

The Public & Private Agenda in Jewish Education

By Harold M. Schulweis

The Crisis

We educators who seek to effect a reconciliation between the synagogue, the Jewish school and the home have to examine carefully the long, drawn face of the Jew. I am not fully convinced by the arguments of the national proposal for parental education which maintain that "adverse factors leading to parental failure are too well known to require enumeration." Nor with the following line that concludes that "too few parents have the knowledge, competence or the will to imbue the children with sustained feeling of Jewishness." We know far too little or presume to know too much about the character of the Jewish family and its discontents. I doubt that the cause of the estrangement is parental ignorance, incompetence or lack of desire. Parental inertia, inarticulateness and inattention are the symptoms of much deeper causes which explain the chasm between the home and the school and the *schul*. At the heart of the conflict lies an axiological crisis: a crisis of values, needs and expectations. Before we engage our energies towards the conquest of the Jewish home, we had better find out who lives at home and how they live.

We are not dealing with bad Jews. We are dealing with different Jews — Jews who are so radically different from our traditional adversaries that we cannot confront them with traditional polemic. We are not confronting apostates or assimilationists who oppose us on religious or ideological grounds. We are dealing with people who have an entirely different agenda of priorities and needs from the curricula and agenda that we represent. There are two agenda in Jewish life: ours and theirs, open and hidden. Ours is an open and public agenda which is discussed at conferences, conventions, from pulpits and platforms. The agenda reflected in our curriculum deals with such matters as Jewish literacy, language, liturgical fluency, ritual competence, Israel, Soviet Union, anti-Semitism, the holocaust. These are the proper concerns of the community. Their primacy and priority are predicated upon our interest in Jewish survival and the quality of the collective life of our people. We who have been raised on the public agenda understand that our own individual fulfillment is based upon adherence to the prescriptions and proscriptions of the community of faith. It is our life and the length of our lives. We appeal to others as we have been appealed to; with the accepted rhetoric of communal faith, wisdom and ethics. A Jew fulfills himself by responding to the imperatives of the community: *I'maan Torah, I'maan Tsion, I'maan ha-Shem*.

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The other agenda, the hidden agenda, is private and its perceptions, demands and expectations are utterly different from the agenda of relationships between man and God and man and society. "Do not tell me what I can do for Judaism; tell me what Judaism can do for me. Do not tell me what I can do to sustain the synagogue and the school; tell me what the synagogue and the school can do for me. For me, not as a member of the *kehillah*, not as an element in the collective aggregate of the Jewish people but for me in my existential aloneness, in my despairs, in my depressions, in my anxieties, in my conflict with my husband or my wife, in the confusions of raising my children, in the difficulties of facing aging and sick parents, in the introspective moments of my life when I feel nausea and boredom and meaninglessness; in my inability to feel, to cry, to laugh. Tell me what you rabbis, educators, teachers, representatives of the public agenda have to say in terms of personal wisdom that can guide me in my personal living." Unless we address ourselves to this psychological revolution, to these personal and private needs, to the interior life of the Jew we will never be able to step foot into the privacy of their homes with our public agenda.

Anomie, alienation, anhedonia, affectlessness are no longer abstract text book concepts. They're existential realities that are afflicting parents and children of our wounded communities. I can testify to that anguish as every rabbi and educator can.

Particularly in the past decade we've witnessed the phenomenon of Bar and Bat Mitzvah which no longer celebrates the rite of passage into adolescence as much as it marks a traumatic passage for the child into a life without parents or life with multiple parents. There is a new nervousness, not over mastery of the *Hafarah*, but over the strained relationship between sets of parents who show up at the Bar Mitzvah, or over those who do not choose to show up at all. The contemporary halachic question is not over the propriety of calling upon two brothers receiving consecutive *aliyot*, but of the priority of two fathers or more being called up, one after the other, for an *aliyah*. The teacher complains that this young boy is not paying attention. But the child has neither head nor heart to learn the *trope* or history or Bible when his mind is filled with episodes of domestic confusion and bitterness.

Yesterday, our parents sang a boastful Yiddish song: "Shikker is a goy, trinken muz er, trinken vill er, veil er iz a goy." Today, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies announces formation of a task force on alcoholism because incidence of Jewish alcoholism is rapidly approaching the national average of one out of fourteen. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous are now asking seriously for the synagogues to open up their quarters because there are now so many Jews involved that they can no longer be assimilated into the basement of the nearby church.

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Breakups, breakdowns are all around us. Professor Herbert Hendon, in *The Age of Sensation*, reports that the number of suicides among young people between the ages of 15 and 24 has risen 250 per cent in the last twenty years. Are our Jewish young immune to such malaise? Jews are like all other people, only more so. The middle class suffers greatly from this crisis of values, and we Jews are part of this middle class, only more so.

The crisis we allude to cannot be dismissed as idiosyncratic, the eccentricities of a handful who may be sent to a psychiatrist or some psychological counseling service. It has become a sociological phenomenon and we are all of us patients. Our traditional public agenda is not attended to not because of inadequate texts or dull faculty. A sensitive soul walks along the forest, surrounded by flowers and rivers and sky, but with a sharp pebble in his shoe cutting into his flesh his esthetic sensibilities evaporate. His attention is directed elsewhere.

The schism of the public and the private agenda indicates a much deeper split between us. It signals the emergence of a new character ideal: the psychological Jew, one who is radically different from the typologies we have known in the past. He is part of the social psychological revolution whose pendulum swings from "we and there and then" to "me and here and now." "There and then" meant fidelity to the classic texts of the tradition, to history and messianic expectations. For the psychological Jew neither history nor eschatology holds such claims upon him. His new sancta revolve around the self, the sacred center of his being. It is a self freed from the tyranny of shoulds, freed from a community which tells him what and when and where to eat; whom to marry, how to marry and when to marry. It is a self concerned with its own liberation. It resonates the language of self-realization, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, self-assertion, self-esteem. We educators, we rabbis and teachers, who come from seminaries and teachers institutes and traditional homes, are not used to this image of self and salvation. Our entire moral and intellectual diction is written in the plural syntax: *zunaynu, farn'saynu, calc'laynu, malcaynu, avinu*. Should a Jew recite "*Sha'chiani v'kiamoni v'higiyani*" — we conclude that he is either an am ha-aretz or a Galitzianer.

The Attraction of Encounter Movements

Because we are not prepared to deal with this new typology and these new needs we put the psychological Jew off. "Look dear friend, I understand what you want. You want spontaneity, self-fulfillment, attention to more personal concerns regarding familial relationships. But this is not the place for your needs. Here we are concerned with Torah, with language, with reading, with writing, with rituals and *halachah*. For what you want, you must go elsewhere." And that's exactly what is happening. They're going elsewhere, in larger numbers than we may realize, drawn not only from the unaffiliated but from those we

count as members.

For the past two decades we have been concerned with our young people's attraction to the Eastern and Christian cults of conversion, from Meher Baba and Hare Krishna to the Divine Light Mission and the Unification Church. More unnoticed is the attraction of the parent generation to experiences and movements such as est, Transcendental Meditation, Arica, Scientology, Gestalt therapy, human potential movement, to encounter groups which Carl Rogers calls "the most rapidly growing social invention of the century." It is not my intention to analyze this social phenomenon, though I think it is terribly relevant to our theme. This is not the occasion to examine the pre-suppositions of these expressions or the adequacy of the success of these encounter movements. But it is imperative that we educators, who seek to influence the character of the Jewish family, pay attention to the hungers that lead so many members of the Jewish middle class to spend so much time, energy and money in such encounter movements; to understand the nature of their discontent with their lives, their marriages, vocations, professions and particularly their disaffection with the institutions of the Jewish establishment. Scholars such as Kurt Bach, Robert Bellah, John Seeley have suggested that these secular, scientific, psychological, social therapeutic modalities contain all the marks of a new religion with its own therapy of rituals, its own charismatic leaders, its own conception of self and salvation, its own orthodoxies and heresies.

It will not do to point out that Werner Erhardt's given name was Paul Rosenberg, or that he abandoned his first wife and their children. It is not enough to dismiss these phenomena as hucksterism, a bit of commercial exploitation. The sexual life of Fritz Perls or the life style of Chuck Diderich are irrelevant to our concerns as Jewish educators. What is important to us is the widespread anxiety of Jewish adults, the parent generation, their hunger for meaning and their inability to find personal wisdom through the institutions of Jewish life. The encounter movements have sprung up outside the establishment institutions of learning and prayer. The parents of our major constituency must be understood, not simply ignored or chastised. We need that family. We cannot do our jobs without them.

The causes of their searching are multiple. But it seems to me that one major concern runs through their complaints and angers. It is of particular interest to us because it relates to basic values. One of the dominant concerns of the young and old, of the upwardly mobile middle class is the fear of failure: marital failure; academic failure, vocational failure, failure in popularity. This fear of failure has supplanted the traditional fear of "yirath shamayim" or "yirath chet." Failure is secular sin which haunts their lives. It begins early in the failure to live up to the fantasies of the parent and which gives to the driven child and adult no rest and even robs him of the enjoyment of his accomplishments. The relentless demand to achieve, to perform, to succeed — so characteristic of the ethos of the middle class

— has de facto been assimilated into the Jewish ethic. The motivating ethic of middle-classness has so successfully been absorbed by the Jewish child of the middle class that it is identified as the authentic traits of Jewishness. This perversion of Jewish ethics is unnoticed and unfought. Inadvertently the Jewish school perpetuates this deformity of the Jewish ethic.

As educators we know the terrible weight of meritocracy in our society which forever rewards and punishes. From cradle to grave, from the silver and gold stars to 3.8 and 4.0 averages, from the scores of the SAT to the GRE we are judged by the extrinsic marks of success. The sociologist Andrew Greeley reports that certain communities operate nurseries that accept only college material. The result of such exclusivity leads ambitious parents to engage professionals to train the toddlers so that they may pass the admission test to elite nurseries. Who would tolerate having a nursery school dropout? It is rumored that the next step in Jewish Operations Headstart is prenatal confluent education. At home and in school, sin is failure and goodness is success. "Robert is a good boy" has come to mean one and only one thing, that he knows and does whatever is required to bring home A's. Rarely do I hear the parent refer to Robert's gentility, kindness, idealism, piety, altruism as manifestations of his goodness. Goodness now exclusively means acquisition of the tokens of academic success which in turn becomes the criterion which judges his worth. That revolution of values in which goodness no longer refers to moral character but to the external marks of grade achievement challenges the ethics of Jewish education. Towards what kind of goodness is our Jewish education directed? The parental judgment of the child's worth in terms of the extrinsic tokens of academic success is sustained by the judgment of the Jewish schools. In this, Jewish schools are no different from secular schools or Jewish homes. It is not piety or character which is acclaimed. For all the disparity between the goals of the Jewish school and the home, as far as the criteria of "goodness" are concerned, there is marked agreement. The Jewish school, wittingly or not, becomes an appendage of middle-classness and the Jewish teacher stands "in loco parentis" as an extension of the middle class parent. Who is praised and who is awarded in our schools? Is the moral ambience of the religious school different from that of the middle class home? Is the relationship between students in the environment of a Jewish school different from that between students in the secular school? Do we celebrate the child for his devotion to Jewish causes, for his compassion, for his kindness? Or solely for his performance achievements? Who is the "successful" Bar/Bat Mitzvah? He who has a smooth voice, a good ear and faithfully echoes the *Haftarah* as he has heard it from his teacher's taped *trope*. Who is concerned about his feelings, how he experiences his Jewishness at this critical passage of his life? Who cares what he believes or how he behaves or even what he knows? The extrinsic marks of his success are the chanting without fluffs, the "good" job, the smooth performance. Does the Jewish school aid and abet the ethics of middle-classness? Is this what is meant by Jewish intellectuality?

The Jewish child, from infancy, is trained to repay his parents for their sacrifice and love in one and only one way: the report card. He has long been surrounded by

myths of the "Yiddishe kop" and tales of Jewish Nobel Prize winners. There is only one way to deserve their love and respect. And he knows the dread of disappointing his parents. A "C" or "D" is a mark of betrayal, a sign of ingratitude. For the Jewish parent will accept no excuse for academic unsuccess. "If he only applied himself. If he weren't so lazy — he could get any grade he wanted." It is as if the failing mark were deliberately intended, a sign of the child's moral failure, not his academic limitations. To bring home a failing mark is to be judged a failure, and to be a failure is to sense oneself unworthy of love. It is difficult for parents who place such an inordinate stress on grades to convince the child to feel otherwise.

It is not difficult to understand how attractive many of the Christian cults appear for youngsters who have experienced the pressure of conditional love, i.e., "I love you when you do well in school." It is hard for young people not to be tempted by a community which accepts you unconditionally, without the price of work, without reference to academic status. It relieves the fear of failure, the omnivorous drive to succeed when one is told that all people are failures, all born in sin but all equally loved by the spiritual father. The cults speak not of test and best but of meditation and love. By comparison the Jewish school appears to be an extension of the joyless pressures of the middle class family whose talk revolves around the virtues of competitiveness and aggressiveness. Even the area of devotion — of prayer and Torah — is reduced in the practiced Jewish curriculum to public performance, to tasks of verbal fluency or memory — not to inner conviction and feeling. The inner life is reduced to public reading and the ultimate spiritual accomplishment is to be capable of standing before the congregation and leading the service.

The argument is not an anti-intellectual preference for feeling over thinking. It is a protest against the perversion of Jewish intellectuality which classically was motivated by moral ends. One prays daily to be granted wisdom and discernment, to learn in order to teach and to fulfill the moral imperatives of the tradition. In Judaism wisdom is a holy pursuit because the end of wisdom is to repair the world, not to "make it." The acquisition of Jewish wisdom is to cultivate the heart, not to fatten the purse. Middle-classness has severed the drive from the moral goal. It has isolated the initiative and intensity from its spiritual telos. The result is goalless ambition, incapable of answering what it is that makes Sammy run. The Jewish child is left with pressure without the nobility of a purpose which transcends the material and hedonistic gains. Is that all there is for all that obsessive striving for grades, for that idolatrous concentration of energy to get into prestigious institutions?

The Jewish child of the middle class is raised to *identify* the calculative, manipulative intelligence so precious to middle-classness with the moral wisdom sought by Judaism; to *identify* middle class privatism with Jewish respect for individual worth; to *identify* middle class aggressiveness with Jewish emphasis upon human freedom. The adolescent attraction to conversionary cultism and the adult experimentation with encounter movements express a common discontent with the embourgeoisement of our public institutions. They seek some remission from the compulsiveness of upward mobility. In these new groups and through different modes, the young and old are encouraged

to break the mask which buries the inner selves, to confess their doubts and fears and hurts. By contrast, the sanctuaries of the establishment are mausoleums of cremated feelings, congregant separated from congregant, pulpit from pew by prayers and sermons which at best touch only upon the public agenda. For these, the Jewish school offers little intimation that its students are part of an intimate community which cares about their personal lives, their interior being, not simply about the public features of the rites of passage, the public celebration of festivals.

Some Proposals for the Conquest of the Jewish Home

I am not advocating that the school or synagogue imitate the fashion of encounter movements. I have not dwelt upon their moral and intellectual faults, their narcissistic conception of self and salvation, the shallowness of their concept of responsibility, the superficiality of their instant community of intimate strangers. I have sought rather to pay attention to the hurts of our people which drive significant numbers of the parents and youth of our middle class to such therapies. Nor certainly am I advocating the abandonment of the public agenda but rather the need to include in our formal and informal programs of education the personal concerns of the private agenda; programs which may open them up to the therapies of the community.

Towards these ends, I propose for your consideration (1) the appointment of an interdisciplinary commission of Jewish educators, psychologists, sociologists, theologians to formulate a Jewish wisdom literature for the Jewish family — a literature which would counsel the floundering family in the art of relationship and the values which Judaism possesses to sensitize and cultivate those relationships; a literature addressed to real-life situations: separation and divorce, sickness and death, sibling rivalry and loneliness, anxiety and the search for meaning, sexuality and aging. How can Jews apply the wisdom and ethics of the classic theological and moral relationships: "bein adam la-makom" (between person and God) and "bein adam la-haveyro" (between person and person) to the personal areas of family and self: "bein adam l'atzmo"?

I find a good deal of the insight and discovery in the writings of Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow resonating with Judaic wisdom. They can be used to help converge Judaic and psychological wisdom because they address the reader personally and situationally. Traditional Judaic wisdom addresses the reader whose self is already found in community and whose therapy, comfort and consolation is understood to be found in community. Our task is to convince the psychological Jew of the wisdom of communal therapy and the larger self. But that re-conversion requires that we deal with his lonely self and his inter-familial relationships. In the traditional universe of Jewish discourse such attention may not have been so necessary. But the psychological revolution has savagely loosened the self from the community.

I find noteworthy that our modern and contemporary Jewish thinkers, even those rooted in the theological ethos of the Jewish community, have been drawn to the more personal, existential concerns of the individual. The

emphasis on the lonely man of faith, his personal guilt, fears of aloneness and of death, his personal feelings, interpretations, ecstasies are themes increasingly dealt with by thinkers such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, J.B. Soloveitchik, Abraham Joshua Heschel. It is as if they have come to sense the neglect of the personal in the classic formulations of the Judaic tradition.

The situational Jewish wisdom I have in mind would caution against the perversions which equate Judaism with middle-classness; as it would caution against identifying the Jewish conception of self, responsibility, feeling and community with the psycho-babble within much of the encounter movements. It would caution against the cheap grace and instant salvation of the proliferating cults of conversion. It would do so not by negation nor by verbal refutation. It would recover the roots of communal wisdom and show how the values and modes of conduct of that tradition may help the individual and his family in living more freely. It would indicate how Jewish ritual and liturgy, Jewish study and practice contribute to the moral and mental health of the individual and his family. And where such material is lacking, it would create new Jewish counsel and moral wisdom.

(2) But we need more than texts if we are to penetrate the Jewish home. We need more than curricula if we are to address the Jewish family and the personality of the psychological Jew. Franz Rosenzweig put it sharply: "Books are not now the prime need of the day. What we need more than ever are human beings, Jewish human beings." Jews need Jews to be Jewish. Establishment institutions do not, and as they are now constituted, cannot enter the personal lives of the new Jewish typology. The psychological Jew is a privatist. He fears "gesellschaft." He is uncomfortable in institutions. He will not come to the classroom or lecture hall. He will not come to the synagogue for education. Secretly he craves *havurah*; some intimate and non-threatening relationship with peers, where he can ask and express his doubts and grow Jewishly. The *havurah* can serve him as a half-way house, an "erub-hatzeroth" between the public and private domain, making it permissible for each to transport his concerns into the personalized common domain. By contrast the public institutions unwittingly intimidate him. Whoever has witnessed this Jew called to some honor on the *bimah* — the *berachot*, the raising or binding of the Scroll, the opening of an ark — has noted his embarrassment, the awkwardness of his stance, the stammering of the benediction, knows that he will not quickly return to the scene of his failure. To be shamed before the congregation of family and friends does little to recommend the public institutions of his life. He will not willingly come to synagogue or adult education classes or even to the sub-community — the *havurah*.

But if he does not come to us, we must come to him. We cannot stand on ceremonies. Somehow, the synagogue and school must enter his home. But who will be sent and who will go? However affluent the Jewish institution, it does not possess the talents or energies to deal with the Jewish family one to one. Are there Jews who know and feel and live Jewish life and would volunteer for this task? Are there Jews who would help create an atmosphere of Jewish culture so indispensable for the setting of attitudes towards

Jewish values? Are there Jews who could explain the techniques and rationale of Jewish observance, the moral poetry of ritual choreography, the memories created by parents for their children? Are there Jews whose personal contact could open the family to a world of ideas and ideals which would affect the table-language of the *mishpocha*? A language not of stocks and bonds and killings and grades and investments; a table-language beyond the narrowly utilitarian, the pragmatic, commercial shrewdness which has taken over our private sanctuary. Who is there in the professional community gifted with the time and energy for such a critical task? Certainly not the rabbis, the educators, the teachers so overworked and overwhelmed by their duties. I propose that Bureaus of Jewish Education, that seminaries, that teachers' institutes, synagogues throughout the nation institute programs for the training of *Judaic para-professionals*, counselors in Judaism who would engage in a two-year study of Judaism under the supervision of the most competent faculty of Jewish thinkers and practitioners, educators, psychologists available in the community; Judaic para-professionals wedded to two classic Jewish purposes, *lilmod ul'lamed*: to learn so as to teach, to teach so as to observe with love the ideals of our religious culture. They must be committed to (A) personal Judaic growth, and (B) service in those areas where the Jewish professional cannot enter or where the Jewish professional feels that he needs help. We know of para-medical professionals, para-psychological professionals, of para-legal professionals; why not Judaic para-professional

counselors? There are colleges throughout the length and breadth of this country which, in increasing numbers, offer two-year programs and at the end of that program offer an Associate of Arts degree in para-professional counseling. Why not a program for Judaism? Why not para-professionals for Jewish life? Why not Judaic lay counselors for the Jewish family? For converts into Judaism? For young people? For the singles?

I have witnessed in my own congregation the creation of a para-professional psychological counseling group. I know these men and women who have given time and energy to such a program; I know psychiatrists and rabbis and sociologists and social workers who have volunteered to train these para-professionals, psychological counselors. I have seen what such training has done for those who have volunteered, how it has changed their lives and their respect for Judaism as a healing and caring tradition. I have also seen the tremendous effect it has had on those who now have come for those services. There is an untapped reservoir of Jewish intellect and altruism in our laity. If we educators, we teachers, we rabbis can spend some time in the development of Judaic para-professionals, we will not only realize our own ambitions for Jewish creativity but will gain lay allies who understand us and who will help create a healthier Jewish community. We will be able to fulfill in some small measure the ambition of this conference, the conquest of the family. Jews need Jews to be Jewish and to become Jewish. It is our sacred task: to create Jews. □

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