figure which can vary from one year to the next. The day school graduates who study in Israel are generally highly motivated and sincere. These students are not

discipline cases or those who were compelled against their will to attend a day school and decided to study for a year or more in Israel. The following is derived from observation not of the worst but of some of the best of the day school graduates, and still the picture is bleak. The picture drawn below is of day school graduates at the *beginning* of their studies in Israel, not at the end of them.

I

There is, first of all, a severe deficiency in Hebrew, be it biblical, mishnaic, medieval, or modern. The problem manifests itself in four areas: pronunciation, grammar, translation and vocabulary, and knowledge of elementary traditional texts.

Correct pronunciation is linked to grammar. Students do not know the simple and essential rules of grammar which enable one to read an unpointed Hebrew text properly (for example, the proper vowelization of *mem* used as a prefix, or the deletion of the *dagesh kal* from the six *begad kefat* letters when they succeed an *aleph*, *hey*, *vav*, or *yud*). It becomes quite embarrassing for students with twelve years of Hebrew day school education to learn that they are unable to read properly. The deficiency is not the inability to recite the relevant rule—only teachers, scholars, and pedants love the rules—but the inability to absorb the rule and read correctly.

With respect to grammar itself—tenses, *binyanim*, possessive suffixes, genetives, and so on—a shocking number of students have never even heard of these; others have not come close to mastering them though they have studied them year in and year out. Basic Hebrew vocabulary is likewise severely deficient. I refer not to modern spoken Hebrew, a lack of knowledge of which is quite understandable for non-Israelis; I refer to basic, simple words which recur in Humash, Rashi, Mishnah, and similar works. Since this vocabulary is lacking, it follows that knowledge of elementary traditional texts—Rashi, for example—is sparse. *Nakh* is also, for many, a closed book. For a parent to have invested thousands of dollars in a day school education over the course of the years and then to have his child unable to read and translate even a text as basic as Rashi indicates a serious problem indeed.

It is not just technique which is deficient. The larger, subjective problem of Orthodox Jewish identity exists, too. During the past 250 years, there have been basically five streams of Orthodox Jewish identity: Hasidism, Musar, Mitnaggedut, philosophy, and Hirschian synthesis, or a combination of more than one of these. Of course, some of these Orthodox identity frameworks are older than 250

years, and all of them have roots in earlier epochs and teachings stretching back to Sinai.

But these five streams are also contemporary and represent a wide spectrum. Alone or in combination, they make it possible for virtually any psychological or intellectual orientation to find a home in Orthodoxy. Yet Jewish day school graduates know either nothing or next to nothing about any of them. It is common indeed to find day school graduates who have *never heard of* Israel Baal Shem Tov or Israel Salanter (not to mention their disciples, their teachings, their writings, or their historical or intellectual significance). Generally, day school graduates have heard of the Vilna Gaon, though again without any knowledge of what he stood for, of how he shaped, through his students, the yeshivah world which affects so many Orthodox Jews even now. Of Jewish philosophy, whether of its medieval issues or of its encounter with the West and the subsequent responses, there is no knowledge whatsoever.

With respect to Hirsch and his *modus vivendi*, there is little knowledge, occasional lip service, and thus little sympathy. Of course, an Orthodox Jewish identity need not limit itself to any one of these five traditions, but what is found in the contemporary Orthodox day school is not some new Orthodox identity, but a vacuum. The link to earlier generations is weak. In this respect the awareness that something is missing is virtually nonexistent. The notion that one must cultivate a relationship with a rebbe, a living embodiment of Judaism, as an intellectual and a personal guide, is foreign.

What does exist among the day school graduates is sincerity, a basic knowledge of the Jewish calendar and its holidays, basic faith, and love of *Erets Yisrael*. These, unfortunately, are supplemented by an intellectual and a spiritual framework which is reflective of and suitable for a high school, not post-high school Jewish education. A comment frequently heard among the faculty of the post-high school institutions in Israel is that they are compelled to do the work which, in light of the intellectual and the spiritual capacities of the students, could have been done in high school. They give credit for staying power to the students who do further their studies in Israel.

It goes without saying that a day school education which leaves approximately 75 percent of the continuing, Israel-bound students with only a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, of elementary traditional texts, and of the paths of Orthodox identity, is going to deprive these students of a firm knowledge of halakhah. Again, the reference is not to the higher subtleties, but to basics. In addition, and perhaps of greater significance, there is also the lack of knowledge of certain central purposes behind the halakhah. Take,

for example, that much abused topic, *tsni'ut*, privacy or modesty. The reference here is not to the halakhic distinctions of what is, and what is not, proper dress. The current problem strikes deeper. The notion that *tsni'ut* applies not only to dress but to general modes of demeanor and character, and that it applies not only to females but to males, is virtually absent. The notion that *tsni'ut* means that an Orthodox male does not look at prurient pictures is only faintly grasped. The notion that what one does at night on a date requires a certain consistency with the fact that one puts on *tefillin* in the morning needs, one finds, to be taught.

## II

The day school is not to be blamed for all of the deficiencies found in its graduates. Day schools cannot pay sufficient wages to attract the best personnel. They cannot do more than what the community expects them to do. They exist in an atmosphere of general educational decline and cannot wholly transcend that influence any more than an individual or an institution can wholly escape the impact of the times. As Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, points out:

Schools in modern society serve largely to train people for work, but most of the available jobs, even in the higher economic range, no longer require a high level of technical or intellectual competence. Indeed, most jobs consist so largely of routine, and depend so little on enterprise and resourcefulness, that anyone who successfully completes a given course of study soon finds himself "overqualified" for most of the positions available. . . . Modern society has achieved unprecedented rates of formal literacy, but at the same time it has produced new forms of illiteracy. People increasingly find themselves unable to use language with ease and precision, to recall the basic facts of their country's history, to make logical deductions, to understand any but the most rudimentary written texts, or even to grasp their constitutional rights. . . . Contrary to the pronouncements of most educational theorists and their allies in the social sciences, advanced industrial society no longer rests on a population primed for achievement. It requires instead a stupefied population, resigned to work that is trivial and shoddily performed, predisposed to seek its satisfaction in the time set aside for leisure.

This bleak description of the present tone of education generally applies to the day school graduate. What is doubly bleak is that when the day school graduate does deviate from the present tone of education, he exhibits enterprise, resourcefulness, and literacy in his general studies far more frequently than in his religious studies. The day school graduate expects that the standards for his religious

studies are, and must be, lower than the standards for his secular studies. Some of the day school graduates with disastrous technical and subjective knowledge in the Jewish realm are exceptionally high achievers on SAT examinations and other standard indicators. A student who would not think of missing a math test will put forth numerous justifications for being absent from a Humash test and expect the instructor to accept them. In short, the attitude toward secular studies is generally far more serious than toward religious studies.

This is not a new problem, but its dimensions are. There are two causes on which I want to dwell in particular because they are relatively new and because they cause most directly some of the problems already outlined. Both of these causes are internal to the Jewish community. Each of them converges from a different direction to reduce commitment and ability to learn texts of Torah.

First, there is the negative spin-off from the current rush to translate sacred texts of Judaism into English. Second, there is the negative spin-off from the new type of Talmud teacher. In both cases, unforeseen side effects of solutions to long-standing problems paradoxically vitiated some of the gains which these solutions afforded.

That the current availability of traditional sacred texts in English is problematic constitutes one of the great surprises in contemporary Orthodoxy. Just a decade ago, not to mention two and three decades ago, Orthodox rabbis and educators bemoaned the dearth of first-rate literature on Orthodox Judaism, and rightfully so. It was next to impossible to recommend books to uneducated or newly Orthodox Jews in a variety of areas: Bible commentary, halakhah, folklore, Mishnah, *Hashkafah* and others. Now there is extensive literature in English in each of these areas. For many teachers, educators, and laymen alike, this has been a boon. But the phenomenon of widespread translation is a double-edged sword. Day school students—of which, we must remember, there are tens of thousands—no longer automatically look into a *sefer*; they look into a translation. Students no longer assume that it is necessary to learn these texts, with all the linguistic and conceptual effort which this learning entails, they merely look into a translation. Students no longer assume that knowledge of Torah requires dedication; they believe that much of it can be obtained relatively easily. A distinction should be made between translations of halakhic texts, such as *Mishnah*, especially those without an English commentary (for example, *Mishneh Berurah*),<sup>2</sup> and between discursive texts, such as *Path of the Upright*, especially those not originally written in Hebrew (for example, *Hovot ha-Levavot*). Translations of the former are harmful

because, for most, they impede the acquisition of the requisite learning skills. Translations of the latter are helpful because, for most, they facilitate the absorption of information whose study in Hebrew would not greatly enhance learning skills. For day school students, then, translations can be valuable supplements, but they can also serve as a convenient excuse for avoiding the real study out of which alone the deep grounding in Judaism—the realization of the purpose of the day school—can emerge.

Integrally related to the excessive reliance on translations is the new type of Talmud instructor. Here, too, a situation which cried out for improvement ten to thirty years ago has been improved with unexpected consequences. During the post-War period quality instructors in Talmud were needed. Day schools were young then, and many of the available Talmud instructors were European refugees. Their deficiencies were obvious; their virtues were not so readily appreciated, but now are sorely missed. The deficiencies included: imperfect English, lack of training in pedagogy, and a lack of familiarity with the lingo and the trappings of American culture. All this detracted from their impact, so much so that the conventional wisdom of the day maintained that the emergence of American-trained *lamdonim*—American yeshiva graduates, duly learned in Talmud and equipped with an M.A. in education and unaccented English—would greatly increase the effectiveness of Talmud instruction in the day schools. The American religious teenagers would no longer be alienated by a European instructor; he would instead be motivated by a rebbe who spoke his own language and who understood him culturally.

On paper, all this made perfect sense; and, no doubt, the pedagogical deficiencies of the early generation of Talmud instructors required serious repair. The desired results, however, have materialized to far less an extent than anticipated. The level of competence in Talmud among the day school graduates is certainly no better nor more widely disseminated than in earlier periods; in fact, the opposite appears to be true. What was wrong with the analysis? It was forgotten that notwithstanding the European instructors' awkwardness in the American setting, they possessed one quality which could not be reproduced through technical improvements in pedagogy, language fluency, and knowledge of America. Generally these instructors possessed vast storehouses of learning; they had spent the best years of their lives wholly immersed in learning. That which is transmitted to a student through his contact with a ripened, authentic *talmid hakham* cannot be transmitted by any young teacher, no matter how intelligent, dedicated, or pious. It will take

more than technical improvement to raise the status of Talmud study; it will take time to let the younger generation of Talmud teachers mature.

### III

Some years ago the college campus was described as a disaster area for Judaism. Now, for a variety of reasons beyond the scope of this article, the campus is becoming a reservoir of great potential for Judaism. The yearning among Jewish university students for knowledge of, and subjective commitment to, Judaism and even Orthodoxy is far more widespread than it was 15 years ago. But the day school, though it is surely far from being the disaster area that the college campus was 15 years ago, is becoming a disaster in its own terms. Its historic role in the preservation of Orthodoxy in America is now sufficiently secured that it is possible to assess its weaknesses and to face up to its severe educational problems without apology, without worrying about what the anti-day-school forces will say. For the only future which we are cutting off by not speaking openly about the problem is our own.

### NOTES

1. An earlier analysis of the day school which concentrates more on causes and cures than on the actual problems is "The Jewish Day School: A Symposium," *Tradition*, 13, No. 1 (Summer 1972), pp. 95-130.
2. See my review of the new translation of the *Mishneh Berurah* in the *Jerusalem Post*, February 13, 1981.