

WHY PROGRESSIVE JEWISH SCHOOLS?

As the school year opens, a shule teacher explains why progressive Jewish education can enrich the development of children in our world

By Mira Stone

THE only way one can understand progressive Jewish education is to see it as influencing and affecting the *whole* child. The progressive Jewish school does not merely dispense Judaica and offer an assortment of information. Like all education, it helps mold attitudes and shape an outlook on the world in which the child lives. This is especially important in view of what is happening to our schools at present, when bigots, anti-Semites and hate-mongers are influential in our school-boards, when "fear stalks our classrooms" (Justice William O. Douglas) and "the spirit of the teaching profession is being crushed and, with it, our hopes of education" (Dr. Robert M. Hutchins). We therefore need to see progressive Jewish schooling as an educational expression which helps comfort the ruffled spirit of the child, helps give him or her some sense of security in a disturbed world ridden with ghoulisn distrust of other peoples and haunted by the nightmarish phantoms of the comic book and the television screen.

The education of the Jewish progressive school is no cure-all for the social ills confronting the child. But any education in which learning for peace and brotherhood is **integrated in its outlook** can at least help to counteract **these ills**. There can be no progressive Jewish education without full, natural inclusion in its scope of the precepts of equality of races and peoples, the teaching of peace and dignity of labor and social justice. If it misses any of these components, it ceases to be *progressive* education and slips into the mire of extreme nationalism that is harmful to the child.

I can hear you say, why a *Jewish* education for our children? Why not organize inter-racial *clubs*, where the above-desired aims can be achieved? Such an education will not *isolate* the child from the rest of the children in his community.

Not only do I have no quarrel with such inter-racial and non-sectarian groups—I heartily welcome them. They do not, however, fully meet the need confronting *Jewish* parents today in the upbringing of their children. Let me explain why.

Developments in Jewish Education

In the past 15 years Jewish parents have shown an increasing interest in Jewish education for their children. Over the past decade the student body in Jewish schools,

all-day parochial, part time and Sunday, has grown from about 240,000 to 350,000. Jewish parents are in search of identification of their children with their people. If the progressive Jew does not find a progressive Jewish educational medium, for that segment of the parents who want such an education, they will seek elsewhere to fill this void. The parents who try to instill full democratic values in their children may resign themselves to providing an education not in keeping with their outlook and aspirations. By sheer passivity they would lend support to the views that certain reactionaries in Jewish life (Ludwig Lewisohn and others) are attempting to foist upon the consciousness of American Jews—that the Jewish American community is basically and exclusively a religious entity, without any basis for secular—let alone progressive—expression.

Furthermore, we want and need a progressive Jewish school because we are vitally interested in helping mold life in the Jewish community. Unless we raise a democratic, freedom-loving generation of young men and women, linked with the life of their people and aware of their history and background, imbued with the heroic and humanistic traditions of Jewish culture and capable of influencing the future of the American Jewish community, we shall not help the American Jewish community to become the force for democracy and freedom which it must be.

Jewish education in the United States today ranges from the Orthodox (the so-called Yeshivas) to the Yiddishist (leaving out for the moment the progressive Jewish schools). Lately, however, the differences are vanishing. Previously there had been at least two basic modes of Jewish education—the religious and the secular. But today not only progressive but also secular values in Jewish education are being rejected. Several years ago at a convention of the National Association for Jewish Education, a "Charter for the Jewish Child" was adopted proclaiming as the basis for Jewish education "the perpetuation of the religious-cultural values in Jewish life." Thus secular Jewish culture and especially the culture of the Jewish working people were negated. *All* systems of Jewish education (except the progressive schools), religious as well as Yiddishist (that is, the Workmen's Circle, the Sholem-Aleichem and the Jewish National Workers Alliance schools) subscribed to this charter. The Sholem-Aleichem schools have substituted

in their Declaration of Principles the term "ritual" for the term "secular." A revealing change!

These general tendencies in Jewish education reflect a retrogressive trend from the healthy secularism which prevailed among certain Jewish groups for many decades. Thus many schools are being imbued with the spirit of religious ritualism, obscurantism and rabid nationalism. Witness these words by a writer in a Yiddish newspaper: "A non-Jewish child understands well, but you understand *better*, a non-Jewish child feels deeply, but *you* feel *more deeply*—you are a Jewish child" (emphasis added). Or witness this effort to isolate the Jewish child: "A Jewish language is that which separates us from other people." Or this nationalistic effort to obscure the fact that there is good and bad among the Jewish people as among all peoples: "All which is Jewish is dear to us."

Thus one meets the corruption of a healthy progressive approach to Jewish history in a statement of Abraham G. Ducker recommending that we acquaint our children with a Confederate colonel of Jewish origin who was a "real American *in the Southern sense* of the word" (emphasis added). Evidently it matters not that "the Southern sense of the word" was the immoral, anti-patriotic one of pro-slavery and sedition against the republic. In view of these trends, what choice is left for progressive and non-religious, non-nationalistic parents, who seek a Jewish education for their children?

A Progressive Alternative

But the progressive Jewish school does offer an alternative, one which has been in existence for over 30 years and has influenced several generations of Jewish American men and women.

There are some who completely reject any Jewish education for our children, usually on the false premise that *any* Jewish education is necessarily separatist and nationalistic. This alternative we have attempted to answer through our description of the progressive schools, whose program offers an antidote to separatism and nationalism.

But the question may yet be asked: does not a Jewish school which separates the child from his *non-Jewish* friends and busies itself with Jewish values alone tend to *isolate* our children, give them a sense of national superiority? But this view ignores the positive values taught in a progressive school.

Is Elijah the miracle-man who brought the widow's dead son back to life or is he the heroic friend of the people who at the risk of his own life cries out against the injustice of the king? Did the prophet proclaim the idea of the chosen people or did he struggle against social injustice, against the evils of the rich?

Was the Warsaw Ghetto a manifestation of *Kiddush-Hashem* (sacrifice to the glory of God) or was it the glorious manifestation of the people's struggle for freedom and human dignity against the evils of fascism?

Is Judah P. Benjamin a Jew to be remembered with

honor by the child just because he was a Jew? Or is the child to be proud of Bondi and Wiener, friends and co-fighters of John Brown?

Everything depends upon the values instilled in the child. Throughout the history, culture and life of the Jewish people, like all other peoples, there is the ever-coursing stream of the people's struggle to improve life, to be free, to live in justice, peace and brotherhood. Progressive Jewish education draws upon these values in Jewish history, literature, stories, song and dance. Such values can help us mold young Jewish Americans capable of creating a democratic Jewish American community, as part of an American nation struggling for its democratic fulfillment.

In the light of changes in the social and class composition of the Jewish community in recent years, to what Jewish school shall we send our children? For instance, the last convention of the Workmen's Circle schools developed the argument that, since the number of wage-earners' children attending their schools has appreciably fallen off, the teaching of socialist ideas has become obsolete and out of tune with the times. The number of workers' children has indeed become smaller because the percentage of Jewish parents who are workers has decreased. But should the pro-labor orientation of the progressive school change on that account? Of course not! The child should appreciate the profound role played by the Jewish workers in shaping the life of the people, should learn of the heroic struggle of the Jewish cloak and dress-makers, the story of Haymarket, the biography of Eugene Victor Debs and Sidney Hillman. These approaches need to be an integrated, inseparable part of the over-all education of the child whose parents are concerned with struggles for right and human dignity.

Cultural Aspects

Progressive Jewish education, then, is that sector within American Jewish education which strives to raise generations of Jewish men and women fortified with the consciousness of their belonging to the Jewish people, with a sense of pride in their people and imbued with a profound sense of equality for all peoples and races. This is an integral part of the effort to keep alive and foster a consciousness of the progressive Jewish heritage and contribution to our democracy, to instill recognition of the contribution of the Negro, the Pole, the Italian and other groups. Along with Haym Salomon and Benjamin Nones, the school brings the child close to Crispus Attucks. Together with Bondi and Ernestine Rose, Frederick Douglass gains meaning for the Jewish child.

But history alone is insufficient to help the child develop emotionally. For this stories, poems, songs and other cultural expressions are necessary. Cultural works which express the hopes, aspirations and life of the people help to organize their consciousness, serve as an invaluable instrument in linking the child with the life of his people.

The child will better understand the life of the sweat-

shop worker when he hears the moving poem of Morris Rosenfeld, "My Little Boy." The dramatization (or reading) of Sholom Aleichem's "Gymnasia" will not only deepen a child's grasp of the evil of discrimination, but will help him relate himself to the people in the story, their suffering and humiliation, their pathos and perseverance, their hopes and struggle.

One of the richest sources of material for progressive Jewish education is modern Yiddish literature. Much of it is humanistic, compassionate, throbbing with vivid characters like *Bontche Shweig*, with Sholem Aleichem's "*Kleine Menichelech*" (little people), full of overtones of militancy on behalf of the oppressed and the downtrodden.

I speak from classroom experience. I have seen my pupils' reaction to the trials and tribulations of Sholom Aleichem's famous boy-hero Mottel, the cantor's son. They not only cry, laugh, suffer and fall in love with Mottel: 12-year olds understood Sholom-Aleichem's implicit message that through all their suffering the people will live on, that the people's ability to love life is endless.

The Question of Yiddish

The teaching of Yiddish has always been an integral part of the program of the progressive Jewish school. Of late, however, there has been a tendency to consider the teaching of Yiddish as nationalistic. The school is often stigmatized as Yiddishist, as an institution where "the children are spoken to in a language they do not understand." Some people even maintain—erroneously of course—that the teaching of Yiddish is the sole function of the school. Behind this argument there is the contention, often unexpressed, that this school—its progressive declarations notwithstanding—is essentially *not* the educational institution for the children of the American-born Jew. Such people say that it may have served its purpose for the Yiddish-speaking progressives in the days when they had children of school age. But now, they say, it is obsolete, is shadowed by Yiddishism—that is, nationalism.

I cannot here discuss the status of Yiddish in present-day life. I can only discuss the relation of Yiddish to the Jewish progressive school. Clearly, the progressive Jewish school is *not* a language school. In any Jewish school the teaching of language—whether it be Hebrew or Yiddish, depending on the ideology of the school—is only one aspect of the curriculum. Some parents hold a negative attitude toward Yiddish. In some cases one must ask if this attitude is *not in part* fostered by undemocratic influences in American life which minimize or negate the culture and language of national groups. In some measure this attitude may stem from the Anglo-Saxon cultural supremacy imposed upon immigrants and their children.

It is, of course, nonsense to say the Jew who does not speak or understand Yiddish is "not as good as those who do speak Yiddish," as one often hears from some Yiddish speaking people. But one who does not know Yiddish misses a great deal. Within the scope of a *planned progres-*

sive Jewish education one cannot jettison the language, which remains an important and vital factor in contemporary Jewish life, because those parents who *never had* such an education do not speak Yiddish.

The school considers Yiddish as an important instrument to help the child approach cultural values which it hopes he will accept as his own. Knowledge of Yiddish gives the full emotional and cultural coloration to these values and makes the impact of the teaching more effective and more lasting. You can, of course, *translate* the above-mentioned "My Little Boy" by Morris Rosenfeld. But the full meaning of its outcry against the infamy of the sweatshop rings truer in the simple, intimate Yiddish. To deny this is to deny the dynamic role of language—any language—as a social force in the life of a people.

It was in Yiddish that the Jewish masses and the Jewish labor movement expressed their aspirations. Through the language the child can be brought close to Jewish life and culture, can be placed in intimate relationship with them.

However, Yiddish is not the language of day-to-day school relationships. In my teaching I use the language through which I can reach them—English. Obviously the teaching of brotherhood, the story of Hanukah, the meaning of Jewish history cannot wait until the child can be told them in Yiddish. At the same time, throughout my teaching, and integrated with it, I consciously and planfully, through song, conversation, reading and writing, promote the knowledge of Yiddish, love for the language and for the values created in it.

This seems to me an inseparable part of progressive Jewish education. The occasional holiday-story told at home is not enough. Nor should our children be exposed to the substitutes which other Jewish schools offer them.

It was the Yiddish speaking Jews who created these progressive schools more than a generation ago as part of their struggle to build their values and ideals. It is up to the new generation to preserve and secure the existence of these values. Many are maintaining a progressive Jewish school for their children. The fact that *you may not* be there is a loss not only to the school, but—which is of much greater importance—to your child.

The Editors cordially invite readers to send us their views on the questions discussed in the above article.

Disgraceful Act of Wagner

AS we went to press, we learned that New York's Mayor Wagner had refused to reappoint the eminently capable Negro Judge Hubert T. Delany to the Domestic Relations Court. The "reason" was undisclosed information about Judge Delany's "left wing views." Judge Justine Wise Polier, who was reappointed to the same court on September 14, said at her swearing in, "I stand for the same thing he (Judge Delany) does. If you appoint me, why not him?" Many Negro organizations and people of good will are protesting this disgrace.