

JEWISH EDUCATION

IS IT FIT FOR PURPOSE?

CLIVE LAWTON THINKS NOT

We all know that there has been a massive increase in the number of Jewish schools and Jewish school places and a concomitant huge increase in Jewish children attending such schools. Indeed, in some places, parents who might not have considered a Jewish school for their children even ten years ago are now thinking of it both because all the evidence is that the schools are good and successful and because it becomes increasingly true that if you don't want your child to be one of a tiny number of Jews, then you can't any longer send them to the local school. Indeed, there are regular stories in the Jewish press now each year about parents bewailing the tragedy that's befallen their child because there's not a place for them at the local Jewish school. Probably that same parent wouldn't have dreamed of going anywhere near a Jewish school in their own time.

It has long been acknowledged, though, that one of the least important reasons most parents choose Jewish schools for their children is the quality of the Jewish education. Some might view it as the price you pay for your child to attend this high-achieving but more or less free state school. Of course a fair number want to be sure that the Jewish education they receive is not radically at odds with their own views – though even there, quite a few parents are pretty confident in their capacity to undo the school's best efforts.

I don't believe that this is simply because parents don't care. I think it's much more because they don't know.

One of the least important reasons most parents choose Jewish schools for their children is the quality of the Jewish education. Some might view it as the price you pay for your child to attend this high-achieving but more or less free state school

Many parents are pleasantly surprised that their children actually seem to enjoy their Jewish studies lessons. They find themselves drawn into the school's Jewish life and, of course, this is one of the reasons why the community has invested so heavily in Jewish schools. For whatever reason – wartime evacuation, the rise of materialism, the domination of non-religious views – there was a radical hiatus in the transmission of Jewish knowledge and skills from one generation to another and without some fairly determined intervention, Jewish life for the vast majority might have withered on the vine.

But the increase in Jewish schools has come at a price. As the number of children attending them has risen, the youth movements have declined. As attending a Jewish school becomes increasingly the norm, people move away from places where they can't access one as their children reach school age. And as Jewish schools become the place absorbing Jewish adult attention and energy, shuls find it harder to recruit the volunteers and enthusiasts they need.

Now if all of this is the unfortunate by-product of a successful system, then so be it, but I'm not sure that it is.

A basic skill like fluent Hebrew reading – or if that seems too

rote-y for you – fluent Hebrew speaking, still seems to elude all but the most exceptional. Most of our children emerge from Jewish schools still without a clue about what goes on in shul, unless their parents are already committed in that direction.

Hardly any Jewish youngsters get anywhere near a grasp of classical Jewish ideas until they leave school and go on to some higher Jewish learning, or they only find such overview understanding if they remain involved in a youth movement.

Jewish schools are as woefully incompetent at teaching anything resembling a historical perspective as most of the rest of the education system is for general historical sense. But at least you might expect the Jewish stuff to connect or correlate with the other historical material pupils are studying.

Children emerge from over a decade of Jewish schooling with no idea at all why they should join a shul, what the Board of Deputies does or how you join a Chevra Kadisha.

When we started Limmud over 30 years ago, we might have been forgiven for thinking that it was not surprising that there were so many thirsty – and under-educated – adult Jews around, given the miserably poor offerings of the cheder system for most. But there are still thousands of adult Jews now who find grown-up intelligent Jewish learning a revelation, something they got nowhere near, even if they attended a Jewish school.

The system has now been running long enough to show a real improvement in the production of really good Jewish teachers, if it were going to happen by current policy. In fact, good Jewish Studies teachers – well educated, thoughtful, open – are like gold dust and we're still having difficulty finding people at the top end to lead our schools. Many of our current head teachers (a fair few

And why would you like to send your child to a Jewish School?



Coz I'd like them to mix with lots of other Jews who are equally puzzled by Jewish rituals, texts and history, in order to preserve our culture

are non-Jewish, which speaks volumes in itself) are excellent educational leaders and managers, but hardly any of them might be called actual Jewish educators, people who the children might look up to as powerful role models for the possibility of being highly educated both Jewishly and generally, as well as impressively in charge of their patch.

To be fair, it's not as if the rest of the world has got it beat. Really good school-based Jewish educators are few and far between, but a number of them around the world are from Britain, so when we do produce them, we lose them. So what does that say about our system and its capacity to deliver to the best a sense of worth and value?

Over the last year or two I've worked with about a dozen Jewish schools around the world and the worldwide system suffers from a common malady. No-one really knows what they want from it. Certainly in the UK at present Jewish schools are not too bad at producing the kinds of common Jewish values in their children that the mainstream of the community manifests. Our young people are encouraged to a warm sentimental relationship with Israel, they feel passionately that the Holocaust should not be forgotten and they'll raise money at the drop of a hat for a good cause.

But, let's face it; probably their parents would have inculcated that into them anyway.

And like their parents, few of them will want to read a Jewish book – even a novel. Such Judaic practice as they adopt will probably be fairly unexamined and they will erroneously continue to feel that the lot of modern Jews in Britain is under threat.

Learning how to street-fight is no substitute for actually being proud in an informed way of the tremendous good fortune and great achievements of the Jews. Raising money when asked is no substitute for understanding why we must all contribute to the upkeep and maintenance of the structures of our community on a regular and organised basis. (Witness the difficulty that schools regularly have in raising money for their voluntary levy to cover the extra costs of Jewish schools. Witness the utter surprise that families feel when faced with the additional costs of placing their elderly relatives in a Jewish old age home. Just ask the Board of Deputies what proportion of people regularly cross off – and always have – the voluntary levy for the Board of Deputies' costs at the bottom of their shul bill.)

Turning up to shul a few times a year without much clue as to what to do or what's going on is poor exchange for a properly informed insight into the timeless resonance of the Jewish tradition, even those bits you don't agree with and have no intention of adopting. After all, we can still be impressed by the Romans and the Greeks without intending to become one. Why is there far less understanding of the massive contribution that Jews have made to the world, now that more than half our youngsters spend half their waking lives in Jewish schools?

Jewish schools are costing us a lot, both in terms of real cash and their impact on other aspects of the Jewish world. It's about time we heard some intelligent explanation as to what exactly they think they're doing and how they intend to measure whether they are anywhere near achieving it yet.