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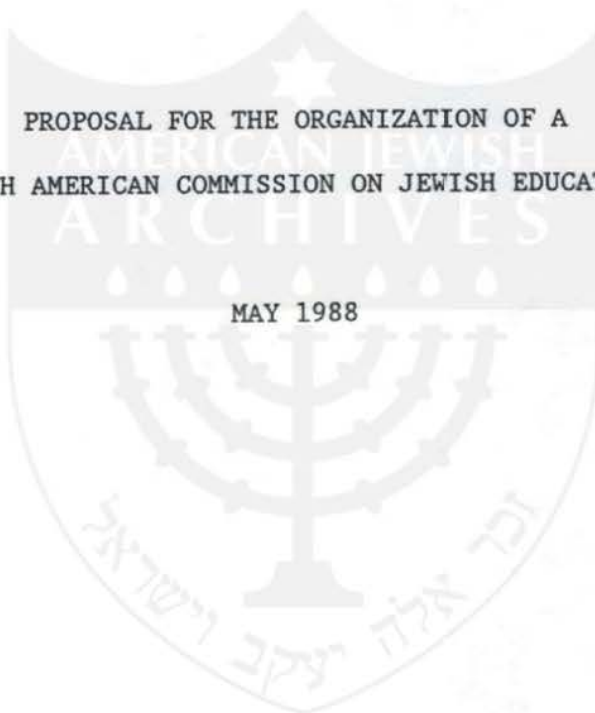
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"Proposal for the Organization of a North American Commission
on Jewish Education", May 1988.

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PROPOSAL FOR THE ORGANIZATION OF A
NORTH AMERICAN COMMISSION ON JEWISH EDUCATION

MAY 1988



INTRODUCTION

The ties that help connect Jews to a meaningful Jewish life now, and similarly help ensure Jewish identity and continuity for our children, face grave challenges. Our society is dynamic and open. It offers countless ways to define and express personal identity. Identification with a community, a tradition, a set of values is now a matter of choice, not necessity. Amid the competing demands and opportunities, what binds an individual to Jewish life? How much of our Jewish heritage will be transmitted to future generations?

These questions challenge the North American Jewish community. It is time to respond with enthusiasm and energy and with the best tool at our disposal - Jewish Education. The Mandel Associated Foundations, in cooperation with the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB) and the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA), and in collaboration with the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF), propose an initiative to explore and recommend significant new support for Jewish Education.

The Mandel Associated Foundations are prepared both to commit their own resources to this cause and to encourage others to support the implementation of projects designed to bring a new vibrancy to Jewish Education.

It should be clear at the outset that Jewish education includes not only classroom instruction but all the settings in which learning takes place--within the family circle, at camps and community centers, through print and electronic media, and in encounters with Israel. Many of these settings do not have the personnel, the programs, the content and the strategies needed to meet the challenge of educating Jews in our open society.

The Mandel Associated Foundations are prepared to support the formation of a national Commission to involve the North American Jewish community in a policy-oriented study of Jewish education in a variety of settings. This study will recommend practical steps and interventions for the improvement of Jewish education.

The Mandel Associated Foundations are supporting foundations of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland. They were established in 1982 by Jack N. and Lilyan Mandel, Joseph C. and Florence Mandel, and Morton L. and Barbara Mandel as a primary means of handling their philanthropic interests.

JWB, the Association of Jewish Community Centers and YM-YWHAs, is the leadership body for the North American network of JCCs and Ys. JWB serves the needs of individual Jewish Community Centers, and it helps to build,

strengthen and sustain the collective Center movement through a broad range of direct and indirect services, institutes, consultations and Jewish experiences, and by identifying and projecting movement-wide directions, issues and priorities.

JESNA is the organized Jewish community's planning, service and coordinating agency for Jewish education. It works directly with local federations and the agencies and institutions they create and support to deliver educational services.

THE CHALLENGE: JEWISH CONTINUITY

Jewish continuity--the creative vitality of the Jewish people, its religion, culture, values and traditions--is an issue of primary importance to the American Jewish community. The central challenge is improving the means by which the Jewish community promotes an active commitment to Jewish identity.

In our society, connections to and expressions of Jewish identity are highly individual. Some Jews are linked by traditional religious practice, some through participation in communal organizations. Others are involved through Israel, Soviet Jewry or memories of the Holocaust. For many, association with other Jews is an important mode of participation.

Our efforts on behalf of Jewish continuity must strengthen as many of these links in as many American Jews as possible. It is a substantial challenge. Because Jewish identification is a matter of choice today, we must provide a persuasive rationale for why commitment and involvement are important. We are convinced that, as a people, we have the vision and the resourcefulness to accomplish this aim.

A KEY: EDUCATION

The Trustees of the Mandel Associated Foundations, in cooperation with JWB and JESNA, have chosen to focus on Jewish education as a potent resource for transmitting the living values of our culture.

As the Jewish community's primary vehicle for responding to the questions of "why" and "how" to be Jewish, education is our best tool for helping Jews to develop and sustain a commitment to active Jewish self-expression, both individually and communally. Jewish education also has the capacity to reach into every aspect and stage of Jewish life--from children to senior citizens, from individuals to families, in schools, community centers, synagogues, camps, nursing homes and child care centers.

Jewish Education Today

Jewish education is conducted throughout North America in a variety of settings in and outside the classroom. More than 30,000 people are employed in Jewish education today. These include teachers, school directors, teacher trainers, specialists, educational planners, and professors of education as well as personnel in community centers, camps and retreat centers. Most Jewish children receive some Jewish education at some point in their lives. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on Jewish education. The field of Jewish education is a large enterprise in the North American Jewish community.

Still, Jewish education throughout North America suffers from a shortage of qualified, well-trained educators. The few institutions which train Jewish educators have fewer ~~faculty and~~ students than at any time in the recent past. Professional standards, meaningful positions, adequate salaries and compensation packages, career advancement possibilities and professional status are not adequately associated with the field of Jewish education. It is difficult to recruit and retain young men and women to the field.

The Jewish community has created notable successes in the last sixty years in such areas as philanthropy, social services, defense and support for Israel. It is time to make the enterprise of Jewish education one of the

success stories of modern Jewish life. Now is the time to turn the concern of the Jewish community toward creating a Jewish educational system which can in all its varieties help to insure the survival of the Jewish people.

The Potential for Tomorrow

We believe that it is possible to establish an educational environment that will be responsive to the current realities of Jewish life in America. To do this, the organized Jewish community must be shown why it should invest substantial new resources of thought, energy and money.

In fact, there are positive elements in place and there is great potential for improvement. Today, Jewish education appears on the agendas of major Jewish forums. Key community organizations and leaders are already increasing time and resources devoted to Jewish education. Jewish community federations, individual philanthropists and Jewish-sponsored foundations appear ready to increase financial support for initiatives that can have a positive impact on the range and quality of Jewish education.

The critical question is: What initiatives will be meaningful?

We propose an approach that will help guide the community toward an optimum application of resources to the needs of Jewish education.

A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

The Purpose

Emerging consensus on the importance of Jewish education makes this an auspicious time for a catalyst to identify the issues, point to practical opportunities for improvement, and engage key people and institutions in positive action. The catalyst: a North American Commission of community leaders, outstanding educators, and other professionals. Commission members are chosen ad personam, for their competence, commitment to Jewish values, influence and institutional connections.

Such a Commission will have a fourfold mission:

1. to review the field of Jewish education in the context of contemporary Jewish life
2. to recommend practical policies that will set clear directions for Jewish education
3. to develop plans and programs for the implementation of these policies

4. to stimulate significant financial commitments and engage committed individuals and institutions in collaborative, communal action.

While the Commission will initiate the study, it will seek to make it a participatory venture. Jewish continuity is a communal challenge. It can best be met through a communal effort expressing the interests and practical needs of involved institutions and individuals.

Thus, an important part of the Commission's initiative will be to involve opinion makers, community leaders, scholars and educators as active participants in all stages of its work, including the implementation of its recommendations.

The ultimate purpose of the Commission is to offer concrete recommendations for strengthening Jewish education in all its forms and settings.

Undoubtedly the Commission's recommendations will require the investment of significant financial support. As noted at the outset, the Mandel Associated Foundations are prepared to commit their own resources. They are also ready to encourage others to support the implementation of meritorious projects and programs proposed by the Commission.

THE STUDY: CREATING CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

The Work

The Commission will meet several times over a period of 18 to 24 months. It will direct the activities of a Commission director and appropriate supporting staff, whose responsibilities will include preparing background papers and reports, gathering and organizing data, consulting with contributing scholars, educators and policymakers, and coordinating the ongoing participation of important Jewish publics.

The Focus: People and Institutions

A study undertaken for the purpose of positive change begins with a fundamental question: Who holds the keys to change? It is a premise of this enterprise that change can best be achieved through a partnership of educators and communal leadership committed to invigorating existing institutions and suggesting new ideas and new operational modes.

One objective of the Commission study ^{should} ~~must~~ be an examination of what Jewish communities and educational institutions must do to professionalize Jewish education and to attract, inspire, encourage and train professionals.

The Commission study may address these issues, among others:

1. Professional opportunities in Jewish education. A profession is characterized by formalized standards of knowledge and training, a code of ethics, institutionalized forms of collegiality, and paths for advancement. We need to look at how these aspects of Jewish education can be developed to professionalize our educational services.
2. The recruitment and retention of qualified educators. Such factors as low status, low salary and limited potential for advancement have a twofold effect on a profession: they deter entry and encourage attrition. We need to examine these factors in light of the small pool of interested talent Jewish education now attracts. We also need to explore the potential for making more effective use of our feeder system--youth movements, camps, community organizations.
3. The education of educators. Today North American institutions graduate fewer than 100 Jewish educators annually. We need to look at how to fill the demand for qualified people in both existing and emerging positions, and to provide continuing professional education.

4. Historical perspective and current structures of Jewish educational institutions. We need to begin with an understanding of the existing structures. A look at the past can help us to assess current institutions and their needs and guide us in establishing any new structures that might be needed to respond to today's needs.

TOWARD TOMORROW

Experience has shown that North American Jews can cooperate to make positive things happen. Today we know that something must happen if we are to transmit the riches of Jewish experience to future generations.

We now have established organizations--service, educational and philanthropic--with energetic leaders who are intensely interested in the question of Jewish continuity. We have, in Jewish education, a tradition of involvement with the why and how of Jewish life.

This initiative invites a communal venture: the deliberate shaping of new connections between individuals and the community of Jewish experience. Thinking and acting together, we can make Jewish education a sustaining force for Jewish life, as rich and dynamic as the society in which it exists.

Drafted by the Mandel Associated Foundations in cooperation with JWB and JESNA. 1750 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44115