

Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

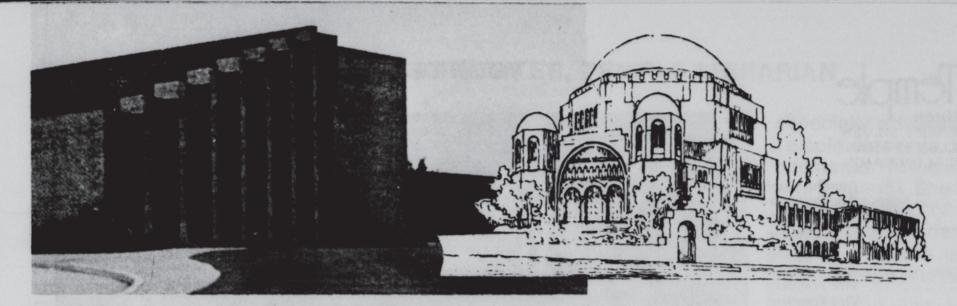
Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated. Sub-series B: Sermons, 1950-1989, undated.

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Education: Is It Worth It?, 1985-1986.



February 2, 1986 Vol. LXXI No. 12

From the Rabbi's Desk: EDUCATION: IS IT WORTH IT? The Sermon of December 22, 1985

There is no more demanding or frustrating profession than that of teaching. The spacedout student may be a unique creature of our time. The tuned-out student has been known to teachers since time immemorial.

The first pedagogue known by name in our literature is Joshua Sirach. During the first half of the second century B.C.E., Joshua was the master of a school in Jerusalem which enrolled the sons of the best families of the city. Towards the end of his life Joshua wrote out a selection of the advice he had offered his students over the years so that they might reflect on it and perhaps share it with their children and grandchildren.

THAT BOOK HAS SURVIVED. We know it as Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Sirach. In it, along with comments on many other matters, Joshua has this to say about the anxiety and frustration of the teacher. "He who teaches the tuned-out (I use the modern phrase; the Bible uses the word kesil, a fool, someone who does not understand the value of learning) is like one who tries to piece together a broken clay pot; or as one who tries to wake up a heavy sleeper from deep slumber. To tell a story to such a student is to tell it to one who is drowsing off; who will say, once the story is finished, "what are you talking about?"

Americans are never satisfied with our schools. Every three or four years when some major event shakes us temporarily out of our complacency, there is another crisis in the classroom. When Sputnik went up and the Russians seemd to have gained an advantage over us in the technology of space, we told our schools to strengthen their teaching in the sciences and mathematics. After Selma we insisted that the schools be crucibles of integration and solve the problems of prejudice and racial justice. As the so-called new morality spread its non-disciplines over the land. we insisted that our schools introduce courses in sex and drug education. When "Roots" made us aware of our ethnic backgrounds, we ordered the schools to become bilingual and teach students in the language of their immigrant parents as well as in English. These last years, as a conservative mood has spread over the land, we ordered the schools to concentrate on "the basics" and many school boards ordered them to become centers for the dissemination of the old-fashioned virtues: including daily prayer, censored texts and creationism.

Whoever writes the history of American education some years hence will comment at length on the inconsistent and contradictory pressures which our society has placed upon its schools and the vulnerability of our schools to these pressures. After all, our schools depend upon local tax levies, a fact which often leads the professionals to give in to the community's pressures even when they know better. In sum, we have asked the schools to make up for the disintegration of the American home and the loss of a sense of common purpose in our society - an impossible task. Increasingly, our schools have been forced to turn their attention away from their primary responsibility - to equip young people with the verbal and computational skills which will equip them for a productive existence in the twenty-first century to matters which are more properly the responsibility of the home and

the larger community.

THOSE OF US WHO TEACH at the college level know that the failures of our school system are not limited to those who drop out from center city high schools or to pre-professional athletes whom the colleges pass along because their muscles are well-developed even if their minds are undeveloped. I remember the senior student at Case Western Reserve University who wrote her term paper for a class in Religion on the prophets of Israel, and every time the word prophet appeared it was written p-r-o-f-i-t. In a freshman class in the Bible some years ago, a third of the students did not know the difference between A.D. and B.C., much less between C.E. and B.C.E. Many complain that professors test with multiple choice questions rather than the old-fashioned essays out of laziness; out of their unwillingness to spend time reading and grading papers. That may be part of the reason, but another part is that you become sick at heart as you read the stumbling attempts of so-called "bright students" to express their thoughts in their native tongue. I (Continued inside)

SUNDAY MORNING SERVICES

February 2, 1986 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch

Rabbi DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

will speak on

The Eternal Light Second in a series on the sacred objects of the Synagogue

February 9, 1986 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch The TMC will lead the service Dr. Aaron Billewitz and Edwin Strauss, Jr. will speak on

Jewish Involvement and **Our Community**

Friday Evening Service - 5:30 - 6:10 - The Temple Chapel Shabbat Celebration — 9:30 a.m. — The Branch

EDUCATION (continued)

once counted one hundred and sixty-eight syntax and grammar errors in a six-page final examination, this by a college junior whose native language was English. When we wonder if our standards are too high or if we simply have a particularly weak class, we have only to look at the increasing proportion of high school graduates who must take remedial English and mathematics at the college level to know that the problem is real and widespread.

Incredibly, education is still a part-time activity in the United States. Most students in our elementary and secondary schools are out of school each year more days than they are in school. Compare this with Japan. A Japanese student begins school at four rather than five, (a year earlier) and spends each year forty to fifty more days in class than our students do. By the time that student graduates from high school (and ninety-seven percent of Japanese students graduate from high school) they have under their belts four more years of classroom experience than do our children. The so-called Japanese economic miracle begins in the classroom. They do more to train the mind. They are committed to education in ways we are not.

Our educational system is still in the horse and buggy age. Why do we retain a part-time system? Why do we have these long summer vacations? Because a century ago the children were needed during the summer on the farm. Farming is done by machines today, but we have not changed the school calendar or significantly altered our attitude towards education. Why not? Because we do not take education seriously. Because a year-round school would increase our taxes. Americans have wanted education to be cheap. Which is to say we have not yet accepted the crucial importance of a first-rate education.

The results of our haphazard approach have been predictable. Our students lack skills. Our teachers lack skills and status. Until women were liberated, that is, for as long as the public schools were one of the few places in which energetic and talented women were allowed to express themselves professionally, the level of teacher competency remained fairly high. But when the gender barriers fell and women were allowed to enter other professional areas, faculty competence fell dram-Over the past several decades teachers have tended to come from the bottom quarter of the classes in second-, thirdand fourth-rate colleges. Our youngsters are not being taught by the best and the brightest. Some years ago I attended a parents' night for my fifth-grader at one of the so-called "fine" private schools. The teacher had written on the blackboard a short outline of her evening agenda. I noticed two spelling and three grammar mistakes in those few sentences. Those that don't know can't teach. There are many in our classrooms whose command of English or of their subject matter is minimal, to say the least.

Americans tend to show the value they place on a service or product by what they will spend on it. What we spend on education speaks loudly of the value we set on the educational enterprise. Until, as a country, we are willing to invest a significant amount of our gross national product on education, provide teachers decent annual salaries which will attract the best and the brightest and professional

conditions of employment; we will continue to have classrooms where the blind lead the deaf, where the least able are misleading some of our most able, and where standards are minimal, often below any acceptable level.

Our historian will develop at length what he will probably describe as a prevailing mood of anti-intellectualism. America was founded by many who felt that a broad back, a willing spirit and some ability at tinkering would see them through. With rare exception, Jews were one, the ethnic groups who immigrated here did not bring with them a tradition which associated learning with leadership and social status. Despite this widespread indifference to any but the most basic learning, America grew prosperous and prosperity seemed to confirm the conventional attitude that all anyone needed to know is the three R's and that academics lived in ivory towers and were not needed in the real world.

MANY OF THESE ATTITUDES REMAIN. Indeed, I am afraid that they have infected our own community. Thirty years ago when I looked at the annual list of National Merit scholars, it read like the membership list of the local synagogues. Today we are not overrepresented. I am told that at a recent meeting, the President of Harvard, Derek Bok, while commenting on the College's admission pool, said something to this effect: "those who came out of Oriental homes are the Jews of this generation." I am not surprised and you should not be either. Our parents knew what was good for us - music lessons, Hebrew lessons, French lessons, not skiing lessons, swimming lessons, soccer lessons. When we came home from school with a report card with four A's and a B, the first question would be, "Why the B?" If we complained, they took the teacher's side.

Today parents come to the sports field far more than to the classroom. They want their children to be well-rounded. Bad grades are the teacher's fault or they really don't matter. We do not push for a year-round school program, in part because one of the ways parents prepare their children for a country club existence is to send them to a country club summer camp where they will master the skills necessary for suburban leisure-time. I keep wondering how they can be so sure that our highly competitive world of four and a half billion earthlings will allow these children a prosperous leisure in return for uncertain contributions. Today's world does not reward undeveloped skills. Undeveloped minds, like undeveloped nations, will find that prosperity eludes them. In their desire for their children to be happy, many have forgotten that schools exist to provide a learning experience, not to provide extra-curricular fun. Learning is a discipline. The mastery of any discipline requires concentration and mental effort. Inevitably, learning involves frustration. Those who perservere, do their homework, work at it, may break through to a level of competence. Those who do not apply themselves will fall short and in a high-tech, highly professional world half a skill is no skill at all.

Studies show that by the time they reach graduate school, the ten percent of our brightest and best are fully equal to students any place in the world, but that in terms of academic accomplishment, the average American student is slipping further and further behind his peers in the rest of the industrialized world. Yet, the prosperity of our society ul-

timately depends not only upon the knowledge and skills of the brightest few but upon the skills of the large group of middle level intelligence.

BY WAY OF COMPARISON, consider Japan. The problem with Japanese competition is not that their factories flood the American market with cheap, shoddy, mass-produced goods but that the goods they sell in our markets are better-designed, better-engineered, more dependable than what we produce. How so? I have already suggested that the average Japanese high school student completes in effect four years more of schooling than the average American student. Between grades 7 and 12 the average Japanese student spends six years mastering a foreign language. The average American student during these same grades spends one year with a foreign language. Japanese students are required to take four years of mathematics and three years of advanced science in high school. The average American high school student takes two years of mathematics and one year of a science. If you want to know why there is a more effective, more efficient work force in Japan, the answer begins in the classroom. The Japanese take a more disciplined approach to learning. Their graduates are more skilled than ours.

At base, the issue is one of motivation. In Japan a student must pass tests every step of the way. At the end of elementary school there is an admission test which determines who will get into the best academic high school. After high school there is a test to determine who will be able to enroll in the prestige colleges. Japan has even a group they call Ronin, a term which once described wandering warriors. The Ronin consist of high school graduates with fine academic records who were not admitted to Tokyo University the first time around and who spend a year or two cramming for the entrance examinations which they take over and over until they are admitted. I do not suggest that we transfer to America Japan's whole testing structure. Competition and family pressure can be excessive, but their educational system makes students recognize the importance their society places on education. In almost every educational system, except ours, the student is made to understand that the best rewards are saved for those who make it all the way. In America the reverse often seems to take place. What is the most important thing in high school? Sports and social life. In America we feel we have to explain to each student the value of each course the youngster takes. I cam across this brief article in yesterday's newpaper which captures some of my concerns. The dateline is Fort Worth, Texas. "A seventeen-year old high school student reportedly paid a math teacher \$75.00 for an A because it meant a chance to get out of school an hour early and no more worries about the subject. "I'm not really crazy about geometry. I didn't see how it would help me in any way later on," said Steve Moore. "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think I could get away with it."

What was there in the culture in which he lived which told this youngster anything about the ultimate value of education, that the schools know what they are doing, that without an education he will not be able to provide a satisfying life for himself? He felt he could bribe a teacher and the teacher was bribable. Automatic promotions, grade inflation, prob-

EDUCATION (continued)

ably parents who laughed at eggheads - why not?

What has been the greatest issue this year in the state of Texas? Not the economic problems resulting from the fall in the price of oil but that the state legislature had the temerity to pass a law prohibiting any student from participating in high school athletics unless he or she maintained the lowest possible passing average. how could the legislature keep star athletes from competing? What is important? High school football, high school baseball, high school track. What's unimportant? Academic achievement, A's. If you want to know why the great American middle is falling further and futher behind, if you want to cry for our country, cry about our intellectual disinterest and education unconcern. I put it to you that a country which depends upon the creativity and productivity of only a small percentage of its people will not be able to meet the stiff competition which the future promises. Other societies are trying harder. Other countries work harder than we do at developing the capacity locked away in their children's minds.

Unfortunately, many Americans think otherwise. The American way is to be satisfied with being well-rounded. The American way is to insist that youngsters must enjoy everything about school. Americans are convinced that there is always a happy ending. It will work out. Why? Look at us. We are the richest nation in the world. Why has it worked out? God blessed us with an immeasurably rich undeveloped land which had the natural resources necessary for the early stages of an industrial society and our people were equal to the brawn-brain demands of such an era. But the iron and steel age is over and those who lack skills will not be equal to the demands of the new age of high technology and worldwide economic and political competition. I appreciate and I approve of the "back to basics" movement, but I would suggest that the basics are no longer enough. Much will be demanded of our adults. They may have to change fields two or three times during a professional career. Those without skills will fall further and further behind.

STUDY AFTER STUDY reports that a significant majority of high school seniors cannot identify the senators of their state or define Strategic Defense Initiative. Democracy needs an educated electorate. A majority of this electorate, I am afraid, is ill-informed. Information is available but only to those who read easily and widely. The facts are there but you have to dig them out. No one who depends on television can appreciate what is really happening. You get a picture, an impression, not the news. You have to have a background into which information fits - some knowledge of history, geography, religion, economics, science. Yet, survey after survey reveals that few have even a rudimentary knowledge of those fields.

The elite ten percent read the thoughtful magazines, the New York Times, the Washington Post or the Wall Street Journal. The ninety percent read the sports, the ads, the cooking pages, the headlines and little else. I will say it categorically: a society which operates at a minimal level of competence will not be able to compete successfully with the rest of the world in the twenty-first century.

IS EDUCATION WORTH IT? Yes, obviously, but before we can have a meaningful educational system we must have the wisdom to be committed to the value of education. Our children need the tools and all of us need to be committed to all that education stands for. We need to be committed to wisdom for its own sake; to information for its own purposes; to the broadest and most reliable knowledge for the sake of our political future.

We must begin to make demands of our children and say to them, "the schools, the community, your family know what basic disciplines you need to master. Why should a seventeen-year old feel free to argue: "I know that geometry won't do me any good." How can he possibly know what demands life may put on him. Why should we have to debate every course offering? Our schools are defensible in and of themselves. Classes are a major part of the way one prepares for life. That's defense enough.

Motivation must begin in the home, but there are fewer and fewer homes in which the adults are wholeheartedly committed to the value of learning. Sadly, I see this lack of motivation even in our homes. The love of learning and respect for the learning, so much a part of our Jewish past, is in many homes a thing of the past. When I enter I find the library has a bar and a television set. Where are the books?

Years ago, when the Hebrew University was simply a dream in the mind of Judah Leon Magnes, who became its first president, he wrote to a number of leading Jewish thinkers asking them for their ideas. Ahad ha-Am, the great essayist, wrote back to Magnes about 1910 or 1912 a letter which included this line: "Learning, learning, learning. That is the secret of Jewish survival." To a large degree, I am convinced that Ahad ha-Am was right and I am convinced that the same truth applies to our society. "Learning, learning, learning is the secret of American survival."

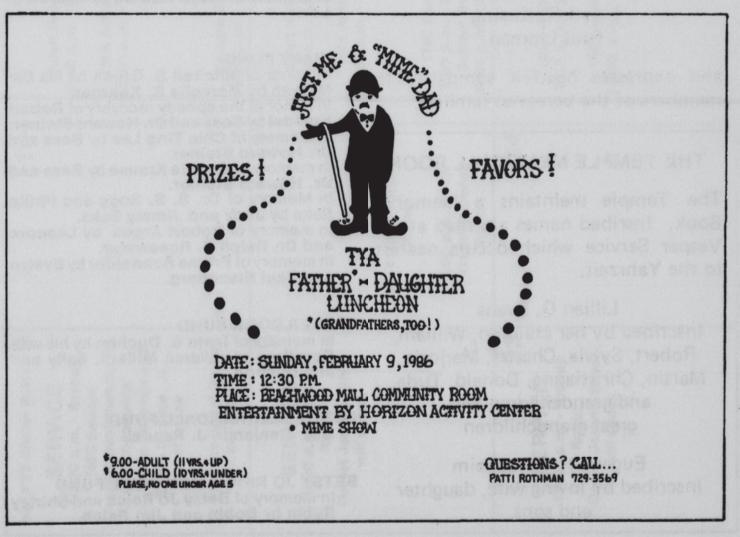
Learning cannot be bought cheaply or by embarking on that kind of crash building campaign Americans prefer. Twenty years ago when James Coleman published his study of

education in the United States, one of his major findings was that educational achievement was not significantly affected by the newness of the school building, the quality of its equipment, the spaciousness of the library or even by the ratio of students to teachers. What had an impact? Family pressures and interests, peer pressures and interests. Since that time other studies have confirmed these observations. Two years ago an English sociologist, Michael Rutter, studied achievement in the common schools and tried to find out why some did a better job than others. He concluded that the most effective schools were those which had developed a clear pattern of discipline, a sense of confident purpose, where a unified and committed faculty had built into their program a system of significant rewards for students who achieved academically. The effective school is not unlike the effective home. A clear sense of discipline and purpose, reward for significant achievement, are the hallmarks of the effective home as well as of the effective school.

When our schools are ineffective it is because the community does not believe that education is one of its quintessential responsibilities. Our schools are, to a large degree, ineffective. The fault lies with us and our blindness to the dramatic changes which have taken place in our world. We deny to ourselves that most of our students are falling further and further behind students in the rest of the industrialized world and that, inevitably, we will find ourselves unable to compete, worse yet as more and more of our children lack the functional skills to manage, they will be made increasingly frustrated with their unrewarding lives. As more and more frustration is built into our society, it becomes more and more likely that people will turn to simplistic panaceas or to men on white horses who promise to lead them to a land their parents promised them but which they are unable to reach on their own.

"Learning, learning. That is the secret." There is no other.

Daniel Jeremy Silver



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