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MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

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Education For What, 1981.

Education For What
Daniel Jeremy Silver
December 6, 1981

Recently the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in a quarterly which is called the Daedalus, devoted successive issues to the American schools' problems and promises. The editor's explanation of this concentration of concern on the schools was that our educational system was undergoing one of those recurring and endemic crises of public confidence and that it was important to have knowledgeable people lay out the assets and the deficits of our school system. Now, it's interesting how often in this post-war era we've had a crisis of confidence in the schools. In the early mid 1950's there was a Sputnik crisis. The Russians beat us into space and instead of naming the priorities and budgets of the administration or the failures and inadequacies of the bureaucracies involved, the National Space Administration, we blamed our public schools. We said that they were not producing students equipped to deal with the space age. We said the big Red schoolhouse was pouring out a torrent of mathematicians and technicians and scientists and we were still training our young people in a curriculum, a classic curriculum which was fit for an older and gentler time, a quite different time. The cry then was that we must change standards and tighten standards. There must be four years of mathematics and four years of science and the emphasis must be on the hard subjects. And what was not said very often during that debate was that the big Red schoolhouse was diverting long before the high school years nearly 85 percent of all students, that already when they were in the fifth and sixth grade Russian students were to be given examinations which determine, once and for all, what track they would be put on, whether they would end their school very early or be diverted to some vocational school program. And that in 1950 we were graduating one in two of every seventeen or eighteen-year old in our society from our high schools and the Soviets were graduating less than 2 in 10 and that proportion has remained rather constant. Today we are graduating three out of four and the Soviet Union is graduating about two out of ten. Indeed, no elitist

school system, that is no system which diverts significant numbers of young people from the elitist academic schools in western Europe or in eastern Europe graduates more than 25 percent of the students from the high school years. And one of the interesting, and often overlooked, facts when we criticize our schools from this point of view is that whenever there have been similar diagnostic tests taken by the upper five percent of our students against the five percent of any elitist system, our students have shown that they are fully the equal of the best trained students in schools elsewhere in the world. And, of course, one can point to the paradox of the fact that Marxist theory would state, that a capitalist and competitive society such as ours would do everything that it could to prevent the lower classes, the classes with less opportunity, from gaining educational opportunity, entry into the fullness of the system, and yet it is precisely our system which encourages young people to stay, to take advantage of all the opportunities that are there as long as they can, and it is precisely the Communist system which detour, divert and dead end the youngsters quite early in their career, and obviously those who come out of more advantaged homes have the better advantage and the better chance of passing those tests.

Now, of course, there's a rule in history that for every action there's an almost equal and an almost opposite reaction and so, not soon after the crisis of confidence brought on by Sputnik, we had a crisis of confidence brought on by the tightening of the curriculum. These were the years when people were writing about death in the classroom, when they were talking about the stultifying effect of competitive academics, and those who were least advantaged, most culturally deprived in our society, relevance was the key word in the early 1960's. We were to create curriculum fit for each student's very special talents and needs. The idea of affirmative action was beginning to take place and there was great concern that we involve ourselves with the handicapped and disadvantaged and that we create a school system which would not automatically reward those whose minds were most agile and ablest. Intelligence tests and other diagnostic tests were

discouraged. Automatic promotion was encouraged. Grade inflation took place because we must bring each child along and make each person feel confident. The so-called core curriculum, four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of a language began to be dispensed with in favor of a whole variety of courses which grew out of the supposed or expressed needs of the young people, driver's courses, drug-related courses, photography courses, pottery courses, and it became possible to graduate from one of our high schools and to be in fact functionally illiterate. And this, of course, was also the era in which the issue of desegregation became a major issue across the land. The court ordered many school systems to concern itself with busing and other effective, presumably effective, desegregation issues. And the focus, again, was on the bottom part of the school group, in providing advantages to those who could not compete and the schools began to face that ultimate anomaly of any educational system, that brains are simply not distributed equally across the society, that it is not simply that cultural deprivation makes it very difficult for the children of the street to come into the educational system designed for the middle-class; but, that even in all classes of society there is a unique distribution of talent from child to child and that any mass educational system is going to have a great deal of difficulty adjusting itself to providing just that mix of motivational programs, of instructional programs, which will reach each and every child. This was a year ago where we had not only the usual schools but we had the alternative schools and the street schools when many were shouting what relevance does Shakespeare have to someone in the street, or others were demanding that we teach Mexican American children in Spanish and other immigrant children in their native tongues, they would learn faster. The issues now were the issues of individual development, and of relevance, they were social issues and the schools tried to respond to these. And as the schools moved to respond to the second 1960 crisis in education we found a number of new problems were coming to the fore. There was the problem of dis-

cipline in the classroom. There was the problem of the falling scholastic aptitude levels of testing. As less attention was being given to the upper tracks they did less well. In many schools advanced placement programs and tracking were attacked as non-egalitarian, as anti-democratic and abandoned. More and more universities found that they were having to make the required courses of their freshmen year remedial English and remedial mathematics and remedial social studies, that they were in fact forced to make up for the deficiencies of the high schools and secondary schools of the nation.

And so during this period, the period we're in now, the emphasis has been on minimal competency and proficiency standards. There has been an attempt to tighten up the requirements, to ^{re}turn to a core curriculum, to demand again that those who graduate with a diploma from high school can at least fill out a job application some place out there in the work force. Every one of these recurring crises has had its favorite books: Why Johnny Can't Read; Crisis in the Classroom. The most recent one is John Coleman Public and Private Schools in which he makes a case that in the last twenty years or so it has been the private schools which have maintained the sense of minimal competency of basic requirements and have made the better job of seeing to it that their graduates could read and write and count and cipher and the like. There's a new interest in private education, in part because of the growth of evangelism, the growth of the so-called Christian school which is not so much Christian as anti-black, in part because of failures of the public school systems themselves, in part because of the concerns by many that the public schools are teaching attitudes that are permissive values which are not acceptable to those families and they would like to have some kind of voucher system which would allow their youngsters to go into some alternative form of education.

Now, one would be tempted, having watched these recurring crises of attitude towards the schools, to be rather tolerant and to assume that all things balance out in the end were it not for the fact that the schools are uniquely susceptible to local pressure. They are dependent upon, for the most part, local or

at most state support for their finances. They are very sensitive to pressure groups within the society and they are very susceptible to fads, educational fads within the society because teaching is a frustrating profession. You have to be patient. You have to be able to accept failure after failure after failure. You have to return day in and day out to face a class, many of whom simply seem not to want to learn. There's no way of mass producing, putting students on an assembly line, and so the impatience of our society has made us turn from time to time to one fad or another and, unfortunately, in the process of switching curriculum, switching over school systems from fad to fad, many children have found that their educational program was aborted, turned off, turned aside in the middle, and we have in the 25 to 30 to 35-year old age group in the society now a lot of people who can't do mathematics because of the new math, a lot of people who can't really read and write because of the new English that the schools tried to adopt some 15 or 20 years ago.

We have a lot of school buildings that were built to fads, schools without walls, schools which made provisions for alternative educational programs but failed to make provisions for libraries where there are big cassette audio-visual rooms but hardly enough space for a basic library of the readings which ought to be part of any educational system.

And one would be tempted to be patient with all of these pressures to change, to be understanding of the frustrations of the teaching profession, were it not for the fact that whereas till now education has had the money largely to do a lot and the wise administrator has tolerated these fads because he could keep on what he was doing and simply act on an alternative system, add on a vocational trade school system, add on a number of special schools, without having to totally destroy what had existed up to this point.

Between 1950 and 1975 financing of public education grew at a rate twice the rate of the growth of our national product, but since 1975 and 1978 we've

seen Proposition 13, the growth of that kind of thriftiness and miserliness that the Reagan Administration represents in domestic policy. We've seen school levy after school levy defeated in most areas where Jews and others who love books are not a significant group ^{with} in the body politic and it is no longer true that educators can tolerate these pressures and simply add on in response to the pressures some program or other into the schools. Hard decisions will now have to be made and those decisions will affect the way in which our young people learn and the kinds of young people that they will be. When a school system lacks the money to do all that it has been doing it can neither cut down the number of hours, the number of sessions during the day which many have done, and if it does that it then must make a choice between the larger courses which are usually the lower level courses, and the smaller courses which are usually for the more academically talented, and usually the choice is to go with those courses where there are the most students. Or it must choose between maintaining those advanced courses and the football program which appeals to the voters and which they believe gets something at least passed as a levy, a modest levy, to keep the school system going.

And so whereas until the mid seventies we could have both alternative education and advanced placement education, in the 1980's it becomes increasingly clear that some very hard difficult choices will have to be made. The school systems will find it very difficult because of their vulnerability to pressure to make those choices.

If any lesson is to be learned from our tendency to criticize the schools, it is that we have asked of our schools the resolution of all the social ills which beset the society, and in my humble estimation a school system cannot resolve the social ills of the society. We've asked the school system to take immigrant children and acculture them to America, and to do so not only in classrooms where English is the basic unit of instruction but in school systems where bilingualism is by law mandated. We've asked the school systems to solve all

of the racial discrimination problems the society created by the way in which we live, the kinds of coherent cultural neighborhoods which we have established, and we forced many a school system to choose between General Motors and school books.

We have asked the school system to deal with alcoholism, with drug addiction, with all those kinds of social problems. And as society moved more and more away from the home where there is at least one adult at the home at all times who can be a reserve, a volunteer, a place where the child can go and spend part of the day, most homes now are homes in which there is no resident mother or father and so the child must be kept in school all day long, especially in the elementary years. The school is not only asked to educate but to be in effect a day care center.

And we have asked these schools to maintain literacy at a time when we increasingly are doing everything through television and through the visual media. We are asking the schools to be egalitarian and democratic, to affirm affirmative action, to bring up those who are most culturally deprived at a time when it's increasingly difficult to maintain standards for those who occasionally see a book in their homes.

Pressure after pressure after pressure has been imposed upon our systems, so much so that they cannot meet all of the expectations that we place on them. The liberals among us, those who have wanted to see a new kind of America, a new kind of American, the greening of America, have asked our schools to produce a non-competitive individual, one whose many talents will be recognized, the right side of his brain as well as the left side of the brain. We've asked the schools to have the courses in the arts, sensitivity courses, courses in all kinds of things beyond the core curriculum that used to be and there's not the time nor the money nor the skills in teacher resource in order to achieve all of this. Those who have been concerned with civil rights and race relations have asked the schools to do all they can to not only integrate but to create first-rate edu-

cation, to mix street children with suburban children and somehow come up with a passive, peaceful and effective society. This has proved to be difficult, if not impossible; and as we can see from our own Cleveland public school systems when the emphasis is purely on integration despite court orders which mandate both the integration of the student body and quality education. It's easy to number busses, it's easy to describe the routes the busses must take, but very very difficult, if not impossible, to provide effective education in classrooms where the children come for a few hours from a variety of areas, come with the prejudice of the parents carried on their shoulders and are told you are now blessed by being in a desegregated classroom.

There have been those in our society, there are those in full cry in our society who look upon the school systems as religious schools. We Jews used to look upon the systems as religious schools, we can understand a bit of what they mean. They claim, however, not that these schools are Christian but that they are anti-Christian, that they are part of a new religion called secular humanism which is permissive, which is atheistic and godless, which believes in sociology and in social values rather than the old-time virtues, and these people are increasingly demanding that only good books be on the shelves of school libraries, that every day begin with a Christian prayer, every football game begin with the students kneeling on the field, God to make them the victor, that creation be brought into the biology classes and the physics classes and that the school systems become in effect propaganda agencies in the molding and training of children according to the evangelical Christianity which is to them the only truth.

And then, of course, there are the teachers, the teachers who have been whiplashed over the last decade by these conflicting and contradictory pressures, who have resorted, to a large degree, by turning away from teaching to union concerns. The union concerns were very real at the beginning, their pay scales were low, their status in society was that of the respect given to someone who

supports the family but is not the equal of the family. But one must say in all candor that the educational establishment has done very little to maintain professional standards and to see to it that high quality people are brought into the field.. Normal schooling, the faculties of education in universities are notoriously among the weakest in the university. I was shocked to read that among students now in college preparing themselves for a career in education the average mean score on verbal aptitudes, on the scholastic aptitude tests, was 392. Now, 500, once upon a time, not so very long ago, was the very minimum that was accepted for admittance to a second-rate university. And so what we have increasingly is a less than adequate, less than learned, certainly less than verbally talented teacher corps forced to move into a school system ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{carry} on a very difficult and complex profession, lacking the tools, clearly, with which to carry on their mandate. And there's been very little concern expressed by the teaching profession to raise these standards, to see to it that there are minimum competency standards in the classroom for the teacher as well as minimal achievement standards in the classroom, grading, for the student. Teachers have fought this and, yet, if we are to have teachers who can't read and write and spell how will they ever teach our children to read and write and spell?

In 1974 a man by the name of Alonzo Crim was appointed to be superintendent of education in the Atlanta school system. The Atlanta school system is largely black. They suffered then from any number of problems. It reminded me as I read of it of the Cleveland School System the last five years, and Dr. Crimm's first undertaking beyond just continuing running the school was to go out and talk to the parents. He found a system where a great deal of concern had been vested in integration and concern with cultural deprivation, concern with teaching children in the street, concern with seeing to it that one took into cognizance the limits that the children would bring into the classroom. But he found when he talked to the parents that the first and foremost requirement that they had, the priorities

they wanted for their schools, was to improve significantly the reading, writing, speaking, listening, and computational skills of the students. Reading, writing, arithmetic - that sounds like the common school of the 1850's - and yet, that's obviously the basic task of a school, competency, the competency to go out and to earn a living. Schools have many other tasks probably but that certainly is the basic one. And as I read his comment I was reminded of the educational system of ancient Israel. Interestingly, the Bible never speaks of the institution we call a school. Schools really originated later. The basic schooling unit was the family and the family provided the youngster with conditioning for character, the values that the family deemed ^{to be} appropriate required for living within the clan and that family, the clan, provided on the job training, apprenticeship training, to be a sheep herder, to be a farmer, to be a smith, to be whatever it was that that youngster would be required to be for the society as a whole. Competency and character, innately, instinctively, before there was an institution called school. These were recognized as the essential elements in any instructional system.

Now, as instruction in a formal way begins in the ancient world it begins by the creation of schools for a group known as the scribes. Scribes appear in all the cultures of the Middle East, they're called soferim. These scribes were required to write, to be the registrars of the bureaucracy, to register the taxes, to register land, to register treaties, to register formulas of marriage, of divorce and so on. They were a very small elite group who were required by every nation, every country, every community, that was settled in that part of the world. And it's interesting that that learning which was demanded of the scribes usually took place in the capital, usually reserved to the children of the upper classes, and yet that learning was called hochma, a term which we know as the term for wisdom. Hochma means a specific skill, the ability to perform a specific task, and it also means the wisdom to live one's life with some degree of quality, with some degree of character. One of the Chap books of those ancient scribal schools in Israel is the book of Proverbs, and the Book of Proverbs describes

the purpose of the attaining of wisdom of the scribal schools in this way. Once you go to the school then you shall understand righteousness and justice and character, every good path. Competency, a specific skill, required by the society, competency and character, the way that one should go, the qualities, the values, that somehow ought to be internalized.

Now the job of providing education, of going into a classroom and teaching, is a very complex one and I want in no way to suggest that there are panaceas, simplicities, but I would suggest that as we face the eighties, as we face falling enrollments and lesser financial backing for the schools, as choices are going to have to be made, the one element which will be fundamentally significant as an achievement for the schools would be some coherent educational philosophy, some coherent set of goals that a society could agree on and that school systems could build on and shape themselves around. But if we try to enforce our schools as we have tried over the last forty years to solve all the problems of the social order, to create a group of young people who will become the kinds of adults who will be saints, we're asking of them an impossible task. We have to be more modest in our expectations of the school. We have to for a period of time give them some clear guidance and I submit to you that that guidance should be that which instruction has always been - competency and coherence. No youngster should graduate from our schools who can't read, who can't write, who can't fill out a job application, who can't speak, who can't express the thoughts that are within in a way which will communicate those thoughts to another, who can't perform the simple computational tasks required in purchasing an object, in budgeting for the family, in filling out one's income tax form in a simple way. We have to see that the schools provide those very basic standards, and there must be minimum standards and, preferably, ways in which the able and the talented will far exceed those standards. And somehow, along the way, by the discipline of the school we must give to the young people a sense of what honesty is all about, what human

relationships, interpersonal relationships are about, what criminality is and what civic duty represents, and this, too, can be done within the community which we call a school - competency and character - and an educational philosophy which will be coherent, consistent, over the next decade.

As so often, I've had to paint for you a picture which is not that hopeful, but, interestingly, when you look back over the crises of the last 30 or 40 years there are some signs that the school system has survived many of the pressures which have been put on them, that our children are resilient, that where there are books and where there is opportunity many will learn. I quoted you a statistic that the top five percent of our students have always been the equal of the top five percent of our students throughout the world which is simply to say that as long as there are public libraries there's a place to go out and read and learn.

And I would add to this another fact, a fact which will appeal to the civil libertarians among us and to those who are concerned with racial justice, that between 1965 and 1975 the number of black students who were graduating from our high schools quadrupled, and that in 1980, for the first time in American history, the percentage of black students graduating from our high schools who went on to college was greater than the percentage of white students who graduated from our high schools and who went on to college. We have made progress. Things have happened. If we could have avoided these single issue concerns, if we could have avoided overloading our schools with obligations much more could have been accomplished. If we allow our schools the money with which to do the job and tell them that what we ask of them is very simple, very complex but very simple, competence and character - that's the focus of your work - we'll try to solve the other problems of the society in other ways, you'll help us with it, but concentrate on the task which is yours. We don't expect that you will achieve it completely. We tell you that these are the minimum achievements which we require of you. Now see if you can't reach that goal.

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"I intended when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the
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 prayers are with us. 'Wherever they are, the children are with us.
 And we pray together with our fellow Jews, we become conscious
 of the Covenant which binds our people to God, and which
 inspires us to high, good ideals which he has set for our fathers
 and for us. We ask God's blessing upon our watching day, that
 it may make us stronger for the work of life, which is our
 duty, our obligation at all times that we live in his presence."

Let us have a day of
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Bless, O God, our worship this day, that it may fill our hearts with the gladness and holiness of the Sabbath. Let us receive from it increased strength and guidance for our life and work. So shall the spirit of this day spread blessing over all days.

* * * *

"I rejoiced when they said to me: 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' " Wherever we go, God is with us. Wherever we are, our prayers can reach him whose glory fills the universe. But we enter his house so that we may worship together as a community. As we pray together with our fellow Jews, we become conscious of the Covenant which binds our people to God, and which inspires us to fulfil those ideals which he has set for our fathers and for us. We ask God's blessing upon our worship this day, that it may make us stronger for the tasks of life, nobler in our aims, and conscious at all times that we live in his presence.

* * * *

It has been said: "If God is not in your heart, you will not find him in the whole universe." May this service help to implant the love and reverence of God in the hearts of all who worship here this day. May the beauty of our faith lead many to find God and to serve him in all their ways.

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15th Nov 1993

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Improve literacy to reading, writing, speaking
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