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## A PROGRAM FOR THE DAY SCHOOL MOVEMENT IN THE '70's AND BEYOND

### INTRODUCTION

After more than thirty years of dedicated, hard work Torah Umesorah, a national organization devoted to establishing and maintaining Orthodox day schools throughout the country, cannot escape the self-evident fact: despite all we have accomplished there is much to be done. We are aware, of course, of the unprecedented growth of the day school movement in the United States and Canada. In 1930 there were only 30 day schools; today there are 430 with an additional 52 in Canada. And it is predicted that by the late '70's there will be close to 500 schools in approximately 40 states and 135 communities. Jewish groups, other than Orthodoxy, have also established day schools. Solomon Schechter Day Schools, under the auspices of the Conservative movement, continue to grow numerically. And recently Reform day schools have been set up. Only the Zionists have failed to open up day schools in the United States—a fact which is paradoxical since, in England, many of the day schools are under Zionist sponsorship.

From the beginning of the movement, the majority of the schools have been Orthodox. Even in schools where the majority of students come from non-observant homes, the philosophy and program of the schools have been Orthodox. At the present time parents, for various reasons, continue to send their children to Orthodox day schools even though they are not observant. Consequently, many Jewish homes have become traditional. I attribute this to what I characterize as the “mystique” of the day school movement.

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But notwithstanding the phenomenal day school growth in the country we must improve, update, and overhaul, if necessary, our existing schools so that they may continue to serve the spiritual and educational needs of close to 100,000 pupils who are enrolled and to the countless thousands who will enroll. This is needed because we are encountering a growing degree of complacency in our day school leadership so that our enrollment has begun to drop off in many communities. To get us out of this "enrollment rut" we need a *cheshbon hanafesh*—a critical appraisal of the directions the day school movement has taken and will take. We have to meet head-on the unprecedented change in the lifestyle taking place in the Jewish community affecting both individual and group practices, including day school programs and philosophy. Most notable of the changes is in the education and background of those heading, influencing, and participating in the day school movement. They are college educated and knowledgeable on Jewish matters. They are demanding change—but not for the sake of change alone. They are demanding change because they believe it is necessary for the survival of the day school movement.

There is an ever-growing feeling that one of the objectives for day school education in the '70's and beyond must be a more concrete and intense dedication to Torah learning. There is no doubt that this has always been one of our aims; yet some claim that it has not been emphasized enough. In our struggle to eliminate *am-har'aratzut* and to put on the "lights" of Torah in this country we have been successful. But to many of our critics the battle is far from over. To these critics we must project with greater intensity the idea that the day school must be basically a preparatory process to higher Jewish learning. As one *Rosh Yeshiva* put it:

Our major aim must be to raise a generation of *shomrei mitzvot* and *lomdei Torah* and to prepare our students to go on to *metivtot* and higher Jewish learning.

Therefore an immediate goal is a program for intensive study of the complete fabric of Judaism and a deepening and broadening of the curriculum. Certainly if our day schools are to train boys

to go on to *metivtot*, for instance, we must properly introduce them to the study of Talmud, of *Torah she-ba'al-peh*. This implies, too, the necessity of a better methodology for the teaching of Talmud. It must be pointed out, however, that accentuating Torah learning does not mean that other goals of Yeshiva education, such as identification with Jewish ideals and values, concern for the people and land of Israel, and high principles of ethics and Jewish living are to be relegated to secondary positions. What it does mean is that the time is ripe for appreciable upgrading of learning and standards of scholarship.

This achievement will not be easy. Frankly, I have found in my travels across the country a persistent resistance on the part of many parents to the teaching of Talmud. One way to improve the teaching of Talmud is to bring more *b'nei Torah*, individually or as team teachers, from the higher *yeshivot* into our schools. Possessed with idealism regarding Torah and Jewish living, these *b'nei Torah* can change the entire Torah complexion of a community and day school. Their devotion to Torah is so strong that their influence on their pupils is more profound than teachers of secular studies. What is preventing implementation of this idea on a large scale is that, despite their idealism, *b'nei Torah* are reluctant to enter the field of teaching unless they can find schools and communities which stress similar ideals *vis-a-vis* Torah learning and observance. Perhaps the answer is, as advocated by many, to send clusters of *kollel jugeotit* into the communities so that they can set up their own *kollel* and continue their studies while giving our students a more inspired and relevant understanding of *Torah she-ba'al-peh*.

The amalgamation of intensive Torah study and the most modern and effective teaching tools and methods will, no doubt, present many problems to the *b'nei Torah* whom we hope to attract to our schools. Torah Umesorah is now involved in such a pilot project, known as the *Aish Dat* Teacher-Training Fellowship Program. This program sets up a special *chinuch kollel* whereby advanced students of Torah are provided with a unique course of study, giving them understanding of modern techniques while they pursue their intensive Torah studies in a *kollel* of their choice. The *b'nei Torah* will have to have a greater knowledge of

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the latest "educational hardware" such as programmed learning and teaching machines as well as new teaching techniques, including team teaching and the open classroom. They, and the other day school teachers, will have to learn more about behavior modification and the like. The Hebrew departments, in particular, will have to learn how to project the open classroom so that our children will have the same kind of enriched facilities, the same types of learning tools in the Hebrew department as they have in the secular department. Of course, no improvements will ever be made unless we make Torah teaching more attractive by providing better salaries, improved fringe benefits, and pension programs.

Together with intensive Torah study there must be greater saturation of the secular studies with the *ruach* of Torah in the day school. More concentrated coordination between the Hebrew and the secular departments should be fostered. I have never forgotten the advice given me in the early days of the day school movement by a German-Jewish educator who kept insisting that we build a seminary to train secular teachers for the day schools. The time has surely come for such a program.

More than ever before we must strive to help our students achieve a deeper sense of identity. Translated into day by day programming, the accent on day school education should be on *learning* and *living*. We want our pupils to practice Jewish living and build a genuine religious environment. This is a vital concept in education. Although we have not accepted the educational philosophy of John Dewey in its entirety, we have found it helpful to adopt some of his techniques, especially his imperative to "control the environment." Methods of education, even among the Jewish people, change, and it is essential to concentrate more intensely and concretely on building a proper religious environment in our schools, as well as in the communities that house them.

In setting up this environment we must keep in mind not only the parents but the entire family as well. We must get the family into the picture of Jewish living, for that, too, is one of the objectives of the day school movement. This is particularly urgent today when so many of our children come from broken homes

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and have no family relationships. The day school, because of its size, its philosophy, and its dedicated staff, is best calculated to become the "extended family." It is incumbent on us to use our imagination and creativity to see that it succeeds.

The *entire* family will have to become involved in Torah learning and Torah living. The need for family involvement is imperative if we are to maintain the moral, spiritual, and religious integrity of the day school. Unfortunately, over the years a number of our schools have been pressured by parents and contributors to water down our school's Orthodox orientation. There are enormous pressures being exerted to change the point of view and philosophy of our schools. In a recent study\*\* of five schools in seven areas of the United States this disturbing conclusion was reached based on the results of the questionnaires returned:

In 33.3 per cent of the reported cases conflict had occurred with other Jewish institutions over attempts to force the school to abandon its Orthodox ideology or to violate Orthodox practice.

Family education is one effective way to prevent the day school's Orthodox orientation from being eroded as the philosophy of the movement. Other programs for children and adults include:

1. Regular *Shabbatonim* for our students to provide them with genuine life experiences.
2. "Adult retreats" so that parents and teachers can be brought together at inspiring Sabbath and Holiday convocations to partake and enjoy the spirit of Judaism.
3. Similar programs to bring together lay leaders of the school and community together to explore and discuss Jewish values.

In developing programs for the day school movement in the '70's and beyond we must not forget our obligation to the Jewish community as a whole. For in using our techniques and methods to educate our children we must also develop programs to inspire and provide leadership to those who want to learn more about Judaism and want to become observant. The Lubavitch move-

\*\*See Irving Fried, "Family Education—A Critical Issue in the Hebrew Day School," *The Jewish Parent*, June 1974.

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ment has been successful in attracting young people and in inspiring non-observant parents. Employing all kinds of public relation methods they projected successfully the *meaning* of the basic *mitzvot*. We, too, need to emphasize such *kiruv rechokim*. It will involve our organizing small cells of learning groups with *baale-battim*. Principals and teacher will have to take the time to plan regular sessions with officers and leaders of their schools, teaching them more about Orthodoxy and Judaism. Women also should not be forgotten and classes for them should be planned.

Part of the above program which must be employed is *kibbush ha'kehillot*, conquering communities and making them more Orthodox in lifestyle and commitment. While Orthodoxy has been on the ascendancy, there are still many day school communities which do not have Orthodox synagogues. This, of course, delimits the growth of the day school movement in the direction we would like to see it go. Thus we have the obligation to bring in rabbis and lay people into the day school picture to a greater degree. Through their assistance more intensive and effective programs of Jewish *learning* and *living* will be developed aiding not only the schools but the community as well.

During these past two summers we in Torah Umesorah have conducted a pilot program in the "conquest of communities for Torah." Through a dramatic program called "SEED" (A Summer Educational Environmental Project), a number of communities—such as Mexico City, Phoenix, Milwaukee, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Winnipeg, Seattle, and Cincinnati—invited students of seven different higher *yeshivot* for a six-week stay during which the entire community, young and old alike, became involved in Torah study and concomitant activities. The results were very encouraging; our office was inundated with telephone calls and letters extolling the project. Our day schools and *yeshivot gedolot* must continue this work on a more regular and intensified basis.

All these proposed plans require a concerted effort on the part of the Jewish community if we are to achieve any part of our goals. There is, to state it succinctly, "much swimming against the tide." But, as is so often true of the Jewish community when faced with improving Jewish education, there are differences

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polarizing the community and obfuscating the issues and little progress is made. For example, there are many observant and devout parents who are up in arms fighting against their schools opening their doors and taking in more non-observant children. We understand their fears; they are afraid that their children's view of Jewish life will be watered down in the process. As a result fractionalization of the Jewish community stares us in the face. Urgent action by Torah leaders is necessary to reduce and eliminate such polarization. A total effort by the entire Orthodox community is also needed to iron out the differences which divide them and to close up ranks.

The day school movement faces important challenges even in the face of its notable achievements. It is hoped that a unified Orthodox community will assist the movement in facing these challenges, bringing about the changes in emphasis, in approach, and in programming which the times dictate.