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Jewish Education, 1925.

Jewish Education

By Abba Hillel Silver

THERE was a time in Jewish history when the discussion of Jewish education was totally unnecessary. Jewish education was assumed to be almost an axiom in Jewish life; it was elemental, there was no Jewish community anywhere in the world which did not have its full quota of schools and teachers. There wasn't a Jewish household wherein the education of children didn't take primacy over every other consideration in that home.

But recently that has not been the case in American Jewish life. In this land primacy was given to philanthropy, secondary consideration was given to the synagogue and the temple, and only the last consideration was given to the problem of Jewish education, with the result that while our communities are almost everywhere splendidly organized from a philanthropic point of view, having their quota of hospitals and orphanages and homes for the aged and relief agencies and recreational agencies; while most of our communities have their splendid synagogues and temples; there isn't one community in the United States that is adequately provided with schools for Jewish children and with schools for the training of Jewish teachers.

And we are confronted by the sad, and to my mind, menacing situation that two-thirds of our junior population, two out of every three Jewish children of school age in the United States, receive absolutely no Jewish education, either in Sunday school, Sabbath school, Talmud Torah, private school, or instruction at home.

Prosperity Won't Save

In other words, two-thirds of the rising generation which is to be the Jewish people of the United States in another decade or two is being reared into an absolute ignorance of all the values, the sanctities, the verities, the traditions, the loyalties, the enthusiasms, of Jewish life, and it is to that generation thus untutored and, in things Jewish, unlettered, that we are going to be called upon to turn over all these institutions and all these synagogues and temples which we have built and are building with so much cost of energy and substance.

Prosperity will not save us—that is almost a platitude—but we probably

do not realize that even our synagogues will not save us.

Now you might ask me: Why Jewish education? Why isn't the public school and the high school, the secular education which our children receive, sufficient for them?

In the first place, we need Jewish education because the children themselves need it. Our children are growing up in a non-Jewish environment, and they are growing up—as Jews—uneducated. They are growing up in an environment the majority of which is not friendly. Finding themselves in such an environment, our children will adopt one of two attitudes: they will either be intimidated by that environment, cowed, beaten, made to feel ashamed of themselves, apologetic, or they will adopt an attitude of dignity, they will face their world courageously, as Jews.

And then we need Jewish education because America demands it of us, because we can make our finest contribution to the totality of American life by being ourselves, by refining that culture and laying it upon the altar of the common American life.

Israel Does Not Want to Die

And there is a third reason for Jewish education, and that is our own reason as Jews. Why should we, after having traversed the centuries and the continents, after having endured so much for a great ideal—why should we here, on these pleasant shores, in this land of freedom, seek to destroy ourselves? And when we do not train our children we are signing our death-warrant. It has taken thirty centuries to prepare the food of life for our people, and our children haven't even the mouths with which to eat that food, the eyes with which to read the letters of our literature, the ears to catch the accents of our speech. Israel does not want to die. I don't wish to die, as a Jew.

And lastly, we need Jewish education because mankind still needs the Jew. The genius of our race is not to be found so much in creating things out of nothing; the genius of our race is to be found in this, that it was able to take the values which other peoples produced, and refine them, purify them, elevate them, reinterpret them, and give forth to mankind what was really a new value, a new idea, a new truth.

What has kept the Jew strong through the ages? What has kept him strong in the midst of those dirty, filthy ghetto lanes? What has kept his spirit from breaking in the midst of those endless exiles and migrations? The Yellow Badge? The Inquisition? The Autos-da-fe? The Crusades? The horrors of the Black Plague? The Blood Accusations? The Host Desecration charges? The well-poisoning charges? The pogroms? The massacres? What has kept this people a pioneering people throughout the ages, a pathfinder, a light-giver, a torch-bearer? The schools, not the wealth!

Who Are Our Heroes

We never could count on armies to defend us. Who are our heroes? We cannot point to a Sargon, or a Xerxes, or a Hannibal, or a Ghengis Kahn, or an Alexander, or a Napoleon. Our Jewish heroes are Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hillel, Saadia, Maimonides, Yehuda Halevy, Spinoza—these are our heroes, men of the Book. We must put first things first, and that is why it is so absolutely important that we get a new type of leadership into Jewish life.

There was a time in American Jewish life when all that was required for a Jewish leader was wealth to give and a good heart to prompt the giving. That is no longer enough. The new type of leader must enter the arena of Jewish life equipped with Jewish learning, or at least with a great sympathy for Jewish learning, for Jewish culture and values, with a great sympathy for all that is going on in the Jewish world.

We are on the threshold of a marvelous era in Jewish life in America. Let us turn our attention to those things which are really the heart of Jewry. Let us establish more and more Hillel Foundations, and then turn our attention to our own communities and build up their schools and teachers and make possible the improvement of our curricula and the publication of textbooks which we require.

We are at the very beginning of things. If the B'nai B'rith, one of the oldest, one of the finest Jewish organizations in America, will turn its attention to this problem, I am sure that it will be doing something of a historic character, it will be fashioning a new age in Jewish life.



ONE HAND riveted to his cap to guard it from sacrilegious attack, the other clutching the remains of a slice of *strudel*, a small boy strained himself high as he could on tiptoes and with wide eyes devoured the moving spectacle before him.

In the little town of Zvanetz in the Province of Podolia death had struck down the *K'sontz*, high dignitary of the Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of Russia, and now hundreds marched with measured tread behind the carriage that crept toward the last resting place for one dead.

The boy could just see over a shoulder covered by a frowzy shawl and his lips parted at the glory of the coloring.

As the new surge of sensation at things bright and beautiful and wonderful took possession of him, the boy unconsciously relaxed the pressure of the guardian hand upon his cap only to clutch it more tightly a moment later. Sad experience had taught him that some stealthy Gentile urchin might snatch the cap from his head and leave him—like a *goy*—uncovered before his God.

A Jew never appears uncovered. Hershel had known that from earliest memory when at the age of three and a half, he had been picked up by his father and carried to *Cheder*. He knew that just as he knew that a Jew must have nothing to do with a crucifix, or that he must never touch *Hazzer*.

Hazzer! The mere thought that it was this animal, the pig, which had desecrated the Temple of Jerusalem, time and time again had aroused him to pious crusade. In such moments he would arm himself with a long green switch so carefully trimmed for him by a dotting aunt and march off to the rickety pile of small timber on the way to the river where lived the fat sow and her brood of little pigs. There, with cries of "*Hazzer! Hazzer!*" he would lay about him with the switch and shout with victory as the little pigs scattered. He would chase them and chase them, and only when the brood sow would rise from her

ooze of mud behind the rickety woodpile would he scurry for shelter.

Of the sow he was afraid. From her he always ran. But each time he ran he vowed vengeance. Some day he was sure his vengeance would be achieved. And when that should come to pass he knew that his grandfather *Alter* way up in heaven would be very pleased.

Hershel's grandfather had been a great man; of this the boy was positive. For, to say nothing of the elder's piety, had he not been six feet four inches tall, and had he not with ease been able to pick up two *Goyim*, one in each hand, and pound their heads together if they so much as dared cast a slur at a Jew?

Hershel was born some time after the death of his grandfather. But Thursday mornings he would get up at daybreak to watch his mother make bread for the Sabbath and then he would sit in rapt attention while she talked of the exploits of her father, "*Alter-der-shtarker*"—Alter-the-strong.

As she talked, she would with magic touch now and then transform little pats of dough into intriguing shapes and put them in the oven for him. Being small, they baked quickly and soon were brought out for him to munch. The mother's magic made the stories about his grandfather *Alter* the more absorbing.

Hershel's brothers and sisters slept during these mornings. But for Hershel, attendance at these breadmakings was as much of a rite as was his distribution of the Friday night *andles* after his mother had given them their whispered blessing.

"Mother," he asked one morning, "I'm going to grow up like grandfather *Alter*. I will, won't I, mother?"

"Yes, surely, if you're a good boy."

He was silent a moment. "Mu. I be very good?"

She smiled gently. "Very very good."

Again he was silent for a time, munching. Then, wistfully, "I wish my name were *Alter*, like his."

She stooped and pressed her lips against his forehead.

"Why, child, you were named after

your grandfather. His name was *Hersh*, too, but they changed it to *Alter* when he was a baby."

And then she proceeded to lead him through a very ancient and mysterious ceremonial.

"He was very, very sick. So sick that his father and mother knew that God wanted him, too. So what could they do? They just changed his name to *Alter*. That settled everything. For then God could have him, and his father and mother could have him, too. Then God took *Hersh* away for Himself and his father and mother had *Alter* left for themselves. And that's how it came about."

This was very impressive to the boy and he sat thoughtfully munching. Finally he spoke.

"If my name were *Alter*, too, I know if any *goyim* did anything I could just pick them up one in each hand like he did and—"

She drew another of the delicacies from the oven for him.

"There, there, child, you'll be like your grandfather. Just be a good boy."

Hershel sighed and munched on.

Yes, Hershel was going to be just like his hero. And of course if he were going to grow up to be so big and fine a man he couldn't permit anyone to snatch his cap from his head and leave him uncovered. Only *goyim* went about with bare heads!

So now, in the crowd that watched the procession, he clutched his cap still more tightly and as the frowzy shoulder changed position he squirmed forward into the open and stood in the very front row of the throng that lined the cobblestone street.

In the very front line his eyes grew wider still. He saw tall patriarchs with heavy beards and long white cloaks with gold braid. He saw short, wiry figures whose measured tread kept propelling the hems of their long robes and raising little spurts of dust. Cavalry in white uniforms with patent leather boots and long sabers. Cossacks in all their wild splendor looming up in grotesque proportion to their small horses. Banners with strange insignia in the Russian he had not yet