



Teaching Toward Tomorrow

Setting an Agenda

for Modern

Orthodox Education

A Symposium Edited by
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**THE "GOOD OLD DAYS" WEREN'T SO GOOD -
WHAT ABOUT TODAY?**

Chaim I. Waxman

My undergraduate professor of sociology at Yeshiva College, Prof. Nathan Goldberg z"l, would constantly exhort his students to beware of nostalgia which tends to paint the past as much rosier than it actually was. I have a sense that many American Orthodox Jews may likewise be painting aspects of the present rosier than they actually are. This is especially the case with respect to Orthodox Jewish education. Below are some of my skepticisms as well as alternative suggestions. These are not presented as anything resembling a systematic analysis, but rather as thoughts which may generate further research and action.

Of the three major denominations of American Judaism, the Orthodox is the smallest and, yet, it is the one for which the least amount of data are available. Some may view the paucity of data as stemming from the biblical aversion to counting (Samuel II 24), but I suspect that it is much more rooted in an ostrich-like stance which looks askance at data and all social science research. It is admirable to talk about successes, such as *ba'alei teshuvah*, though we have no data on their numbers. We celebrate the number of day schools, though we know very little about what they produce and how many students they cause to go astray. We proudly tout the increases in the numbers of our youth and the fact that Orthodox Jews are about a third of American Jews under age thirty-five who are synagogue members, and their percentage is increasing.

But there are too many matters that we don't talk about and we don't want to investigate. (I am using the collective "we." There are some who have long been urging the Orthodox community to fund research on the community, but to no avail.) We have no data and are silent about the flip side of the *ba'al teshuvah* phenomenon, those who leave Orthodoxy (in Israel they are referred to as *ba'alei she'elah*). I am not referring to those who were nominally "raised Orthodox," the "non-observant Orthodox." This was the group that, during the first half of the twentieth century, made up a significant percentage of those identified as Orthodox in the United States. They were typically those who, for one

reason or another, belonged to an Orthodox synagogue even though they were non-observant and may have rarely attended services. They were the source of the huge drop in the numbers of Orthodox in preceding generations in the US, because their children were much less likely to affiliate with an Orthodox synagogue. Since the 1950s, however, increasing numbers of those who identify as Orthodox have been observant and received day school education. Given that the Orthodox birth rate is higher than the replacement level – and for the more intensely Orthodox it is much higher – if day schools are as successful as they are touted as being, the Orthodox population should be much larger than it is. Why are the Orthodox still only around ten percent of the American Jewish population? Apparently, there is a drop-out rate, despite day school education, and the drop-out is not limited to the so-called Modern Orthodox community; it appears to be prevalent as well in the so-called Haredi community.

It seems reasonable to assume, but we have no hard data to substantiate, that the average number of children for the Modern Orthodox might well be higher were it not for the high cost of Jewish living in the Orthodox community. On the other hand, it also seems reasonable to assume that the so-called Haredi Orthodox have even less expendable income and yet this has not led to a decline in their birth rate. We need to know much more about the relationship between the cost of living Jewishly and the birth rate. It does not seem to be a simple inverse correlation between the two.

It seems reasonable to assume that there are religiously observant families and people who have been forced to curtail their communal involvements and, perhaps, cease entirely to affiliate communally because they could not afford day school tuition, the cost of summer camps, shul membership (which not infrequently includes a large building fund). Just to indicate the magnitude of the issue, tuitions at Modern Orthodox high schools in the New York-New Jersey area are more than \$18,000 per child; summer camp ranges between \$4,000-6,000 per child; and annual shul membership, exclusive of the annual shul dinner, appeals, and *kidushim*, is \$1,000 or more.

None of this is new and, as the call for this symposium suggested, the financial crunch and other issues "seem to be of particular concern today." Several proposals, such as those of George Hanus and Scott Shay,¹ have been more widely discussed but, other than becoming subjects for discussion groups, nothing appears to be happening to seriously address the economic issue, and it is a vital one, especially for the Modern Orthodox community which may be pricing itself out of existence. Indeed, to the extent that there has been a "Haredization of American Orthodoxy" – and I have reservations about that – it may be, in part, a result of people being forced into the so-called Haredi camp because of economic constraints. The costs of shul membership, tuition, and camp, just to deal with those cited earlier, is much less in the Haredi community, and both the process of applying for as well as the probabilities of receiving scholarships are much more favorable there.

Finances aside, everyone (myself included) asserts, and there are some data to substantiate, the fact that day school education plays a major role

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in enhancing commitment to Orthodoxy as well as commitment to the Jewish People and the organized Jewish community. However, as far as I know, no one has ever studied the degree to which day schools may actually encourage disaffiliation with Orthodoxy and the Modern Orthodox community in particular. Too many day schools are designed for the academic and/or economic elite. So-called "average" students are viewed by others, and often by themselves, as unworthy and as failures, and they develop a sense of being unwelcome. Even if they are not manifestly encouraged to leave the schools, the schools do not address their needs, and those students frequently do not develop the proficiency in Hebrew and the other skills necessary to fully participate in Orthodox Jewish communal life, which increasingly entails Talmud classes such as *daf yomi* and other *shiurim*. Feeling left out, they may drop out of communal life altogether.

In the final analysis, despite the assertion of the wonderful

accomplishments of the day school movement, there has never been a real cost-benefit analysis, and we really do not know how effective it has been. It is high time that such a study be undertaken.

In terms of new initiatives, I would like to see an expansion of high school and post-high school educational programs in Israel for American Orthodox youth. Currently, there are almost no programs in Israel for Orthodox American high school age youth. I am not talking about tours, even those such as the increasing number of summer tour programs. I have in mind programs through which high school students would spend a full year in Israel. Of course, there would be breaks during which they might return home for visits, but they would be in a year-long Israel program. Currently, most of the efforts are in the post-high school year in Israel yeshivas. Some research has been conducted on those programs, and more is needed.² But these yeshivas are, essentially, intensive Talmud-focused programs. What about those who are not Talmud-oriented and others who cannot tolerate an intensive religious studies program? I do not mean "at-risk" or "drop-out" youth, but simply normal, observant, good young men who simply do not find intensive Talmud study to their liking. It does not "speak to them." Once again, we have no data, but I suspect that there are many such youth. Perhaps the Israel experience with *mekhinot kedam tzva'iyot* [pre-army study institutes] tells us something, namely, that when there are alternatives to the traditional yeshiva track, there will be a significant numbers of takers. Does that not suggest that there is a need for much broader programs conducted within a positive Orthodox environment in Israel? To some extent, the universities' overseas programs, and especially that of Bar-Ilan, serve this function, but there is room for and grounds for expanding the opportunities for such programs. If designed properly, they could have an additional advantage over the traditional year in Israel programs, in that even those American colleges and universities which do not award credit for study at an Israeli yeshiva would grant credit for this type of program.

For those for whom college credit is not a concern, the program should have social service built in as a value. I have in mind here something

along the lines of the American Peace Corps program which was so successful during the 1960s because it promoted service as a positive value. There are now some women's programs that combine learning with national service, *sherut le'umi*, but they are few and only for young women. What about young men, particularly those who are not interested in an intensive Talmud program?

In all probability, there will be resistance and even opposition from some to this type of program. They will assert that it will dissuade young men from intensive study in a yeshiva program in Israel. Similar opposition was heard when the *mekhinot kedam tzva'iyot* were established. But, just as the Israeli yeshivot weathered the challenge, so will the year in Israel programs. The fact is that those who are cut out for the year in Israel program will probably continue to go there at the same time that newer opportunities for those who would not go there are opened up. It should be emphasized that the overall benefits of the year in Israel, in terms of Jewish identity and Jewish connectivity, will probably be as high from these new programs.

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¹Hanus is an attorney and real estate developer in Chicago who called upon Jewish day schools to initiate endowment programs and challenged American Jews to bequeath five percent of their estates to those endowments. Shay, who believes that the Jewish community has the responsibility to provide quality Jewish education, proposed the Egalitarian Tuition Plan to dramatically cut day school tuitions. Every child would be guaranteed Jewish education, and the cost would be covered by everyone in the community and supplemented by tuition of parents who would pay according to their means and the number of their children in day school. See Scott A. Shay, *Getting Our Groove Back: How to Energize American Jewry* (Jerusalem and New York: Devora Publishing Co., 2007).

²See Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out? Myth or Fact? The Impact of the Year in Israel* (New York: Yashar Books, 2007).