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## I Send My Child to Hebrew School

Mendell Lewittes

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*I send my child  
to  
Hebrew School*



**I SEND MY CHILD  
TO  
HEBREW SCHOOL**

by  
**RABBI MENDELL LEWITTES**

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## INTRODUCTION

In previous generations, no argument would be necessary to justify the above action on the part of a Jewish parent. Providing a Jewish education for Jewish children was a responsibility equal to that of providing food and clothing. Nay, more! Jewish education was a legal obligation of the father, recorded in Jewish law\* among the obligations to circumcise a child and to teach him a trade or profession. Early in Jewish history\*\* a school system was set up by every Jewish community to provide for the education of the young. The prophet Isaiah had set the goal in the verse "And all thy children shall be learned of the Lord." This goal was striven after and approached even when Jews lived among illiterate peoples, where education was

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\*Kiddushin, 29a.

\*\*Drazin, History of Jewish Education, pages 37 ff.

the privilege of the few. Among the many things of which a Jew can justly be proud is this ancient system of education which could well serve as an example to many countries and faiths.

The question of Jewish education has, however, become a debatable issue in these times and in this country with a great number of Jewish parents. Today parents know that their children will not grow up illiterate and unschooled. The American public school system provides a secular education which will enable all American children to take their place as American citizens and equip them with the skills necessary for making a living. Jewish education appears as something additional, perhaps superfluous, making additional demands upon the time and energy of the children, calling for an extra financial burden upon the parents. The question then presents itself as follows: My child receives a well-rounded secular education in the public elementary and high school which will prepare him for American life. Why burden him or her with additional work as given in the Talmud Torah, work which is not related directly to American life and which will not better his or her chances of making a living.

## EDUCATION—PREPARATION FOR LIVING

To best understand why we should provide a Jewish education for our children, we must first realize that the purpose of all education is to prepare one to take his place in society and live in a manner most satisfying to himself and most conducive to the proper social relations. Now our children grow up not only as Americans, but as American Jews. Our children must learn to live not only as American citizens but as good Jews. And one cannot intelligently live as a Jew unless one is prepared to live as a Jew. Without Jewish education, a Jew does not know what is required of him as a Jew nor how to conduct himself as a Jew. Without a Jewish education, our children will be at a loss—as many regrettably are today—when they enter a synagogue or when they wish to celebrate Jewish festivals. Primarily, then, a Jewish education is “to learn in order to do,” to equip a child with the skill of living like a true and loyal Jew.

This skill will make the child happy, both as a child and when he becomes an adult. He will know where he belongs and what he has to do. It will put him on an equal standing with his non-Jewish neighbor, each having their respec-

tive religion. The American people, despite the fact that there is complete separation between church and state, are by and large a religious people. A Jew who not only professes his religion but practises it as well, stands higher in their estimation than the Jew who has no religious affiliation. Through the synagogue and the church, the blessings of American life common to Jew and Christian can be spread to all.

### WHY AM I A JEW?

Jewish education supplies the answer to that important question. Because of intensified anti-Semitism, the Jew has to be on the defensive. He has, first of all, to explain to himself why he should remain a Jew when Jews are molested and maligned, when others look with contempt upon the Jew. He has to satisfy himself that it is worthwhile being a Jew despite the many disadvantages which may come to him as a result of his Jewishness. He must be convinced that by adhering to Judaism he gains more than by abandoning it. All this can come only after becoming acquainted with the treasures of Judaism, with being inspired by the remarkable history of our people, with the knowledge that Judaism is the eternal faith of an eternal people.



Because of the Nazi practice of anti-Semitism in its most gruesome form, we Jews are faced today with tremendous problems. The total victory of the United Nations has given Jews an opportunity to solve these problems forever. Important questions as to Jewish policy must now be answered. We have to present to the rest of the world our solution to the problem of the Jew. But only educated Jews can solve the Jewish problems intelligently. Only those who are familiar with the millennial history of our people, who have in their perspective the whole range of Jewish thought and activity, can speak in the name of the Jewish people. Only those who are inspired through knowledge of our sacred literature and our prophetic teachings can fearlessly defend our rights. Jewish education makes intelligent Jews who will help wipe out the scourge of anti-Semitism and restore Jewish life to a normal and fruitful existence.

### CHARACTER EDUCATION

The purpose of Jewish education is by no means only a negative one, i.e. the answer to anti-Semitism. Jewish education would be necessary and productive of good even if persecution of the Jew were completely eliminated. For

Jewish education teaches character and right attitudes toward life in general. The gravest deficiency of modern secular education is its preoccupation with physical and mental skills and the neglect of the spiritual and social side of the child. Because of the fear of introducing any religious subject in the public schools, the ideals of religious life, such as justice, fair play and the brotherhood of man, have been ignored. Secular education does not prepare the ethical man who guides himself by honesty and kindness. It isn't any great wonder that juvenile delinquency and crime is such an important problem today.

Jewish education, however, prepares the ethical man. It implants the social attitudes which lead to peace and human brotherhood. It fashions character and molds the individual into an integrated personality who will strive for the welfare of all humankind. Jewish teaching includes the ideals toward which men must strive if they wish to eliminate war and its ruthless toll of life. Woven into the fabric of Jewish thought is the concept of human freedom and the sanctity of the individual. Jewish education inculcates piety and a readiness for personal sacrifice for truth and humanity. This is the type of Jew, an exemplar of righteousness, which the study of the Torah makes possible.

## WHAT THE JEWISH HOME CAN DO

We see now the reasons why a Jewish education must be provided for every Jewish child. A parent must learn how to discharge his obligation in the best manner. How can my child obtain a Jewish education? What institution or method is the most efficient one to transmit the precious heritage of Israel?

First of all we must realize that education must not be restricted to the period of formal schooling. Education is a life-long process. The Talmud says,\* "As soon as a child begins to talk, his father should teach him Torah." This means, the child must be taught at home to repeat the Shema Yisroel and the morning prayer for children and the blessings for eating even before he enters school. In the pre-school period the child absorbs much from his environment. A Jewish atmosphere in the home, with the observance upon the part of the parents of Jewish laws and customs, is the best teacher during this period. During subsequent stages, when formal schooling has already begun, the religious attitude of the home is an important adjunct of the Hebrew School. A kindergarten under Jewish auspices is a great help, also, in preparing the Jewish child for Hebrew School. Under the guidance

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\*Succah, 42a.

of a kindergarten teacher who has the proper training for such teaching and is herself devoted to the Jewish way of life, the beginnings of Jewish knowledge are transmitted to the child under the most favorable circumstances.

### AGE OF SCHOOLING

The next question the parent must ask himself, is, "At what age is my child ready for Hebrew School?" Following again the sage advice of the Talmud,\* schooling should commence when the child is six or seven years old, depending upon his innate intelligence. This is approximately the age when the child begins his or her secular education in the public school. This is the proper time to enroll a child in Hebrew School. To delay and postpone at this point is harmful for two reasons. First, the child misses valuable years of schooling in Jewish subjects. If we enroll him when he is ten, he will be learning those subjects that are designed for children of six. Secondly, the child comes to regard his Jewish education as secondary, as less important, than his public-school training. When both phases of education are begun simultaneously, in the eyes of the child they have equal

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\*Ksubos, 50a.

status and will command an equal share of his attention and interest.

It is important to emphasize at this point that Jewish schooling must not end with the elementary school, but must continue on into the high-school age. The bane of American Jewish life is the idea that Bar Mitzvah marks the end of Hebrew School and Jewish education. It is just after the six years elementary Hebrew School that the child is ready to be initiated into the higher branches of Jewish knowledge. In the four years during which the child goes to high school, a tremendous amount of Jewish knowledge can be transmitted to his maturing mind, and give him a rounded-out conception of Judaism which he will retain for the rest of his life.

It must likewise be understood that even graduation from a Hebrew high school does not mark the end of Jewish education for the average Jew. After the period of formal schooling, the injunction of study of the Torah rests upon every Jew. In every Jewish community there have existed adult study groups, such as a Chevra Mishnayos or a Chevra Shas (Talmud). We must develop in America an adequate program of adult Jewish education which will maintain the interest of grown-up Jews in the inexhaustible fount of Jewish knowledge.

## WHAT TYPE OF HEBREW SCHOOL?

What sort of Jewish school is best adapted to American Jewish life? The European Cheder, where secular knowledge was ignored, is obviously out of the question. There are two alternatives: The parochial school, known as Yeshiva, where the Jewish and general subjects are studied in the same building under Jewish auspices; and the afternoon school, known as Talmud Torah. The Yeshiva school enables the child to receive a maximum of Jewish knowledge. From three to four hours a day can be devoted to Jewish subjects, usually taught in the forenoon, when the child is fresh and alert. The whole atmosphere of the school, even during the instruction of the general subjects, is thoroughly Jewish. It is from the graduates of Yeshiva elementary and high schools, nurtured in the traditions of scholarship which prevailed in Europe, that American Jewry will find its communal leaders and spiritual guides. Nor does the Yeshiva school neglect the cultivation of the true spirit of Americanism. Secular subjects are taught in a manner parallel to the public school.

The Talmud Torah, by its very nature, cannot transmit to the child the volume of knowledge which can be obtained in the Yeshiva. But it can provide the Jewish child with the funda-

mentals of Jewish knowledge, it can inspire him with an ardor for his faith and with a zeal for his people, it can teach him the essentials of Jewish practise. It can do these things provided the following: The child must be enrolled in the Hebrew School no later than the age of seven. The hours of instruction shall be ten a week, i.e. two-hour periods every school day. Instruction must be continued after the Bar Mitzvah in a Hebrew High School. The Talmud Torah must have a competent staff of teachers who are versed in Jewish lore and the principles of pedagogy and are themselves religious Jews devoted to their calling. The building and equipment of the school must be modern in every respect so as to provide the finest environment and make Hebrew School attractive. Fortunately, we possess in many Jewish communities such schools, and there are many more schools which can readily be improved into the best type of Talmud Torah.

From the foregoing it is apparent that other methods of Jewish education are unsuited and inadequate. Attendance at Sunday School, with its limited hours of instruction, will not give the child the fundamentals, the "three R's" of Judaism, such as "Davening" and "Chumash." Mr. Israel Chipkin, director of the Jewish Education

Association of New York City, makes the following statement,\* "Children stay in Sunday School over an extended period, but acquire little knowledge of Jewish content. It has left the child Jewishly impoverished, has substituted ignorance and superficiality for thoroughness and mastery of the sources of Jewish knowledge, which were the stamp of the Jewish student."

Neither can a private teacher compare in efficiency and results with the Hebrew School. Attendance at Hebrew School, where classes meet regularly, inculcates the habit of regular and sustained devotion to Hebrew lessons. A child is stimulated to better efforts by other members of the classroom. By means of group activity, certain positive attitudes to Judaism are developed, which cannot be done by private instruction at home. Teachers in Hebrew School meet certain pedagogical standards, whereas the average run of private teachers are incompetent and fail to arouse the full interest of the child.

### THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN JEWRY

The blight of Nazism has devastated many Jewish communities in Eastern Europe which

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\*American Jewish Year Book, 1937, 25 Years of Jewish Education.



were centers of Jewish learning. American Jewry must take up the torch of Torah so brutally and violently snatched from our co-religionists across the Atlantic. A number of noted Jewish scholars have found refuge in these shores. They can help us forge the next link in the chain of Jewish tradition. With Jewish parents in America living up to their responsibility to provide a thorough Jewish education for their children in a well-organized system of Hebrew Schools, the pages of Jewish history written in this country will be no less glorious than the preceding ones. Then will our children achieve true freedom, as our sages say,\* "He is truly free who is occupied with the Torah."

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\*Ethics of the Fathers, Chap. 6.

Look for the



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BETH ISRAEL CONGREGATION  
BATH, MAINE

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NO. 1

This issue is dedicated to our children in Bath who attend both Hebrew and Sunday Schools.

Profit Benefit of Children.

We trust they will be inspired with greater eagerness to study the Torah.

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Our Sunday School is well attended, considering the size of the community.

We are most gratified to announce that a very attractive young lady, a newcomer in our midst, Miss Ernestine Bates, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bates, answered the call for volunteer teachers in our Sunday School. In her three weeks of Sunday School teaching in Bath she has won the affection of her pupils besides being able to enforce good discipline. Your Rabi is immensely pleased with Miss Bates' work, and is deeply grateful to her for her work and services to our community.