The Benderly Boys: American Jewish Education

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

I Making Order out of Chaos, 1900–1939 11

1 The Making of the Master: Benderly in Baltimore 17
2 The New York Bureau and Its Critics 36
3 A Few Good Men (and Women) 55
4 The Struggle for a Modern School System 91
5 The Organization of a Jewish Education Profession 117
6 Progress under Threat: Jewish Education and the Great Depression 159

II Jewish Learning for Jewish Living, 1910–1945 185

7 Education as Enculturation: Progressivism and the New York Bureau 191
8 The Jewish School Curriculum and the Limits of Progressive Reform 213
9 The Central Jewish Institute: The School Center as a Model for the Modern Talmud Torah 237
10 “An Environment of Our Own Making”: The Origins of the Jewish Culture Camp 268

III Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism, 1940–1965 323

11 Unity in Diversity? The Jewish Education Committee 328
12 Rebuilding, Renewal, and Reconciliation in the Postwar Era 375

Conclusion: The Benderly Revolution 409

Notes 421
Index 479
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In the Maine woods, I rock in a hammock
slung between pine trees. My parents
lean against a white birch fence, watching.
They are young.
They wear knickers and brown sweaters.
They look many-layered, lapped and overlapping.
I can tell they’ll become
dry brown fruit, that they’ll last.
—Kinereth Dushkin Gensler, Journey Fruit

Introduction

Long before Temima Gezari became a renowned Jewish arts educator she was Fannie (Fruma) Nimtzowitz, a Jewish education success story. Fannie arrived in the United States as an eight-month-old baby in 1906, and her family settled into a dilapidated room behind her father’s hardware store on Pitkin Avenue in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. In those days her family was so poor that she and her two older siblings slept on a bed made out of chairs. Yet Fannie’s home overflowed with the sounds and smells of Judaism.¹

Like many Jewish immigrant couples, Fannie’s parents were doing their best to negotiate an “intermarriage”; Fannie’s mother, Bella, was a pious woman while her father, Israel, was a dedicated socialist and atheist. On Thursday afternoons, however, it was Israel who religiously made the trip to a fish seller on nearby Belmont Avenue where he picked out live carp, whitefish, and pike for the Sabbath. The fish were placed overnight in the family washtub until Bella was ready to prepare the traditional Sabbath gefilte fish. On Saturday mornings, while Bella and her mother went to synagogue, Fannie and her father would attend to their own ritual: devouring a feast of jellied carp’s head.

When Fannie’s artistic abilities became apparent at age six, her father became her champion and even tried to enroll her in art classes at the Educational Alliance. (At that time she was still too young.) But he and Bella declined to send her to religious school. Few Jewish families looked on formal Jewish education for girls as necessary or even desirable. However, there was a small cadre of young men and women who were trying to change that perception and, more generally, to invigorate American Jewish education. They were attached to the New York Kehillah’s Bureau of Education, which was established in 1910 to modernize and standardize
Jewish education in the city with the largest Jewish community in the world. They were led by Samson Benderly, a visionary, strong-willed educator who grew up in Safed, Palestine, and abandoned a promising medical career in order to save Jewish souls and hasten an American Jewish renascence.

One of the Bureau's central projects in the 1910s was a string of Jewish girls’ schools, designed to begin narrowing the ratio of boys to girls in the system, while providing a laboratory for experimentation with new methods and teaching materials. In Brownsville, the local Bureau school branch met at the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah. Fannie passed the building frequently on her way to the library and hardly paid it any notice. One afternoon, however, she saw a new sign over the entryway advertising a Sunday morning picnic in Prospect Park for girls between the ages of seven and ten. Recreational activities like picnics, slide shows, and story hours were popular Bureau recruitment devices. In Fannie’s case the tactic worked exactly as envisioned. When she arrived home, she announced to her mother that she was going on a picnic. Her mother, apparently, did not know what a picnic was and reacted skeptically. But when Fannie explained that the event was being sponsored by the Talmud Torah, Bella readily consented.

The following Sunday Fannie arrived with a brown-bag lunch in her hand and a penny in her pocket. It turned out to be an unforgettable experience, “the greatest thing that ever happened in my life.” There was the enormous fun of playing games, and rolling in the grass—the sensation of grass under one’s bare feet was a rare treat for a city kid. The ice cream that the young Bureau staffers distributed for dessert was greeted with cheers. But the activity that made the deepest impression on Fannie was the performance of a play depicting the biblical story of Joseph. “My Bubbie used to tell me that story over and over again, I loved it!” she recalled. “This was the first live play I had ever seen with real make-up and ‘gorgeous’ costumes. . . . We were so absorbed with this colorful pageant. Tears rolled down our cheeks when Joseph was thrown into the pit and we cheered with delight when he revealed himself to his brothers. What a day it was! But that was not the end, by any means.”

Fannie and the other girls were invited back to the Stone Avenue building the following Sunday for Bible stories and a magic-lantern slide show. “Of course, I was there,” she recalled. And then came Benderly’s enrollment pitch: “Why shouldn’t the Jewish young women, who are going to be the mothers of Israel, know their history, know their Bible, be able to speak the [Hebrew] language? Why shouldn’t they have a Jewish education?” Fannie registered on the spot. When she returned home, her mother was delighted. Without Israel’s knowledge, Bella squirreled away a few pennies here and there over the next weeks and months to
cover the two-dollar-per-year tuition. Fannie eventually graduated from Girls Preparatory School No. 3 and continued her Jewish education at the Bureau's Marshaliah Hebrew High School and, later, at the Jewish Theological Seminary's Teachers Institute, where she came under the influence of another seminal figure in American Jewish education, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan.

Temima Gezari was one of hundreds of thousands of Jewish children and youths who were touched directly or indirectly by the Benderly revolution in American Jewish education. Between 1900 and 1960, the American Jewish educational landscape was virtually remade by Samson Benderly and his disciples. From the modernization of the Jewish supplementary school to the development of the first Jewish educational summer camps, and from the creation of the central educational agency system to the launching of the oldest continually published Jewish education journal, there were few great innovations and developments in the field of Jewish education during the first half of the twentieth century that did not emerge from or get shaped by the Benderly group.

This book tells the story of that transformation. I approach this topic mindful of the critique of an earlier generation of American Jewish educational history, which was long on detail about administrative and organizational reforms but shied away from the “careful examination of the peculiar tone and temper of Jewish schools in America,” and often declined to view the growth and development of American Jewish education “from the perspective of its interaction with particular currents in American intellectual and social history and their effect on the evolvement of the Jewish school.” As education historian Walter Ackerman emphasized, Benderly and his disciples “not only created an administrative and organizational foundation of Jewish education in this country, but also developed an intellectual and social ambience” that endured for much of the twentieth century.4

A second tendency in some of earlier literature, which this volume seeks to avoid, was a failure to adequately distinguish between the prescriptive and the descriptive. In connection to this flaw it is useful to observe that most Jewish educational history was written by practitioners, whose investment in the system and particular loyalties necessarily shaped their narratives. In this respect American Jewish educational historiography hardly differed from scholarship on the general field of American education. But, whereas, by the 1960s and 1970s, a generation of historians led by the venerable Bernard Bailyn successfully and thoroughly integrated the history of education into the study of American civilization more generally, American Jewish historians largely failed to follow suit. Even as the study of the public school system, higher education, and other subjects was
invigorated by analyses employing race, class, and gender, and informed by discourse on ethnicity, identity, and culture, American Jewish educational history remained rarefied and marginalized.\(^5\)

This state of affairs was as unfortunate as it was unjustified. As historian Jonathan Sarna pointed out, the school is one of the primary settings “where American Jews confront the most fundamental question of American Jewish life: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, part of the larger American society and apart from it.” The study of American Jewish education, then, offers an invaluable window through which to observe and evaluate how American Jews negotiated, synthesized, and performed their multiple identities over time.\(^6\)

The conundrum of how to live in two worlds, how to become an American Jew, was central to the educational project that animated Benderly and his disciples. They saw themselves in the vanguard of a holy mission to bring about a Jewish national and cultural renascence. Benderly himself, along with the clique that coalesced around the first Bureau of Jewish Education—Mordecai Kaplan, Judah Magnes, Israel Friedlaender, and Henrietta Szold—did much to reinforce this belief. One of Benderly’s chief disciples, Isaac Berkson, described him as “a product of the age-long Jewish urge to persistence, inter-playing with the modern aspiration for a revival of Jewish life which is inherent in the Hebraic and Zionist movements.” The cultural Zionist philosophy of Ahad Ha-am, with its vision of a spiritual center in Palestine nourishing Jewish communities the world over, energized this calling. Fundamentally, however, the focus was on ensuring Jewish survival and cultural effervescence in North America rather than the land of Israel. As such, the Benderly group was equally devoted to John Dewey’s expansive view of democracy as not only a political system but, more than that, a way of life.\(^7\)

Dewey wrote disparagingly of the melting pot model of assimilation. His appreciation for the enriching role of cultural diversity in American society and his recognition of the fluidity of American identity opened the door to theories of minority group adjustment that allowed for and even enshrined ethnic survival. Benderly disciple Leo Honor gave expression to this view in an address to a gathering of Philadelphia communal leaders: “I think we Jews are performing a useful service by maintaining our distinctive pattern. . . . When we emphasize that we regard ourselves, despite our differences, as a fully integrated part of the American community, we are concretizing the true meaning of Democracy, the deeper, profounder meaning of Democracy.”\(^8\)

Appropriately enough, Dewey expounded on his conception of unity in diversity in the pages of the \textit{Menorah Journal}, the bimonthly organ of the Jewish renascence devoted “to the study and advancement of Jewish culture and ideas.”
His avid readers within the Bureau of Jewish Education, led by Berkson, utilized it as the cornerstone for a theory of hyphenated identity that provided justification for their conception of the modern Jewish supplementary school. But it was equally powerful as a guiding principle for American Jewish communal life. New York Jewry’s experiment with a unified community organization in the 1910s failed in part because immigrant factionalism outweighed any sense of common purpose or shared values. Over the next few decades, the Benderly group worked assiduously to facilitate the distillation of a distinctly American Jewish pattern to replace the Judaism of the immigrant ghetto. They likewise became the arch-champions of *K’lal Yisrael*, Jewish unity based on a shared sense of ethnicity or peoplehood, a purposefully vague concept that gingerly sidestepped the thorny issue of dual national loyalties.

Although Benderly’s earliest disciples included women as well as men, he called them his “boys.” The larger team of workers at the Bureau in the 1910s, which at its height included close to one hundred full- and part-timers, referred to themselves by the more gender-neutral “Bureau bunch,” while the inner group adopted the name Chayil, an acronym for the Hebrew phrase “education is our national foundation,” and a word meaning valor or virtue. Over time, it was the “Benderly boys” appellation that stuck. His disciples in turn called him the “chief” or the “boss.” In later years, he liked to think of himself as “Abba,” or father, and he certainly cultivated a paternal relationship with many of them. But as with many relationships between parents and children, Benderly’s interactions with his boys were often marked by complexity. As one recalled:

> Time and again he was disappointed in the young hopefuls whom he found and groomed. In the early days when he was blamed for [the] occasional follies of some of his disciples he would reply in a paraphrase of Ezekiel: “The sons have eaten sour grapes and the teeth of the fathers are set on edge.” In later days he would often speak sadly of some of his ‘boys’ who had turned against him—“I have reared and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.”

Yet it was also true that “[n]o single man . . . has done as much as Samson Benderly did in attracting young men to careers in Jewish education.”

Through the bureaus and the Hebrew teachers colleges, the Benderly boys and their colleagues engineered a managerial revolution that touched everything from teacher certification and compensation to building construction and facilities maintenance, and from student recruitment and retention to school management
and finances. This managerial revolution, and the professionalization of the field, which is thoroughly explored in part 1 of this volume, were achievements in their own right. And historians who take note of the modest impact of progressivism on Jewish education often fail to recognize that the inspiration for these organizational reforms came from the so-called administrative progressives in the world of general education. In the final analysis, one can argue that the ideas of Frederick Taylor, Edward Thorndike, and Franklin Bobbitt had at least as much influence, if not more, on the direction of American Jewish education as those of the pedagogical progressives.

Yet the Benderly group’s ability to carry out sustained and enduring progressive reforms, particularly in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy, was limited. Arguably, the most enduring success was the experiment in Jewish culture camping, which was largely the brainchild of Albert Schoolman, for many years the director of Cejwin Camps and co-owner of Camp Modin. Less impressive were the attempts to import progressive pedagogies, such as Helen Parkhurst’s Dalton plan and William Heard Kilpatrick’s “project method,” into the supplementary school classroom. This mixed record is the subject of the part 2 of this book. Chronologically speaking, it covers roughly the same period as part 1.

What accounts for this gap between theory and practice? Walter Ackerman observed, “Like their counterparts in public education, Jewish educators spoke more progressively than they acted.” Another student of Dewey’s influence on Jewish education, Ronald Kronish, concluded that the Benderly boys found it extremely difficult to connect theory and practice. He added that “[e]ven though many Jewish educators paid lip service to Dewey and progressivism . . . in actuality Dewey was treated more as a symbol, a prestigious leg to stand on, a way of buying into American culture while still retaining one’s Jewish identity.”

I share these scholars’ assessment of the limited extent of pedagogical progressive Jewish educational reform. And I would hasten to add that the educators themselves recognized their failure. In the volatile and gloomy atmosphere of the Depression-era 1930s, a number of unsparingly critical assessments of the previous twenty years appeared in professional journals. But, in my view, Kronish’s characterization of progressive Jewish educators as superficial readers of Dewey is unduly harsh, particularly as it is applied to the Benderly boys. At least four members of this group, Alexander Dushkin, Isaac Berkson, Emanuel Gamoran, and Samuel Dinin, engaged seriously with the application of progressivism and elements of Dewey’s philosophy of education in particular to Jewish education in their doctoral dissertations; their grappling continued well into their professional careers. Dewey was not a mere “symbol,” nor was his invocation “a way of buying into
American culture.” Rather, Dewey’s philosophy provided justification for their integrationist-survivalist project.

More convincing, if not determinative, is the argument posed by Kronish and others that “the lack of practical influence of Dewey and progressive education on Jewish education” represented a failure of educational vision, “the failure to find an adequate synthesis to bridge the gap of different educational situations—the situation of the dominant American culture, and the situation of the Jewish community, a minority religio-ethnic sub-culture.” This problem was real, and it was acknowledged by the more thoughtful members of the Benderly group.

Other critics of Benderly and his disciples portray them as too much in the thrall of progressivism. Rather than taking their cues from an internally derived value system and a reservoir of Jewish approaches to education, they were over-eager to adjust Jewish education to American norms. As Walter Ackerman put it in his classic 1975 appraisal of the Benderly boys, they were too susceptible to “the passing fads and fancies of American life,” unmoored as they were from “a clearly accented standard rooted in Jewish culture and traditions.” This indictment is weakened by its static conception of Jewish culture. Indeed, increased scholarly attention to the extent to which cultural diffusion has been the norm in Jewish history, including in the area of educational pedagogy, renders the argument passé. Equally important, it downplays the extent to which Benderly and his coterie were guided and constrained by their overriding concern for Jewish continuity. Ackerman rightly questions the adequacy of an educational program dedicated to survivalism as an ultimate end, on the grounds that it is an instrumental rather than intrinsic value. But he does not emphasize the extent to which a survivalist ethos acts as a check on the wholesale adoption of a host culture’s methods, systems, and ideals.

Unity in diversity became the rationale for the system of Jewish central educational agencies that proliferated in the 1920s and after the Depression. At first, most bureaus devoted themselves primarily to operating communal school systems in working-class neighborhoods, catering primarily to the children of immigrants. In larger cities, they were also involved with teacher training, either creating or working in tandem with Hebrew teacher colleges. The bureaus’ adoption of a service agency model embracing the wide gamut of religious and ideological groups—from the Yiddish socialists to the religious Zionists, and from the Reform to the rigorously Orthodox—was gradual and not without controversy. Its most important champion was Alexander Dushkin, who first experimented with elements of the service agency approach in 1920s Chicago. In the 1940s, he presided

Introduction 7
over a more far-reaching and broadly inclusive bureau, the Jewish Education Committee of New York, which became the model for the central educational agency in the postwar period. The development of the Jewish Education Committee and its role in reinterpreting and reformulating the Benderly ethos in light of postwar conditions is the focus of part 3, the final section of this volume.

If the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel were powerful centripetal forces, there were equally potent centrifugal forces at work in postwar Jewish America. Indeed, at the same moment when K’lal Yiśra’el was promoted to a core Jewish value, social and demographic factors were trending away from ethnicity and toward denominationalism as the primary template for communal definition. Rapid Jewish acculturation into the middle class, suburbanization, and the culture of the Cold War each played their part in shaping the new dynamic.

Opponents of the service agency approach, including Berkson, recognized that the prerequisite of nonpartisanship would constrain bureaus from championing their own programs, which they viewed as essential to the facilitation of integration and Jewish survival. Rather than acting as a lever for change by developing educational models that were grounded in progressive methods and Mordecai Kaplan’s Reconstructionist approach to Judaism, the central agency would either perpetuate the status quo or buttress a change model that promoted partisanship and denominationalism.

Dushkin and his supporters, however, understood that unity in diversity was a key to winning broad-based communal support for Jewish education. Although his central educational service agency model could not entirely reconcile the competing postwar impulses of Jewish unity and religious denominationalism, Alexander Dushkin had the foresight or good luck to anticipate these trends. He also recognized that unity in diversity along religious lines, what sociologist Will Herberg called the “triple melting pot,” was becoming the accepted American ideal. Its application to the Jewish community was an inevitable manifestation of acculturation. Dushkin welcomed this trend, as it presaged the development of a truly American Judaism—a necessary prerequisite, in his opinion, to the fashioning of an enduring system of American Jewish education. Berkson and his supporters, in contrast, had a much more difficult time adjusting to the new reality. Berkson’s communal model of education, whatever its inherent merits, was decidedly out of touch with the zeitgeist.

My ability to tell this story has been significantly enhanced by the availability of a rich trove of archival sources, in both the United States and Jerusalem. Indeed, space limitations compelled me to make some difficult choices about what to
include and exclude. In the end, I settled on a narrative that focuses on the transition from communal Talmud Torahs to afternoon congregational schools and day schools, and on the professionalization of the field through the development of the central agency system. As a result, important topics such as teacher education and Reform Sunday schools receive only passing treatment.

There are a few important lacunae in the surviving documentary sources that affected my ability to tell a comprehensive story. Most important was the dearth of material on Benderly’s female disciples. A related problem was the paucity of records documenting what actually transpired in the classroom. I was able to compensate somewhat for this through the use of photographs, student interviews, and surviving lesson plans. Inevitably, however, my discussions of the schools focus primarily on the work and activities of lay and professional leaders. Other major gaps in the record were the consequence of fires at Camp Achvah and Cejwin Camps. The former was particularly devastating, in that it destroyed Benderly’s personal and work-related papers dating at least as far back as the 1910s. Most of the records that survive from the crucial first decade of the New York Bureau of Education were preserved by Rabbi Judah L. Magnes, leaving us, once again, with a top-down view. Despite these limitations, I have strived to provide a textured account.

To be sure, the Benderly boys (and girls) were not the only actors in the field, and their blend of integrationism, cultural Zionism, and educational progressivism did not appeal to all segments of the community. For example, the rise and fall of Yiddish education occurred parallel to and largely independent of that of the Talmud Torahs and was treated as a marginal phenomenon by Benderly’s coterie. The day school movement also emerged independently. Benderly himself was an unreformed opponent of day schools until his death in 1941. Other members of his circle came to recognize the value of day schools to train Jewish leadership and were intrigued by the modernized day school with its integrated Jewish and general studies curriculum. But they assumed that the Jewish community’s romance with the public schools would significantly limit the appeal of such day schools.

Benderly and his disciples attracted a diverse array of opponents. There were traditionalists who distrusted their modern methods and suspected their commitment to religious practice, and uncompromising Hebraists who rejected their accommodationist approach to American society and questioned their commitment to Hebrew language. There were skeptical central European Jews who believed that Jewish education was best left to the religious movements and ideological groups, and parents who were simply interested in preparing their sons for bar
mitzvah and mechanical prayer book reading in the synagogue. The educators’ successes were incremental, hard earned, and sometimes jeopardized by larger socioeconomic and cultural forces.

At the same time, Benderly and his protégés managed to extend their sphere of influence to groups that made strange bedfellows, including the Reform movement. Benderly and Kaplan did little to hide their contempt for the minimalist educational program that prevailed in most Reform congregations. Benderly derisively referred to Sunday schools as “Shandeh [disgrace] schools,” particularly when he was lecturing to rabbinical students at the liberal Jewish Institute of Religion, where he taught for many years. Yet, for thirty-five years, the Reform movement’s Commission on Jewish Education was directed by one of his protégés, Emanuel Gamoran. Despite their misgivings, Benderly and most of his group also made their peace with and helped to solidify the ascent of the congregational schools in the postwar era. This development required a compromise of core principles, however, which some found impossible to sanction, thereby precipitating a crisis and ultimately a break within the inner circle.

Ackerman observed that the “plans and programs” of the Benderly group “carry a distinctively American imprint,” and “their efforts reflect a conscious attempt to meld, if not to impose, certain aspects of American life and thought with the raw material of the Jewish tradition.” Their “amalgam of the Jewish and the American” was far more than an educational program. It was a paideia, an educational process designed to realize a conscious cultural ideal, or what Berkson called “a vision of the rebirth of Jewish life.” The Benderly boys embraced an evolutionary conception of Judaism. Their archetypal American Jew was a model of integration who lived affirmatively and fully in both the Jewish and American spheres and who embraced an expansive view of the points of intersection. While never denying the tension between integration and survival, they viewed it as essentially generative. Moreover they insisted that Jewish survival in America was facilitated by integration or, more accurately, that integration constituted the sole route toward an expression of Judaism sufficiently compelling to engender the will to survive. Today, in an era of postmodernism and separatist Orthodox resurgence, this cultural analysis might appear quaint. Yet, for those who cannot abide cultural annihilation yet equally recoil at the prospect of cultural segregation and societal balkanization, the Benderly boys’ paideia remains vital and compelling.14
PART I

Making Order out of Chaos, 1900–1939
On a sunny June afternoon in 1910, nineteen-year-old Israel Chipkin entered the familiar portals of the Educational Alliance building on New York’s Lower East Side, where he was scheduled to meet with Dr. Samson Benderly. For two years the building had served as the home of his beloved Dr. Herzl Zion Club, and his thoughts may have momentarily strayed to memories of the Hebrew-speaking society he had helped to found soon after Theodor Herzl’s death in August 1904. Two of his club mates, Samuel Abrams and Abba Hillel Silver, had recently enrolled at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the Reform movement’s rabbinical seminary. Chipkin, too, was giving serious consideration to a rabbinical career, although his more traditional bent propelled him to look to the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). He arranged a meeting with Professor Israel Friedlaender, a scholar of Bible at JTS, who had taken an interest in Jewish youth organizations. Chipkin became acquainted with Friedlaender through their mutual work in Young Judaea, an umbrella organization for the burgeoning Zionist youth groups that were forming throughout the Northeast and Midwest. Chipkin helped to organize its founding conference a year earlier, in 1909, where Friedlaender was elected president. Friedlaender was delighted to help Chipkin enroll in the Jewish Theological Seminary. But the professor had also recently become chairman of the newly created Bureau of Education, and he suspected that the young man’s talents as a youth leader and his devotion to Hebrew would make him an ideal Jewish educator. Before he made his decision about rabbinical school, Friedlaender advised, Chipkin should meet with Benderly. Chipkin agreed, and Friedlaender arranged the conference.¹

Just a few years earlier it would have been almost unimaginable to counsel a promising lad like Chipkin to take up Jewish education as a profession. The status of the average Hebrew teacher in New York was low and his lot deplorable. Even in the best schools, salaries ranged from $25 to $40 per month, for between twenty-two and twenty-five hours of teaching per week, hardly enough for a family to live on. There was no job security, and classrooms were typically overcrowded and in disrepair.² But with the opening of the Bureau of Education and the arrival of Benderly from Baltimore, a new optimism was in the air. With the financial backing of banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff, Benderly aimed to reform the existing system and professionalize Jewish education. He was looking to attract to
the Bureau a cadre of young college men and women whom he could train to be the next generation of Jewish educational leaders, and Israel Chipkin had just the credentials he was looking for.

Benderly was not charismatic in the conventional sense, but in those early years he could inspire communal leaders and college students alike by dint of his personal magnetism. “He could enter a room and begin to weave his spell on the crowd,” remembered one of his former associates. “He wasn’t an orator, but he could get into any small group of people and just bewitch [them]. There’s no question about it.” On that June 1910 day, Benderly could not have had a more receptive audience. As Benderly laid out for Chipkin his vision of a community-based Jewish educational system under the direction of professional pedagogues and administrators, Chipkin welled with excitement. Benderly’s exhortations about “the limitations and compensating opportunities of the creative pioneer” had a ring of familiarity to the young man, who in 1906 had acted in and helped to stage perhaps the first Hebrew play produced in America, Abraham Goldfaden’s David Ba-Milchomo; the difficulties of pioneering did not deter him in the least. Forty years later, Chipkin could still vividly recall the meeting. “I was enthralled by the challenge, the adventure and the dream. And who could dream with more enchanting fantasy or inspire with greater pioneering audacity than this great teacher and master. Like the dream for Zion which Theodor Herzl aroused in me when I was a pupil in an afternoon Yeshiva in New York City, so my interview with Dr. Benderly filled my soul with a new vision. I had a mission to perform as a Jew in and for America.”

Near the end of his pitch to a prospective recruit, Benderly’s voice would reach a crescendo as he posed four questions that were designed both to excite the listener and to help clarify whether he was a good fit for the Bureau:

1. Do you believe in the future of American Judaism?
2. Do you recognize that Judaism is not carried in the blood stream, and that it is, therefore, not transmitted automatically from generation to generation, but only through the instrumentality of education?
3. Do you agree that what is being done today in our Jewish schools is not of a quality calculated to inspire our youth to devote themselves to their people and its ideals, and therefore lacks the power to insure the glorious future for American Jewry for which we have the potentiality?
4. If you believe in the need for a revolutionary reorganization of program and methods, do you have sufficient faith in yourself and your abilities to feel confident that through your coming work and making Jewish
education your vocation, you will be able to bring this needed revolution into being—and if so, are you ready to devote yourself?\textsuperscript{4}

The questions are revealing in that they underscore Benderly’s faith in the future of American Judaism and his desire to build an American system of Jewish education on the scaffolding of progressivist school reforms. Over the next decade Benderly demonstrated flexibility in his tactics even as his fealty to these goals remained undiminished. His priorities ultimately placed him in conflict with various interest groups, which succeeded in part in dampening his success. Chief among these were the European-trained maskilic Hebrew teachers and old-guard Orthodox rabbis.

Significantly, the revival of Hebrew and the upbuilding of the Yishuv in Palestine figured nowhere in these questions, underscoring an ongoing tension between the Zionist loyalties of Benderly and his followers and their commitment to an American Jewish renascence. This conflict was mitigated to a large extent by their conviction that Zionist cultural proliferation was instrumental to the development of a vibrant American Jewish ethnic culture, that in form and substance American Jewish culture would derive inspiration and meaning from the Hebrew revival. But the tension was never entirely resolved and remained a source of internal debate as well as external friction both with hard-core American Hebraists and with the Bureau’s non-Zionist German Jewish patrons. Benderly was also politically savvy enough to realize that his ambition to create a truly community-based educational system would founder if he was perceived as intent on pushing a partisan agenda, although his critics remained convinced—justifiably so, to some extent—that this was mere obfuscation.

A number of contributing factors blunted the Bureau’s effectiveness. Its greatest initial asset, the support of Kehillah chairman Judah L. Magnes, became a profound liability. Its fortunes rose and fell with that of the larger Kehillah enterprise. The Bureau never succeeded in achieving a secure financial footing, a problem that was exacerbated by Benderly’s inability to live within his budget. Benderly was more of a visionary thinker than a manager, and more authoritarian in style than a team player. Ultimately, however, the Bureau failed because Benderly and his associates were unsuccessful in mobilizing the masses of Jewish parents to their cause. In the 1910s, large numbers remained unconvinced of the need to Americanize the Jewish educational system, or they did not deem it a sufficient priority to lend it substantive material and political support. For many, subsistence and cultural integration remained paramount concerns. Moreover, with the outbreak of the First World War, attention turned to events overseas. While connections to
Jewish institutions and folkways remained central to the lives of many immigrants, their appeal derived from an ability to evoke the old country, to act as sources of stability and reassurance rather than mechanisms for acculturation. To be sure, American consumer culture had a profound effect on immigrant Judaism. But these changes occurred organically. Intentional adaptations, while winning the support of more acculturated elements concerned about keeping their children within the fold, continued to provoke much resistance.
chapter 1

The Making of the Master

Benderly in Baltimore

When Samson Benderly arrived in Baltimore on September 23, 1898, he was just another impoverished and exhausted immigrant pursuing a promise of opportunity. In Benderly’s case the dream involved a medical career. In his hands, he held the office address of Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, a professor of ophthalmology at Baltimore’s College of Physicians and Surgeons. Three months earlier Benderly had met with Friedenwald when the doctor was passing through Beirut on his way home from a trip to Palestine. Friedenwald encouraged the young medical student to finish his studies in Baltimore, and since that fateful meeting, Benderly could think of little else but America.¹

Benderly’s overseas voyage commenced a few weeks later in Beirut, where he boarded a steamship bound for Montreal. From there he traveled by rail to Baltimore, arriving on a Friday afternoon just hours before the Sabbath. As he reflected on his trip, he could not help but marvel at the distance he had traveled, both physically and emotionally. His spiritual journey had begun years earlier.
when he was a youth in Safed. Insatiable curiosity about the larger world around him had set him on a path of rebellion against the seemingly narrow world of his Hasidic family. Rampant poverty and political uncertainty were facts of life in late-nineteenth-century Safed. But so, too, were the warmth and security generated by a close-knit community steeped in mysticism and Kabbalistic lore. Benderly’s family was prominent and relatively well off. When young Samson was growing up, his merchant father was a communal leader and intercessor with the local Turkish government. Hershel Benderly was descended from pietists who immigrated to Palestine from the Bessarabian village of Benderly, probably in the late eighteenth century. The family of Samson’s mother, Leah Ashkenazi, also likely arrived during that period. Ashkenazi boasted a distinguished lineage, including two eminent decisors and anti-Sabbateans, the former chief rabbi of Amsterdam Hakham Zvi Hirsch ben Jacob Ashkenazi (often referred to as the “Hakham Zvi”) and his son, the renowned German Talmudist Rabbi Jacob Emden.2

Samson Benderly was born on March 31, 1876. The third of five children, he received a traditional education at the Bet Hamidrash of Safed. Benderly’s parents expected him to go into the family business or become a rabbi. But by the time he reached adolescence, his dreams lay elsewhere. His fascination with the cosmopolitan medieval physician, philosopher, and scholar Maimonides probably led Benderly to seek out worldly, scholarly, and therefore unconventional role models within his own surroundings. Built on a mountaintop overlooking the Sea of Galilee, late-nineteenth-century Safed was still a fairly remote town. The best medical care was provided by Christian missionaries affiliated with the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Among the Jews, whom Jewish community leaders regarded warily despite their inability to attract more than a handful of Jewish proselytes. In a celebrated case in 1850, a Jewish mob descended on and severely beat a would-be Jewish convert and his missionary companion, requiring the intervention of the Turkish authorities and, ultimately, the British consul, James Finn, in Jerusalem. The rabble-rousers were arrested and remained in jail until Consul Finn extracted a written guarantee from Safed’s rabbinical leaders that the Jews would no longer molest any Christian missionaries or their Jewish proselytes. Missionary activity waned in the 1860s and 1870s but began again in earnest in the early 1880s, when Benderly was a boy. Although there is no evidence that Benderly contemplated conversion as a youth, he found the missionaries intriguing and was willing to break his community’s social taboos to befriend them. He recognized that they possessed knowledge and experience that he was incapable of finding within his own community.3

One of Benderly’s earliest acts of defiance was to seek out an English missionary physician surnamed Henderson who operated a free health clinic across the street
from his house. Dr. Henderson agreed to tutor the lad in English if Benderly would reciprocate by teaching him some Hebrew. The doctor cultivated Benderly’s interest in medicine and probably encouraged him to pursue his studies at the Syrian Protestant College, known since 1920 as the American University in Beirut. At the same time, two American missionary teachers who assisted Dr. Henderson at the clinic, the sisters Ford, befriended young Benderly and filled his head with stories about the United States and the wider world. His horizons were similarly expanded by a priest named Ben-Zion Friedman, a learned Jewish apostate who lived adjacent to the mission hospital. Friedman lent Benderly books on secular subjects and engaged him in discussions. Friedman exerted considerable influence on Benderly and likely helped Dr. Henderson persuade him to pursue his studies outside Safed.4

When fifteen-year-old Samson announced to his shocked parents his intention to enroll at the Syrian Protestant College, his father tried desperately to obstruct the plan. When Benderly defied his father’s wishes and departed for Beirut, Hershel Benderly even officially disowned his son, although the act may have been a nod to community expectations as much as an expression of anger or sorrow. While in Beirut, Benderly stayed with a sympathetic uncle and supported himself by giving Hebrew lessons and performing chores at the college. When the elder Benderly was later stricken with phlebitis, Samson returned home to care for him. Hershel “retained a very deep love and devotion” to his son, according to Benderly’s cousin Menahem Barshad. Years later, when Benderly was already in the United States and Hershel was on his deathbed, “he called his family together . . . and after giving specific instructions regarding his will and burial, he insisted that he be propped up on his pillows and given a pen and paper to write a last message to his son Shimshon across the seas.”5

Although Syrian Protestant College was founded by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, it was independently administered and funded. Its first president, Daniel Bliss, himself a former evangelist, opened its doors to people of all faiths. Indeed, the college prided itself as being nonsectarian even as it unapologetically promoted Presbyterian values and attitudes in its curricular and extracurricular activities. Benderly retained a strong fondness and admiration for Bliss, who played an important role in shaping his intellectual and moral development. In 1896 Benderly received his bachelor’s degree from the college and enrolled in its medical school. He was in his second year of the program when he called on Aaron Friedenwald. Thus, despite his peyot (sidelocks) and the pointy Assyrian beard he still sported, Samson Benderly was no stranger to Protestant American mores and attitudes when he arrived in Baltimore in 1898.6

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4. Benderly in Baltimore

5. Benderly in Baltimore

6. Benderly in Baltimore
Benderly quickly made his way from the train station to Aaron Friedenwald’s office, where he was warmly greeted and invited to the doctor’s home for the Sabbath. That evening at the Sabbath table, Benderly could hardly contain himself and regaled the diners with tales of his journey and his plans to study in the United States. He quickly endeared himself to the family, and Aaron Friedenwald arranged for Benderly to enroll at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Baltimore where he specialized in ophthalmology. Despite the Friedenwalds’ largesse, Benderly realized that he would need to find a means of supporting himself. As in Beirut, he turned to Hebrew teaching. However, in Baltimore his first students were Aaron Friedenwald’s thirty-four-year-old son Harry and three daughters of Dr. Benjamin and Sophia Szold, including thirty-seven-year-old Henrietta. Both Harry and Henrietta participated in the general Jewish cultural revival of the late nineteenth century and became leaders of the American Zionist movement. Both developed enduring friendships with Benderly and played important roles in his eventual selection as director of the Bureau of Education in New York.

Apparently, Benderly needed to augment his tutoring income and soon became involved in Jewish supplementary education. Not long after his arrival in Baltimore he may have begun teaching in Congregation Chizuk Amuno’s Sabbath school. By autumn 1899 Benderly was employed by the Society for Educating Poor and Orphan Hebrew Children. Founded in 1852, the Society attracted the interest of some of the leading members of Baltimore’s Jewish establishment, and was ably managed and amply funded. With the influx of large numbers of eastern European immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s, the Society’s work was ramped up. A headquarters was established on East Baltimore Street in the vicinity of the growing immigrant ghetto. By 1895 it was running two Sabbath schools and subsidizing two afternoon Hebrew schools. Benderly began as a teacher at the Hebrew Free School for Poor and Orphaned Children, one of the Society’s afternoon schools, which met alternately in the vestry rooms of synagogues on Lloyd and Eden streets. He was elevated to principal in 1900. In his charge were two hundred students and five teachers. Benderly set the school’s tuition at three dollars a month. That same year, the name of the Society was changed to the Hebrew Education Society (hes), perhaps to minimize its stigma as a charity institution in the eyes of parents of prospective students. Patrons may also have wished to emphasize that it was under Jewish auspices so as to distinguish it from the mission schools that operated in the area.

Benderly made a jarring first impression on benefactors and students alike.
According to one student, “Benderly was a sight to behold. He was short and thin and looked like a scare-crow. His hair was pitch black, and contrary to anything we had ever seen, was parted straight down the middle. He wore ear locks (peyot concealed under his black hat) and a short pointed beard; and his glasses were thick and always slid down his nose. His coat which was much too big for him came down to his boot tops, and he kept his hands in his sleeves to keep them warm.” Still, this does not seem to have blunted his effectiveness in the classroom. According to a June 12, 1900, letter to the editor written by Mrs. Caroline Kaiser in the local Anglo-Jewish newspaper, Benderly enjoyed some early success teaching his students Hebrew and history. Mrs. Kaiser’s glowing account of a school examination may be somewhat exaggerated; her husband, Cantor Alois Kaiser of Congregation Oheb Shalom, was a staunch supporter of the Society. Nonetheless, the letter is interesting because it provides early evidence for Benderly’s experimentation with various pedagogical methods that would later become hallmarks of his approach, including the utilization of maps and other visual aids in the study of history and the use of singing and recitations in the teaching of Hebrew. While it appears that Benderly had not yet introduced the study of Modern Hebrew using the natural method he would later popularize, he was clearly teaching Hebrew comprehension as opposed to mechanical Hebrew reading. Mrs. Kaiser lauded the school for its “modern methods,” adding that “the teachers know what they are about, especially the Principal, Dr. Samson Benderly, who possesses remarkable skills in imparting as well [as] examining. The monotony generally connected with examinations was averted by recitations and songs in Hebrew and English executed by the children.”

At this point, Benderly’s ostensible primary concern was still his medical studies. As he graduated his first class of students from the Hebrew Free School, Benderly himself received his medical degree and soon thereafter began a residency at the Hebrew Hospital and Asylum Association of Baltimore, where Aaron Friedenwald held a post on the Honorary Staff of Physicians. Believing that Benderly had the makings of a gifted physician, Friedenwald remained his strongest benefactor and cheerleader. He engaged the young doctor in continual discussions and became convinced that Benderly’s temperament was well suited to medicine. “Though he was stubborn and persevering and possessed an iron will, he was tender and very sympathetic. People’s suffering affected him deeply, and his eyes would fill with tears when he saw people in pain.” Evidently, however, Benderly’s deepest interests lay elsewhere. Even while doing rounds at the hospital Benderly’s mind was engaged with the problems of Jewish education. Indeed, Benderly’s conflicting loyalties created friction at the hospital. When its board of
officers learned that Benderly was using his examination room at the hospital to tutor some of his Hebrew students, he was summarily chided and the practice was prohibited.\textsuperscript{12}

At some point during the late summer or early fall of 1900 Benderly realized that Jewish education was becoming for him more a preoccupation than a diversion. His school schedule conflicted with his hospital shifts, and it was expected that he would give the school up. Instead, he continued to disappear from the hospital. Years later, Benderly liked to tell the story about how he broke the news to Dr. Friedenwald that he was leaving medicine to devote himself completely to the h\textit{es} and his school. Friedenwald apparently responded by checking Benderly’s pulse to determine whether he was ill. He and his associates considered Benderly’s career decision to be “suicidal” and attempted to dissuade him. “You know, Dr. Friedenwald,” Benderly is said to have retorted, “healers of the body there are many, but there are very few healers of the soul, and I want to try my hand at that.”\textsuperscript{13}

The anecdote makes for a compelling origins story because it seems to reveal so much about Benderly’s character. Its truth, however, is impossible to verify, and it obscures the reality that Benderly’s actual decision to leave medicine was forced. According to the hospital’s records, a complaint was lodged with the medical committee that doctors were frequently absenting themselves from the hospital “to the detriment of our hospital work.” An ensuing investigation exposed Assistant Resident Physician Benderly as the cardinal offender. The committee chairman confronted Benderly, who refused to give up his school. At that point, the matter was brought before the hospital’s board of officers, which told Benderly he would need to choose between the Hebrew Education Society and the Hebrew Hospital. Benderly reacted by tendering his resignation from the hospital.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Defining an Educational Vision}

With his medical career over, Benderly was free to devote himself entirely to the h\textit{es}. Over the next few years he transformed it into one of the most cutting-edge Jewish educational institutions in the country. Early on, he dedicated much attention to the questions of educational philosophy and curriculum. His most important influences in the area of philosophy and pedagogy were Johann Pestalozzi, an advocate of education through active engagement and direct concrete observation, and Herbert Spencer, who believed that instruction should be made pleasurable and encouraged inquiry-based learning and a pragmatic curriculum designed to advance successful living and human progress. Indeed, one can detect the influence of both men’s writings in many of Benderly’s most celebrated innovations. A
third seminal influence on Benderly’s outlook and approach was the cultural
Zionist theorist and polemist Asher Ginsberg, who wrote under the pen name
Ahad Ha-Am.\textsuperscript{15}

Benderly wrote that “the two basic problems of a Hebrew School curriculum
were the acquisition of the Hebrew language, without which there would be no
system of Jewish education, and the adaptation of many studies which are beyond
the intelligence of children.”\textsuperscript{16} As early as 1902 Benderly was experimenting with a
Hebrew curriculum patterned on the natural method, a foreign-language teaching
technique designed to imitate primary-language acquisition. The natural method
relies on immersion: lessons are conducted entirely in the foreign tongue, as
opposed to being translated into the learner’s primary language. Vocabulary is
taught through pictures, objects, and the natural surroundings, while grammar, at
first, is taught inductively. Early emphasis is placed on oral skills, with reading and
writing introduced later.

Benderly was by no means the first to apply the natural method to the teaching
of Modern Hebrew. Perhaps the earliest experimentation with Hashitah Hativit
(the natural method) or Ivrit b’Ivrit (literally, Hebrew in Hebrew), as it was popu-
larly dubbed, took place under the direction of Nissim Behar, the principal of the
Alliance Israelite Universelle School in Constantinople between 1873 and 1882.
Behar, a French teacher, was trained in the natural method and the pedagogies of
Pestalozzi and his student, Friedrich Froebel, a similarly staunch advocate of self-
directed, activity-based education for young children, who pioneered the mod-
ern kindergarten. Behar was dismayed with the ineffectiveness of the translation
method employed by Reb Hayim Babani, a colleague who taught Hebrew. Behar
shared with Babani the works of Pestalozzi and Froebel and helped him to apply
the natural method to the teaching of Hebrew. When Behar became the principal
of the Hatorah V’hamelakha school in Jerusalem in 1883, he appointed Hebrew
revivalist Eliezer ben Yehuda (né Perlman) to teach Hebrew and apprised him of
the experiments with the natural method in Constantinople. Recognizing the
instrumentality of Ivrit b’Ivrit for nationalistic education, Ben Yehuda adopted the
method with great enthusiasm and eagerly undertook to perfect it.\textsuperscript{17}

During his childhood in Safed, Benderly came into contact with another of Ivrit
b’Ivrit’s earliest advocates, Izhak Epstein, who experimented with the natural
method in the late 1880s while teaching Hebrew at a girls’ school in Safed. In later
years Benderly credited Epstein with introducing him to Ivrit b’Ivrit. Benderly also
had some knowledge of Ben Yehuda’s activities. It is likely that he read articles in
Ben Yehuda’s newspaper, Ha-Tzevi, advocating the use of Hebrew as the language
of instruction in Palestine’s Jewish schools. As a Hebrew teacher in Beirut, Benderly
may have been familiar with pamphlets and articles publicizing the natural method
such as Yehuda Grazovsky’s 1893 *Hashita Hativit Belimmud Sefat Ever* (The Natural Method in the Teaching of Hebrew). But his first in-depth exposure to the natural method may not have come until after his arrival in Baltimore, through an exhaustive rationale for the adoption of *Ivrit b’Ivrit* by Izhak Epstein that appeared in 1899 in *Hashiloah*. He considered Epstein a gifted pedagogue and encouraged his disciples to study with Epstein during their Palestine sojourns in the 1920s.18

By the time Benderly arrived in the United States, the natural method was the subject of much debate among educators and linguists. The controversy played out in academic conferences and journals as well as within local districts and individual schools. Much of the allure of the natural method was its recourse to developmental psychology and physiology. Supporters approvingly quoted French educational philosopher Joseph Jocotot’s dictum: “Become a child if you wish to make progress in studying a language, it is the quickest and surest road to success.”19 The natural method held out the promise of teaching students to think in the target language. In the words of one of its champions:

Its great merit, in my opinion, consists in the fact that it leads the learner to associate the new vocabulary directly with objects and actions instead of their English names. The natural tendency of the learner is to translate the foreign phrases he hears and sees, but by this method he is soon convinced that he is wasting his time and only practicing English by doing so because he can raise his hand and say “I raise my hand” in any language without the necessity of first thinking it in English. The student moreover on seeing before his eyes objects and actions and hearing them described, must receive more vivid impressions and is therefore more likely to remember than where words only are associated together as in translation.20

Language teachers were also attracted to the natural method because of its inductive approach to grammar acquisition. “Nothing can solace [the teacher] for the ennui which grammars cause him: this is a suffering which kills, or at least shortens life, and takes from the mind all freshness and vigor,” a proponent of the method wrote.21

The best-known champion of the natural method in the late-nineteenth-century United States was Gottlieb Hennes, a German immigrant who had trained in the principles of Pestalozzi at the Lehrer Seminar and operated a number of New England private schools. Hennes gained fame in the late 1860s when he succeeded in teaching a class of twelve preadolescent boys (all children of Yale faculty members) to speak German fluently in a single school year. Given Benderly’s voracious appetite for treatises on educational theory and practice, and his
particular interest in the natural method, he was likely familiar with Hennes's work, as well as earlier Pestalozzian experiments in Germany.  

Benderly also may have been aware that, even under the guidance of experienced foreign-language teachers, attempts to introduce the natural method into New England public schools had proved disappointing. Many of the arguments employed by the technique's opponents foreshadowed those that parents and community leaders would use to resist Benderly and his allies. In order to be taught well, the natural method required not only seasoned teachers but also small class sizes and numerous contact hours. Hennes, for example, met with his "twelve most intelligent and promising boys" for forty weeks, five days a week, four hours per day. The average public school language teacher could only dream of such conditions. Another complaint was that the content of the language classes, especially in the first year, concerned mostly trivial subjects, that it was virtually impossible to explore abstract concepts without recourse to translation. A variation on this argument was the contention that while the natural method might have prepared students for superficial or a fairly concrete level of conversation, it did not adequately train them to read "for the sake of content," to tackle great works of literature. The exponents of this line of argumentation often questioned whether oral competency constituted the primary motivation for foreign-language instruction. The continued prevalence of classical-language study in the finest public and private schools reinforced this view. Still other critics stressed that it was a mistake to pattern foreign-language teaching after primary-language acquisition because, developmentally, the latter process could not be separated from the child's dawning awareness of the surrounding world and his or her development of life skills. Unless the learner was an immigrant or expatriate, second-language acquisition was not typically motivated by such concerns. Critics asserted that primary-language acquisition was a long but necessary process precisely because cognition and language were growing together. Applied to learning a second language, the natural method seemed laborious and artificial.

In 1899, a year after Benderly's arrival, the Modern Language Association of America issued a report counseling teachers to avoid dogmatism in foreign-language instruction and to utilize a variety of approaches in their classrooms. Certainly, the natural method continued to attract champions and remained popular, particularly in European boarding schools and American private academies, into the 1920s and 1930s. However, many practitioners appeared to be groping for a middle course between immersion and translation in foreign-language teaching, while Benderly's fervor for the natural method was only building steam.  

Benderly located himself firmly within the progressivist educational camp. His convictions were no doubt reinforced by his ideological commitment to a Jewish
cultural resurgence along the lines envisioned by Ahad Ha-Am. In his 1893 essay “Imitation and Assimilation,” Ahad Ha-Am advocated for the revival of Hebrew in the Jewish Diaspora—and not only in Palestine—as a bulwark against assimilation. While Ahad Ha-am viewed Hebrew as essential for unlocking Judaism’s literary treasures, including spiritual and religious texts, his conception of cultural revival was far broader and more secular. He conceived of Hebrew as a modern spoken language—a medium for everyday discourse and creative expression. In Benderly’s view, the natural method essentially asked teachers to create in microcosm the environment envisioned by Ahad Ha-Am. This conviction was shared by early teacher practitioners of Ivrit b’Ivrit such as Ben Yehuda and Epstein.27

A turning point came for Benderly in 1900 when one of Ben Yehuda’s early followers, David Yellin, published an Ivrit b’Ivrit primer and teacher’s manual, Lefi Hataf. In that textbook Yellin made extensive recourse to the insights and methodologies of Pestalozzi and Froebel, particularly in his utilization of child play, music, and especially sensory learning through object lessons. Yellin followed earlier proponents of the natural method in his emphasis on teaching conversational skills prior to reading and writing. Yellin, like others, believed that building up a child’s initial vocabulary would make the eventual introduction of reading infinitely easier because reading with comprehension was more likely to retain a student’s interest. Yellin patterned Lefi Hataf on the lessons he taught in his own classroom using his students as guinea pigs to perfect experimental versions of the textbook. The textbook was published in Russia and gained popularity with leaders of the fledgling Modern Hebrew–speaking khayder movement (the heder metuqan movement) in eastern Europe. Buoyed by Yellin’s Pestalozzian-inspired experimentation with Hebrew teaching in Palestine, Benderly made it a springboard for his own practitioner research and considered his approach an adaptation of Yellin’s method.28

In turn-of-the-century Palestine, Hebrew was also being taught to most children as their second language; it received minimal environmental reinforcement save for its intentional use in a handful of Zionist settlements and urban homes. Of course, Yellin and his associates eventually succeeded in their hard-fought efforts to make Hebrew the primary language of instruction in the Zionist schools, while Benderly reconciled himself early on to working within the limitations of a supplementary school framework. Benderly’s students arrived at the hēs after a full day of study in the public schools, where the language of instruction was English and the educational mission was often consciously assimilationist. He was battling not only student fatigue but also the societal devaluation of his work. Ambivalence and deprecation came from parents, reflecting an immigrant subculture that belittled traditional Hebrew teachers and saw little practical value in Jewish education.
beyond synagogue skills training and bar mitzvah preparation. Moreover, the Talmud Torah, or communal Hebrew school, labored against its reputation as a charity institution. In eastern Europe the Talmud Torah was reserved for children from impoverished families, while the more well-to-do sent their sons to privately run elementary schools, or khayders.

Benderly’s adoption of a dual school system scheme must be understood in the context of Jewish immigrants’ allegiance to the public schools. Any Jewish education plan designed to attract the children of the Jewish masses could not ignore this fact. “What must be borne in mind,” Benderly told a group of Zionist leaders, “is that the new system of Jewish education must be built on principles underlying the life of all American Jews.” Even the acculturated leadership of the late-nineteenth-century Jewish revival, including members of Benderly’s social circle in Baltimore, never gave serious consideration to Jewish private schools. In the mid-nineteenth century, a number of all-day Jewish schools had operated in cities with large Jewish populations. But they virtually disappeared as public schools spread in the aftermath of the Civil War. To be sure, Benderly’s fealty to the public schools was fairly rigid and reflected his own romance with America, his conviction that public schools were agents of democratization as well as Americanization. “Our country is by far the most favorable to the proper development of the broad-minded Jew, whose broadness does not depend on the thinness of his Judaism,” he declared. In the late 1910s Benderly even advised one of his disciples, Alexander Dushkin, to omit from his dissertation a brief yet mildly positive assessment of the role of all-day Jewish schools in training American Jewry’s future religious functionaries and leaders.29

But Benderly arrived at his position only after carefully considering the Catholic parochial school model. He recognized the potential advantages of dual curriculum all-day schools. “In such schools the Jewish spirit predominate[s],” he explained. “The purely Jewish studies would find their proper place in the curriculum and our children’s health would not be endangered” from the stresses of an extended school day. But he concluded that such a plan, “even if it was practical otherwise, should be banished from our minds.” He acknowledged that historically in Europe the adoption of an isolationist stance vis-à-vis the Christian host culture had ensured Jewish survival, but he cautioned that Jews “paid dearly for this isolation.” Expressing the predominant attitude, Benderly asserted: “What we want in this country, is not Jews who can successfully keep up their Jewishness in a few large ghettos, but men and women who have grown up in freedom and can assert themselves wherever they are. A parochial system of education among the Jews would be fatal to such hopes.”30

At the same time, however, Benderly acknowledged the limitations of the
Sabbath and Sunday schools. With all his faith in American exceptionalism, he recognized that the country was essentially Christian. For that reason alone, the Protestant Sunday school model was unequal to the Jewish need. “We cannot teach in a few hours a week everything pertaining to Judaism as the Christians do in the Sunday schools with regard to Christianity. Theoretically, this is not a Christian country, but in practice it is. The environment is Christian: and for Christian children a few hours of instruction a week in a Sunday school is sufficient. We, however, have a much more laborious task; and then so much of our energy goes merely for defense.” The minimalist Sunday school program did not physically tax students, and the classroom setting was often, but not always, cleaner, brighter, and less shabby than the average inner-city Talmud Torah. But the number of teaching hours was entirely insufficient, the curriculum consequentially meager, and the mostly voluntary teaching staff were often functional Jewish illiterates, unqualified even for entry-level spots in a Hebrew teacher training program. Even those students who remained in such schools through confirmation “know next to nothing about Judaism, and yet they must be confirmed.” Benderly viewed the relative ignorance of Judaism he witnessed among the American Jewish elite as the ultimate indictment of the Sunday school system. “Have you ever met with intelligent Jews, very often university graduates, who know nothing of Judaism, although they were confirmed in a Sunday school?” he asked rhetorically. “If the Sunday school system has anything in its favor, it has had ample time to prove it.”

Given Benderly’s ambitious plans for a language-centered curriculum utilizing the natural method, his rejection of the Protestant Sunday school model was hardly surprising. But his disavowal of the Catholic parochial school model, if equally predictable, underscored the tensions that existed between his ideological and pedagogical commitments. Benderly acknowledged that the dual school system was not without its own shortcomings. Trained as a doctor, he was particularly attuned to the strain that long school hours and a lack of physical activity placed on the young body: “It is too hard for our children to attend two schools on the same day. Anyone who has taught children in a daily Hebrew school knows of the weariness of these little ones.” But he reluctantly concluded that “this phase of the problem cannot be completely solved.” The dual school system was a desideratum, although Benderly tried to do all that he could to mitigate its deleterious effects on his students.

Building a Modern Jewish School

In 1903 the Hes purchased and renovated a building at the corner of Aisquith and Jackson streets. When it was completed, the school included ten classrooms,
bathroom facilities, a library, a school office, a janitor’s room, and covered playgrounds. Benderly insisted that the classrooms be bright, well ventilated, and adequately heated in the winter months. The entire facility was fitted with electrical fixtures. Each room had two large windows to allow in plenty of light and air. Walls were adorned with maps and pictures. His model was the public school. Benderly was fanatical about the cleanliness of the building as well as the students. He reportedly had twenty faucets installed in the school’s washroom and insisted that each child wash his or her hands upon entering the building. “The first task on the part of the teacher was to examine the pupils’ hands and to say ‘Yadayim.’ If they were unwashed, it only happened once,” recalled a former student. Benderly preached that cleanliness “kept away sore throats, promoted regular attendance, and preserved the text books, such as they were.”

Concern for the children’s health also compelled Benderly to reduce the number of teaching hours per week in the Jewish school. “The studies of the Hebrew school should be simplified and co-ordinated with the public school curriculum so that the child should spend in the Hebrew school as little time as is actually needed for our purpose,” he urged. Benderly’s elementary school met in two shifts for two hours per day on weekday afternoons and Sunday mornings. Boys and girls learned separately and the latter attended school only four days a week. Children’s services were held on Saturday mornings, and since traditional Jewish law forbade teachers and students from writing or using electricity on the Sabbath, Saturday afternoons were reserved for reading activities. He also held morning sessions combining schoolwork and playtime during the summer months, when the public schools were on vacation. For those children who did not flee the city, attending his school was “preferable to any other way in which they can spend the hot summer days.”

By 1908 Benderly was advocating a maximum of eight hours a week of formal class time, supplemented by structured playtime, singing, and extracurricular club work. When the Aisquith Street facility was built, Benderly insisted that each of its three floors include a covered playground, allowing students to alternate between study and play. According to a 1910 annual report, “The class work was so arranged that half the classes were out using the playgrounds while the other half was being instructed. Each pupil had two and a half hours of play at organized games during each afternoon of attendance. . . . [Benderly] was convinced that so far from injuring their health the attendance at our school is an advantage because of the time spent on our playgrounds while others are kept in hot, ill-ventilated rooms or dirty streets.” Benderly likely conducted the first Jewish school in Baltimore with playground facilities, and as late as 1914 the Hes was still the only institution with recreational facilities large enough to accommodate all of its students.
If Benderly were simply interested in ensuring that his students received proper exercise and exposure to fresh air, he could have outsourced their structured recreation time to the public schools or the local Young Men’s Hebrew Association (ymha). In fact, his interest in physical education and playtime stemmed in part from an educational motive. Pestalozzi taught that the “art of education” involves putting together “in narrower bounds what Nature puts before us scattered over a wide area.” By this he meant that the best educators create opportunities for learning that simulate the natural learning process. Competency in a discipline implies mastery in a system of knowledge, a way of knowing one’s world, through one’s primary faculties and senses. Language acquisition comes through exposure to sense impressions that the learner is taught to name, describe, and categorize. By insisting that the sole language of the playground be Hebrew, Benderly maximized playtime’s myriad teachable moments. One student remembered that “[e]verything was taught in Hebrew. . . . Baseball games were played in Hebrew. A strike was called a Hako-oh, and if you used an English word, you were out even if you had only one strike against you. There were many words missing, but we made them up as we played along.”

The centrality of Hebrew to both the formal and the informal school curricula was a source of great pride to benefactors such as Harry Friedenwald. At the Aisquith Street building dedication in December 1903, Friedenwald gushed:

In our schools, Hebrew, which some called a dead language comes to life under the magic of speech, for all instruction excepting History, is in Hebrew. The exercises in physical culture and the games and songs are conducted in Hebrew only. This method has the advantage of making a profound and indelible impression. It is of intense interest to the pupils, who take evident pleasure in the progress they make, and being so different from the mode of instruction in the Public Schools, it does not fatigue them, but, on the contrary, being a change of work, in a measure, brings them rest. . . . We are convinced . . . that we acted wisely in adopting the modern and natural method of teaching the Hebrew language.

Friedenwald’s enthusiasm was not universally shared by parents and religious leaders, some of whom were ideologically opposed to the revival of “the Holy Tongue” as a modern, secular language and considered scandalous the use of visual aids in the teaching of Bible stories. Benderly apparently believed that as long as he had financial support and encouragement from the established elites and could fill his classrooms with students, he need not worry. Parents who objected to his goals and methods were free to send their children to the more
traditional Baltimore Talmud Torah or to one of the smaller schools or *khayders*. Indeed, according to one account, he refunded the tuition of those children who did not make sufficient academic progress and encouraged parents to withdraw their children and send them elsewhere. When one mother objected and implored Benderly to keep her son in the school, Benderly reportedly told her that her tuition money would more profitably be spent on a new hat. In the short run his attitude was vindicated. The Federated Jewish Charities, which was established by mostly central European Jews in 1906, considered the *hes* to be one of its crown jewels and supported it with a liberal annual subsidy. This arrangement substantially freed Benderly from fund-raising and no doubt influenced his thinking on the benefits of a communal system of Jewish schools. But the Orthodox community was particularly strong in Baltimore, and in the long run Benderly’s failure to allay the concerns of its leaders contributed to the *hes*’s stagnation and decline after his departure for New York.39

While Benderly cut his sidelocks and became increasingly lax in his personal observance of Jewish law, he recognized the need for the *hes* to respect and uphold an Orthodox standard of Jewish practice. His attitude is best illustrated by his approach to Saturday classes. Benderly was loath to relinquish Saturday afternoons as a time for study. On a practical level, however, strict observance of the Sabbath, particularly the prohibition on writing, made conventional classroom study a difficult proposition. So Benderly decided to reserve Saturday afternoon classes for honing students’ Hebrew reading skills. He developed an elaborate recording system for teachers that technically avoided violating the prohibition. Hebrew stories were printed on numbered cards, and each student was given a small hand-sewn bag to wear around his neck. When a student completed a story, the teacher gave him a small corresponding number, which he placed in the bag. Teachers collected the bags at the end of class and made paper records of each student’s progress on Monday mornings. Of course, whether one viewed this system as an ingenious accommodation or a mockery of the spirit behind the law was a matter for interpretation. Benderly certainly believed that Hebrew study was well within the spirit of the Sabbath. But some traditionalists feared that Benderly’s loose orthodoxy amounted to a backdoor invitation to secularism.40

If the brand of secularism they had in mind was Jewish nationalism—and some Orthodox leaders were deeply suspicious and even hostile toward Zionism—then their estimation of Benderly was not shy of the mark. Benderly attempted not only to teach Hebrew fluency but to imbue his students with a love of Palestine and a sense of connection to the fledgling nationalist revival. Years later one of his students, Rebecca Aaronson Brickner, recalled being enraptured by his explanations of the *Ve-Ahavta* prayer with its references to the seasonal rains in Palestine.

*Benderly in Baltimore* 31
“For the first time I felt that prayers were not merely an echo from a dim past, whose memory we had to revere, but that they were actual living things fashioned out of the grass roots of a living people dwelling on their own soil, and taken with them as they scattered throughout the world. A living link was forged between me and my people by a Native Son, who made Palestine real for me,” she explained. “From that moment on I became a Zionist.” Brickner remembered being deeply moved by the tears that rolled down from Benderly’s eyes as he recited the poetry of Judah Ha-Levi, and uplifted by the Zionist songs that Benderly sang with his students on Saturday afternoons. “[M]y heart yearned and cried out. I was reborn. I was made a ‘whole’ Jewess. After that I was athirst for the culture of my people. I drank it like a thirsty flower in a desert, even though I was living in a 100% Jewish atmosphere, where the word of God was always heard in our household, and where the Holy Books were always open, studied and taught.”

Benderly’s greatest challenge was finding teachers who had the requisite language skills and pedagogic training to institute his curriculum. Uppermost in his mind was Herbert Spencer’s dictum that a teacher should be a friendly influence and a role model rather than an antagonist and, inevitably, an object of derision and scorn. As such, Benderly avoided as much as possible the employment of older immigrant teachers. Their foreign accents, teaching styles, and manners of discipline often alienated students, who compared them unfavorably with the teachers in their public schools. “By good teachers,” Benderly explained, “we mean those who, in addition to their intellectual and pedagogic equipment, possess knowledge of our American Jewish youth, who are imbued with Jewish ideals, and know and love the Jewish people, in whose future they believe. Such teachers are not to be found in the open market. They are extremely rare; their price is more precious than pearls.” Benderly also believed that younger students, in particular, responded better to a nurturing female influence, a surrogate mother. The teaching force in the public elementary schools was predominately female. With all this in mind, he founded, in October 1902, the Baltimore Hebrew College, a forerunner of the institution established under the same name in 1919.

To call the embryonic teacher-training program a college was a something of a misnomer. Nevertheless, Benderly managed to enroll forty-five students and attract an impressive faculty to the school, including Henrietta Szold and Professor Aaron Ember of the Semitics Department at Johns Hopkins University. His first class consisted of twelve young women, seven of whom were high school graduates. After the first year of study, his more able students were given teaching assignments at his school, where they received on-the-job training and supervision as well as a stipend, which was meant to encourage their continued participa-
tion. Ultimately, only three of the original students completed the four-year course and received diplomas. The attrition rate was primarily a function of the rigorous curriculum and exacting standards. At the end of the second year, five students were counseled out of the program because they could not keep up with the work. Benderly also set up a preparatory school for high school students, which acted as a feeder school for his teacher-training program. Some of his best teachers, including Jennie Miller and Ben Rosen, were homegrown.43

Jennie “Hemdah” Miller, in particular, won a special place in Benderly’s heart. “She was a gifted teacher. Together they planned new methods and techniques for teaching Bible stories and Hebrew, and for the celebration of the holidays. Together they were a wonderful team,” remembered Aaronson Brickner. “He would spin the ideas, and she would carry them out magnificently. The ideas flowed in torrential streams, and she could do just about everything and anything. She was teacher, school secretary, librarian, art director, playground director and the pupils’ friend. Between them, there were no such things as hours and days.” Benderly married Miller in 1909.44

Another great impediment was the lack of teaching materials. Benderly searched in vain for Hebrew-language children’s stories geared to American Jewish children and found the conventional Hebrew grammars ill suited to his approach. Following Pestalozzi, who advocated the use of pictures, manipulatives, and other “sensory objects” in the first stages of language teaching, Benderly created a series of stereopticon or magic-lantern slides that he projected while teaching vocabulary. The magic lantern was also employed in the teaching of Bible stories. Benderly wanted to make the stories “live for the children.” He collected biblical scenes by artists such as James Tissot and Gustave Doré and had them converted into slides.45

Benderly and his staff also produced a series of primers and readers adapting recently issued educational materials from eastern Europe as well as creating their own. Aaronson Brickner recalled creating a set of Hebrew short stories that were used on Saturday afternoons to reinforce students’ reading skills: “We even created a category of good and bad characters who actually lived for the children. We invented Meier Ha-Shovov (the wild one) Chayoh Ha-Pesayoh (the foolish one) a Chanoh Hatovoh (the good), Rivkeleh Ha-Chachomoh (the wise), etc. I believe these were the first Hebrew stories for American Jewish children written in the natural way.” Benderly made use of the latest small-scale duplicating technology, purchasing both a mimeograph and a schapirograph. Using a Hebrew typewriter with vowels, he prepared work sheets and textbooks on mimeograph stencils and hectograph master sheets.46
In 1909 the Hebrew Education Society’s enrollment topped three hundred for the first time. Benderly was entitled to feel a sense of accomplishment. In just a few years he had transformed the HES from a conventional charity institution into a model, forward-looking Hebrew school and demonstrated the efficacy of the natural method in the teaching of Hebrew. Many of the other progressive educational innovations that he would peddle and popularize in New York and elsewhere—including the smaller class sizes, shorter hours, clean, well-lit and well-ventilated classrooms, visual aids, sight charts and maps, singing, club work, student government, festival celebrations—were already in place. His experimentation with teacher and adolescent education likewise informed his later work. At the same time, some of Benderly’s weaknesses, which would later blunt his effectiveness in New York, were also already in evidence, including his penchant for educational fads, his quixotic approach to experimentation, his fiery temper, and his impatience with dissenters and adversaries. Benderly’s regard for the public schools, which he viewed as a model of efficiency, approached veneration. Critics wondered whether his obsession with shaving time off of his school’s fire drill evacuation record—he never tired of boasted that he could clear the building in three minutes or less—was indicative of eccentricity or misplaced priorities. Disputes in Baltimore over the teaching of Hebrew and Zionism as well as accusations of religious laxity were harbingers of future flash points in New York, while tensions between the democratic and elitist strands of Benderly’s educational philosophy and agenda that would later confound some of his colleagues were likewise apparent.

Benderly’s shortcomings aside, his school and methods justly achieved recognition beyond Baltimore. In 1902 A. S. Waldenstein wrote a laudatory article about Benderly’s school in Hashiloah, the influential Hebrew monthly edited by Ahad Ha-Am. “The educational program of Dr. Benderly is to my knowledge the only answer to Jewish education in America,” Waldenstein proclaimed. Benderly’s influential friends talked up his achievements in venues like the annual Zionist conventions and encouraged visitors to Baltimore to observe the school for themselves. The local Anglo-Jewish newspaper, the Jewish Comment, similarly sang his praises: “Few schools have been better organized and on sounder principles than the school of the Hebrew Education Society,” the newspaper declared in 1906. “[I]t has been a conspicuous success and has impressed American teachers in search of a well planned system of Hebrew and religious education.” Benderly began receiving speaking invitations from groups in other cities who were eager to learn the secret behind the education miracle he had wrought in Baltimore. A few years later
the *Jewish Current* prophesied that Benderly’s school “will not remain permanently the only one of its kind.”

Of course, Benderly’s was not the only school in the United States to adopt a Hebrew-language-centered curriculum and the natural method of instruction. At roughly the same time that he was experimenting in *hes*, *Ivrit b’Ivrit* made modest inroads in a handful of Talmud Torahs in Jewish population centers such as New York, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. The most celebrated of these schools was probably Shaare Zion in Brooklyn, New York, a cultural Zionist school founded in 1893 by Zvi Hirsch (Zundel) Neumann. Ten years later one of the largest Talmud Torahs in New York, the Uptown Talmud Torah, adopted a Hebraic curriculum under the influence of Hillel Malachowsky. The principals and teachers in these schools were generally eastern European *maskilim* (adherents of the Russian Jewish Enlightenment) who had begun their careers teaching in the modernized or “reformed” *khayders* that slowly made inroads at the end of the nineteenth century. Like Benderly, some of them were serious educators, well versed in general educational philosophy and pedagogy. Neumann, for example, used visual aids and objects in the teaching of Hebrew and decorated his classrooms to create a Hebrew atmosphere. But as Waldenstein understood, what distinguished Benderly from the rest was his aspiration to create a modern *Americanized* Hebrew school grounded in the latest progressive methods, a worthy companion to the public schools. “Benderly has integrated Jewish education into the needs and requirements of the American environment,” Waldenstein wrote. “He has thus shown his pedagogical genius.”

It was Waldenstein’s article that first brought Benderly to the attention of Judah L. Magnes. At the time, Magnes was a recently ordained Reform rabbi pursuing doctoral study at the Universities of Berlin and Heidelberg. But he was ultimately instrumental in bringing Benderly to New York, and worked hand in glove with the pedagogue until 1922, when Magnes settled in Palestine. Shortly after reading the glowing report in *Hashiloah*, Magnes happened upon Harry Friedenwald at a Zionist convention in Pittsburgh. One of his first queries was about Benderly. Was he really the Jewish educator wunderkind that Waldenstein had portrayed? “Ah Benderly, that is a man you should come to see,” Friedenwald responded warmly. “Indeed I did go to Baltimore as soon as possible,” Magnes later remembered, “and from that time dated the many pleasant meetings with Drs. Friedenwald and Benderly in Baltimore, at which we dreamed our dreams and made our plans for Hebrew education in America and for the upbuilding of the Yishuv in Palestine.” A few years later, when Magnes and his associates in New York were looking for a director of the newly created Bureau of Education of the New York Jewish Community (Kehillah), Benderly was an obvious choice.
“I have heard great sighs from among those of us who miss the good old days, the years of exploding immigration, who cry and say those early days were better!” Israel Konovitz wrote in 1944. The wistful purveyors of such nostalgia conjured up images of “faithful and upright” Jewish immigrants, stalwart opponents of Jewish ignorance, profoundly “worried about the education of their children” and demanding “Torah from the teachers.” Invariably, these images were contrasted unfavorably with the contemporary Jewish education scene, where “[t]here is no one to require, no one to demand. And those that do request are satisfied with the very minimum.” Konovitz had a simple message for the sentimentalists: You’ve got to be kidding!

Few people were in a better position to pass judgment than Konovitz, the longtime principal of the Downtown Talmud Torah, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A maskil, or “enlightened” Jewish educator in Romania, and an ardent Hebraist, Konovitz had been astounded and dismayed with the state of Jewish education in New York when he arrived in 1903. He recalled his first encounter with Jewish education, a one-teacher and one-room Jewish ghetto school, or
khayder, on the Lower East Side. Konovitz stumbled upon the school accidentally as he was walking along Madison Street and came across a sign hanging on the gate to a stable. The “master teacher” promised to teach “your boy from aleph-bes [A-B-C] to bar mitzvah” while also advertising himself as an “exceptional letter writer.”

As an “astonished” Konovitz pondered “the connection between aleph-bes and bar mitzvah and a stable with horses,” his attention was drawn to the sing-song Hebrew recitation emanating from an upper-floor window. He ascended the “crooked stairs,” walked through a “dark hall,” and came face-to-face with the paradigmatic Jewish schoolroom: The instructor sat on a platform with a single student in front of an open prayer book, while about twenty-five other boys of various ages horsed around below. The student repeated the prayer word for word after the teacher, winning an occasional rap on his back from the instructor’s rod for mispronunciation or a loss of attention. When his five or ten minutes were up, he was sent home and the next boy was called up. A few minutes later two women arrived at the door, and the teacher suspended this routine to write letters for them to relatives in Europe. One impatient boy suddenly interrupted the instructor, threatening to kill him for keeping him waiting for almost an hour. The others referred to the teacher as “Jew man,” “like they would say ‘China man.’”

This then was the true state of Jewish education in the immigrant ghettos at the height of the Jewish mass migration to North America. To be sure, there were exceptions to the norm—a few well-run communal schools, under the influence of European-born educators, influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment and familiar with modern pedagogic principles. Some were beginning to experiment with teaching Hebrew using the natural or direct method. But these were isolated examples in a sea of khayder schools and peddler “siddur teachers” who went from house to house offering bar mitzvah preparation and teaching boys to mechanically read the prayer book.

The Kehillah and the Origins of the Bureau

The first successful effort to systematize Jewish education in New York City was accomplished as part of a wider effort to create a New York Kehillah, an organized Jewish community. There was a venerable tradition of local and regional Jewish communal organization in eastern Europe dating at least as far back as the sixteenth century. But it was doubtful that this structure could be exported to the United States, where separation of church and state militated against effective means of enforcing religious conformity and where ethnic minorities, with the exception of Native American populations, were accorded no special corporate
status. Turn-of-the-century Jewish New York, which Arthur Goren aptly described as a “jangle of provincial loyalties, religious ‘medievalism,’ and strident radicalism,” appeared particularly inhospitable to the establishment of a unified communal organization. An attempt in the late 1880s to create one central Orthodox rabbinic authority in the city ended in abject failure. Even the creation of a unified Jewish philanthropic federation in New York such as that which existed in Boston since 1895 and Philadelphia since 1901 seemed impossible. Those two Jewish population centers were dwarfed by Gotham’s throbbing urban Jewish ghetto. New York was the largest Jewish center in the world. Of the approximately 1.5 million Jews who immigrated to the United States between 1881 and 1910, the majority settled in New York. According to one estimate there were 1,265,000 Jews living in the five boroughs in 1910, 542,000 within the neighborhood south of Houston Street, east of the Bowery, and north of Canal that came to be known as the Lower East Side.

At the same time, American Jews’ struggle to respond effectively to international events underscored the need for a community organization that could speak authoritatively and with one voice. This became especially apparent in the aftermath of the pogroms that swept through the Russian Empire between 1903 and 1906. In February 1906 a group of prominent Jews of central European descent including Jacob Schiff, Oscar Straus, Cyrus Adler, and Louis Marshall organized the American Jewish Committee (AJC) to defend Jewish interests and act on the community’s behalf. Central European Jews, who referred to themselves collectively as German Jews, came to the United States in considerable numbers in the mid-nineteenth century and were more socioeconomically established than the recently arriving eastern Europeans. Reflecting the conservative bent of its founders, the AJC tended to work quietly and behind the scenes, much the same way as the traditional Jewish intercessors had operated with government authorities in Europe. Although immigrant leaders applauded the AJC for activities on behalf of Jews abroad and lobbying for continued unrestricted immigration at home, many socialists and Zionists chafed at the backdoor tactics of the AJC and deeply resented its oligarchic structure. A few Committee leaders, most notably Marshall, favored making the AJC a more representative body as a way of co-opting what they considered to be the more responsible elements within the immigrant community while tamping down the radicals. Others, like Straus, were more apprehensive.

The direct impetus for the establishment of a local Jewish communal organization in New York came in September 1908 when the *North American Review* published an article by Police Commissioner Theodore A. Bingham in which he alleged that Jews were responsible for a disproportionate amount of the crime in
the city. Bingham painted a portrait of Jewish urchins raised on the streets into a life of pickpocketing and purse snatching. Stirred up by the Yiddish press, the immigrant Jewish masses erupted in what Mayor George B. McClellan characterized as a “storm of indignation.” At first, the Committee was reluctant to respond publicly to the allegations for fear of inadvertently granting them legitimacy. Its leaders were also deeply sensitive to the reality that even if the police commissioner’s statements were exaggerated, Jewish criminality was indeed rife in New York City and could generate an antisemitic backlash if placed under the media spotlight. But the AJC’s inaction engendered scorn from the Yiddish press and fueled immigrant leaders’ frustrations at their own political impotency. In short order a broad coalition of immigrant organizations was assembled into a working group to respond to the crisis. Bowing to the pressure, Marshall began negotiating a settlement with the deputy police commissioner. Bingham would disavow his remarks, and the Committee would accept the apology and consider the matter closed.  

To sell the deal to the immigrants, Marshall turned to his brother-in-law, thirty-one-year-old Judah L. Magnes, who effectively bridged the worlds of “uptown” and “downtown.” As rabbi of the flagship Reform congregation in New York, Temple Emanu-El, Magnes ministered to the city’s most prominent German Jewish families. But he was also the president of the Federation of American Zionists and maintained cordial relations with labor leaders and the Lower East Side intelligentsia. In 1905 Magnes won the hearts of the Jewish masses when he led a huge protest march down Fifth Avenue against the Russian pogroms and organized a Jewish Defense Association, which raised money for relief work and arms.

Magnes secured the cooperation of the immigrant working group, which promptly accepted Bingham’s retraction, but he also encouraged the creation of a “permanent and representative organization” to speak on behalf of “the one million Jews of New York” and “defend their rights and liberties” as well as address the Jewish crime problem. A subsequent two-day conference attended by 250 delegates representing a multitude of immigrant organizations and described by one newspaper as “turbulent, eloquent, bitter, sentimental and quite often practical” resulted in the formation of a New York Kehillah. The Kehillah affiliated with the AJC as its New York district, and the members of its executive committee sat on the AJC governing board. Men such as Marshall and Schiff who supported this arrangement viewed it as a means of exerting influence on the downtown Jews while bolstering the Committee’s legitimacy in their eyes. From the perspective of the eastern Europeans, the partnership promised uptown prestige, influence, and funding.

Much of the enthusiasm for a communal organization was grounded in a
progressivist faith that social problems could be effectively ameliorated through expertise, efficiency, and nonpartisanship. But try as they might, the Kehillah’s advocates were unable to avoid stirring up long-standing and polarizing debates about the nature of post-Emancipation Jewish identity. At the Kehillah’s founding convention, which was held in February and March 1909, delegates unanimously adopted a constitution, which asserted that “the purpose of the Jewish Community of New York City shall be to further the cause of Judaism . . . and to represent the Jews of this city.” It also pledged not to engage in political activity “or interfere with the autonomy of a constituent organization.” This impressive demonstration of unity, however, scarcely concealed intense behind-the-scenes political jockeying. The decision to define the Kehillah in religious terms was a concession to Orthodox and Reform religious leaders as well as prominent German Jews who opposed the notion of a secularist organization. The constitution’s wording was also meant to mollify those who insisted that a nationalist orientation would be un-American and who wished to avoid the impression that the Jews as a group represented a unified voting bloc. But as Goren explained, emphasizing religion as “the single legitimate basis for ethnic organization imperiled the notion of a comprehensive communal structure, one that would encompass the multifarious Jewish public.” There was a deep chasm between this radically circumscribed conception of community and the more holistic model envisioned by the cultural Zionists. Among the cultural Zionists’ most articulate thinkers and popularizers was Israel Friedlaender. In a 1907 public lecture titled “The Problem of American Judaism,” the JTS professor closed with a vision of a vital and unfettered American Jewish community, distinct yet wholly integrated into American society, living an American style of Judaism sustained by close connections with the land of Israel and with Jewish people the world over.9

It was left to Magnes, who shared Friedlaender’s cultural Zionist orientation and his desire to make the Kehillah an instrument of Jewish renascence, to enunciate a definition of Jewishness that all parties could abide. In a forceful sermon delivered on the eve of the founding convention, Magnes inveighed against the prevalent notion that Americanization need come at the price of Jewish national identification, arguing that homogenization was not only inimical to Jewish survival but ultimately stultifying to American civilization. “American culture, American nationality can be made fruitful and beautiful by contact with the culture of the varied nationalities that are among us,” he argued. “America is not a melting pot. It is not the Moloch demanding the sacrifice of national individuality.” Yet even as he defended what today would be termed ethnicity as a component of Jewish identity, he deftly insisted that “nationality and religion” were “inextricably
interwoven” and that “the cultivation of Jewish nationality depends, in large mea-sure, upon the religious impulse behind it.∞≠

Magnes warned in his sermon that a Judaism denuded of its national characteristics had little chance of appealing to Jewish youth. “We are in danger of rearing a godless generation . . . because in the name of spurious Americanization we shout from the housetops that our people give up their national individuality,” he declared. “These national aspects [of Jewish life] . . . may become, and in numerous instances they have become, the connecting links between past and present, between the parents and their children.” It was an argument that was prudently and deliberately crafted to disarm his Emanu-El congregants. The generation gap was an enduring concern for Magnes, one that he returned to time and again in his public addresses and personal correspondence. He and other cultural Zionists viewed the Kehillah as a vehicle through which they could stem what they considered to be the tide of assimilation and indifference among American Jews, particularly the children of the immigrants. This helps to explain why Jewish education was elevated to an immediate priority on the Kehillah’s agenda.∞∞

In September 1909 the Kehillah’s executive committee approved a proposal by Dr. Mordecai Kaplan to conduct a comprehensive study of Jewish educational conditions in New York City. Anecdotal evidence suggested a largely ineffective, decentralized Jewish educational system with limited reach, but up until then a methodical survey of existing conditions had never been undertaken. Under the supervision of Dr. Bernard Cronson, a public school principal, ten canvassers fanned out to Jewish neighborhoods across the city to collect quantitative data and conduct on-site inspections of the schools. The survey’s results were distressing. Only about 41,000 of the city’s 170,000 Jewish school-age children (24 percent) were enrolled in a Jewish school at any one time.∞≤ Even so, existing facilities, equipment, materials, and methods were utterly inadequate. Teachers were poorly paid and often incompetent. Curricular goals tended to be vague and content redundant. Attendance was spotty and attrition rates high. Little if any coordination existed between schools. Indeed, to speak of a system of Jewish education was misleading. What existed was a hodgepodge of congregational schools, Sunday schools, community-supported Talmud Torahs, institutional schools, khayders, and private tutors.∞≥

The report, which was written by Kaplan and Cronson and presented at the Kehillah’s first annual convention, highlighted few bright spots in its composite portraits of each of the general types of schools. But it was especially critical of the private khayders. It characterized the typical teacher as a ne’er-do-well who had failed at other means of livelihood. With no licensing agency or generally agreed
upon set of credentials, anyone could hang out a shingle and take in students. The dilapidated, dark, stuffy, and often filthy conditions of the one- or two-room schools were similarly described in disparaging terms. But the most withering criticism was reserved for the curriculum and methods of the *khayder*. Given the frenzied and unruly environment, it was hardly surprising that little content was mastered. Most students’ learning progressed no further than reading the prayer book by rote and memorizing a few blessings. “There is hardly an ideal aim in the mind of the teacher, except in some cases it is the training for the Bar Mitzvah feat of reading the Haftorah.” The report’s hostility toward the *khayder* was well deserved. Aside from the private tutors, it was the mode of Jewish education that was least susceptible to adequate regulation and standardization. Yet, owing to its association with life in eastern Europe, many immigrants clung to it for sentimental reasons. Thus, reformers tried to discredit the *khayders* and snuff them out.14

Even before the report was completed and presented to the convention, Magnes contacted Benderly in Baltimore to discuss how to interpret and respond to the survey results. Benderly’s influence can be detected in some of the report’s recommendations, which focused on centralization, teacher education, and the development of appropriate textbooks. But no reform would be possible without the adequate financing of Jewish education. The report estimated that in order to educate 100,000 Jewish children, the community would need to spend about $1.5 million annually, much of which would need to be collected through charitable donations. “It is only the well-to-do that can supply the necessary buildings, and have them properly equipped.” With this need in mind, Magnes also wrote to philanthropist Jacob Schiff, summarizing the contents of the report and asking for his financial help. Magnes played up the decrepit conditions and the legions of Jewishly unschooled youth, which he effectively associated with the prevalence of crime and delinquency that had indirectly motivated the founding of the Kehillah. “How can we expect our young men and women growing up in crowded sections and working under unfavorable conditions, to be pure, and clean, and honorable, if they are allowed to drift from the anchorage which the religion of their fathers might have given them? The cleft between the parents and the children is in itself an element of weakness, and this can only be bridged over through Judaism which, on the one hand, will be acceptable to the parents, and on the other hand, attractive to the children.” Schiff responded by donating $50,000 over five years for the “improvement and promoting of Jewish religious primary education in this city.” His gift, which was also announced at the first Kehillah convention, helped to leaven the impact of the report and encouraged others to open their pocketbooks.15

“Fifty Thousand Dollars for the *Khayders*,” the following day’s Yiddish *Morgen*
Journal headline blared, reflecting the general excitement. But community expectations aside, Magnes never promised that the money would be doled out directly to the schools. Uppermost on the Kehillah chairman's mind was the challenge of how to use the money most efficiently to promote reform. Magnes decided to pose the question directly to Benderly. The Kaplan-Cronson report called for the creation of a central coordinating Jewish education agency. In a detailed letter to Magnes written in the convention's immediate aftermath, Benderly agreed. “It seems clear that the fund at your disposal should not be spent in propping up this or that institution, but should be used as a lever for the study and improvement of primary education in New York City.” A bureau of Jewish education, he wrote, could raise the quality of Jewish education by performing four central tasks: research, teacher organization and advocacy, public relations, and educational experimentation. He expanded primarily on the last of these areas, suggesting that the bureau operate one or two model schools where it could develop and pilot curricula, methods, and textbooks. The schools would be “concrete examples and guides” to the existing schools, acting as a constructive force for the improvement of conditions and the raising of standards across the board.16

The influence of progressivism on Benderly’s plans was unmistakable. He argued that the schools must establish an organic relationship with the community and believed that scientific analysis of “the Jewish educational forces” in the city would elucidate economies of management that would lead to greater efficiency. He also demonstrated a naive faith that institutions would readily innovate their systems and methods. In Benderly’s mind it was simply a matter of finding solutions and waiting for public opinion to “ripen.” In the short term there was reason for optimism. Schiff approved of Benderly’s general plan and was instrumental in securing for the new bureau another $25,000 gift over five years through the New York Foundation, which was administered by his brother-in-law, Professor Morris Loeb. The bureau idea also won the support of the leading Talmud Torah principals, whose cooperation would be critical to its success. Finally, Magnes convinced Benderly to become the bureau’s director on a five-year contract. In May 1910 the Kehillah’s executive committee officially voted to establish the Bureau of Education.17

The Bureau’s Opponents

At the end of his letter to Magnes, Benderly had advised that the new bureau he was proposing should adopt a gradualist approach to its work lest it get too far ahead of public opinion. Further, he had demonstrated sensitivity to budgetary constraints and seemed to suggest that the Bureau not undertake commitments
unless it had the requisite funding in hand. Within a year, however, he cast aside his own sensible advice and began promoting an ambitious and costly three-pronged program to remake Jewish education in the city.\(^\text{18}\)

Benderly hoped to increase the capacity of the Talmud Torahs (community Hebrew schools) by 3 percent annually by building ten new schools every year, with a capacity of four hundred to five hundred students each, in new and underserved Jewish neighborhoods. He also wanted to improve the quality of education in the current schools by bolstering the nine largest and most promising Talmud Torahs, supplying them with about 40 percent of their current income on top of what they were already collecting through tuitions and fund-raising. The subsidies would be contingent on the schools’ acceptance of Bureau-determined standards in the areas of curricula, methods, hours of instruction, tuition collection practices, teacher hiring, and facility maintenance and sanitation. Finally, he advocated a considerable expansion of the work of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Teachers Institute (TI), which opened in 1909, and the creation of preparatory schools that could serve as feeders and simultaneously boost the quality of the TI student body. Benderly wanted to see TI graduate one hundred students per year in order to meet what he believed was a significant shortage of qualified teachers throughout the country. In all, Benderly estimated that his plan would require a fund of $110,000 annually, above and beyond the $15,000 per year from Schiff and the New York Foundation which was being used for the Bureau’s operating costs.\(^\text{19}\)

Benderly’s expansive vision for the Bureau was no doubt clarified by the process of personally familiarizing himself with existing circumstances, which began over the summer of 1910 and continued after the Bureau of Education was officially opened in October. In particular, he undertook a detailed study of the financial conditions of the schools, with an emphasis on the larger Talmud Torahs, which the Bureau published in 1911. His exuberance was in large part fed by the generally encouraging initial meetings he had with school administrators and lay leaders. Shortly after its inception, the Bureau established cooperative relationships with the city’s largest institutional schools, including those of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Educational Alliance, the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society, the Jewish Protectory, and the Young Women’s Hebrew Association. The Bureau was also approached within its first nine months of operation by three leading Talmud Torahs, the Downtown Talmud Torah on the Lower East Side, the Israel Salanter Talmud Torah in Harlem, and the School of Biblical Instruction (Meserole Street Talmud Torah) in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. In some cases the schools were completely reorganized. In others, principals and directors eagerly instituted various efficiency-minded structural and managerial changes as well as curricular and pedagogical innovations. As Benderly later wrote, the receptive climate
compelled him to “modify and enlarge” his plans. “The fact that these Talmud Torahs had taken the initiative in negotiating with the Bureau was a guarantee of success; it was too tempting an opportunity to bring about the standardization of the Talmud Torahs of New York for the Bureau to let it pass by unused.” He also wanted to cultivate the goodwill of various lay groups that had approached the Bureau about helping to establish new schools in communities where none existed. In his mind, the best way to accomplish this was for the Bureau to project an aura of effectiveness and utility.20

Over the next few months these plans were refined and pared down, especially after Jacob Schiff balked at the steep $110,000 per year price tag. Schiff suggested that $50,000 per year would be a more attainable goal. He also dismissed Magnes and Benderly’s proposal to fund-raise a permanent Jewish education endowment. He reminded them that a $2 million endowment would be required in order to guarantee $100,000 of income per year. “Anyone who understands New York conditions in the least knows that it is an impossibility to raise such a sum,” he cautioned. Moreover, he bristled at the notion that he and his uptown crowd should have to foot the bill for future generations. The needed monies should be raised through annual subscriptions, he advised, even while doubting that the cause of Jewish primary education was likely to be greeted with openhandedness. Schiff was particularly skeptical that the more affluent eastern European Jews would contribute substantially to a Jewish education fund. As for himself, Schiff added that while he would, “no doubt, be willing to become a liberal contributor,” he would “not for a moment entertain the proposition” that he contribute “one half . . . nor even a quarter” of the proposed annual fund. “How large a part I
would be willing to contribute would depend upon the readiness with which our Russian Jewish townsmen would come forward themselves in support of the schemes proposed by Dr. Benderly."

Magnes was undeterred by Schiff’s pessimism. “Dr. Benderly, Dr. Friedlaender, Dr. Kaplan and myself are young and hopeful, and we are willing to make a strong fight for Jewish education, because we feel that Judaism in this country is largely dependent for its strength upon the education this generation is able to give its children,” he wrote to Schiff. Magnes agreed that “our Russian Jewish brethren will have to respond as they never have before.” But in a demonstration of relentlessness characteristic of a successful fund-raiser, he placed the onus on Schiff to set the example: “[I]t is all the more essential that we be able to say that a given sum has been contributed by you; I need hardly tell you, our Russian brethren look to you to point the way.” Schiff ultimately promised to contribute $10,000 per year if Magnes was able to secure $40,000 from the community at large. Magnes and his colleagues worked assiduously over the spring and summer of 1911 to raise the funds. Not only were they able to secure a hefty $5,000 from Schiff’s son-in-law Felix Warburg, and smaller but substantial pledges from other German Jews; they also found prominent modern Orthodox businessmen and members of the Cloak and Suit Manufacturers Association receptive to their solicitations. A fund-raising drive in Arverne, Queens, a popular summer destination for the affluent modern Orthodox, was particularly fruitful, with men such as Samuel Hyman, Israel Unterberg, and Jacob Rubin each promising $1,000. In all, 233 donors pledged a total of $250,000 over five years.

The successful campaign bolstered spirits at the Bureau and encouraged Benderly to ramp up activities. In the end, however, only 89 contributors met their obligations. The Bureau soon began accumulating a deficit, which climbed to $32,184.87 in October 1914 and reached $46,184.92 by October 1915. The Bureau’s difficulty in collecting on promises stemmed in part from poor public relations. One of the few notices in the general press, a laudatory 1914 New York Times article titled “How the Kehillah Worked an Education Miracle,” noted that the Bureau’s work “has been going on, all unnoticed, in the city’s midst.” To some extent Benderly viewed the Bureau’s ability to work quietly as a virtue. He boasted to Schiff that substantive changes had been made in the Talmud Torahs “without the flare of trumpets.” But if the Bureau’s low profile—at least in the general and Anglo-Jewish press—arguably helped to diminish controversy, it left some erstwhile supporters wondering why they should continue their yearly donations. Clothier Morris Asinof, whose subsequent philanthropic commitments demonstrated a genuine interest in Jewish education, was fairly typical. “I am always willing to help out a good cause,” he wrote in November 1912. But “to be frank, I do
not see what has been done so far by the Bureau of Education. Whenever I will
convince myself that you have accomplished your pledges, I will only be too glad to
give whatever I promised.”

More problematic was the unremittingly hostile coverage that the Bureau re-
ceived from the traditionalist Orthodox Yiddish Morgen Journal. At first, the
newspaper welcomed the establishment of the Bureau as “the first systematic
attempt to bring order out of the chaos of Jewish education in America.” It likewise
praised the appointment of Benderly, who was characterized as “a real specialist.”
But its coverage soon soured when it became clear that the Bureau would subsi-
dize only the larger, more established Talmud Torahs and sought to promote
American-trained teachers over immigrants. The Journal also objected to the
Bureau’s expressed nonpartisan approach to working with schools and the lack of
Orthodox oversight on its board of trustees. It distrusted the Zionist agenda and
newfangled methods of the Bureau’s director and his staff. Benderly, it com-
plained, “appreciates the flowers of other gardens sooner than his own.” But
mostly the newspaper used the Bureau as a whipping boy to attack the integrity of
the Kehillah and its Reform rabbi chairman, Magnes.

Morgen Journal owner Jacob Saphirstein’s antipathy for the Kehillah was mag-
nified in 1914 when an exasperated Magnes helped to launch a competing news-
paper, Der Tog, with the financial backing of Schiff and Louis Marshall. But
ideology and personal antagonism aside, Saphirstein was a shrewd businessman
who knew that controversy would sell papers. A master at stoking the tensions
between uptown and downtown, Saphirstein depicted the Bureau as a tool of
Schiff and his German Reform clique, who bankrolled much of its activities. The
Journal’s reactionary education reporter Ephraim Kaplan gleefully sensationalized
the Bureau’s relatively harmless gaffes and ominously portrayed its pedagogical
innovations. As Arthur Goren aptly concluded, Kaplan “treated ‘methods’ and
‘systems’ as synonymous with ‘free thinker’ and ‘heretic.’”

If Saphirstein’s motives and tactics were pernicious, the Morgen Journal ex-
plained the genuine discontent of the immigrant teachers and Orthodox rabbis
who felt threatened and marginalized by the Bureau’s efforts to standardize and
reform the Talmud Torahs. The former group coalesced under the banner of
the Agudath Ha-Morim Ha-Ivrim B’Nu Y ork V’Sevivoteha, the Hebrew Teachers
Union of New York and Vicinity, which was organized in 1910 just as the Bureau
was beginning its work. At first glance, the goals of the teachers’ union and the
Bureau coincided. Both were interested in improving the economic and social
status of the Talmud Torah teacher. The union’s second secretary, Solomon (Zal-
men) Heller, remembered embittered immigrant teachers watching as prosperous
eastern European Jews, inspired in part by the Bureau, raised money for a number
of new Talmud Torah buildings but did little to improve the status of the teachers. “The one thing these balebatim forgot was that for the educational good it was necessary to also improve the teachers’ lot, so that they could work with peace of mind,” he wrote. “And it was this that the teachers’ union, which was organized in those days, came to remind them.” In 1911 Benderly moved to establish a Board of License. Cooperating Talmud Torahs agreed to employ only teachers who held a provisional or permanent license and to institute a salary scale that ranged from sixty dollars for a novice teacher to as much as eighty dollars for a veteran. The scale represented a vast improvement over the thirty-five to forty dollars a month that was the norm in most institutions. In addition to himself and Mordecai Kaplan of the Teachers Institute, Benderly recruited a diverse group to sit on the licensing board, including a respected Orthodox rabbi, a Talmud Torah director, and a public school principal.26

The union had two major objections to this plan. The first was that it covered only the larger Talmud Torahs and religious schools that associated with the Bureau. Many of the union’s members would not benefit, because they taught at the smaller, unaffiliated institutions. Benderly hoped that the other schools would be forced to raise their salaries as well in order to compete for teachers. In fact, this trickle-down theory did not materialize. On the contrary, a few of the larger schools, including the Machzike Talmud Torah, balked at the Bureau salary scale, thus undermining the entire scheme. “If our teachers apply to him for a license, they may permanently remain at the Bureau for we will find others to fill their positions,” the Talmud Torah’s president J. M. Phillips wrote in a letter to the editor of the Morgen Journal.27

Even more upsetting to the members of the Hebrew Teachers Union, teachers were not granted provisional licenses unless they could demonstrate capability in English and familiarity with modern teaching methods, as well as proficiency in Bible, Hebrew language, and literature. Permanent licenses were reserved for those teachers who were fluent English speakers and could establish advanced mastery of both subject matter and pedagogy through a licensing exam. The provisional licenses required renewal every six months and expired after three years, by which time the teacher was expected to pass the licensing exam. Benderly assumed that three years was plenty of time for immigrant teachers to become fluent English speakers and well versed in teaching methodologies. He even offered English and pedagogy lessons at the Bureau, which were scheduled in the mornings when the teachers were free. Union members, however, believed that the requirement was designed to favor native-born, American-trained teachers over them. They rankled at the thought that younger teachers, often with a weaker command of
Hebrew and less familiarity with the textual sources, could immediately obtain permanent licenses.\textsuperscript{28}

It did not help matters that Benderly was fairly transparent in his hope that the American teachers would one day dominate the profession, although he was quick to add that such a day was far off. For the foreseeable future the demand for qualified teachers would easily outweigh supply.\textsuperscript{29} Such reassurances did not quell the immigrant teachers’ fear of economic competition from the younger teachers. In the summer of 1912 the licensing board’s credibility was compromised when it lost the participation of its Orthodox rabbinical representative, Rabbi Moses Z. Margolies, spiritual leader of the affluent Kehilath Jeshurun synagogue and chairman of the board of education at the Uptown Talmud Torah. Its fate was all but sealed when Hebrew Teachers Union members resolved not to appear before it for certification. By 1915 it had ceased to function.\textsuperscript{30}

The Cautionary Story of Harry Fischel and the “Sanhedrin of Mt. Morris Park”

Another source of dissention came from immigrant Orthodox rabbis who felt their traditional prerogatives as arbiters of Jewish education were being compromised. Led by Rabbis Margolies and Philip Klein of Congregation Ohab Zedek on the Lower East Side, they adeptly capitalized on general community frustration with the Bureau’s discriminatory Talmud Torah funding practices. Championing the cause of the smaller Talmud Torahs, the rabbis folded their plea for equity into a broader argument about the nefarious intentions of the Bureau, which was also accused of diluting Talmud Torah education by shortening hours, favoring Americanized teachers, and centering the curriculum on Hebrew language acquisition using the natural method. Naturally, among their demands was the creation of a mechanism for Orthodox rabbinical supervision of the schools. The rabbis’ actions on the educational front were intimately tied up with political machinations in the other areas of Kehillah work, most importantly efforts to communalize the supervision of kashruth. When in 1912 the Kehillah organized a Vaad Horabbonim (Board of Orthodox Rabbis) to oversee its kashruth certification program, and agreed to fund a number of positions for kashruth supervisors and district judges, the rabbis in turn reached a truce with the Bureau. But after the kashruth program disintegrated and the Kehillah cut its funding for the rabbinic board, the rabbis renewed their offensive.\textsuperscript{31}

The disagreement turned particularly ugly at a convention of the newly independent Vaad Horabbonim in May 1914 when its leaders accused Konovitz,
principal of the Bureau-affiliated Downtown Talmud Torah, of being a former Christian missionary. The explosive charge was not new. It was based on letters that the Vaad had received two and a half years earlier from Romanian rabbis alleging that Konovitz was forced to leave Europe after confessing to them. At that time, the letters were brought to the attention of Magnes, who investigated and ultimately discarded the allegation. Konovitz insisted that he was an innocent “pawn in the game of communal politics” and provided documentary proof to back up his claim. At that time, the Vaad let the matter drop. But when relations with the Kehillah soured, it had no compunction about reviving the accusation.32

When the *Morgen Journal* printed an account of the rabbinical convention under the headline “Missionary as Principal of a Kehillah Talmud Torah,” an irate Magnes contacted his brother-in-law, Louis Marshall, a partner at the law firm of Guggenheimer and Untermyer, to inquire about whether the newspaper could be sued for slander. Magnes bemoaned the “merciless and so dishonorable . . . hounding of an upright, innocent man” and railed against “the spirit of the Inquisition . . . that now has broken loose against us.” Konovitz had no grounds for a libel suit, because he was not cited by name in the article. However, Marshall advised, the Kehillah as an incorporated entity had ample cause and standing to bring an action. Marshall wondered aloud whether a lawsuit might cow the *Morgen Journal*’s implacable publisher. Even if the suit were brought with the intention of settling out of court, it “would be quite likely to make Saphirstein squirm.” In the end, no action was taken, probably because Konovitz wanted to spare his wife and five children from the media spotlight. Magnes and Benderly must have also realized that even if the Kehillah ultimately prevailed in court, the lawsuit would be an unwelcome distraction that would likely be detrimental to the work of the Downtown Talmud Torah and the Bureau.33

But the seriousness with which Magnes and Benderly contemplated the action underscores the extent to which they believed that the rabbis and the *Journal* were damaging the Bureau’s reputation within the Orthodox community. Like the Hebrew Teachers Union, however, the Vaad was not strong enough to destroy the Bureau. Prominent modern Orthodox Jews, some of whom had close ties with Mordecai Kaplan, continued to support it. At that same 1914 Vaad Horabbonim meeting, for example, Harry Fischel, president of the Uptown Talmud Torah, accused the rabbis of hypocrisy, claiming that before the Bureau came along they had never interested themselves in the Talmud Torahs. The professional and lay leadership of the Bureau-affiliated Talmud Torahs were reluctant to cut their ties and did their best to shrug off intermittent controversies. When Vaad members pressured Rabbi M. Rabinowitz, a member of the board of directors of the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah, to disaffiliate, he demurred that “it would be a crime to
jeopardize the training of two thousand Jewish children on account of the Bureau of Education. The Bureau gave money and hardly interfered at all in the internal affairs of the institution—and the Talmud Torah needed money badly.\textsuperscript{34}

Fischel’s tenure as president of the Uptown Talmud Torah epitomized the tensions within the Orthodox community over the efficacy of the Bureau’s activities. The real estate magnate, who prided himself on embracing technological progress and modernization without compromising on his observance of the Sabbath and adherence to Jewish dietary laws, similarly resolved to “combine the ideas of Judaism and Americanism in the management of the [Uptown Talmud Torah] Association.” Benderly found a keen ally in him. Shortly after Fischel assumed office in 1911, the Bureau published its standardized curriculum for the Talmud Torahs, which will be discussed in chapter 4. Fischel enthusiastically offered to pioneer the program at the Uptown Talmud Torah. According to Fischel’s memoirist, the cooperative relationship with the Bureau won the school favorable publicity and applications skyrocketed, far exceeding the number of available seats. In a single year enrollment grew from 1,275 to 1,707 pupils.\textsuperscript{35}

Fischel supported an expansive vision of the Talmud Torah as a youth center. He enlisted the support of Jacob Schiff, who offered the school $25,000 toward the erection of a West Side branch just north of Central Park on Lenox Avenue and 115th Street. The new building included club rooms, a library, a children’s synagogue, and a gymnasium as well as classrooms with a capacity for about six hundred students. The satellite branch was specifically designed to attract a more affluent demographic—the children of tradition-minded nouveau riche families who had recently moved into the Lenox Avenue–Mount Morris Park neighborhood—and Fischel anticipated that it would be self-supporting. In addition, Fischel personally funded an addition to the main building on East 111th Street, which likewise served as a recreational center.\textsuperscript{36}

Fischel’s West Side branch of the Uptown Talmud Torah was an early, bold attempt to realize Benderly’s conception of a modernized Talmud Torah that inadvertently highlighted the considerable social and political obstacles that confronted the Bureau at every turn. It immediately became a popular center for neighborhood youth and young adults. But despite its up-to-date facility, progressive curriculum, and Fischel’s recruitment of one of Benderly’s most promising protégés, Alexander Dushkin, as principal, the school struggled to attract its target population. This so-called “rich man’s Annex” had a difficult time shaking the Talmud Torah stigma of being a poor man’s school. Fischel reasoned that “a modern educational program in conformity with the spirit of times” would appeal to wealthier families. He considered it vital that the children of the “well-to-do class” receive a thorough Jewish education since he viewed them as the future

The New York Bureau  51
Jewish communal leaders and philanthropists. However, wealthier families were unaccustomed to sending their children to any type of religious school. Those who sufficiently cared about their children’s Jewish education tended to hire private tutors.37

Just when the school’s recruitment efforts on the West Side of Harlem began to show signs of modest but steady progress, another problem came to the fore. Dissention between modern Orthodox and traditionalist factions on the board of directors, which had plagued the term of Fischel’s predecessor, once again bubbled to the surface. Older traditionalists resented the cooperative relationship that Fischel forged with the Bureau. They were suspicious of the progressive pedagogical reforms that it peddled and resented what they perceived as the Bureau’s imperious and meddlesome approach. As historian Jeffrey Gurock aptly explained, “They did not share the new elite’s belief that the old world shell of Orthodox religious educational practices could be removed without endangering the essence and the future of traditional faith.” Fischel himself was less charitable in a private letter to Jacob Schiff. These men were “of the old fashioned type who believed that the only way to give children a Jewish education is by teaching them in the same way as they were taught twenty-five years ago in Russia. And it is the same men who have always held back the progress of the institution at all times.”38

Fischel was an autocrat, and some of the opposition was fueled by his overbearing posture with the board. Privately he confided to Schiff that his high-handed tactics were necessary in order to “take the institution out of chaos and transform it to an up-to-date Talmud Torah run along the most modern and efficient system.” He added that “were it not for these autocratic methods, which I was compelled to use, it would have been impossible to connect our institution with the Bureau of Education and to accrue the benefits of their advice and cooperation and to accomplish so much for the thousands of the children who have derived the advantages of a modern Jewish education.”39

One flare-up occurred when Fischel purchased a stereopticon machine for the school on Benderly’s recommendation. The school was struggling to accommodate as many students as possible in its main branch. Benderly suggested that large numbers of younger children could be given preparatory classes focusing on holidays, history, and Bible stories twice or three times per week in the auditorium. Such instruction, he advised, would at once be made more attractive and effectual if accompanied by illustrative magic-lantern slides. The suggestion was warmly received by Fischel, who was able to seat hundreds of additional children. His opponents, however, believed that the innovation trivialized the subject matter by blurring the line between Torah and entertainment. They further objected to the actual slides, which included biblical scenes by artists such as Gustave Doré and
James Tissot. The images, they contended, were irreverent and sacrilegious because they violated the biblical injunction against making graven images. Raising their cudgels against “assimilation” and “apostasy,” antagonistic board members resorted to cutting the auditorium’s electrical wires to prevent the teacher from showing the lantern slides. 40

A similar howl of protest was heard when Fischel lent his support to the creation of a children’s synagogue equipped with a piano, even though the instrument was not used on the Sabbath. Hundreds of children were attracted to the synagogue and empowered by the opportunity to run their own services. Traditionalists, however, could see only the introduction of a theater-like atmosphere into a solemn, sacred space. A newspaper editorial aptly compared Fischel to Sysiphus, “perpetually laboring in pushing a stone uphill,” only to have it roll down to the bottom just when it was about to reach the summit. 41

All the while, the Morgen Journal, true to form, did its best to whip up traditionalist resentment and paranoia. The Bureau and Fischel were portrayed as tools of uptown philanthropists, who were intent on meddling with the Talmud Torah’s curriculum. With “the power of money” on its side, the Bureau was forcing its snake oil on the powerless masses. “All sorts of plans are discussed, except the very best plan, namely, to leave the Jewish religious education in the hands of the religious parents, and of those who want to help them,” the newspaper railed. “It occurs to no one that the ordinary Jew, who sends his children to the Talmud Torah, knows what he wants and is more entitled to make his own mistakes than to stand aside and watch the more serious mistakes made by others who understand him very little and sympathize with him even less.” In an editorial titled “The Root of the Trouble,” the Journal counseled: “Those who give their money for the Bureau to rule the Talmud Torah, do not deserve any gratitude, and cannot get it either. They will finally get tired of giving money. Then those institutions will again be managed according to the spirit of those who need them for themselves and for their children.” 42

Not one to brook dissention, Fischel demanded a vote of confidence from his board of directors at the school’s annual meeting in February 1914, and resigned when he did not receive its undivided support. Schiff and some of the modern Orthodox board members encouraged Fischel to reconsider, lest he hand a victory to “the Sanhedrin of Mt. Morris Park.” “I will say frankly that I should consider it nothing less than a calamity if unprogressive ideas within the Board were to force Mr. Fischel’s retirement,” Schiff exclaimed. His protests were echoed by Magnes: “If the Board of Directors are fighting about a method, if they are disputing over a dollar, if they disagree because they do not like the looks of a certain teacher or his accent, they should remember that, while they are airing their petty differences,
185,000 Jewish boys and girls are running around the streets of this city as little pagans and infidels without the opportunity for Jewish teaching and training.” But an exhausted Fischel refused to yield.43

“The Board of Directors in its entirety wishes you to know that it stands for Orthodox Jewish Education along modern lines,” the Talmud Torah’s officers wrote to Schiff, trying to reassure him in the aftermath of Fischel’s resignation. Schiff prophesied that the Jews of Harlem would “sweep over” the traditionalists who were “standing in the way of modern Orthodox Jewish education . . . like the ocean sometimes sweeps over a little island in a storm.” But Fischel’s successor, Henry Glass, tried to restore calm by keeping the Bureau at arm’s length from the Talmud Torah. Benderly put the best face on the resignation. “I have no doubt that you strengthened the cause of Jewish education considerably,” Benderly wrote to Fischel on the day after the meeting. “Instead of permitting all those petty things to go on in the dark, you forced a flood of light on the subject and you have once and for all made the issue clear. . . . I could see yesterday that the public was with you. The people demanded progress, for they have learned to their sorrow that the old way has never gotten their children to remain loyal to Judaism.” For Benderly, Fischel’s resignation and the Bureau’s loss of a foothold in the Uptown Talmud Torah represented a particularly painful setback in an ambitious plan to revamp Jewish education in New York City through cooperation with the largest and most stable Talmud Torahs.44
CHAPTER 3

A Few Good Men (and Women)

Modernizing the largest existing Talmud Torahs was only one element of Benderly’s lever approach to Jewish educational reform. From his earliest discussions about the Bureau with Magnes, Benderly envisioned that a significant investment of time and resources would be devoted to the operation of one or two laboratory schools where curricula, methods, and textbooks could be worked out with the expectation that they would garner accolades and quickly spread to other schools. He also viewed the laboratory schools as potential feeder schools for the recently launched Teachers Institute (TI) of the Jewish Theological Seminary, thereby addressing the dearth of qualified teachers while raising the overall level of preparedness of incoming students. For Benderly, teacher training and the professionalization of the Jewish teaching workforce was a sine qua non for successful Jewish educational reform. “The real task will be to supply institutions, the old and the new, with teachers that can use these better methods [piloted at the Bureau] successfully,” he explained. Benderly’s preference for a teaching force composed primarily of individuals who were raised and trained in the United States was already apparent in Baltimore. When asked to enumerate the qualifications of an effective Hebrew school teacher he routinely responded that the teacher “must, above all things, combine knowledge of Judaism with an understanding of the needs of American children.” Indeed, he went even further, arguing that it

Above: Leo Honor, Rebecca Aaronson Brickner, Israel Chipkin, and Albert Schoolman (first, third, fourth and sixth persons, left to right) with female friends, c. 1920. Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Newton Centre, MA.
was easier to tutor an Americanized teacher in Jewish studies than to provide a European-style teacher with an appreciation and understanding of the attitudes and psychology of American Jewish children.¹

Given his approach, Benderly naturally looked expectantly to the Teachers Institute. What he found, however, was a fledgling part-time operation. Classes for the 1909 inaugural class of thirty-four students were conducted three evenings a week at the Uptown Talmud Torah at East 111th Street by Mordecai Kaplan, Israel Friedlaender, and Rabbi Elias Solomon. Officially, requirements for admission included “a knowledge of Jewish subject matter equivalent to that obtained in a two years’ course supplementary to the regular training given in the various Talmud Torahs of this city,” as well as a high school diploma. In practice, however, the proficiency prerequisite could not be enforced, and students were divided into elementary and advanced sections. By necessity, instruction often took place on a rudimentary level, leading one contemporary critic to describe the Teachers Institute as little more than a glorified “Jewish secondary school rather than a professional training school for teachers.”²

Although the teacher-training school did not fall directly under his purview, Benderly regarded its expansion and upgrading as a central priority. In May 1911 Benderly wrote a detailed memorandum, in consultation with the Teachers Institute principal Mordecai Kaplan, in which he outlined plans to convert the school into a full-time program with daytime courses in Jewish subjects, pedagogical methods, English language, and American history and civics for prospective Talmud Torah teachers and current teachers incapable of passing the Bureau’s licensing exam. Weeknight “extension” courses along the lines presently offered would be reserved for aspiring Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders. Such courses could be expanded as well to satellite locations including Brooklyn and Newark, New Jersey. Admission standards would be strengthened and strictly enforced. In a dig at the present student body, Benderly suggested that, rather than diplomas, they should receive upon graduation certificates of attendance with an anecdotal evaluation of the quality of their work.³

He further proposed that the Institute be housed in its own downtown facility, within easy walking access to the Jewish theater district on Second Avenue and the Lower East Side. “Much of the dignity of the present Teachers’ Institute has been taken away from it by reason of the fact that it is regarded merely as a course of the Uptown Talmud Torah,” where the classes were held, he wrote. Finally, he envisioned “close cooperation” between the Bureau’s licensing board and the Institute. In a candid admission that lends credence to allegations of the Hebrew Teachers Union, Benderly explained that he wished to effectively convert the Institute into the primary source for Hebrew school teachers without unduly antagonizing the
European-trained teachers who were the mainstay of the present schools. While persons unconnected to TI would be permitted to sit for the Bureau’s licensing exam, Benderly asserted that “we may assume failure on the part of almost all presenting themselves to the License Board without previous preparation in the Teachers’ Institute.” He estimated that a reorganized and upgraded Teachers Institute would require a budget of about $17,000 per year.4

While TI was eventually expanded and upgraded, Benderly was given a clear signal from Jacob Schiff to back away from any scheme that appeared to bring the school under the Bureau’s sphere of influence. Benderly’s plans, however well conceived, were bound to antagonize the Jewish Theological Seminary’s president, Solomon Schechter. As a primary benefactor of the Seminary, Schiff was well aware of Schechter’s opposition to the Bureau, which stemmed from political territorialism as well as perceived ideological differences. Schechter even initially refused to allow the Institute to conduct courses in English, American history, and teaching methods for European-trained teachers, even though the Bureau was ready to defray the costs. The Bureau was forced to offer these courses on its own. But Schechter’s hostility aside, teacher training remained uppermost in Benderly’s

A Few Good Men  57
thoughts as he designed the Bureau’s laboratory schools. Benderly remained committed to utilizing the laboratory schools as “preparatory schools” for the Teachers Institute. Rather than concentrating on the primary grades, the schools were intended for youths between the ages of twelve and sixteen. An intensive three-year curriculum was designed to provide students with the necessary grounding to enter the Institute with advanced standing. By the mid- to late 1910s, Kaplan and Benderly took note of a steady improvement in the general caliber of the student body, which they attributed to the influx of Bureau-trained Hebrew high school graduates with a strong foundation in Hebrew language.5

In Search of a Few Good “College Men”

While Benderly looked to the Institute to train the rank-and-file teachers, he also wished to cultivate an elite group of educators, grooming them for future leadership positions in Jewish education. “Jewish education must be organized on a large scale by a body of professional workers who will devote their entire time to the study and the solution of the problem,” Benderly urged. Such pronouncements underscored the extent to which Benderly exemplified the quintessential school superintendent of the era who was certain that research carried out by scientific managers would “find practical answers to practical problems.” As David Tyack and Elisabeth Hanslot explained, “Whereas the educational evangelists of the mid-nineteenth century aroused the citizenry against evils, the administrative progressives talked increasingly of problems to be solved by experts.” If the Bureau was a demonstration of Magnes’s and Benderly’s internalization of the progressive-era faith in scientific management, these men realized that whatever progress they hoped to achieve would be isolated and short-lived without a crop of Jewish educational scientific managers to carry it forth. Unless the field as a whole was professionalized, the Bureau would be reduced to a voice crying out in the wilderness.6

Initially, Benderly’s thought was to recruit these individuals from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), a traditional yeshiva, which had been founded in 1896 on the Lower East Side.7 Benderly believed that he could entice the RIETS students to teach in his preparatory schools with promises to pay their way through college and provide them with a small salary. Mordecai Kaplan, whose dim view of “the general run of these men” left him with “little faith in this scheme,” quickly dissuaded Benderly from this plan. Instead, Kaplan urged Benderly to recruit from the pool of Jewish students at the City College of New York (CCNY) who were active in its Jewish culture and Zionist clubs.8

Kaplan quietly doubted whether Benderly would be able to assemble a sufficient number of young men with the requisite raw talent and passion for Jewish
life, but he was quick to send Benderly’s way anyone who seemed promising.⁹ The same year that Benderly arrived from Baltimore, Kaplan became involved in advising a group of students who wished to inaugurate a branch of the Menorah Society at CCNY. The Menorah Society for the Study and Advancement of Jewish Culture and Ideals, founded in 1906, was the brainchild of a cadre of Harvard University students led by Henry Hurwitz. From Cambridge, the Menorah idea rapidly spread to other college campuses, and an Intercollegiate Menorah Association was established in 1913.¹⁰

Menorahites made singularly promising Bureau recruits. In those days they viewed themselves as part of a loose movement of Jewish revivalists, a “saving remnant.” One scholar sympathetically characterized the societies as “oases of Jewish interest amidst the indifference to Jewish affairs which prevailed among the college sons of the immigrants.” The movement’s aims were broadly cultural rather than distinctly religious. While the movement did not insist on ideological purity—an in-house history defined Menorah as “neither orthodox nor reformed,
neither Zionist nor anti-Zionist”—most members were broadly sympathetic with the aims of cultural Zionism. They tended to view the Jewish world through an arguably simplistic binary frame; one was either an assimilationist or a survivalist. Menorahites, who naturally identified with the latter group, viewed the dissemination of Jewish culture as the surest way to combat the mind-set of those whom they associated with the former.11

Kaplan soon enlisted the assistance of Friedlaender and Magnes, who became cosponsors of the City College Menorah group. The students whom Kaplan, Friedlaender, and Magnes advised were a diverse lot. Some were the products of observant or Zionist homes; a few were involved in Zionist youth organizations such as the Dr. Herzl Zion Club. For these boys, Menorah was a natural extension of their existing commitments. Yet others were previously estranged from Judaism and found Menorah a vehicle for Jewish (re)engagement. The three men’s scouting on Benderly’s behalf was responsible for luring much of the Bureau’s early young talent, including Philip Kleinman, Mervin Isaacs, Louis Prashker, Julius Drachsler, and Leo Honor. Friedlaender’s connections with Young Judaea also netted important recruits including Barnett Brickner and Israel Chipkin.

Kaplan’s most celebrated “find” was Alexander Dushkin, an active Menorahite who was also president of the City College Zionist Society. In many respects Dushkin’s background was fairly typical of the group. He was born overseas but arrived in the United States while he was still a child. Prior to enrolling at ccny, he attended public school and one of New York City’s elite exam high schools. His family was observant but not rigorously Orthodox, and young Dushkin was actively engaged in Zionist and Jewish cultural activities.

Alexander Dushkin was born in Suwalki, near the Polish-Lithuanian border in 1890. His mother, Rachel, a homemaker who raised five children, was a pious Jew who fasted every Monday and Thursday. His father, William, was a maskil and a Zionist. Before the family immigrated, he was a teacher and principal; for five years he ran Suwalki’s community Talmud Torah, and later he opened a modernized khayder, where the traditional curriculum was supplemented with the study of modern Hebrew literature and other secular subjects including arithmetic and Russian language. He was the kind of man who habitually attended synagogue but with a secular book surreptitiously nestled behind the covers of his prayer book. Dushkin recalled once catching his father reading a Hebrew translation of Herbert Spencer’s Education during Yom Kippur services.12

As was true of many of his colleagues, Dushkin’s childhood in eastern Europe played a formative role in shaping his idealistic convictions. He imbibed Zionism and a love of Hebrew prose and poetry from his father’s modern khayder. Dushkin’s introduction to socialism came when he began attending a yeshiva or
advanced Talmud school in a nearby town. The older boys in the school devoured socialist pamphlets and dreamt of a Russia without the czar. “In those days, Russian Jews were sustained by three great dreams: escape to America, social revolution, and return to Zion,” Dushkin wrote in his memoir. “Singly and together these dreams formed the ferment of ideas which motivated the youth of my generation.” While Dushkin found his father in sympathy with socialism and revolutionary ideas, the elder Dushkin’s true hope was to relocate his family to the United States before his boys reached conscription age. Alexander’s elder sister Kate was sent to America first to help prepare the way. When enough money had been saved, the rest of the family followed in 1901.∞≥

Upon graduating from Harlem’s P.S. 171, Dushkin entered Townsend Harris Hall High School, at that time the New York City public school system’s most prestigious exam school. In the late nineteenth century, the school was populated mostly with the children of the city’s more established ethnic groups. The students tended to be constitutionally conservative, and their parents voted mostly Republican. By the turn of the century, the school’s ethnic composition was radically changing to reflect the influx of immigrants into New York City from southern and eastern Europe. Jews, in particular, flocked to Townsend Hall and its parent institution, City College, often bringing with them a devotion to socialism and an interest in progressive reform. By 1903, 75 percent of the student body was Jewish. The percentage would continue to climb until it surpassed 90 percent by 1920.∞∂

Enrollment in Townsend Harris Hall meant a guaranteed spot at City College, the poor man’s Harvard, which helps to explain why ambitious immigrant Jewish youth coveted admission. The workload was grueling. “It was work, work, work, three to four hours of homework each night. Holidays were used to cram for exams,” remembered one of Dushkin’s contemporaries. According to the school’s historian, however, the “yeshiva bahurs [scholars],” in particular, seemed to relish the competitive atmosphere. “[T]he students had almost an arrogant pride in attending a hard school—they worked.”∞∑

It was at Townsend Hall where Dushkin initially met Honor, Brickner, and Drachsler, all of whom he would work with closely at the Bureau and beyond, forging lifelong friendships spanning decades. Given the school’s dismissive approach to Deweyan-inspired educational reform, there is no small irony in Townsend Harris Hall’s role as a breeding ground for progressive Jewish educators. Even as the public school system under the leadership of Superintendent William Maxwell lent a sympathetic ear to the reformist voices emanating from Morningside Heights, most Townsend Harris Hall administrators and faculty members were unmoved. “We are teaching for college,” the school’s Academic Department sniffed. Philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen, whose teaching responsibilities in his early
years at CCNY included mathematics courses at Townsend Harris Hall, found its educational environment to be strict and inflexible. He criticized faculty, who seemed more concerned with grades and discipline than nurturing students’ intellectual curiosity. Instructors referred to their students as “men” rather than “boys” and treated them accordingly, routinely teaching their courses on a college level. One student who graduated in 1911 recalled that the “faculty were remote beings, a few were excellent teachers, but there was little personal interest in the students.”

Benderly’s protégés agreed that at Townsend Hall “teachers taught their subjects rather than their students.” Yet there is little evidence that they were consciously reacting to their high school experience when they later advanced a Jewish educational program that effectively repudiated the traditional educational model, with its emphasis on content transmission, for one that emphasized socialization and affective learning. On the contrary, Townsend Harris Hall was remembered fondly as a place where habits of mind and even habits of heart were cultivated. For example, the school’s humanities curriculum introduced Dushkin to the poetry of Walt Whitman and to an abstract appreciation of the transformative power of the outdoors and wilderness experiences. Albert Schoolman, who graduated from Townsend Hall in 1913, probably captured his friends’ prevailing attitude about the school when he wrote in his unfinished memoir, “It was the case of all study and no play makes ‘Jack’ a bright boy.” The pioneer of Jewish educational camping added: “The school was primarily a study institution with no program of recreation of any sort, which I did not miss since as a foreigner I had not yet been introduced to the typical athletic and other recreational programs of an American high school.”

Dushkin was preparing for a career in social work. A proficient cellist, he was planning to reach out to immigrant youth through music. Through his friendship with composer Blair Fairchild, he secured a position as club director at the Third Street Music School Settlement. Fairchild became a longtime patron and mentor to Dushkin’s violinist brother Samuel and was ready to pay Alex’s way through the New York School of Philanthropy (later to become Columbia University’s School of Social Work) when, in Dushkin’s words, “my guardian angel took hold of me by the hair of my head, as it were, and turned me around.”

Dushkin was already cognizant that many prominent social workers and settlement directors did not share his enthusiasm for ethnic survivalism. While at the music school he caught considerable flack when he published an editorial in its house publication urging young people not to alienate themselves from the culture of their immigrant parents. Dushkin had little patience for what Theodore Roosevelt would later call “100 percent Americanism.” At City College he joined both the Menorah and Zionist societies. The latter club, which was the smaller of the two,
Dushkin first visited on a whim. But when he found himself delivering a passionate Zionist oration at his first meeting, he recognized his deep-seated emotional identification not only with the Zionist project in Palestine but also with the hopes and aspirations of his parents. “I had the curious feeling as if someone else, my father, was speaking through me. Then and there the boys elected me president.”

Dushkin went on to spearhead an effort to introduce Hebrew-language instruction to City College’s curriculum. He circulated a petition, collecting the signatures of ninety students expressing interest in enrolling in Hebrew-language courses. Among the signatories were Leo Honor, Mervin Isaacs, Julius Drachsler, Philip Kleinman, and I. B. Berkson.

Significantly, Dushkin refused to see any conflict between his participation in what he called the pre–World War I Jewish “awakening,” including his budding interest in Zionism, and his “romantic passion” for “cosmopolitanism” and “the Religion of Man,” as expressed in Whitman’s poetry. At the same time that he was agitating for Hebrew, Dushkin’s favorite pastime was hiking with his close friend Berkson along the banks of the Hudson River near Tarrytown, carrying a copy of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in his backpack. Berkson recalled that Dushkin introduced him to Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road,” which served as their unofficial anthem.

From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master, total and absolute,
Listening to others, and considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me . . .

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Dushkin, his brothers, and Berkson spent one summer canoeing and portaging on the Fulton Chain of Lakes in the Adirondacks. The two buddies subsequently purchased their own canoe and spent many weekends camping and exploring the Palisades. Their love of the outdoors later influenced their decision to join with Albert Schoolman in cofounding Camp Modin, a Jewish-themed overnight camp in central Maine.

When Dushkin called on Kaplan one Friday evening to consult about a Menorah
program, the rabbi took the opportunity to steer him toward Benderly. Kaplan initiated the conversation by inquiring about Dushkin’s career plans. When Dushkin shared his desire to find a way to combine his love for music with settlement work, Kaplan demurred. “At once I began to plead with him that a man like him who seemed to be interested in Jewish things ought not to waste his powers on so vague and un-Jewish an activity as settlement work,” Kaplan wrote in his diary. “Forthwith, I mentioned to him the new field that was being opened up with the establishment of the Bureau of Jewish Education. I argued that there was no reason why he could not make a career in Jewish work.”

Kaplan shared with Dushkin the dismal findings of his recent Jewish education survey. It was a story about which Dushkin already had firsthand anecdotal knowledge. After his arrival in the United States, his father had tried, without success, to resume his career as a Jewish teacher. Ultimately, he and his wife opened a small store instead, although he supplemented their income by moonlighting as a private tutor. Alex Dushkin was surprised when Kaplan expressed hope that the Kehillah’s education work, under the guidance of Samson Benderly, could turn the situation around. Mindful of his father’s bitter experience, Dushkin agreed to meet with Benderly, but only with great hesitation.

“Dr. Benderly impressed me as a person combining grandiloquent fantasy with realistic engineering,” Dushkin later recalled. “Despite my skeptical approach, I was overwhelmed by his impassioned, urgent optimism as well as by his reasonable analysis of the tasks ahead.” Before Dushkin had time to reconsider, Benderly adroitly enlisted him to teach at the Bureau’s preparatory school at the ymha on Ninety-second Street and Lexington Avenue. His first day on the job was “a nerve-racking failure.”

I faced my first class of some forty boys aged 11–13, and they “rode me hard.” On my way home I was prepared to tell my parents that I tried teaching and “it was not for me.” But I decided to try it again. The next day I was teaching another class. I got on top of the situation, enjoyed the change immensely and have been at it ever since.

Other Menorahites and Zionist Society members were similarly enticed by Benderly’s charms. Toward the end of his four-and-a-half-decade career in Jewish education Leo Lazarus Honor still retained “vivid memories” of his initial meeting with Benderly. Indeed, Honor wrote that “the emotionally charged voice of ‘the Chief,’” asking the four questions that he routinely used to gauge the interest of potential new recruits, still resounded in his inner ears.

Honor first came to Kaplan’s attention in 1911, when he was elected to the
presidency of CCNY’s Menorah chapter in his sophomore year. Shortly thereafter, when Kaplan delivered a series of lectures for the Menorahites, he came to know Honor on a personal level and recommended him to Benderly. Broadly speaking, Honor’s childhood was similar to that of Dushkin, although the Honor family was financially more secure. Leo was born in 1894. His father, Hirsch Honor, was a physician who transplanted his medical practice from Volhynia, Russia (contemporary western Ukraine), to New York City. Hirsch brought his wife and three children to the United States in 1901, when Leo was seven years old. Hirsch was a devoted Zionist and established with his wife a home that was characterized by a “broad Jewish consciousness” and a “traditional Lithuanian scholarly outlook.” Leo was enrolled in public school and graduated from Townsend Harris Hall in 1910 and from CCNY at the age of twenty, in 1914.26

If City College proved a fertile recruiting ground for the Bureau, so too did the Americanized Zionist youth movement that was coalescing at roughly the same time. Here the crucial recruitment agent was Israel Friedlaender, who became head of the Federation of American Zionists’ educational program in 1906 and was instrumental in convincing the organization that the creation of a Zionist-oriented yet Americanized youth arm was critical to the movement’s future. One promising lad that caught Friedlaender’s attention was Barnett Brickner, a Townsend Harris Hall student who became president of the Dr. Herzl Zion Club’s senior branch in 1908.27

Barnett Brickner, the son of a recently immigrated dry-goods merchant and his wife, was born in 1892 and grew up on the Lower East Side. Brickner’s parents, fearing that their children would be seduced by an unsalutary element in the New York ghetto, directed them “on the path of Jewishness,” encouraging them to become involved in religious, intellectual, and Zionist activities. Brickner’s mother, Bessie Furman Brickner, had had a brief stage career in the Yiddish theater on New York’s Second Avenue, and she imbued her children with an appreciation of the arts and literature. She had a particularly strong influence on Barnett, who was born with anatomic leg length inequality, or a “shortened leg,” and spent much of his free time indoors, often in her company.28

Whatever insecurity Brickner might have felt because of his congenital defect was mitigated by his outgoing personality. Brickner had a flair for the dramatic, which he probably inherited from his mother. Unable to play sports, he gravitated toward other social and recreational outlets. When he was about thirteen years old, he became active in the Dr. Herzl Zion Club, where he honed his considerable forensic and oratorical skills. Spirited debates on topics of Jewish interest were a favorite club pastime and, along with the club’s frequent door-to-door fundraising campaigns and neighborhood soapbox speechifying, they allowed Brickner
myriad opportunities to exercise his silver tongue. Brickner’s gift for public speaking won him the nickname “Boy Orator” and the notice of Zionist leaders, including Friedlaender. In 1908, when he was only sixteen, he was invited to address a meeting of the Federation of American Zionists at Cooper Union. According to his biographer, Brickner delivered a “masterful oration” that helped persuade attendees to support the creation of a junior branch of their movement. Friedlaender became the first president of the youth organization, which became known as Young Judaea.≥

Benderly and Magnes put Brickner’s speaking talents to good use in the summer of 1911, when their campaign to raise money for the Bureau went into full swing. Brickner was sent to the Arverne section of the Rockaway Peninsula, a predominantly Jewish seaside resort community near the southern tip of Long Island, to lead services and propagandize on behalf of the Bureau. The newly bourgeois, mostly first-generation modern Orthodox Jews who summered there, were impressed with Brickner’s ability to slip effortlessly between English and Yiddish. His presentations were punctuated by a series of slides, custom designed by Benderly, graphically depicting the state of Jewish education in New York in pie charts, tables, and bar graphs. The slides lent Brickner an air of scientific authority while his public speaking talents provided the drama necessary to enwrap his audience. Indeed, he made such a favorable impression that Benderly dispatched him on subsequent speaking engagements as well as follow-up visits with individual subscribers.≥

Brickner’s oratorical skills were likely an important factor in Benderly’s decision to appoint him director of the Bureau’s extension activities while he was still a sophomore at Columbia. In those early years, the cornerstone of the Bureau’s extension work involved mass assemblies in auditoriums and theaters around Manhattan and Brooklyn, where staff members led elementary-age groups in Jewish songs and told Bible stories with the aid of magic-lantern slides. Older students heard lectures on Jewish history and contemporary life and prepared holiday pageants and entertainments for the younger children. Nathan Brilliant, who was at that time a teacher at one of the public schools where the Bureau rented space for its extension work, recalled his introduction to Brickner: One day while in the midst of a lesson, Brilliant was called out of his classroom by a colleague who urged him to “gaze at the spectacle in an assembly hall on the floor below.” Brilliant looked down and was immediately enthralled by the site of Brickner addressing about two hundred students. What was striking to Brilliant was the young audience’s level of engagement. Brickner “was holding his audience spellbound. Boys and girls, often unruly on such occasions, were listening to the burly young teacher as though they were transfixed.” As Brilliant observed Brickner in
action that day, he had no way of knowing that they would later become close colleagues at the Anshe Chesed Euclid Avenue Temple in Cleveland, Ohio, where Brickner served as rabbi from 1925 until his death in 1958 and Brilliant worked as educational director from 1927 to 1946.31

As one of the few early members of Benderly’s coterie to be born in the United States, Brickner spoke English unencumbered by an immigrant accent, and this heightened his credibility among the youth. Another native-born early recruit was Dushkin’s childhood friend Isaac Baer Berkson,32 who would distinguish himself as the philosopher of the group. Berkson was born in Brooklyn to Henry and Jennie Berkson in 1891. Jennie (née Berkman) grew up in Suwalki, where her family was cordial with the Dushkins. The friendship was renewed in New York, particularly after the Berksons moved from Boro Park to the Dushkins’ Harlem neighborhood in 1904. Isaac developed a platonic crush on Alex Dushkin, even as he looked down on many of his other Jewish public school classmates, whom he dismissed as “assimilationists.” “They didn’t have the scholarly background that my family had and, indeed, they didn’t appreciate Jewish life. At the same time, they spoke English with a nasal twang, which bothered me. I was a little bit of an anti-Semite at the time,” he admitted. Dushkin, in contrast, exuded an easygoing comfort in his own Jewish skin. Berkson was also attracted to his rakish good looks and intellectual curiosity. A year older than Isaac, Alex became his model. Berkson somewhat sheepishly remembered choosing his classes, his friends, and his club affiliations based on Dushkin’s example.33

Berkson’s embarrassment was no doubt a function of his later falling out with Dushkin in the 1930s. Yet his interest in promoting a Jewish renascence was genuine and enduring. When Dushkin brought Berkson to his first Zionist club meeting at ccny, the experience was transformative. “As a youth I believed the Greeks gave the world beauty, the Romans law and the Jews religion and ethics. We felt that the renascence of the Jewish people would bring a renascence of the world.” He added: “We were very romantic at the time, and at different times everybody—well, many young men—went in for a cause, either socialism or Zionism. It was a period of causes, and I was completely enthused by the thing.” Berkson’s home life helped to orient his direction. His haberdasher father kept his business open on Saturdays, even while his mother ran a fairly traditional, kosher Jewish home. A steady assortment of relatives from the “Old Country” cycled through the Berkson home as they acclimated themselves to New York, including Jennie’s Talmudist brother and a couple of maskilic Hebrew-speaking cousins, ensuring that Isaac was exposed to a richness of Jewish culture. One of the cousins, David Epstein, tutored twelve-year-old Isaac in biblical Hebrew grammar. Berkson also attended a traditional Talmud Torah.34
Interestingly, despite his attachment to Dushkin, the latter was not directly responsible for introducing Berkson to Benderly. Dushkin took for granted that Berkson would enter his family’s business, an assumption to which Berkson himself reflexively subscribed. Almost alone among his friends, Isaac was exempt from holding down an after-school job to help contribute to his family’s income. Berkson’s family was by no means rich, but he was better off financially than most of his peers. Nevertheless, the work of the Kehillah and the Bureau in particular intrigued him, appealing to his sense of idealism and Zionist fervor. Berkson eventually joined the Bureau staff a year after Dushkin, in 1911, when he was encouraged to meet Benderly by Philip Kleinman, another Bureau worker who later pursued a career in the Conservative rabbinate.

Although Berkson never reported his parents’ response to his decision to trade the security of their haberdashery for an economically precarious career in Jewish education, the career choices of at least some of Benderly’s young recruits met with reprobation at home. Israel Chipkin described his parents’ severe disappointment upon hearing the news. “They could not quite comprehend why I should consent to become a miserable melamed [Hebrew teacher] when I could become a respectable rabbi. After all I did owe something of respect to the reputation of my rabbinical ancestry and baalebatische American uncles.” Ever the dutiful son, Chipkin’s act of defiance against his parents caused him considerable heartache and guilt. But as with his peers, he was deeply inspired by his interview with Benderly, who appealed to his idealism and conviction of mission to help stimulate a Jewish revival. “There was something of the Hasidic rebe in Benderly and he molded us into a camaraderie of believers,” Dushkin recalled. “We considered ourselves a band of pioneers who were ‘hastening the footsteps of the Messiah.’”

It was this romantic spirit that sustained these young men and other early members of the Benderly group, including Mervin Isaacs, Louis Prashker, and sixteen-year-old Rebecca Aaronson. She accompanied Benderly from Baltimore, Hebrew typewriter in tow, to serve as his personal secretary. This same spirit likewise animated the career trajectories of many who later joined the coterie, including Emanuel Gamoran, Leah Klepper, Hajnalka Langer, Samuel Margoshes, Albert Schoolman, Mordecai Soltes, and Libbie Suchoff.

Of Benderly Boys and Benderly Girls

One of the earliest “Benderly girls” to join the group, Libbie Suchoff, was born in Luptsch, a town outside Minsk, Russia, in 1891 and immigrated to the United States with her family in 1903. She came to the attention of Benderly indirectly, through the founder of Young Judaea, David Schneeberg, who was concerned
about the prevalence of soup kitchen Christian missionaries on the Lower East Side. Schneeberg recognized an uncommon charisma in the young Suchoff and asked her to spearhead an Anti-Missionary League. Suchoff’s success at organizing youth activities impressed Benderly, who was looking to expand the Bureau’s extension work. Why split her time between the Anti-Missionary League and her “day job” as a public school teacher when she could completely devote her energies to saving Jewish youth by working for the Bureau? At first, Suchoff hesitated and worked with Benderly only after public school hours. However, in 1915, she joined the Bureau full-time and helped to initiate an experiment in after-school Jewish clubs with adolescent girls, which eventually came into full flower as the co-ed League of the Jewish Youth of America.37

Other female Bureau workers found their way to Benderly through the Teachers Institute. One of the earliest was Hajnalka Langer, who was born in 1889, grew up in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, and graduated Hunter College and Teachers Institute in 1912. Benderly employed her as a handicrafts teacher. “My own specialties in the Bureau work, as conducted by our chief,” she recalled years
later, “were to supplement the verbal and memory work in the curricula, with working materials for the ‘whole child,’ work with the hands and feet. [Bureau coworker] Elma Ehrlich’s nickname for my department was ‘limbcraft.’” In addition to “limbcraft,” Langer directed the Jewish Homemakers’ Association, an inspired but short-lived division of the Bureau dedicated to teaching young mothers how to Judaize their homes and initiate Jewish activities with their young children. It was reincarnated in the late 1920s as the Jewish Home Institute.

The question of whether these women “merit the appellation Benderly boy” has lately attracted the attention of some researchers. From the outset, it is important to acknowledge that, as far as we know, this matter is not one that concerned the women themselves. Social conventions dictated that, with few exceptions, women inhabited secondary or supportive roles and, ultimately, gave up their professional work to raise children. The women at the Bureau appeared to internalize these expectations. Benderly certainly took them to heart when preparing his disciples. He encouraged his most promising male protégés to do graduate work at Columbia University Teachers College in preparation for administrative positions but had no such expectations for the women.

In at least one case, that of Leah Klepper, we know that Benderly himself considered her to be on par with his male disciples. Klepper, who graduated from T in 1915, became a principal of one of the Bureau’s girls’ preparatory schools and served as a teaching coach to scores of novices. In the mid-1920s Benderly announced that Klepper had been admitted into the “Senior Group of young men” and was invited to attend his consultation meetings. Notice that Benderly unreflectively used gender as a marker for his closest advisers. Klepper was an anomaly; her elevation seemed to indicate that though her gender was not a disqualifier, her circumstances were unusual. Significantly, Klepper never married and remained in the field long after many of her female colleagues departed. Langer, by contrast, who appeared to acquire special status during the Bureau’s heyday, followed the conventional pattern and left the working world after marrying Herman Winer in 1920. She returned to the Bureau’s successor, the Jewish Education Committee, as an early childhood specialist a few years after her husband died, in 1936.

The cases of Rebecca Aaronson Brickner and Libbie Suchoff Berkson are less clear-cut. Brickner attended classes with the boys as well as Benderly’s early morning meetings. Aside from serving as Benderly’s personal secretary, and as an effective recruiting agent of adolescent girls, she took her turn teaching both at the Bureau’s girls’ schools and in an experimental program for Reform educational settings, at Temple Emanu-El. But Brickner later embraced the role of rabbi’s wife and operated within its confines. Although she would have been fully capable of running the religious school in her husband’s Cleveland synagogue, she preferred
to engage in volunteer work, focusing much of her attention on an assortment of women's organizations. Yet Shuly Schwartz observed that although Brickner “rarely took on paid leadership positions in her own right and didn’t describe herself as a Benderly ‘boy,’ she continued to see herself as a professional educator.” Schwartz concluded: “Though exercising power like a ‘girl,’ she very much belonged to the maverick group of Jewish educators known as the Benderly boys.”

Regardless of whether Benderly would have been persuaded by Schwartz’s argument, he certainly acted paternalistically toward Brickner, who was only thirteen when she began teaching for him in Baltimore and sixteen when she accompanied him to New York. He tenderly called her by the nickname “Tobacco,” perhaps because of her combustible personality, and felt comfortable letting his public guard down in her presence. In a 1927 letter Benderly lamented that the lack of intimate time during a recent visit to Cleveland had prevented him from “ventilating some of the good odorous jokes.” He promised that “some day we will make it up.” Benderly also thought nothing of commenting on sensitive subjects like Brickner’s weight, which would have been considered terribly rude unless he was a virtual relation. “I do not want you to get too fat and clumsy,” he scolded her, only months after the birth of her first child. “You know I always like quicksilver more than molasses.” He and his wife Hemdah remained close with Rebecca throughout
their lives. They were “Ab” and “Immo” to her, years before these terms of endearment gained currency among other group members.\textsuperscript{43}

A still stronger argument can be made for the admission of Libbie Suchoff, who, even after marrying Isaac Berkson in 1919, never entirely retired from professional life. Libbie codirected the League of the Jewish Youth with Chipkin until her departure for Palestine in 1921. When the couple returned in 1923 and moved to Philadelphia, where Isaac became assistant director of the Associated Talmud Torahs, under Ben Rosen, Libbie worked as a secretary and teacher and, ultimately, director of a Hebrew high school. At the same time, she began running the girls’ camp at Camp Modin and eventually became the camp’s director in the late 1930s. Still, there was no doubt in her mind that her primary duty, during the first decades of her marriage, was raising her three children. When she worked, it was primarily to supplement Isaac’s modest income. Her domestic responsibilities were complicated by Isaac’s cerebral, absent-minded nature, and emotional volatility. “She had the unpleasant role of being the prophet’s priest, smoothing over the feathers which he inevitably ruffled and telling him, ‘We’ll work it out,’ taking the worrying on her own shoulders,” explained Isaac’s biographer, Henry Skirball. Libbie gave Isaac “the pattern of life he felt he required to accomplish his work.” Incidentally, this included her tours of duty at Modin, which was co-owned by the Berksons as a financial investment (see chapter 10) but failed to sustain Isaac’s interest beyond the 1920s.\textsuperscript{44}

Other women, many of whom were graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Friedlaender Extension Classes, were likewise employed by the Bureau as teachers, club leaders, tuition collectors, recruiters, and clerical workers. They were part of the larger Benderly orbit, which Langer and others referred to as the “Bureau bunch.” But they were not admitted into the inner Benderly circle, which adopted the name Chayil. A few, for instance Bertha Singer (TJ, 1920) and Mamie Goldsmith (Friedlaender Extension Classes, 1922), remained associated with the Benderly group throughout their lives when they married members of the inner circle. Others kept up a relationship through the Jewish Teachers Association or maintained social and even philanthropic contacts with the group. By the mid- to late 1910s, Kaplan and Benderly took note of a steady improvement in the general caliber of the TJ student body.\textsuperscript{45}

The Teachers Institute also brought a number of men into the Benderly orbit, including Schoolman and Gamoran. Albert Schoolman was born in Suwalki, Lithuania, in 1894 and immigrated to the United States shortly after his father’s death in 1907. While Albert Schoolman had social connections to a few of the Benderly boys—his parents were friendly with the Berkson family in Suwalki and maintained the relationship in New York—he was preparing for a career in engi-
neering. His interest in Jewish education was piqued only because his Harlem apartment bedroom window happened to open on classroom windows of the Uptown Talmud Torah. Schoolman became intrigued by the classroom procedures that he often witnessed in the late afternoons and early evenings. “What interested me particularly,” he remembered, “were several classes of high school boys and girls and older persons studying with a youngish teacher at times in animated fashion. As days, perhaps weeks passed, I became more and more intrigued by what was happening. Finally I went to the office of the school and asked about those classes. I was told it was a branch of the Jewish Teachers Institute, conducted by Jewish Theological Seminary of America.” The teacher was Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who encouraged Schoolman to enroll in his program. By 1916 Schoolman was directing one of the Bureau’s preparatory schools.46

Emanuel Gemoraman was born to a Hasidic family in the Ukrainian city of Belz in 1895 and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1907. Family members shortened their surname shortly to Gamoran after arriving in the country but were proud to retain the essential nature of the patronymic, which denoted Talmudic learning. A measure of the family’s commitment to traditional study was their decision to enroll “Monish” in the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Talmudic Academy rather than public school. Schoolman commented that “Emanuel remained a ‘Gemoraman’ all his life.”47

Like Schoolman, Gamoran lost his father at a young age. His Uncle Itzik, the patriarch of the family in the United States, recognized the young Gamoran’s facility for Torah learning and brought him at the age of fifteen to the Jewish Theological Seminary with the intention of enrolling him in rabbinical school. Informed that Gamoran was too young, Itzik agreed that Gamoran should complete the Teachers Institute course as a preparatory program, whereupon he could continue in the rabbinical school. But Emanuel proved to be a natural teacher and displayed organizational skills that brought him to Benderly’s attention. In short order, he entered the typical Bureau apprenticeship, which included turns at classroom teaching, school administration, club leadership, and supervision of extension activities. Soon after, under Benderly’s supervision, he and Mordecai Soltes organized and managed a popular after-school club organization, the Circle for Jewish Children.48 Other young men who later became fixtures in Jewish education, including Samuel Dinin (T1, 1920), Harry Coopersmith (T1, 1921), Judah Lapson (T1, 1921), and Azriel Eisenberg (T1, 1922), also apprenticed at the New York Bureau.

Although Benderly invested great energy into training his protégés, he could not rely solely on them, and the largely female support staff, to run the Bureau office. He needed to turn to more mature educators who were broadly sympathetic with
his goals and possessed the requisite administration skills and Hebraic knowledge. Some of these men were modern Talmud Torah principals eager to supplement their incomes. Unlike the Benderly boys, they were not only born in Europe but also trained there and had gained their initial work experience in the modernized *khaydersons* before immigrating to the United States. Their numbers included the Hebrew poets Simon and Pesach Ginsburg, who worked in the Textbook Department, Israel Konovitz, who directed the Department of Statistical Research, and Joseph Bragin, who ran the Hebrew high school. Among the most influential members of this group in the field of Jewish education was Zevi Scharfstein, who directed the Bureau's Textbook Department in the mid-1910s. Scharfstein later became a professor at the Teachers Institute, the longtime editor of the Hebrew teachers' journal *Shevile Ha-Hinukh*, and one of the most prolific Hebrew textbook writers in the United States.

As a rule, these men tended to be less enamored of Benderly than were the “boys” of the younger generation. But the Bureau director's enthusiasm was infectious, and even the seasoned educator Scharfstein could not help but be charmed—at least initially. Scharfstein recalled his first meeting with Benderly at the Bureau offices in the United Hebrew Charities building on Second Avenue: “I saw before me a short, stout, bespectacled man with a stubbly beard.” Scharfstein noted that his nearsighted eyes were playful, if slightly condescending. Benderly buttered Scharfstein up in eloquent Hebrew, complimenting his articles and calling him a kindred spirit, “a progressive who understood the American scene.” Then he offered Scharfstein a job, “hinting at the glorious future awaiting me.” Scharfstein was impressed by the bustle in the offices and the file cabinets full of records. “I had prayed for such a situation for years, but Hebrew education was disorganized everywhere with no funds for central offices. Now I could fulfill my work as I had dreamed.”

During their second meeting the pair spoke for three hours. “Benderly was a talker, his mouth a gushing spring.” They spoke about a wide range of issues, including philosophy, adolescent psychology, and the problem of the Orthodox, and Scharfstein returned home elated. Then his wife began asking practical questions, such as how much he would be making. Scharfstein realized he had forgotten to ask. “Who in his moment of happiness could think of such dull matters?” Alas, reality dawned. The salary was meager, and Scharfstein's wife was forced to work in order to make ends meet. More significantly, Scharfstein came to realize that Benderly's ambitions far exceeded his means. During his eight years at the Bureau, Scharfstein was responsible for a number of achievements, including a Hebrew children's magazine, *Shaharut* (The Dawn), which was published for five years, and a revised and much-improved edition of the Bureau's Hebrew primer,
Sefer Ha-Talmid. The latter was probably the first Hebrew textbook to draw entirely on the American environment in its stories and exercises.  

The Education of the Benderly Boys
Despite Benderly’s much-touted goal of raising teacher salaries, even his most talented young male recruits still earned about one-third of what the average male urban public school teacher was paid (and about 70 percent of what the average female urban public school teacher earned). As principal in 1913 of one of the Bureau’s preparatory schools for girls, which involved teaching six classes three days a week, supervising teachers, communicating with parents, coaching dramatics and music, lecturing at assemblies, leading religious services twice on Sabbaths, and running the school office without clerical help, Israel Chipkin made only fifty dollars per month, which was paid irregularly since the Bureau was perennially short of funds. Even experienced staff members, such as Scharfstein, were earning only twenty-five dollars per week.

If Bureau salaries were arguably skimpy, Benderly took care to pump sufficient monies into a scholarship program that allowed his most promising “college men” to continue their studies upon graduation at Columbia University Teachers College. The Bureau also made occasional loans to its employees to help tide them over the summer, when teaching opportunities were scarce. As one disciple acknowledged, these financial incentives, “given early and at the right time,” were decisive “in binding the young men and women whom he favored, to careers in Jewish education.” Between 1911 and 1918, eighteen Bureau staff members engaged in graduate-level study at Teachers College. Nine members of this early group went on to complete doctorates.

Benderly had multiple reasons for encouraging his protégés to study at Teachers College. Foremost on his mind was his goal of professionalizing the field of Jewish education and his conviction that graduate degrees from a premier education school boasting marquee faculty such as John Dewey and Edward Thorndike would shore up the credibility of his disciples, particularly in the eyes of his German Jewish funders and the general education world. No doubt he also believed that these young men and women required grounding in educational theory, behavioral psychology, organizational management, and pedagogical methods if they were to become future educational leaders. But his advice was controversial even within his inner circle of advisers. Mordecai Kaplan made no secret of his preference that men like Dushkin and Berkson enroll in the Jewish Theological Seminary’s rabbinical program rather than doctoral study at Teachers College. “What a boon it would have been if the strongest men among [Benderly’s disciples]
had seen that the only logical step for them to take was to combine the rabbinate with the function of the educator,” Kaplan wrote. “But instead of the stronger men in that group turning to the ministry, the weaker men, weaker in both character and mentality, have grown displeased with their prospects in the Bureau, and have applied to me for advice with regard to entering the Seminary. This means that the rabbinate which is the only feasible form of effective Jewish spiritual leadership is to be in the hands of weaklings, while the better and stronger men who might have joined it, if not for the misguided fanatical tendency of Jewish nationalism, are doomed to become mere cogs in the philanthropic educational machinery.”

In Alexander Dushkin’s candid assessment, Benderly feared that if he sent his “boys” to the Jewish Theological Seminary, they “would be seduced by the more glamorous openings in the rabbinate.” But there were profound ideological reasons why Benderly dismissed Kaplan’s advice. Benderly might have styled himself after a Hasidic rebe in the way he interacted with his disciples, but he was also deeply anticlerical, rebelling against his pietistic upbringing in Safed. The Hasidic melodies of his youth still had the power to bring him to tears, and Kabbalistic thought continued to shape his conception of Jewish peoplehood. Yet he resisted a congregational paradigm for Jewish communal life, gravitating instead to a more secular ethnic conception of Jewish identity premised on a Hebraic-nationalist revival.

JTS’s president, Solomon Schechter, who from the outset was inclined to view the Kehillah and the Bureau in competitive terms, was irate that Benderly was steering his disciples away from the rabbinical program. The Bureau was organized while Schechter was on sabbatical leave in South Africa in the 1910–11 academic year, depriving him of the opportunity to smother it in its cradle. Deeply jealous of the Seminary’s prerogatives, its aspiration to be the “focal point of the educational as well as religious endeavors of American Jewry,” and mindful that JTS and the Bureau were competing for funding among a largely identical pool of donors, Schechter could not understand Kaplan’s and Friedlaender’s enthusiasm for Benderly and the Bureau. He was also deeply suspicious of Benderly’s secular brand of cultural Zionism. As historian Naomi Cohen observed, although Schechter was largely responsible for making Zionism “an integral component of Conservative Judaism and Conservative Jewry an integral component of the American Zionist movement,” he insisted that “the importance of a Jewish national consciousness was predicated on the needs of the Jewish religion.”

The antagonism between Schechter and Benderly became a major headache for JTS faculty members Kaplan and Friedlaender. The Seminary president scuttled a plan favored by Benderly and Kaplan to create a special track for Benderly’s recruits at the Teachers Institute, which they were to attend in conjunction with
their secular college and graduate study. He also repeatedly harangued his faculty about their dual loyalties. As chairman of the Bureau’s board of trustees, Friedlaender found himself in the oftentimes untenable position of playing the buffer between Benderly and Schechter, and was accordingly subjected to especial abuse. At first, Friedlaender patiently tried to reason with Schechter that the goals of the two organizations need not be in conflict. But in willfully blinding himself to the natural political competition between the two, he only succeeded in eliciting Schechter’s exasperation. “The real point at issue is the welfare and development of the Seminary and the institutions connected with it,” Schechter lectured him. “You are a member of our staff just as I am, and you must decide for yourself how far compatible or incompatible the plans of your Bureau are with the activities of the Seminary Teachers Institute.” As Friedlaender finally conceded in a private letter, “My association with the Bureau has in one sense been a source of suffering, I might also say torture, to me. . . . [Schechter] has on a number of occasions openly charged me with being a traitor to the Seminary.”56

Kaplan also expressed frustration at being caught between the two headstrong visionaries. His journal entries demonstrate his essential agreement with Schechter, even as they express personal fondness for Benderly and deep admiration for his work. Contrasting himself to Schechter, Kaplan observed: “The reason I can work with Dr. B. is probably because I am young and can adapt myself to what I see to be the need of the hour. For the time being he is to me the most positive force in Jewish life today.” Like Schechter, Kaplan understood the centrality of religion in American life and that American society tolerated religious diversity more readily than identification along national or ethnic lines. Though sympathetic to the thought of Ahad Ha-Am, Kaplan was deeply skeptical that an enduring American Jewish pattern could be grounded in secular cultural Zionism. “Dr. B. is perhaps the only man who is working out Achad Haamism in Golus [exile] in a systematic and organized way,” Kaplan marveled. He quickly added, however, that Benderly’s “scheme” was ultimately built on a “fallacy,” namely, “that it is feasible to maintain distinct Jewish groups in the Diaspora, that shall unite in themselves two coordinate cultures of a national character.” In the long run, “Only by giving Jewish culture a distinctively religious significance in the true modern sense of the term is there any hope of Jewish education being built up in this country.” Kaplan predicted that “[o]nly those, therefore, who will give a religious interpretation to Jewish culture will be entrusted with the care and supervision of Jewish education.”57

Here Kaplan was both the visionary and the trenchant critic. Even as the Talmud Torahs were enjoying their heyday, Kaplan recognized the community school as transitory, bound to give way to a congregation-based educational
system. Moreover, he posited that the principle of “community responsibility for Jewish education,” much touted by Benderly and Magnes, amounted to nothing more than noblesse oblige, since the wealthy steadfastly refused to educate their own children in these institutions. “The abnormality which makes the T.T. system untenable is its eleemosynary character. It is maintained by the well-to-do for the children of the poor,” he wrote.58

If Benderly believed that he was creating an enduring Jewish education system, Kaplan recognized it as a generational phenomenon, contingent as it was on the socioeconomic conditions of the immigrant slums and gilded ghettos. Kaplan pointed to the devastating fact that the very same benefactors who supported the Talmud Torahs failed to establish Jewish schools for their own children. “It is only when Conservative congregations are aroused to the need of establishing properly organized religious schools that the normal condition of self-support will be attained in Jewish education,” he concluded.59 By 1914, when Kaplan penned this diary entry, he was already playing with the idea of expanding the institutional footprint of the synagogue in Jewish life to encompass social, recreational, and educational functions. The Benderly group’s answer to the synagogue center was the school center, a concept most comprehensively elaborated in Berkson’s doctoral dissertation, “Theories of Americanization” (1920), and best exemplified (see chapter 9) by Manhattan’s Central Jewish Institute (1917–1944).

As for the Benderly boys themselves, Kaplan confided that “[in] my heart of hearts I feel there is something wrong with the spirit that animates them in their work.” In Kaplan’s view, Benderly had all too successfully imbued them with an Ahad Ha-Amist spirit:

I had always missed something in Achad Haam’s conceptions of Judaism, but certainly its realization in practice I have always found jarring to me. It is wanting in appreciation of indefinable religious longings and aspirations. . . . It is this spirit that has taken possession of the men and I have found them strange, unresponsive to the deeper appeals of Judaism, so that I have often wished that these men were drawn to the Seminary, where, while the religious spirit is lacking, it is at least not pooh-poohed, as is the case in nationalistic circles.60

One can only speculate about the extent to which these convictions were spawned or solidified by an unconscious desire to diminish institutional frictions. Elsewhere, Kaplan lavished praise on Benderly’s disciples, comparing them favorably with his rabbinical students.
Despite Schechter’s protestations, Kaplan, Friedlaender, and a few other Teachers Institute faculty members, including Moshe Halevi (Morris D. Levine) and Shalom Baer Maximon, conducted “special classes,” usually in the evenings, for the young Bureau staff members in Bible, Talmud, Jewish history, Jewish thought, and Hebrew language. Most met in faculty homes. Despite the lateness of the hour and their hectic schedules, Kaplan found the students to be serious and eager to learn. At one point, when Kaplan expounded on the importance of reviving Hebrew, the students enthusiastically agreed henceforth to carry on their class in Hebrew. In contrast, a similar suggestion to his rabbinic students fell flat.61

The Benderly boys found their studies with Teachers Institute faculty to be uneven. On the one hand, they were sufficiently impressed with Kaplan that they successfully lobbied Dean William F. Russell to invite him to teach a yearlong seminar in biblical criticism at Teachers College in 1915–16.62 On the downside, they felt sufficiently frustrated by the sluggish pace of Friedlaender’s Jewish history course to complain to Benderly. In Kaplan’s view, much of the difficulty with the “special classes” could be traced to the irregular class schedule and the lack of clearly defined desired outcomes. Little could be done to address the former constraint; faculty members received no compensation for the courses, which they assumed on top of their already considerable Seminary teaching loads, research, and other responsibilities. But Kaplan worked assiduously to address the latter, distilling aims and objectives so as to give the “special classes” greater focus and direction.63

At Teachers College, Bureau staff pursued programs of study that were tailored to their individual interests and strengths. For example, Berkson pursued a joint program in philosophy and the sociology of education, while Honor studied history and curriculum development and Dushkin concentrated on educational administration. Many took advantage of the opportunity to study educational psychology with Edward L. Thorndike and teaching and supervision with Frank M. McMurry. Dushkin studied with one of the gurus of “scientific management,” George Drayton Strayer, while the “New History” propagated by James Harvey Robinson profoundly influenced Leo Honor. The proximity of Union Theological Seminary afforded Berkson and others the opportunity to study religious psychology with George Albert Coe. For many, including Rebecca Aaronson, the opportunity to study with John Dewey was a highlight of their graduate studies. Yet as one student acknowledged, Dewey’s “aloof, monotonous drawl as a lecturer contrasted strangely with the vigorous, original and germinal ideas which he taught us.” Berkson recalled arriving for class at Dewey’s lecture hall at least a quarter of an hour early so that he could secure a front-row seat because the philosopher was often barely audible beyond the third row. “Dewey attempted to teach us how to
think by the remarkable method of himself thinking out his philosophical problems in front of his students,” Dushkin remembered.\(^4\)

The professor who worked most closely with the Benderly boys was William Heard Kilpatrick, Dewey’s pragmatist interpreter and advocate of the “project method.” In contrast to Dewey’s dry and cerebral lectures, Kilpatrick’s classes were typified by a “‘free for all’ heated debate,” as Kilpatrick encouraged students to analyze and discuss various educational problems in an attempt to reach consensus. Kilpatrick referred to the Bureau group with considerable fondness and pride as his “Jewish boys.” He supervised a number of their dissertations, offered career advice, wrote recommendation letters, and kept abreast of their work at the Bureau and beyond.\(^5\)

While Benderly turned to Teachers College and the Teachers Institute to provide his disciples with a formal course of study, he remained directly involved with their education and professional development. Much of these interactions came in the course of early morning meetings that were officially billed as a seminar in pedagogy and methods but usually took the form of debriefings or “schmooze sessions.” Benderly usually held court at an intimate Lower East Side diner, where he mentored his protégées and regaled them with “delightful epigrams and stories and practical advice.” Latecomers were forced to “pay” a token “penalty” to charity. In the summertime, the meetings were relocated to Benderly’s home in Englewood, New Jersey, where the more leisurely environment invited “‘endless’ analyses, discussions, projections, fantasies.” Dushkin wrote: “Like all great teachers, he recognized the value of devoting himself to his disciples, even to ‘wasting’ time with them.” Benderly’s wife Jennie, who adopted the Hebrew name Hemdah, enjoyed entertaining his students and took a motherly interest in their work and developing careers. As an educator herself, she no doubt found the pedagogical discussions stimulating.\(^6\)

In addition to providing his young protégés with opportunities to advance their secular and Jewish education, Benderly devised an apprenticeship program at the Bureau, which allowed his disciples to gain experience in management, public relations, and extension work. He also promptly put them to work in the Bureau’s laboratory schools. Laboring in the trenches would provide them with much-needed practical experience and on-the-job training, while also alleviating what would have been a serious shortage of teaching personnel. Some were also sent to teach in cooperating institutions such as the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Downtown Talmud Torah, and even the Reform movement’s august Temple Emanu-El.

Despite their enthusiasm, not all were natural teachers. Kaplan recorded his dismay upon accompanying his Teachers Institute students to observe a model Bible lesson taught by Isaac Berkson:
I was never so convinced of the futility of the courses in pedagogy given by the Teachers College of Columbia as when I saw Berkson teach. It is now the third or fourth year that he has been taking courses at that institution and with all that there was nothing that gave the least evidence of his having benefited by that training. It was a poorly organized lesson. No single idea was made to stand out with sufficient clearness for the children to carry away with them. His Hebrew—for he taught the lesson in Hebrew—was of the poorest.67

In time, the most talented teachers, including Berkson, assumed supervisory roles in the schools and became department heads at the Bureau. Benderly’s long-term goal was to raise a generation of scientific managers who could expand on and extend his Jewish educational revolution.

The combination of university classes, Jewish studies classes, Bureau work, and teaching responsibilities made for a grueling schedule. The more disorganized or distracted within the group sometimes could hardly remember whether they were coming or going. Leo Honor’s friends never tired of telling how, a few days after he was transferred from an administrative position at one of the Bureau’s preparatory schools to an instructorship at the Teachers Institute, he showed up at his old office and was surprised to see the furniture rearranged. When he asked his clerk who was responsible for the redecoration, he received a quizzical response: “Why, the new principal made the changes.” The look of surprise on Honor’s face dissolved into a sheepish smile. “Why, yes, there’s a new principal, I forgot,” he said, and made a swift exit. When Honor’s absent-mindedness did not adversely affect his teaching. “He was a born teacher and counselor,” marveled Samuel Margoshes, “and the students sensed it, clustering around him.”68

Part of what kept them going was the camaraderie—the intellectual stimulation and spiritual sustenance they derived from each other’s company. Gamoran was seldom more at peace than when he was communing with his friends, humming Hasidic melodies or telling folktales around a Sabbath table. His dear friend Honor, on the other hand, could not carry a tune but enjoyed bonding with friends over a game of chess. There were also countless “midnight sessions” in the coffee shops of central Harlem, where the group would congregate after their evening programs at work, or study sessions in the library. There they would sip tea and schmooze. “There we were, amidst grass roots aspirations of the Jewish populace, to transplant, to nurture and to preserve the Jewish way of life of other places and of other climates,” Schoolman recalled. “We, too, felt these stirring impulses of the community, and our group would reflect long hours and with great intensity, philosophically and organizationally, on the issues of the day.”69
The Trip to Palestine: A Formative Experience

A final component of the Benderly boys’ education was an extended trip to Palestine. As Dushkin explained in his memoir, Palestine was viewed as both a rite of passage and a sort of finishing school. “I went not as a tourist, nor as an immigrant, but as a student, intent on completing my preparation for professional service in American Jewish education,” he wrote. Dushkin compared himself to Antaeus, from Greek mythology, whose awesome strength derived from his physical contact with Mother Earth. “As an educator facing the prodigious tasks of Jewish life in America, I felt a deep need of immediate personal contact with the historic homeland, and of direct confrontation with those who were recreating there our Hebraic civilization. I needed the reassuring knowledge and the abiding faith to be derived from living experience in pioneering Palestine. I saw myself as the first of many such students who would be coming in future years to bring back to their communities sustaining strength from the creative spirit of the Land.”

While cultural Zionism shaped the Benderly boys’ mission and was, from the outset, a constituent component of their collective identity, the lure of Palestine was significantly enhanced by the excitement surrounding the promulgation of the Balfour Declaration. The British conquest of Palestine and the promise of a Jewish national home seemingly transformed a pipe dream into reality. The impact of the Balfour Declaration on the Benderly group is evident in the Bureau’s biweekly children’s magazine, the *Jewish Child*, which was edited in that period by Emanuel Gamoran and Mordecai Soltes and featured frequent contributions from other staff members. The November 30, 1917, edition carried an uncharacteristically large headline announcing Britain’s declaration. Underneath it was a widely reprinted lithograph, *Der Jüdische Mai*, by the Zionist artist Ephraim Moses Lilien. In the foreground it depicted a suffering old Jew surrounded by brambles and snakes, gazing eastward toward a distant sun, gleaming over a revivified Jerusalem. The caption read: “The Ancient Hope and the Promise of Fulfillment.” The accompanying article unequivocally characterized Britain’s promise as “one of the greatest events in all Jewish history,” the culmination of twenty-five years of work by the Zionist movement and “the realization of the two thousand years’ old dream of the Jewish people.”

In a subsequent issue, the editors addressed an open letter to their young readers, in which they painted the wondrous future that they believed was in sight: “We will be a nation living in our own land again. The Hebrew language will be spoken by thousands of Jewish children like yourself in the streets of Jerusalem.” With the season of Hanukkah at hand, they compared what they hoped would be the imminent homecoming of throngs of Diaspora Jews to the return of
the Maccabees and their supporters to the Temple after vanquishing Antiochus’s army: “But now when we return from a much greater battle, a much longer battle . . . that lasted 2,000 years, and we return with a greater victory in our hearts, can you imagine the joy there will be? . . . What in the world is to stop you and me from building a new temple and raising new sanctuaries as beautiful as, or even more beautiful than, the old ones? . . . And think of it! We could make the new walls of the temple so lovely that people would travel from the world over to see what you and I have done.” Of course, there was an unspoken major impediment to the rebuilding of the Temple: the erection of the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of Omar amid the ruins on the Temple Mount. Likely, the editors, carried away by their own excitement, were writing hyperbolically. Still, their exhilaration was palpable.72
Dushkin set sail for Palestine in December 1919 and remained there for two years, cobbling together work as a teacher at David Yellin’s Hebrew Teachers' Seminary and as a school inspector for the British mandatory government. He was soon joined by other Bureau staff members, including Leah Klepper and Leah Konovitz. Isaac and Libbie Berkson followed in 1921; Emanuel and Mamie Gamoran in 1924; and Leo and Jennie Honor in 1927. Some members of the Benderly group lacked the financial wherewithal to make the journey. Israel Chipkin finally swallowed his pride and secured a loan from Albert Schoolman and other friends, enabling him to spend a year’s sabbatical in Palestine in 1928–29. The responsibilities of motherhood compelled Rebecca Brickner to delay her first visit until 1932.

Day-to-day life in Palestine in those years was often a struggle. Letters describe the difficulty of doing without modern conveniences, such as iceboxes, conventional bathtub showerheads, and hot water on demand, which the visitors took for granted in the United States. Those who had long ago internalized American middle-class manners and mores were often bewildered and exasperated: “There is no such thing as trained help in this land. The servants are terrible. They are all yachsonim [aristocrats]. Berkson has his maid eating at [the] table on Friday nights,” Rebecca Brickner sneered. She recoiled at the low standards of personal hygiene, necessitated, in part, by the “primitive” conditions, and was particularly horrified that longtime residents in Palestine, among her own group, succumbed to local norms of behavior. Her comments reveal as much about her own prejudices as they do about her surroundings. She decried Libbie Berkson’s “dirty cook . . . with her horrible ghetto methods of kashruth,” and deplored the Berksons for their lackadaisical and indulgent child-rearing methods. Their daughter Dina’s English “is atrocious,” Brickner complained, “and while she speaks Hebrew fluently she uses the inflection of a real kike. I couldn't get her out of the house fast enough. She almost had [the Brickners’ son] Balfour speaking with her sing-song.”

Many of the roads in Jerusalem were still unpaved. In the hilly Talpiot neighborhood, on the southern outskirts of the city, where the Berks, Brickners, and Rosens dwelt, residents were forced to contend with choking clouds of dust in the summers and knee-deep mud in the winters. Those who brought children with them were often preoccupied with their socialization. “Judah made the statement that the children in Palestine don’t play fair,” Sue Rosen reported to Ben about their son. She quickly added: “that seems to be a failure of not only children in this country but of adults also.” One of the attractions of Talpiot was its proximity to Deborah Kallen’s progressive elementary school, which Benderly disciples agreed was anomalous on an otherwise disheartening educational landscape. On the other hand, members of the Benderly group such as Rosen, Honor, and School-
man, at considerable personal and financial sacrifice, sent their wives and children for extended stays in Palestine, in some cases for up to two years, in order that the children should become fluent Hebrew speakers and experience the national revival up close.\textsuperscript{74}

In their spare time some women studied at the American School of Oriental Research and, after 1924, the newly opened Hebrew University. Others employed private Hebrew or Arabic tutors. They were also recruited for Hadassah activities. The men, who typically came to Palestine on shorter excursions, often toured the local school systems and lectured to local assemblies of educators. The Jewish social scene among the Anglo-speaking expatriates in Jerusalem was tightly knit, which some found stifling. Prior to the influx of German refugees in the 1930s, the entire Yishuv had a provincial feeling. This allowed the American educators to meet and socialize with members of the Zionist intelligentsia—Bezalel founder Boris Schatz, for example, and \textit{Palestine Post} editor Gershon Agronsky. Rebecca Brickner sat next to, and engaged in an animated conversation with, the poet Hayim Nachman Bialik at an evening honoring Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky. The Berksons lived down the road from writer Shmuel Agnon and Hebrew University professor Joseph Klausner. During most of his first visit, Dushkin lived in an annex to educator David Yellin’s home and was mothered by his wife, Itta. After the 1920 riots he moved into the home of a rattled Henrietta Szold and her companion Sophia Berger, who lived in a mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood. Dushkin was quickly integrated into Szold’s inner social circle, which also included Norman Bentwich, Jessie Sampter, and Nellie Strauss. They spent Sabbaths together and went on sightseeing excursions. Szold introduced Dushkin to another member of her group, a Cornell-trained nutritionist named Julia Aronson, who was working with Hadassah. The two began courting and were married some months later in Szold’s garden.\textsuperscript{75}

By all accounts, the Benderly boys were profoundly affected by their time in Palestine. There were the transcendent experiences, such as Dushkin’s witnessing of High Commissioner Herbert Samuel chanting the haftarah on the Sabbath of Consolation, on July 31, 1920. As Dushkin sat among the worshippers in the Old City’s Hurvah Synagogue, he was swept up by the historical symbolism of the moment: “My spine shivered; I was in a state of trance as I heard the first Jewish High Commissioner of the again–Promised Land read to his people Isaiah’s ancient prophecy of the Return. There was not a dry eye in the crowded old synagogue that morning.” Likewise, there were events that seemed to encapsulate the entire Zionist project to which they were committed: Chipkin, for example, was moved to tears as he watched Jewish schoolchildren, bedecked in local greens and flowers, stage an Arbor Day pageant in a newly built neighborhood, Bayit V’Gan,
on the outskirts of Jerusalem. And there were moments of affirmation: “The [Hebrew] University is wonderful. It makes me feel as though I were living those Friedlaender days over again,” Rebecca Brickner wrote to Barnett. “[Professor Joseph] Klausner [with whom she was studying Hebrew literature] is not as human a personality as our sainted Friedlaender, but he does know literature. . . . He was amazed to know how much Hebrew I knew. It was thrilling to find yourself finally acknowledged. When the students saw me taking down notes with accuracy and speed, they didn’t believe their eyes.”

Then there were the arguably more mundane but equally powerful experiences: celebrating Jewish holidays in Tel Aviv’s public squares, inhaling the aroma of orange groves, and witnessing Jerusalem sunsets. “Yesterday was Lag B’Omer and what a day that is in Palestine,” Brickner wrote, a few weeks later. “The night before there were huge bonfires lit all over for children and for adults and everyone was out singing songs and dancing the hora. In the morning, the whole land was covered with tiyulim [hikers]. Everybody went somewhere and the land was filled with song.” She proceeded to describe her visit with one of the first Zionist settlers, a wizened old man named Mr. Broza, who steadfastly rebuilt his farm after it was burned by Arab rioters. As she sampled his home-pressed wine and canned fruits, she was inspired by his determination and perseverance. He seemed to her to embody an almost interminable quality, as if he were the personification of the
eternity of the Jewish people. “No one [here] knows what time means,” marveled Ben Rosen’s wife, Sue, “yet with it all there is a feeling of just living without having all the worries and cares of the outside world. Just what it is I cannot explain, and no one else seems to know.” She added: “There is a fascination about the place, hard to explain.”

Finally, there were clarifying moments, when ideas and attitudes seemed to gel. One such occasion came toward the end of the Berksons’ second Palestine experience, a seven-year sojourn from 1927 to 1934, during which Isaac directed the Jewish school system and served on the executive of the Jewish Agency, while Libbie operated a teahouse, Al Kos Te, on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem’s city center. In the increasingly politicized environment, when Zionist public opinion was inflamed by the British government’s restrictions on Jewish immigration and periodic deadly Arab violence, a movement to employ exclusively Jewish labor swept the Yishuv. Zionists across the spectrum viewed the Jewish-only labor policy as essential to consolidating a self-sufficient economy and community, while providing employment to Jewish immigrants. A minor scandal ensued when it was learned that Libbie employed an Arab dishwasher at her teahouse. As a public figure in the upper echelons of the Jewish Agency, Berkson came under intense pressure to serve as an example. When the man pleaded for his job, citing his industriousness and the need to support his family, Isaac was moved, not only by his personal plight, but by the bedrock injustice of the Jewish-only labor policy, which he considered racist and an impediment to the increasingly elusive prospect of Arab-Jewish rapprochement. Ironically, this prima facie evidence of the Jewish desire for political and economic separation helped to convince Berkson of the merits of binationalism. Shortly thereafter, he and his family returned to the United States. “To me the principle was the chief thing,” Berkson explained. “Man-kind is an entity; the individual is part of mankind. There must be basic equality of all the races. . . . I have a great admiration for Judaism; [but] it is more particularistic than universalistic and I, unlike Libbie, cannot be that way.” Berkson realized that he had the heart and soul of a Diaspora Jew. “My roots in American life, in universal ideas, were too strong. . . . I believed in the public school, symbol of equality. . . . The Jews are an inter-nation and thus there was work to be done here [America] also. Bialik understood this . . . I was not sufficiently identified with Palestine to make it possible for me to stay there.”

Berkson’s politics and his attitudes toward Arabs were hardly universal among the Benderly group. While Mamie Gamoran recalled that what “really gave reality to the Holy Land” was the picturesque sight of Arabs with their camels in Jaffa port, Rebecca Brickner considered them a blight on the Palestinian landscape: “The Arabs lend a very unhealthy picture to the situation. They and their dirty kids
and camels and donkeys mess up the streets.” Dushkin’s experience working for
the mandatory government and his inability to organize a unified Jewish and Arab
scouting movement convinced him that both Arabs and Jews desired political and
social separation. But Berkson’s doubts about the efficacy and morality of a sov-
eign Jewish state in Palestine, and his preference for a post-nation-state Zionism
that was defined by “ethical nationalism” and internationalism, put him in the
company of Mordecai Kaplan. “If nationalism is . . . irredeemably militant and
hostile,” Kaplan wrote in 1933, “what does the world gain by the Jews’ creating
another source of group hatred and militancy?”

Another instructive lesson that the sojourns in Palestine drove home was the
difference between the largely secularist character of Jewish nationalism in Pal-
estine, on the one hand, and the Kaplan-Friedlaender brand of cultural Zionism,
which the Benderly boys imbibed in New York, on the other. For some, the
contrast was disorienting and even disconcerting. Recounting his involvement
with the advent of scouting in Palestine, in 1920, Dushkin expressed dismay that
the Jewish youth eschewed his efforts to develop a program that drew on Jewish
history, religion, and iconography. “The other leaders of the Jewish scout move-
ment definitely objected to such ‘ghettoization’; their desire was for a Hebrew
counterpart of scouting ‘like other nations,’” he wrote. “They failed to realize that
gentile scouting was also deistic in its outlook, the scout everywhere being encour-
aged to follow his particular religion. And when the Jewish scout leaders elimi-
nated the words ‘faithful to god’ from the scout oath, they seemed to me to lean
too far backward in their opposition to galut [Exile] Judaism.”

Bertha Schoolman and Rebecca Brickner were confronted with another lesson
in religious-secular relations in the Yishuv when they inadvertently walked into a
melee between Orthodox Jews and members of the militantly secular Poale Zion
on a Tel Aviv street during the second day of Passover. The brawl began when a
Poale Zion member carrying a large tray of fragrant bread, still warm from the
oven, through Allenby Street to his nearby restaurant, stumbled over an old re-
gligious Jew on his way to synagogue. “The old Jew smacked the halutz in the face
and trounced all the bread in the street.” He was joined by other vigilantes who
smashed the restaurant windows and organized an impromptu hametz (leavened
bread) burning ritual, which quickly devolved into an all-out riot. In Brickner’s
mind, it was the Poale Zion that caused the provocation: “To me it was a great
chutzpah on the part of the Poale Zion. Altogether, there is a great lack of spiri-
tuality on the part of the young people in the land. There is an absolute lack of
religion. In fact, they laugh at it.” Years later, Israel Chipkin was still expressing
astonishment and dismay that Labor Zionist organizations in North America
seemingly went out of their way to hold their conferences and events on Friday
evenings. As much as he wished to support Labor, “their attitude towards public activities on the Sabbath is causing me embarrassment.”

Still, the lack of spirituality they sometimes encountered seldom interfered with Benderly group members’ ability to derive spiritual sustenance from their encounter with the land. For some, including the Berksons, Dushkins, Schoolmans, and Chipkin, their relationship with Eretz Israel reached a new height when they purchased tracts of land in Netanya from a conglomerate in Petach Tikva. The deal was initiated by Al Schoolman, whose business sense was no match for the speculators who dominated the Palestinian land market. The families most likely overpaid for the property, which was planted with orange orchards and managed by a local concern. And they were not unduly concerned about the provenance of the land, which had been purchased from an Arab sheik absentee landlord, who acquired it from the Turks. When they were persuaded to sell the land to the Jewish National Fund in 1947, so that the orchards could make way for a workers’ colony, the families made no profit on their real estate investment. But the gratification that they derived from their orchards was immeasurable: “I am writing this on the terrace of the Wohl House,” began a letter that Julia Dushkin penned to the Schoolmans in 1935. “My back is being baked by a very clement sun, while the front of me is kept cool by less kind ocean breezes. I can view our marvelous stretch of green towards the East, and the dazzling, blue Mediterranean towards the West. . . . I love to watch boats going anywhere especially while my feet are embedded in the fragrant, beautiful soil of Nathanya! I’m still romantically lured and very happy that we have some wee share in it, and I’m always grateful to you for that.”

Perhaps there is no better measure of the connection that the Benderly boys felt for Eretz Israel than the depth of longing they experienced when they were apart from it—the unresolved sense of conflict that they carried as servants of a Jewish renascence in North America predicated on a nationalist revival in Palestine. “There is one thing in your letter which disturbs me radically,” Chipkin playfully chided Berkson in a 1934 letter. “In fact it has almost robbed me of hope. I refer to your confession which is but casually stated by you, namely that ‘I waste considerable time in the Vienna Café, playing the game of chess, which it appears, I shall never learn.’ And here I am, green with envy, hoping for the day when I can come to Palestine to learn the first moves in chess.” Dushkin expressed a similar sentiment to Berkson, albeit in a more plaintive 1922 missive: “At midnight, if we are not too tired and sleepy, we lie awake and engage in the fascinating task of picturing what your life in Palestine must be, especially in Jerusalem, with Miss Szold, Miss Berger and our other friends. I do not want to wax sentimental, but at times the desire to run away from this modern, noisy humdrum life to the varied quietness of Palestine, where one can envisage life more nearly as a whole, grows
into real pain. I am more determined than ever to carry my old idea into realiza-
tion, namely to divide my life from now unto the end, in two parts—the first part
here in America and the second part in Palestine.” The Dushkins, who immigrated
to the young state of Israel in 1949, negotiated their dual commitments more
adroitly than most.83

In one way or another, each member of the Benderly group struggled to attain a
measure of inner reconciliation. They surely believed that the Jewish nationalist
revival transcended the Zionist project, and frequently asserted that their work
hastening a Jewish renascence in North America was equally significant to that of
the halutzim in Palestine. But the romance of nation building was alluring. Slog-
ging through frequently monotonous work in central educational agencies during
the 1920s and 1930s, the Benderly boys often found it difficult to avoid pining away
for a piece of the action in Palestine, where Jewish history was being made.
Chapter 4

The Struggle for a Modern School System

Samson Benderly’s research into the finances of the various Jewish schools convinced him that the Talmud Torah system constituted “the line of least resistance” to reform. Despite their precarious finances and historical association with the impoverished, the schools enjoyed communal support. They were generally governed by local boards of directors and supported through a combination of donations, charity benefits, and tuition collections. Some of the more prominent schools, such as the Downtown Talmud Torah and Uptown Talmud Torah, were organized by landsmanschaften, immigrant benevolent societies modeled after fraternal organizations, whose members helped defray their costs. In a few cases, the schools were connected with synagogues. The communal character of the schools was an important consideration because Benderly was trying to build a system that was at once complementary to and analogous with the public schools. While he could not rely on a tax base to support his system, he hoped to instill within community leaders and the Jewish masses alike a sense of responsibility for funding a communal system of Jewish education that would educate the children.

Above: Hebrew school pupils at the Inwood Hebrew Congregation. Photograph by Virginia Stern. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary
of rich and poor alike and serve as a Jewish melting pot wherein an American Jewish pattern could be forged.¹

Benderly was also impressed with the caliber and progressive-mindedness of a number of the Talmud Torah principals whom he met, mostly veterans of the reformed khayder movement in eastern Europe. These were not glorified siddur peddlers but thoughtful educators, some of whom were conversant in educational theory. Although many remained observant, they had been influenced by the haskalah and were fervent Jewish nationalists. Of course, all these potential building blocks would be useless if there did not exist a will to reform. Here again, Benderly was encouraged. “The most hopeful sign is that the more intelligent among the directors are not satisfied with the training these schools impart to their pupils, and have long been casting around for ways and means of improving their institutions,” he concluded.²

Not surprisingly, schools were much more amenable to administrative and fiscal streamlining than to curricular and pedagogical innovations. The Bureau, meanwhile, was congenitally constrained from pushing too hard in these latter areas. Benderly freely admitted that “the Bureau of Education was perfectly clear as to what the curriculum of a Jewish school should be.” As an arm of the Kehillah, however, it was officially nonpartisan. Since curricular content and to some extent methodology could not be divorced from ideology, Benderly found himself in a bind. Some critics even questioned the wisdom of the Bureau becoming involved in any existing school’s affairs. But without the financial resources to create more than a few of its own laboratory schools, Benderly recognized that the Bureau had little choice but to work within the existing system.³

A solution to this conundrum presented itself when Benderly was invited to a meeting of the Central Board of Jewish Education, a loosely centralized federation of some of the city’s larger Talmud Torahs under the leadership of Dr. Joseph Bluestone, a Lithuanian-born physician who served for many years as president of the Machzike Talmud Torah on the Lower East Side. The board was organized in 1909 with the object of designing a unified Talmud Torah curriculum, which could alleviate the educational disruptions that resulted from the high rate of student attrition, exacerbated by pervasive Jewish mobility. Rabbi Schmarya Leib Hurwitz, principal of the Israel Salanter Talmud Torah, liked to compare the Hebrew school to a passenger carriage. “The carriage remains full but the passengers are constantly changing. By the time it reaches the middle of its route hardly a single passenger remains who boarded at the first stop.”⁴

Thus far, despite the seriousness of the problem, the group had been ineffectual, paralyzed in part by the precarious financial situation that prevailed in most schools and the reluctance of local leaders to cede power to a central body. Bend-
erly recognized that cooperation with the Central Board would accrue to the Bureau’s benefit. The Bureau could provide the necessary cash flow to jump-start the stalled process. A Bureau-backed standardized curriculum, elaborated by representatives of the major Talmud Torahs and carrying the imprimatur of the Central Board, would command much-needed legitimacy. The Bureau could then argue that it was only enforcing a program that the Talmud Torahs themselves created and endorsed. Benderly likely also viewed cooperation as a means of co-opting a potentially competing organization and bringing it under the Bureau’s aegis.5

The Central Board was willing to cooperate with the Bureau, and a suggestion was made to convene a working group composed of representatives from the various schools’ boards of directors. Benderly must have believed that such a group would likely be too conservative and impliable to devise a program that he could support, because he struggled to convince the Central Board to adopt a different course. He pleaded that “directors of Talmud Torahs, no matter how intelligent they may be, can as little devise a working plan of studies as directors of a hospital can draw the plans for an operating room, or superintend a surgical operation.” He counseled that the Central Board turn instead to the principals of the schools, a group that promised to be more amenable to Benderly’s viewpoint and approach. His argument won the day, and Bluestone extended an invitation to the principals of the board’s affiliated schools to meet with himself and Benderly to devise the curriculum. Ten principals assembled for the initial meeting: six from schools associated with the board, two who were brought by Benderly, and two others who came out of personal curiosity. Israel Konovitz, principal at that time of the Shaarey Shomayim Hebrew School, served as secretary.6

Years later Harry Handler, then principal of the Machzike Talmud Torah’s uptown branch, remembered the scene of the first meeting, which took place on December 3, 1910, and resulted in the formation of a permanent Principals Association: “We were witnesses to a strange and depressing scene but also to a binding of hearts. The principals arose one after another and introduced themselves: I am so-and-so, the principal of such-and-such school in such-and-such place. Men who for years plowed in the same field, laboring for the same ideal, did not know one another personally. Nor did they know anything about their colleagues’ work. We were hermits, each bound by our own sorrows.” The group continued to meet on a weekly basis and over the course of thirty-one conferences drafted a standardized curriculum and unified schedule and school calendar.7

Although the incentive to address the problem of an ever-shifting school population was strong, the principals’ group was stymied at first by its inability to adequately address the equally vexing problem of attrition. For every hundred
students who entered into first grade, on average only thirty remained by grade four, and just three succeeded in reaching the seventh grade. On one level, the statistics were hardly extraordinary and almost predictable. Notwithstanding the compulsory nature of the public school system, it suffered from a 40 percent attrition rate by the eighth grade. There was even a silver lining to the otherwise gloomy statistic: the dropout rate revealed that the actual number of individuals exposed to a Jewish education at some point during their childhood was far greater than the fifty-one thousand snapshot figure (forty-one thousand in Jewish schools and ten thousand with private tutors) contained in the Kaplan-Cronson report. Nevertheless, the attrition problem enormously complicated the task of holistic curriculum design. Progress resumed only when the principals resolved to take as an article of faith that school reform would itself stem the rate of attrition. They convinced themselves that a standardized curriculum, progressive teaching methods, reduced hours, better textbooks, smaller class sizes, and bright, clean classrooms were bound to create a more pleasant school environment that would favorably compete with the street for the children’s interest and loyalty. Their optimism turned out to be misplaced. Over the next few years the rate of elimination hardly budged. But Handler asserted that the gambit still paid off because the improved quality of the schools attracted greater enrollment overall, which translated into larger graduating classes.∫

Philosophical differences that cut roughly along generational lines presented the principals with yet another hurdle. In good pedagogical fashion, Benderly insisted that the clarification of the objectives of Jewish education was a necessary prerequisite to the development of a curriculum. Indeed, the curriculum should flow out of the objectives. The younger, maskilic principals agreed, but the question of objectives baffled the traditionalists. “Would anyone think to ask: ‘What is the objective of laying tefillin, donning tzitzit, eating matzo [on Passover]?’ ” they wondered. Teaching Torah to children was a divine commandment, they insisted, an obligation that did not require rationale. After much deliberation, the maskilim managed to find common ground with the traditionalists under the banner of Jewish survivalism. “The aim of Jewish education is the preservation of the Jews as a distinct people, existing and developing in the spirit of the Jewish religion,” the curriculum stated. This bland, sufficiently vague formulation can rightly be criticized for begging the questions of justification and purpose. Yet it was the result of protracted, earnest deliberation. The principals were well aware of their evasion. But they viewed it as the price of devising a community program for an ideologically heterogeneous population. Each school board would need to answer the questions itself, based on its own particular philosophy. This is not to imply that the curriculum they adopted was devoid of ideology. Where the principals found
commonality was in a commitment to national revival. According to Konovitz, most held that the religious and national components of Jewishness were inexorably bound. The key to Jewish survival in the United States was a Jewish national renascence grounded in Zionist culture and the revival of the Hebrew language, within a religious framework. The Jewish school was to be a primary engine of this revival.Ω

Amusingly enough, there was no better evidence of the chasm between hope and reality than the fact that the principals’ deliberations were conducted in Yiddish and English. But their Zionism found palpable expression in the Hebraist curriculum they devised, which devoted almost the entire first two years to Hebrew language acquisition utilizing the natural method. The expressed goal was to enable the child to become sufficiently fluent in Hebrew to begin studying the Pentateuch in the third year from an abridged version of the original text. Even traditionalists welcomed the prospect of teaching the Pentateuch for content rather than concentrating primarily on translation. But the concentration on spoken Modern Hebrew in the first two years could not obscure an equally compelling nationalistic rationale. The curriculum mandated that teachers begin by focusing on oral and aural comprehension through the aid of pictures, objects, playthings, and activities and only later introduce reading and writing. A subgroup tasked with choosing textbooks settled on the Bureau's newly produced classroom reading charts and Yellin’s Lefi Hataf, both explicitly designed to support the Ivrit b'Ivrit approach. The curriculum also completely did away with mechanical Hebrew reading, a mainstay of the traditional Talmud Torah program, which was typically used to facilitate synagogue literacy. In the new standardized curriculum, study of prayer was delayed until the final two years of the primary school sequence, when students were deemed developmentally capable of studying the prayers from both the literary and philosophical perspectives, while synagogue skills were to be honed experientially in a children's synagogue. Abbreviated services with an emphasis on congregational singing were to be held on Saturdays and holidays. Young children were also to be taught to sing familiar prayers by heart.∞≠

The curriculum was revolutionary in its tacit recognition that a primary purpose of the Jewish school must be Jewish socialization and that the Jewish school must greatly expand its in loco parentis role. In a radical departure from tradition, the standardized curriculum mandated instruction in Jewish customs and ceremonies, no longer taking for granted that they would be taught in the home, and advised that central rites and rituals be modeled in the school.∞∞

Another curricular innovation and concession to the American environment was the introduction of Jewish history, which was conceived as a means to enhance
Jewish identification. “Above all it is necessary to bring home to the children the
grandeur of Jewish history, the heroic struggle and the unparalleled martyrdom of
the Jewish People for the sake of its ideals, to arouse their pride in our great past,
and to stir enthusiasm for the endeavors marking the Jewish revival of our own
days,” the report asserted.

Little concern or interest was demonstrated in the deliberations about issues of
historicity, in separating history from memory or sacred history from verifiable
history. Indeed, teachers were advised to “draw upon the large mass of legends,
appealing with particular force to the childish imagination.”

The principals agreed that it was not the primary responsibility of the Jewish
school to acculturate the children to their American environment or instill within
them patriotism and identification with American values. The public schools were
more than adept at this task. Yet they were nevertheless sufficiently concerned
about demonstrating that Judaism was consonant with Americanism to urge the
observance of American national holidays, with the exception of Christmas, in the
Jewish schools. The curriculum instructed that “the patriotic significance of these
holidays should be brought out, and whenever possible the relation of these holi-
days to similar events in Jewish history should be pointed out.”

The principals were equally bold in the areas of organization and school man-
agement. They adopted a unified calendar, standardized the daily schedule, and
reduced the hours of instruction from two to one and a half hours per day (seven
and a half hours per week) for the younger children. They also pledged to keep
class sizes down to a maximum of thirty pupils and discontinued the “exceed-
ingly cumbersome and degrading” collection of tuition fees during class. Instead,
the schools contracted with the Bureau, which set up a Tuition Collections De-
partment that employed mostly college students to make home collection visits,
thereby increasing efficiency and revenue. Bureau agents effectively investigated
parents’ financial status, determining their ability to pay tuition. They also tried to
establish personal connections with parents, reporting on their children’s progress
and publicizing Bureau and school activities.

Hovering over all the principals’ negotiations was Benderly, alternately guiding,
coaxing, or acting the part of silent observer, allowing proxies to make his points.
His closest allies were Handler, Konovitz, and Joseph Bragin, principal of the
School of Biblical Instruction on Meserole Street in Brooklyn, all of whom were
eventually employed in some fashion at the Bureau. He also received a sympathetic
hearing from Hurwitz of the Israel Salanter Talmud Torah; Ephraim Ish-Kishor,
the English Zionist principal of the Uptown Talmud Torah; and others. Even those
who disagreed with him could not help but respect his grasp of the issues, depth of
vision, and grand ambitions. Benderly framed the discussions with a comprehen-
sive list of questions, which he explained in such a way as to render the answers seemingly self-evident. Since progressives outnumbered traditionalists, Benderly sometimes simply allowed deliberations to play themselves out to their predictable conclusions.\(^{15}\)

When the principals completed their work, the chairmen of the various Talmud Torah boards of education were assembled to review the curriculum, which they ultimately endorsed. Benderly was elated, believing that he had found willing partners and a reservoir of goodwill on both the professional and lay levels. As we have seen, some of this goodwill quickly evaporated when it became clear that he was only interested in working with the larger schools. Given the limited financial resources at his disposal and his industrial, efficiency-centered mind-set, Benderly’s reasoning was flawlessly logical. “The cost of instruction must . . . be brought down to the capacity of the average workman,” he insisted. “Hence the watchword in the financiering of [a Jewish educational] system must be economy. Economy, however, is possible only through organization, and organization is more practicable in larger schools than smaller ones.” Everything from building maintenance to administration would be more cost-efficient on a per pupil basis in larger schools. The larger schools likewise had a greater potential for excellence on the educational level, he argued, because of their flexibility to group students by age and ability, and their financial wherewithal to hire the best teachers and a full-time principal.\(^{16}\)

Benderly was careful to devise an aid scheme that encouraged the Talmud Torah’s transformation from a charity school to a communal school. The Bureau would entirely subsidize the education of up to one-third of the student body, provided that the school was able to collect full tuitions from another one-third and at least partial tuitions from the final third. Naturally, he also made such aid contingent on affiliation with the Bureau and adoption of its reforms.

With much fanfare, the Bureau announced the standardization plan including the curriculum, licensing board, salary scale, and financial aid program in the fall of 1911. It was one of the Bureau’s proudest moments, a truly innovative and in some respects groundbreaking achievement. Four of the largest Talmud Torahs immediately affiliated with the Bureau, and a few others joined later.\(^{17}\) In important ways, however, it remained a paper revolution. We have already seen how the licensing board and salary scale were effectively undermined by the teachers’ union, traditionalist rabbis, and Talmud Torah lay leaders. Strenuous opposition from parents made the implementation of the more far-reaching curricular reforms virtually impossible in all but one or two schools. For example, Handler characterized the decision to discard the teaching of mechanical reading as “impractical” and “nonbinding.” Parents insisted that their children learn the
performance skills necessary to pray in the synagogue. Even teachers were dubious about the practicality of postponing prayer book study to the final two years of the program. Could the majority of children, who dropped out after the second or third grade, be permitted to leave school without learning to read from “the most holy book in the eyes of the Jewish masses?”  

A similarly uphill and often futile battle was fought by those who tried to strictly implement the teaching of Hebrew language according to the natural method. The experience at the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah was typical. When the principal and teachers tried to experiment with *Ivrit b’Ivrit*, eliminating the use of the ubiquitous phonetic-method textbook *Reshith Daat*, the parents revolted:

> One year . . . I had a meeting with my first grade teachers and we decided to devote the entire fall semester—three months—exclusively to the teaching of spoken Hebrew. . . . The rooms were filled with different objects, toys and pictures that teachers and students used in their studies. The lessons were stimulating and alive, not dry and tedious like when we used *Reshith Daat*. . . . The pupils enjoyed their studies, the teachers were thrilled with their progress and I, a workaholic by nature, was daydreaming sweet, pretty dreams. Then suddenly the pretty dreams turned into nightmares. Parents began pulling their kids out of school, at first little by little, but then in droves. This was not the usual attrition; it was an exodus—like the Exodus from Egypt! We brought the parents in for a meeting to hear firsthand their complaints and criticisms of the school and the reasons why they removed their children. We heard one resounding answer from them all: ‘Our children have been in school almost two entire months and still don’t have a book in their hands and haven’t even seen a single letter in all that time.’ With our hearts aching and our eyes welling with tears we witnessed the destruction of the building for which we had been laying the foundation.

The principal wryly concluded: “Only then did we fully appreciate the description ‘People of the Book’ upon which we pride ourselves. Here, in America, we were the people of the book *Reshith Daat*.”  

Opposition to *Ivrit b’Ivrit*, which peaked in the years before the U.S. entry into the First World War, came not only from parents but also from non-Zionists and anti-Zionists who associated the method with the larger Jewish national endeavor. This latter group included traditionalists within the Orthodox community who objected to the profanation of the Holy Tongue as well as some of the staunchest German Jewish financial supporters of the Bureau. A measure of the uproar can be
Struggle for a Modern System

gauged from the Bureau’s defensive response. Friedlaender, in his capacity as chairman of the Bureau’s board of trustees, was compelled to answer the critics at the third annual Kehillah convention in 1912. “The Ibrith b’Ibrith method constitutes but an insignificant fraction of the activities of the Bureau,” he insisted. “The Bureau has neither invented this method nor does it identify itself with it.” Friedlaender did his best to allay fears that the Bureau was promoting ethnic separatism or a godless, secular Jewish nationalism. “The Bureau energetically repudiates the preposterous allegation that it endeavors to make Hebrew a spoken language in this country. We look upon Hebrew merely as the key, and the only key, to the understanding and appreciation of our religious and literary treasures. We do not believe in a Judaism without Hebrew, but just as little, and even less, do we believe in a Hebrew without Judaism.”

When the Bureau was created, the German Jewish mandarins were well aware of the cultural Zionist proclivities of the Bureau’s stalwarts but took a calculated risk in supporting them out of genuine concern for the religious education and socialization of the immigrant children. If men such as Schiff and Warburg never explicitly threatened to cut off the Bureau’s funds over their opposition to the natural method, they used their leverage to push for a reduction in the curricular emphasis on Modern Hebrew. Warburg pressed Magnes on the issue in a 1913 letter. In response, Magnes framed the Bureau’s support of the natural method purely in pedagogical terms. “In general, it is our contention that the living method which we employ makes instruction more attractive, easier and more efficient,” he wrote. “Should anyone be able to suggest better methods to us, we shall be happy to adopt them.”

The matter did not end there. Little more than a year later Schiff summoned Benderly to his home to clarify the Bureau’s approach to Hebrew study. In a two-hour meeting, he tenaciously exhorted the director to revise the standardized Talmud Torah curriculum so as to reduce the number of years devoted to Ivrit b’Ivrit. In the meeting’s aftermath, Benderly drafted a seven-page position paper on Hebrew study that considerably expanded on Magnes’s arguments. Benderly explained that he had conducted extensive observations of Talmud Torah classes throughout the city, which revealed that the translation method and mechanical Hebrew reading were not only time-consuming and monotonous but also ineffective. The natural method, he insisted, was not adopted for the purpose of teaching Hebrew “as a living language, for it would be absurd to attempt such a thing in this country.” He emphasized that “[t]he only reason why Hebrew should be taught in any religious school in this country is in order to enable our children to understand the Prayers and the Bible in Hebrew. Any other purpose is foreign to our
system of Jewish religious instruction in America.” As evidence of his sincerity, Benderly pointed to the content of the Bureau’s Hebrew primers, which concentrated exclusively on religious-related vocabulary beginning in the second year.22

Benderly and his supporters have been taken to task for spinning “half-truths” to placate their patrons. If they did not intend to make Hebrew a spoken language in America, they were surely interested in connecting American Jewish children with the nascent Zionist movement in Palestine. “For them, the language was the essence of Jewish education,” writes historian Arthur Goren. “It not only linked the child with his past but it promised to win him for the movement for Jewish renaissance.” While this characterization is accurate, it presents an incomplete picture. Unlike some Hebraist educators, Benderly and his closest allies were not Diaspora negationists. The educational program they devised was built on the premise that American Jewish children would remain in the United States and was designed to encourage them to contribute to the growth and vibrancy of the American Jewish community. Benderly’s commitment to Ivrit b’Ivrit and his belief in its efficacy were surely influenced by his ideological commitments. But ideological fealty to cultural Zionism did not necessarily translate into an inflexible orthodoxy on the question of teaching methodologies. “I . . . have taken the view that the [natural] method should only be employed during the first three years [of the curriculum], as I have my doubts whether it will be possible for American Jewish teachers to bring out the finer shades of meaning in the ethical instruction if Hebrew remained the medium of instruction during the last four years,” Benderly reassured Schiff. “I also feel that the knowledge of Judaism which the American Jewish boy or girl ought to have should be in the language which they employ in their daily communication with their fellowmen. I have practically convinced most of the principals of the Talmud Torahs of this. I have no doubt that . . . it will not be difficult at all for me to convince the rest.”23

Nor should one be left with the impression that Benderly and his colleagues were somehow presiding over a curricular tsunami while all the time successfully obscuring it from Schiff and Warburg’s view. Schiff, in particular, sat on a number of Talmud Torah boards of directors and was even known to visit the schools incognito in order to observe classes. The truth was that the propagation of Ivrit b’Ivrit in New York’s Talmud Torahs during the 1910s was slow and incomplete. Consider the disappointing sales figures for Sefer Ha-Talmid, the Bureau’s Ivrit b’Ivrit series of Hebrew primers, which did not substantially improve even after the outbreak of war in Europe resulted in a serious shortage of alternative textbooks from Russia. By 1914 the Bureau had even pruned the most radical aspects of the standardized Talmud Torah curriculum from its own model schools. During the first two years of the seven-year sequence, phonetic reading and prayer book
were reintroduced while language instruction utilizing the natural method was cut back to 25 percent of the teaching hours. In the final four years of the curriculum, as Benderly explained to Schiff, the Bureau utilized English as the language of instruction so as to enable students to discuss sophisticated concepts.24

It is also important to point out that Benderly’s German-Jewish patrons were not unanimously opposed to modern Hebrew instruction. Indeed, at roughly the same moment when the Bureau was being pressured by Schiff and Warburg to abandon the natural method, Benderly received an invitation from Temple Emanu-El Rabbi Hyman Enelow to experiment with teaching Hebrew in his congregational school. Enelow’s overture came with the blessing of Bureau patron Louis Marshall, who also sat on the board of the flagship New York Reform synagogue. Benderly eagerly responded to Enelow’s inquiry by elaborating a six year program: “It is planned that during the first two years attention should be given mainly to learning to read, picking up of a vocabulary and the acquisition, to some extent, of what we may call the ‘Hebrew language sense.’ The third, fourth, fifth and sixth years are to be devoted exclusively to the Hebrew prayers found in the Union Prayer Book.”25

Benderly sent Enelow two of his most gifted sta√ members, Rebecca Aaronson and Libbie Sucho√, to inaugurate the Hebrew program. “I am indeed very glad to learn that you are pleased with Miss Aaronson,” he wrote to Enelow in December 1913. “I wish we had a few more girls like her.” Benderly was not dogmatic about the use of Ivrit b’Ivrit in the Sunday school. At one point he suggested that Enelow encourage the teachers to use picture books to teach Hebrew vocabulary by means of the translation method. Enelow was pleased with the Bureau collaboration, and for a few years Emanu-El became the Bureau’s laboratory Sunday school. Bureau sta√ members, including Sucho√ and Alexander Dushkin, adapted hall-mark Bureau methods for the teaching of biblical history and holidays and customs in the Sunday school setting, including the use of stereoptican slide shows and handicraft activities.26

The Hebrew program, in particular, encountered resistance from some of Rabbi Enelow’s congregants. One letter, from the secretary of the YMHA of New York, Falk Younker, captured the emotional discomfort that many felt with both the teaching methods and the content. Younker described a recent visit to the Uptown Talmud Torah, where Benderly’s Hebrew teaching method was being used:

Although I can read Hebrew ﬂuently enough to conduct Sabbath services whenever called upon to do so, and notwithstanding the fact that I have had no difficulty in helping to conduct services on the High Holidays for our young people at the Brotherhood, I did not understand half a dozen words
that were spoken during the time spent in these rooms. The teachers in these two classes held up countless objects before the children and when they did not understand, they made all sorts of gestures in order to draw on their imagination. These motions were devoid of grace and refinement.

Younker, who considered himself Jewishly well educated, was made to feel incompetent, indeed illiterate, in an Ivrit b’Ivrit classroom. “It was all like Greek to me,” he admitted. His sense of being in an alien environment surely colored his attitude about the teacher’s gesticulations and other seemingly outlandish methods. Adopting another familiar line of argument, Younker insisted that Benderly’s methods would do nothing to address the perceived crisis of morality that pervaded the younger generation, particularly among the immigrants. He warned that “the cause of Judaism in America will suffer greatly if Dr. Benderly is permitted to continue his system along present lines,” adding for good measure that “the manner in which the problem of instruction in religion for our Jewish youth is being worked out at present, is not in accordance with the aims and ideals that Mr. Schiff and others have in mind.” Enelow was not completely indifferent to his congregants’ sensitivities. For example, he declined to introduce the Bureau’s children’s magazine, The Jewish Child, into his school, presumably due to its overt Zionist content and traditionalist assumptions about readers’ home religious practices. Nevertheless, Enelow was unmoved by criticism of Benderly and his Hebrew teaching methods, and cooperation between the Bureau and Emanu-El’s congregational school continued.

After World War I many Talmud Torahs persisted in teaching Hebrew reading through the phonetic method even as most began utilizing aspects of Ivrit b’Ivrit to teach Bible and conversational Hebrew. Regardless of the parental opposition to Ivrit b’Ivrit, which persisted into the 1920s, advocates of the natural method were forced to contend with a shortage of properly trained teachers. By the 1920s more teachers were conducting their classes entirely in Hebrew, yet many were falling back on the tedious workbook exercises and mind-numbing conjugation charts that Benderly derided. When advocates of Ivrit b’Ivrit found that critics were often mollified by the argument that it aided in the teaching of Hebrew Bible, they predictably responded by conflating Hebrew language and Bible study, and gearing Hebrew language primers to the teaching of biblical vocabulary.

**Benderly, Gender, and the Education of Girls**

When Benderly was not preoccupied with the Talmud Torahs, his most pressing concern was the Bureau’s laboratory schools. The creation of one or two model
elementary schools “for the purpose of working out various phases of primary education” and serving as “concrete examples and guides to now existing Hebrew schools” was an integral part of the original plan for the Bureau that Benderly laid out to Magnes in his blueprint letter of March 1910. The schools were to be the Bureau’s showcase for its innovative teaching methods, classroom materials, and administrative innovations. Demonstrations of their effectiveness, utility, and efficiency, he felt certain, would result in their being copied and snatched up by the existing Talmud Torahs. Benderly also hoped that the schools would help to alleviate the shortage of qualified Americanized teachers by serving as feeders for the Teachers Institute. “I feel confident that when two model schools will have demonstrated the advantages of better methods, the problem will not be to induce the existing primary schools to adopt them—the imitative faculty will dispose of that problem readily:—the real task will be to supply institutions, the old and the new, with teachers that can use these better methods successfully,” he wrote to Magnes. 29

What began as two modest experimental schools for boys and girls at the Ninety-second Street YMHA and the Thomas Davidson Society on Henry Street quickly metastasized into a formidable network of Hebrew schools and extension education programs across three boroughs. By 1917, under the direction of Isaac Berkson, the Bureau was operating five elementary and intermediate girls’ schools in Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Brownsville with an enrollment of 2,458, as well as high school classes in those same neighborhoods for 650 boys and girls. In addition, the Bureau was coordinating a wide-scale extension education program for children and youths who received no formal Jewish education, with neighborhood centers serving growing Jewish communities in the Bronx and Brooklyn as well as neighborhoods such as Washington Heights and Yorkville in Manhattan. According to one estimate, the Bureau was reaching almost 20,000 children and youths in 1917. 30

On the positive side, the Bureau schools filled an acute need for a terribly underserved population. Initially, Benderly planned to have the Bureau operate one model school for boys and another for girls. But he soon reassessed these plans in light of the close relationship he had forged with a handful of Talmud Torahs serving almost exclusively boys, most notably the Downtown Talmud Torah on the Lower East Side. Its principal, Israel Konovitz, was on the Bureau’s payroll and allowed Benderly and his staff open access for observation and experimentation. This placed the Bureau in a position to devote the bulk of its energies to educating Jewish girls. As Benderly pointed out to Jacob Schiff, Jewish education for girls was “sorely neglected.” The Bureau’s number crunchers estimated that only one in ten Jewish girls in New York City between the ages of six and eighteen were receiving
a formal Jewish education at any given time, and about half attended Sunday schools. Benderly attributed the relative neglect of girls’ education to a mindset that the immigrants brought with them from eastern Europe, where education for girls, whether religious or secular, was not the norm. The rich texture of Jewish home and community life enabled girls to acquire the Jewish knowledge they needed through osmosis. “The environment was entirely Jewish and the home, the synagogue, and the street made up for the lack of schooling.” Even if Benderly, who had no firsthand knowledge of shtetl life, was indulging in a bit of romanticization—by the turn of the century, a majority of Jews lived in cities where the ties that bound them to Jewish life were somewhat more tenuous—he was no doubt correct that strikingly different conditions prevailed in the United States and warranted a reevaluation of the traditional approach to girls’ schooling. “Here the Jewish girl receives the same secular education that the Jewish boy receives. The environment is non-Jewish, the home is becoming less and less Jewish from day to day and women play an increasing role in the activities of the Jewish community. Unless a system of education is worked out for Jewish women in this country there is no hope of ever having a Jewish home life here and the danger of women ignorant of Jewish things taking part in Jewish communal work is self-evident,” he explained.31

The emerging gap between girls’ levels of secular and Jewish knowledge was troubling to Benderly because he feared that it would lead them to devalue Jewish life. It would be a mistake to view Benderly as a protofeminist. He supported hiring women as teachers, particularly for younger children, because he, like many of his counterparts in secular education, believed that they were on average more nurturing and temperamentally better suited than men to work with this age group. He also had little hesitation about promoting able women to administrative positions. Female principals supervised two of his girls’ schools, and the long-time director of his youth extension program was also a woman. For the most part, however, the familiar pattern in public education of male managers supervising female teachers and office assistants remained the norm in the Bureau schools. As we have seen, Benderly’s attitudes about women in the workforce were fairly conventional. He fully expected women to quit their jobs upon marriage, as his own wife had done, and certainly by the time they had children of their own.32

Ultimately, Benderly believed, the Jewish woman’s most important tasks were Jewish homemaking and child rearing, and his arguments in favor of Jewish education for girls followed accordingly. “How much more stability would the Jewish home have if, out of every fifty Jewish mothers, one had once been a Jewish teacher, and twenty others had received a Jewish education,” he mused. Indeed, Benderly’s argument for girls’ religious schooling had little to do with his
estimation of their inherent intellectual abilities except inasmuch as he viewed them to be appropriate candidates for certain teaching positions. “If our Public Schools suffer from over-feminization, our schools, particularly the Talmud Torahs, suffer from over-masculinization,” he contended. “What a fund of love and devotion to Judaism lies in the breast of the Jewish woman, and how little we have taken advantage of it.”

Benderly and his assistants set up what became a three-tiered girls’ school program. They continued to experiment with and reshape it throughout the 1910s. In its original incarnation, it included a three-year preparatory school for girls between the ages of eleven and fifteen. By 1912 there were twelve hundred girls enrolled in three preparatory schools in Harlem and on the Lower East Side. From the outset, the schools were intended to both provide a venue for experimentation and ameliorate the shortage of qualified, American-trained teachers. Thus Benderly recognized the need to develop a high school program for his graduates, which would serve as a feeder school to the Teachers Institute. The first girls’ high school classes were inaugurated in 1913. A year earlier he also began experimenting with an extension education program for eight- to eleven-year-old girls on Sunday mornings in theaters and assembly halls that lay vacant at that time of day. In a few months’ time, the classes were drawing an average of nine hundred children per week.

In just a few years, the system was considerably expanded. The extension centers, which originally relied primarily on auditorium work and were designed to be “inspirational” rather than “informational,” were soon deemed inadequate. By 1916 they had metamorphosed into more conventional supplementary schools, albeit with a fairly minimal twice-a-week program. Auditorium sessions were still used for Bible stories, Jewish history, music, and customs and ceremonies, which were taught with the aid of magic-lantern slides. But a classroom-based Hebrew

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Struggle for a Modern System 105
course, designed to familiarize the girls with the synagogue and home liturgies, was added one afternoon per week, in part to accommodate parental demand. In addition, a less intensive middle school track was added to parallel the preparatory school. By 1916 the Bureau’s school system, with its five girls’ schools and five high school branches, had become the largest in the city, serving over three thousand students, nearly one-third more pupils than its largest competitor, the Machzike Talmud Torah, which operated three elementary school branches for boys and girls in lower Manhattan and Brooklyn.35

The Hebrew High School: Challenges and Opportunities

Although the primary thrust of Benderly’s efforts during the Bureau’s early years was in elementary education, he recognized from the outset the importance of reaching adolescents. Toward the end of his life he confided to Rebecca Aaronson Brickner that “if he could start his experiments all over again, he would begin with young people at the age of 12 or 13 and not with children at the age of 7 or 8.” Youth, unlike children, were capable of grappling with abstract ideas. Moreover, they were typically both impressionable and motivated to learn, eager for critical engagement. “One has to want to learn to gain knowledge,” he concluded. Benderly’s comments would surely find support among many contemporary educators, but he forgot or glossed over the considerable handicaps that he would have faced in 1910 had he attempted to launch a broad-based Jewish high school initiative. At that time, parents in New York were required to send their children to school only until age fourteen—the age would be raised to sixteen later in the decade—and many working-class youngsters entered the workforce at the end of eighth grade. It was unrealistic to believe that these youths would have had the time, energy or inclination to attend Hebrew high school at the end of a full workday.36

Hebrew high school was bound to be a tough sell even to those who enrolled in public high schools. Only a minority attended Jewish supplementary schools as children, and given the astronomically high dropout rates, only a small fraction of this select group were bona fide graduates with the necessary skills to continue their studies. Furthermore, formal post–bar mitzvah Jewish schooling was virtually unheard of in the United States save for Reform Sunday schools, where confirmation, usually at age sixteen, served as the terminus.

When the Bureau, in cooperation with the Principals Association, established the Hebrew High School in 1913, it truly created an educational system de novo. The lack of vested interests and established patterns of operation enabled the Bureau to gain a foothold in secondary education without the kind of wrangling
that took place when it tried to bring order and standards to the Talmud Torahs and the Jewish teaching profession. As with the establishment of the girls’ schools, few traditional players on the Jewish education scene felt threatened. Indeed, the Bureau could be lauded for rendering a constructive service to the community by plugging the holes in the existing education system. On the other hand, the lack of an established tradition of secondary Jewish education meant that winning buy-in from parents and students would be an uphill battle. Success would depend as much on finding a winning marketing strategy as on creating a quality product. As any advertiser can attest, it is a challenge to create a market for a commodity if your targeted consumer never felt its absence to begin with. This is the best vantage point from which to appreciate the Bureau’s actions on the high school front.  

The first step was to combat the perception that Jewish education ended with bar mitzvah and create at least an impression that remaining in Jewish school through age fourteen was normative. Benderly and the principals convinced the Talmud Torahs cooperating with the Bureau to institute a formal graduation ceremony at the end of their middle school programs. Such ceremonies were unprecedented, perhaps because they would bring to light how few students actually completed their studies and also because traditional teachers and principals brushed them aside as American flourishes, *goyische naches_. But Benderly and his allies understood that graduation was also “a ‘commencement,’ a springboard for continuing Jewish studies on the secondary level.” He was likely familiar with New York City superintendent William Maxwell’s success in raising the high school enrollment rate by keeping elementary students in the system through graduation. The institution of a graduation ceremony also undermined the notion that Jewish education was a gendered activity. Students would be granted recognition for completing their studies independent of the boys’ bar mitzvah service. In the autumn of 1912 the Bureau convinced eight Talmud Torahs to participate in an “official and dignified” joint graduation ceremony with the requisite pomp and ceremony. Prizes were awarded and valedictory speeches made. The exercises became an annual tradition. The following year, the oldest two girls’ preparatory schools graduated their first classes. According to Kaplan, who addressed the graduates along with Magnes, Benderly, and Henrietta Szold, “The exercises were more interesting and beautiful than any I have ever witnessed at any public school graduation. The pity of it was that there were but few outsiders present. I believe that if Dr. Benderly had possessed the same skill at advertising as in ‘organizing’ he and his work would have been the talk of the town. He certainly deserves it.”

If Benderly failed to realize the publicity potential of the graduation exercises, he was very conscious of how to market the Hebrew high school to potential
Clara Weitzman's diploma and graduation exercises program, Marshaliah Hebrew High School, 1924.

In author's collection.
students and their parents. He was confident that so long as the high school was viewed as reputable, it could pull in a select number of boys who desired to continue their studies. He invited two of the largest Talmud Torahs, the Uptown Talmud Torah and the Downtown Talmud Torah, to collaborate with the Bureau and the Principals Association in working out a curriculum. He also wisely chose to invite an established principal of one of the larger modern Talmud Torahs to organize the boys’ high school, a move that reassured parents and members of the Principals Association alike. Joseph Bragin, formerly of the Meserole Street Talmud Torah, possessed credentials in the area of Jewish scholarship but was modern in outlook. Energized by the series of Talmud Torah principals’ meetings in 1911, Bragin attempted to introduce Ivrit b’Ivrit and the new curriculum into his Talmud Torah but was eventually rebuffed by the school’s conservative balebatim (lay leadership). Eager to move on, he enthusiastically accepted the challenge of setting up the Hebrew high school and directed it for the next twenty years, until his death. Described by one contemporary as physically “well built and of pleasant mien and bearing,” Bragin naturally elicited the confidence of others. “He is a born teacher, and seems to on the whole be contented with his lot,” one contemporary observed. When Kaplan invited Bragin to offer some courses at the Teachers Institute, he quickly became one of its most popular instructors.39

Attracting girls presented a more formidable challenge. Persuading parents of the value of girls’ Jewish education on the elementary level was difficult enough. The prospect of convincing them to forgo their daughters’ contributions to the family budget in order to keep them in Hebrew high school seemed doubtful. Asking the parents to pay for this education, which according to one estimate initially cost the Bureau about twenty dollars annually per head, was out of the question.40 Even those girls who remained in school frequently spent the after hours working part-time, often in the family business or looking after younger siblings. Here was a textbook case for Benderly’s much-vaunted principle of community responsibility for Jewish education. Revealingly, however, the girls’ preparatory schools and high school were placed on a secure financial footing not through a broad-based fund-raising campaign or a community chest subsidy but thanks to the largesse of a single donor, Louis Marshall, who set up the Florence Marshall Fund and made a $150,000 initial gift in 1916 to honor the memory of his late wife. The Hebrew high school was eventually named the Florence Marshall Hebrew High School and was popularly known as Marshaliah.41

Relieving parents of the cost of preparatory school and high school education was a crucial prerequisite for success. But Benderly believed that finding an initial crop of promising students required a deliberate recruitment and public relations effort. He dispatched Libbie Suchoff, a former public school teacher and one of his
sharpest and most capable assistants, to scout out potential candidates. With the cooperation of the public schools, a thousand adolescent girls were selected for possible admission. Each girl was interviewed at home, where the investigators were able to meet her family and get a glimpse of her home life. Suchoff reviewed each candidate’s physical, mental, and academic profiles and investigated the socioeconomic background of her family, the stability of her home life, and the education levels, attitudes, and Jewish commitment levels of her parents. In the end, five hundred girls were selected for admission into the preparatory and high school programs.\textsuperscript{42}

The girls’ high school program was divided into four tracks, underscoring its vocational orientation. An intensive curriculum focusing on biblical, postbiblical, and Modern Hebrew literature, taught entirely in Hebrew, was offered to those girls preparing for careers in Hebrew schools, while girls who aspired to become Sunday school teachers, club leaders, and Jewish social workers were offered a two-year basic Jewish studies curriculum taught in English followed by a third year devoted to specialized, professionally geared study and internships. The Sunday school program fed into an extension department at Teachers Institute (later named in memory of Israel Friedlaender), while the club leader and social work tracks prepared students for matriculation in the Bureau’s short-lived School of Jewish Communal Work, which was directed by Julius Drachsler.\textsuperscript{43}

As Benderly anticipated, the vocational nature of the high schools proved to be a strong selling point with parents. Even those who were initially indifferent or antagonistic to the idea of their daughters attending the high schools were won over by the practical benefits. Some were apparently also impressed by changes in their daughters’ affect and their growing enthusiasm for Judaism, which they attributed to the schools’ influence. Benderly himself took note of the schools’ salutary impact on the students. Reporting to Schiff, the Bureau director could barely contain his enthusiasm: “We have failed hitherto to reckon with the latent forces of Jewish womanhood. Let us give these young women the opportunity and they will give us again the Jewish home, which played such an important role in the past.”\textsuperscript{44}

Reaching for a biological simile that harked back to his medical school days, Benderly analogized his differentiated secondary school program to an animal cell. The nucleus or core was composed of those few students, both male and female, who undertook the rigorous Hebraic program. “This nucleus is important not only for itself, but also as a leaven—that is, for the influence it will exert.” The protoplasm consisted of those students who enrolled in the “more moderate curriculum” or engaged in Jewish youth group activities and club work. For these individuals, the essential component was the “Jewish milieu,” with the primary
educational goal being to “provide the Jewish experiences formerly found in the environment.” Fundamentally, this philosophy was consistent with his support for a range of curricular options of varying intensity on the elementary school level, as well as a program of extension education for those children who received no formal Jewish schooling. Jewish survival, he believed, would be safeguarded by a highly educated elite leading a receptive folk who were emotionally connected to Judaism, immersed in Yiddishkeit (Jewishness), conversant in Jewish customs, ceremonies, and liturgy, and strongly affiliated with the local Jewish community, the larger Jewish people, and the Zionist project in Palestine, but not necessarily literate in classical Jewish sources. His was a hierarchical approach that was spiritually grounded in traditional, premodern European Jewish society, where a basic khayder education was afforded to many boys, even of limited means, while yeshiva education was restricted to the few, and girls’ education was generally confined to the home. And while it was somewhat at odds with America’s commitment to compulsory elementary education, it was very much in line with the contemporary philosophical underpinnings of the U.S. education system, which viewed basic education as a right and secondary and higher education as the purview of the social elites.\(^{45}\)

Few were more enthusiastic about the Hebrew high schools than Mordecai Kaplan, whose Teachers Institute soon reaped the benefits of a better-prepared student body. In his 1914 commencement address Kaplan acknowledged the contribution of the Bureau schools in allowing TI to raise its admission and graduation standards. By the mid-1910s, between 75 and 90 percent of the students who matriculated at TI were alumni of the Bureau’s high schools. This enabled TI to intensify its curriculum and eventually eliminate its elementary-level courses. Kaplan later estimated that the Hebrew high school had added three to four years of preparation to the average TI candidate. By 1920, the Institute’s faculty felt confident in abandoning English in favor of Hebrew as the language of instruction in classical textual as well as modern literature courses.\(^{46}\)

Contesting the Objectives of Jewish Education

The exponential growth of the Bureau’s school system was a testament to the dynamism and commitment of Benderly and his devoted staff. It can also rightfully be cited as evidence of Benderly’s failure to live within his budgetary means. More fundamentally, however, it underscores the inherent tensions that existed between Benderly’s goals. From the outset, Benderly’s desire to build a laboratory school was complicated by his efforts to use the Bureau schools to address the teacher shortage. He and his assistants struggled with balancing the dual priorities
of small-scale experimentation and preparing as many students as possible for admission to T1.

By all accounts, Benderly had an almost boundless penchant for experimentation. But his exuberance inadvertently blunted the effectiveness of his research, as trial and error often substituted for controlled experimentation. "No sooner were the works of Thorndike and Dewey published, than Benderly had them on his desk," Rebecca Brickner recalled. Only slightly exaggerating, she added: "In the mornings he would read, and in the afternoons he would test out these newly acquired theories. Then the fun began. We seldom did the same thing twice." Brickner was describing Benderly's days in Baltimore, but the same spirit pervaded his work in the New York schools. Using a rabbinic maxim, Zevi Scharfstein wryly observed to Magnes that Benderly "builds worlds and then destroys them." Without missing a beat, Magnes responded: "God does the same. That is the nature of every creator." A willingness to blithely tear down one’s experiments midstream and begin from scratch is arguably an asset in a laboratory school, although even in that setting a lack of discipline severely limits one’s potential for yielding meaningful results. But a lack of baseline consistency punctuated by deliberate and incremental change can be maddening for both teachers and pupils in a more conventional setting like a preparatory school and probably had a deleterious effect on learning and outcomes.47

Benderly’s unwillingness to mind his bottom line was an act of hubris fed by a penchant for bold risk taking and a misguided belief that Magnes could fund-raise the Bureau out of any financial hole. The resultant severe contraction of his school system at the end of the decade wreaked havoc with his teachers’ and students’ lives. Even before then, the staff was often unpaid for months at a time, engendering friction, personal hardship, and bitterness. More than a few Bureau workers resigned in disgust. The situation became so dire in the summer of 1917 that Benderly’s closest aides drafted a plaintive appeal to Magnes, which was signed by the entire staff. Even members of Benderly’s board of trustees, Henrietta Szold and Israel Friedlaender, became sufficiently frustrated with his disregard for their financial directives that they threatened resignation. "It is my firm belief that if the Bureau is allowed to continue in this manner much longer," Friedlaender wrote to Magnes in June 1916, "it will be forced to stop its activities, wrecking the lives of the little army of enthusiastic young men and women who have staked their future on the success of the Bureau and involving the greatest catastrophe which, in my opinion, can befall New York Jewry." Friedlaender and Benderly were barely on speaking terms when Friedlaender was murdered in the Ukraine while on a Joint Distribution Committee mission in 1920.48

Benderly convinced himself that salvation would come from the Bureau’s
German-Jewish benefactors. Perhaps, he came to believe the hostile Orthodox Yiddish press’s overstated characterization of the Bureau as the indispensable tool of “the great philanthropists who want to be the rulers.” At one point, Benderly challenged Jacob Schiff to invest in Jewish education a mere one percent of the “brains, energy” and capital that he spent building up the Union Pacific Railway. Schiff politely demurred: “If you had only challenged me like this twenty years ago!” Some time later, when the philanthropist was complaining to Benderly about his instructional methods, Benderly offered Schiff a caustic rejoinder: “The tragedy for us now, Mr. Schiff, is that our roles have changed. You give the educational advice and I am expected to do the financing of Jewish education.”

It is easy to empathize with Benderly’s unsuccessful attempt to reconcile conflicting realities. Benderly operated with the weight of the roughly 150,000 Jewishly unschooled children on his shoulders and only modest funds in the Bureau’s bank account. In his March 1910 letter to Magnes, he compared the Bureau’s role to that of a lever, trying to raise the standards of Jewish elementary education through study and modeling. However, in truth, he never completely made his peace with this limited role. While he verbally acknowledged that the Bureau could not even begin to directly make a dent in the number of unschooled children, he nevertheless fell into the trap of embracing this futile task. Whether motivated by a messianic complex or a bleeding heart, the tragic end result was the same.

Significantly, Benderly’s lack of budgetary discipline did not stem from a dearth of managerial skill. On the contrary, he had a precise accounting system and a good head for details. He was deeply concerned with the financial aspect of Jewish education. One of his first projects at the Bureau was to investigate the financial condition of the existing schools and issue a detailed report replete with facts and figures. Indeed, the results of his inquiry played a determinative role in his controversial decision to concentrate the bulk of the Bureau’s energies and limited resources on the largest, economically most secure Talmud Torahs. Benderly was also consumed with the mission of making Jewish education affordable, which he viewed as a precondition for convincing all but the poorest parents that paying for elementary Jewish education was a parental responsibility. Without parental consent to this principle, Benderly believed that the entire system of Jewish education was in jeopardy. Even philanthropists sympathetic to Jewish education refused to entertain the premise that Jewish schools should be sponsored by the wealthy. Operating budgets, they insisted, should come primarily from tuition collection. It was on this basis that Benderly developed a financial aid scheme for the largest Talmud Torahs that capped the percentage of full scholarship cases at one-third of the total school register.

Moreover, a major aspect of his educational experimentation was devoted to
problems of affordability and sustainability. Benderly believed that a maximalist, five-day-a-week program was too costly to serve as the predominant supplementary school model. His preparatory schools were designed to test whether efficiency measures could be effective in recouping some or all of the teaching hours sacrificed by the adoption of a three-day-a-week curriculum. The extension schools, meanwhile, investigated the efficacy of mass education utilizing technology as well as a variety of teaching strategies and reinforcement devices in obtaining limited, primarily affective objectives. Sometimes, as with the extension schools, the results were disappointing, leading Benderly to experiment with other cost-effective schemes.\textsuperscript{52}

Benderly’s refusal to divorce the realm of finance from that of educational goals and student achievement was reflective of the trend in public school education toward scientific management. One of the leading administrative progressives, Frank Spaulding, dismissed as hopelessly sentimental those educators who refused to investigate the relative cost-effectiveness of various methods, schedules, and even curricular programs on the grounds that the educational value of school, in terms of both habits of mind and habits of heart, was immeasurable. Benderly agreed, not because he was a proponent of lowering standards—although he clearly did not believe that fluency in classical Jewish sources was a necessary or attainable goal for more than a small percentage of students—but because he had a highly developed sense of what the Jewish education market would bear.\textsuperscript{53}

Maximalist Jewish educators laced into Benderly for peddling a watered-down Jewish education. One of his fiercest critics was Louis Hurwich, the longtime superintendent of the Bureau of Jewish Education in Boston, who portrayed Benderly’s experimentation with a reduced schedule as a betrayal of the cause of Jewish cultural renaissance to which he and his disciples professed allegiance. Benderly was too apt to bend to the exigencies of American life, too quick to counsel accommodation rather than resistance. In Hurwich’s view, the path of adjustment led ineluctably to cultural annihilation. “‘Adjustment,’” Hurwich wrote with the lessons of the Second World War in mind, “is synonymous with ‘appeasement.’ . . . Environment is also a dictator. In Jewish education we learned appeasing the environment only invites more appeasement, until there is nothing left to appease with.”\textsuperscript{54}

Writing in the 1950s, when the system of community Hebrew schools over which he presided was giving way to less intensive congregational schools, Hurwich was feeling bitter and defeated. Not surprisingly, he cast about for someone to blame and settled on his old rival Benderly. Rather than acknowledging the determinative power of social forces such as migration and acculturation, Hurwich lamented that “Jewish education lost its soul” more than thirty-five years earlier with the original
sin of its master. Benderly’s supposed willingness to compromise standards and his eagerness to “make Jewish education easy” was a dagger in the heart of the Hebraists and maskilim like his father-in-law, Israel Konovitz, who were working assiduously to promote a national Jewish consciousness and connection to the land of Israel based on the dissemination of Hebrew language and culture in the United States. Why, Hurwich wondered, had Benderly not experimented with a system of rigorous schools to “find out whether the so-called ‘maximum’ in Jewish education could be achieved also on a large-scale”? Why had he not done more to replicate the successful work of the modern Talmud Torahs (like Konovitz’s Downtown Talmud Torah!) and save them from decline in the 1930s?55

What made Benderly’s willingness to sell out that much more painful, in Hurwich’s mind, was that he was blessed with gifts of leadership that Hurwich and others simply did not possess. “He was a tremendous personality and had qualities which made him unique in Jewish education. . . . In this wonderful, free country his work had the potential to trigger a new Golden Age the likes of which there were few in our history.” Benderly could have spearheaded “renewal of productive Jewish spiritual life” but chose instead to “sate the wolf and starve the sheep.”56

There is much that one can take exception to in Hurwich’s critique, beginning with his overheated rhetoric, his romanticization of the past, and the oversimplified and self-serving nature of his conclusions. Jewish Diaspora communities have historically struck a balance between accommodation and resistance with their host cultures. The 1910s were hardly the Eden for Jewish education that Hurwich remembered. And whether or not the congregational school was unwittingly legitimized by the anticlerical Benderly’s experimentation with a reduced schedule, its ascendancy—and the corresponding decline of the Talmud Torah—had far more to do with suburbanization.

But Hurwich’s characterization of Benderly as an accommodationist with limited faith in the power of social engineering was accurate. Benderly viewed himself as no less of a survivalist than Hurwich, but he insisted that any Jewish educational endeavor that did not work within, rather than in opposition to, the American environment was doomed to failure. “[W]e are all anxious for the evolution of a Judaism which will be in harmony with American conditions, in order to assure its perpetuation in this country. We must get clear the fundamental fact that the kind of Judaism we want to perpetuate in this country is that which can hold its own in this environment, and that the home and the synagogue must be willing to share with the school the burden of educating the new generation for this task.”57 To borrow a contemporary metaphor, if Benderly was behind the wheel and got caught in a skid, his inclination would be to attempt to regain control of his automobile by driving into it rather than abruptly turning away.
Superintendent of girls’ schools Isaac Berkson implicitly exposed the simplistic nature of Hurwich’s blanket condemnation of adjustment when he frankly portrayed the Bureau’s support for girls’ education as an act of accommodation to the American environment and its values. “To fail to make adequate provision for the education of our Jewish girls would be a fatal blunder in our process of adjustment to the new conditions,” he wrote. Hurwich, presumably, would agree, since he supported Jewish education for girls in Boston. Indeed, there were many instances when Hurwich, who studied social work and education at Columbia University, was no less avid an advocate for adjustment than Benderly and his coterie. Perhaps the most famous example was his support for Jewish camping, which culminated in 1943–44 with the founding of Camp Yavneh in Northwood, New Hampshire.58

Benderly’s experimentation with the three-day-a-week program, and later a two-hour-per-week curriculum, was neither an endorsement nor an attempt to undermine the five-day-a-week school. Rather, it was a concession to the voluntary nature of religious education in the United States and a strategy for making Jewish education self-supporting. Benderly meant to provide flexibility and variety in the educational system so that parents could choose the option for their children that best reflected their values and suited their needs and priorities. If parents were willing to support five-day-a-week schools and the schools themselves were placed on a sound financial footing, Benderly had no objection to them, so long as the children could handle the intensive program and added work requirements. “It is imperative . . . that besides impressing [parents] with the profound necessity for this education, they must also be taught to realize that Jewish education is a commodity, and must be paid for just as any other commodity, such as food, clothing, shelter, books, etc. To impose one type of curriculum with a given number of hours of instruction per week, for all parents, is at present, both unwise and impossible. . . . Jewish parents must be given the opportunity of showing how much of the commodity, Jewish education, they are willing to buy for their children.”59

To some, including Hurwich, treating Jewish education as a commodity was no doubt repellent, an object lesson in the dangers of avid adjustment to America’s morally vacuous capitalist culture. Educational value was reduced to a dollar value, and the needs of the community (as determined by the professionals) were subordinated to the whims of the consumer (in this case, the parent). But since American Jews showed no inclination to opt out of the public school system in significant numbers and set up a parallel education system like the Catholics, there was little that the professionals could do to impose their standards, especially in a city like New York, with its huge, diverse Jewish population and highly decentralized Jewish school system.
The Organization of a Jewish Education Profession

In 1917 the United States entered the First World War, and the Kehillah all but fell apart. News of the United States’ entry into the war hit the streets on Friday morning, April 6, 1917, as Benderly and his protégés were holding their usual breakfast meeting in his favorite East Side diner. As the sound of newsboys excitedly hawking their extra on the sidewalk outside interrupted their conversation, Benderly turned serious and declared: “We have lost more today than we can possibly rebuild in a generation.” Although the Jewish education profession as a whole rebounded by the early 1920s, Benderly’s prediction about the impact of the war on New York City’s educational infrastructure was prophetic. The Kehillah soon became a victim of politics and shifting philanthropic priorities. Magnes’s ardent pacifism and sympathy for the revolutionaries in Russia, which he did little to conceal, rendered him a persona non grata with numerous Kehillah supporters. Prominent Jews of German extraction, such as Jacob Schiff, felt compelled to display their American patriotism amid suspicion that they harbored pro-German
sympathies. The Kehillah was so closely identified with Magnes that it suffered by
extension. But regardless of Magnes’s politics, donors were moved by accounts of
Jewish suffering in war-torn Europe to direct the bulk of their philanthropy to-
ward relief agencies such as the Joint Distribution Committee. Addressing cultural
and spiritual needs at home, by comparison, seemed less immediately pressing.1

Over the next two years, Benderly involved some of his chief disciples, par-
ticularly Dushkin, Julius Drachsler, Samuel Margoshes, and Mervin Isaacs, in a
utopian but ill-conceived attempt to save the Kehillah through revitalization and
democratization. The process involved his staff in logistical planning, neighbor-
hood caucusing, a membership drive, and an extensive community survey. Dush-
kin later characterized the work as “hectic,” “unrewarding,” and in short an “im-
possible task.” One bright spot was the publication of the survey in 1918 as the
Jewish Communal Register. While the Register failed in its intended function as a
vehicle for selling Kehillah membership and turned into a financial disaster, its
1,597 pages of statistical information and articles about the New York Jewish
community and its rich and variegated organizational life was “a veritable mine of
information, a lasting historic document of value.”2

Benderly and Magnes at least had the foresight to disconnect the Bureau from
the Kehillah and affiliate it and the city’s largest Talmud Torahs with the newly es-
tablished Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies. This was no
simple task, as it encountered much resistance from Federation benefactors who
believed that its support should be limited to welfare activities. Indeed, when it was
established in January 1917, the Federation explicitly excluded cultural and reli-
gious activities from its purview. According to a planning document drawn up in
May 1916, support for educational institutions was rejected because “there is not
the unanimity of opinion in the community as regards the aims, methods, and pur-
poses of religious education work which exists with reference to the work of other
charitable and social service agencies.”3 Federation leaders also feared that requisite
improvements to the Jewish educational system would prove so costly that they
would demand disproportionate and overwhelming infusions of cash, far beyond
the Federation’s means. Adequately subsidizing education would necessarily starve
other affiliated institutions such as social service agencies and hospitals.4

It quickly became clear, however, that the ability of the schools to raise funds
was severely encumbered by the existence of the Federation. Many longtime do-
nors to these institutions incorrectly assumed that a single contribution to the
Federation would cover the gamut of their previous philanthropic obligations and
withheld their school donations. Under Benderly’s guidance, the schools con-
stituted themselves as a joint committee to negotiate with the Federation. Armed
with a Bureau-crafted report demonstrating that a large percentage of children at
the schools came from indigent families, the committee urged the Federation to support the charity aspect of Jewish education by supplying schools with scholarship money, while avoiding “questions of conscience and conviction” by disavowing any oversight of an affiliate school’s curriculum, religious orientation, or philosophy. If Federation leaders were unmoved by the plight of the schools and their touted function as a moral bulwark against the influence of the mean streets—“Jewish social pacifiers” was Kaplan’s evocative description—they were probably swayed by the committee’s threat to create a rival educational-religious philanthropic federation if the schools were not admitted. Separate secular and religious fund-raising agencies would only weaken the community, Benderly and his colleagues argued. It was a point with which the Federation’s president, Felix Warburg, wholeheartedly concurred.

The Federation’s turnaround came in March 1917, after three months of intensive negotiations, and was viewed by many in Benderly’s circle as a major victory. Kaplan, for example, called it “an epoch-making event in American Jewry. It has broken the back of the assimilationist tendency.” He lauded his friend Benderly as “the one man without whom such a development would never have taken place . . . [the] most constructive genius in Jewish social life at the present time!” and predicted that New York’s example would be followed by federations in other cities.

But as Benderly understood, the victory was a mixed blessing. On a symbolic level, it was nothing less than an affirmation of the Bureau’s mantra of community responsibility for Jewish education, particularly as the Federation replaced the Kehillah as the vehicle for communal organization and cooperation. On a practical level, the Bureau’s schools and extension program along with the larger Talmud Torahs would be assured survival in uncertain economic times. On the downside, however, the subsistence-level subsidy would assure little more than stasis; the price for stability was arrested development. Institutions that affiliated with the Federation agreed not to engage in their own fund-raising campaigns. For the next twenty years, the Bureau of Jewish Education remained on life support, with Benderly forced to curtail his grandiose plans.

A few of Benderly’s disciples sensed from the outset that affiliation with the Federation would be an unmitigated disaster. Berkson called it “selling our birthright” and “the first step to destruction.” The Federation, Berkson realized, was merely “throwing a bone to a dog.” Jewish educators, he believed, needed to raise a fund of their own, both as a way of creating a connection with the wider community and as a means of gaining greater independence. Benderly countered that the establishment of the Federation would make fund-raising extremely laborious and often futile. Years later, Berkson remarked with a smile: “Benderly was always practical, you see—up to a point.”

The Education Profession 119
No doubt, some of the resistance Benderly encountered in his efforts to rebuild the Bureau was a backlash resulting from his previous spendthrift ways. Even his stalwart financial backers wanted to see him on a shorter leash. Faced with the necessity to radically scale back the Bureau’s activities, Benderly became despondent. At some point in the first half of 1919, he called together his remaining staff and suggested that the Bureau be disbanded, and that he and some others might join the Education Department of the Zionist Organization of America. Dushkin had taken a position there in 1918 working for Henrietta Szold. A group of Benderly’s close disciples, including Berkson and Chipkin, resisted the proposal. They had heard from Dushkin that Szold was treated derisively and her department afforded scant attention and few resources. The Zionists, intoxicated by the Balfour Declaration, were more interested in fanciful mass aliyah schemes than Diaspora education. The Bureau, they argued, must soldier on through the present difficulties if the principle of communal responsibility for Jewish education was to be salvaged.

Benderly relented, but he was exhausted. His herculean efforts to reorganize the Kehillah had utterly failed, and now a decade’s worth of education work seemed likely to wither. He largely withdrew from the day-to-day running of the Bureau and joined his brother Jacob Benderly’s import-export business, preferring to leave Bureau matters in the hands of his lieutenants, who by this time were in their mid- to late twenties and eager for greater responsibilities. According to Dushkin, Benderly fancied that he would be able “to follow the Jewish tradition of making a living out of business and devoting the rest of his time to the promotion of Torah; nay even to make it possible for some of his disciples to do likewise.” In reality he achieved little satisfaction or financial security and succeeded only in eliciting the sympathy of his friends. A dismayed Kaplan observed that “the one man who I had hoped would hold out to the last has also surrendered. All this talk about his doing Jewish work in addition to his business duties is to me moonshine. If the Jewish community is in such a state that it has not enough work for a man like Benderly then it is in a mighty precarious condition from which a thousand thinkers like myself are powerless to save it.”

This latest disappointment, coming on the heels of his other setbacks, sunk Benderly into a severe depression and even drove him to contemplate suicide. In March 1920 he contracted a serious case of pneumonia. This bout with a life-threatening illness apparently triggered a change in his outlook, helping him to emerge from his spiritual crisis. “When he recovered from his illness he was a broken man,” recorded Kaplan, “but kept on repeating that he was himself again.” He then proceeded to throw himself into another ill-fated business proposition, the American Palestine Company, which sought to sell prefabricated, low-cost
housing to Jewish immigrants arriving in Palestine. As Kaplan predicted, Benderly was “as little successful with the new scheme as with all of his schemes in the past.” Despite a number of extended business trips to Palestine, he failed to attract sufficient financial backing, and his “low priced, all purpose, four room tent” failed to catch on with the immigrants of the third aliyah. When after a few years this venture too failed, resulting in financial loss for Benderly and his investors, he rejoined the Bureau full-time.11

The Unrealized Potential of the Jewish Education Association

While Benderly worked through his midlife crisis, his disciples tried to draw lessons from the collapse of the Kehillah and the enfeeblement of the Bureau. It was not clear when the community would refocus its attention from pressing matters abroad, including the relief efforts in eastern Europe and the fate of Palestine, to home-front priorities such as education. Some simply gave up on the prospect of careers in Jewish education and moved on to other professions, ranging from the rabbinate to accounting. Others preferred to find fault with the leadership and its methods. “It seemed to some of us that Dr. Benderly had relied too narrowly on the friendliness of a few individuals,” recalled Berkson. “It was evident that if the Jewish educational movement was to make progress, it would need the backing of a large following of laymen who would make it their primary concern.” It was an idea that the Benderly boys would return to time and again: the need to cultivate grassroots interest in Jewish education. Without the support of lay leaders and the sympathy of the masses, Jewish educators would fail to command the resources and legitimacy necessary to effect a transformation.12

From this idea emerged the Jewish Education Association (jea), which was created in 1921. The problem was translating theory into practice. For in reality Dushkin, Berkson, and their colleagues had limited patience or respect for those lay people who expressed a genuine interest in Jewish education. These mostly modern Orthodox eastern European garment manufacturers lacked any vision of Jewish education. They approached the problem primarily from a philanthropic perspective and were content with propping up the existing schools by providing scholarship money for poor children and some funds for building construction and repairs. “As far back as I remember, in my connection with Jewish work, I can recall a feeling of latent distrust of these ‘orthodox’ balebatim of ours,” Berkson wrote to Dushkin. “I knew that they did not represent the idea of Jewish life that interested me. It would be instructive if someone would go right down to the bottom and make an analysis of the basis of their Judaism. I am sure the main elements would be cholent [traditional Sabbath-day stew] in its many varieties,
and a desire to play a part in the only social and communal life which is open to them.” Dushkin and Berkson, influenced by the rhetoric of community responsibility, set their sights much higher. They wished to create a standardized, organized communal education system.

In November 1919 Dushkin drew up a plan for a central organization that would take responsibility for Jewish education in New York City. The organization, which would either emerge from a reorganized Kehillah or be created from scratch, would act as a parallel organization to the Federation, concerning itself with raising and distributing funds for educational and possibly, in time, other religious and cultural activities. The heart of the proposal involved a $1 million annual campaign, which would be used by the central organization to subsidize existing communal schools, affiliate and aid congregational and institutional schools, regulate private instruction, conduct extension activities, recruit future educational leaders, support teacher-training institutions, build new school buildings in underserved neighborhoods, and fund the Bureau of Education. The plan placed as much priority on garnering small annual membership subscriptions as large gifts. Half the anticipated annual income would be collected from individuals donating $100 or less, with $150,000 brought in from approximately twenty thousand donors giving $10 or $5 gifts.

While the Kehillah delegates declined to act on Dushkin’s plan, many expressed interest in the creation of an entirely new education service agency. The following autumn, Berkson drew up a list of about one hundred prominent community leaders with a demonstrated interest in Jewish education. These men and women were invited to form an organizing committee, which evolved over the next eighteen months into the JEAC. The committee was chaired by shirt manufacturer and philanthropist Israel Unterberg and comprised primarily other wealthy, tradition-minded, eastern European clothing manufacturers, many of whom sat on the boards of directors of the largest Talmud Torahs. Most had long ago relocated from the Lower East Side to more fashionable neighborhoods uptown. Some were involved in Mordecai Kaplan’s initiative to build a Jewish Center on the Upper West Side. Others were congregants at Kehilath Jeshurun, the leading Orthodox synagogue across town in Yorkville. Magnes played a central role on the committee and was expected to eventually serve as chairman of the JEAC’s executive staff. Benderly, who was in Palestine when plans for the committee were drawn up, also joined the organizing committee upon his return.

Berkson acted as the secretary of the committee, which held numerous planning meetings in late 1920 and 1921. A tentative procedural plan, coauthored by Berkson and Albert Schoolman, overtly framed the new organization as a conscious reaction to the Bureau’s perceived failings: “In view of the fact that our main
difficulty during the past ten years has been the lack of responsibility on the part of the community for the solution to [the Jewish education] problem . . . the whole tendency in organization shall be towards creating a strong lay body which will be educated to assume this responsibility.” Berkson, however, soon lost faith in the JEA’s lay leadership, his view being reinforced by his strained working relationship with them. A second-generation American who spoke without an accent and barely knew his way around the Lower East Side, Berkson found the immigrant milieu in which these men operated to be foreign. It was a world in which business was conducted in Yiddish over heaping plates of salted fish in kosher dairy restaurant back rooms. They, in turn, viewed him with suspicion as an outsider. His efforts to organize the group and imbue it with a sense of purpose fell flat. He came away feeling that he had been treated like a clerk.17

The two men who could have inspired the organizing committee to reach for a higher purpose were Magnes and Kaplan. Neither, however, felt capable of pushing the lay leaders. Magnes was still smarting from his largely self-inflicted wounds during the war and was determined, at all costs, to work by consensus and avoid controversy. Meanwhile the leadership of the JEA was in turmoil over Kaplan’s contentious departure from the Jewish Center and his establishment of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. The implications of the Jewish Center affair were considerable. It divided the community, poisoning the air and complicating fund-raising efforts. Negotiations between the factions occupied many hours of conferences and meetings, draining lay leaders’ energies for other work. Several of Kaplan’s opponents broke with the JEA, and those who remained feared that the organization would lose the cooperation of the Orthodox community and the traditionalist Yiddish press if it did not make clear that “we are interested only in real orthodox education, at least for ten years to come.” Their use of the term Orthodox was elastic enough to include cooperation with the Conservative movement’s United Synagogue and nonaffiliated groups such as Young Judaea. Still, the outlook of the committee was a blow to those who favored the creation of a truly transpartisan service agency.18

Over the next few months the budget and scope of the proposed organization were considerably scaled down. By the summer of 1921, Magnes was anticipating that the organization would start out by conducting a modest two-year, $100,000 campaign. Rather than trying to meet the financial needs of existing institutions and fund new construction, the Jewish Education Association would initially engage in propaganda, conduct extension activities for Jewish youth, license teachers, encourage the enforcement of a citywide salary scale, and help organizations raise money for themselves.19

To make matters worse, in the Benderly boys’ view, the lay leadership was
convinced that the JEA needed at its head an individual with stature in the community, preferably a rabbi. Unterberg’s candidate to head the organization was Rabbi David de Sola Pool, the well-regarded former spiritual leader of Congregation Shearith Israel (the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue), who was concluding a stint in Palestine working with the Joint Distribution Committee. Pool was friendly with Dushkin and had officiated at his marriage to Julia Aronson in Henrietta Szold’s garden. But he had no previous experience in the field of Jewish education, a fact that rankled Berkson and Dushkin. After years of being groomed for leadership, they anticipated being handed the new organization’s reins of control. Yet, just as Kaplan had predicted, their doctoral degrees from Teachers College, which capped a decade of training and study, failed to command the same level of respect and trust from the immigrant clothiers as rabbinic ordination. Unterberg’s courting of Pool seemed to make a mockery of Benderly’s goal of professionalizing Jewish education, placing into doubt the Benderly boys’ career aspirations.20

Dushkin’s sense of professional outrage and “personal pique” were magnified by the dismissive manner in which Unterberg treated him, “like another foreman of his shirt factory.” Apparently at Magnes’s urging, the JEA’s organizers were prepared to employ both Pool and Dushkin on an equal footing, with Pool as head of the Communal Department and the public face of the organization and Dushkin as general secretary and head of the Department of Education. But Dushkin declined. He was short on cash and skeptical that the committee could raise the minimal funds necessary to get the organization off the ground in a timely manner. But he was primarily motivated by his conviction that the JEA’s leaders were “incapable of non-partisanship in Jewish life.”21

As disgusted as they were by Unterberg and the “mildly Orthodox all right class” that dominated the JEA, Berkson and Dushkin were especially disappointed with their mentors—Magnes, Kaplan, and Benderly—whom they judged to be too quick to compromise on core principles in order to obtain immediate results. The depth of Berkson’s and Dushkin’s disillusionment was in direct proportion to the esteem in which they had formerly held these men. Berkson compared Magnes to a Wilsonian character, “‘lady-like’ and aloof by temperament,” whose “principles are altogether in the realm of the Spirit.” He scoffed at his penchant for rationalization, which facilitated “the strange phenomenon of this professed radical, leading and playing darling to the Jewish bourgeoisie.” As for Kaplan, the professed “religious reformer,” he “leaves all Jewish life exactly where it is. He is more interested in the apparent consistency of theoretical formulas than in the consistency of practice and of life.” And, finally, there was Benderly, the closest to a father figure for these young men, who in Berkson’s estimation had “fallen prey to expediency,
led on by his desire for power, an expression more fundamentally of an overdose of the instinct that [Edward] Thorndike terms, ‘the satisfaction of being a cause.’” Berkson also faulted Benderly’s autocratic leadership style: “He has been brought up in the East; no better clue to his character in the personal side can be given than one which a colonist here in Palestine let drop. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Dr. Benderly acts like an effendi; he expects everyone else to work for him.’”

Many of Berkson’s characterizations were spot-on. But these traits were no more in evidence in 1921 than they had been during the Bureau’s heyday. Berkson’s letters read like those of a endangered adolescent fuming with righteous indignation, having discovered his parents’ fallibilities and apparent hypocrisies.

Dushkin’s role at the JEA was eventually filled by Benderly boy colleague Israel Chipkin. As the JEA became more established, its ambitions grew. In its peak years, the JEA’s annual campaign benefited from the expertise and showmanship of theater owner Joseph Leblang and war savings-stamp program creator Manny Straus. But even their combination of careful organization and ballyhoo could not bring in more than about $250,000 annually. In its twenty-year existence, the JEA never came close to realizing the original $1 million per year fund-raising goal, nor did it erect a single educational building, or make substantive progress toward the standardization of the Jewish educational system in New York City. One measure of its limited success was the continued affiliation of the largest Talmud Torahs and the Bureau of Jewish Education with the Federation. Even in its most successful years, the JEA could never hope to match the Federation’s by-no-means munificent yearly subsidies of these institutions.

To some extent, resistance within the Federation to a full-fledged philanthropic educational agency stymied the JEA. As the JEA organizing committee proceeded in its work, it went out of its way to assuage Federation leaders’ concerns and demonstrate its loyalty to the Federation, even if that meant forsaking the types of fund drives that sustained the Federation. In the final analysis, however, the JEA’s limited horizon was a function of its leadership and base of support. On one level, the JEA represented an important accomplishment: the first citywide Jewish educational agency in New York that not only served but was primarily funded by the immigrants. Nevertheless, the JEA also exposed the extent to which the newly affluent “alrightniks” were still unprimed to support Jewish education as a top-tier community priority. Fundamentally, they continued to regard the communal Talmud Torah as a charity school and did not view their donations as an investment in the education of their own children. Thus they never really bought into the full implications of the community responsibility idea.

Soon after rejecting the job offer from the JEA, Dushkin returned to the Bureau of Jewish Education as assistant director. The JEA organization episode prompted
much introspection among the Benderly boys. Efforts to distill lessons from the affair inexorably led them to conclude that a considerable chasm existed between the cultural Zionist ideology of the elites and the emotional, other-directed Judaism of the folk. Moreover, this disconnect rendered futile, in the near term, any attempts to centrally organize Jewish education. For now, the Benderly boys concluded, they should bide their time, working as writers, teachers, and executives in more specialized institutions such as the Teachers Institute, the Central Jewish Institute, the YM-YWHA, the Jewish Welfare Board, and the Bureau of Jewish Education, where they could spread their point of view on Jewish life and Jewish education. “Gradually we would develop, from the younger men of the community, those who have been for a longer time subject to the influence of American education, those who have been touched by the Zionist idea . . . the nucleus of an organization” to centralize and standardize Jewish education.25

Patterns of Jewish Educational Organization outside New York

Over the next few years, key members of the Benderly group took the new game plan to heart. Albert Schoolman devoted his attention to developing the Central Jewish Institute’s progressive Hebrew school and summer camp, while Leo Honor became a member of Kaplan’s staff, serving as registrar and history instructor at the Teachers Institute. Mordecai Soltes settled into a long-term position as educational director of the Jewish Welfare Board, while Leah Klepper became a master teacher and mentor for ti students. The careers of other “Benderly girls,” for instance Hajnalka Langer Winer, who served in the late 1910s as executive director of the Jewish Center, were abandoned or put on hold in order to raise children, although some, including Rebecca Aaronson Brickner continued to involve themselves informally in educational endeavors through the work of their husbands. Brickner took an active interest in the Euclid Temple’s religious school. Others continued to work part-time. Capitalizing on the role of her husband, Emanuel Gamoran, as head of the Reform movement’s educational department, Mamie Gamoran launched a successful career as a textbook writer. Libbie Berkson, meanwhile, devoted her summers to running the girls’ division at Camp Modin, and eventually became the director of the entire camp in the late 1930s.

In retrospect, however, the group’s assessment of prospects for change proved to be unduly pessimistic. The size and diversity of New York City’s Jewish community rendered it uncommonly difficult to organize for Jewish educational purposes. Yet the example of the New York Bureau in its heyday served to inspire other communities to action. As the effects of the sharp recession of 1918–1921 finally lifted and the condition of eastern European Jewry stabilized, American Jews were
able to reallocate their philanthropic resources to strengthen their communities at home. Local pressure, sometimes bolstered by the recommendations of communitywide surveys, induced a growing number of communities to organize central educational agencies in the 1920s. Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon, established agencies in 1921, followed by Chicago in 1923, Cleveland and Indianapolis in 1924, Cincinnati and St. Louis in 1925, and Buffalo and Omaha in 1928. On the eve of the Great Depression, fifteen communities boasted Jewish educational bureaus or associations of some kind, including Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Detroit, which had already established organizations in the mid- to late 1910s.26

These communities adopted a variety of organizational structures and funding schemes. In general, however, two models coalesced during this period, the Talmud Torah association and the service agency. The former type was exemplified by the agencies in Boston and Philadelphia, while the archetypal service agency was developed in Chicago. For comparative purposes, it is also useful to look at the example of Cleveland, where the director of the service agency–style bureau also served as superintendent of the Cleveland Hebrew School.

The diversity of approaches to Jewish education in the cities is notable, given their apparent similarities. These industrial metropolises of the Northeast and Rust Belt were immigrant magnets and contained the largest Jewish communities outside New York City. In all these cities, Jews made up a sizable percentage of the overall population in the 1920s, ranging from about 9 percent in Chicago to 13 percent in Cleveland. Chicago, with approximately 225,000 Jews, and Philadelphia, with about 200,000, were the second- and third-largest Jewish population centers in 1920. Cleveland, with an estimated 100,000, and Boston with about 80,000, rounded out the top five. By the 1920s all these cities housed a variety of Jewish social service, welfare, and cultural organizations, as well as federated philanthropic agencies or community chests.27

Yet there were also notable differences, which help to explain the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the educational agencies. For example, the relative health of the various federations and their directors’ attitudes toward Jewish education were crucial indicators of success. Also important was the existing educational infrastructure. Jewish migration patterns within these cities and their suburbs varied, which affected enrollment patterns and the relative popularity of various types of Jewish schools. Naturally, the philosophies and personalities of the various educational agency directors also played an important role in determining the direction and effectiveness of their organizations.

Boston is a particularly interesting case study because it was run for many years by an intimate yet self-proclaimed archcritic of the Benderly group. Louis
Hurwich came to Boston in 1917, during his summer recess from Columbia University Teachers College and the Kehillah’s short-lived School for Jewish Communal Work, to work as an unpaid intern to Morris Waldman, the director of Federated Jewish Charities. The Federated’s most recent campaign had raised nearly $250,000, which represented a substantial increase from the previous year and left the agency with a surplus of more than $100,000. Waldman was interested in expanding the scope of the Federated’s work, which up until that point had been devoted solely to social welfare activities, and asked Hurwich to survey Boston’s Jewish education scene. Hurwich, who served as the Talmud Torah director in Indianapolis from 1911 to 1916, was hardly green in the field of Jewish education. Not only did he submit a detailed accounting of Boston’s various Jewish schools; he also laid out for Waldman a recommended plan of action. Hurwich proposed that the Federated subsidize the Talmud Torahs and Sunday schools and set up a reserve fund for new school construction and existing building renovation. At the same time, he used his considerable political skills to engineer the organization of the Talmud Torahs under a single umbrella association that would distribute the subsidies, set standards, and extend Jewish education to new neighborhoods and other underserved populations. Not only was the essence of the subsidy plan adopted by the Federated Charities, but Hurwich was also appointed superintendent of the new Associated Boston Hebrew Schools, which was reorganized in 1921 as the Bureau of Jewish Education.

Hurwich boasted that the Federated’s acceptance of his funding proposal distinguished Boston as “the first community in the United States to organize Jewish education on a community-wide basis, and as a community responsibility.” But as Abraham Gannes noted, “the Bureau of Jewish Education of Boston was unique in that it interpreted its community responsibility for Jewish education as being in areas of secondary and higher education mainly.” Walter Ackerman agreed, marveling that “[t]here was something daring in [Hurwich’s] unyielding subordination of its service functions to the task of establishing and maintaining standards in the five day a week schools.”

Hurwich’s priorities were evident from the outset. With the decline of immigration, he attached increasing importance to the training of American-born Hebrew teachers. A strong teaching staff, he recognized, was an essential prerequisite for raising educational standards. The lion’s share of his time and the Bureau’s funds were devoted to growing and strengthening the fledgling Hebrew teachers’ training school, which evolved into the formidable Hebrew Teachers College. Hurwich was a zealous guardian of the intensive supplementary school program and an exacting advocate for quality control. In partnership with the college, which in its early years was directed by Hebraist Nissan Touloff, Hurwich effectively standard-
ized the program of the Talmud Torahs through the creation of a communitywide Hebrew high school, which became the primary feeder school for the college.29

A demanding entrance examination for the Hebrew high school was introduced in 1924, which prodded the Hebrew elementary school principals to accept a uniform curriculum. An initial two-year Hebrew-language immersion program was followed by a four-year sequence that emphasized Bible, Hebrew reading, conversation, and composition. Minor subjects included customs and ceremonies and history. Only the latter subject was taught in English. The testing program was expanded in 1929 to include twice-yearly achievement tests in grades two through five as well as the final exam at the end of grade six. Hurwich was a master at utilizing a combination of persuasion and pressure to achieve his goals. He notoriously published the exam results by school and by class, and refused to grant full diplomas to those students who failed. The spirit of competition and the terror of public shaming kept teachers on edge and helped to compel adherence to the uniform curriculum. Not surprisingly, school attendance on exam days was markedly lower than usual, as teachers encouraged low-achieving students to stay home rather than bring down their class’s average score.≥≠

As for the Sunday schools, they were barely tolerated by Hurwich as a necessary evil. While it is true that Hurwich originally recommended to Waldman that they receive a share of the Federated’s subsidy, he readily admitted that his motivation was tactical. Most of the Federated Charities’ directors were affiliated with Reform congregations and equated Jewish education with the Sunday school. Proposing to include the Sunday schools in the funding scheme was simply good politics, a concession designed to ensure the subsidies to the Talmud Torahs. And although the Boston Bureau was officially created from a merger of the Associated Hebrew Schools and the Sunday schools’ central organization, in practice the Sunday schools remained peripheral to Hurwich’s activities. In fact, Hurwich did not hesitate to siphon off funds from the Sunday schools and divert them to expand the program of the Hebrew Teachers College. He took pride that the Bureau influenced the decision of three institutional Sunday schools to expand their program to include weekday classes. Community fear of missionary activities sufficiently pressured the Boston Bureau to engage in some extension work. Hurwich recruited Israel Konovitz’s daughter, Leah Konovitz, a gifted young educator at the Central Jewish Institute in New York, to spearhead these activities (the two were later married). But Hurwich privately complained that extension work was a poor financial investment. The “thin program” of holiday celebrations and club work was costly, and Hurwich preferred to see the Federated’s money used to strengthen the intensive program.≥∞

Admirers like to quote Hurwich’s conceit that his “expressed aim . . . was to
create through the years something like the spirit of the Yeshivah of Volozhin.” The comment captures the unabashed elitism that permeated the Boston model. As Ackerman pointed out, it was “a posture neither unknown nor unappreciated in a city which boasted the Public Latin School and its policy of selective admission and such prestigious universities as Harvard and M.I.T.” Indeed, Hurwich claimed that far from objecting to the system of high school admissions exams and standardized achievement testing, parents found the procedures reminiscent of the public schools and consequently a cause for increased confidence in the Hebrew schools. Likewise, he was able to convince both parents and teachers that the uniform curriculum would help to alleviate the impact on educational continuity of the high rate of Jewish mobility. Hurwich likely exaggerated the equanimity of his various stakeholders. According to Ackerman, who was a product of the system, parents worried about the added pressure on their children introduced by the testing regime, particularly since it came on top of a rigorous public school program, while teachers objected to being forced to “teach for the test” and resented being evaluated based on their students’ test scores. As for the students, “in those days no one paid any attention to what pupils said or thought.”

While Hurwich repeatedly denigrated Benderly’s willingness to bend to the exigencies of the American environment, and his alleged conviction that “Jewish education must be easy,” he shared some of Benderly’s “redlines,” including his skepticism about the practicality and utility of day schools. Fundamentally, the two men were separated by their contrasting approaches to the challenge of Jewish continuity in the United States. Hurwich devoted himself to what amounted to leadership training, while Benderly, operating in a city where Jewish higher education was dominated by three rabbinical seminaries, also concerned himself with cultivating a basic level of Jewish literacy and Jewish feeling among the children of the Jewish masses. In a way, both were trying to compensate for irretrievable building blocks of eastern European Jewish life. Hurwich was intent on replacing the learned caste that was shaped by the world of the yeshiva so as to provide a healthy counterbalance to the wealthy but Jewishly undereducated balebatim. Benderly shared this concern, as was evidenced by the Bureau’s commitment to the Marshaliah Hebrew High School. But he was also preoccupied with baseline socialization, once the role of the family and the village, which he saw as an essential condition for the creation of healthy community. These differences in outlook were reflected in the men’s divergent approaches to the role of the Bureau director. Benderly tended to view the educational landscape broadly. He was as consumed with issues of efficiency, access, and affordability as he was with content, methods, and teacher training. While Hurwich was not unmoved by the former concerns, his primary interest was in building citywide institutions such as
the Hebrew Teachers College and the Hebrew high school that could not be supported on the neighborhood or individual synagogue level.33

If Boston's Jewish community was rendered especially amenable to Hurwich's elitist educational approach by the influence of the city's milieu, other equally favorable conditions likewise facilitated his success. Hurwich began his work with some unusually well-organized, high quality institutions within his Hebrew school system, including the Evrio Hebrew School in the West End, the Adath Jeshurun Hebrew School in Roxbury, and the Moriah Hebrew School in Dorchester, all of which had capable principals and teachers who were experienced practitioners of the natural method of language instruction. Unlike the Benderly group in New York, where the adoption of Ivrit b'Ivrit provoked controversy, Hurwich and Tour-off had little trouble enforcing a Hebraic-centered curriculum in Boston. As we have already seen, despite characteristic tensions between the established Jewish community and the immigrants, Hurwich also found a sympathetic partner in the Federated Charities, a relationship that continued under Waldman's successor, Maurice Hexter. Hurwich was fortunate to arrive at a moment when the agency could afford to think and act broadly. Although Federated's annual campaign stalled for a few years in the early 1920s, the annual subsidies, which earned the Bureau much goodwill from the Talmud Torah directors and lay leadership, continued unabated until the eve of the Depression, by which time the Bureau had consolidated its position and its uniform curriculum was firmly in place.34

The extent of Hurwich's good fortune becomes clear when one compares his experience with that of A. H. Friedland in Cleveland. Friedland may have first crossed paths with Hurwich, as well as Benderly boys Chipkin and Brickner, on the Lower East Side when he joined the Dr. Herzl Zion Club as a teenager. Like Hurwich, Friedland was a fervent Hebraist with high educational standards who made his initial reputation by running an exemplary Ivrit b'Ivrit girls' school, the National Hebrew School on the Lower East Side. He also positioned himself outside Benderly's immediate orbit, although he maintained close relationships with many of Benderly's disciples, including Emanuel Gamoran, with whom he collaborated in the 1930s on Gilenu, a popular Hebrew primer. Yet Friedland's nineteen years in Cleveland (1921–1939), where he served as superintendent of the Cleveland Hebrew Schools (CHS) and the educational director of its Bureau of Jewish Education, were rife with frustrations and disappointments.35

Even prior to the Depression, which eviscerated the Cleveland Bureau and enfeebled the Talmud Torah system, Friedland was working at a severe disadvantage. Despite unstinting support from the city's typically divided rabbinical leadership, Friedland was unable until 1931 to convince Cleveland's Federation of Jewish Charities to broaden its funding mandate to include Jewish education. Ethnic and
class divisions within the Jewish community, though hardly unique to Cleveland, nevertheless resulted in paralysis. Friedland’s dual role at the Bureau and the chs also engendered controversy, as opponents accused him of playing favorites among the various educational institutions and diverting a disproportionate amount of money to the cash-starved communal Talmud Torahs.36

A hint of Friedland’s potential to engage in transformative work was evident in the mid-1920s when he aggressively expanded the Talmud Torah network by establishing new branches, provided supervision and consulting services to congregational schools, and conducted outreach activities to unschooled children. Friedland hired a director of extension education, who introduced a program along the lines of the New York Bureau, replete with holiday celebrations, weekly auditorium illustrated lectures and Bible movies, club activities, and summer story hours. But much of this was cut back when the Cleveland Bureau’s annual fund-raising campaign repeatedly proved incapable of meeting its target. By 1928, even while the Cleveland Bureau was able to raise a total of only $56,000 through its annual campaign, the chs system alone was carrying a $60,000 debt. In 1930, with fund-raising lagging, the Cleveland Bureau essentially became a one-person operation.37

Friedland’s problems were exacerbated by Cleveland Jewry’s migration pattern. Jewish suburbanization occurred earlier and more completely in Cleveland than in other northeastern and midwestern cities. Enrollment in the chs, which remained steady at around 2,100 students through the mid-1920s, began a precipitous decline in 1927. The migration continued even during the Depression. In less than ten years the school system lost two-thirds of its student population. In the affluent suburbs, congregational schools became the norm as the chs was all but locked out by the synagogues. Thus, in the late 1920s. Friedland was already contending with an enrollment crisis in the Talmud Torahs that would not hit many other communities until the late 1930s and 1940s.38

Benderly boy Ben Rosen’s experience as superintendent of the Associated Talmud Torahs (ATT) in Philadelphia represents a more successful effort to balance the goal of supporting an intensive communal education program with efforts to reach out to the unschooled. Here, too, however, political conditions prevented Rosen from realizing his long-held goal of uniting the various communal and congregational school systems under a single coordinating agency. Rosen arrived in Philadelphia in 1921, two years after the city’s Talmud Torahs were federated and admitted as a constituent agency of Philadelphia’s Federation of Jewish Charities. Those first few years were not auspicious. Hyperinflation and a weak postwar economy created an environment where the Federation was unable to adequately respond to the teachers’ demand for wage increases. A resultant teacher strike
convinced community leaders to give the AT&T complete managerial control over its affiliates. Rosen, who was working part-time for Hurwich, in Boston, while completing his army service, was invited to Philadelphia as part of the reorganization process.

With the reins of control in hand, Rosen was able to introduce management efficiencies and enforce a rigorous, Hebraic-centered curriculum. As in Boston, the communal elementary schools maintained a five-day-a-week schedule, although as a cost-saving measure the course of study was reduced from six to four years. Financial pressures also led to a reduction in the number of class hours per week, although Rosen held the line at seven and a half hours for advanced students, which kept Philadelphia in step with Boston. Rosen's position was strengthened by the solid working relationship that he developed with Federation director Jacob Billikopf as well as the AT&T’s yearly subsidy. He also benefited from a symbiotic relationship with Gratz College, which trained teachers, many of whom were graduates of the AT&T’s Hebrew high school. The preexistence of a Hebrew teachers’ training school prevented Rosen from exerting a decisive influence on its management and program. However, it allowed him to concentrate his attention on other needs, and to collaborate with various Gratz faculty members on curricular materials and pedagogical experiments.

One of Rosen’s signal achievements in the 1920s was the erection of two Jewish education centers in heavily Jewish South Philadelphia. The centers were built with Federation sponsorship, as part of a general building campaign, in 1928. Rabbi Julius Greenstone, a fixture on Philadelphia’s Jewish education scene during the first half of the twentieth century, characterized the establishment of the two South Philadelphia centers as “one of the most significant landmarks on the road of the development of Jewish education in this city.” Prior to their construction, only a single school was housed in a building designed specifically for educational purposes. Most other schools met in converted dwellings or synagogue basements. According to Greenstone, “the rickety and unsafe conditions of most of these buildings constituted a great menace to the health and safety of both teachers and pupils.”

The Jewish educational centers underscored Rosen’s expansive view of Jewish education. It was not that the center model itself was cutting-edge—by 1928 it had crossed into the mainstream—but, rather, that Rosen interpreted his mandate as director of the Talmud Torah system sufficiently broadly to initiate a wide range of educational programs with target populations that extended well beyond his Talmud Torah pupils. His ambition was to convert the AT&T into a network of progressive school centers patterned after the Central Jewish Institute in New York. The Jewish educational centers not only housed the largest branches of the AT&T and the
Hebrew high school; they also bustled with a variety of educational, religious, and recreational activities for all age groups, including Jewish kindergartens, clubs, youth groups, lectures, and High Holiday services. Rosen adopted the slogan “The whole family goes to the Jewish school.” Contrast this with Hurwich’s unsuccessful attempt to convince the Boston Federated Charities and balebatim in Mattapan of the need for a similar center in that densely inhabited Jewish neighborhood. Hurwich attributed his failure primarily to a lack of political acumen. Yet his single-minded drive to bring his pet projects to fruition suggests that as appealing as the idea of a Mattapan educational center might have been, it simply did not rank on the top of his priority list.42

If the South Philadelphia centers telegraphed Rosen’s interest in extending his influence, so too did his foray into extension education, where he once again exported the New York model to Philadelphia. Rosen pressed the importance of using mass education to reach the unschooled as early as 1925. Federation leaders, however, were reluctant to support the AT&T’s expansion into extension education because they feared it would encroach on the activities of the city’s venerable Hebrew Sunday School Society. Rosen seized the opportunity to act on his own when the AT&T received a generous donation from a local fraternal organization. Rejecting Billikopf’s suggestion that the gift be used to build up the AT&T’s scholarship fund, Rosen counterproposed a two-day-per-week extension program. The extent of his ambition was revealed in a letter to Billikopf in which he presented the AT&T’s expansion into extension education not merely as an end in itself but also as a tactic to pressure the Sunday School Society into modernizing its curriculum.43

In spite of these achievements, Rosen never realized his aspiration to bring the various school systems under a single coordinating agency. Rosen publicly called in 1925 for the creation of a bureau that would be empowered to approach Jewish education in Philadelphia holistically. A Federation committee of rabbis and community leaders chaired by Cyrus Adler echoed his recommendation in a 1926 report. But congregational and institutional schools feared for their autonomy, and the organization that emerged, the Council on Jewish Education, was toothless. Rosen and his allies made a second attempt to centralize Jewish education in Philadelphia in the late 1930s but were thwarted by the city’s Conservative rabbis, who wished to strengthen their congregational schools at the expense of the Talmud Torahs. Rosen, too, had become a controversial figure by that time, “a strong personality” who was accused of promoting Jewish nationalism and Modern Hebrew at the expense of religious studies. The truth of this accusation was debatable. Regardless, a citywide coordinating agency was created only after Rosen’s departure, under the guidance of Leo Honor in 1945.44
As a group, the Talmud Torah associations of the 1920s made important strides in the development of standardized, modernized communal education systems serving mostly working-class children. The stronger agencies were able to advance the Jewish teaching profession by enforcing salary scales, creating licensing boards, writing codes of practice, and offering health and life insurance programs. Some were engaged in teacher training and ancillary educational programs. They were vitally important agents in the spread of the Hebrew-centered curriculum, which despite the misgivings of some religious and progressive educators remained dominant—at least on paper—into the postwar era.

At the same time, however, they had little success in ameliorating some glaring weaknesses, most notably in the area of student retention. Even Hurwich in Boston, with his laserlike focus on the intensive Hebrew schools, could not buck the trend. Boston’s high turnover rate was reflected in a 1929 survey, which found that registration levels precipitously dropped off in the older grades. Close to 60 percent of the total students registered in the eight best schools were in the first and second grades, while only one percent, or approximately twenty-eight students in the entire Boston Hebrew school system, made it all the way to the sixth grade. The Talmud Torahs in Philadelphia and Cleveland were hardly in better positions, with average yearly turnover rates in 1936 of between 40 and 55 percent. Only the Sunday schools managed to maintain a low dropout rate.45

Overall enrollment statistics varied widely from city to city, reflecting differences in movement affiliation rates, mobility patterns, and socioeconomics. Cleveland by far had the highest proportion of its elementary population enrolled at any given time, about 60 percent in 1923, but only one-sixth of those students attended weekday schools. At the other extreme, the 1929 Boston survey found only 28.5 percent of the elementary-school-age population enrolled in Jewish schools, with 57.5 percent attending weekday congregational or communal schools. Philadelphia was somewhere in the middle, with 35 percent of the child population attending in 1936, about half of whom were in weekday schools. To some extent all these statistics are misleading, since they are only snapshots. Indeed, a 1928 New York survey estimated that while 28 percent of the elementary school Jewish population was enrolled in Jewish schools at any one time, about 75 percent attended a Jewish school at some point between ages seven and thirteen.46

What must have been dispiriting, however, was the inability of even the best Talmud Torah systems to increase enrollment rates during the 1920s. In Boston, for example, Hebrew school enrollment remained flat between 1919 and 1929, despite an approximately 260 percent increase in expenditures. Better facilities, administrative efficiencies, and even programmatic and instructional improvements could
not overcome basic demographic realities, including the decline of immigration from Europe and American Jews’ increasing abandonment of the working-class ghettos for more upscale city neighborhoods and suburbia. As the long-term future of the communal Hebrew school seemed increasingly precarious, it could not have escaped the notice of more astute observers that the Talmud Torah association was a transitional educational agency model.47

The Bureau in Transition: The Chicago Experience

If the Talmud Torah association was tasked with modernizing and standardizing the immigrant school, the service agency aspired to coordinate and provide educational help for a range of Jewish school systems throughout an entire community. This model became common in the 1940s and 1950s and was epitomized by the Jewish Education Committee in New York (1939). However, Alexander Dushkin began to experiment with elements of the service agency a decade and a half earlier in Chicago. When Louis Cahn, the executive director of the newly formed Jewish Charities of Chicago, invited Dushkin to “organize a Board of Jewish Education” in July 1923, he almost certainly envisioned a Talmud Torah association along the lines of those in Philadelphia and Boston. The Jewish Charities organization had emerged from an amalgamation of separate Orthodox and Reform philanthropic agencies. In that merger it inherited five traditional Talmud Torahs and a Hebrew high school, which were subsidized at the combined rate of approximately $40,000 per year. The schools were unsanitary, disorganized, and ineffective. According to Cahn, the officers of Jewish Charities believed that “in order to get anywhere, it will be necessary to have a general superintendent, whose function will naturally be to coordinate the work, develop it, systematize it, etc.” Nowhere in his job offer did Cahn suggest that the superintendent’s responsibilities might extend beyond the affiliated schools. Dushkin, however, was already contemplating a more ambitious plan. “What would interest me in Chicago would be a long range program aiming to bring the majority of Jewish boys and girls in the community under the influence of a diversified system of Jewish education,” he wrote in reply. “To what degree I shall be willing to assume the superintendency of the Board of Jewish Education which you propose to organize, will depend in large measure upon the readiness of the community leaders to stand in back of such a program.”48

At first, Dushkin was somewhat reluctant to relocate from New York to Chicago. The position was appealing, but he believed that “it would be much better for the organization of the whole field that I remain in the ‘central’ office.” At that time he and Benderly were trying to position the New York Bureau as a national office, with directors of various bureaus around the country acting as an associate
staff. Dushkin wrote to Berkson, trying to convince him to take the Chicago position instead. But Berkson was an academician at heart and could not see himself knee-deep in administrative work. When his friend declined, Dushkin accepted. “We should certainly not lose the Chicago opportunity,” he wrote, adding that he welcomed a “fresh start” and the prospect of being his own boss. Although the position in New York was comfortable, it is fortunate that Dushkin freed himself from the underfunded New York Bureau, where his mentor would always overshadow him. Dushkin was a talented manager and a personable advocate for the cause of Jewish education. In Chicago he was able to build on and surpass Benderly’s New York Bureau model.  

Dushkin arrived in Chicago in early October 1923 and spent the next month investigating existing conditions as well as sizing up his lay leadership and his partners at Jewish Charities. In many respects, the situation in Chicago reminded him of New York in 1910. “If anything, conditions are worse,” he wrote to Benderly. Only about 20 percent of the roughly fifty thousand Jewish elementary-school-age children were enrolled in Jewish schools, with more than half attending Sunday schools. The weekday schools were almost entirely populated by boys, while girls made up about 58 percent of the register in the Sunday schools. The curriculum of the one-day-a-week schools was predictably meager. As for the Talmud Torahs, few showed any traces of modernization. The school facilities were, likewise, inadequate. “Several of the schools . . . could, in my opinion, beat anything that New
York could produce in 1910 in matters of dirt and disorder,” Dushkin wrote. Finally, he barely concealed his contempt for the existing teaching staff and school administrators, whom he deemed incompetent or cultural misfits.50

By mid-November, Dushkin was putting the final touches on a plan for the coming year, which involved the introduction of efficiencies in school management, organization, and finance, ranging from the creation of a Tuition Collections Department to the coordination of a central janitorial squad. Dushkin insisted that schools supported by Jewish Charities allow his agency, the Board of Jewish Education, to oversee all budgetary matters. He required that they submit monthly attendance and progress reports and, as a prelude to establishing a licensing board, compelled the schools to vet any prospective teachers with him. Dushkin anticipated that his agency would also initiate extension work, engage in publicity and propaganda, offer teacher-training classes, and open an afternoon school for girls. But his main focus was on improving Jewish Charities’ subsidized Talmud Torahs. These schools were some of the weakest and most “old fashioned” in the entire city, and if the Charities was willing to increase its allocation, Dushkin hoped to admit some of the more modern Hebrew schools to the network as quickly as possible to serve as a lever and provide balance to the system.51

The most controversial element of Dushkin’s plan was reducing the length of the afternoon sessions in the younger grades, from two hours to ninety minutes. Dushkin publicly defended the cutback as an expression of concern for the children’s health and welfare. But his motives were also financial and administrative. Reducing the length of the class period and adding a daily assembly for all grades would enable teachers to meet three classes per session rather than two, without lengthening the overall hours of operation. The teaching staff could be reduced, providing Dushkin with the opportunity to rid the system of the so-called “dead wood,” while part of the cost savings could be used to raise salaries. It seemed like a winning proposition, particularly since the majority of the student population was in the younger grades, thus maximizing the financial benefit. However, it unleashed a political firestorm.

Dushkin hoped to minimize the fallout by retaining the two-hour-per-day schedule in the upper grades. But Orthodox leaders were distrustful of Jewish Charities and Dushkin’s agency. Led by Rabbi Saul Silber, they argued that the change presaged the conversion of the Talmud Torahs into Sunday schools. The ultra-Orthodox rabbi and Talmudist Yehudah Gordon went so far as to excommunicate Dushkin and the Charities leaders. The ban proved ineffective and provoked a backlash in the Yiddish and Anglo-Jewish press. It was ultimately rescinded, and Dushkin succeeded in implementing his new schedule by threatening
to withhold the subsidy checks until the schools complied. “We have had our fight, and we came out more than victorious, because while the fight strengthened our side, it demoralized the other,” he wrote to Benderly. “As I told you, the fight was just on the issue that I hoped it would be, namely, who has the authority in Jewish educational matters in Chicago.”

In reality, rapprochement with the Orthodox schools was tentative and fleeting. By 1926 a new conflict arose when three of the Talmud Torahs refused to honor a unified *Ivrit b’Ivrit* curriculum, despite the fact that their representatives had been involved in its formulation. On this occasion the disagreement proved irreconcilable, and the schools broke away from the Board of Jewish Education, eventually forming their own organization, the Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago. Other traditional Talmud Torahs soon followed. Dushkin professed to be relieved that the schools had decided to “make Shabbos for themselves.” The renegade Talmud Torahs “have been an obstacle to us in every possible way, and the money which we spend on them can certainly be used to much better advantage,” he wrote to Benderly. “We have been very patient with them in the interests of ‘peace’; but we recognize that in the long run peace must be with ‘honor,’ and for us to dump so much of the community’s money into the type of education to which we heartily object, is not dealing honorably with the community.”

The defection of the traditional Talmud Torahs undermined Dushkin’s conception of the Board of Jewish Education as a communitywide service agency operating a united school system. Of the original schools under the Charities’ auspices, only the relatively progressive, Zionist schools remained within the Board of Jewish Education’s orbit. Frictious relations with the traditional schools underscored the difficulty of honoring Dushkin’s assurance that the Board would exempt itself from matters impinging on member schools’ ideological and religious orientations. But it was naive to believe that Dushkin and his staff’s progressive educational bent, avowed Zionism, and aversion to immigrant-style Orthodoxy would not affect their dealings with the schools or the agency’s policies. Even were the Board to conscientiously guard its objectivity, the lines between content and pedagogy and between achievement standards and curricular goals were often murky. Nevertheless, the pursuit of nonpartisanship remained a hallmark of the Chicago model.

Despite the split with the traditionalists, the Board substantially extended its influence during the first six years of Dushkin’s tenure. In 1923, Board-affiliated schools enrolled about 18 percent of the Jewish school population, or roughly two thousand students. By 1929, almost 47 percent of students, about seven thousand children, attended schools cooperating with the Board. Some of this increase was
due to the affiliation of more modernized Hebrew schools and the Board’s creation of a number of schools in underserved neighborhoods. But many of the students attended congregational schools.\(^{55}\)

Although it ultimately became the norm for central agencies in the postwar era, the Chicago Board of Jewish Education’s extensive work with congregational schools was virtually unprecedented in the 1920s. When Dushkin first floated the idea of admitting the congregational schools in a letter to Benderly, his response was cautious. The anticlerical Benderly questioned the genuine commitment of most rabbis toward Jewish education and feared that Dushkin’s agency would become embroiled in synagogue and movement politics. He insisted that rabbis’ primary allegiance was often first to their movement and only secondarily to K’lal Yisrael, the general Jewish community. Dushkin, however, quickly recognized the implications of the proliferation of Conservative synagogues in newer Jewish neighborhoods and the growing influence of congregations of all stripes on Jewish family life. Adopting the Protestant model, the rabbi and the synagogue were increasingly insinuating themselves into central Jewish life-cycle events, including circumcision, bar mitzvah and confirmation, marriage and bereavement. “This fact of vital congregational activity, with all its implications for education, had to be accepted and dealt with by the community agency,” Dushkin concluded.\(^{56}\)

As the Chicago Board’s work with the congregational schools expanded, its mission subtly changed. The functional aspects of its program were balanced and ultimately eclipsed by a menu of support services. To be sure, the agency remained focused throughout the 1920s on expanding its communal school network and establishing a robust extension program. Dushkin and the Board’s director of extension education, Ben Edidin, introduced New York Bureau–style children’s circle groups and a youth league, organized neighborhood holiday assemblies, developed a Jewish scouting program, and revived the Jewish Child magazine. The Board also made its first serious foray into teacher training and adult education with the establishment in 1924 of a College of Jewish Studies. Significantly, however, it was slowly shifting its financial resources away from the communal schools. In 1924 roughly 60 percent of the agency’s annual budget was funneled directly to the Talmud Torahs in the form of subsidies. The withdrawal of the more traditional schools in 1926 freed up a considerable amount of money, which Dushkin used to expand service-oriented programs, such as the Board’s teacher supervision department and the development of teaching aids and materials. Depression-era budget cutting resulted in the reduction of subsidies to the remaining communal schools, which were never fully restored when the financial crisis abated. By 1941 subsidies comprised only 20 percent of the Board’s budget. During this same
period, enrollment in the leading congregational schools surpassed that of the largest Talmud Torahs.\textsuperscript{57}

The Board inaugurated its congregational work with the appointment of Bendery disciple Jacob Golub, who served as a traveling principal for six small congregational schools. By 1930 fifteen congregational and thirteen Sunday schools were affiliated with the Board. Unlike the Talmud Torahs, these schools were generally attached to affluent synagogues and served a solidly middle- and upper-middle-class clientele. A few of the Sunday schools were operated by the Chicago chapter of the National Council for Jewish Women. They turned to the Board for pedagogical expertise and oversight rather than financial assistance. Indeed, the Board was able to charge them a nominal fee for its services. With some cajoling, Dushkin succeeded in convincing these schools that, within limits, the benefits of mutual cooperation would more than outweigh any loss of autonomy. He organized a Congregational School Board, composed of lay, rabbinical, and administrative representatives from each member school, which elaborated a series of reforms and standards including a unified calendar, salary scale, and teacher-training requirements. Member schools welcomed Board supervisors into their classrooms and teacher meetings and cooperated in the implementation of interschool music, Jewish civics, and holiday celebration programs, and Board-operated, citywide Hebrew high schools. According to Leo Honor, who succeeded Dushkin as head of the Chicago Board in 1934, the supervisors raised the quality of instruction “by means of stimulating teachers to self improvement through testing, elaboration of proper text materials, and utilization of proper techniques, by curriculum improvements, and through inter-school activities.”\textsuperscript{58}

Not surprisingly, there were limits to the extent to which the schools were willing to cede their autonomy. Despite protracted negotiations, the Congregational School Board was unsuccessful at implementing a unified curriculum and standardized tuition fees. In both these cases individual interests outweighed the perceived benefits of cooperation. Congregational rabbis found the Board supervisors unresponsive to their repeated insistence that the curriculum emphasize synagogue skills and reading with understanding of selected passages from the Pentateuch. They were considerably less concerned that the children should become fluent Modern Hebrew speakers. In this case, the supervisors’ commitment to progressive educational methods and efforts to maintain the Board’s nonpartisan ideological orientation caused them to shy away from the teaching of religion, in favor of culture. The impasse over the tuition fees was more straightforward. School representatives extolled the Board’s overall motive, namely to discourage the poaching of students from one school to another. But the
socioeconomic profile of the member congregations was too diverse to set a uniform tuition fee.59

Observers agreed that the cooperation of the Board was a boon to the congregational and Sunday schools. Yet Dushkin’s decision to extend the Board’s services to these schools was not universally lauded by educators, including those within the Benderly circle. Some insisted that the role of the central agencies should be to “build communal schools, whose control should be entirely in the hands of the community and not dependent upon the whims and desires of officers of individual congregations.” Moreover, they looked to the communal schools as agents in the propagation and dissemination of a cultural Zionist American Jewish culture. But Dushkin believed with considerable justification that he was simply bowing to demographic realities. The nascent conflict between the champions of communal education and the advocates of cooperation with the congregational schools would become more pronounced in the 1930s and 1940s.60

The cutting-edge work of the Chicago Board, which was facilitated by Dushkin’s capable leadership and expanding budgets from the Charities, positioned it as a prime training ground for the next generation of educational leadership, even rivaling Benderly’s Bureau, which despite its tight budget continued to prioritize leadership preparation and mentorship. Key staff members who helped to build the Chicago agency in the 1920s were snatched up by bureaus in small and medium-size Jewish communities such as those in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Buffalo, and Omaha. After the Depression, Chicago staff members were lured away by bureaus in Rochester and Los Angeles.

In a few short years a generally unpromising employment market turned around as the strong economic climate of the mid-late 1920s encouraged Jewish leaders in midwestern and interior northeastern cities to set up bureaus and Talmud Torah associations. A sudden shortage of qualified candidates for top-tier leadership positions is attested in the flurry of inquiries and talent-scouting letters that crossed the desks of Bureau chiefs Benderly, Dushkin, and Rosen. Younger educators generally welcomed the opportunity to strike out on their own, build up fledgling organizations, and spread their cultural-Zionist ideology and progressive pedagogical methods. Some, however, found that personal and professional life far from major Jewish population centers was isolating. Relatively modest budgets and well-meaning but seemingly unenlightened community leaders added to their frustrations.61

Consider the case of Jacob Golub, who moved from Chicago to Cincinnati to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In a series of candid letters to his friend Leo Honor, Golub shared his dissatisfaction in Harrisburg: “[I] am somewhat disappointed with the limited educational interests that are natural in a small city where there is
even no university and the general standard of culture is rather low. I therefore have a feeling that I am not in my right field and would prefer a situation where educational interests played a larger role,” he wrote. He informed Honor in a subsequent letter of his decision to resign, despite the uncertainty of future employment prospects. “The whole thing was too small for me. The small shop keepers expected me to pal with them, which I couldn’t do, and they complained of an overdose of education. So now I am soon to be one of the army of the unemployed, unless my good friends help me find something.” Golub was eventually hired to run the Education Department of the Zionist Organization of America, and he spent the final decade of his career as the librarian at the successor to the New York Bureau, the Jewish Education Committee.62

New York–trained Jewish educators who made their way west to take up positions in the Mississippi Valley often found themselves at odds with eastern European–trained teachers and Talmud Torah principals defending the front lines. The dynamic, while reminiscent of the tensions between the maskilim and the progressive educators in the large northeastern and Rust Belt cities, was probably exacerbated by familiar East-Midwest antagonisms in America during that period. The midwestern schoolmen built a string of Talmud Torahs in small and medium-size communities and, by 1934, established the Midwestern Federation of Hebrew Teachers. The flagship institution was George Gordon’s Minneapolis Talmud Torah, which opened its doors in 1911 and, at its height in 1930, enrolled 856 students. But there were also rigorous schools conducted by stalwart cultural-nationalists in smaller cities such as Kansas City, Missouri, and Omaha, Nebraska, as well as plenty of mediocre institutions that struggled to retain competent Hebrew-speaking staff. The Midwestern Federation of Hebrew Teachers was in constant struggle with the carpetbagger Bureau leaders, but the latter ultimately had the upper hand, since they were recognized as the “Jewish educational statesmen,” and won the support of the growing number of American-trained rabbis.63

Emanuel Gamoran and the Reformation of Reform Jewish Education

A third central agency model, organized on a denominational rather than a communal basis, was also developed in the 1920s by the Reform movement’s congregational arm, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC); it was later copied by the Conservative United Synagogue. Its unlikely prime mover was Benderly boy Emanuel Gamoran, a man who devoted himself to advancing the cause of Jewish peoplehood over denominationalism.64

Gamoran’s Commission on Jewish Education was an outgrowth and intensification of earlier Reform educational initiatives. While Reform leaders’ interest
in religious education dates as far back as the organization of the movement itself, the UAHC did not become involved on a sustained, institutional level until 1905, when it merged with the Hebrew Sabbath School Union. At that time, a Department of Synagogue and School Extension (DSSE) was organized under the direction of Rabbi George Zepin, whose responsibilities included field visits to existing congregations and schools as well as assisting in the establishment of new institutions. Simultaneously, the UAHC also maintained a religious school textbook publications committee, a board of editors under the leadership of Rabbi David Philipson, among its standing committees.

By the early 1920s many younger Reform rabbis began itching for a more proactive approach to education, openly expressing exasperation with the UAHC’s relatively modest efforts. At the 1922 Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) convention, for example, Detroit rabbi Leo Franklin complained, “We are always talking about the religious education of our children, but we have done very little in a practical way to meet the need.” The DSSE, he argued, “is doing work purely theoretical and is not getting to the heart of the work itself.” Rabbi Max Raisin, of Paterson, New Jersey, was more blunt: “Our religious schools are in a very chaotic state. It is true that educators hold our religious education in contempt.” When Zepin attempted to defend himself and his department by pleading a lack of funds and “the absence of a fuller measure of co-operation on the part of the gentlemen here assembled,” Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, of Cleveland, shot him down for his “lack of initiative.” “Lack of vision, incompetence, lack of technical and expert knowledge; not lack of money but expenditure of money along improper channels, there lies the fault,” Silver retorted.65

Looking to experiments such as New York’s Bureau of Jewish Education as a guide, critics advocated increased centralization of the Reform movement’s network of religious schools, facilitating the exchange of ideas and materials. When the CCAR convention passed a resolution advocating the creation of a religious school federation, under the auspices of the CCAR, Zepin and his supporters mobilized in an effort to diffuse the criticism and defend the Union’s turf. The UAHC empowered a new Commission on Jewish Education (CJE) to coordinate textbook and curriculum development and spur professionalization, thus obviating the need for a CCAR educational body. In search of a capable education director for the commission, Zepin contacted Teachers College professor John Dewey for a recommendation. Dewey consulted with his colleague William Heard Kilpatrick, who turned to his “Jewish boys.” When Alexander Dushkin declined the position, Kilpatrick recommended a promising younger doctoral candidate, Emanuel Gamoran, who was writing his dissertation on the history and philosophy of Jewish school curricula in eastern Europe and North America.
Gamoran, while flattered, initially dismissed the offer as impracticable. An ardent Zionist who came from a strictly Orthodox home and had lately come under the influence of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, Gamoran realized that he would be out of place at the UAHC, which was a bastion of classical Reform. Indeed, the driving force behind the Union's educational activities and the chairman of the CJE's board of directors was Philipson, an outspoken opponent of political Zionism and a staunch defender of classical Reform's radical manifesto, the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform.

“I do not believe in the Sunday School,” Gamoran told Zepin when they met. “It will not help us sufficiently to perpetuate Judaism in America.” Despite his polite demurral, Zepin refused to take no for an answer. He arranged a second meeting and recruited Dr. Henry Slonimsky, professor of ethics and pedagogy at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, to help him coax the reluctant Gamoran. Zepin believed that Gamoran would regard Slonimsky less suspiciously because he was of eastern European extraction. “Well, you are not the only one who doesn’t believe in the Sunday school,” Slonimsky told Gamoran reassuringly. “We are all trying to intensify Jewish education. If you accept [this position] you will help us to intensify, and the Sunday school will become, we hope, a more intensive school.”

Privately, Slonimsky offered an even harsher assessment of the Reform educational system and believed that the future of the movement would be in doubt if it was not transformed. “You know the educational system in the Reform camp: it is in a perilous state, and something will have to be done to reform this Reform,” Slonimsky wrote in a letter that was passed around the New York Bureau office. “The [week]day school in one form or another must come; and the content must be made more richly and distinctively Jewish.” Slonimsky was strongly in favor of recruiting “one who has grown up in the Benderly atmosphere” for the new position. There were few others who combined the requisite pedagogic knowledge and credentials while being “thoroughly imbued with Jewish feeling and Jewish knowledge.” He admitted that the appointment would face resistance from the Reform establishment. “Of course there are great difficulties in the way. They will be reluctant because it is a confession of poverty; and above all, above all, there is the question of Zionism!” But Slonimsky pledged his personal support and promised to “rally forces behind” the new educational director:

I need not tell you that it is a task of the most far reaching significance and of statesmanship in the preeminent sense of the term. . . . I wish you could realize the importance of this whole undertaking. The old alignments—Reform, Orthodox, etc., etc.—are bound to be obliterated. We must have Jews and we

The Education Profession 145
must do our best to make them positive, self-conscious Jews. You must not
give up the Reform camp and simply leave it out of your account. They repre-
sent the elite in wealth, prestige and . . . what is more, in Jewish possibilities, at
any rate through their children. Furthermore, if something is not done for
them, then of an inevitable sociological law . . . our Russian brothers will fol-
low in their footsteps, so that everything will be lost.\footnote{67}

If Gamoran was tempted by the potential to remake the Sunday school, and
swayed by the force of Slonimsky’s argument and his promise of backing, he was
also enticed by sweeteners that Zepin was prepared to write into his contract,
including a yearlong honeymoon sabbatical, which Gamoran and his new wife,
Mamie Goldsmith, used to travel through Europe and live for ten months in
Palestine. Gamoran later recalled that any remaining reluctance was assuaged by
Zepin’s promise that Gamoran would not be required to censor his Zionist views.
The CJE’s board “should know that I am a Zionist,” Gamoran insisted. Signifi-
cantly, he consented to “abide” by the policy decisions of his board so long as it
agreed to first listen to his point of view. As he forged alliances and his confidence
grew, so too did his ambition. “For forty years, Emanuel Gamoran labored to
transform the schools of the Union step by step, in graduated degrees and on many
fronts, into a system of Jewish schooling based significantly on Jewish tradition, on
meaningful acceptance of Israel and Zionism, and motivated by the postulate that
Jewish group life in America can be positive and creative in function and practice,
beyond the abstract concept of the mission of ethical monotheism,” Albert Schol-
man observed.\footnote{68}

Gamoran’s influence on the Reform movement’s educational system was won
through persistence and perseverance. Michael Meyer, scholar of Reform Judaism,
described him as “a small man with a large fund of energy and an imperious will.”
One of Gamoran’s secretaries was more blunt, referring to him as “a regular little
Napoleon.” Shortly after his arrival at the Union, he made his public debut at the
1923 CCAR convention, where he delivered an address based heavily on his disser-
tation and unveiled the first graded Reform religious school curriculum. His
speech accurately reflected his educational priorities and serves as a reliable road
map for the direction he would take the Commission on Jewish Education over
the next decades. Gamoran began by positing two educational aims: “the develop-
ment of the individual and the preservation of the social heritage of the group and
the group life which fosters it and develops it.” He allowed that the latter goal was
instrumental while the former was intrinsic. But he used his formulation to justify
increased attention to American Jewish socialization and values clarification. On
both scores he opened the door to Reconstructionist-style approaches without once mentioning Kaplan or even Benderly.69

He followed up with an elaboration of his curricular program, which gave primacy to “Jewish customs and ceremonies” over ethics, and to “Jewish songs and Jewish current events” over catechisms. His aim was no less than a reinjection of Jewishness into Reform Judaism, a recovery of traditions and customs long ago set aside, reclamation of the very concept of nationhood (reformulated as ethnicity or peoplehood) that Reformers had parted with in the nineteenth century as a price for citizenship. What allowed Gamoran to be so bold was that he presented his program in practical or didactic rather than ideological terms. He argued for the reintroduction of ceremonial Judaism not as a conscious repudiation of the previous generation of Reform leaders, but because he agreed with Dewey and Kilpatrick that values were best imparted through the means of “purposeful activities.” Throughout his address Gamoran took care to couch his proposals in the language of social science and educational philosophy.70

Gamoran presented himself as a nonideological, energetic, “can-do” pedagogic expert who would introduce the latest progressive educational methods to the Reform religious school. Still, his appointment was controversial, and there were many who doubted that a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Teachers Institute and an acolyte of Benderly and Kaplan could further Reform educational goals.
Chief among the skeptics was Rabbi Samuel Schulman of Temple Beth El in New York, who chaired the CJE’s subcommittee on youth education. Although Schulman would eventually come to respect and admire Gamoran, their relationship in the 1920s was fraught with tension. Privately, in acerbic missives, Schulman repeatedly complained about Gamoran’s lack of allegiance to the Reform movement. When in 1925 Zepin and Philipson contemplated hiring Gamoran’s friend Israel Chipkin as director of the Union’s Youth Education Department, Schulman aggressively campaigned against the appointment, despite his recognition of Chipkin’s talents. Similarly, he torpedoed Gamoran’s proposal that the Union hire another of his former colleagues from the Bureau of Jewish Education, Samuel Margoshes, to write a modern Jewish history textbook. “If in addition to our Executive Director, we are going to have all our writers men who cannot be presumed to be in sympathy with what our Temples and schools stand for, I fear we will have a great difficulty in carrying out our curriculum,” he complained to Philipson. “And it will be a fine irony (this I say in strict confidence) if through the pressure brought to bear by the manager of the [Department of] Synagogue and School Extension in these appointments, the Judaism of our Temples would get to be incorporated by men who are not in sympathy with it. . . . I certainly enjoy humor. But this is becoming a scream.”

Schulman and Gamoran locked horns over the content of a number of textbook manuscripts. One of the most vigorous debates centered around Lee Levinger’s History of the Jews in the United States, the first American Jewish history textbook aimed specifically at a school-age audience. Gamoran and Schulman vigorously argued over whether the book should be a religious or a social and cultural history. Whereas Gamoran aimed to publish a history of American Jews, Schulman wished to tell the story of American Judaism. Both were well aware of the stakes involved. Gamoran wished to ensure that the ideal presented was integrationist rather than assimilationist, and Jewishly pluralistic rather than exclusivist. Like Benderly, he viewed America as a venue where Jews could participate in general society while preserving and adapting their own unique cultural heritage. Gamoran was eager to celebrate the full range of Jewish cultural expression in the United States, from the socialists to the Zionists, from the religious traditionalists to the reformers.

Schulman did not advocate complete assimilation. But the range of Jewish expression he wished to sanction was limited to the religious sphere. America, he believed, was founded on the principles of religious pluralism and cultural homogeneity. To celebrate Jewish ethnicity and nationalism was to draw attention to one’s otherness and invite questions of one’s loyalties. His ideas reflected classical Reform’s rejection of Jewish cultural and national distinctiveness in the wake
of emancipation. Furthermore Schulman viewed the relativism implied in Gamoran’s inclusivist conception as a challenge to what he believed was the triumph of Reform Judaism. If differences between various movements were to be minimized in the interests of promoting Jewish peoplehood and unity, then the student reading the textbook would be left to wonder aloud: Why be Reform?

Despite his promise to defer to the will of his directors, Gamoran stood his ground, and his vision for the book ultimately prevailed. Similarly, he did not shy away from conflict with other foes on the cje’s board, including the implacable anti-Zionist rabbi Louis Wolsey of Philadelphia’s Congregation Rodeph Shalom. One of Wolsey’s more dramatic tirades was occasioned by the inclusion of a Tu B’Shevat (Jewish Arbor Day) program, focusing in part on Theodor Herzl and the modern-day upbuilding of Palestine, in an assembly program collection slated for publication by the UAHC. “It seems to me that you have gone one step too far in your very obvious attempt to propagandize the Reform Synagogue with your Zionist nationalism,” an irritated Wolsey wrote to Gamoran in 1930. “This kind of business has got to stop.” He added that “every bit of nationalism” in the assembly collection constituted a “deliberate attempt to violate every commitment of Reform Judaism, and to make propaganda for this radically different interpretation—alas, with the machinery of the very organization under whose auspices the book is issued. I consider the whole procedure a bit of treason.”

Gamoran, however, refused to be cowed. Reminding Wolsey that the CCAR had only recently voted to include the Zionist national anthem, “Hatikvah,” in the Union hymnal, Gamoran retorted: “It seems to me that you and those who share your outlook should be reconciled to the thought first, that American Reform Jewry is by no means unanimous on the question of Jewish nationalism.” Despite his almost gleeful needling, however, Gamoran was genuinely offended by Wolsey’s abusive tone, and told him so. Wolsey’s letters were “insulting” and “unrabbinical,” Gamoran scolded, and “are a sad reflection both on your ideals of ‘ethics’ and on your ‘good taste.’” Again, Gamoran won the day, and the assembly book was published with the Tu B’Shevat program intact.

If Gamoran savored these individual victories, his transformation of Reform education was gradual and involved a prolonged, multipronged initiative that included the publication of a monthly teachers’ magazine, school visits and observations, lectures, advocacy work, and personnel training. Gamoran’s western trip from December 1934 to January 1935, while atypically long, provides a glimpse into the type of spadework in which he regularly engaged. Making his way from Seattle to Los Angeles, followed by a swing through Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri, Gamoran spoke to congregants at synagogues large and small; led workshops and engaged in consultations with teachers, school directors, and rabbis;
keynoted and led sessions at a religious school conference in San Francisco; sold books; and engaged in fund-raising for the Union. In his letters to headquarters, Gamoran rated the conference, in particular, as an outstanding success. Attendance at the teachers’ sessions ranged from 100 to 150, while his public lecture attracted a crowd of 250. “One thing is certain,” Gamoran wrote to an associate: “the conference fulfilled a need and all those present, rabbis and teachers alike, acted like people thirsting for pedagogic knowledge and help.”

His visits to individual congregations were also appreciated. To be sure, Gamoran found some rabbis, such as Rabbi Ephraim Frisch of Temple Beth El in San Antonio, Texas, resistant to the Union’s curriculum and textbooks. But in the aftermath of the visit even Frisch had only appreciative words for Gamoran, specifically his sessions with religious school teachers. Others, such as Rabbi Irving Reichert of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, were even more effusive in their praise. “Dr. Gamoran scored a tremendous hit,” Reichert wrote to Zepin. “He was in rare form and every one of his lectures was most enthusiastically received. I have never seen a group of people warm up to a man so quickly and so genuinely.”

A rare note of dissention came from Rabbi Jerome Mark of Temple Beth El in Hollywood, California, who complained that Gamoran had showered far more attention on the wealthier and more established B’nai Brith Temple (known today as the Wilshire Boulevard Temple) despite the greater need at Mark’s smaller congregation. Mark fairly attributed Gamoran’s schedule to Temple B’nai Brith’s robust financial support for the UAHC and heavy patronage of its textbooks and curricular materials. Indeed, the imperative of balancing multiple agendas had necessitated strategic decisions around scheduling. In the final analysis Gamoran’s trip was memorable, not only for advancing his educational work and the profile of the Union in the western United States, but also because he managed to secure a $5,000 publication fund (a gift of more than $75,000, when adjusted for inflation, in 2010 dollars).

Still, Gamoran devoted significant attention during his trip to fledgling and modest-size congregations, particularly in smaller cities. He recognized that ultimate success in his work would depend on forging strong ties between the Union and its member congregations, which he hoped would translate into broad adoption of his curriculum and textbooks. Indeed, it was in the area of textbook production that Gamoran enjoyed his widest influence. The publication of Gamoran’s landmark 1923 curriculum would have remained a largely symbolic gesture were it not followed up with supporting textbooks and educational materials. Gamoran fulfilled Benderly’s dream of “a graded well-printed, properly bound, illustrated
series of textbooks that take into consideration the limited time at the disposal of our children."

Textbook publication was a lucrative business for the UAHC (which published the Commission on Jewish Education’s line of textbooks), at a time when the other movements had not yet begun issuing their own schoolbooks. The UAHC and the CJE also had limited competition from Jewish publishers. Only Bloch and Behrman House held consequential shares of the market during the interwar years, and their line of textbooks was much less innovative than that of UAHC. Smaller presses, for example Shiloh, the Hebrew Publishing Company, and the Workman’s Circle Educational Committee, served niche markets, while the Jewish Publication Society mostly avoided the textbook publishing business.

The CJE’s books were in many areas pioneering efforts. As Gamoran himself wrote in the introduction to one book, published in 1930, “[t]he present status of American Jewish education may be partly described by the fact that nearly every book or syllabus recently published has had to be introduced as the first of its kind.” There is ample evidence that the CJE’s books were widely used by Conservative supplementary schools and community Talmud Torahs as well as Reform congregations. A few titles were even used in Orthodox-affiliated day schools and religious schools. Many of the books went through multiple printings and editions. Teachers and students were undoubtedly attracted to their presentation as well as their content. Printed on a high grade of paper, they were smartly bound and handsomely illustrated, in sharp contrast to those of other Jewish presses. Indeed, at Gamoran’s insistence, they had the look and feel of public school textbooks. Gamoran relied on his able production manager, Max Singer, who had a refined aesthetic sense as well as vast knowledge of the printing and publishing business. Like other Benderly boys, Gamoran believed that children would approach religious school more seriously if it bore greater resemblance to the public schools, their natural frame of reference, where they spent the bulk of their day. Along with female teachers, hygienic facilities, desks and chairs, and modern pedagogies, an attractive set of properly graded textbooks was a marker of an authentic American school.

As editor of the texts, Gamoran exerted a pronounced pedagogical and ideological imprint. Even when he was forced to compromise on content, the books that were published during his tenure reflected his educational vision, priorities, values, and modalities of Jewish identification. Consider, for example, Hillel’s Happy Holidays (1939), the first Jewish schoolbook designed to teach holidays and customs, which was written by Gamoran’s wife, Mamie, and illustrated by Temima Gezari. Promoting Jewish cultural literacy to an acculturated audience, the book
fostered a greater sense of Jewish unity and respect for American Jewish pluralism, two Gamoran goals, which took on increased urgency on the eve of the Second World War.

Mamie Gamoran invited readers to learn about the holidays through the experiences of children, presumably similar to themselves. By following Hillel's life throughout the course of a year, the reader was introduced to the Jewish holiday cycle. The stories themselves amounted to a performance of American Jewish adjustment; the reader could not help but assume that the protagonists were meant to be archetypes, and the modes of Jewish identification presented, prescriptive. Yet Hillel's was surely an idyllic Reform Jewish family. Hillel recited *shema* every night before he went to sleep; the family celebrated the Sabbath every Friday evening with candle lighting, *kiddush* (blessing over wine), *motzi* (blessing over bread), and a festive meal; and Hillel's parents attended Shabbat services weekly.82

Mamie named her protagonist after her youngest child, a choice that the eponymous Hillel took many years to live down. Arguably, however, the best way to understand the fictional Hillel is to gain a little insight into the actual Hillel's family and childhood home in Cincinnati. “We were somewhat of an anomaly,” Mamie remembered. “We were liberals in our thinking, in our children’s education, in our religious practices. Nevertheless, we erected a Sukka on our wide, open porch each Sukkot holiday, and served wine, tea and cake to as many as two hundred visitors. Some guests shook the lulav and said the blessings for the first time. I used to say jokingly, ‘The Reform say we are Orthodox and the Orthodox say we are Reform.’ But we wanted to be Jews without a label, and I think we had a real Jewish home.”83 The fictitious Hillel was as anomalous as the real Hillel must have seemed to his Reform Jewish Cincinnati neighbors. But he was close enough to their reality to foster identification. *Hillel’s Happy Holidays* was a prime example of how Gamoran tried to educate for more “Jews without a label,” even as he sat at the helm of a denominational educational agency.

The publication of a book on rituals and holidays fulfilled a goal set by Gamoran in his 1924 *CCAR* address, and he saw it as a milestone. Gamoran advocated concrete and purposeful activities to engage students in Judaism, as opposed to catechisms and dry theological discourses. “If we are going to teach theology to little tots of seven or eight, we are going to fail,” he insisted. His agenda was elaborated in his “Note to Teachers,” which served as the book’s introduction. Gamoran hoped that religious school students would not only read the book but use it as a springboard for experiential or activity-based learning. He also hoped to encourage a return to ritual observance among Reform Jews generally. Shabbat parties in religious school, or an inviting description of Shabbat dinner in his
wife’s book, might spur parents to introduce and observe Sabbath rituals in their homes. In summary, *Hillel’s Happy Holidays* provided a blueprint for American Jewish observance in the acculturated home. “We must create an atmosphere favorable to Jewish learning and values,” Gamoran argued. “We are almost completely dependent on the home for a Jewish atmosphere, and so many of our homes are bereft of Jewishness that unless we create a Jewish environment by supplementary activities through the Jewish school, the synagogue center, and the camp, we shall fail to achieve our purpose.”

Gamoran was also a tireless advocate for the study of Hebrew, although he readily admitted that the objective of Hebrew fluency was unrealistic in a one- or two-day-a-week religious school setting. In the *CJE*’s *Gilenu* series of Hebrew primers, coauthors Gamoran and A. H. Friedland asserted that their “general aim” was “to develop a favorable attitude to Hebrew on the part of the child.” Still, they could not allow themselves to abandon the goal of reading with comprehension, particularly the easier passages in *Genesis*; and they continued to hope against hope that advanced students would be able to write simple Hebrew compositions. But since Gamoran was unable to convince the majority of Reform synagogues to intensify their religious schools by adding a mandatory day or two of instruction on weekdays, Hebrew-language study, where it existed at all, was generally geared toward mastery of the Hebrew sections of the Union prayer book. Only a relative handful of synagogue schools introduced an intensive two- or three-day-a-week Hebrew language program, and then virtually always on a voluntary basis. Gamoran’s inability to effect intensification underscored the limits of his agency’s clout. Despite the strength of the Union in comparison with analogous congregational bodies of the Conservative and Orthodox movements, the Reform movement remained decentralized, with individual congregations zealously safeguarding their autonomy.

*The NCJE*

When Benderly returned to the education scene in the early 1920s, he found that many of his former apprentices were running bureaus and Talmud Torah associations of their own across the Northeast and Midwest. Still envisioning himself as the “chief,” and eager to reestablish his relevance, Benderly broached with his “boys” the idea of establishing a professional organization. He envisioned transforming the New York Bureau into a national bureau, with the central agencies and school systems in other cities as satellites. The heads of these organizations would become his “associate staff” and would meet a few times a year to exchange local reports and plan national initiatives. Benderly’s plan suggested an effort to
reassert his relevance in the wake of his business failures. He was clearly restless, frustrated at being trapped at the New York Bureau, where his outsize ideas were constrained by his modest budget. He compared the Bureau to “a big dynamo running on a tiny engine.”

If his colleagues were dubious about the plan and bemused or mildly annoyed by Benderly’s paternalism, they nevertheless decided to go along with it. Whatever misgivings they had were outweighed by a desire for recognition. An eighteen-member associate staff representing organizations in nine cities was assembled in 1924. It comprised some of Benderly’s critics, including Louis Hurwich, Nissan Touroff, and Zevi Scharfstein, as well as his disciples. The staff could have been larger and even more geographically diverse, as Bureau directors in three other cities were eager to become members. But, whether motivated by feelings of self-importance or a fear of compromising their professional status, the associates declined to invite these men to join, because they were trained as communal and social workers rather than as educators.

From the outset there were those who believed that the thrust of the national bureau’s activities should be in the direction of mobilizing support among the laity. Indeed, some, such as Alfred Sachs of the Cleveland Bureau of Jewish Education, went as far as to suggest that efforts should be made to set up a national, lay-led fund-raising organization in support of Jewish education. Benderly countered that conditions were “not yet ripe” for the establishment of such a group. But he was sympathetic to the idea of increased outreach to laypeople. Ben Rosen proposed that the national bureau publish a Jewish educational newsletter, a public relations organ directed specifically at a lay audience. Benderly heartily approved, suggesting that the newsletter be patterned after the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Bulletin. When the bulletin, titled *Jewish Education News*, finally appeared, however, the result was underwhelming, and it was soon discontinued.

Meanwhile, members of the associate staff began to question whether Benderly’s organizational scheme was the most effective vehicle to further professionalize the field. Even Dushkin, who helped to originate the idea, experienced a change of heart. “It smacked too much of centralized organization, somewhat like a powerless government ‘Office of Education,’ ” Dushkin later wrote. They looked to the example of other Jewish professional organizations, such as the National Conference of Jewish Social Service, the professional organization of Jewish social workers, as well as to the National Education Association, the professional organization of public school educators. By mid-1925 plans were hatched to establish a National Council for Jewish Education (NCJE). In order to maximize interest and participation, the decision was made to hold an inaugural conference in conjunc-
tion with an upcoming annual convention of the National Conference of Jewish Social Service, which was scheduled for late May 1926 in Cleveland.89

A joint session of social workers and educators chaired by James Davis, president of the Board of Jewish Education (BJE) of Chicago, was held on Tuesday evening, May 25, with papers by Menorah founder Henry Hurwitz, Reform educator Rabbi Jacob Pollak, and Yeshiva University president Dr. Bernard Revel. The papers were followed by a plenary address by Benderly titled “The Last Fifty Years in Jewish Education in America.” The ideological diversity of the speakers was meant to communicate the group’s desire to be transpartisan and broadly inclusive of educators working in a variety of settings. The twenty-six founding members of the NCJE were associated with central agencies, Talmud Torah associations, Hebrew teacher colleges, denominational education commissions, youth organizations, and the community center association.90

Subsequent sessions were held on May 26 and 27. The program reveals the range of issues that interested the group. Administrative progressives concerned with “scientific management” and “standardization of work” were engaged by sessions on school-building programs, teacher remuneration, and standardized Hebrew testing, while educational progressives and traditionalists alike found much to debate in an extended session devoted to curricular reconstruction. The former sessions, in particular, highlighted the progress attained by Jewish educators since the early 1910s and the prevailing sense of optimism within their ranks in the mid- to late 1920s. All in all, there was a palpable excitement in the air born of the conviction that the tools of scientific management would result in advances in multiple realms. Even the session on weekday school curricula, which began with an acknowledgment that reform in the realms of administration and organization far outpaced those in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy, was characterized by an overriding conviction that Jewish educators had it within their power to guide American Jewry in its encounter with modernity and American culture to a new stage of Jewish development.91

The founding NCJE members issued a statement of purpose, drafted by Dushkin, identifying “the creation of a Profession of Jewish Education” as a supremely important task, equal in importance to the cultivation of community support. A professional organization with annual conferences would facilitate the exchange of research and opinion, which was deemed essential to the development of an “authoritative Jewish educational leadership.” It would also strengthen “the esprit de corps among the first line workers as a step in the direction of organizing the Jewish teaching profession on a nation-wide scale.”92

A revealing footnote to the establishment of the National Council and the
Cleveland conference was Benderly’s reluctance to participate. Dushkin practically had to twist his arm to get him to Cleveland and to have him deliver the keynote address. Benderly did not object to the establishment of a professional organization, although he might have been hurt by the implicit rejection of his national bureau initiative. But he professed to see little point in the conference or his address. “I do not believe that the reading of a paper has any effect on listeners,” he pointedly wrote to Dushkin. “It is a discussion which does the educational work.” Benderly went on to compare professional conferences to “a vaudeville, in which you have so many numbers, each one coming out and doing his stunt.” He doubted whether his attendance was worth the discomfort of two nights of sleep on a train and the loss of two workdays.

“I am always happy to receive a letter from you,” Dushkin’s response began. “I must admit, however, that your last letter did not make me so happy.” Dushkin proceeded to explain to Benderly that the conference’s structure was merely a reflection of common procedure. “Of course this is not intensive or adequate; it is pretty superficial; and yet I feel definitely that these conferences have done more for setting the ‘fashion’ of community support for Jewish education throughout the country than any other single factor,” Dushkin explained. “I know you believe in extension education, and this is a very important form of Jewish extension education.” In Dushkin’s view, the merit of these types of conferences from an educational standpoint was almost beside the point. If Jewish educators wanted to be taken seriously as professionals, it was best to conform to established protocols. It was a lesson that Benderly, never the team player, had trouble appreciating. Perhaps it also demonstrated that for all his talk about the importance of adjustment to America, Benderly remained an immigrant, unaccustomed to and somewhat dismissive of the various rituals of American public and professional life.

At its third annual conference, in May 1928, NCJE members agreed to create *Jewish Education* magazine to serve as its organ, a vehicle for disseminating the views and research of National Council members. The journal was funded by the NCJE’s associated agencies. But its editors were unpaid, and the journal had no permanent home, being run instead out of the regular offices of its successive editors until the early 1940s, when it found a home at the newly established American Association of Jewish Education.

For Dushkin, who was appointed as editor, the establishment of a professional journal was the next logical step in the ongoing project to shore up the Jewish teaching profession and guide the future direction of American Jewish education. When *Jewish Education* was launched in January 1929, its editorial board promoted the magazine as a remedy for an “illiterate” profession. Lamenting the dearth of resource literature for teachers, principals, rabbis, and lay leaders, espe-
cially in English, its first editorial promised to replace “vague oral discussion—much ‘lip worship’ of Jewish education,” with a “current ‘written word’ which might carry authoritative information as well as inspiration.” Brimming with optimism, the editorial promised that Jewish Education would strive to be “a record of educational experience and opinion, a review of conditions and trends, and a source of current educational information.” The sanguinity was striking given that the journal was undertaken on a shoestring budget by an organization with a few dozen members. But it reflected the strides that Jewish educators had made over the previous twenty years.

The inaugural issue was archetypal in that most articles were culled from recent NCJE conference papers. The centerpiece of the first issue was a series of papers on the Jewish Sunday school, which had been presented as a symposium at the 1928 NCJE conference. That Dushkin would choose to make the journal’s first impression with an in-depth consideration of one-day-a-week schools might seem counterintuitive. The vast majority of NCJE members were hostile to the Sunday schools. Some worried that lavishing any attention on them was tantamount to conferring legitimacy, giving parents the cover they needed to take the minimalist route with their children’s Jewish education. As Dushkin’s accompanying editorial made clear, he was making a statement about the role of central agencies. If they wished to be truly communal—thereby justifying substantial federation funding—they would need to serve the educational needs of the broader Jewish community including the congregational schools and the Reform movement. According to statistics cited in one of the articles, two-fifths of students enrolled in Jewish education programs attended Sabbath and Sunday schools. In some midwestern cities the proportion was as high as 70 percent. These students and the segment of the population from which they sprang could not be ignored.

Dushkin established a bold editorial voice and did not shy away from leveling criticism. Ideologically, the magazine was unapologetic in its embrace of progressive educational theory and Kaplanian Reconstructionism. Its editorial staff was supportive of a transpartisan central agency model, and committed to opening its pages to articles considering a wide gamut of educational settings. Yet bolstering the communal weekday Hebrew schools or modern Talmud Torahs was the principal agenda, authentically reflecting the priorities of the journal’s sponsor, the NCJE.

After an inauspicious start, the 1920s were a dynamic time for Jewish education. By 1929 the idea of community responsibility for Jewish education had been adopted in some form by a dozen mid- to large-size Jewish communities. Some communities, such as those in Baltimore, Cincinnati, and St. Louis, established coordinating
bureaus of Jewish education, funded by the local philanthropic federation. Others, such as those in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Detroit, set up central Talmud Torah systems. Progress was being made in professionalizing the Jewish education field. A professional organization and journal were established, and a dozen teachers colleges and training schools were turning out mostly American-born professional educators. Considerable strides had been made in modernizing the weekday community schools; student enrollment rates were modestly rising, particularly among girls; and progress had been made in producing a textbook literature and introducing new subjects. “The foundation upon which we stand is modern, and our own,” Dushkin proudly declared.

He and others had no way of knowing that much of what they had accomplished would soon be under threat. In fact, many of these accomplishments were dreadfully precarious. As Dushkin and his Jewish Education magazine staff were making their final corrections on the third issue, the stock market abruptly collapsed, presaging a decade of economic hardship and the most challenging decade that Jewish educators would face in the twentieth century.
Chapter 6

Progress under Threat

Jewish Education and the Great Depression

If Israel Chipkin was initially shaken by the stock market crash in the autumn of 1929, he did not mention it in his correspondence. Perhaps he was reassured by the public pronouncements of JEA leaders that the organization’s activities would not be curtailed by the economic downturn. “The Jewish Education Association is proceeding with its work in the unshaken faith that the men and women who make up its body of friends and supporters will not permit the stock market to act as the barometer of their attachment to the cause,” the JEA’s newsletter stated reassuringly in December 1929. “The Association is convinced that their attachment is determined by quite a different barometer, one that is lodged deep in their souls, a spiritual barometer which was formed by centuries of history and which no external accidents or incidents can dislodge.”

The statement was partly hyperbolic, of course, concocted by the organization’s gifted public relations officer Israel Goldberg (who also wrote under the name Rufus Learsi), and Chipkin knew it. Still, even as late as December 1930, JEA president Israel Unterberg was sounding an optimistic note, acknowledging that a
“difficult year for the work of Jewish education has just elapsed,” while pointing with pride to the organization’s success at living up to its “policy of no curtailment in work or service.” A similar promise was made at the beginning of 1931, but by that summer it was becoming clear that the downturn was going to be longer and more severe than government officials and economists had imagined. The JEA was suffering from an acute shortage of cash, resulting from a decline in the size and number of annual donations. With little hope of raising its $150,000 budget, a series of austerity measures were swiftly put in place, beginning with the slashing of wages and the elimination of personnel.2

When members of the board met with Chipkin to share with him their austerity plan, he was flabbergasted and deeply dismayed. Loyal workers were to be let go, while the remaining staff members would be burdened with extra duties and see their salaries reduced anywhere between 20 to 50 percent. Naturally, as the highest-paid member on staff, he would be taking the largest pay cut. With a single stroke of the pen the clock was turned back a decade, and his wages were reduced to the level he had received when he was first hired in 1921. He tried to fight the cuts, but he realized from the outset that his efforts were futile. In private, he lashed out at the fecklessness of his lay leadership. But if the JEA began the Depression in a more precarious condition than some other central agencies, its policy of retrenchment was hardly unique.3

The single most difficult day in Chipkin’s career came on Friday, October 31, 1931, when at the end of the workday he stood by the office door and handed staff members their first substantially reduced salary checks. It was a dreadful task that practically made him ill and caused him to consider resignation. Two of his deputies took their paychecks under protest, while a third, the fund-raising officer, decried his as an insult and refused to accept it altogether. He was soon let go. “As for the rest of the staff,” Chipkin wrote to one of his lay leaders, “I wish you could see the tears and distress.” It was a scene that was replayed, with slight variations, in educational agencies and schools across North America.4

The Great Depression had a devastating effect on American Jewish education, virtually wiping out many of the tentative gains of the previous two decades. Even today, the generation that came of school age in the 1930s is characterized as the most Jewishly ignorant of the twentieth century. Enrollment figures that were slowly rising throughout the 1920s declined back to pre–World War I levels. Lay-offs at schools and educational agencies were de rigueur, while the salaries of those who remained were cut and sometimes unpaid for months at a time. Struggling schools were forced to shut their doors, and though central educational agencies were generally able to avoid complete closure, their work was severely curtailed. Equally disturbing to Jewish educators was the rapid abandonment by schools of
educational standards, administrative improvements, teacher licensing requirements, and efforts to promote safer and more hygienic facilities.

**Depression and Retrenchment**

Like many Americans, the Benderly boys were slow to appreciate the implications of the financial upheaval, including the potential threat it posed to the modest successes attained on the Jewish education front over the preceding two decades. At the June 1930 annual conference of the NCJE, Ben Rosen, director of the Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia, delivered a presidential address in which he rhetorically asked whether there was a “crisis” in Jewish education. Rosen identified problems that would only become more pronounced in the coming years: extensive payroll delays; institutions sapped by mortgage payments; donor apathy; and even hostility to Jewish education as a communal priority in the face of growing physical deprivation. Yet he was also able to strike a hopeful note, premised in the conviction that more effective public relations and a little introspection would go a considerable way toward opening the funding spigot. The downturn, he believed, would force educators to become more effective communicators to parents, communal leaders, and philanthropists. Moreover, as laypeople became more interested in Jewish education and began to ask, “Has Jewish education made good?” professionals would be forced “to get again at the fundamentals of our field.” Basic questions about costs, objectives, and outcomes would need to be revisited. But, ultimately, progress could and would continue to be made.5

In the winter of 1930–31, Rosen conducted an extensive NCJE-sponsored survey of the Depression’s effects on Jewish educational institutions in fourteen cities with the largest Jewish populations. The survey was repeated the following autumn. By the end of 1930, educational institutions in most cities were feeling the effects of the slump. The statistics were grim: tuition revenue was down in most schools; many local federations were cutting the size of their appropriations to central educational agencies; and direct fund-raising was yielding paltry sums. Teaching staffs at many schools were reduced; clerical staffs cut; classes consolidated; and extension activities curtailed or altogether eliminated. By autumn 1931, many cities were registering steep declines in enrollment figures, especially in the communal Talmud Torahs. In New York City alone, the largest communal schools showed a decrease of 17 percent over the previous year, while congregational afternoon schools and Sunday schools lost 4.5 percent and 10 percent of their students respectively. Teacher salaries were also being cut, and bureaus were forced to eliminate staff. Some congregations were privatizing their religious schools,
making teacher salaries entirely contingent on tuition revenues, while others were hiring volunteer teachers—many of whom were unqualified—for their Sunday schools.6

While these trends were naturally deplored, the Benderly group, through the NCJE and Jewish Education magazine, attempted to maintain a steely confidence in the face of adversity. Initially, those bureaus that fell under the aegis of local federations were not being asked to bear a disproportionate burden of the budget cuts. Dushkin emphasized this point in an editorial: “One cannot help thinking of the . . . Jewish proverb: ‘God sends his remedy before the plague.’ The efforts made during the past decade to get the communities to assume responsibility for Jewish education, either by the local Federations of Charities or by the Jewish Education Associations, [have] been fully vindicated in this time of trial.”7

Of course, this did not make the Benderly boys impervious to the human cost of the Depression, which could be seen on the faces of the out-of-work parents who were compelled to swallow their pride and seek scholarships so that their children could remain in Jewish schools. As executive director of the JEA, which distributed hundreds of scholarships a year to children from the neediest families, Chipkin interacted with these parents on an almost daily basis. He described a typical supplicant in a December 1930 article in the Jewish Tribune, a mother who traveled with her young son all the way to his midtown Manhattan office from Brownsville. “She looked pale and frightened. She was evidently unaccustomed to the busy center of skyscrapers and bewildering traffic. She held her little boy by the hand. ‘This is my little boy,’ she said. ‘He is nine years old. He used to go to Talmud Torah, but my husband stopped working and I cannot pay.’ ” In another all too common case, a father asked Chipkin to intercede with a Hebrew school principal on behalf of his son, who was being threatened with expulsion because of the father’s failure to pay tuition. “But I have not enough to pay my rent,” the man pleaded. “I promise to pay for my child as soon as I begin to earn again. Won’t you help me keep my child in school?” As Chipkin and his colleagues realized, for every request of this sort there were an unknown number of families who were too embarrassed to ask.8

Then there were the scores of teachers and office staff who were laid off or saw their wages reduced to below subsistence levels. In Chipkin’s own office, for example, there was Bessie Evans, a young woman whose salary was cut by 40 percent in October 1931 while seeing her workload increase by half. “I have been unable to make ends meet on my present salary,” she wrote to the organization’s budget committee in 1933, noting that her reserve was nearing exhaustion. “I know that the members of the Board are worried about our budget for the coming year but I feel that the same God, who will provide the minimum budget, will provide a little
bit more to enable you to exercise fair play and give me a square deal.” Not surprisingly, the committee was unwilling to adjust her wages. She was told that she was lucky to have a job. What she was not told was that her continued employment was at least in part a function of her gender, which the organization used to rationalize paying her a fraction of what a man with an identical job description would earn. Like other agencies, the JEA fired a number of men and reassigned their work to women who were paid considerably lower wages, even by Depression standards. In Evans’s case, the duties she inherited were originally performed by a man making 75 percent more than she.Ω

In Philadelphia, where salary cuts and layoffs were instituted by the summer of 1930, senior teachers from the various branches of the Associated Talmud Torahs appealed to Rosen in September 1930, on the eve of the Jewish New Year: “The teachers are desperate; they are hungry, and ready to do anything in order to get some money for the holidays.” Rosen naturally sympathized but was powerless in the face of Federation budget cuts. Given the paltry level of teacher compensation, even in good times, most Talmud Torah teachers had little savings to fall back on. As conditions continued to deteriorate, teacher salaries in some cities were in arrears for months at a time.∞≠

Out of the public eye, the effects of the downturn, both personal and on the state of Jewish education more generally, were a cause of great consternation and soul-searching. “I am sorry to report to you that I have suffered severe blows in my work. I never expected them to be so severe,” Chipkin wrote to Leo Honor, in the wake of the cuts at the JEA. “I am afraid that those I have depended upon have deserted me. The entire experience has proven physically painful and spiritually humiliating.” He stated that “[m]y own desire is to quit and I have decided to do so several times but the people in the field seem to think that I would do harm to the cause,” and added, “It is going to be a struggle to get along on the amount I am offered here.”∞∞

With an equally precarious situation in Chicago, Honor had his own reasons to be demoralized. Yet he did his best to stiffen the resolve of his close friend and colleague: “Regardless of what our personal situation may be in the immediate future, it is our duty to hold on, for, if we let go, the panicky condition in which American Jewry finds itself may result in the complete undoing of all that which we have accomplished during the last fifteen years.” Twenty years after he and Chipkin pledged themselves to the cause, joining the original circle of Benderly’s protégés, Jewish education remained for Honor an avocation as much as a profession:

Oh, how I sometimes long to escape to get away from it all . . . how fortunate are the young Jews of Eretz Israel who can remake their personality through
the sweat which they pour into the ground, who can honestly sing *livnot v’lehibanot*. But Is—we have no right to escape—we have a holy duty—and we must show ourselves equal to it.\(^{12}\)

Honor’s letter points to the critical role played by the tight-knit group of friends in shoring up one another’s confidence and encouraging each other to soldier on. Chipkin in turn played a similar role the following summer when declining enrollment numbers coupled with a reduction in Federation subsidies compelled Albert Schoolman to consider closing his archetypal modernized Talmud Torah and educational center, the Central Jewish Institute (*cji*). Noting that the Institute served as a lab school, and an embodiment of the educational philosophy that animated the Benderly group, he implored Schoolman to hold on for the sake of the field and the future of the Jewish community. “In a situation such as we face today, it is not numbers that need to be protected as much as quality and standards,” Chipkin explained. “The closing of the *cji* will be encouragement to all those forces who are either opposed or who lack faith in that philosophy of Jewish life in America which we represent. . . . If this institution was worth all our efforts and faith in the past, is this the time to give up?”\(^{13}\)

To be sure, as the Benderly group’s correspondence from this period demonstrates, strains of self pity mingled freely with declarations of honor and duty. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that they felt as if a half a life’s work was in danger of obliteration. “The institution[s] which we represent, which we have helped to build in the last twenty years seem to be falling all around us. There is a feeling of loneliness, disappointment, discouragement and futility which sometimes oppresses us. It has been our lot, however, to serve as the pioneers for an idea, for a cause,” Chipkin implored. “Our position has been reduced to that of spiritual watchmen, to defenders of the leaders of retreat, to protectors of the cause.” This argument was voiced time and again by various members of the Benderly group.\(^{14}\)

Holding on was no longer a virtue, however, if the institution was sufficiently compromised to be ineffectual and beyond revival. The Depression merely hastened the inevitable death of many communal schools in declining Jewish neighborhoods. But in the short run their demise left hundreds of youngsters without the option of a local supplementary school.

For Jewish educators in New York City, a critical juncture came during the summer of 1932 when the Federation for the first time introduced the principle of “functional discrimination” in the distribution of its meager funds. The educational institutions receiving annual subsidies since 1917 were among the most esteemed in the city, including the *BJE* and the largest Talmud Torahs. Their share of the total pie up until 1932 was a slender 5 percent. Now they were faced with, on
average, a 40 percent cut above and beyond previous across-the-board reductions. In four years their shared allotment from the Federation fell 60 percent, from $262,000 in 1929 to $108,000 in 1933. Since most of these institutions’ budgetary costs comprised fixed charges, such as mortgage payments and salaries, which in many cases had already been reduced to below subsistence levels, the reductions forced another round of painful layoffs.

The Federation’s change in policy elicited howls of protest from educational leaders led by members of the Benderly group. Schoolman drafted a strong letter to Judge Joseph Proskauer, president of the Federation, which was subsequently revised by Benderly and Chipkin, in consultation with Mordecai Kaplan, Dushkin, Golub, and Honor, and signed by the directors and presidents of six of the affected institutions. While the letter did not induce the Federation to immediately backtrack, it may have contributed to its decision to restore some of the funding the following year.∞∑

Arguably, the most interesting section of the otherwise predictable letter advanced the argument that social welfare funding should rightfully be the purview of the local, state, and federal governments, while ethnic and religious-based charities should concern themselves with cultural and educational activities essential for group survival. After all, “the economic troubles of the Jewish people do not originate with the Jewish community nor are they limited to, or characteristic of, the organized Jewish community,” the educators insisted. “However, the religious, the character development, and the group cultural needs of the Jewish community can make claim upon no other assistance except from the organized Jewish community itself.” For a people that traditionally prided itself in the principle of communal self-sufficiency enshrined in the so-called Stuyvesant Pledge (the promise made to the governor of New Amsterdam by the Jews who arrived in 1654 that their sick and indigent would not become community charges), the argument was controversial. But in making it the educators were joining a small but growing chorus that included Isaac Rubinow, the gifted Cornell economist and social insurance advocate who helped to draft the Social Security system. “What do we owe to Peter Stuyvesant?” Rubinow famously asked at a convention of Jewish social workers, opening the floodgates to a vigorous debate. If most members of the Benderly group did not share Rubinow’s socialist sympathies, they viewed government social insurance as a prerequisite to adjusting the Federation’s funding priorities.∞∏

Showdown in Chicago: The Price of Weak Public Support

Not only was the immediate economic effect of the Depression on Jewish education devastating; it also exposed significant weaknesses in the education system.
that the Benderly group had created in the previous decades. Chief among these was the lack of deep public support. As local federations and community chests increasingly brought Jewish education systems under their aegis, and in many cases steadily increased the size of their annual allocations, Jewish education leaders grew complacent and tended to write off their opponents as “assimilationists,” marginal players with loud voices but limited influence. This proved to be a critical miscalculation.

In light of the progress of the previous twenty years in raising the quality of most schools, leaders of various education bureaus such as Rosen and Dushkin considered it almost unimaginable that Jewish communities would abandon education as a funding priority. But as conditions continued to decline, what was once inconceivable was being touted in some quarters as commonsensical. The sporadic donor support for restricting federation dollars to charity purposes that Rosen observed in 1930 gained considerable momentum over the following two years.∞π

Nowhere was this clearer than in Chicago where, during the darkest days of the Depression, opponents of community-supported Jewish education nearly succeeded in decoupling the Board of Jewish Education from the Jewish Charities organization. The extent of their success came as a shock to the Benderly group. They perceived Chicago as standing “at the forefront of systematic organization and of adequate support for Jewish education,” and with good reason: over a span of eight years, Jewish Charities increased the budget of the Board of Jewish Education by $90,000—from $41,000 in 1923 to $130,000 in 1930. During that same period, the Chicago Board’s policy of providing educational services to congregational schools generated support among Chicago’s rabbis, particularly in the Conservative and Reform movements. In 1923 the forerunner of the Chicago Board was subsidizing seven schools, all Orthodox, instructing a total of 1,866 pupils. By 1930 a total of thirty-five educational institutions were affiliated with the Board, representing 8,000 pupils, or one-half of the students receiving a Jewish education in the city, including eight schools that identified as Orthodox, seven as Reform, and twenty that were Conservative or unaffiliated but broadly “traditional” in orientation.∞∫

Dushkin also worked assiduously to cultivate a cordial relationship with the most prominent personality on the Chicago Jewish scene, businessman and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. While Dushkin’s efforts to convert the former Sears Roebuck president to the Zionist cause were fruitless, Rosenwald did become a friend and generous benefactor to the Chicago BJE. Dushkin in turn became a trusted consultant to Rosenwald on various charitable projects and supervised the education of chess prodigy Samuel Reshevsky, whom Rosenwald served as a pa-
tron. Rosenwald’s death in 1932 was a severe blow, depriving the Board of an influential champion in its hour of greatest need.19

But goodwill from Chicago’s more liberal rabbis and even Rosenwald did little to persuade those who believed that Jewish Charities should confine itself to supporting nonpartisan social welfare activities. Questioning the rationale behind the idea of community sponsorship for Jewish education, they insisted that education was necessarily grounded in ideology and, as such, should be deemed the purview of parents, congregations, and other groups with distinctive outlooks on Jewish life. Why, these opponents wondered, should their philanthropic dollars be used to support the propagation of ideas with which they were not necessarily in sympathy?

Dushkin repeatedly found himself combating this position, sometimes in radio addresses and other venues designed to reach a mass audience, although all too often he confined himself to friendly meetings where he was unlikely to move public opinion. He argued that Jewish Charities was the only communal organization in the position to subsidize the education of the poor, train teachers, and promote a sense of Jewish consciousness that transcended religious movement or political party lines. He was especially forceful, though arguably defensive, in his insistence that the central agency was nonpartisan but in accord with American ideals and committed to perpetuating Jewish life in the United States.20

Many of Dushkin’s critics decried the Chicago BJE’s Zionist orientation. Dushkin responded by dismissing “the rather naïve and somewhat arrogant delusion that teaching of Palestine and working for Palestine are unpatriotic to America,” while simultaneously insisting that “Palestine should be taught sanely, without exaggeration and without false implications.” Dushkin succeeded in changing few minds with his assortment of rationalizations and reassurances. More impressive was the Board’s proven willingness to work with schools across a wide ideological spectrum, with the exception of the Yiddishists. But it is doubtful that the extent of the Chicago BJE’s cooperation and educational support for non-Orthodox congregational schools was well known in the general community and, particularly, within the wealthy circles of central European Jews who were among Jewish Charities’ largest donors. Dushkin genuinely believed that he had reached out to this latter group but lamented the difficulty of “winning over” those who would not “take the time to listen with an open mind.”21

As long as times were good, the naysayers were held at bay, and Dushkin was able to approach their opposition to the Chicago BJE philosophically. But the economic downturn provided his opponents with a ready opportunity to refight the battle over the BJE’s subsidy from Jewish Charities, and with formidable
ammunition. With so many out of work and lacking the most basic needs, funding education was a luxury, they argued. Dushkin countered the charge by asserting that Jewish life was hardly worth preserving if it were devoid of any cultural content. “We must not permit the cry of ‘bread versus education’ to undermine our spirit and cause irreparable cultural harm to the growing generation of our children,” he implored in a radio talk delivered in April 1932, marking the occasion of Jewish Education Week. “Dignity, faith, self-understanding, and self-respect are as important to the normal human being as is life itself. We must provide not only for the body alone, but for the spirit also.”

But Dushkin’s argument, which was repeated on numerous occasions over the following two years, did little to blunt the forcefulness and persistence with which his opponents made their case. Both the president of Jewish Charities and the president of Dushkin’s BJE lost virtually their entire fortunes in the economic crisis. And even small-time donors were rocked by a series of bank failures in 1931 and during the Chicago Panic of June 1932. With donations to Jewish Charities drying up, its leadership was under increasing pressure to satisfy basic needs with an ever-shrinking budget. An early sign of trouble came in the summer of 1931, when Jewish Charities asked the BJE to accept an immediate 10 percent cut in its allocation while requesting a 5 percent cut from its other constituent agencies. The disproportionate reduction was successfully reversed by Dushkin’s friends on the federation’s allocation board, but opponents convinced the director of Jewish Charities, Samuel Goldsmith, to appoint a special committee to evaluate the BJE’s effectiveness, identify possible economies in its organization, and examine the practicality of creating a funding structure independent of Jewish Charities.

Initially, Dushkin appeared to believe that the Chicago BJE would be spared from the most draconian proposals. In an October 1931 letter to the Berksons, he acknowledged that “we are facing in Jewish education the severest test that I can remember” and expressed little doubt that his opponents were “determined to crush us.” He added: “Fortunately, we have powerful friends in court.” If he counted Jewish Charities executive director Goldsmith among those friends, he was bound to be disappointed. Goldsmith, while sympathetic to Jewish education, ultimately assumed the role of arbiter rather than advocate. When the special committee issued an inconclusive report in December 1931, the question of creating a separate federation for cultural and educational organizations was thrown into Goldsmith’s lap. Goldsmith conducted a study that was published in June 1932 and was intended to placate all sides. Goldsmith complimented the work of the Chicago BJE and endorsed the principle of community responsibility for Jewish education. At the same time, however, he effectively legitimized the view that donors should have a right to indicate whether they wished their monies to be al-
located solely for social welfare purposes. He proposed a designation plan whereby contributors would be permitted to indicate what percentage of their donations they wished to funnel to the BJE. Only monies that were specifically designated for educational purposes would be so utilized. The plan was ratified by a second committee, which set an implementation date of January 1933.24

What might have seemed like a Solomonic compromise to Goldsmith was recognized as a severe blow by Dushkin and his supporters that would further shrink the BJE’s budget and even threaten its viability. Seized with a sense of alarm, over the next few months they did their best to reverse the decision, but to no avail. At Dushkin’s urging, a strongly worded resolution was unanimously passed by the Chicago Rabbinic Association deploring the designation plan as “unjust in principle and destructive in practice,” and predicting that it would only foment “division and disunity in our midst, and may lead to further divisiveness and disintegration as regards other activities in the community program.” In their view, the plan would not only cause irreparable damage to “the morale and effectiveness of the Jewish school system”; it would also set a dangerous precedent by allowing donors to micromanage the allocation of their federation donations without regard to genuine communal needs. The rabbis threatened to take their plea to “the community at large, and not cease our efforts until all the subscribers to the Charities will realize the great injustice that has been done in this retrogressive and reactionary step.” But Jewish Charities did not capitulate to what its leaders perceived as an idle threat.25

Goldsmith’s designation plan was in all likelihood the best outcome that the Board of Jewish Education could have expected under the circumstances. The most radical proposals, including eliminating the BJE’s funding completely over a two-year period, had been defeated, but it was unrealistic to believe that Jewish Charities would risk alienating a considerable number of influential donors, particularly in a time of economic crisis. This was the analysis of members of Dushkin’s own lay leadership, including the Chicago BJE’s president, James Davis. The Board could not afford to take the principled but radical step, urged by some, of disaffiliating from Jewish Charities. It was unlikely that an independent BJE appeal could raise even $25,000, he argued.26

Whether Dushkin cared to admit it or not, the episode exposed the BJE’s Achilles’ heel. The support that it enjoyed in the community was soft at best. Dushkin was conflicted about what to do next. The part of him that wished to take a principled stand was eager to resign in protest. He was genuinely insulted by the designation plan, which singled out the Board of Jewish Education among all the federated agency’s affiliates. He and others pointed to the injustice and illogic of denying the BJE a portion of the funds from the gifts of subscribers who declined

The Great Depression 169
to state their allocation preferences. But he was especially concerned that the plan would set a dangerous precedent and would be eagerly copied by other federations across North America that were similarly cash starved and under pressure to prioritize “bread” over “Torah.” There was also a personal element at play. Relations between himself and Goldsmith deteriorated in the course of the unpleasant episode, and Dushkin could hardly bear to continue dealing with the Jewish Charities leader. With all these considerations in mind, and with the support of his wife, Julia, Dushkin drew up a three-page letter of resignation dated January 3, 1933.27

Why the letter was never sent and his resignation not tendered at this juncture can be gauged from Dushkin’s correspondence with Berkson during this period. In short, he concluded that he could not allow his personal pride to override his professional obligations. When Dushkin broached the possibility of resignation with his old friend, Berkson instructed that the essential question was whether Dushkin could do more to fight for the principle of community responsibility for Jewish education as an insider or an outsider. “Should we make a fight for the community viewpoint in Jewish life in America, and for the communal support of Jewish education? Can the fight be made within Federation, on its own merits, not on the score of throwing a bone to a dog who might get nasty? Or is it necessary to get out, and wage the fight against Federation.” That Dushkin was moved to write but not to send a letter of resignation implies that he struggled before settling on an answer.28

Dushkin’s correspondence with Berkson is fascinating not merely for the light it sheds on a career decision that was made at a critical juncture in Dushkin’s professional life. It reveals how Dushkin’s predicament occasioned an existential crisis that called into question the efficacy of twenty-five years of work by the entire Benderly group, if not the principles on which Dushkin and his colleagues based their labors. The Chicago experience seemed to expose as “superficial” the successes that the group had enjoyed in the 1910s and 1920s. The reality, Berkson concluded, was that “the idea of a community supported Jewish education has not taken real root. In a sense, Jewish education remains a parasitical plant, on philanthropy on the one hand, on congregational organization on the other hand.”

In Berkson’s view, community responsibility for Jewish education was a principle worth fighting for. “To me it has always seemed that the idea of communal support of Jewish education was not a matter of a convenient form of financial organization but was in itself the reflection of an outlook on Jewish life which attempted a synthesis between the national and religious (or for myself I would say the institutional and traditional instead of religious) viewpoints.” Berkson believed that “the time has come for the ‘boys’ to take a stand, and to assume leadership.
There must be a clearly recognizable philosophy of Jewish life behind any move-
ment for Jewish education, otherwise it will, in some fashion or another, assume
the aspect of a fight for a special vested interest, or for jobs. And the men must be
ready to make larger material sacrifices. Do they believe enough in their hearts, in
the value of Jewish life in America? There must be an honest searching of the heart.
Otherwise, the fight will have no significance, and no chance of success.”

Dushkin decided to stay and fight for a more equitable compromise but looked
forward to leaving Chicago as soon as the dust settled. In March 1933 he decided to
raise the temperature by taking his conflict with Jewish Charities public in a Jewish
Education magazine editorial. Whether he believed that a public shaming would
effectuate a change in policy or acted primarily out of frustration is uncertain.
What is undeniable, however, is that the editorial brought his relationship with
Goldsmith to a new low point. The Jewish Charities head castigated Dushkin for
his lack of professionalism, suggesting that he could not “indulge in editorials
which pull in by the ears the Chicago situation without pulling [himself] in by the
ears and participating in the miring.” He added: “So far as the Chicago situation is
concerned, your editorial simply, with the groups here, would put you in a posi-
tion of besmirching your own escutcheon.” While Dushkin took exception to
Goldsmith’s “bitter personal tone,” what struck an especially raw nerve was Gold-
smith’s rejection of the editorial’s characterization of Chicago’s organized Jewish
community as standing at the vanguard of a movement to systematize and ade-
quately fund Jewish education. The leadership of Jewish Charities never perceived
itself as spearheading any kind of movement on behalf of Jewish education, Gold-
smith insisted. Indeed, they “didn’t know enough about this matter” to con-
sciously stake out a position. “We would not be in our present jam on this whole
problem if there had been either community education or if our board had been
thoroughly convinced,” Goldsmith added. “Even among the ardent friends of
Jewish education there is very little knowledge as to how the money is spent, and
what we, in terms of what is done, mean by ‘systematic organization of Jewish
education.’”

Dushkin publicly protested but privately conceded Goldsmith’s larger point.
His friends in the Jewish communal service world such as Maurice Hexter and
Maurice Karpf, as well as fellow educators such as Berkson, were quietly making
the same argument, not merely about the Chicago situation, but about the rela-
tionships between education bureaus and communal service federations nation-
wide. The easy flow of money in the 1920s gave Jewish educators a false sense of
security, causing them to devote insufficient attention to generating public interest
in and support for their work. While creating separate education funds in the
economic climate of the 1930s was ill advised, ultimately Hexter and Karpf believed

The Great Depression  171
that it was a good idea because it would force the professionals to reach out to the general Jewish public and become more responsive to their wants and needs. Needless to say, it would also mean coming to some kind of understanding with the German Jewish Brahmins. All this had a very familiar ring, of course, dating back to the years of the New York Kehillah. In 1917 Benderly predicted that federation support for Jewish education would be a mixed blessing, at best. His words turned out to be prophetic in ways that he probably had not imagined.31

In the short run, however, sympathetic observers such as Karpf were concerned that the trials were taking their toll, not only on specific educational budgets and programs, but also on the morale and drive of the Benderly boys themselves. This was the case in part because the Benderly boys were fighting their battles individually without meaningful organizational support. The NCJE, for all its accomplishments, lacked the stature and the resources to serve as an effective lobbying group. “As I see it, very little is being done to bolster up the courage of your people,” Karpf wrote. “The best abilities and efforts of your group are utilized in administrative problems and details when they should be used for research, planning and broad
social action. I fear very much that a continuation of this type of program spells the retardation if not the doom of your whole enterprise.”

By mid-1933, conditions in Chicago were somewhat improved. The designation plan was dead. It turned out that some of Jewish Charities’ largest contributors refused to go along with it, insisting that it was the rightful job of the agency to determine how its funds should be allocated. Shortly thereafter, Dushkin began negotiations with Hebrew University that culminated with his acceptance of an appointment to its newly established Department of Education as a professor of pedagogy. He departed Chicago in January 1935. It took two more years before Jewish Charities found a workable solution to the conundrum of Jewish educational funding. In the end a separate Welfare Fund was set up to cover not only educational and cultural programs, including the BJE, but also relief funds for increasingly beleaguered overseas Jewish communities.

Part of what saved Jewish education funding in Chicago as well as in other cities nationwide was Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, particularly the landmark Social Security Act of 1935. As government assumed more responsibility for social welfare work, Jewish federations were able to provide greater support for education and other ethnically particularistic causes. To be sure, the reallocation of resources was gradual. But the immediate effect in the mid-1930s was to forestall the types of budget crises that jeopardized what remained of the Jewish educational infrastructure that was built up in the 1920s.

**Judaism as a Civilization**

The Depression and soul-searching it engendered coincided with the publication of Mordecai Kaplan’s magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*. The volume was far from a runaway best seller. Yet, in the eyes of the Benderly group, it was arguably the most significant publishing event of the decade. Even Yehezkel Kaufmann’s *Exile and Estrangement* (1930), which helped to fuel and direct an ongoing debate about Jewish nationalism, did not rival Kaplan’s book in its impact. *Judaism as a Civilization* represented the most mature and elaborately argued iteration of Kaplan’s communal vision and its rationale. Kaplan had developed and played around with many of the book’s central ideas for close to two decades in his classroom, from the pulpit, and in his published writings. His closer confidants among the Benderly boys read and commented on chapters in progress and helped advance Kaplan’s thinking on topics ranging from Jewish education to the preferable structure of a future American *kehilla*. Their discussions with Kaplan, in turn, affected their own educational priorities.

At the NCJE’s June 1935 annual conference, organizers set aside an entire session
for a symposium on Kaplan’s book. Participation from the floor was so overwhelming that the following panel was rescheduled so that the discussion on *Judaism as a Civilization* could be continued. The conference’s penultimate session was an oration by Kaplan himself, which was held jointly with the professional associations of Jewish social workers and Jewish center workers. Kaplan’s conception of Judaism as an evolving civilization and his advocacy for an organic community, or *kehilla*, in the United States attracted many enthusiasts within the ranks of the Jewish educational leadership. They recognized that the most progressive or scientific pedagogical and managerial techniques were ultimately worthless without a social vision: an image of what it meant to live Judaism in an American context and the example of an adult community taking steps toward its realization. But even in this largely hospitable environment he also had his critics.36

Essentially, the discussion boiled down to two questions: (1) Whether it was in fact possible to create a vital Jewish community in the United States, and (2) if so, should the *kehilla* or the synagogue be at its center? In relation to the former question, the naysayers were primarily Zionists of the *shelilat ha-galut* (“negation of the Diaspora”) stripe. Invoking familiar arguments, they warned of the inimicality of the United States and the hostility of many American Jews to cultural pluralism, and were highly skeptical that American Judaism embodied the spiritual and creative energy necessary to fashion a new and autonomous Jewish civilization. The latter question exposed the long-existing fissure between advocates of communal and congregational models of Jewish education. Appropriately enough, the standard-bearer for the primacy of the synagogue was Rabbi Barnett Brickner, one of the members of Benderly’s coterie who had chosen to attend rabbinical school (Hebrew Union College) and realize his educational vision through his pulpit.37

But the vast majority of the audience stood squarely behind Kaplan as he took up cudgels against the synagogue. Kaplan harshly criticized the American synagogue as an essentially bourgeois institution unconcerned with social and economic amelioration within the Jewish community. In its quest for members, the synagogue demeaned religion by engaging in crass commercialization and individualistic competition. It did little to foster Jewish creativity and close to nothing to promote Jewish unity. In fact, Kaplan resisted using the term synagogue at all to describe American Jewish congregations: “[T]he truth is that the very concept of the synagogue in the sense in which the term *k’neset yisrael* is used in Hebrew—a term that would correspond to the use of the phrase ‘the church’ by a Catholic—has ceased to exist. . . . We have organizations for worship, which speak of their buildings as temples or synagogues, but the diversity of religious opinion and cultural background has made each a law unto itself.”38
To a large extent, Kaplan’s skeptical view of the American synagogue was an extension of his discomfort with American Jewish denominationalism. For example, on the educational front, Kaplan was willing to recognize the inevitability of the synagogue as a locus for Jewish education. But, in harmony with education bureau directors such as Dushkin and Rosen, he feared that a synagogue-administered educational program would inculcate movement or individual synagogue loyalty rather than a sense of organic Jewish unity, a loyalty to K’lal Yisrael.

Brickner was more in touch with the American pulse when he essentially argued that denominationalism was a basic feature of American religious life. A synagogue shorn of its “autonomy” and “independent character” would be “bereft of its character” and would fail to satisfy its congregants, he explained. He was also on firm ground when he singled out religion as the most promising manifestation of Jewish expression in the American context. Here his arguments dovetailed somewhat with those of the skeptics of cultural pluralism: “Is the kehillah compatible with the mores of America, and can a minority people as small as ours hope to change the mores of America? On the other hand, the synagogue has been in the mores of America from its very inception. American thought and life is tolerant to the ideal of freedom of conscience. Would it not be more desirable to transform the synagogue into a much more effective instrument than it now is, and to conduct under its dome most of those cultural activities which Kaplan includes in a civilization? Perhaps, it would be more appropriate to call what Dr. Kaplan expounds a religious culture, rather than a civilization.”

Kaplan recognized the historical importance of religion as an identity marker in the United States and would place more emphasis on the religious component of his vision for an American Jewish civilization in his later work. But he stubbornly refused to acknowledge that cultural pluralism was more utopian graft than paradise lost, that Horace Kallen and other architects of American cultural pluralism were creatively reenvisioning the meaning of E Pluribus Unum. “[I]t would be a doubtful service to America were we to identify Americanism with the cultural monism characteristic of Nazi Germany rather than the cultural pluralism which has characterized America in the past. Jews are not the only minority group in the American population. There are the Catholics, the Negroes for example. Are Jews justified in betraying the interests of other minorities to win the good will of the majority?”

Whether or not Kaplan realized it, the groups he cited—a religious minority (albeit with some national characteristics) still suspect in the eyes of many Protestants because of its ties to the Vatican, and a segregated racial minority largely regarded by the Caucasian majority as inferior—did little to shore up his argument.
among his skeptics. But Kaplan’s examples were not incidental to his argument, as he saw much to emulate in the way both communities remained distinct in America. “If the Catholics can do it, there is no reason why we cannot do it,” insisted Kaplan’s son-in-law Rabbi Ira Eisenstein. But, of course, there was a critical stumbling block that even Eisenstein acknowledged: neither of these models was remotely appealing to the vast majority of American Jews. Nevertheless, Kaplan and Eisenstein urged those Jews who were interested in an organic Jewish community to begin assembling the building blocks in anticipation of a more promising future environment: “After all we had settlements in Palestine before we had the Balfour Declaration,” quipped Eisenstein. “You don’t follow the logic of events; events have a logic of their own. In the same way you work toward them together. That was the fallacy of the first generation of Jews and now we are guilty of the same thing. They said, first we have to establish ourselves economically and when we are all settled, we will resume Jewish life—and a whole generation was lost. You have to start at once to attempt to organize a Jewish community.”

Kaplan’s case for expounding a distinctive American Jewish identity rested heavily on his conviction that (white, Protestant) Americans would accept nothing less than complete assimilation, and possibly even conversion, as a price for total acceptance. That he and others would even consider holding up the African American community as a possible corporate model for American Jews underscores the extent to which the antisemitic environment of the 1930s shaped Kaplan’s rhetoric and the contours of his argument. Antisemitism not only thwarted Jews’ acceptance as equals in American society; it deeply injured their sense of self-respect, Kaplan argued. Internalizing the stereotypes and prejudices of the majority, American Jews were abandoning their heritage and culture, leaving them “Jewishly illiterate,” bereft of their moorings, “the most traditionless element in the population.” Membership in a “Jewish fellowship,” a kehillah capable of envisaging “the problem of Jewish life in its entirety,” would satisfy American Jews’ crying need for “status, self-respect, and cosmic orientation.”

The Depression and the resultant radicalization of American politics also had a profound impact on Kaplan’s worldview. Addressing the economic inequalities between the Jewish bourgeoisie and the working class was central to his communal vision. While Kaplan was not a socialist, he was convinced that laissez-faire capitalism and the competitive nationalism that it fueled was a failed and toxic system. Instead, he embraced a program of American social and economic reconstruction aimed at forging a “co-operative commonwealth.” He dubbed his kehillah a “Jewish collective,” asserting that “the rest of the world” was becoming “collectivist” and the “Jews must respond with a collectivism of their own.”
Although by the mid-1930s the national economy was showing tentative signs of recovery, it was imperceptible to most Jewish educators. Reflecting the national scene, teachers, despairing of meager wages and a lack of job security, were increasingly drawn to trade unionism and socialism. The lead editorial in the April–June 1935 issue of *Jewish Education* endorsed a one-day walkout orchestrated by the Hebrew Teachers Union calling attention to the “sad state into which Jewish teaching has fallen.” But the editors were apoplectic a year later when the more Americanized Jewish Teachers Association (JTA) participated in the United Front May Day parade. Israel Chipkin, who condemned the teachers in an editorial, was particularly rankled because they made common cause with the anti-Zionist Communist Party. His concerns were echoed by *Hadoar*, which ran a front-page editorial condemning the JTA for “strengthening the bloody hands of Communist pogrom-makers in Palestine.” Chipkin repeated the editors’ concern with the economic condition of Jewish teachers and criticized parents, lay leaders, and communal professionals for doing little to address their plight. But he also lambasted teachers for analogizing their relationship with Talmud Torah principals and boards to that between management and labor in the factory or even the public school. The “class struggle” had no place in the Jewish school. Chipkin cited the lack of profit margin and taxing power of the Jewish school. But, at heart, Chipkin viewed Jewish teaching as a calling, and he feared that the entire system would collapse if such an adversarial relationship became the norm.

Chipkin’s perspective not only underscored a disconnection between teachers and management; it was also symptomatic of a generational divide. Deborah Pessin, secretary of the Jewish Teachers Association, sounded a very different note when she condemned her union’s critics for trying to “terrorize [the teachers] into silence” and “descending to Nazi tactics.” She claimed that fear of American fascism, as well as a desire for economic justice, prompted the JTA to join the parade, making common cause with a broad coalition of unions, professional organizations, and minority and religious groups. Younger educators were generally more willing to entertain and espouse a radical restructuring of the economic system. Chipkin inadvertently exacerbated frictions with his paternalistic tone and martyr complex. Both were in evidence at the 1933 NCJE conference when a paper describing the impact of economic conditions on teachers was met by Chipkin’s insistence that the teachers bear their burden with an air of dignity and forbearance. Apparently, his comments were interpreted by some as sanctimonious and elicited howls of protest. A young firebrand at the Chicago Bureau, Israel Rappaport, bristled at
Chipkin’s “righteous plea for further self-sacrifice for the cause of Jewish education.” The lecture would have had more credibility had it not come from someone who “managed to derive a comfortable living out of the profession in the course of a number of years,” he complained. Rappaport obviously was not well acquainted with Chipkin’s financial woes and ascetic bachelor lifestyle. Chipkin occupied a modest room in the JTS dormitory and devoted a significant portion of his dwindling salary to supporting his extended family.45

Chipkin and like-minded Benderly boy colleagues found themselves in an untenable position. On the one hand, they had spent the past twenty-five years building up the communal school system and professionalizing Jewish education. They shuddered at the thought that their work might have been for naught—that the modern Talmud Torahs would give way to resurgence of the khayder and the ascendancy of the Sunday school. But, on the other hand, the starving teachers were the backbone of the system.

As the Depression wore on, pressure from the teachers built up. In 1934 a joint committee of teachers and principals demanded that the JEA establish a code of employment. Younger teachers, in particular, expressed their unconditional support for direct action in order to force the New York Jewish community to grapple with their plight. Chipkin was baffled by the “ideology of class distinction and class struggles.” He wondered aloud about what he believed was the inordinate emphasis on the economics of the profession to the exclusion of “the scientific and the idealistic aspects.” Chipkin wisely chose to swallow his misgivings and co-opt the group. A more broadly representative committee was convened by the JEA, including representatives from the JEA and the wider community as well as the teachers and principals. Over the course of the next five years they negotiated a code of practice that not only addressed the issue of salaries but also defined teachers’ duties and rights, vacation periods, and tenure process, and established a procedure to govern the relationship between teachers and schools. The Code of Ethics and Standards was adopted in January 1939 and was periodically revised thereafter.46

Others felt less threatened by the radicalization of the teachers. JTS registrar Samuel Dinin, who was a decade younger than Chipkin, looked to Kaplan and his mentors at Teachers College for inspiration. Dinin romantically charged that Jews, once paragons of wholesomeness in their behavior and moral standards, were tainted by their exposure to industrial capitalism. Echoing Kaplan, Dinin warned that a return to “all of the old traditional values” was impossible. Rather, he urged that a socially democratic communal organization should be created that would concern itself “with the whole fabric of Jewish life, with whatever promotes the social and cultural welfare of all the Jews.” In a 1937 essay he argued for the primacy
of the “social aim” of Jewish education. “Education, socially conceived, must deal with life as it is actually lived. . . . Such a Jewish education cannot ignore the social economic scene, nor the Jewish community in its widest aspects.”

Dinin’s concern for the “social economic scene” made him less skittish in defending the unionization of Jewish schoolteachers and more sympathetic to their attraction to radical political causes than some of his colleagues. Dinin shared their concerns, but he was also disturbed by their knee-jerk conservatism. A double standard seemed to be at play wherein a wholly modern, status-seeking community of social climbers expected its teachers and other “religious people” to be otherworldly and content themselves with learning Torah and seeking a reward in the world to come. “For a teacher to haggle over wages and bread is to bring into the realm of the spiritual and the eternal the corrupt ideals of the physical and temporal world,” they seemed to believe. Dinin dismissed this sort of dualism as utter nonsense, and he encouraged teachers to hold the community responsible for their plight. Taking a page from Kaplan, Dinin asserted: “It is the better part of wisdom, then, for teachers not only to fight for their rights whenever and wherever such rights are curtailed or abrogated or even endangered, but to fight simultaneously the apathy of parents, and the undemocratic community set up, and to fight for a new communal set up in which their position and rights will be maintained along desired standards.”

The one-day strike and the May Day march demonstrate that the teachers were not placated by the JEA committee’s slow progress in hammering out a teachers’ code. To some extent, the existing teachers’ associations were pressured to take more militant action by members within their own ranks. An Agudath Muvtalim (Union of Unemployed Teachers) was organized, which staged “stormy demonstrations” in front of the offices of the Hebrew Teachers Union and disrupted its general meetings. One witness described the “violent display of tempers” that erupted on those occasions. Severe economic distress, which resulted in an on-average decline of 60 percent in teacher remunerations, finally compelled the maskilic Hebrew Teachers Union and the Americanized Jewish Teachers Association to set aside their differences and coalesce around a joint plan of action: in June 1937 New York-area teachers organized a single, unified Hebrew Teachers Union. By early 1939, 725 teachers were members of eleven locals, organized geographically. That number soon grew to 850, representing 80 percent of the total workforce. As the Depression eased, progress was made on salaries and benefits. The union was also involved in the development of the uniform Code of Ethics and Standards and successfully fought for the reinstatement of twenty-six dismissed teachers.
Lessons Learned: Cultivating Community Support

No one knew better than Ben Rosen the extent of the devastation that the Depression was wreaking on Jewish education. It was Rosen, after all, who conducted the surveys that charted the slashed budgets, declining enrollments, and dwindling wages, providing his colleagues with a bird’s-eye view of national conditions. Taking stock in 1937, Rosen noted that central agency budgets had been decreased by up to one-half since 1930. The willingness of federations to jettison or disproportionately slash funding for educational and cultural programming during the early 1930s had been instructive. There was a serious chasm between educators and community leaders. Each side was highly suspicious of the other’s motives and viewed the other as an impediment to realizing a suitable Jewish educational program. Rosen believed that it was essential to work within the existing system to place Jewish education on a firmer footing. Lay leaders, he argued, should be brought into the education enterprise as collaborators, not simply as check writers. His view was endorsed by other central agency and Hebrew college directors who were burned by their experience in the 1930s, including Chipkin, in New York, and Honor, in Chicago.\(^5\)

At the 1936 NCJE conference, Rosen found a partner in the federation world who shared his convictions and was eager to work with him to open the lines of communication between the two groups. New York Federation leader Joseph Willen and Rosen were panelists in a session dedicated to “financing Jewish education.” Rosen resonated with Willen’s frank assessment that the “moneyed groups” needed to be disabused of their “erroneous impressions of Jewish education,” while Jewish educators were obligated to exhibit more receptivity to the concerns and views of the philanthropists if they wished to secure more than a token amount of funding. Both men endorsed the idea of establishing a lay group affiliated with the NCJE that would work in tandem with educators to develop a program of Jewish education and be charged with promotion and fund-raising within the community. An exploratory committee was organized to drum up interest for such a group within the larger Jewish community. With the support of the National Council of Federations and Welfare Funds (NCFWF), an official Laymen’s Section of the NCJE was quickly organized, and Rosen touted its potential to elevate Jewish education closer to the top of the communal agenda.\(^5\)

But a lay division would not attract sufficient publicity. Nor would participation in it carry the necessary level of prestige to attract more than the most committed community leaders. Chipkin’s experience at the JEA, which suffered from an inability to extend its support from its “alrightnik” base to the “uptown” power elite that comprised the backbone of the Federation, convinced him of the
importance of raising the status of Jewish education work in the eyes of lay leaders. Federations would not take education seriously until it attracted the attention and interest of their most important donors. As Rosen, Chipkin, and Honor considered the matter, they increasingly recognized that the absence of an autonomous lay-led agency made Jewish education anomalous in the Jewish world. It was community leaders rather than professionals who took the initiative in organizing the central defense, community relations, fraternal, and community service agencies. Even the religious movements were built on a tripartite system of seminaries, lay-congregational groups, and professional organizations.

The men were also mindful of Maurice Karpf’s observation about the isolation and weakness of the central educational agencies in their Depression-era clashes with local federations and the lack of support that they felt as embattled professional leaders. An umbrella organization would be able to strategize and coordinate a national response to crises; foster intra-agency cooperation; assist midsize and smaller Jewish communities in organizing their educational services; mount nationwide publicity campaigns; conduct research; and act as a clearinghouse for information and data.∑≤

Over the next two years, professionals at the dozen existing bureaus cultivated local lay leaders in anticipation of creating a lay organization. On an unseasonably cold day in May 1939, forty-five powerful lay people, representing eleven of the largest Jewish communities east of the Mississippi, founded the American Association for Jewish Education (AAJE), forerunner of the Jewish Education Service of North America. The group elected as its leader Mark Eisner, an attorney who served as the head of the Board of Higher Education in New York City. Among the attendees, an assortment of judges, attorneys, physicians, and businessmen, were civic leaders in their respective communities. They agreed on an initial budget of $15,000 and a program of Jewish educational promotion, coordination, expansion, improvement, and research.∑≥

Chipkin, who served as the AAJE’s founding secretary, greeted its announced program as “a most welcome step” that “promises blessings for Jewish citizens and for America generally.” As a practical matter, however, he and his colleagues were under no illusion that merely founding such an organization would suffice: they knew they would need to carry on the day-to-day activities of the nascent group until it acquired the leadership and the budget to stand on its own. This fact became clearer when the financial resources did not immediately materialize. Prior to 1942, the organization was running on less than $1,000 a year. In those early years, the organization’s most significant activities included gaining exposure and raising awareness about educational issues through regional conferences, publicity materials, and the inauguration of Jewish Education Month and Week.∑∂
The conference and session planning underscored that improvement of lay-professional relations would require more than goodwill from both sides. In the wake of a number of AAJE-sponsored education-themed sessions at the regional conferences of the National Council of Federations and Welfare Funds, leading communal service professionals complained to Chipkin and Honor that the meetings were too promotional in nature. The civic leaders and top-tier philanthropists the educators were targeting were a savvy lot who would not be persuaded by appeals to guilt or Madison Avenue–style campaigns. “Even granting that all Jews accept the desirability of some form of Jewish education, the fact remains that they don’t agree on the content or the basic organizational phases,” George Rabinoff of the NCWF reminded Chipkin. He emphasized that opposition to a community-supported Jewish education program came not only from so-called “assimilation-
"ist elements" but “from practically every segment of the population,” from the religious denominational bodies that supported a congregation-based approach to the traditionalists who understandably complained that their all-day yeshivas were marginalized by the professionals. “It seems to me important that these negative factors be analyzed rather than ignored,” Rabinoff implored. “Federation cannot increase its support to Jewish education against the opposition of the big contributors.”

Chipkin was unprepared to hear the criticism and tried to slough it off. But Honor’s experience at previous meetings as well as his less prickly personality made him more receptive to Rabinoff’s advice. He implored his friend to take the criticism seriously and shift tactics. “We do not reach at these meetings the community leaders who do not believe in Jewish education,” Honor admitted, as the pair discussed the program for a conference in Omaha. “I personally believe that instead of talking to more than 100 people, it might be advantageous if we educators would get an opportunity to sit around a table and exchange ideas and points of view with a few individuals who have as yet not been sold on Jewish education and who do not understand what we educators are trying to do.” He added: “Instead of utilizing the sessions in order to sell the idea of Jewish education or even the responsibility of Jewish Federations for a community program of Jewish education, we ought to discuss specific, concrete problems that are facing the community, and ways and means by which they can be solved.”

But even if the AAJE made few converts among the skeptics, it was raising its community profile by speaking out on issues of concern to many American Jews in the early 1940s, including religion in the public schools, Jewish youth apathy and lack of self-esteem, and the need for religious and spiritual uplift during wartime. If none of these issues confronted head-on the underlying obstacles facing Jewish education, their airing introduced many people to the AAJE and probably made them more receptive to its wider agenda. All the same, the organization’s reach and impact were severely curtailed by its finances. It was not until munitions manufacturer Frank Cohen gave the American Association a $30,000 challenge donation in 1942 that its fund-raising began to take off and it was able to hire a professional staff. In 1943 Rosen was appointed as the AAJE’s first full-time executive director. His dogged efforts, cut short by his premature death in 1945, won the organization much-needed support and funds while increasing its profile in communities outside the Northeast and Rust Belt. Despite its slow start, the founding of the AAJE heralded the dawning of a new chapter in the history of American Jewish education.
PART II

Jewish Learning for
Jewish Living, 1910–1945
At Rabbi Barnett Brickner’s Euclid Avenue Temple, in Cleveland, the Purim carnival was a highlight of the year for both the Sunday school children and their parents. Libbie Braverman, the temple’s director of extension activities (and, later, school director) described the scene:

A feeling of expectation and excitement is in the air. People are hurrying from store to store; workmen are hammering the last few nails into the especially constructed bandstand; children are already trying out their masks. An infectious holiday spirit pervades the atmosphere. Purim is here—traditional, yet modern in every respect.

Inspired by Tel Aviv’s merry Adloyada festival and parade, the largest annual event in mandatory Palestine, the Euclid Avenue Temple’s Purim carnival was meant to inject life into “the usual anemic form that the celebration of Purim takes in this country.” A game room occupied the children, while the recreation hall was designed to resemble a Tel Aviv street scene. Names of Tel Aviv thoroughfares were given to the aisles, which were lined with booths depicting institutions, such as Hadassah Hospital, and displaying and selling Holy Land merchandise, including olive wood ritual objects and woven tapestries. The climax of the day was the parade, with floats designed by the religious school children. One loaded with boxes of oranges, representing Palestine’s citrus industry, carried the banner “All Juice and No Pits,” while another depicted a child’s hand dropping a coin into a Jewish National Fund box. Among the winning floats was a reproduction of one of the Gazoz soft drink stands that were ubiquitous in interwar Palestine.

The Euclid Avenue Temple Purim carnival and parade exemplified at their best the educational innovations of the Benderly group during the interwar years. Preparing for the carnival actively engaged the entire community in Jewish learning. The classes that designed the floats spent weeks researching in the synagogue school library, while the men’s club members who constructed the street scene educated themselves about the geography and iconography of the Yishuv’s modern city. As Braverman explained: “It provided us with unusual opportunities for a large school project, and afforded us an example of how the traditional and the modern can be beautifully blended.” Only someone immune to the holiday spirit would stop to observe that in trying to effect a balance between tradition and
modernity, the emphasis seemed to be squarely weighted toward Tel Aviv rather than Shushan.  

While the spread of the central educational agency and the accompanying introduction of administrative efficiencies into the schools represented an important facet of a so-called golden age of Jewish education ushered in by the Benderly boys, it was by no means their sole preoccupation. They were equally interested in developing a functionalist school curriculum that reflected their ideological commitments and values, particularly their faith in progressivism and dedication to Jewish survival. Reflective members of their circle gave careful consideration to the rationale and aims of Jewish education in a democratic society. Curricular innovation and reform presented these educators with a concrete opportunity to bridge the gap between idea and practice.

Samson Benderly and his disciples were deeply concerned that the home could no longer be depended on to transmit Jewish learning through an engagement of the young in a process of “learning to do by doing.” “The atmosphere which surrounds [the child] is no longer saturated with Jewish life, and the traditional Jewish home has notoriously weakened in its influence over its American-born children,” Isaac Berkson observed. It was left to the Jewish school to step into the breach and assume an expanded role in socializing its pupils into the Jewish community so as to assure its survival. Mordecai Kaplan expressed the challenge succinctly: “The task that devolves upon the Jewish religious school is to cultivate in the child a sense of warm intimacy with the Jewish people, with its life and its institutions, to create within him a sense of exaltation in those experiences of his people which have constituted for the human race the very footprints of God, and to implant within him a high ambition to contribute his share towards the perpetuation and enrichment of its spirit.” But to accomplish this mission would require a broad expansion and revamping of the conventional Talmud Torah curriculum.

The search for a new curricular road map for the Jewish school was heavily influenced by the example of progressive educators, who were simultaneously engaged in a redefinition and expansion of the mission of the public schools. American educators at the turn of the century were struggling to respond to the destabilizing effects of industrialization and immigration. A wide array of interest groups, ranging from businessmen to labor union leaders, and from settlement workers to agrarian publicists, were demanding that the schools assume an expanded role in preparing children for their future roles as citizens by taking on responsibilities that had traditionally been performed by family, church, neighborhood, and shop. Defenders of classical education felt threatened by the “ca-
cophony of voices . . . demanding educational reforms of every sort and variety.” But John Dewey and his followers strove to be responsive, preaching that the public school had become a “legatee institution,” a bulwark against moral and social decay, society’s last best hope for rearing a next generation.⁴

In his best-selling 1899 tract *The School and Society*, which was based on a series of lectures he delivered to parents and other backers of his Laboratory School, Dewey reasoned that “[i]t is radical conditions which have changed, and only an equally radical change in education suffices.” Dewey expressed nostalgia for agrarian life that surely touched a chord with many of his readers. Migration to the cities had weakened the bonds of family and community, deprived children of an intimate connection with nature, and severed the direct relationship between production and consumption, all of which had a deleterious effect on character building. While recognizing that it was futile to try to turn back the clock, Dewey advocated for the introduction into the public school curriculum of manual and household arts “as methods of learning and living . . . as instrumentalities through which the school itself shall be made a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons.” Dewey aimed to make the school into an “embryonic community,” in which the child “learns through directed living,” thereby simulating as much as possible the educational process of the agrarian village. “When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious.”⁵

Kaplan’s articulation of the ultimate purpose of the Jewish school is in large measure a sectarian expression of the societal function Dewey conceived for the public school. Both envisioned the school in its ideal state as a hothouse producing engaged, invested, and constructive members of society. Thus, it becomes apparent why Benderly and his protégés enthusiastically applied Dewey’s model to the Jewish context. Benderly’s opponents were quick to criticize, as a dilution of the curriculum, his introduction into the Jewish schools of creative and performance arts, holiday celebrations, assemblies, and club work. They charged that he was driven by a belief that learning must be made easy and fun in order to appeal to students. Benderly did not veil his desire to boost enrollment and stem the alarmingly high attrition rate through actively engaging students in their learning. But his overriding motivation, which seems to have been lost on some critics, was to simulate as closely as possible the educational process that in an earlier generation took place within the Jewish home and Jewish neighborhood. Benderly was under
no illusion that singing Jewish holiday songs and baking challah could substitute for Hebrew and Bible study. But, as Dewey’s example suggested, the value of the former activities was that they taught students on a practical level how to “be Jewish” and how to “do Jewish,” while strengthening their emotional connections with Judaism, Jewish culture, the Jewish people, and the Jewish homeland.
Education as Enculturation

Progressivism and the New York Bureau

In the 1910s the basic curriculum in the New York Bureau of Education’s standard intermediate and preparatory schools was centered on cognitive learning, an indication that despite his commitment to diversify the curriculum, Benderly continued to view as core knowledge Hebrew and Judaism’s classical texts. The preparatory school curriculum was similar to the one worked out, with Benderly’s consultation, by the modern Talmud Torah principals’ group, with the major difference being its truncated five-and-a-half-hour-per-week schedule. Over half of the meeting hours were devoted to the study of Hebrew language and literature, including selections from the Pentateuch and the Bureau’s monthly Hebrew magazine, Shaharut, utilizing the natural method. The other major subjects included history and liturgy, with fifteen minutes per week allotted to synagogue and holiday music. Even the standard intermediate school, which met for only three to three and a half hours per week and employed the translation method of Hebrew study, devoted the bulk of its class hours to Hebrew and history, with music class.

Above: The coronation of Queen Esther in a Purim play at the Central Jewish Institute. Holiday pageants were integral to the extracurricular programs of modernized Talmud Torahs. Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.
utilized primarily to familiarize students with the synagogue and home liturgies. In addition, both tracks devoted fifteen minutes per week in the first year to current events, utilizing the Bureau’s weekly English magazine, *The Jewish Child.*

The impact of Benderly’s progressive-influenced innovations was most keenly felt on the margins of the Bureau schools’ curricula, in the form of cocurricular and extracurricular activities. Saturday sessions were used for children’s services and Sabbath assemblies, which typically encompassed storytelling and group singing of Sabbath hymns and Jewish folk songs. The services allowed girls the opportunity to assume leadership positions in a synagogue setting at a time when conventional synagogues reserved such roles for males. Girls took turns as prayer leaders and Torah readers. According to Sarah Schreiber, student council president at Hebrew Intermediate School No. 2, “Every girl is so anxious to become a *chozon* [prayer leader] that she is always trying to show her teacher how well she reads.”

Benderly introduced a club period on Sundays during which students were encouraged to choose from a variety of enrichment activities such as choir, dance, and dramatics. Much of the club work was dedicated to preparation for performances in the school’s holiday programs. The members of the Ho-Ivreeeh Club, which was drawn from upper-level students at Preparatory School No. 1, worked out a club plan that involved “learning new Jewish songs at each meeting; holding discussions on questions in Jewish history; reading Jewish legends in Hebrew; gathering a scrap book of items of interest in Jewish life; and discussions of current Jewish events, based on articles in *The Jewish Child.*” The club was advised by one of the teachers, Jeanne Schechter, a native of Palestine. The Bnoth Eber Club, at Preparatory School No. 3, met over the summer of 1912 to practice the Hebrew play *Bath Zion*, which it performed for the entire school at the Rosh Hashanah assembly. The play, which was directed by teacher Mervin Isaacs, was a thinly veiled allegory about the relationship between the Jewish people and the land of Israel that also sought to pay homage to the United States: “Ben Judah is violently torn away from Bath Zion and driven from place to place all over the world. Everywhere he is received with curses, everywhere he is beaten and oppressed, everywhere he is forced to wander onward, until finally, aged and weary he is received kindly into the land of Columbia (the United States), where he becomes young and strong. From there he is able to return to Bath Zion, who during his long years away has faithfully waited for him.”

In addition, club leaders tried to expand their members’ Jewish horizons by inviting them to their homes for “sociables,” hosting inspiring presentations by notable speakers, and exposing them to the city’s rich array of Jewish cultural activities. When Henrietta Szold returned from her first trip to Palestine in 1912, she regaled the girls of Preparatory School No. 1 with tales of her trip, including
stories about the everyday lives of boys and girls in the Zionist colonies. When Jeanne Schechter accompanied her Ho-Ivreeh Club to a production of Jacob Gordon’s *Gott Mensch und Teufel* (God, Man, and the Devil), many of the girls told her that it was their first excursion to New York’s renowned Yiddish theater. School clubs also became involved in antimissionary work and, toward the end of World War I, raising funds for Jewish relief efforts.4

In short order other Jewish supplementary schools in New York City and beyond adopted the extracurricular club programs, children’s services, and similar Benderly innovations. Some schools, such as the modern Minneapolis Talmud Torah, under the direction of Dr. George Jacob Gordon, probably developed their programming independently, at least initially. In the early 1910s the Minneapolis Talmud Torah already boasted its own Hebrew newspaper, titled *Chaber Yelodim*. But by 1912 Benderly was actively spreading his methods through the dissemination of the *Jewish Child*, which was utilized by dozens of schools outside the New York area, and via the Bureau’s Information Department, which dispatched field-workers, surveyors, and other researchers to communities throughout New England, the Middle Atlantic region, and the Midwest. The rabbi of a Sabbath school in Kansas City, Missourri, organized a Daughters of Israel club, which was inspired to sew clothing for indigent Jewish tots in Jerusalem after reading in the *Jewish Child* about a similar project undertaken by one of the preparatory school clubs in New York. The Kansas City club’s student leader, Augusta Brendine, penned a letter to the children’s newspaper, asking the girls in New York to send her the clothing patterns. Closer to home, the Daughters of Queen Esther club at the Hebrew Free School in Yonkers, New York, raised money to purchase for their school a stereopticon machine. Schools that worked closely with the Bureau, such as the Salanter Talmud Torah in Harlem and the Downtown Talmud Torah, also developed children’s synagogues, after-school clubs, and a full calendar of holiday programs.5

The Bureau’s extension education program, which evolved over the decade from a Sunday morning auditorium program into a bona fide supplementary school, also included a club component. When the program began in the spring of 1912, under the direction of Barnett Brickner, about twenty clubs, a choir, and a dramatics club met weekly at the Odeon Theatre on Clinton Street. By July it was attracting about eight hundred girls weekly. Similar programming was introduced that autumn at the Educational Alliance and the Uptown Talmud Torah, and by 1915 there were also extension centers at the Meserole Street Talmud Torah in Williamsburg and the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah in Brownsville. Clubs were open to any boy or girl between the ages of ten and thirteen not enrolled in a Talmud Torah or *khayder*.
The Bureau also experimented in these early years with summer extension programming. Extended school vacation in the summer months allowed Benderly and his colleagues to offer an expanded program of formal and informal education for the children of working-class families who were stuck in New York City. A cadre of volunteers assisted Brickner, most of whom were public school teachers. Many remained involved in Jewish education for years to come, including Young Judaea leader David Schneeberg, future industrialist Frank Cohen, and composer Samuel Goldfarb, who later became the director of the Bureau’s Department of Music. Goldfarb, who alternated his appearances between the various extension locations, was a favorite of the youngsters. According to a report in the Jewish Child, “The children like his playing and show it by their hearty responses during the singing periods.”

As Benderly looked back on the Bureau’s heyday in a 1925 letter to Dushkin, informal education loomed large in his mind. “I have felt all along, and I think you feel so too, that atmosphere and real spiritual influence can be obtained more outside of the classroom than in the classroom. The fine spirit which prevailed in the preparatory schools of the Bureau ten or twelve years ago was largely due to the so-called extra-curriculum work.” Benderly elaborated on this observation, delineating in his view the differing goals of formal and informal education. The former should be primarily focused on knowledge and skills acquisition, he argued, while that latter should educate for citizenship. “A child trained with the idea of service, will when grown into manhood and womanhood be more willing to participate in Jewish activities than they are at present,” he counseled. “If the Hebrew school can accomplish this, it would lay the foundation for a more organized community.”

Benderly went on to share with Dushkin a Hebrew school model patterned along the lines of Dewey’s notion that a school should be a community in microcosm, where various aspects of the “life” of the “ideal Jewish community” were represented and reproduced through clubs and other school activities, “so that when a child will have attended a club for a given time, it shall have done so for the purpose of training itself for one of the forms of service for which it will be called upon to render when it is grown up.” His intriguing thought experiment was never brought to fruition.

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging: The Bureau’s Youth Movements

By 1914 the Bureau was experimenting with Jewish high school associations for adolescent boys and girls in heavily Jewish neighborhoods such as Brownsville and Harlem. Mamie Goldsmith remembered being recruited for the Bronx chapter of the girls’ club by a high school classmate. “Would you like to join a Jewish girls’
"club?" her friend asked. "They help you to be a Hebrew teacher." "Nothing was further from my mind," Goldsmith later admitted. But, seeking a social outlet, she went anyway and eventually met her future husband, Emanuel Gamoran, who was one of the club leaders and adviser to the club newspaper.

The Bureau's extension activities took an ambitious turn in 1917 with the creation of the Circle for Jewish Children and the League of the Jewish Youth of America. The source of inspiration for these associations was likely sparked by a controversy over the mission and direction of Young Judaea that rocked that organization in 1911 and 1912. The Bureau's clique of directors saw much potential in Young Judaea, but they came into conflict with its young leadership over issues of organizational direction and control. Young Judaea's president, Israel Friedlaender, and its secretary, David Schneeberg, believed that the organization's raison d'être should be informal Jewish education and wanted it to be as broad-based as possible. As cultural Zionists, they supported Young Judaea's nationalist orientation but viewed it as a manifestation of a larger concern with what Mordecai Kaplan would later call Jewish peoplehood. Younger activists, however, pushed for an overtly political Zionist program and succeeded in inserting Zionist language into the organization's constitution. Rebuffed, Friedlaender resigned the presidency but did not give up on the idea of a general Jewish youth organization. The following year, in an effort to stabilize Young Judaea's funding, widen its mission, and professionalize its management, Friedlaender and Schneeberg tried to engineer its takeover by the Bureau of Jewish Education. Again, the younger leaders successfully resisted, viewing the scheme as "an attack on their autonomy and Zionist objectives." Some Benderly disciples, including those associated with the original Dr. Herzl Zion Club, believed that a variety of Jewish youth organizations serving different constituencies should coexist. Other members of the Bureau's staff, including Mervin Isaacs, who became secretary of Young Judaea in July 1912, were relieved that the organization escaped Benderly and Friedlaender's grasp. More radical than their mentors, these young Bureau workers did not want to see Young Judaea's mission diluted. They also resented the well-meaning but patronizing approach of the older generation.

Nevertheless, Benderly and Friedlaender remained convinced that the Jewish community would be well served by a youth movement that was sympathetic to cultural Zionism but rose above partisan affiliations. The League for the Jewish Youth of America and the Circle of Jewish Children were a realization of their aspiration. The central idea behind the League was "to create a community of adolescents, which will bind the young man and young woman to all the other Jewish young men and young women in America." Likewise, the aim of the Circle was described as creating for the children "pleasant associations with Jewish living
and [an] emotional attachment to the Jewish people, based on some knowledge and appreciation of Jewish values.” Expanding on this rationale, Alexander Dushkin argued that when boiled down to its core, Jewish education was about “impart[ing] to Jewish children in this country . . . a sense of affiliation or ‘belonging to’ the Jewish people.” Formal Jewish education was “simply the elaboration and enrichment of this sense of ‘belonging to’ the Jewish people, by teaching its content and significance.” Informal, or extension, education aimed to get to the same place, primarily and necessarily through experiential activities and affective learning.11

In the case of the League, the bond between the individual and the community was forged and reinforced through participation in Jewish religious and cultural activities, discussions, and lectures about the challenges and problems facing contemporary Jewry, and through service to the community. The city was divided into five chapters, or galils, which sent representatives to a coordinating City Council. A spirit of fellowship was cultivated through mass meetings and the League’s monthly magazine. League coordinators Libbie Suchof and Israel Chipkin assiduously cultivated leadership among the youth. Some members, including Samuel Blumenfield, Harry Coopersmith, Samuel Dinin, Azriel Eisenberg, Miriam Ephriam, and Mamie Goldsmith, continued their Jewish education at Teachers Institute and pursued careers in Jewish education and communal work. Others were inspired to a lifelong commitment to volunteer work. “Like a pebble thrown in the water, there were undreamed widening circles engendered by the League,” Goldsmith wrote.12

Similarly with regard to the Circle, conscious efforts were made to make the children feel that they were part of a larger movement of Jewish children. Members were also encouraged to participate in “the social phases of Jewish life,” particularly through mass festival celebrations and pageants. During the 1910s Benderly and the members of his Extension Department were continually refining their program in search of more effective methods of conducting mass instruction at a minimal per capita cost. By 1915 the children who attended the large Sunday morning sessions were divided into groups of up to twenty-five and were assigned a volunteer leader, usually a high school student, who received special training and attended regular preparation and advisory meetings. The leader served as a role model and direct liaison between the children and Bureau. She encouraged her group to attend the weekly sessions and special holiday assemblies, involved them in club work, and distributed copies of the Jewish Child and special holiday pamphlets.13

Elements of this organizational system were clearly incorporated into the structure of the Circle. Jewish neighborhoods were districted, often by block. Each was assigned to a local high school student leader, who visited every Jewish child
between the ages of eight and twelve in her district and enrolled them in the organization. Individual groups operated as combination club and scout troop, meeting for weekly activities under the guidance of the student leader. The various groups were united on the neighborhood level through a branch center, or headquarters, which held holiday celebrations, pageants, and other educational events, and on a citywide level through the Jewish Child, which was reconceived as a weekly Circle newspaper. Members paid a nominal five cents per year in dues, which entitled them to membership certificates, Circle buttons, holiday story booklets, free tickets to branchwide events, and copies of the Jewish Child. By 1918 there were thirty thousand children enrolled in the program, although it is unclear what percentage were active members.\footnote{14}

In an editorial published in the Jewish Teacher, Dushkin, Berkson, and Albert Schoolman responded to critics of the broad-based youth movement idea, both within Young Judaea and among their fellow Bureau colleagues. They argued that the nonpartisan character of the League was necessary in order to create “a real community of adolescents,” reasoning that “[j]ust as a community of Jewish adults cannot stand for any one party in Jewry, but must necessarily allow the interplay of various forces,” so, too, should the League of the Jewish Youth steer

Members of the League of the Jewish Youth of America dressed for a pageant. Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Newton Centre, MA.

Education as Enculturation 197
clear of identifying with any particular stream of Jewish life. Anticipating that the League would be criticized for being “contentless,” the trio countered that exposing youth to the diversity of Jewish expressions in the United States, far from constituting a dilution of content, was actually a safeguard against the promotion of thoughtless conformity through conditioning, a common feature of fervently ideological youth organizations, particularly in Europe. “Let that element in Jewry, which makes the strongest appeal, and has the most inherent value, prevail in influencing the American Jewish youth,” they wrote.

The editorialists were also intent on responding to the critique of traditionalists who questioned the relative educational value of any youth organization and were alarmed that the Bureau would promote the League and the Circle as alternatives to a conventional supplementary school. Elsewhere, Dushkin stressed the contingency nature of extension education. “To accommodate all Jewish school children at the present time, at least 137 new school buildings would be needed, and about 1,800 new teachers, clearly an impossible task for the immediate future,” he estimated in his 1917 survey of Jewish education in New York City. A stopgap measure was needed to “deal immediately with the great army of the unschooled,” at a minimal per capita cost. The editorial, in contrast, advocated for youth group–based extension education on its own merits. “Modern educators have come to realize the folly of making a distinction between organization and content in education.” Echoing their Teachers College mentor William H. Kilpatrick, Dushkin, Berkson, and Schoolman asserted: “Good organization is in itself content. The boy who gives up his time in a cause from which he expects no selfish return, and who spends some energy in inducing others to join the same cause, is being affected spiritually in a more real, more profound manner, than if he were made to listen to some unctuous moral lecturing. The Jewish girl who comes in contact with other Jewish girls, as a Jewess, for conscious participation in things Jewish, may thereby be brought nearer to the Jewish people, than if she were to attend some ‘class,’ a few perfunctory hours per week.”

Even as Bureau workers naturally looked to Young Judaea as a source of inspiration as well as a cautionary example, they were also heavily influenced by non-Jewish youth organization models, particularly the Boy Scouts of America and its imitators, as well as the boys’ and girls clubs of the YMCA. Benderly and his disciples could not help but take notice of the explosive growth of the Scouts, an organization that was imported to the United States from Britain in 1910 and by 1917 boasted over 280,000 members, including a robust presence in New York City. Jacob Schiff’s son Mortimer was a tireless promoter and generous benefactor of the Boy Scouts and an early member of its national executive board. Successful imita-
tors such as the Camp Fire Girls and Girl Scouts offered variations on the general scouting theme.\(^{17}\)

On the most basic level, the scouting organizations and their forerunners taught League and Circle organizers the importance of regalia, rituals, oaths, songs, and mass meetings in creating a sense of group cohesion, investment, and loyalty to the cause. Circle members were initiated in dramatic, mass, open-air ceremonies where they recited their oaths, sang the Circle song, and received their bright blue and white buttons emblazoned with the letters “C” and “J.” The initiation ceremonies for the League were even more intricate and rich in Jewish symbolism. They were elaborated by League co-organizer Israel Chipkin, who was likely influenced by the secret initiation rites of the Independent Order of B’nai Brith. Un- salaried and half starving, Chipkin willingly placed his graduate studies on hold and cloistered himself for a month in a small room in Lakewood, New Jersey, where he developed not only the League’s initiation rites and organizational structure but also fully elaborated programs and study guides for each of the League’s three levels. After a twelve-week probation period, League novitiates, in the presence of their district leaders, were brought before a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, where they recited a formulaic history of the Jewish people and accepted the Commandments held in the Ark using the identical response that the Children of Israel had employed at Sinai: “We shall do and we shall obey” (Na’aseh V’Nishmah). Upon reciting these words, the Eternal Lamp, or Ner Tamid, was lit, symbolizing “the eternal light of Israel, which has burned unquenched for a hundred generations, and which it now becomes their duty to tend and replenish.” Then the initiates made three vows: to study Judaism (Torah), volunteer for Jewish service (Avodah), and perform acts of loving-kindness (Gemilut Hasadim). Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasadim are identified as the three pillars on which the world stands in Ethics of the Fathers. The words were worked into the League’s emblem, which took as its central symbol the Ner Tamid.\(^{18}\)

Circle of Jewish Children directors Mordecai Soltes and Emanuel Gamoran almost made a fetish out of the blue and white Circle buttons. They even published a story in the Jewish Child, written by Gamoran, in which a thoughtless Circle member is hauled before Satan on Judgment Day for using his Circle button to play a popular street game with some neighborhood Irish kids. Only when the youngster expresses remorse for profaning his Circle button does God forgive him and make him into an angel. “This is not an ordinary button,” the story lectured. “It is the button of the Circle of Jewish Children. You must always wear this where everyone will see it. Let everyone know that you are little Jewish boys and little Jewish girls. Let all know that you are friends, brothers and sisters to each other.

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\(^{17}\) Education as Enculturation 199
This button is to stand for the unity of little Jewish friends.” White was for purity and blue was for truth, and both were for the flag of Zionist pioneers, the young readers were instructed.19

Character building, which first and foremost meant the inculcation of conventional, middle-class morality, was central to scouting and also played a significant role in the Circle. Whereas a Boy Scouts initiate pledged to uphold moral, religious, and civic values, the Circle inductee likewise promised to be dutiful and honorable. The first part of the two-pronged Circle oath, “I will always be happy and make everybody else happy,” was reminiscent of the Camp Fire Girls’ final law, “Be happy,” while the second part, “I shall always help everybody who needs my help,” mirrored the Boy Scout’s promise “To help people at all times.” And, while Boy Scouts vowed “To do my duty to God and to my country, and to obey the scout law,” the Circle member pledged his allegiance to Judaism and the Jewish people. If the Circle oath contained no exact equivalent to the Boy Scout’s promise “To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight,” the Circle’s motto, “Honor thy Father and thy Mother,” which appeared in the center of its membership certificate, with a Star of David on either side, was an apt corollary, which addressed itself to a most pressing concern within the Jewish community: the generation gap between immigrant parents and their Americanized children. One aspect of Boy Scouting, the concern with sublimating sexual expression through the rechanneling of hormonal energies into physical activity, had no analogue in the Circle. The Circle’s emphasis on enculturation through the teaching of Jewish rituals, customs, and songs resembled the Girl Scouts’ cultivation of domestic skills and tendency to stress the balancing of the desire for self-actualization with the needs and expectations of the family and community.20

The nonpartisan stance of the League and the Circle vis-à-vis the gamut of Jewish religious and political movements, which was so important to Benderly, Friedlaender, and the Jewish Teacher editorialists, was also an integral feature of the Boy Scouts, which took care not to officially align itself with any American political party, even though many of its board members were active Republicans. The historian of the Boy Scouts, David Macleod, argues that the organization “upheld what recent scholars have labeled a ‘civil religion’—not as a prophetic faith standing in judgment upon actual American practices but as a celebration of the American way of life, in which a decent measure of religiosity plays an important but subordinate role.” What Americanism was to the Scouts, Jewish pride was to the Circle and the League. Moreover, just as religious faith, while a bedrock tenet of scouting, was subsumed under the larger concern with citizenship and patriotism—indeed many Protestants equated their religious values with Americanism—so, too, did the Circle and the League view Jewish belief and practice as a facet of Jewishness, a
function of identification with the Jewish people. The Jewish festivals and pageants that were central to the Circle and the League were rites in an American Jewish civil religion that had more to do with ethnic pride and group continuity than religious piety. And just as the Boy Scouts gave representation to its values by appropriating national iconography such as the eagle and the American shield, which it superimposed over British Scouting’s traditional fleur-de-lis on the Boy Scout badge, so too did the Bureau’s organizations utilize both archetypal Jewish signs such as the Star of David and more weighty symbols such as the Ner Tamid to telegraph their Jewish ideals.21

If identity and character building were uppermost on the minds of the Circle and League organizers, they were well aware that a transparently didactic approach was unlikely to attract droves of inductees. For the younger children, the Circle adopted a psychological approach by stressing the theme of Jewish pride, adroitly appealing to their need for validation in the face of the mixed messages about being Jewish that they received from society. Not only was Jewish pride incorporated into the Circle oath, but it was also reinforced through music, stories, and many articles printed in the Jewish Child. A favorite Circle song at rallies and festival celebrations was the Yiddish “Ober Yiden Zeinin Mir,” with its refrain:

Ver meir zeinen, zeinen mir, ober Yiden zeinin mir.
What we are, we are. But one thing is certain. We are Jews.

Another much-loved song, Chester Teller’s “Children of Israel, On,” which was written especially for the Bureau, drove home a similar message of Jewish perseverance. Its final verse ended with an affirmation:

But Children of Israel, we do not despair
For we’re singing today, as we ne’er sang before,
There’s hope in our souls and there’s joy in the air
As the Children of Israel go marching once more.
Then on! on! on! on!
O Children of Israel, on as of yore.22

When the Jewish Child ran an essay contest on the subject “Why I am a Member of the Circle,” the winning entries, some of which were published in the magazine, emphasized group loyalty. “This club is mainly and chiefly to strengthen the Jewish religion, to make it strong and firm so no other religion can beat it,” Pearl Dorman, a member of the Harlem branch, wrote. “I think that every Jewish child that does not belong and hasn’t become a member of the Circle of Jewish Children of
America is a slacker towards the Jewish religion. . . . I hope to prove to the world that all my life I will do my best for anything concerning my religion which can never be wiped off the earth,” she added for good measure.  

Circle organizers did not shy away from raising the challenge of antisemitism. It was not unusual for stories told at holiday gatherings and published in the *Jewish Child* to address day-to-day ethnic and religious tensions that surfaced in the form of teasing, destruction of property, and physical assaults. In one tale, two Jewish children respond after neighborhood bullies vandalize their sukkah. In another, older Jewish boys come to the rescue of a younger child who is being accosted because of his religion. The stories unself-consciously reinforced Jewish distinctiveness as a value; indeed, their underlying message was often Jewish superiority.  

The lethal potential of antisemitism was driven home in late 1918 when news spread that thirteen-year-old Circle member Sadie Dillon was apparently beaten to death by neighborhood thugs who objected when she hoisted a Zionist flag from her Harlem apartment balcony. (Dillon’s death was later ruled a suicide.) Confronted with hundreds of terrified children, Soltes and William Kolodney, who ran the Circle’s Harlem center, organized a special meeting where they helped the children process Sadie’s apparent murder and salvage some larger meaning out of the tragedy. At the end of the meeting the children saluted the flag for which Dillon was said to have died, and sang “Hatikvah.” The November 15, 1918, issue of the *Jewish Child* was largely devoted to Dillon. A detailed account of her death was printed along with news of the Circle meeting and reaction from both members and leaders. “There is sorrow in the hearts of the Jews who live in Harlem and there is sadness wherever Jews meet and mention the name of brave little Sadie Dillon. But everywhere, flying above their sorrow, like a flag that rises above the clouds and that flaps its folds courageously in the high winds of heaven, one feels the great spirit of little Sadie Dillon and one is made happy to know that such courage still lives in the hearts of Jewish children,” the magazine observed. Mildred Lederman, the president of the Harlem Circle chapter, wrote that Dillon’s death filled her and her friends with resolve to follow Sadie’s example of Jewish dignity.  

Like the Scouts, the League in particular cultivated an aura of excitement and romance. “Jewish Youth of America in whose veins still flows Jewish blood and in whose souls still exists the Jewish ‘will to live,’ ” began one call to action. Chipkin tried to sell the youth on the inestimable significance of their decision to affiliate with the League. “Awakened, self-conscious, the Jewish Youth of America have turned to their people’s past and present exclaiming, ‘I seek my brethren.’ ” They would be foot soldiers in the national Jewish renascence. Annual mass rallies and conventions generated the energy and exhilaration that comes from participating in a movement.
Here, too, music played a central role in creating an esprit de corps. Among the tunes that were written explicitly for the League’s rallies was the now ubiquitous melody for “Shalom Aleichem.” It was composed in 1918 by Bureau music director Samuel Goldfarb’s brother, Rabbi Israel Goldfarb, spiritual leader of Brooklyn’s Congregation Baithe Israel Anshe Emes, as he sat on a bench near the Alma Mater statue on the steps of Columbia University’s Low Library. “[Samuel] told my father that he wanted something new to teach. Something catchy and melodic that [the youths] would learn easily and that they would be able to sing in unison when they got to this mass rally,” Israel’s daughter Bella Goldfarb Lehrman recalled. “I began to hum to myself. I fished out a sheet of music-paper from my briefcase and jotted it down. It was on a Friday, which may be the reason why the melody and the words came to my mind simultaneously,” Israel Goldfarb wrote to a colleague. “The popularity of the melody traveled not only throughout this country but throughout the world; so that many people came to believe that the song was handed down from Mt. Sinai by Moses.”

In the wake of the Balfour Declaration, much of the romance was generated through association with the aims and activities of the Zionist colonists and the promise of national revival. The League’s monthly magazine, Hed Ha-Galil, was dominated with news from Palestine, travelogues of League members touring the Holy Land, and the promotion of activities aimed at connecting League members to the Zionist project. For example, the December 1921 issue was headlined by an article titled “Echoes from Galil,” in which League student president George Hyman breathlessly reported on his trip to the Galilee. Hyman’s Galilee was animated and verdant, with “wonderful banana groves, stately Cyprus alleys, and bamboo plants growing so quickly that if you leave your hat on the end of a branch at night, it will be out of reach in the morning.” His image of the colonists was dreamy: “Chalutzim, swinging their pick-axes away at the road, stripped to the waist in the broiling sun, with their hardened bodies brown to a crisp.” His assessment of British high commissioner Herbert Samuel was perfectly glowing: “Truly another Nehemia has come to rebuild the Jewish National Home.” And his call to action unmistakable: “I met several American boys . . . who had come over with the Jewish Legion. They are very happy but deplore the fact that more pioneers don’t come from America, and the chaps from Russia and Poland seem to be justified when they say that we are leaving the actual building up of the land to them. It is not enough to send money; they come with ‘nothing but ten fingers’ to do their bit.”

Given Friedlaender and Benderly’s objections to the direction of Young Judaea, it is a little ironic that the League became so overtly Zionist. Of course, the Zionist movement was far more established by the end of the decade, and the
endorsement of its aims by the British government and U.S. president Woodrow Wilson gave it an added air of legitimacy. Much of the zeal and agitation on behalf of the Zionist cause stemmed from the young members themselves, although it was surely fanned by organizers Dushkin, Berkson, and Suchoff, all of whom made extended visits to Palestine shortly after the First World War. A portion of Berkson’s Palestine diary appeared in the same issue of *Hed Ha-Galil* as Hyman’s travelogue. Still, political Zionism continued to come in for attack by prominent members of the German Jewish establishment and a large segment of the Reform rabbinate, as well as many socialists and Orthodox Jews. Its endorsement by the League seemingly contravened the League’s pretense to nonpartisanship.29

At the same time, the League’s marketing material stressed the intellectual orientation of the League, a tack that starkly contrasted with that of the Boy Scouts and reflected genuine programmatic differences between the two movements as well as the different profiles of their typical members. League organizers completely internalized the stereotypes of Jewish youth as serious, intellectually curious, and eager to Americanize. The League’s promoters stressed the organization’s desire to advance critical thinking and open-ended inquiry among its members. In one promotional essay, Chipkin seemed to assure Jewish youths that the League understood the attitudes and orientation of their generation and was interested in promoting their empowerment.

The difference in orientation between the Boy Scouts and the League was also due to their different approaches to progressivism. Whereas the Boy Scouts was on “the conservative edge” or “Teddy Roosevelt wing” of the progressive movement, League organizers reflexively infused the League with a Deweyan approach to progressivism. “As Americans, our youths are learning that intelligent citizenship in a democracy must be based upon knowledge,” Chipkin wrote. He imagined the League as an answer to broad social problems, facilitating in particular a “virile, zealous desire on the part of the youth towards complete living—to live, to act, to think, to feel and to aspire as Jews.”30

To be sure, some of the apparent similarities between the Bureau organizations and the Scouts obscured equally significant differences in orientation. For example, while the Boy Scouts, like the Circle and League, admitted the children of immigrants and acted as an Americanizing institution, it espoused homogenization and Anglo-American conformity. President Theodore Roosevelt, one of the Boy Scouts’ early champions, was an enthusiastic supporter of the melting pot ethos, and its board included a number of influential immigration opponents. By contrast, the Circle and League championed the notion that minority groups could retain their ethnic distinctiveness while fully participating in and contributing to American democracy.31
In the 1940s and 1950s, after Benderly’s death, a critique of the Benderly revolution began to congeal, as reflected in the writings of Zevi Scharfstein, who portrayed Benderly and his followers as unnecessarily quick to make concessions to the dominant culture. This argument was picked up in the 1960s and 1970s and elaborated on by a younger generation of educators. Its most cogent advocate was Walter Ackerman. In a generally laudatory 1975 article about the Benderly boys in the journal *Judaism*, Ackerman accused these old-guard educators of being too beholden to progressivism, too susceptible to “the passing fads and fancies of American life,” because they lacked “a clearly accented standard rooted in Jewish culture and traditions.” While this criticism contains some truth, it does not adequately account for the transitional nature of American Judaism in the 1910s and 1920s. Immigrant Judaism was undergoing a process of Americanization, which Benderly, Kaplan, and their disciples recognized as predictable and hardly unprecedented. They were vitally interested in influencing the direction and course of this synthesis. But they felt constrained from getting too far ahead of the process, particularly in the religious sphere. Even the Zionism they promoted tended to sidestep the ideological questions that so preoccupied party activists in Europe and Palestine.

When confronted with a conflict between their educational goals and their commitment to educational progressivism, however, they unapologetically prioritized Jewish survival. An important case in point is the Benderly group’s opposition to the Gary plan for the public school system. Originated by William Wirt when he was superintendent of schools in Bluffton, Indiana, and applied more comprehensively and to an urban setting by Wirt in Gary, Indiana, the plan was touted in the early 1910s by social progressives and administrative progressives alike, and quickly spread to other school districts. According to historian Diane Ravitch, “The Gary plan was many things to many people, but above all it was an effort to put progressive ideology into practice. The Gary school was a children’s community and a community school. It offered an enriched curriculum, superb facilities, and a fully utilized school plant—and all at a saving to the taxpayers.” Between 1914 and 1920, the Gary plan was implemented in 136 schools in thirty-seven cities across fourteen states.

Wirt’s fundamental innovation was the supplementation of formal classroom learning with extensive use of informal and vocational educational venues like the shop, laboratory, gymnasium, auditorium, playground, farm, and library for instruction. The student complement was divided in half, with one group, or platoon, engaged in classroom-based study while the other cycled through a variety of
nonclassroom venues. The platoons rotated places during the second half of the day. According to its many proponents, the advantages of the plan were myriad. It responded to advocates for widening the academic school program through the introduction of the creative, domestic, and industrial arts, as well as physical education and nature study. It made more extensive use of school and neighborhood facilities, required a reduced teaching force, and addressed the increasingly acute problem of student overcrowding without requiring the erection of costly new school buildings. The Gary plan also extended the school day to 4:30 PM and introduced optional Saturday classes. The longer school day not only facilitated the platoon system and kept children in a structured environment (and off the streets) through the midafternoon; it also allowed for greater student tracking by ability and the creation of individualized learning programs. For a time, the school year in Gary was extended to eleven months, but this was reversed in 1915 because of budgetary constraints. Wirt referred to his system as the “work-study-play” school, but it widely became known as the “platoon school” or simply the Gary plan.34

Historians of education debate Wirt’s motivations. Their assessments are often colored by their view of his plan’s merits. Those who see the Gary plan as an innovative, if ultimately flawed, attempt to realize Dewey’s vision of a school responding to the needs of industrial civilization, as advocated in The School and Society, tend to stress Wirt’s credentials as a student of Dewey’s at the University of Chicago, as well as Dewey’s endorsement of the Gary schools in the Schools of Tomorrow, which he coauthored with his daughter Evelyn. They note the laudatory articles by Dewey’s disciple Randolph Bourne in the 1915 volume of the New Republic, which more than any other publication brought the Gary plan to the attention of the general public. They stress that the great merit of Wirt’s plan was that each school functioned as a “self-sustaining child community” with children engaged in various activities integral to its functioning and upkeep, from record keeping to facilities maintenance, as well as contributing to its intellectual and spiritual life through the humanities, arts, and sciences. As Cremin observed: “The theory was straight from Dewey: whereas formerly the child participated in the industrial arts of the household, he now participated in the industrial activities of the school, with artisans, nurses, gardeners, lunchroom supervisors, and accountants taking the place of father, mother, and older siblings in the older agrarian home.” The school in turn was more fully integrated into the life of the community; indeed it was conceived as its intellectual and artistic center.35

Those who take a dimmer view of Wirt and his motives tend to see the Gary plan primarily as a grand but wrongheaded experiment in the application of scientific management to achieve maximum efficiency and economy. They em-
phasisize that Wirt’s description of the Gary plan in the February 1911 issue of the *American School Board Journal* first and foremost stressed the financial benefits of the plan, while his speech before the Department of Superintendence, in February 1912, focused on the ways in which his system maximized the use of the school plant. Dewey’s intellectual biographer, Robert Westbrook, contends that, in actuality, Wirt’s perspective on the purpose of education differed significantly from that of Dewey: “Wirt valued his little commonwealth of student/workers less as a participatory democracy than as a way of indoctrinating children into the work ethic and as a means of cutting the costs of maintenance of the expansive facilities the platoon system required.” Moreover, according to two students of the Gary plan, Wirt’s justification for industrial education was diametrically opposed to that of his former teacher. Dewey, who supported public education as an agent of democracy, bristled at the prospect of industrial education being used to segregate working-class children and perpetuate the existing class structure. Wirt, by contrast, “wanted an educated populace, but educated to take orders cheerfully and positively; above all, he desired order, voluntary or otherwise.” Broad-based industrial education was useful not because it gave “practical value to theoretical knowledge” but in and of itself, as preparation for more specialized vocational training.

Regardless of Wirt’s personal motivations, it is undeniable that most school systems that copied the Gary plan were sold on its alleged cost savings. This was certainly the case in New York City, where the board of education hired Wirt as a consultant and began experimenting with the platoon school on a small scale in 1915. Experimentation became more extensive in 1916, over the objection of a skeptical superintendent and initial evidence that children in the platoon schools suffered on average from lower achievement scores than their counterparts in conventional schools. Uppermost in the minds of board of education members was finding sufficient seating for the burgeoning numbers of school-age children, a result of torrential levels of immigration prior to the outbreak of World War I. Some, including Superintendent Maxwell, presumed that the importation of the Gary plan was meant to solve the City’s budgetary shortfall.

The introduction of the Gary plan to New York City at the height of an overwhelmingly positive publicity blitz presented Benderly and his disciples with a dilemma. The system came with impeccable progressive credentials, including a stamp of approval from Bourne and Dewey himself. It promised to root out formalism, while ushering in a greater degree of social efficiency. Advocates for scientific management in Jewish education, as Benderly and Dushkin surely were, could not also help but be impressed by the plan’s use of administrative reforms to heighten efficiency and lower per capita costs.

At the same time, however, the Gary plan incorporated a released-time program,
whereby students were permitted to attend off-site religious school classes as part of the school schedule. Jewish educators feared that such a program would inflict irrevocable harm on the afternoon religious schools. If the schools tried to incorporate the released-time hour into their schedules, they would be hampered by insurmountable logistical difficulties and economic constraints. Most Jewish schools served multiple public schools, which presumably would find it impractical to synchronize their release programs. And even within individual public schools, where students were divided into two platoons and tracked by ability, it was unrealistic to expect that students would be released by grade level. Attempts to accommodate multiple age groups dismissed sporadically throughout the day from multiple schools would be economically prohibitive. In addition, the commuting distance between the public schools and the Talmud Torahs was often too long to allow for student attendance in the middle of the day, and chaperoning younger children to and from the public schools would require an added staff expense. In the event that separate religious school classes were designed particularly for the released-time program by the Bureau or neighborhood synagogues and institutions, educators feared that parents might be discouraged from sending their children to the more intensive schools.

Even without the released-time program, the Gary plan threatened to wreak havoc with the afternoon school owing to its extended-day public school schedule. The proposed 4:30 PM dismissal time would force the Talmud Torahs to cut into the family dinner hour or slash their programs. It would also render unworkable the efficiencies that Benderly had introduced to the Bureau schools and cooperating Talmud Torahs. In short, the Gary plan threatened to reverse the Bureau’s hard-fought advances in the direction of achieving an economically viable, graded afternoon school program. Benderly and his staff were convinced of the need to vigorously oppose the Gary plan whatever its educational, economic, and social merits.

Revealingly, when in February 1916 Isaac Berkson visited Gary, Indiana, to observe firsthand the platoon system in action, his report centered almost exclusively on its impact on religious education. Berkson adopted an alarmist tone, highlighting the difficulties that church and synagogue schools had encountered in trying to coordinate with the public schools, and intimating that if such problems were manifest in a relatively small urban district such as Gary, with only four thousand students, they would be even more acute in a vast city such as New York. The Gary plan, Berkson concluded, was “fundamentally dangerous to the Jewish school,” and it would be “sheer stupidity for anyone who is interested in the welfare of the Jewish schools, to hastily accept [it].” The Bureau’s official opposition to the Gary plan came in a report, written by Benderly, to a special meeting of
Kehillah delegates on November 24, 1915: “We Jews can accept on principle any plan which will bring about greater economy in the administration of the public schools,” he stated, “but only on condition that such economy will not rob us of the time necessary for the religious instruction of our children.”

The almost uniform opposition to the Gary plan within the immigrant Jewish community facilitated the Bureau’s position. Anti-Gary sentiment built in the autumn of 1915, when the city controller recommended that the Gary plan be extended to the entire city, even before the completion of a trial run in the Bronx. Parents began to fret that the plan would dilute the quality and intensity of public school education. Many were also vehemently opposed to the released-time plan, concerned that it might promote religious friction between students. These fears were reinforced by Associate Superintendent William Ettinger, who proposed a number of modifications to the Gary plan, including the replacement of released time with a once-a-week early dismissal schedule. If Ettinger was aiming to rile up Jewish parents, he knew exactly which buttons to press. He conjured up the prospect of teachers actively directing children to religious instruction and even delivering children up to the churches. “I think the greatest mistake that can be made would be to establish a point of contact between the school system and the churches,” he stated. He added that the extensive auditorium and playground time worked into the schedule served only to waste students’ time, while the proposed cuts in teaching staff would surely have an adverse effect on educational quality and student achievement. “The child and not the dollar is what we think of in New York,” exclaimed Ettinger, sounding a rallying cry.

A group of concerned Jewish mothers on the Lower East Side organized a mass protest, with the blessing, and perhaps the coordination, of Alderman Max Levine, who had strong ties to Tammany Hall. Levine’s wife, who took an active part in the demonstration, compared Jewish hostility for the Gary plan to “the rumbling issuing from a smoldering volcano which is constantly adding fuel from every Jewish heart in which the spark of Judaism exists.” She took rabbis and other Jewish leaders to task for being slow to engage the issue. Indeed, speaker after speaker denounced the plan at the special November 24 Kehillah meeting, including National Council of Jewish Women leader Sadie American and Magistrate Isadore Levy, who complained: “I do not think the people of the City of New York are crying out for any change in the educational system. Someone is trying to thrust this Gary Plan down our throats.”

The Bureau’s stance, which did not reject the platoon school plan in principle, was more moderate than the sentiment of the immigrant delegates. Benderly suggested to the delegates that as a strategic matter, the Kehillah and its constituent organizations should frame their opposition to the Gary plan primarily in
educational terms, rather than dwelling on the released-time issue. His report was careful to leave the door open to cooperation with Wirt if the concerns of the Jewish community were adequately addressed. Magnes, meanwhile, insisted publicly that the Kehillah and the Bureau were open minded about the concept of platoon schools and found Ettinger’s modifications of Wirt’s scheme encouraging. The resolutions that were ultimately passed by the Kehillah were carefully crafted so as not to go on the record as entirely opposed to the Gary plan. Voicing its opposition to the lengthening of the school day beyond six consecutive hours so as to rescue the afternoon Talmud Torahs, the Kehillah adopted wording that also implicitly rejected the released-time plan: “A six-hour day affords opportunity for parents who desire to do so to give their children religious instruction outside of those hours.” It further welcomed efforts to economize in the schools, so long as efficiency and the quality of education were not compromised, and affirmed that “public education must be non-sectarian and non-religious.”

The nuance in the Kehillah’s position was lost on most observers, including the press. The New York Times headlined its story “The Kehillah Opposed to Gary School Plan,” a source of frustration to Magnes. In fact, Benderly and Magnes worked extensively with Wirt in advance of the Kehillah meeting to ascertain whether a schedule could be devised that would accommodate the needs of the Talmud Torahs. The two men were under pressure to make a good-faith effort to come to an accommodation with Wirt, since the released-time plan enjoyed the support of some of their most generous German Jewish patrons, including Louis Marshall, and old-line rabbis such as H. Pereira Mendes. Neither man opposed religion in public schools, only the introduction of a sectarian interpretation of religion. “Because we cannot teach religion in the public schools without creating sectarian wounds and bruises, sectarian heart-aches, sectarian soul-storms. Then let us do the next best thing,” counseled Mendes, and “accept the Gary plan, which will . . . give parents a chance to be awakened to choose between the tooth and clawism of just the three ordinary R’s and the saner life of Life lived in harmony with Reverence, Righteousness and Responsibility.”

Magnes and Benderly were also sensitive not to alienate Catholic and Protestant religious leaders who supported the Gary plan. The Bureau was invited to participate in, and felt it had no choice but to at least formally cooperate with, an Interdenominational Committee on Weekday Religious Instruction, whose stated purpose was “to secure religious instruction for all public school children by utilizing any time which the school programs permit . . . [and] to see how far weekday instruction at churches can be developed in [New York City], especially through the Gary plan.” Magnes consented to serve as a representative of the Jewish community on the committee, along with Rabbis Mendes and Maurice Harris.
The immigrants and their children, however—those who were directly affected by the plan—were in no mood to observe political niceties. The religious education issue was far from their only concern. They were genuinely afraid of the Gary plan, which they viewed as a roundabout attempt to steer their children into vocational education. Jewish parents saw the public schools as a vehicle for socioeconomic advancement. As one historian explained, “The future was riding on one’s child, not on selected children from your socio-ethnic class. . . . Any attempt to limit educational access or to divert a student onto a vocational track from which no viable future could be perceived, had to be opposed.” Preparations to radically expand the number of platoon schools elevated the Gary plan to a campaign issue in the mayoral race. The incumbent reformist mayor, John Purroy Mitchel, who was running on a Fusion ticket, supported the Gary plan, while his opponents, Democrat Judge John Francis Hylan and Socialist Morris Hillquit, opposed it.44

Three weeks before the election, over one thousand pupils, most of them Jewish, staged a strike at Public School 171, on Madison Avenue near 103rd Street, a school in East Harlem where the Gary plan had recently been introduced. Gathering in front of the building, they chanted anti-Gary slogans and attempted to impede access to other students. The demonstrations turned violent when strikers began pelting the school windows with rocks, shattering about a hundred. Police and truancy officers attempted to disperse the crowd and return the students to their classes. But the demonstrators reassembled and extended their picket to nearby P.S. 72, on Lexington Avenue and 105th Street, where they were joined by hundreds of neighborhood mothers. The women shouted epithets at the policemen and tried to prevent them from arresting the youngsters. Twenty-four-year-old soapbox orator Minnie Kirtz egged on the demonstrators and urged resistance, until she was dragged away flailing by the police and charged with disorderly conduct. An even larger crowd of about five thousand high school students renewed the protest that evening, marching through the streets with banners and placards, some urging the defeat of Mitchel and supporting Hillquit’s candidacy for mayor. In the next ten days, the rioting spread to other Jewish neighborhoods, including Brownsville, Williamsburg, and the Lower East Side, where the Gary plan had been implemented. Police car tires were slashed, and school property was destroyed. Some protests were sufficiently disruptive that schools were forced to cancel their classes.45

The Mitchel campaign saw the hand of Tammany Hall behind the riots, while others blamed the Socialists, and there is probably some truth to the view that the protesters were at least initially stirred up by agitators. The Democratic Party machine played up alleged nefarious connections between the Gary plan and big business, an all too plausible conspiracy theory for many, given that the city of
Gary was an invention of the United States Steel Company and even named for its chairman. One Tammany Hall crony characterized the Gary plan as “a system by which the Rockefellers and their allies hope to educate the children of this and coming generations in the doctrine of contentment—another name for social serfdom.” But it would be a mistake to discount the genuine indignation on the part of the students and their parents. An extended school day interfered with after-school jobs. High school students were further inflamed by the recent introduction of military training into the schools, the result of a new state law. Parents feared for the erosion of church-state separation and the potential for religious friction, segregation, and coercion in the schools. A subset clearly shared the Bureau and the Kehillah’s concerns about the deleterious effect of the Gary plan on the Talmud Torahs. But most importantly, they were motivated by the fear that a door of opportunity was being closed to their children. Jewish immigrant voters helped to resoundingly defeat Mitchel at the polls, and with him they buried the Gary plan. Among the winners were the Talmud Torahs and the Bureau of Jewish Education. For the Benderly boys, the Gary affair demonstrated the limits of their fealty to progressive reform. Their first loyalty was to Jewish survival through the cultivation of a creative and dynamic American-Jewish synthesis.⁴⁶
When the Jewish Teachers Association (JTA) was created in 1914 by Bureau staff members with Benderly’s encouragement, it was meant to be a counterweight to the immigrant-dominated Agudath Ha-Morim Ha-Ivrim, the Hebrew Teachers Union of New York and Vicinity. By 1917 the JTA had about seventy names on its membership roll, mostly graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary Teachers Institute. (Aside from country of origin and educational background, a standout difference between the two groups was the prevalence of women in the Jewish Teachers Association and their virtual absence from the Hebrew Teachers Union.)

Short-lived cooperation between the two organizations in the aftermath of a widely honored Hebrew teachers’ strike in late 1910s resulted in initiatives to set minimum salaries, insist on year-long contracts, and revive the licensing board. Before long, however, these gains became casualties of rivalries and bickering between the immigrant melamdin and the Americanized teachers.

The ideological chasm between the two groups was highlighted when the Jewish Teachers Association adopted an educational platform in 1923. A couple of

Above: Students at the Central Jewish Institute light Hanukkah candles, c. 1925. Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.
years in the making, the impetus for the platform came from Judah Magnes, who suggested that the JTA appoint a committee to study members’ attitudes toward the challenges facing the Jewish schools. The platform emerged from extensive discussions in response to the committee’s findings, and while it somewhat masked what its framers acknowledged were “wide divergences of opinion particularly in religious and in Hebraistic leanings,” it encapsulated the views of “the bulk of the membership” and, therefore, deserves careful study. A major force behind its composition was Samuel Dinin, a member of the third cohort of aspiring Jewish educators to come under Benderly’s influence, roughly in the first half of the 1920s, although old stalwarts such as Albert Schoolman, Leo Honor, and Isaac Berkson who served as officers of the association during the early years of its existence were actively consulted.≥

Significant, in light of the strong Zionist thrust of the document, was the explicit recognition that the teachers were engaged in preparing students to live Jewish lives in the United States. The platform’s first plank was an unequivocal affirmation of the Zionist project and the Yishuv in Palestine. But the sentiment was tempered by the acknowledgment that regardless of the success of the Zionist enterprise, “creative and progressive Jewish communities in the Diaspora” would continue to exist “for a long time.” Therefore, the Jewish schoolchild should be taught to identify with and draw inspiration from the Jewish national home, while simultaneously preparing “to participate fully in the life of America, as a citizen earnestly bent on giving his best to America in terms of his Jewish ideals and in terms of the international Jewish brotherhood.”∂

The delicate balancing act between support for Jewish nationalism and commitment to building a thriving American Jewish community was likewise reflected in the platform’s approach to Hebrew-language study. It was easily the most controversial plank in the eyes of both the Association’s members and their rivals in the Hebrew Teachers Union. What began as a seemingly strong endorsement of Ivrit b’Ivrit was in reality an evasive declaration that opened the door to a variety of methodological approaches. The statement could be read as mild rebuke to Hebrew-language purists who advocated for a language-centered curriculum that rendered as ancillary all other subjects, both in terms of time allocation and by insisting on Hebrew as the sole language of instruction. At the very least, the plank insisted on balancing the goals of Hebrew-language fluency and conceptual understanding. To that end, it singled out for especial consideration conceptual subjects such as history and current events in which high-level discussion would be stymied if students and teachers were forced to converse in elementary Hebrew. But the plank also adopted a conspicuously passive posture on the issue of how Hebrew fluency should be cultivated. As such, it could be interpreted as a conces-
sion that a one-size-fits-all approach to Hebrew-language study privileging the natural method was elitist and educationally unsound.  

None of this was lost on the platform’s critics both within and outside the Jewish Teachers Association. Downtown Talmud Torah principal Israel Konovitz, who also served on the Bureau of Jewish Education’s staff, criticized the platform for its equivocation on Ivrit b’Ivrit. His sentiments were echoed by Joseph Bragin, the principal of the Bureau’s network of Hebrew high schools, who maintained that Jewish culture was a Hebraic culture and must be transmitted in Hebrew if it were to retain its meaning and uniqueness. (Revealingly, Bragin brushed aside parallel arguments in favor of Yiddish literature and language instruction in the Jewish schools, contending that the lack of time precluded such study.) Detractors outside the JTA orbit adopted a harsher tone in their criticism, although their underlying perspective was similar. Among the earliest articles to appear in the Hebrew teachers’ magazine Shevile Ha-Hinukh was a scathing critique of the “practical educators” associated with the Jewish Teachers Association, who denigrated the importance of Hebrew-language instruction and studying classical sources in their original language. The article was written by Boston Hebrew College dean Nissan Touroff, described by one scholar as “a zealot for the revival of Hebrew culture.” It was extremely combative, dividing teachers into “us” and “them,” and challenging the “practical educators” to choose sides. Similarly, a Hadoar article by Israel Frishberg of the Herzliah Hebrew Teachers Institute unabashedly argued for privileging the imperative of Hebrew cultural survival in curriculum development over pedagogical considerations. The “needs” of the students, he stated baldly, were superseded by the need to teach Torah and Hebrew language.

Criticism of the JTA platform from opponents such as Touroff and Frishberg was part of a larger broadside against progressive education that sprung from the pages of Shevile Ha-Hinukh in the mid- to late 1920s. One of the clearest articulations of the antiprogressivist stance came from Pinchas Churgin, principal of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary’s Beth Medrash L’Morim (Teachers Institute), who rejected any effort to reformulate the aims and objectives of Jewish education in light of progressive theories and categories. Calling into question the rationale for an Americanized Jewish education and dismissing concern for the insights of educational psychology, the “natural development and growth of the child,” Churgin argued that the underlying principles of Jewish education were timeless. Attacking what he termed the “new education,” Churgin insisted that the sole aim of Jewish education was social induction through cultural immersion. The study of Torah and other classical texts in their original language was foundational.
Churgin was singularly unimpressed by the recourse to experiential learning and extracurricular activities as a means to Jewish socialization championed by the Benderly group and their fellow travelers. “The Jewish Teachers Association believes that the school does not function which does not aspire to Jewish play as well as to Jewish study,” the progressive association’s platform stated, recognizing “extra-curricular activities as an integral part of the school’s work.” The Hebraist poet Simon Ginzburg adopted an even more extreme position than Churgin, sparing neither the “minimalist” educators affiliated with the Jewish Teachers Association nor defenders of the natural method, including Zevi Scharfstein and Touroff, whose dubiety about child-centered, progressive education did not preclude them from adopting a generally utilitarian posture toward modern educational theory and methods.⁸

Among the most interesting essays to appear in Shevile Ha-Hinukh was a critique by Isaac Berkson that underscored the lack of unanimity about the applicability of progressive educational philosophy to the Jewish school even within the innermost circle of Benderly protégés. In the article, which was also published as a three-part series in the Jewish Institute Quarterly, Berkson offered a thoughtful meditation on John Dewey’s educational philosophy and its implications for Jewish supplementary education. Organizing his analysis around the ideas presented in two series of Dewey’s lectures, The Child and the Curriculum and School and Society, Berkson reminded Jewish educators that Dewey’s child-centered approach to curriculum and school organization was paired with an equally strong conviction that schoolwork should respond to and anticipate the needs of society. He defended Dewey against those who misinterpreted his pedagogical approach as a license for unrestrained individuality, anti-intellectualism, and lack of teacher planning and direction in the classroom. In the interest of safeguarding democracy, Dewey sought to mold the learner into an engaged and active citizen who was both a consumer and a producer of culture.⁹

Berkson asserted that Jewish educators in particular should balance the palpable necessity to make Jewish schools more child centered with the Jewish community’s need for literate and engaged members who were prepared to contribute to institutional vitality through volunteerism, and to cultural propagation through learning and performance. Judaism, he affirmed, was a book-centered civilization. As such, Jewish education had traditionally involved heavy emphasis on book learning, and Berkson agreed with progressive education critics such as Churgin and Frishberg that Jewish education for the elite would need to remain heavily literary. Indeed, Berkson went even further, cautioning educators against a wholesale application of Dewey’s pedagogical approach to Jewish education. “Certain principles which may be central for a society whose continuity and persistence is
assured, may have to be qualified for a society whose main problem is first to attain some stability in organization.” Dewey’s ideas, he argued, were designed to respond to the conditions and needs of American society. As a minority culture still in the process of reinventing itself within an American idiom and establishing itself on a firm basis on American soil, Judaism required an educational strategy that emphasized cultural literacy, beginning with the study of the Torah and other classical texts. “Our educational system, need not be, indeed dare not be, a blind imitation of any other system or model, however excellent in its place. If we should attempt all at once to embody the principles of Child and Curriculum and School and Society in a drastically logical fashion, without taking into consideration the special conditions of our developing Jewish life, we should undoubtedly soon reduce to ruins the little we have at present, and remain with nothing to build on for the future.”

Some critics of progressive education have misinterpreted Berkson’s caution as a blanket repudiation of Dewey’s applicability to Jewish education. In fact, Berkson still saw a central role for progressive educational philosophy in guiding the reconstruction of the Jewish school. Like his mentor, Benderly, he recognized that the Jewish school was increasingly being asked to assume socialization functions that traditionally were within the purview of the home, the street, and the neighborhood. As such, he distinguished himself from critics such as Churgin who belittled classroom Shabbat parties and school holiday celebrations as insubstantial and superfluous diversions. “In Eastern Europe where Jewish influence permeated life, the school could with greater justification confine itself to one aspect, that of the book. In America, the Jewish school dare not so limit itself. It must undertake many tasks which formerly got themselves done of themselves.” The challenge before the Jewish educator in the intensive afternoon school was finding an equilibrium between book learning and experiential learning, between formal and informal education.

An intensive Jewish education program, combining advanced study of Hebrew language and literature with course work designed to promote socialization, “may be taught with profit to probably the brightest 25 per cent” of the student population, Berkson wrote, while “the average boy or girl” would be sated with “popular education” designed to promote participation in Jewish cultural, religious, and institutional life. “If, in the end we succeed in giving ten per cent of the Jewish population the ability to derive enjoyment and edification from a Hebrew book, we shall, of course, be reaching an unusually high standard, one immeasurably beyond the current achievement.” This goal was highly ambitious, given the prevailing enrollment numbers and attrition rates.

But his scheme was not a mere concession to existing conditions; it was a belief
in the futility of teaching an intensive Hebraic curriculum to the majority of pupils. The vast majority of students left Hebrew school having mastered “little more than mechanics of reading or the babbling of a few Hebrew words and phrases.” Berkson noted that the Hebraist teacher typically responded to the schools’ dismal track record by calling for greater determination and effort. Anything less than zealous devotion to the cause of Hebrew literacy was deemed “treason to the holy mission of the Jewish teacher.” Berkson candidly challenged this orthodoxy: “May not the inadequacy reside in the ideal itself so easily assumed to be appropriate and wholly good? May not the true difficulty be that we are attempting, in blind adherence to the past, to foist upon the situation a program fundamentally unsound, adapted neither to the child’s need nor to the demands of Jewish life?”

In less intensive Jewish educational settings, for instance the Sunday schools, Berkson counseled surrendering entirely the unattainable goals of Hebrew-language study and classical-text mastery. Most Sunday schools exacerbated their endemic handicaps by cleaving to a watered-down literary curriculum, refusing to let go of the “bookish ideal” even as they reduced the number of teaching hours to approximate the Protestant norm. “The great tome of Jewish learning has been thinned out into a small booklet, consisting in great part of pages borrowed from the Protestant leaflet.” Instead, he argued, these schools should focus on preparing students to participate in Jewish social, cultural, and religious life. While hardly concealing his contempt for the minimalist education offered in the Sunday schools, Berkson elaborated a vigorous defense of an activity- or project-based program centered around the Jewish calendar and life cycle, Jewish institutions, and communal activities such as philanthropy and support for the Jewish colonization of Palestine. Asserting that “education through direct participation in Jewish institutional life is a valid, central, and sound aim for Jewish education,” he concluded that “it is an idea which has strong pedagogical and sociological justification, as a basis for the development of a system of popular education which will be socially effective and related to life.”

Berkson’s willingness to circumscribe the application of Deweyan pedagogy in the Jewish school was indicative of the struggle that progressive Jewish educators encountered in their efforts to reconcile seemingly conflicting values and priorities. So, too, was Berkson’s embrace of an unabashedly elitist Jewish educational vision, which contravened the spirit of Dewey’s educational philosophy. In Dewey’s view, which Berkson heartily endorsed in his book *Theories of Americanization*, the overriding purpose of education was to prepare students for democratic citizenship. Indeed, Berkson championed the extension of democratic plu-
eralism to Jewish communal life. But he was apparently willing to relegate this goal behind the priority of cultivating a Jewishly literate leadership.

The publication of Berkson’s article in Shevile Ha-Hinukh despite its cautious approach to applying Dewey’s theories to the Jewish school demonstrated that the magazine was not uniformly hostile to progressive education. The journal also opened its pages to unabashed educational progressives such as Gamoran, Golub, Honor, and other Teachers College acolytes who advocated experimentation with cutting-edge methodologies. But the dominant tone was set by skeptics such as Scharfstein and Touroff.

The JTA platform, in contrast, was steeped in progressivist educational philosophy, which was reflected not only in its sections on curriculum but also in its planks devoted to school governance, which should be “democratic” and “cooperative,” and in those dealing with the role and mission of the teacher. Likewise, the Association tarred its detractors with the brush of naïveté and insensibility: The immigrant teachers were hopelessly out of touch with the mentality and needs of the students. Regardless of their high-minded aspirations to stimulate a Hebrew renaissance and save the Jewish people from cultural annihilation, they were doomed to failure unless they reckoned with the environment that shaped the children in their classrooms. “Their methods are either remnants of the yeshivah or are absent entirely. Their curricula contain the dying embers saved from the conflagration which set fire to the European chadorim. The smoke of these embers is stifling the Jewish boys and girls in America. We must replace the embers with fresh burning coals. We must have teachers trained in western methods train the American Jewish children,” argued a Jewish Teacher editorial accompanying the platform’s publication.

While the editors of the Jewish Teacher were quick to heap scorn on the old-style melamed “who smoked in the classroom, muttering his instruction between puffs,” they recognized that he was largely a relic of the past. A more meaningful and worthy battle was to be had with the ultranationalist and Orthodox camps over the bedrock ideological question of the wisdom of accommodation with American society, the possibility of finding a formula that would ensure group survival while acceding to the inevitability of acculturation. Thus, they were eager to define the Jewish Teachers Association against the foil of the Hebrew Teachers Union. In their own ways, both the ultranationalists and the Orthodox counseled separatism, finding refuge in an autonomous subculture. The American-trained educators, however, recognized this eastern European strategy as unsuited to the American milieu and wholly unappealing to the second generation. “We must adjust our curricula and our methods to a changing environment,” the editorial
concluded. “The destiny of Jewish education rests in our hands, and we are deter-
minded not to shirk our responsibility, or to ignore the issues involved.”

A Decade of Progressive Experimentation

When Isaac Berkson wrote his cautionary article about applying progressive edu-
cational methodologies to the Jewish school in 1927, a wave of experimentation was
well under way, much of it spearheaded by intimates who had studied alongside
him at Teachers College. While New York remained a center of creativity, much of
it emanating from the Central Jewish Institute and a diminished Bureau of Jewish
Education, it was soon rivaled by Dushkin’s central agency in Chicago. Dushkin’s
efforts to transform the Board of Jewish Education into a service agency acted as an
impetus for educational experimentation. Board specialists served as resources for
classroom teachers and supervised experiments with new methods. Smaller con-
gregational schools in particular, which often lacked professional leadership, were
eager to capitalize on the agency’s services. The Board of Jewish Education was also
blessed with a talented and enterprising staff, which was a tribute not only to
Dushkin’s hiring skills but also to his facility as a mentor. Although Dushkin lacked
Benderly’s force of personality and refrained from adopting his intimate and inten-
sive paternalistic mentoring style, he nevertheless trained a gifted group of educa-
tors, many of whom went on to assume leadership positions in other communities.

As for the experiments themselves, the record of success was decidedly mixed.
Many were consciously patterned after well-publicized and acclaimed initiatives in
the public and private school realms. In some respects, the impediments to imple-
mentation of progressive-style reforms in the Jewish schools were not entirely dif-
ferent from those in the public schools. When Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker
published their appraisal of best practices in progressive education across the
country, The Child Centered School, the schools that were featured were typi-
cally well financed and highly specialized. The Progressive Education Association,
which was founded in 1919 to promote school reform, began as a fringe organiza-
tion that was dominated by representatives from private experimental schools.
Often, the supplementary nature of the Jewish school, with its limited schedule
and late afternoon or Sunday morning classes, exacerbated the weaknesses of
experimental methods or rendered them unworkable or impractical. In a few
cases, however, thoughtful conceptualization and sound rationale were combined
with adroit implementation, and the results were truly transformative. Even less
enduring approaches stimulated the creation of a stream of new textbooks and
other teaching materials, many published by Emanuel Gamoran at the Union of
American Hebrew Congregations, some of which continued to be utilized well after the original trials had been terminated and forgotten.

The most celebrated pedagogical approach to emanate from the halls of Teachers College in the aftermath of World War I was the “project method,” popularized and unstintingly promoted by William Heard Kilpatrick. In a widely disseminated 1918 essay, Kilpatrick defined the project as a “whole-hearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment.” In his view, “education based on the purposeful act prepares best for life while at the same time it constitutes the present worthy life itself.” The project method was meant to apply Edward Thorndike’s connectionism—the theory that learning was linked to stimulus-response association, and that behavioral responses were more likely to become established patterns if they elicited satisfying results—to Dewey’s philosophy of education. Kilpatrick believed that engagement in activities of genuine interest would maximize both cognitive and affective learning. But if he viewed “the presence of a dominating purpose” and “wholeheartedness” as essential, he likewise believed that the location of the project within a social environment would build the learner’s moral character. “Moral character is primarily an affair of shared social relationships, the disposition to determine one’s conduct and attitudes with reference to the welfare of the group,” he wrote.18

Jewish educators such as Gamoran and Rabbi Barnett Brickner found the project method appealing, in part, because it promised to engage children, liberating them from mind-numbing recitation and rote exercises that often dominated classroom instruction. Kilpatrick also effectively offered a rationale for the types of socialization activities that were increasingly becoming the mainstay of extension education programs like those offered by the Circle for Jewish Children and of extracurricular programming in progressive Jewish schools. Equally important was the potential of the project method in the area of character development. Advances in child psychology discredited the premise that knowledge ensures ethical conduct, which was used to justify the ubiquitous resort to catechisms and moralistic Bible stories in nineteenth-century religious school classrooms. For educators who were loath to relinquish what they perceived to be a fundamental aim of the Jewish school, Kilpatrick provided a remedy by means of a curricular template that applied the educational psychology of Thorndike and William James. Students engaged in purposeful activities could be habituated into moral and ethical behavior.19

Yet another attraction of the project method was its impact on concomitant as well as direct learning. Guided by Thorndike’s behavioral psychology, Kilpatrick believed that it was crucial that the learning process evoke positive emotional
responses in the learner. The supposed relationship between positive association and the routinization of behavior was of particular interest to the Benderly boys in light of their perennial concern about the impact of assimilation and the dissolution of family bonds on Jewish identity formation in the second and third generations. For educators such as Gamoran and Brickner who were working with Reform Jewish youth, the challenge was in some respects even greater because many were growing up in homes where Jewish ritual observance was minimal, and often a distant memory. Given their interest in promoting active Jewish living, they could not ignore the assurance that student engagement in purposeful Jewish activities was far more likely to encourage repeated performance over the long term than conveying the facts about Jewish life through more traditional methods such as lecture or question and answer.\textsuperscript{20}

Gamoran, who worked closely with Kilpatrick at Teachers College, was an early convert to the project method. He advocated its adoption, particularly for the teaching of customs and ceremonies, in his inaugural appearance at the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ annual convention in 1923. A few years later, at the 1926 CAAR gathering, Gamoran organized a symposium on the project method, which included presentations by Brickner, himself, and others. A spirited and lengthy audience discussion followed the presentations.\textsuperscript{21}

Many of the comments shed light on the reasons why the project method was ultimately unable to serve as a transformation agent in the supplementary schools. Chief among these was the discrepancy between the time-intensive nature of project teaching and the limited schedule in the supplementary schools. This was especially true in the Sunday schools but also in the afternoon schools, many of which met for only five to seven hours per week. Anticipating this criticism, Gamoran raised the familiar debate over whether educational objectives should be centered on mastery of skills and attitudes or content. “It is very often advisable to spend more time to ‘cover’ less ground, provided by doing so the right effect is brought out,” he countered. He also noted that projects, by design, often cut across traditional subject areas thereby inviting an overall reassessment of the way in which the Jewish school structured its time.\textsuperscript{22}

While his argument was liable to get a sympathetic hearing from educators, it invited a radical departure in what historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban have called “the grammar of schooling.” As they documented, school organization and structure, including age-based cohorts and the division of the curriculum into traditional “subjects,” is highly resistant to change. Ironically enough, Benderly and his group were at the forefront of efforts to give Jewish schools the look and feel of public schools. This goal was achieved by the 1920s in large measure because parents and community leaders internalized the image of the public school.

\textsuperscript{222} Learning for Living
as an educational ideal. The Jewish school’s imitation of the public school in its structure, aesthetics, and choreography was critical to its legitimacy as an American institution. Stakeholders could hardly now be expected to easily discard this image.\(^{23}\)

Brickner admitted that any attempt to abolish the conventional school subjects in favor of “actual life units, projects in work and play,” was almost surely doomed to failure, while Gamoran insisted that such a wholesale restructuring of the school was unnecessary; the project method could function in a conventional school setting. Yet his repeated contention that “the project method aims to unify the process of education even as life is unified” left little doubt about his ideal.\(^{24}\)

Scheduling challenges were not the only impediment to the introduction of the project method. Others objected that Jewish schools lacked the requisite resources and qualified teachers. The project method depended on a flexible teacher, comfortable with extemporaneity and sufficiently self-assured to relinquish to the students a modicum of directional control. Heads nodded when Rabbi Marius Ranson of Congregation Beth Emeth in Albany declared that “the unskilled teacher with the project method is more at sea than without the use of this device.”\(^{25}\)

Jewish educators were also challenged by the concept that the purposeful activity should emerge from the child’s initiative. To be sure, their misgivings were hardly unique. Kilpatrick’s method encountered considerable opposition in general education circles from detractors of child-centered education. Even some progressive educators questioned whether Kilpatrick had upset the equilibrium that Dewey sought in education between the needs of the child and the interests of society. In Kilpatrick’s defense, he never equated the project method with an abdication of the role of the teacher in guiding the education process. However, he was short on specifics, and elaboration by supporters such as Gamoran and Brickner served only to reinforce an apparent tension between method and objective. If the purposeful activity was to be an outgrowth of the child’s experiences and grounded in the social environment, how was the Jewish school teacher to deal with the pervasive superficiality of Jewish cultural and religious life in pupils’ homes?\(^{26}\)

Unbounded as was the affection for Kilpatrick among the Jewish educators who studied with him at Teachers College, their ideological commitments and cultural loyalties dictated a more conservationist approach to Jewish education as a means to societal induction. Berkson may have had Kilpatrick’s project method in mind when he cautioned against an uncritical application in the Jewish school of progressive methodologies designed explicitly for the American democratic context. Kilpatrick’s abiding disparagement of an educational approach that prized “the acquisition of bookish information,” as opposed to an “activities approach” or
“acting on thinking,” likewise posed a considerable challenge to Jewish educators, including progressives, who viewed text study as a core Jewish practice and the literary curriculum as a guarantor of spiritual continuity and cultural renascence. An American style of Judaism was in its formative stage and would emerge from a synthesis of the forces of Jewish tradition and those of the American zeitgeist. But unless the Jewish forces were bolstered by the Jewish school and by a revitalization of the home and synagogue, Judaism would likely be overwhelmed by the attraction of the American environment.27

Undoubtedly, the area where the project method won the widest acceptance in the formal curriculum was Jewish social studies. In particular, the Keren Ami (Fund for My People) tzedakah (charity)28 project was for many years a fixture of the Jewish school and camp. It was probably first developed in 1925–26 by teachers in Chicago under the guidance of Alexander Dushkin and the bje’s extension education director, Ben Edidin. But within a year or two it was initiated at the Central Jewish Institute in Manhattan and, likewise, appeared in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and other cities. Frequent requests for information prompted Edidin to publish a fifty-page teachers’ manual, in collaboration with Toby Kurtzband, a staff member at the Bureau in Cincinnati. An article based on the manual also appeared in Jewish Education magazine.29

The object of Keren Ami was to utilize the weekly collection of tzedakah, which was common in many schools, as an occasion to train students “for intelligent participation in Jewish community life.” Dushkin also had practical reasons for supporting Keren Ami. He wished to abolish the practice within some schools of applying student contributions toward the operating budget, and hoped to give schools ammunition to use against fund-raisers who often approached schools requesting that they run special drives on behalf of their causes.30

The basic method was straightforward. Funds were collected on a weekly basis and on special occasions, such as holidays, at a predetermined hour. Collection was accompanied by a fifteen-minute presentation and discussion about the work of a particular type of charitable organization. In younger classes, these would be prepared by teachers, while older children could be delegated to each take a turn conducting research and making a presentation. The presentations were often supplemented by occasional assemblies. Printed organizational materials were also distributed.31

Twice or three times a year, a schoolwide student council was convened to make allocation decisions. In order to heighten the significance of the councils in the minds of students, they were often accompanied by pomp and great fanfare. The deliberations, which were conducted by elected class representatives, sometimes with the older students (grade four and up) as spectators, were guided by student
balloting designed to narrow and/or prioritize an initial list of causes and organizations drawn up by teachers or a select student committee. Typically, an effort was made to choose a range of overseas and domestic causes. Allocation patterns inevitably changed over time to reflect communal priorities. For example, as conditions for European Jewry deteriorated in the 1930s, the bulk of Keren Ami funds were shifted from Palestine to relief organizations operating in Germany and eastern Europe.32

Naturally, variations on the basic program developed in different venues, including Jewish culture camps, as well as afternoon and Sunday schools. At Cejwin Camps, cabins took turns on successive Fridays performing skits about various organizations, and an elaborate ritual was created for the public collection of the Keren Ami boxes shortly before the Sabbath. When Mordecai Kaplan observed a Keren Ami delegates’ breakfast meeting during the summer of 1929, he suggested that the activity be enriched by the study of Jewish classical texts relating to tzedakah. His proposal was incorporated into the Keren Ami Bulletins produced by the Central Jewish Institute. A 1940 issue of the Bulletin, for example, presented biblical and midrashic stories about the patriarch Abraham’s hospitality as exemplified by his open tent.33

Advocates of Keren Ami identified numerous virtues. When executed properly it was an effective vehicle for educating students about the workings of the domestic Jewish community as well as Jews abroad. Few other Jewish school activities were as effective in heightening students’ sense of K’lal Yisrael, of mutual Jewish responsibility. By the 1930s, Jewish social studies and American Jewish history were becoming increasingly popular in congregational schools and progressive Talmud Torahs, owing, in part, to the influence of Mordecai Kaplan.34

Many students approached the allocation process seriously. At the Central Jewish Institute, funding priorities even became fodder for club debates. In 1934 the Hadassah club engaged in a spirited debate over whether Keren Ami proceeds should go to Jews in Germany or Palestine. On a pedagogical level, Keren Ami was hailed for encouraging student initiative and modeling experiential learning. Finally, for the administrative progressive, Keren Ami brought “greater regularity and efficiency” to the previously haphazard and often chaotic tzedakah collection process.35

For many, however, Keren Ami was simply the exception that proved the rule about the project method. As progressive Jewish educators became reconciled to the difficulties of utilizing the project method as a basis for formal curriculum elaboration and organization in the supplementary school, they turned their attention to other well-received experiments in the world of secular education. By the early 1920s, the individual method of instruction was garnering considerable
hype. Developed in the early 1910s by Frederic Burk, president of the San Francisco Normal School, the individual method was popularized after World War I by his disciples, most notably Carleton Washburne in Winnetka, Illinois; Willard Beatty in Bronxville, New York; and Helen Parkhurst in Dalton, Massachusetts, and later at the private Dalton School in Manhattan.

The greatest virtues of the method were that it allowed students to work at their own pace while abolishing pedagogically dubious, yet ubiquitous, teacher lectures and student recitations. It also circumvented the problems of social promotion (or, alternately, grade repetition) and student tracking, and seemed particularly well suited for small schools that could not support graded classes. Each student was guided by a plan of clearly delineated goals and activities. Upon mastering the material, the student approached the teacher, who administered an examination. The student might then proceed to the next unit or concentrate on other studies. The elimination of batch processing of students allowed learners to allocate more time to their weaker subjects, while gifted students could indulge in enrichment work. Washburne, Beatty, and Parkhurst complemented the use of the individual method in the primary subjects with class or schoolwide assemblies and group classes in art, music, and physical education. Opportunities for social development were also provided in the form of extracurricular activities, ranging from student government to dramatics and dance.36

For the Jewish educator, the individual method seemed capable of addressing perennial problems ranging from poorly trained teachers to heterogeneous classes. Some even imagined that it would mitigate the limited schooltime schedule. As such, the method was adapted to subjects ranging from Jewish history to Hebrew and was implemented in supplementary schools across the United States in the mid-1920s and 1930s. But despite early optimism about its utility, the method created its own challenges and encountered significant resistance from teachers and students.

At the outset, the individual method attracted influential champions, including Alexander Dushkin and Samson Benderly. In 1926 Dushkin encouraged experimentation with the individual method in the teaching of Hebrew at Chicago Board-affiliated communal and congregational schools. Two members of the Chicago bje’s supervisory staff, Edward Nudelman and Israel Rappaport, prepared curricular materials including the Ha-Mitlamed (The Self-Teacher) series of textbooks, and trained teachers. Adoption was swift; within a year most schools were utilizing the individual method.37

At first, Dushkin and his staff were buoyed by improvements in student test scores. In his 1927 annual report, Dushkin predicted that “this new method may revolutionize the conduct of the Hebrew school.” Teachers could respond to indi-
individual students’ learning needs and styles, he pointed out, while students were encouraged to assume a greater measure of responsibility for their learning. Interest in the method was also fueled by the administrative advantages it conferred. Children who enrolled midsemester could be smoothly integrated into the classroom, while student progress could also be monitored more easily by the front office. In large traditional classrooms, students at the extreme ends of the achievement spectrum tended to attract the most attention. With the individual method, those in the middle would no longer fall through the cracks.38

As news of the Chicago Board’s encouraging experimentation with the individual method spread, interest grew in cities across the country. The first edition of Ha-Mitlamed quickly sold out, and the Board sold the book rights to a New York publishing firm in return for a share of the royalties. Meanwhile, the staff was hard at work on a second series for more advanced students. But there were already warning signs that the method was falling far short of expectations. As the novelty wore off, teachers began reporting that students were finding the work to be monotonous. Classroom management issues increasingly came to the fore. Students who lacked motivation, or were unmoved by the spirit of competition that the individual method sometimes engendered, found it easy to loaf around. It was also becoming clear that a significant minority of students were finding the individual method ill suited to language study. Achievement tests consistently found that about 20 percent of children showed little or no progress in their Hebrew studies. Nudelman wondered whether some of the Chicago BJE’s curricular materials were graded too steeply and otherwise poorly conceived. He also suggested that at least some of the low-achieving students may have found second-language mastery a hopeless proposition regardless of the teaching method. Yet he was forced to admit that a 20 percent failure rate was alarmingly high.39

The adoption of the individual method of Hebrew instruction in cities such as Chicago represented the first significant retreat from the natural method by progressive Jewish educators, signaling their willingness to privilege their commitment to child-centered classrooms over their dedication to the revival of Hebrew as a modern, spoken language. The departure was breathtaking. The cornerstone of the natural method was its insistence that second-language study should resemble as closely as possible primary-language acquisition. But the individual method relied on translation and emphasized vocabulary memorization, silent reading, and mechanical exercises. It likewise left few occasions for direct expression and, in an age when phonograph records were still a novelty, little opportunity for individual students to hear the spoken language. One is left to wonder how Nudelman, Rappaport, Dushkin, and others reconciled their promotion of the individual method with their continued adherence to key tenets of the natural method. Mark
Krug, who led the Chicago Board of Jewish Education after the Second World War, asserted that the individual method of Hebrew instruction was ultimately abandoned in Chicago by 1945 because “it converted the Hebrew schools into ‘goal factories’ . . . de-emphasized the importance of Hebrew as a living language, and made the formation of attitudes and a creative and meaningful relationship between the class and the teacher, and the pupil and his [peer] group impossible.”

If anything, the results of Benderly’s experimentation with the individual method in the New York Bureau’s Marshaliah Hebrew High School were even more discouraging. He grossly misjudged the aptitude and ingenuity of the high school students, who were trained using more traditional pedagogies and found it difficult or impossible to adjust to the new approach. Some lacked the necessary initiative, but most were simply lost without the steady support of their teachers. Compounding the problem was Benderly’s intransigence. Convincing himself that the individual method was akin to that of the traditional yeshiva, “where a student was required to prepare his own shiur, coming to the teacher for help only when he needed it,” Benderly turned a deaf ear to the appeals of his teachers and principals, who were soon “sobered” by their classroom experiences and the “vehement opposition” of the students. The result was a mass exodus of pupils from the Hebrew high schools. His colleagues fretted that an entire generation of prospective Hebrew teachers was being lost. It was only the exigencies of the Depression, which curtailed Benderly’s publication of new textbooks, that forced him to revert to more conventional teaching methods.

While experimentation proceeded in the area of Hebrew language, Chicago BJE staff member Jacob Golub applied the individual method to the study of Jewish history. The impetus came from his work as traveling principal of a number of small congregational Sunday schools, where the usual problems associated with a limited schedule were compounded by the resort to multiaged, heterogeneous classrooms. Golub turned for inspiration to the work of Henry Clinton Morrison, superintendent of the University of Chicago’s Laboratory Schools, who developed the “unit mastery” approach to education. Sometimes termed the laboratory or Morrison method, it distinguished between memorization and true assimilation, or understanding. One salutary aspect of the method was its rejection of the incessant drilling that occurred in many classrooms. While similar in many respects to the Winnetka and Dalton plans, Morrison utilized teacher-centered and discussion-oriented pedagogies at the beginning and end of each unit. Rationale and motivation would thus be clarified at the outset. Like Kilpatrick, Morrison believed that students needed to be engaged in their learning. But he was more flexible about the initial source of the inspiration, allowing that purposing need not be self-generating to be authentic.
Golub’s adaptation of the laboratory method achieved three beneficial goals. It eliminated the use of pedantic, tedious, and antiquated history texts; minimized the use of teacher lecture; and taught history as a chain of causes and effects, as opposed to a series of facts. Under Golub’s supervision, the Board’s staff developed a series of units on the biblical and Second Temple periods with titles such as “How Our Ancestors Gave Religion to the World” and “Why We Celebrate Chanukah.” They were eventually published by the UAHC as a three-volume history series. Following Morrison’s approach, each unit was designed according to a five-step process: exploration, presentation, assimilation (or collection of data), organization, and testing for mastery. Golub was particularly concerned with the initial step, which involved introducing students to the subject, or “problem,” and impressing on them its relevance to contemporary life. He insisted that “in teaching, as in life, it is not sufficient that the problem shall be important, but it must be impressed upon anyone whose problem we would make it.”

Unlike the project method, which found its application in the extracurricular activities realm of the Jewish school, the laboratory method was widely adopted in formal classroom instruction. Its popularity was significantly enhanced by the publication of supporting textbooks. Among the most widely used books was a three-volume history series, published by Gamoran and written by Mordecai Soloff, who worked in the late 1920s alongside Golub in Chicago.

Yet, as it was implemented, the method was often considerably watered down, which had the effect of draining out its most salutary features. As with many progressive-era pedagogies, the application of the laboratory method to the religious schools was hindered by time constraints and a lack of competent teachers. (Golub allocated about eight weeks to each of his units and readily admitted that his Second Temple curriculum would take the average class about a year and a half to complete.) Ironically, it was originally touted as a remedy for both problems, particularly the latter. Demonstrating the naïveté and conceit of the administrative progressive at his worst, Golub argued that the Jewish schools needed to be rendered teacher-proof. “Much as we desire it, we dare not trust to individual teaching genius. We must perfect the machine, a device that will largely of its own accord incline to higher achievement,” he wrote. Golub’s suggestion that the laboratory method could somehow inoculate the school from the detrimental effects of the incompetent teacher revealed an incredibly unsophisticated understanding of the role of the teacher in planning and facilitating experiential learning.

The most damning flaw with the method as it was actually implemented was its reduction of data collection and assimilation—a key step in the laboratory method—to little more than textbook reading. Again, practical realities undoubtedly came into play. Curriculum writers could not assume that most schools
would have access to libraries that were well stocked with books, magazines, and other resources that the students would require to conduct genuine research. In effect, lecture and recitation were merely being substituted with the equally monotonous routine of individual seated work, consisting of textbook reading and answering questions—hardly a model of progressive pedagogy. Both Golub and Soloff recommended a number of more hands-on, constructivist activities at the end of each of their textbook units. But these were typically utilized for enrichment purposes, assigned to stronger students who quickly completed the basic class assignment.

Jewish Home Institute

If the laboratory method as implemented in the Jewish schools represented the triumph of administrative progressivism over Deweyan-style pedagogical progressivism, another experimental curriculum, developed by the New York Bureau, was far more individualized and experiential in design. The Jewish Home Institute was intended to prepare mothers to teach their young children Jewish customs and folkways. Designed by Benderly’s wife, Hemdah Miller, with the assistance of Zena Rabinowitz, and enriched by stories, games, poems, and songs developed by Samuel Grossman and Samuel Goldfarb, the program is noteworthy because it represented an early attempt at preschool education, and the most significant effort by the Benderly group to influence the home prior to World War II.

The preeminence of the home as an educative influence on the child was as little remarked on by the Benderly boys as it was self-evident. Given their concentration on the school, the relative silence on the matter is understandable. But one wonders whether greater attention to this fact might have affected the design, goals, and implementation of their educational programs. To be sure, Benderly and his disciples were advocates of strong parent-teacher associations in Jewish schools, although their motives were admittedly focused more on promoting student retention and obtaining parental buy-in for their educational innovations than on adult or family education. Prior to the Jewish Home Institute, the most profound effort to educate parents was the Central Jewish Institute, which, as the prototypical Jewish education center, was designed to engage the entire family unit in a smorgasbord of educational, cultural, and recreational activities. But, even there, the family was not treated as a unit but was broken up into its constituent parts.

In the Bureau’s early years, a Jewish Homemakers’ Association, tasked with teaching mothers how to complement their children’s Hebrew schoolwork with home-based activities, was led by “Benderly girl” Hajnalka Langer. This program, which Langer characterized as an early attempt at “adult education and educa-
tional projects for the family,” was probably Benderly’s inspiration for the Jewish Home Institute. But it was a small-scale operation that was barely mentioned in Bureau activity reports. The program was likely discontinued in 1918, when Langer left the Bureau to become executive director of the Jewish Center.46

By the mid-1920s, the goals behind the Jewish Homemakers’ Association took on new urgency. Keenly aware of the impact of the virtual cessation of immigration on Jewish communal demographics, Benderly and his disciples began to focus their attention on the second generation. They were alarmed at the level of ignorance about Judaism among Americanized parents and the relative Jewish cultural impoverishment in many of their homes. A new generation was entering Hebrew school as Jewish cultural illiterates with little emotional connection to religious rituals and folkways.47

As we have seen, the Jewish teacher was increasingly acting in loco parentis, inducting children into the practice of Jewish rituals, ceremonies, and customs that were traditionally learned in the home. Even so, the school, which was already handicapped by its supplementary nature, stood little chance of success if there were little or no home reinforcement or, worse, if parents conveyed to their children a blasé or dismissive attitude about Judaism. “A child begins to learn the moment it is born. Its early impressions are the most telling,” Benderly wrote in a pamphlet titled After You—What? A Message to the Jewish Mothers of America. “It is, therefore, self-evident that the home which plays so large a part in the early life of your child should be of the utmost significance in its education.”48

As the quotation suggests, Benderly realized that an effective means of ameliorating this trend was a vigorous early childhood educational program that engaged the mother as educator. Anecdotal evidence suggested to him that the reluctance of parents to socialize their children often stemmed from their own ignorance about Judaism. The Bureau received many letters from mothers who felt ill equipped to provide their young children with Jewish experiences and to guide them in Jewish rituals and ceremonial practices. Encouraged by the relatively high secular education level of most young mothers, Benderly became convinced that the best solution to the problem was a correspondence course. If mothers themselves could be tutored in the fundamentals of Jewish practice, they could effectively (re-)Judaize their homes.49

The very fact that Benderly’s message was addressed explicitly to mothers, as opposed to fathers, was a function of immigrants’ rapid assimilation of Western gender role norms. This point was inadvertently driven home by the Institute’s emblem, a picture of a mother reading with her daughter over the Hebrew phrase (from Deuteronomy 6:7) Veshinantam l’vanekha, literally an injunction directed at fathers to teach their sons. In eastern Europe, the religious education of male
children was deemed the responsibility of the father, a tradition that could be traced back at least as far as the Talmud (Kiddushin 29a).\textsuperscript{50} Since the Victorian Age, however, American mothers were tasked with virtually all aspects of child rearing, including oversight for religious as well as secular education. This posed a particular challenge to American Jewish women, most of whom had received little or no Jewish education themselves, hence the rationale for Benderly’s suggestion to “Learn while you teach,” which became the Jewish Home Institute motto. The mother was designated an “associate teacher” and assured that her work would be guided by the “trained staff” at the Bureau, which was “always ready and eager to help.”\textsuperscript{51}

Her preparation began with a general teachers’ guide that focused on method and pedagogy. Much of the advice was fairly mundane. “You must try to use your voice correctly, as children are quick to imitate,” the guide advised in a typical section devoted to teaching songs. “A nasal, chesty or throaty tone on the part of the teacher will generally be followed by the same kind of incorrect tone on the part of the child.” Similarly, a section on how to tell a story suggested adopting an expressive and natural-sounding style.\textsuperscript{52} Yet, characteristic of the Benderly group’s educational work in the interwar years, the manual also revealed a degree of tension between the goals of promoting children’s self-expression and developing skills and discipline. For example, when
directing children’s craft projects, mothers were advised to “permit as much free play as possible” and adopt a hands off approach: “Better a less perfect result worked out entirely by the child,” it suggested. Yet they were simultaneously instructed to send their children’s handiwork to “headquarters,” where it would be scored for “neatness, skillfulness and general effectiveness.” This tension was by no means unique to Jewish progressive educational curricula. Dewey himself on different occasions advocated the cultivation of a child’s “self control” and unrestricted self-expression. In another example of conflicted aims, the most exemplary student work was awarded prizes. In fact, the associate teachers’ manual suggested that competition would incentivize children to do their best work. Yet, as progressive educators pointed out, this type of extrinsic coercion was liable in the long run to destroy self motivation. It seems that while Hemdah Miller and the Institute staff were attentive to method, there was no attempt to strictly adhere to the orthodoxies of Dewey, Froebel, Maria Montessori, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, or any other early childhood educational theorist.53

Mothers were also supplied with content information in the form of unit guides. A twenty-week course focusing on the Jewish holidays, including Hanukkah, Purim, Tu B’Shevat (Jewish Arbor Day), Passover, and Shavuot, was published in 1927–28. About a month prior to each festival, the associate teacher received a guide devoted specifically to the upcoming holiday. These booklets, each about sixteen pages in length, were practically oriented and concisely presented. For example, fully one-fourth of a guide devoted to Shavuot was filled with recipes and ideas for a Shavuot children’s party. In each of the four weeks leading up to a Jewish festival, the Institute sent home an envelope with an assignment guide including two lessons, stories, craft project instructions, and sheet music. Also included were phonograph records, games, and supplies, such as modeling clay and cutouts. Plans for two subsequent courses, on Jewish heroes and Hebrew, went unrealized, owing to tepid interest and Depression-era budget cuts.54

“Please tell Hemdah Miller for me that she is doing a corkingly fine piece of work,” Dushkin wrote to Benderly in December 1927. Dushkin was using the Institute materials successfully with his daughter Kinereth, who reportedly loved the stories, games, music, and crafts projects. “It is an excellent idea, and I only hope it will prove to be zera kyama di la yifsak [a blessing for children who will not cease from the words of Torah].”55 Other educators, including Ben Rosen, were similarly utilizing the course enthusiastically with their young children. Yet the Institute was a commercial failure. By 1930 the Bureau had sold only eighty subscriptions. Benderly experienced greater luck adapting the materials for use in Sunday schools and, later, Jewish nursery schools. It is likely that a more extensive and expertly managed publicity campaign, perhaps in conjunction with a
partnering women’s organization such as Hadassah or the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, would have yielded far better results. But Benderly had neither the budget nor the patience to follow through.  

By contemporary standards, the quality of the Institute course material was uneven. Despite Samuel Grossman’s effort to adopt a naturalistic writing style, some of the stories were overly didactic and employed vocabulary that was too sophisticated for the average preschooler. Others, however, were as inspired as the best writing of contemporaneous Jewish children’s authors, such as Emily Solis-Cohen and Elma Ehrlich Levinger. Similarly, while some of the songs were eminently forgettable, “The King’s Song” and “The Watchman of the Tower,” among others, became minor classics, still included in popular children’s song collections.
in the postwar era. The breakout hit was undoubtedly Grossman and Goldfarb’s “My Dreydl.” With a catchy tune and simple lyrics (e.g., “I have a little dreydl, I made it out of clay; And, when it’s dry and ready, Then ‘Dreydl’ I shall play”), it remains a standard today.57

The flaws in the materials were pointed out by colleagues when Benderly presented them at a session of the 1930 National Council on Jewish Education annual conference. But the educators were united in their belief that the Jewish Home Institute represented a signal achievement, an assessment that continues to hold up today. Indeed, the Jewish Home Institute was on the cutting edge of a number of trends that came into full flower in the 1930s and 1940s, including the “Jewish Home Beautiful” movement and the development of an Americanized pediatric Judaism.

While the holiday course was the centerpiece of their efforts, Benderly and Miller hoped to forge ongoing relationships with mothers and provide them with a variety of resources to help them make their homes more Jewish. Institute staff members were available to advise mothers about everything from where to purchase Sabbath candlesticks to how to set a Passover seder table. On the inside cover of the Institute’s manuals, a full-page advertisement headlined “Make Your Home Jewish! How Can I Do It?” encouraged mothers to write to the Institute’s Department of Information and Service with their questions and problems. With its directives to mothers to “beautify” their homes with ceremonial Judaica and Jewish art, create Jewish home libraries, and explore the Jewish culinary arts, the Jewish Home Institute anticipated the Jewish Home Beautiful movement that flowered in the 1930s. Whereas an earlier generation of mostly Yiddish-language resources were designed to teach immigrant mothers how to keep an Americanized home and raise Americanized children, the Jewish Home Institute, the Jewish Home Beautiful pageants, and magazines such as the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism’s monthly Outlook, all in English, were designed to reach out to Americanized mothers and shape a Jewish cult of domesticity.58

While much of the American Jewish culture created between the wars strikes the contemporary observer as kitsch, Miller and the Jewish Home Institute staff understood that mothers would not embrace this Americanized Jewish culture if they did not find it fresh, compelling, and upbeat. As historian Jenna Joselit explained in her discussion of the Jewish Home Beautiful movement, a “vision of Jewish life” was fashioned “that was simultaneously participatory, fun, and colorful,” effectively offering “a rebuttal to the charge that Judaism was lackluster and ill equipped to withstand the blandishments of modern American society.” If Grossman and Goldfarb’s “My Dreydl” hardly stood up creatively in comparison with Christmas carol classics such as Franz Gruber’s “Silent Night” and Irving Berlin’s
“White Christmas,” its buoyancy and accessibility quickly elevated it to the status of consummate token Jewish song at public school Christmas pageants.\textsuperscript{59}

Although the Institute itself did not live up to expectations, it paved the way for a veritable explosion of resources devoted to the education and cultural enrichment of young Jewish children. These included an increasing number of Jewish preschool manuals and educational materials as well as holiday-themed children’s books such as Sadie Rose Weilerstein’s \textit{Adventures of K’tonton}, which was first serialized in the early 1930s in the Women’s League magazine \textit{Outlook}.\textsuperscript{60}
CHAPTER 9

The Central Jewish Institute

The School Center as a Model for the Modern Talmud Torah

The educational experimentation at the New York Bureau and its laboratory schools found its fullest expression in the program of the Central Jewish Institute (CJI), which operated in Manhattan’s Yorkville neighborhood between 1916 and 1944. The first modern Jewish educational center in the United States, it soon became a model for other schools and Jewish community centers in the New York area and beyond. At its helm, from 1918 until its demise, was Benderly disciple Albert Schoolman, who ably elaborated on a programmatic blueprint developed by his colleague Isaac Berkson.

CJI opened in the fall of 1916 on 125 East Eighty-fifth Street next door to Kehilath Jeshurun (KJ), the neighborhood’s most prestigious Orthodox synagogue. Supported by some of KJ’s lay leaders, CJI was nevertheless an independent institution, a cause of some friction with its neighbor. And while its orientation, at first, was vaguely modern Orthodox, it defined itself as a transpartisan, community

Above: The Central Jewish Institute’s motto, “Judaism and Americanism,” was frequently celebrated in its national holiday festivals and pageants. Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, and Newton Centre, MA.
institution. CJII’s leaders, who touted it as a new kind of Talmud Torah, defined its educational mission broadly to include the entire family unit. A community supplementary school for children ages seven to fourteen was always its core, but the staff also directed and oversaw a variety of educational, social, and recreational activities for parents and youth as well as children receiving no formal Jewish education.¹

The Institute and its summertime counterpart, the Cejwin Camps (which will be discussed in chapter 10), played a pioneering role in fostering and creating a multifaceted Jewish American subculture that emphasized cultural Zionism, identification with the Jewish people, and the promotion of uncomplicated integration of Jewish and American values. The CJII experiment sheds significant light on the ideals and goals of the Benderly group. It also demonstrates the obstacles that these educators faced and the compromises they were compelled to accept. Even after the CJII was closed, important elements of its mission and vision continued to live on in the work of a host of Jewish educational institutions including schools, camps, and Jewish community centers.

From Yorkville Talmud Torah to Central Jewish Institute

It was Mordecai Kaplan who first floated a very early version of the educational center idea in 1908 or 1909, before he resigned as the English-speaking rabbi of KJ.² Sarah Baum Epstein recalled how Kaplan excoriated a well-meaning synagogue young adult group for holding its Hanukkah pageant in the nearby New York Turn Verein hall, which was festooned with Christmas decorations. “We had a wonderful time. When everything was all over we called on our Rabbi, now Professor Kaplan. I thought when he stood up he was going to congratulate us. Well he got up there. How he thundered and how he bellowed. . . . And he said ‘how dare you have this beautiful Jewish play in such Christmas surroundings?’” For Kaplan, the revival of Judaism depended on the creation of institutions that embodied a “Jewish social atmosphere.” He entreated his congregants to build a social and educational center, at one point even suggesting that they sell the current synagogue property and relocate to a building better suited to serve a multiplicity of functions.³

Kaplan’s ideas apparently made a great impression on Samuel I. Hyman, a successful feather merchant who became the driving force behind the CJII’s construction. An active board member of Kehilath Jeshurun, Hyman had long recognized the need for a Talmud Torah building. For many years, the synagogue conducted Talmud Torah classes in its vestry rooms, which Hyman and others judged to be too cramped and unpleasant. It was Kaplan who influenced Hyman
to expand his vision to encompass not merely a school but a Jewish community center. Upon hearing Kaplan’s criticism of the Hanukkah pageant, Hyman reportedly pledged, “it won’t be long before we have our own home.” In 1910, heartened by the early success of the Bureau’s first model schools, he purchased three adjacent houses that lay between the synagogue and Lexington Avenue.([

When, after considerable delay, the building’s cornerstone was finally laid in May 1915, Kaplan hailed “the inauguration of a new method in Jewish life.” Privately, however, a conflict was brewing over Hyman and his supporters’ desire to make the institution independent of the synagogue. On the one hand, the synagogue’s membership remained an important base of CJ’s financial support and leadership, although it also drew considerably from tradition-minded professionals and successful businessmen with addresses on Central Park West and West End Avenue. At the same time, however, Hyman’s group feared obstruction from KJ’s older and more conservative constituents who looked askance at the concept of housing religious and recreational functions under a single roof. Kaplan initially supported dividing the Institute from the synagogue for precisely the same reason, although he eventually backtracked as his synagogue-center idea crystallized.([

The relationship between Kaplan and Hyman was complex and fraught with tension. While Kaplan recognized and publicly lauded Hyman’s service as a philanthropist and Jewish communal leader, he privately derided Hyman as crass, self-righteous, and unreflective. “A more cock-sure, self-opinionated [man] is seldom to be met with among our people, particularly about matters which he knows least,” Kaplan sneered. Perhaps what bothered Kaplan the most was Hyman’s patronizing attitude and overly familiar posture toward the clergy. At one point, an exasperated Kaplan instructed Hyman not to call him “my boy.”\

Hyman, for his part, apparently resented Kaplan’s decision in 1909 not to renew his contract with Kehilath Jeshurun and never entirely gave up on the idea of luring Kaplan to CJ. The two also clashed over the establishment of the United Synagogue of America, the Conservative congregational organization, in 1913, particularly the decision to grant membership to synagogues with organs and family pews. Kaplan recalled in his diary how Hyman “got up and in a blustering and overbearing manner began to recite his oft reiterated statements about his being an American-born Jew who kept his Shabbos and who believed that there was only one kind of Judaism, namely modern orthodox.” Hyman’s speech was interrupted by Jewish Theological Seminary president Solomon Schechter, who launched into a tirade of his own, stomping his foot and accusing Hyman of impudence. In response to the creation of United Synagogue, Hyman became involved in the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (commonly referred to as the OU). Interestingly, Hyman did not seem to pick up on numerous
hints in Kaplan’s sermons and writings in the 1910s that Kaplan no longer hewed to the modern Orthodox line. 7

Kaplan’s successor at KJ, Rabbi Herbert Goldstein, added further direction to the plans for CJI and served for a short time as its first director. Goldstein was instrumental in introducing youth-oriented clubs and social welfare circles for women, analogous to those that were fashionable in the Reform temples of the time. Kaplan, who detested Goldstein as a charlatan and a poseur, characteristically sniffed at his wholesale borrowing. But Goldstein contributed to the transformation of KJ-CJI into a proto-synagogue center. Upon Goldstein’s resignation to head the Institutional Synagogue, the directorship was once again offered to Kaplan, who briefly considered the possibility of leading both the CJI and the Jewish Center on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. But Kaplan understood that the Institute’s nebulous relationship with KJ promised to be an ongoing headache. By this time it was becoming clear that CJI would not remain officially connected to the synagogue. Kaplan was committed to a synagogue-center, as opposed to a school-center, model. An entirely independent CJI could not evolve into a synagogue center so long it sat adjacent to KJ. Even were CJI to reamalgamate with KJ, Kaplan’s evolving approach to Jewish practice and theology would make it impossible for him to reassume the KJ pulpit. While he was willing to preach occasionally at KJ after Goldstein’s departure, he had not forgotten how stifled he felt during his final years at the congregation. So Kaplan declined the offer and confined his efforts to building a synagogue center on the other side of Central Park. 8

“Judaism and Americanism”

If Kaplan and Goldstein played a role in guiding Hyman and his group toward a more expansive view of the Institute, it was Hyman who initially set its tone. CJI’s mission was embodied by the motto “Judaism and Americanism,” which was emblazoned on its portal. Like other prominent modern Orthodox Jews of his day, Hyman took great pride both in his American identity and his fealty to traditional Jewish law. He never tired of boasting that despite some early trials, his steadfast observance of the Sabbath and other Jewish rituals ultimately proved little barrier to his financial success. Hyman came of age at a time when the pressure on Jews to compromise on Sabbath observance was palpable, as employers routinely turned away applicants who refused to work on Saturday. Thus, success stories such as his carried considerable resonance in modern Orthodox circles. They were promoted as modern morality tales, Jewish Horatio Alger stories. Hyman’s untimely death
shortly after the Institute opened became an occasion to render more overt the connection between his lifestyle and cji’s mission.9

The original slogan of the Institute was actually “Judaism—Patriotism: Better Jews, Better Americans.” cji was dedicated in the midst of World War I, when the Jewish community, like other ethnic groups, self-consciously paraded its patriotism. Hyman’s speech on that occasion was meant to emphasize that the founders’ goal of strengthening New York Jews’ sense of Jewish consciousness would in no way conflict with loyalty to the United States. “This institution is to promote sanity in Judaism. This institution is to teach love of God and love of country; and when I say country I mean the United States of America,” Hyman declared, taking an oblique swipe at the Zionists, including the educators who populated the modern Talmud Torahs and the New York Kehillah’s Bureau of Jewish Education. Paraphrasing Russian Jewish liberal poet Judah Leib Gordon, he concluded: “In private life be Jews, but in public life be Americans.”10

Hyman’s sentiments were echoed and amplified at that same dedication ceremony by philanthropist Jacob Schiff, who was far more direct in his contention that Jewish identity ought to be limited to religious rather than nationalist expressions. “Jews in the City of New York stand at these times at the parting of the ways. Are we to be American Jews or Jews who happen to dwell in America?” Schiff challenged. “I feel that unless we live our Judaism as a religion and nothing else, being Americans in all other respects, our posterity will be subjected to great tragedies.” Schiff concluded by exhorting the audience: “Be good Jews; be good Americans. And it is not being a good American to claim separateness. Anyone who claims that cannot be a loyal American.”11

When cultural Zionist Isaac Berkson became executive director of the Institute in late 1917, he consciously chose to subtly but significantly reshape its mission, softening its motto around the edges by dropping the reference to patriotism and the implication that the nature and content of Jewish expression could be used as a measuring rod for American loyalty. Berkson and his successor, Albert Schoolman, emphasized instead the simpler and conveniently nebulous “Judaism and Americanism” motto on the building’s entryway, which they interpreted as an endorsement of the teaching of Jewish tradition and values through progressive pedagogical methods. They advanced a Jewish American synthesis that combined the content of Judaism with the forms of American society, particularly the social and educational philosophy of John Dewey and the techniques and aesthetic of the New York City public schools.12

Berkson personally sympathized with Mordecai Kaplan’s more radical vision of an American-style Judaism that discarded rituals seemingly out of step with
modern sensibilities, but he wisely decided not to antagonize his largely conservative stakeholders. Nevertheless, he was unapologetic about his cultural Zionist sympathies. At CJ1’s first anniversary celebration, which occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Balfour Declaration, he waxed passionately about the significance of the rebuilding of Palestine for Diaspora Jewry. Borrowing Puritan minister John Winthrop’s description of the Massachusetts Bay colony, Berkson referred to the Yishuv in Palestine as a “City upon a Hill,” implying the same spiritual and ideological connection between America and the Jewish national home in Palestine as Louis Brandeis evoked when he called the settler-pioneers “Jewish Pilgrim Fathers.”

Berkson went so far as to suggest that the Yishuv constituted “the vision without which all of our busy activity [at CJ1] would be meaningless.” Not content to speak in generalities, he gave an extended discourse on the need for Jews to create an “inter-nation with its center in Palestine” bound by “service to Torah” rather than along “territorial lines”—“a new nation with a new aspiration.” Inspired by Wilsonian internationalism, Berkson called on American Jews to dedicate their material and spiritual resources toward the establishment of the Jewish “inter-nation” just as American soldiers were giving their lives for the formation of a League of Nations. Turning finally to the Institute, he asserted that the upbuilding of the Jewish inter-nation depended on Diaspora Jewish education: “What we need is an educational institution; an institution which will determine our relation to our center in Palestine, and which will also determine our relation to the countries in which we live. To build that educational institution is the great task that the Jews have before them; a counterpart to that other task of building our Jewish center in Palestine.”

There is no record of how the audience responded to Berkson’s address, but it must have struck a jarring note in the context of the other speeches delivered that day, none of which made any reference to Zionism. While not exactly a brief for hyphenated identity, Berkson’s call for allegiance to a Jewish inter-nation was, at first glance, a far cry from the narrow conception of identity advocated by Schiff and Hyman. In Berkson’s mind, however, drawing distinctions between a spiritually based internationalism or ethnic consciousness and nationalist territorialism sufficiently inoculated him and other cultural Zionists against Schiff’s charges of separatism and dual loyalties. Such distinctions probably flew over the heads of most of his audience, but they might have been meaningful to Schiff, who by 1917 openly supported the goal of a Jewish cultural and religious center in Palestine.

More in keeping with the spirit of the anniversary celebration was Felix Warburg’s description of the Institute’s work: “It begins to embrace Father Abraham on the one side and Father Abraham Lincoln on the other,” he said, in a line that
drew much applause. “It brings the parents into the life of the children, when, a few years ago, there was a danger that children might go one way and the parents the other.” As it became clear that the primary constituency of the Institute would be working-class immigrants and their children, the Institute’s mission became more overtly dedicated to social work. The slogan “Judaism and Americanism” became shorthand for an additive orientation toward Americanization that stood at variance with the dominant absorptionist and melting-pot philosophies.\(^{16}\)

As early as 1921, the chairman of CJJ’s Talmud Torah committee, Edward Epstein, who claimed responsibility for coming up with the “Judaism and Americanism” motto, could state with no intended irony, “Our Americanism is not for the purpose of parading our patriotism, but to harmonize our Jewish life with other conditions under which we live here in America.” President Jacob Rubin elaborated on the practical contours of the Institute’s Americanization work. The purpose of Jewish education was twofold, he argued, “preservation of the ‘old’ . . . and adjustment to the ‘new.’ ” He continued: “Our education aims to give of Jewish ideals and to take of American ideals. This is what we mean by adjustment, and not the negation or compromise of what is vital and inherent in our traditional Jewish life.”\(^{17}\)

“Judaism and Americanism” as an Americanization strategy became the underlying message in much of the Institute’s work. It was routinely invoked in the Institute’s literature and at major celebrations and institutional milestones. A souvenir book prepared on the occasion of the Institute’s third anniversary struck a careful balance between integration and survival. Under the heading “Talmud Torah is the Basis of a Jewish Community Center,” the pamphleteer wrote: “Talmud Torah is the principle means by which the Jewish people seek to conserve Judaism in the Dispersion. But to conserve Judaism is only one half of their fundamental problem; they need also to adjust themselves to the conditions of the land of their adoption.” Similarly, in a report to the board about an upcoming community celebration of Washington’s Birthday, Rubin explained that the program would seek to acquaint neighborhood patrons with “the ideas of freedom and justice that were embodied in the American constitution and that are fundamental to American democracy,” quickly adding: “As we are wont to do in all our work along the lines of Americanization, an attempt will be made to interpret or to present those ideas from a Jewish point of view, and to note the relation and bearing that they have to American life.”\(^{18}\)

National holiday observances were viewed as particularly fitting occasions to highlight the message. Attendees at a Lincoln’s Birthday pageant were each provided with a program that included a short essay titled “What is Americanism and what does it Demand of Us?” It read in part: “Americanism is something positive,
not negative; it demands a loyalty, not a disloyalty. . . . Not by negation and neglect of our Jewish souls, but by contributing what is finest in us to America and by taking the finest in America unto ourselves can we become loyal to America."\(^{19}\)

Even after the 1924 Johnson Act essentially shut America's doors to eastern and southern European immigrants, "Judaism and Americanism" remained a defining motif of the Institute. Indeed, as late as 1943 CIJ’s promotional literature defined its mission as producing "wholesomely and happily" integrated American Jews. To be sure, CIJ’s approach to integration was not entirely reflexive and uncritical. The 1920 souvenir booklet was careful not to associate CIJ with the coarse America of the city streets but rather with American ideals such as efficiency, progress, and democracy. Likewise, the Judaism that was valorized came forth out of Zion rather than the European ghettos or the Pale of Settlement. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than a photograph depicting three girls in long white dresses in a scene from a CIJ American holiday pageant. The middle one represented the contemporary American Jew. She was flanked on her left side by Lady Liberty holding an American flag and on her right by a Palestinian Jewish pioneer holding the Jewish national flag. A large American flag was draped in the background. In the unlikely case that one failed to grasp the blatant message, a helpful caption declared: "Our League of Jewish Youth effects a harmonious blending of what is profound in our Jewish heritage, with that which is significant in American life."\(^{20}\)

Isaac Berkson and the Philosophy behind the Institute

The philosophical basis for CIJ’s approach was worked out by Berkson during his year at the Institute and elaborated in his doctoral dissertation, *Theories of Americanization: A Critical Study*, which was published by Columbia University Teachers College in 1920. Committed to ethnic group survival, Berkson adamantly rejected the narrow equation of an American type with Anglo-Saxon racial and cultural affiliation. Nor could he accept the melting-pot theory of Americanization, which envisioned America as "God’s Crucible . . . where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!" The first approach, which Berkson recognized as grounded more in emotion than in fact, demanded the complete absorption of southern and eastern European immigrant groups, in the name of Anglo-Saxon superiority, while the second, which respected the unique genius of each ethnic culture and envisioned foreign groups contributing to the creation of composite American type, also ultimately led to ethnic self-annihilation.\(^{21}\)

At the same time, however, he struggled with the racial undertones of philosopher Horace Kallen’s more felicitous cultural pluralism theory, which embraced hyphenated identity. Kallen’s appeal to the essentialist axiom that people can
change their ideas but not their grandfathers, that “[s]elfhood . . . is ancestrally
determined,” struck Berkson as unsupportable. Influenced by evolutionary theory,
Berkson recognized that identity was fluid. Although he appreciated cultural plu-
ralism’s preservation of ethnic group integrity, he believed that Kallen’s conception
of American civilization as “the unified resultant of the separate cultures existing
side by side as distinct entities . . . a federation of nationalities” flew in the face of
prevailing conditions and values. The United States, while ethnically heteroge-
neous, was not analogous to Switzerland or even Canada, where long traditions of
respect for ethnic separatism and autonomy prevailed. American national identity
was not based exclusively on a shared political and economic culture but also on a
shared language, social life, and ethos.22

According to Berkson, ethnic group cohesion was possible in America without
ethnic segregation if group social life was based on an understanding of nationality
that was essentially spiritual and psychical. In this formulation, which he called the
community theory of Americanization, culture, not bloodline, becomes the sine
qua non of ethnicity, thereby solving the conundrum of hyphenated identity. “The
spiritualization of the purpose of nationality is the most important factor in the
adjustment potentiality of groups to one another,” Berkson argued. “It points to a
possibility for the preservation of individuality by other means than segregation,
and reveals a way of retaining loyalty both to the cultural life of the ethnic group
and to the life of the total group in all its aspects.” Berkson’s model, of course, was
Jewish Diaspora culture, which for over a millennium was largely divorced from
territory but was based instead on a common commitment to Torah as “the basis
and the goal of Jewish life.”23

His inspiration was the philosophy of Ahad Ha-Am, as interpreted and applied
to the American situation by Israel Friedlaender. Indeed, Berkson began his dis-
sertation chapter on the community theory with an extended quote from Fried-
laender’s 1907 lecture “The Problem of Judaism in America.” In that essay, Fried-
laender painted a picture of Diaspora Judaism that transcended faith to include
the full range of culture and social life. He insisted that a full-bodied and vital
Judaism could flourish in an environment of relative political freedom. Fried-
laender viewed the United States as the only place where his vision could be fully
realized in his day, owing to the size and unprecedented prosperity of the Jewish
community as well as the prevailing political conditions. Jewish citizenship in the
United States was not the result of emancipation as in Europe, where it was
“purchased at the cost of national suicide,” but “the natural product of American
civilization.” In Friedlaender’s estimation, the great folly of the modern era was
Western Jewry’s willingness to jettison the national aspects of Judaism, which he
equated with secular Jewish culture, as a price for political emancipation.24
Recognizing the potentially overpowering attraction of the dominant culture, Berkson understood that an ethnic group could easily be obliterated unless a constellation of institutions applied countervailing force. Group survival involved the creation of communities anchored by religious, social, and cultural institutions designed as both sanctuaries and engines of ethnic group culture. Berkson shared Friedlaender’s conviction that Judaism’s survival in a free environment would depend on its ability to “again break the narrow frame of a creed and resume its original function as a culture, as the expression of the Jewish spirit and the whole life of the Jews.” He was also, no doubt, heartened and emboldened by Friedlaender’s conviction that vigorous participation in ethnic group life need not interfere with American patriotism and civic participation. Friedlaender approached the challenge head-on by asking whether the Judaism he envisioned was compatible with Americanism. He responded: “The people who thus anxiously inquire betray a poor conception of human psychology. They seem to think that the souls of men are like those cheap musical slot machines, which can play only a single tune. The human soul is characterized not by uniformity but variety. . . . To be sure in blending Judaism with Americanism the edges and corners will have to be leveled on both sides. Compromises are unavoidable. But the happiest of marriages is a series of mutual compromises.” He added that “Judaism and Americanism will not be intersecting but concentric circles. In the great palace of American civilization we shall occupy our own corner, which we will decorate and beautify to the best of our taste and ability, and make it not only a center of attraction for the members of our family, but also an object of admiration for all the dwellers of the palace.”

Berkson privileged the school as “the central agency around which the ethnic group builds its life” because of its central role in socialization. Speaking specifically of the Jewish case, he lionized the Talmud Torah, the communal Jewish school, as an agent of transformation, not merely transmission: “Working hand in hand with the public schools the Talmud Torah provides that education which the ethnic community alone is capable of transmitting. It selects from the inheritance of the group those things which are of abiding worth. The loyalty which the school demands is not to the past for the sake of the past nor to the characteristic customs and ceremonies when these are trivial, but to what is sublime, significant and beautiful in the history of the ethnos.” While Berkson understood that Americanization along the lines he was proposing would naturally involve an organic process, the Jewish school played an important role in modeling and fostering cultural reconstruction as Friedlaender, Mordecai Kaplan, and others envisioned.

Berkson must have realized that his embrace of public education also imposed limitations on the efficacy of the Jewish school. Berkson’s goal was the survival of
Torah—Jewish cultural and spiritual values—as the essence of Jewish group life. Yet his community theory adopted the premise that an individual’s ethnic allegiance was inevitably and necessarily ancillary to identification with the values and culture of the larger society. In his critique of Kallen, Berkson, like his mentor Benderly, rejected Jewish day schools because they interfered with education for democratic citizenship, which was the primary purpose of the public schools. Day schools organized along ethnic or religious lines, as were the Catholic parochial schools, would interfere with “the free play of divergent currents, which the community of interests in America should demand. . . . [W]hen we would segregate our children in the schools on the basis of nationality, we would tend to make one factor in the complex situation determine all other relationships to their fellow American citizens.” Ethnic schools, like a “federation of nationalities” more generally, would promote a type of ethnic sectionalism that was toxic to the perpetuation of a shared American national identity.27

Although Berkson’s opposition to Jewish day schools was ideologically grounded, contemporary critics would do well to remember that he was writing at a time when day school education was a nonstarter for the vast majority of immigrants and their children. Indeed, prior to Berkson’s arrival on the scene, Hyman briefly flirted with building a day school rather than a Talmud Torah and community center. But the idea quickly died from lack of interest as well as philosophical misgivings.28

A more significant criticism of Berkson’s community theory was that it overburdened the Jewish school with unrealistic expectations, especially given the school’s supplementary nature. Even under ideal conditions, the school was at best a secondary locus of socialization. The primary venue was the home. Yet he refrained from placing the onus for cultural transmission primarily on the family. Berkson’s reluctance stemmed from a lack of faith that parents were up to the task. In his view, the parents were invariably woefully ignorant of Jewish culture themselves or unable to overcome a considerable generation gap exacerbated by their perceived foreignness in the eyes of their children.29

Absent the parents, it was up to the school to step into the breach. Here Berkson looked to the public schools for a precedent, since they were also increasingly acting in loco parentis. But he tacitly admitted the severity of the handicap in his expansive view of the Institute as a neighborhood center catering to the entire family rather than simply children and youth. “No plan of education is complete which does not include the parent,” he wrote in his description of CJI. “One of the main principles upon which the Central Jewish Institute bases its work is the belief that only by dealing with the family as a whole can the integrity of Jewish life be preserved.” Not only did CJI aim to bridge the chasm between parents and.
Learning for Living

children by offering the former classes in English and civics; it also scheduled Jewish study circles, lectures, cooking classes, and holiday celebrations designed to promote Jewish cultural literacy.30

If Berkson’s privileging of school over family as the central communal agency for cultural production and diffusion was guided in part by prevailing sociological conditions, his failure to provide a leading role to the synagogue is more complicated if equally glaring. Respect for religious pluralism was enshrined in America’s founding documents, granting it a legitimacy that ethnic pluralism could never hope to achieve. Jewish communities in America were traditionally organized around the synagogue and to some extent social organizations like lodges and benevolent societies rather than the school. Indeed, outside urban immigrant enclaves, the Jewish school was often an appendage of the synagogue. Yet, as with the school, cultural dissemination was core to the purpose and function of the synagogue. Moreover, the synagogue recognizably concerned itself with the entire communal age spectrum. Even as Berkson was fleshing out the Institute’s mission and program as an embodiment of his community theory, across Central Park his teacher Mordecai Kaplan was pioneering the Jewish Center, a synagogue center that was guided by an analogous raison d’être.31

Berkson’s disregard for the synagogue was symptomatic in part of a deep anticlerical bias that he inherited from his master, Samson Benderly, and was reflective of the attitudes of some maskilic educators. It also reflected his commitment to a Deweyan-inspired conception of democracy as a system of social organization designed to promote human freedom, self-determination, and self-actualization. Berkson viewed the synagogue as an agent of social and religious conformity rather than a creative force in Jewish life. But the reason that Berkson directly cited for his rejection of the synagogue as the central communal agency in cultural transmission was its narrow purpose, its “limited sphere of influence.” Judaism, he argued, encompassed a broad view of spiritual life that included far more than religion and worship: “The culture of the Jewish people, including as it does a language, a literature, and a profoundly spiritual social outlook, cannot be confined within the walls of the synagogue, where the erstwhile living thought is embalmed in liturgy, aspiration petrified into prayer, and social life fossilized in ceremonies.” Here, once again, Berkson was following the lead of Friedlaender, who envisaged a declining role for the traditional synagogue in a coming Jewish renascence. Friedlaender anticipated that a healthy modern Diaspora Judaism would “probably tend to emphasize more strongly its cultural aspect,” including literature, music, and the visual arts.32

Berkson gave a nod to Kaplan’s efforts to create a synagogue center on the Upper West Side, commenting approvingly on the “recent tendency to define
religion in broad terms, making it practically synonymous with the spiritual and social aspiration.” But he was skeptical that Kaplan could truly realize his goals. The history of cji’s complicated and sometimes thorny relationship with kj gave Berkson a thorough appreciation for how entrenched social hierarchies in synagogues could gum up the levers of political power, thereby forestalling even aesthetic and structural reform initiatives. Berkson did little in his dissertation to conceal his patronizing attitude toward organized Judaism. However, he was surely careful to conceal these feelings from his patrons at the Institute, who were predominately religiously Orthodox and socially conservative.33

Yet, if Berkson found the synagogue ill equipped to transmit the breadth of Jewish cultural life and expression that he and Friedlaender envisioned, he could not escape the reality that even his idealized school center would be restricted in its capacity as an agent of cultural creation and transmission. Thus, Ahad Ha-Am’s vision of an autonomous Jewish cultural center in Palestine nourishing the Jewish communities of the Diaspora loomed large in Berkson’s thought. He freely admitted that his community theory could be viable only if Ahad Ha-Am’s vision were realized. Given the centrality of cultural Zionism to Berkson’s theory of ethnic group survival in the United States, his seemingly discordant speech at the Institute’s first anniversary celebration becomes more comprehensible. In Berkson’s mind, the Yishuv was a partner and inspiration for cji, without which its mission would be doomed to failure.34

CJI and KJ: The Challenges of Translating Theory into Practice

Berkson stayed at the Institute only about nine months. But in that time he developed a detailed blueprint for the cji that was in line with the Bureau’s approach. cji president Jacob Rubin regarded the document as a five-year strategic plan and later used it as a measuring rod by which to judge his tenure. In line with Hyman’s thinking, Berkson defined the task of the cji as twofold: It should become both “the community house of the neighborhood” and a center of Jewish communal life in New York City. In order to achieve the former objective, Berkson asserted that the institution must become “a centre for Jewish study and Jewish learning” as well as a recreational center. But if conducting educational activities and providing recreational facilities were the most concrete, service-related manifestations of cji’s mission, Berkson was also concerned with how the Institute projected itself to the neighborhood. One can detect the influence of Ahad Ha-Am in his assertion that “[h]owever excellent the social and recreational work may be, the Institute shall have completely failed of its purpose if it does not ultimately succeed in radiating Jewishness throughout the neighborhood.” Berkson was mindful
that every institution had its own character, and he was intent that CJI distinguish itself from the vaguely Jewish settlement houses and Ys. Like other students of John Dewey, Berkson respected and derived inspiration from the work of the settlement movement. But he objected to what he and others perceived as its assimilationist agenda. “The very atmosphere of the Institute must be thoroughly Jewish. The decorations and pictures must be Jewish. The personalities, whether in the specifically Jewish work, or in activities of a more general social and recreational nature must all be imbued with the central spirit, that of fostering Jewish life,” he wrote.35

He was equally concerned lest the Institute adopt paternalistic airs. “The people in the neighborhood should be urged to consider the Institute a part of their own life, and not an extraneous organization that has come to ‘uplift’ them,” he wrote. Yet, for all his well-meaning communal rhetoric, Berkson was a social worker. He firmly believed that “[n]o leader of a social center should carry on their activities without a conscious and definite aim in their work with the human material.” This clinical terminology was accompanied by a didacticism that dripped with conventional middle-class morality. For example, Berkson presented the Institute’s recreational facilities, club work, festival celebrations, and shows as an answer to the coarse and licentious influences of city life. “What shall a young man do after the day’s work? Shall he spend his leisure in indulgences which degenerate physique and destroy character, or is it possible to furnish him with equally interesting but more wholesome recreation?” Berkson was responding to those critics, especially at next-door Kehilath Jeshurun, who seized on CJI’s gymnasium and locker rooms as sufficient cause to declare the Talmud Torah trief (nonkosher). As it turned out, the only complaint that patrons had about the Institute’s recreational facilities was that they were too modest. Its gymnasium was small, and it lacked a running track and a pool. These defects thwarted CJI’s attempt to position itself as a meaningful alternative to the Ninety-second Street Y.36

Berkson’s successor, A. P. Schoolman, was also repeatedly constrained on the board level from fully realizing the vision of a community institution serving the entire family unit. To be sure, programming for youth and adults was incorporated into the Institute’s calendar of activities from the outset. A typical program of activities dated December 1917, at around the time of Schoolman’s arrival, lists a variety of classes, study circles, club activities, organizational meetings, recreational opportunities, holiday celebrations, and religious services aimed at youth and adults. Many of these events, for instance a communitywide Hanukkah pageant, were explicitly Jewish in content and orientation, while others, including a “Menorah Smoker,” were socially or recreationally oriented but under Jewish
auspices. Yet some board members, particularly those associated with Kehilath Jeshurun, doggedly insisted that these activities were mere window dressing to the primary purpose of the Institute, to serve as a neighborhood Talmud Torah.\(^{37}\)

The conflict could be traced back to the origins of CJI and its murky relationship with KJ. By the 1920s two seemingly conflicting narratives took hold about CJI’s origins and purpose. The first viewed the Institute as an answer to KJ’s inadequate school accommodations, while the second conceived of CJI as completely independent of KJ and designed to serve a far broader constituency. The reality, as we have seen, lay somewhere in between.\(^{38}\)

CJI ultimately became independent of KJ, yet much of the initial funding for the Institute was raised prior to the makeover, and not all the benefactors welcomed the new mission or the breakup. Chief among this group was real estate mogul and philanthropist Harry Fischel, a longtime officer at KJ who took a special interest in Jewish education. In 1927 he made a passionate plea for renewed emphasis on the Talmud Torah and reunification with KJ. Fischel’s primary loyalty was to the synagogue, which was struggling with a dwindling membership. Fischel feared that the synagogue would not be able to compete for young members without a Talmud Torah and other accoutrements of a synagogue center along the lines of the Jewish Center on the Upper West Side. He was, therefore, convinced that amalgamation would strengthen the synagogue.\(^{39}\)

With the help of Rabbi Moses Z. Margolies, KJ’s distinguished Yiddish-speaking senior rabbi, Fischel succeeded, in part, in thawing relations between CJI and KJ. But the merger proposal made little headway with the skeptical leadership of the Institute. Their perception was that the cultural differences between the two institutions were simply too wide to be bridged. The old-timers at KJ were among the Institute’s most vociferous detractors, criticizing everything from the coed classes and modernized curriculum to the gymnasium and locker rooms.\(^{40}\) Rubin ruefully recalled how shortly after the blueprint for the CJI building was drawn up, some KJ members began to derisively refer to CJI as a “shvitz-bud (sweat bath).” Rubin was well aware of the history between the two institutions. He served as president of KJ when Hyman first opened CJI, and futilely tried to effect cooperation between the institutions, as both were struggling financially. He soon grew disgusted by the antagonism of some influential synagogue members toward the Institute. A few years later, when he assumed the reins of CJI upon Hyman’s death, he steered clear of any connection with KJ. The vice president of CJI, Judge Isaac Cohen, spoke on behalf of the opponents of reunification: “If our institution was not kosher enough until now it is not going to be made so now. . . . I say we have a clearly well defined, established viewpoint of Jewish life in America, and it
disagrees with certain well-defined Jewish viewpoints that they have. . . . I will not permit narrow-mindedness and bigotry to be instilled. I have a viewpoint contrary to their views, and I do not intend to surrender.”

CJI’s insistence on eschewing a movement affiliation was a badge of honor in the eyes of its professional staff and some of its lay leaders. But, as a result, it operated under a cloud of suspicion about its religious bona fides, with the rumor mill seemingly working overtime at “the synagogue next door.” KJ opponents of CJI tended to view the Institute as insufficiently Orthodox and were quick to seize on any piece of evidence to make their point. More often than not, they peddled half-truths and misunderstandings. For example, a Saturday sandwich delivery to the Institute, which scandalized the dissenters, was actually ordered by Hunter College, which rented classroom space. Critics also had difficulty reconciling themselves to CJI’s newfangled educational methods. But these complaints were often subsumed in a more general broadside that questioned the Institute’s Jewish authenticity. In the minds of many KJ opponents, the line between tradition and Jewish law was hazy. The coeducational classes, the locker rooms, and the sandwich delivery provoked an equal sense of outrage, and all pointed to the Institute’s inherently trifl status. Some CJI board members could barely contain their anger in the face of seemingly baseless accusations and were quick to charge hypocrisy, since many KJ members and their children were notoriously lax in their own level of personal observance.

Even as the boundaries between the Orthodox and Conservative movements remained somewhat blurred as late as the early 1930s, Schoolman and some board members’ ties to Mordecai Kaplan and the Jewish Theological Seminary reinforced a belief that the Institute should remain transpartisan. However, the greatest fault line between the synagogue and the school center was socioeconomic rather than religious. Any hope of operating a truly community institution was complicated by the stark class distinctions that existed among Yorkville’s Jews. CJI was built at the corner of Lexington Avenue, the unofficial boundary between the middle- and working-class sections of the neighborhood. Berkson and CJI’s founders initially assumed that the school was ideally situated to draw from both elements of the population: the Orthodox bourgeois Russian and German Jewish manufacturers, professionals, and merchants who lived west of Lexington Avenue and attended KJ and Orach Chayim congregations, and the shopkeepers, artisans, and factory workers who lived between Lexington Avenue and the East River. But despite the best intentions of the founders, it quickly emerged that their compatriots at KJ and Orach Chayim were loath to send their well-heeled children to a community-funded institution. Even if one dressed the poor children up “in the finest kind of clothes,” quipped one board member, the affluent would persist in
their resistance to sending their children to CJJ. After numerous recruitment drives among the well-to-do had proved largely fruitless, Rubin conceded that “[w]e have a different type of Jew here, not our type.” In 1926 Schoolman acknowledged that fewer than six children in the Talmud Torah came from KJ member families. “Every congregation has its own school particularly fitted for that class of people,” Rubin concluded.43

The poorer classes were often equally alienated from the rich, whom they found intimidating and patronizing. Former CJJ student Isolde Sommer Blum’s family began attending KJ around the High Holidays in 1938, shortly upon emigrating from Upper Bavaria to Manhattan, where they lived in a dilapidated walk-up on Eighty-fourth Street, between First and Second avenues. She recalled her intense feelings of discomfort as a child in the synagogue. “It was more of a sense of being a foreigner and outsider, unacceptable and unaccepted—raggedy—than I have ever felt in my life. I had never seen such a fancy shul and fancy people.” Blum claims that in those days her world was starkly divided between “the haves and the have-nots”; the affluent KJ children rarely socialized with Isolde and her friends. Frances Abramson, another CJJ alumna who attended KJ, recalled that going to shul made her very self-conscious of her family’s limited means, since most of her clothes were hand-me-downs from well-meaning KJ families. Everyone knew their relative status based on the order in which they received the hand-me-downs. Abramson received her clothes thirdhand, while Blum, whose family was even needier, received hers fourthhand. Indeed, most impoverished families avoided KJ altogether, preferring to attend separate religious services at CJJ or elsewhere.44

Board members were frustrated if not entirely surprised by CJJ’s inability to attract the well-to-do. A few suggested that the Talmud Torah remake itself as a middle-class institution by charging a higher tuition fee. “You could do more for the perpetuation of the Jewish race if you will also educate a child of a rich Jew,” counseled Manhattan Borough president Julius Miller. “You need them more than the poor, although they should not be discriminated against.” For the most part, however, board members resigned themselves to catering primarily to the poor, though they were quick to seize on almost any opportunity to attract a more affluent “balebatishe” element. Where most drew the line was at creating a separate “school within a school” for the KJ and Orach Chayim kids. That possibility was broached in 1928 as part of the larger discussion about increased cooperation and possible amalgamation between CJJ and KJ. A longtime board member, who was sympathetic to a merger, floated the possibility of utilizing the identical administrative and teaching staffs to operate two distinct schools in the CJJ building. But others quickly shot down the idea. “What would you do, make a separate entrance?” quipped one board member. The Institute’s treasurer, Jacob Wener, was...
more direct: “This is a democratic institution. We don’t want to have two classes. We want to consider every Jewish child alike, rich or poor. We don’t want any distinction. I think it will put this institution in a very poor light.” Most board members believed that a merger would scare away CJI’s poor constituents.45

CJI’s Curriculum Controversy

Given the differences in social class and outlook between the various CJI stakeholders—parents, professional staff, neighborhood rabbis, and members of the board of directors—tensions were bound to develop over institutional priorities and perceived community needs. The most serious clash in the early years of the Institute was over the curriculum of the Talmud Torah, a matter of extreme sensitivity because it cut to the heart of the Institute’s mission.

Under the Institute’s first director, Herbert Goldstein, the Talmud Torah had been little more than a glorified khayder. The teachers were mostly foreign born and trained. Boys and girls learned separately, with the girls attending for fewer hours and receiving a less rigorous curriculum. The emphasis of the curriculum was on liturgical fluency and Bible reading using the Hebrew-English translation method. When Berkson was hired, he put this curriculum aside because it embodied neither the Bureau’s cultural Zionist ideological orientation nor its progressive pedagogical approach. In its stead, he developed a graded six-year curriculum that followed the example of the Bureau schools, emphasizing Modern Hebrew, taught using Ivrit b’Ivrit, and formalizing the teaching of subjects such as current events, Jewish history, customs and ceremonies, and music, which were designed to induct the child into the American Jewish community. The outline of this curriculum was included in his plan, and the course of study itself was published in his doctoral dissertation. He also set about replacing the old staff with younger teachers, many of whom were trained at T1. As he wrote in his plan, echoing Benderly, “Our children must be taught by teachers who understand the American child, who can command their respect, and give them inspiration.”46

Schoolman continued to work toward bringing the school in line with Berkson’s curriculum. He hired a fellow Benderly protégé and Kaplan disciple, Jacob Golub, as the school’s principal. He also did away with separate boys’ and girls’ classes, making the Talmud Torah coeducational. What Berkson and Schoolman may not have anticipated was the extent of parental resistance to the changes. During the 1920–21 school year, parental complaints reached the point where the Parents Association launched an investigation into the school’s curriculum. CJI’s board of directors decided to send representatives of its Talmud Torah Committee to meet with the Parents Association and to conduct a study of its own.47
Three months later, the committee submitted its report. It found a fractured parent body roughly divided into three parties. The first just wanted their (male) children to be prepared for their bar mitzvahs and advocated a minimalist approach centered on proficiency in Hebrew liturgical reading. The report barely concealed its contempt for this approach, which it characterized as a “barukh she’pitarni” education, a reference to a bar mitzvah prayer traditionally recited by the father absolving him of responsibility for his son’s future violations of Jewish law. The second preferred to give their boys a European khayder-style education, with daily study long into the evening hours and with the ultimate goal being mastery of Talmudic literature. The report evinced more sympathy for what it characterized as a “maximalist” approach but ultimately rejected it as out of sync with the American environment. The final party, reflecting the view of the Institute’s professional staff and many of its lay leaders, argued for a curriculum designed to produce graduates who saw no contradiction between embracing America and living traditional Jewish lives. The word “harmonize” was used in advocating for what one would call today an integrated personality. Invoking the Institute’s motto, the report presented harmonization as CJJ’s “underlying purpose.”

The report asserted that where the third approach fundamentally deviated from the second was in its insistence that the modern Talmud Torah perform the dual functions of knowledge dissemination and socialization. “The Jewish school,” it stated, “must build the child’s personality in addition to giving him Jewish knowledge.” One could no longer assume that children would learn how to “be Jewish” and “do Jewish” in their homes. Central to this new approach was the employment of American-trained teachers, preferably born or raised in the United States, who could relate to the students and the use of “modern” teaching methods.

Reflecting the views of the professional staff as well as most of the active lay leaders, the report heartily endorsed CJJ’s continued fealty to the third approach, regardless of the criticism it engendered, pointing out that the Institute was winning the plaudits of educational and community leaders and was becoming a model for other Jewish schools and community centers around the country. Yet the curriculum issue remained very much alive through the mid-1920s, in part because the head of the Parents Association was an avowed critic but also because CJJ’s rabbinic advisers were lukewarm at best in their support. The former problem not only created considerable friction between the Parents Association and the staff but also exposed the potential conflict between Berkson’s vision of an empowered and involved parent body and his particularistic recipe for the reconstruction of Jewish life.

If the parents were a concern, then the noncommittal attitude of the neighborhood rabbis, who served ex officio on CJJ’s board, was equally problematic. Some
exasperated board members looked to the imprimatur of the board’s rabbis to verify the Institute’s kashruth, while others, including the board’s president, Jacob Rubin, were rankled by the suggestion that CIJ needed any rabbinical endorsement. “If you want a real success in CIJ education,” Rubin remarked caustically at one meeting, “leave the Rabbis alone. No sooner we drop the Rabbis we make progress all the time.”

The rabbis, meanwhile, were miffed that Berkson set aside the traditional curriculum they had worked out with Goldstein in 1916 in favor of one that derived its inspiration from the ideas of Benderly, Dewey, Ahad Ha-Am, and Kaplan. The most that they could say in the new curriculum’s favor was that given prevailing environmental conditions, it was expedient. According to Rabbi Moses Hyamson, of Congregation Orach Chayim: “If the idea is to take account of environment, and bearing in mind the limited hours, and the fact that they come after school when they are tired, you have to attract them with songs in Hebrew and English, and with what I call a lot of nonsense. From that point of view here is the ideal education.” The assertion was not exactly a ringing endorsement.

Board members whose support for CIJ was motivated primarily by a philanthropic impulse were more apt to counsel compromise with the parents and the rabbis. The Institute’s minutes suggest that stalwart supporters of the progressive, cultural Zionist curriculum mostly held the line against the curriculum’s doubters and detractors.

But a comparison of Berkson’s 1918 curriculum with one prepared by Schoolman and Golub in 1922 reveals that the professional staff was responsive to parental complaints and neighborhood realities. Sometime after Schoolman’s arrival, the Institute began offering a four- or even two-year school sequence in addition to its core six-year program. This utilitarian approach probably stemmed from Schoolman and Golub’s reluctance to turn any child away coupled with the recognition that new pupils without Hebrew-language facility could not easily be mainstreamed into the upper grade levels of the six-year sequence. But it was a significant concession to the opponents of Ivrit b’Ivrit as well as neighborhood parents who desired a more minimal or less rigorous Jewish education for their children. In the two-year sequence Modern Hebrew was dropped entirely from the curriculum. Liturgical prayer reading was combined with Bible study taught almost entirely in English as well as a smattering of history, holidays, and current events. The four-year sequence, which retained a Hebraist curriculum, demanded a different but similarly troubling sort of compromise for a serious educator. For the most part the content standards remained identical to those of the six-year course. The expectation was simply that the course would be taught at a more rapid pace.

Even within the six-year course, compromises were made. Parental concerns
Modern Talmud Torahs such as the Central Jewish Institute used children's services to teach prayers and synagogue choreography. Girls and boys sat separately but without a partition. Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

around the teaching of prayers accounted for much of their resistance to the Bureau-style curriculum. As Berkson explained, “In America, where parents do not expect too much from their children in the matter of Jewish education, the ability to read Hebrew mechanically is often completely identified with Jewish education.” Hebraist educators regarded rote instruction in prayer reading to be a waste of time. Ideally, they argued, liturgical study should be postponed until children were advanced enough in their Hebrew-language studies to vocalize the prayers on their own. They also feared that instruction in mechanical prayer reading would feed into parents’ tendency to distinguish between the “religious” and “nationalist” elements of the curriculum.∑∂

Faced with a rebellion among the parent body, Benderly’s disciples at CJI were forced to steer a middle course. Prayer reading was granted a far more prominent place in Schoolman’s 1922 curriculum than it had in Berkson’s 1918 version. Most of the extra time devoted to the prayer book came at the expense of Modern Hebrew and Bible study, both taught Ivrit b’Ivrit. While Ivrit b’Ivrit was by no means abandoned by CJI, Schoolman showed a fair degree of flexibility in addressing parental concerns. Whereas in Berkson’s curriculum Bible and Modern
Hebrew commanded between 50 and 70 percent of the teaching hours in the upper grades, Schoolman’s typically devoted between 40 and 50 percent of the curriculum to Hebrew and Bible study. It is significant to note the differences in the way each articulated his goals in relation to Hebrew study. Berkson extolled the “natural method” on pedagogical grounds, as superior to the translation method of foreign-language study. But he freely admitted that the adoption of Ivrit b’Ivrit was motivated by a commitment to facilitating “national regeneration.” Writing only months after the British government committed itself to the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine, Berkson argued that the study of Modern Hebrew was of “supreme significance for the present and future of Jewish life.” He asserted that “[a]ll Israel must have its common language,” adding that “the complete forgetting of a distinctive tongue will undoubtedly mean complete obliteration of the Jewish group.” Schoolman, while no less enamored with Palestine and no less committed to the unity of Israel, appreciably pared down his expectations of CJII graduates, even those who completed the six-year program. Very few would become fluent Hebrew speakers, capable of conversing with their cousins in Palestine; for most the study of Hebrew would foster an “emotional attachment” to the Jewish people. Berkson listed Hebrew-language acquisition as the first of four curricular aims, while Schoolman omitted this objective, insisting instead that his curriculum was “not formulated primarily for producing erudite Hebraists or Talmudists.”

Fortunately for the CJII leadership, by the late 1920s the debate over the curriculum appears to have been settled. Entering its second decade, CJII’s lay and professional leaders were becoming more comfortable with its institutional identity. Moreover, the growing number of second-generation parents no longer expected the Talmud Torah to replicate an eastern European khayder-style education. While only a subset were drawn in by the Talmud Torah’s ideological commitments, most were won over by CJII’s ability to infuse Jewish teaching and Jewish living with joy. Nevertheless, the CJII experiment was a harbinger of things to come. Over the next decades, the Benderly group’s educational agenda would continue to be reshaped in response to a constellation of challenges revolving around class, ideology, demography, and the solidification of denominationalism.

**A Successful Educational Experiment**

Even as Schoolman and his colleagues were forced to contend with fickle parents and curmudgeonly neighbors, CJII was showered with praise from the Jewish community’s movers and shakers. Prior to the onset of the Depression, the New York Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies held up CJII as a
model educational organization and acted favorably on its allocation requests despite its dwindling Talmud Torah register. Louis Marshall celebrated CJI as “the only oasis in the desert of Jewish education.”

In retrospect, along with its Jewishly affirmative style of Americanization, the Institute is best remembered for its progressive educational approach. The Institute perfected the modernization work begun in the Bureau's model schools. Indeed, Berkson and Schoolman both earned their chops as principals of Bureau schools prior to their successive appointments as executive director of CJI. One historian of Jewish education singled out CJI as “probably the one school that came closest to using [John] Dewey's ideas in practice.” Berkson and Schoolman viewed CJI as a laboratory where they could test the theories and methods they studied at Teachers College. They succeeded in affecting a “managerial revolution” at CJI that rippled through the rest of the Jewish educational world. The Institute set a standard with its elegant, hygienic, open, and well-ventilated facility; efficient administrative procedures; reduced schedule; American-trained teaching staff; and active parents’ organization. In 1918, CJI was only one of a handful of Talmud Torahs across the United States with both outdoor and indoor recreational facilities, including a gymnasium and rooftop play area. These innovations did not amount to a philosophical reenvisioning of Jewish education. But they were, nevertheless, influenced by the general progressive critique of American education leveled by Dewey and his colleagues. Here was “an industrial, technological kind of revolution affecting the life of the school just as applied science affects the life of society as a whole.”

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Dewey and his pedagogically progressive interpreters influenced the formal Talmud Torah program. Many of the documents that would shed light on this question—such as teacher lesson plans, observation reports, and student work—have long ago been destroyed or are gathering dust in some unknown attic or basement. The few course materials that are known to have survived, including general curriculum outlines, a detailed history teacher’s guide, a Jewish ceremonies curriculum, and assorted exams, are suggestive but hardly conclusive. There are also some impressionistic descriptions of classroom visits in the Institute’s board meeting minutes. However, the observers were not trained educators and were focused primarily on student competency rather than teacher pedagogy and classroom management.

One school of thought contends that “the modernization of the Talmud Torah, in the example of CJI, was more in terms of style and outer form than in terms of substance.” Ronald Kronish, a student of Dewey’s influence on Jewish education, argued that Berkson's conservationist approach to Judaism severely limited his willingness to integrate Deweyan thought into CJI’s program. Based primarily on a
few passages from Berkson’s doctoral dissertation, Kronish concluded that “text-centeredness—imparting the classical wisdom of Jewish tradition—remained paramount” to Berkson. “The curriculum could be modified a little bit—taking the interests of the child into account—but the course of study remained fundamentally the same, of necessity, if Judaism and the Jewish heritage were to be preserved.” Thus, methodologically, the school remained fairly traditional, with “book-learning and formal classroom instruction” predominating.60

On the other hand, scholar Walter Ackerman, evaluating the same evidence, concluded that Berkson’s conception of Torah, which he held up as “the central idea in Jewish life,” was too expansive and vague to serve as a guiding principle on which to order programmatic design. Berkson contended that Torah was not merely the Pentateuch or even the oral law but rather the totality of Jewish culture, religious as well as secular.

Heavily influenced by the views of Friedlaender and Kaplan, Berkson advocated for the creation of a pluralistic, multifaceted American Jewish civilization and viewed the Jewish school not only as a site for enculturation but as a primary agent of its elaboration. But in Ackerman’s view, Berkson was inhibiting the expression of any clearly articulated vision of a Jewish ideal on which he could base
an American Jewish *paideia*. Instead, his educational goal was expressed in terms of the imperative of Jewish survival, a powerful slogan but an instrumental rather than intrinsic value. Ackerman’s critique was meant as a broadside against Dewey’s social pragmatism, which underpinned the adjustment agenda touted by *cji* and other progressive educational institutions. Thus, contrary to Kronish’s view, Ackerman believed that the work of the Bureau and by extension *cji*’s school program was overly determined by “forces totally extrinsic from the culture from which it ought to grow.”

The reality, as best it can be discerned, was more complicated than either of these critics suggests. We have already seen that curriculum development and implementation at *cji* was a dynamic process. As one might expect, the school’s curriculum emerged from a process of compromise between pedagogues, rabbis, and parents and as such should not be understood as a reflection of any single approach or ideal. Even the curriculum worked out by Berkson in 1918 was the outcome of parental input, as well as economic and social contingencies, as much as it was a reflection of Berkson’s philosophical outlook.

At first glance, the *cji* curriculum appears to have been fairly traditional, in that it was divided into discrete subjects or disciplines. Course objectives, as indicated by surviving examinations, were expressed in terms of skills and content acquisition. Students were expected to demonstrate basic competencies and Jewish cultural literacy. An eighth grade Hebrew-language examination included verb conjugations, sight translations, and short essays. A seventh grade biblical history exam interspersed factual and theological questions.

However, alongside mechanical Hebrew reading and Bible study were subjects such as Modern Hebrew, history, customs and ceremonies, and music, which placed *cji* firmly within the reformist educational camp. While many of these subjects were designed to socialize students into the Jewish group and were heavily weighted toward cultural transmission, they served as building blocks for the construction of a thoroughly modern conception of national identity and as such were alien to the traditional curriculum. Thus, the appellation conservationist as applied to Berkson is at once technically accurate but only mildly instructive. Consider, for example, Berkson’s justification for teaching *Ivrit b’Ivrit*, which placed as much emphasis on the revival of Hebrew as a living language as it did on classical Jewish textual literacy.

The charge that Berkson and Schoolman lacked a vision of Jewish education and were guided primarily by extrinsic forces is equally misleading. In fact, they harbored dual ideological commitments, to Dewey’s expansive doctrine of democracy and to Friedlaender’s elaboration of cultural Zionism. Berkson’s dissertation amounted to an extended apologia for the latter’s vision of Diaspora Jewish life by
way of his commitment to the former. Dewey’s robust attack on the proponents of the melting-pot theory and Anglo-Saxon cultural conformity gave license and encouragement to the expression of ethnic identity in the American context. “No matter how loudly any one proclaims his Americanism, if he assumes that any one racial strain, any one component culture, no matter how early settled it was in our territory, or how effective it has proven in its own land, is to furnish a pattern to which all other strains and cultures are to conform, he is a traitor to an American nationalism,” Dewey declared. “Our unity cannot be a homogeneous thing . . . it must be a unity created by drawing out and composing into a harmonious whole the best, the most characteristic which each contributing race and people has to offer.” As Lawrence Cremin observed: “What more suitable theory for a society in flux, a society of immigrant groups engaged in a dramatic reshuffling of customs and allegiances, a society whose intellectuals sense a loss of community and a driving need to rebuild it?” No wonder it resonated so completely with the Benderly boys.65

But Berkson was a man in search of a theory to justify his preconceived loyalties. Long before he encountered Dewey, Berkson was attracted to an approach that reconciled his political allegiance to the American government with his fidelity to Jewish culture and spiritual life. Berkson prefaced his chapter on his community theory with an extended epigraph from a 1907 essay by Israel Friedlaender anticipating Dewey (and Horace Kallen’s cultural pluralism). Friedlaender laid out a vision of America where Jews could participate fully in “the civic, social and economic progress of the country, fully sharing and increasing its spiritual possessions and acquisitions” while simultaneously remaining “deeply rooted in the soil of Judaism, clinging to its past, working for its future, true to its traditions, faithful to its aspirations, one in sentiment with their brethren wherever they are, attached to the land of their fathers as the cradle and resting place of the Jewish spirit.” Significantly, Friedlaender imagined an American Jewish people “receiving and resisting, not yielding like wax to every impress from the outside, but blending the best they possess with the best they encounter; not a horde of individuals, but a set of individualities, adding to the richness of American life, leading a new current into the stream of American civilization.” Schoolman used the identical quotation in the conclusion of an article touting the virtues and describing the philosophy of CJJ.66

The twin pillars of Deweyan democracy and Friedlaender–Ahad Ha-am cultural Zionism found expression throughout the curriculum. On the one hand, teachers were instructed to emphasize the harmony between democratic values and Jewish tradition. For example, a lesson on the Torah’s legal code stressed the “democratic interpretation” of the Ten Commandments and other “moral laws.”
The Torah was presented as the source for the Western, democratic moral and ethical code. Teachers were directed to highlight portions of Pentateuch, such as Leviticus 19, that mandated social justice and philanthropy. The lesson entirely sidestepped laws and commandments, for instance those condoning slavery and genocide, that conflicted with contemporary sensibilities. The lesson plan ended with a section on the “contemporary significance of the Torah” consisting of a single quotation from Solomon Schechter: “The brutal Torahless nationalism promulgated in certain quarters would have been to the Rabbis just as hateful as the suicidal Torahless universalism preached in other quarters.”

On the other hand, the curriculum was designed to “bind the child in loyalty to the Jewish People . . . especially with the new life in Palestine . . . so that he may strive for a continuous development of its ideal—cultural, social, religious—aspirations.” For example, a lesson on the Israelite conquest of Canaan and the geography of Palestine was careful to make connections between past and present. Students were expected to reflect on the impact of Palestinian geography on the halutzim and the upbuilding of the Jewish national home in Palestine. Much of the lesson was devoted to a discussion of the perceived scourge of assimilation. Amplifying on the Deuteronomistic historian’s dim view of the Israelites’ susceptibility to Canaanite culture, the teachers’ guide asserted: “Every step towards assimilation leads towards further disintegration. No sense of national unity, no consciousness of national purpose—‘Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.’” Written prior to the archeological excavations of William F. Albright, John Gart-sang, Kathleen Kenyon, and others that would shake scholars’ confidence in the biblical account of the Israelite conquest and settlement, the teachers’ guide treated Joshua and Judges as fact and utterly obscured the line between history and theology.

The guide’s condemnation of assimilation, however, was coupled with a full-throated endorsement of evolution as a constant and revitalizing force within Jewish history. The Pharisees predictably emerged as the heroes of the late Second Temple period because they democratized Judaism and liberated it from its connection to the Temple cult. The implicit message about the contemporary scene was palpable. Adjustment and survival were desiderata, because the Jewish people remained culturally generative. It is hardly surprising that the appearance of the teachers’ guide roughly coincided with Mordecai Kaplan’s early articulation of Reconstructionism.

As much as Berkson and Schoolman might have struggled with the application of Dewey’s and Kilpatrick’s ideas programmatically, their first priority was to bring the Institute’s Talmud Torah in line with public school norms. As Alexander Dushkin wrote in his 1918 survey of the New York Jewish educational scene, “the
example of the public schools has caused marked improvement in the equipment and management of the better Jewish schools of New York. Modern men and women have begun to utilize the principles and technique of American education for the upbuilding of an effective Jewish school system.” Classroom photographs from the mid- to late 1910s and early 1920s point to a number of telltale modifications. These include the introduction of coed classes, the replacement of tables with movable desks, and the increased use of blackboards, charts, maps, and other visual aids. Another important innovation was the introduction of female teachers, especially in the lower grades. While female teachers were long the norm in many Sunday schools, very few found positions in afternoon schools prior to 1910. The Bureau of Jewish Education was probably the first to utilize female teachers with any regularity in its girls’ schools, a development that was facilitated primarily by the opening of the Teachers Institute. By the mid-1920s, the TI’s classes were attracting more women than men, a cause for some concern to Kaplan, who supported the introduction of women into the Jewish education field but feared the feminization of the Institute.

Methodologically speaking, the approach in the classroom was eclectic. Viewed
broadly, the orientation was decidedly progressive. While the admittedly fragmentary evidence suggests that frontal teaching remained an important, if hardly exclusive, method of instruction, photographs also depict teachers circulating among rows of seated youngsters presumably engaged in individual work. They also show older students engaged in more informal, small group work on the school’s rooftop. A history guide prepared by Schoolman and Leo Honor instructed teachers to avoid lecture in favor of “discussion, question and answer method, [and] special reports by children to whom special topics have been assigned.” Teachers, they continued, “should take care that questions should not be mere fact questions, but thought questions” requiring students to engage in interpretation. Also, teachers should “indulge” in “ample use of illustrative material and maps and charts.” They stressed that emphasis should also be placed on drawing connections between history and contemporary life. Indeed, Schoolman and Honor cited two arguments or justifications for the study of Jewish history:

1. The knowledge of the past [is] essential to an intelligent understanding of the present (not all of the past functions in contemporary life and throughout our study of the past, we must remember that our aim is to understand not the past, but the present).
2. The problems which face the Jewish people can only be solved by a method in harmony with the Jewish spirit and the ideas for which the Jewish people has always stood. The content of these ideas and the manner in which this spirit manifests itself, can only be discovered through a study of Jewish history.

Their articulation reflected the progressive educational goals of utilizing education as a vehicle for social transformation and of taking into account the needs, perspective, and interests of the child.²¹

It would be naive to assume that Schoolman and Honor’s prescriptive guide provided an accurate picture of what was actually going on in every CJI classroom. Methodology undoubtedly varied not only between subjects but from classroom to classroom, a function of each teacher’s training, classroom management ability, and personal style. Reporter Mary Singer’s description of a history class she observed in November 1918 suggested an engaging yet fairly traditional pedagogical approach on the part of the teacher: “Here are a group of school children, their faces smiling and expectant, filing into the history class. The Chanuka festival is the subject of discussion. Alert, eager faces are turned toward the teacher who narrates in colorful, vivid words the significance and history of the festival. Ready hands are raised to supply a missing fact.”²²
In their efforts to implement progressive curricular approaches in the classroom, CJJ’s professionals faced some of the same hurdles that felled their colleagues in the public schools, including pressure to “cover” material; resistance from traditionalists, skeptical parents, and community leaders; inadequately trained staff; and budgetary constraints that resulted in overextended teachers and large class sizes. In addition, they confronted challenges particular to the Jewish supplementary school, most notably the paucity of contact hours and a largely text-based, language-intensive curriculum. Moreover, contrary to some of their critics’ contentions, Berkson and Schoolman were acutely aware of the limitations of utilizing a “majority educational ideology” in a minority educational setting. Their fealty to Jewish group survival and cultural effervescence was sacrosanct. They were neither slavish followers of the pedagogical progressives, nor were they opportunistic cherry pickers who paid only “lip service” to Dewey and his interpreters. Rather, they attempted to find a balance between their Jewish ideological commitments, curricular objectives, and methodological proclivities that made sense given the requirements and limitations built into the supplementary school setting as well as the economies imposed by the New York Federation and the Institute’s board of directors. As historian Ben Jacobs rightly pointed out, the question we should ask about the pedagogical progressives’ influence on Jewish education “is not what was lost in the transmission, but rather what was gained in the transformation.”

Unlike the Talmud Torah, the Institute’s Extension Department was relatively unburdened by demands that inhibited innovation. As such, Berkson and Schoolman were far freer to experiment with progressive pedagogical approaches. The incorporation of a robust Extension Department into CJJ’s program was integral to Berkson’s school center blueprint; it was a concept that Berkson borrowed from Benderly’s Bureau of Jewish Education, and he turned to Bureau veterans such as Libbie Suchoff, Leah Konovitz, and Emanuel Gamoran to get the program off the ground. Berkson targeted two primary audiences: elementary-age students who declined to enroll in a Jewish school program and adolescents who either attended high school or had recently entered the workforce. In addition to establishing active chapters of the Circle for Jewish Children and the League of Jewish Youth, the Institute organized a variety of recreational and cultural clubs for older adolescents, which attracted Talmud Torah pupils and alumni along with other neighborhood youths. It also housed a growing number of clubs that were begun as a result of teen initiative. In 1930 it became the venue for the Israel Friedlaender classes, an extension education program for teens and young adults, which was initially funded by the Jewish Theological Seminary. “We were happy there—a lot of people were always going in and out of the building,” recalled Sonny Sonnen-
feld, who made CJI a second home during the Depression. Sonnenfeld, who characterized himself as “probably the worst Hebrew student who ever lived,” nevertheless cultivated an allegiance to CJI through its intramural basketball league, club program, Saturday night dances, and theater troupe. His friend Arthur Auster traveled religiously to Yorkville from Bedford-Stuyvesant on the subway line, which opened in 1936 and connected that neighborhood to Harlem. “Traveling as frequently as I did was a great tonic to me because I didn’t have anything else.” Their Maccabee club, which met on Sundays, had a strong political flavor. “We were young, spirited people—several quite left-leaning—having spirited discussions, expressing honest feelings on things,” Auster recalled. CJI lured plenty of would-be juvenile delinquents off of the streets during the Depression, including Bernard Schwartz, better known as Tony Curtis, whose acting career began on the CJI stage. Sonnenfeld concluded: “It was a place that gave us something to do. Kids don’t want to get into trouble. CJI kept us busy.”74

In summary, the Central Jewish Institute’s pioneering accomplishments on the educational and cultural fronts should not be obscured, even if the cultural provincialism of various stakeholders conspired with economic and demographic constraints to thwart the Institute from realizing its full potential. CJI’s agenda, by its executive director’s own admission, was dreadfully ambitious. “The task of developing Jewish personalities in a city of six million with a heterogeneous Jewish population of one million and a half souls, by an institution that comes in contact with but two thousand families, is a task nigh incalculable in terms of time and effort required,” Schoolman wrote. “Yet contrary to all expectations of the skeptic, our positive Jewish approach has met not with a cold reception, but with the warm, thrilling, responsive heartbeat of a vital, enthusiastic organism.”

For twenty-five years, CJI blazed a trail in progressive Jewish education, helping to usher in momentous changes in the way American Jews thought about Jewish education, the Jewish center, and their identities as American Jews. Although CJI fell short in completely realizing its vision and ultimately became a casualty of Jewish socioeconomic mobility, it was a valuable and generative educational experiment.75
Chapter 10

“An Environment of Our Own Making”

The Origins of the Jewish Culture Camp

Even before they reached home, Florence Kummel and her husband realized that they had probably overreacted to their daughter Rose’s homesickness when they gave in to her entreaties and fetched her from the Central Jewish Institute Camps, only a week into the season. Rose appeared healthy and in much better spirits than her letters would have suggested. Throughout the trip home, she could not stop talking enthusiastically about her bunkmates and the camp activities. But the biggest surprise came when the family sat down that evening for supper. Kummel and her husband were utterly “dumbfounded” as Rose chanted the Grace After Meals “with all the pronunciation of a Yeshiva scholar.” In a sheepish letter to Rose’s counselor, Kummel marveled: “As the day wore on we noticed ever so many good habits she had made, and all in one week.”

The Jewish literacy that Rose had acquired at camp was particularly heartening to Mrs. Kummel, who lived in a small town that lacked a vibrant Jewish community. Vowing to return Rose to camp the following summer, she explained that

“while the outdoor life of your camp was a consideration, we value first the advantage she would derive in being in the CJ1 environment.” Whether or not Rose herself placed a similar value on her acquisition of new Jewish skills and knowledge, she was certain to associate her pleasant memories of summer friends and activities with the camp’s pervasive Jewish atmosphere.

By the early 1920s, when the Jewish educational camp was born, the residential summer camping movement was already in its sixth decade and attracting about 15 percent of American children between the ages of five and fifteen on an annual basis nationwide. What began, in the 1860s and ’70s, as an institution serving primarily wealthy white boys from the Northeast “went from class to mass” at the turn of the twentieth century as religious groups and social welfare organizations sought to ameliorate the conditions of the urban poor. Jewish children from both ends of the economic spectrum began attending summer camps in larger numbers in the early 1900s, with the affluent often patronizing private Jewish-sponsored camps, and the working-class immigrants enticed by low-cost or free fresh-air institutional camps operated by an array of social welfare and communal organizations, including community centers, federations, and settlement houses. In some cases these camps served kosher food and held Sabbath services, but generally they were indistinguishable organizationally and programmatically from their non-Jewish counterparts.

The novelty of the Jewish educational camp was its integration of significant Jewish content into the conventional camping program. In the words of Jewish educational camping pioneer Albert Schoolman, the camps were conceived as an “experience in the art of Jewish living.” Elaborating on this point, Isaac Berkson, co-owner of Camp Modin, the first private Jewish educational camp, asserted that these camps were built on the premise that “all genuine education implies a form of living as well as knowing, that learning and living are parts of the same process. The basic aim and method of education therefore becomes participation in Jewish life in all its aspects—cultural social and communal.” When Rose Kummel attended CJ1 Camps in the mid-1920s, formal Jewish study was a standard element of the program. But even after the classes were phased out during the Depression, Jewish culture, motifs, and practices were imbedded into the camp’s fabric and integral to its activities.

It is no accident that the goal of the Jewish educational summer camp is reminiscent of that of the Jewish educational center as exemplified by the Central Jewish Institute, and of the larger Jewish center movement. The Institute founded and for a time operated the first Jewish educational camps, which in 1933 became known as the Cejwin Camps. As Alexander Dushkin observed, CJ1 director Schoolman always considered the camps as “one phase of a larger idea.”
From Vacation Home to Summer Camp

The origin of Jewish educational camping in the United States is usually dated to the summer of 1919, when a dozen or, perhaps, twenty girls from the Central Jewish Institute’s Talmud Torah and their teacher spent a two-week wholly subsidized vacation at a Catskills farmhouse near Parksville, New York. That same summer, a similar initiative was commenced with ten children at a farm in New Jersey by the Sholem Aleichem Folk School No. 1. The ultimate outcomes of these experiments were the first Jewish educational camps in the United States: the Zionist, Jewish pluralistic CIJ Camps (1921) and the Yiddishist Camp Boiberik (1923). A third Jewish culture camp, Modin, was opened in 1922 on the shores of Lake George in Canaan, Maine. These three camps largely set the pattern for those that followed, including the handful of other educational camps of various ideological stripes that were opened in the interwar years, such as the Farband (Jewish National Workers’ Alliance) Labor Zionist Camp Kinderwelt (1925) and Samson Benderly’s Camp Achvah (1927). Jewish educational camping hit its stride in the 1940s and early 1950s, as exemplified by the establishment of the Zionist leadership-training Brandeis Camp Institute (1941), the Hebrew-speaking Camp Massad (1941), and the first Conservative and Reform movement camps, Camp Ramah, Wisconsin (1946), and the Union Institute camp (1952), respectively.

Although the two 1919 experiments culminated in the establishment of educational camps in the early 1920s, in their embryonic stages neither can properly be called a camp in the conventional sense. Rather, both grew out of a summer school routine in which classes were offered for an hour or two in the mornings, whereupon the children were brought to parks or beaches for recreation in the afternoons. The Benderly group experimented successfully with this paradigm in the Bureau’s girls’ preparatory schools and the Downtown Talmud Torah before the First World War. After morning lessons, youngsters picnicked with their teachers on pumpernickel and jam sandwiches, ice cream, and cake in Bronx, Van Cortland, and Prospect Parks. A story hour and singing were combined with games and other recreational activities. According to one witness, the parks echoed with songs, screams, and cheers.

The model was soon adopted by other Talmud Torahs and Yiddish schools, including those associated with the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute. But it was taken to a new level at the Derech Emunoh synagogue in the Rockaway resort town of Arverne, New York, where a summer school was operated under the Bureau’s guidance for the children of vacationing middle-class Jews. Meeting twice a week in the mornings throughout the summer of 1912, over a hundred children of various ages attended formal classes and a variety of cultural and recreational
clubs, with afternoons spent at the beach. The idea behind the venture was “to make the vacation more than just a way of ‘killing time.’”

Among the volunteers who helped to organize the club work at Derech Emunoh was Matilda “Tillie” Endel Hyman, the wife of Central Jewish Institute founder Samuel Hyman. The daughter of an Alsatian Jewish family that settled in ante-bellum New Orleans, Tillie was French educated and steeped in southern gentility. She was animated by the spirit of noblesse oblige. Like her eastern European husband, she wished to Americanize the immigrants, while keeping them within the Jewish fold. Tillie’s association with the Arverne summer school proved fortuitous, for a half-dozen years later it was CJI’s Women’s Auxiliary, under the leadership of Tillie Hyman, that spearheaded the Institute’s “vacation home” for children, in the Catskills.

Hyman’s motive was essentially philanthropic. Many of the working-class families that sent their children to CJI could not afford summer getaways at the seashore or in the mountains. The practice of treating poor children to a few weeks of wholesome activity and fresh air outside the city was hardly exceptional during this period. Yet parents were so enthusiastic about the vacation home project after the initial session, that mothers volunteered to cook and “keep house” for the children if it could be extended to accommodate more youngsters. The following summer, two houses were rented for ten weeks in Warwassing, New York, near the popular
Jewish vacation community in Ellenville, where about 120 children enjoyed a two- 
to three-week vacation. In 1921 and 1922 the operation was further expanded on 
campgrounds near Central Valley, New York, furnished by the Interstate Parks 
Commission, with 250 and 350 children accommodated per season respectively. 

By that point the experiment was widely heralded as a success, and the search 
for a permanent site was initiated by cji’s executive director, Albert Schoolman, 
and the head of the board of directors’ camp committee, Jacob Wener. A seven- 
hundred-acre site on Martin’s Lake, near Port Jervis, New York, was purchased in 
1923 for $31,500. Over the following year, under Schoolman and Wener’s supervi- 
sion, an extensive construction project, made possible by selling $60,000 of 
bonds to board members and friends to help cover a $100,000 bank loan, moved 
forward at a furious pace. After a one-season hiatus, the camp opened on its new 
site in July 1924, with over sixty buildings erected, including bungalows, mess 
halls, infirmaries, social halls, and numerous playing fields. By 1926, cji was operating 
two fully equipped camps—one for boys and the other for girls—on either side of 
the lake with a total of one hundred buildings accommodating 750 to 800 children 
and staff at one time. On the eve of the Depression, the number of campers attend- 
ing the camps over the course of the summer topped 1,000. At that time, in a bid 
to maintain the camps under the control of sympathetic lay leaders, they were 
legally separated from the Central Jewish Institute. By adopting the name Cejwin 
Camps, Schoolman was asserting their independence from the Institute even as he 
acknowledged their historical and ideological connection. Cejwin was a clever, 
vaguely American Indian–sounding acronym for the Central Jewish Institute.∞≠ 

Schoolman was not altogether candid when he boasted years later that the 
camp project was entirely economically self-sufficient. More accurately, the camp 
ever approached the New York Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic 
Societies for community funds, nor did it solicit prominent philanthropists outside 
the Central Jewish Institute inner circle. While the camp was operationally profitable most years, at least until the 1970s, the purchase of the expansive 
Martin’s Lake site and the significant capital improvements of the 1920s and 1930s 
were possible only with the ongoing financial support of members of the In- 
stitute’s board and its Women’s Auxiliary.∞∞ 

The move to make the camps independent of cji proved to be propitious, as it 
insulated them from the Institute’s increasingly precarious financial condition. 
Cejwin was arguably better positioned to realize the progressive educational vision 
of cji because it was unfettered by much of the Institute’s baggage. With the 
Hebrew school at its core, cji’s staff was constantly struggling to find a balance 
between cognitive and affective learning. Camp, of course, was unencumbered by 
an established curriculum and traditional academic expectations. On the contrary,
it was expected to concern itself with spiritual development and character formation. Cejwin’s financial independence also afforded Schoolman a greater deal of programmatic latitude.

A Private Camp with a Jewish Idea

It is unclear how actively involved Schoolman was with the vacation home in its earliest stages. The glowing reports he received from parents, staff members, and youngsters surely hinted at the experiment’s promise. If he harbored any doubts, the transformation of the vacation house into a full-fledged camp at the Central Valley campgrounds convinced Schoolman of its potential. In the autumn of 1921, he requested a leave of absence from the CJJI in order to complete his doctoral work at Columbia University Teachers College. The subject of his dissertation was to be Jewish camping. The dissertation never materialized, largely because Schoolman was drawn more to the concrete work of building Jewish educational camps than to theorizing about them in the abstract. Prior to committing himself to Jewish education, Schoolman had planned to pursue a career in engineering. His background provided an excellent grounding for the planning and decision making involved in scouting out and developing residential camp sites.12

Schoolman’s faith in the potential of Jewish educational camping was made plain by his decision that same year to approach his friends Isaac Berkson and Alexander Dushkin about the possibility of opening a second camp. Unlike the CJJI Camps, this camp would be privately owned and cater to a wealthy clientele. Priced to compete with other private Jewish camps, it would distinguish itself by providing a rich cultural Jewish program in addition to the typical array of camp activities. Schoolman’s rationale was compelling. Affluent Jewish families in the Northeast and Midwest, like their non-Jewish neighbors, were increasingly sending their children to residential camps. Since these camps were heavily segregated by religion, as well as by race and class, Jews frequently patronized Jewish-owned institutions. Yet, with few exceptions, such as Camp Kohut (1907) in Oxford, Maine, Jewish-owned camps downplayed their Jewishness. Surely, a subset of the Jewish camp-going population would be attracted by a camp that offered a robust and constructive Jewish activity program as well as the assurance of traditional Sabbath observance and a strictly kosher kitchen, Schoolman reasoned. It seemed like an opportune time to jump into the business and provide an alternative Jewish camping model, his friends and their wives agreed.13

Schoolman looked askance at camps where “the Sabbath day was generally no different from week-days” and “Sunday, usually the visiting day, took on a festive mien, with the Sunday dinner counterbalancing the Shabbat meal on Friday
evenings.” Even those camps that “found it necessary or ‘good for business’” to serve kosher meals and incorporate some type of Sabbath observance usually compartmentalized this aspect of camp life by hiring a rabbinical student and, perhaps, a mashgiah (kashruth supervisor) who, alone, attended to these concerns. “In time the office of this functionary became known as the week-end rabbi of the camp; and it was no pun at all, to designate this as the weak end position on the staff,” he quipped.\(^{14}\)

Braving the snow and subzero temperatures, Schoolman and Dushkin journeyed by train to Skowhegan, Maine, during the dead of winter in 1921–22 in search of a location for their camp. There, they trekked in an open sled to the shores of Lake George, near the village of Canaan, Maine, where they inspected a discarded hotel. “The buildings and grounds were ‘not much,’ but the beautiful lake and surrounding mountain forests were glorious,” Dushkin remembered. “We fell in love with the place, and we decided to acquire it then and there.” Camp Modin, “The Summer Camp with a Jewish Idea,” opened with forty-five male campers the following summer, but not before the business partners were forced to invest a considerable sum developing the site. “We did not realize how much sweat and how much blood-money would be involved in converting those shabby buildings and those wooded hilly grounds into fit living quarters and playing fields for modern boys and girls,” Dushkin stated.\(^{15}\)
The costs involved in operating a camp came as a rude surprise to Dushkin and Berkson. They had been enticed into the venture, in part, by Schoolman’s prediction that the camp would afford them a measure of financial security and independence. The backdrop for the decision to open Camp Modin was the disappointment and indignation that Dushkin and Berkson had experienced at the commencement of the Jewish Education Association. Still smarting from what they perceived to be the discourteous and dismissive treatment they had experienced at the hands of lay leaders, as well as the fecklessness of their supposed champions, the camp appeared to be an insurance policy, allowing them to “ride through possible ‘storms’” in their “troubled profession.”

Schoolman’s forecast about Modin’s financial profitability turned out to be overly optimistic, at least during its first two decades. Modin did not begin turning a profit until 1928, and then, soon after, the camp fell on hard times during the Depression. Nevertheless, the couples compensated themselves as salaried employees for their camp-related work. Both the Berksons and the Dushkins relied on the camp to supplement their below-subsistence salaries during their years in Palestine. (Isaac ran the Yishuv’s education department in the late 1920s and early 1930s, while Alex taught and directed Hebrew University’s Education Department and lab school between 1935 and 1939.)

The couples identified other advantages to running the camp. Arranging to have their summers free so that they could operate Modin allowed Dushkin and Berkson to delay burnout in often frustrating positions. Moreover, as Dushkin and Berkson moved into administrative jobs remote from the educational front lines, it seemed more important than ever to maintain direct educational contact with children in a progressive educational environment. Modin became a laboratory for educational experimentation and innovation. Not only did it allow them to play a pioneering role in the development of Jewish summer camping, but it also gave them “needed and valuable personal experience” working with “the whole child the whole day.”

As it turned out, the hands-on experience with children proved to be more appealing to Dushkin, who relished his many seasons running the boys’ camp, than for the more cerebral and mercurial Berkson, who liked to remark, only partly in jest, that “[c]amp would be wonderful if there were no kids!” Berkson had little patience for day-to-day camp operations, although he was active in Modin’s management during its early years and contributed to the elaboration of its educational program. Schoolman, of course, was occupied with the Céjwin Camps during the summers. Thus, it fell to the spouses to take an active role in Modin’s management. Libbie Suchoff Berkson and Bertha Singer Schoolman each took extended turns directing the girls’ camp and running the camp’s winter office.
Julia Dushkin, who suffered from frequent bouts of illness, preferred a more ancillary role, occasionally opening and closing the camp and hosting visitors. When Alexander Dushkin’s position at the Jewish Education Committee compelled him to give up his summer obligations at Modin in 1939, Libbie essentially became its sole director. Her position was formalized when the Dushkins and Schoolmans sold their shares of the camp to the Berksons in 1942. For a few seasons in the late 1940s, she shared the duties of running the camp with her son-in-law, Ted Cohn. When Cohn’s interests turned elsewhere, she brought on a partner, Samuel Kadison, and eventually sold her share of the camp to him in 1958.\(^{19}\)

The Kvutzah and the Genesis of Hebrew Camping

A third Jewish educational camp to emerge from the Benderly group was Camp Achvah (1927). It grew out of Samson Benderly’s Kvutzah, a bold and controversial experiment in leadership training that climaxed with the establishment of the first Hebrew-speaking camp in North America. The Kvutzah began as an effort by Benderly to recapture some of the spirit of the early years of the Kehillah. Among his proudest achievements from that era was the training of a younger generation of Jewish educational leaders, many of whom by the mid-1920s appeared to be reaching the prime of their careers. It seemed, however, that there were few young people of a similar mettle following in their footsteps.\(^ {20}\)

Professional training was rarely far from Benderly’s mind. When he returned to the Bureau after his failed business ventures and midlife crisis, a leaner budget compelled him to focus on a few core projects. Chief among these was the Marshak Hebrew High School, which he conceived in large part as a training ground for future Hebrew teachers, a preparatory school for the Teachers Institute. Benderly’s attitude about T I was complex, to put it mildly. He had enormous respect and fondness for Kaplan, T I’s principal, and recognized that some of the most gifted teachers of the younger generation, including Leah Klepper, Hajnalka Langer Winer, Anna Machlowitz, and Anna Grossman Sherman, had received their training there. T I also initially served as a conduit for some of his “boys,” including Emanuel Gamoran, Samuel Dinin, and Schoolman. But he did not consider it a center for leadership training. He also had mixed feelings about members of the faculty, whom he viewed as single-minded zealots for Hebraism with little genuine interest or understanding of educational theory and methods.

During the winter of 1926–27, in consultation with Joseph Bragin, the longtime principal of the Hebrew high school, Benderly decided to handpick the best graduating students and prepare them for leadership. They would become part of an elite fellowship group, known as the Kvutzah, and would split their time outside
their college work between Jewish study and on-the-job training at the Bureau. This was the time when Benderly was still enamored of the individual study method popularized in Dalton, Massachusetts, and Winnetka, Illinois. Thus, he devised an individual program that students could complete at their own pace and supplemented it with more formal Sunday classes and a two-week intensive seminar with Benderly, Bragin, and members of the Hebrew high school faculty at a summer camp school in Arverne.  

Participants dubbed the camp school Achvah, the Hebrew word for brotherhood, and according to surviving accounts, the experience was enormously powerful, leaving participants with “a feeling of noble dedication.” Benderly, too, was taken with the experiment, particularly with the educational potential of the summer camp school model. He became convinced that Kvutzah members could accomplish more through an extended, intensive summer session with a daily schedule divided evenly between farming, recreational activities, and study than through an entire academic year of learning. Over the course of the following winter, the Kvutzah program was modified and sharpened. New cohorts were added annually. The individual study plan, which proved disappointing, was abandoned in favor of more conventional classes. A winter fieldwork program, which usually involved teaching in one of the Bureau schools and advising in its club program, provided members with hands-on experience. Each Kvutzah member received a modest living stipend. At its height, the Kvutzah included about fifty members.

Notably, the new curriculum envisioned a five-year sequence broken down by historical period where the study of history, texts, and traditions would be integrated. The study of Judaism in sequential form emphasized the developmental aspect of Jewish culture, and was likely influenced by Deweyan functionalism and Kaplan’s emerging understanding of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. Another essential innovation was the adoption of Hebrew as the vernacular of Achvah. It was spoken in the dining room, on the playing fields, and presumably in the cabins. New vocabulary was devised to facilitate the needs of American baseball and basketball. Kvutzah members published a weekly Hebrew newspaper at Achvah and took part in debating clubs and reading circles. Hebrew folk songs and dances were imported from Palestine and comprised the core of the camp’s culture. Hebrew dramatics productions, which in the early years were directed by Ari and Ahuva Kutai, members of the Habima theater troupe, became a highlight of the summer. Kvutzah members Abraham Gannes and Levi Shoshuk recalled that “Hebrew culture was a natural phase of group life.” In order to impose discipline, the Kvutzah organized an enforcement council, which was empowered to penalize recidivism and adjudicate cases involving serial backsliders. According to participants, the immersion program resulted in high rates of Hebrew fluency. Achvah
“took on the appearance of a Hebrew speaking colony, headed by Dr. Benderly, who was ‘Abba,’ father, teacher and guide, and Mrs. Benderly who was their ‘Imma,’” wrote David Rudavsky, who directed Achvah’s day-to-day operations. Influenced by the first American tour of the Habima theater company in 1927, Benderly determined that the Kvutzah would adopt the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew. Up until the late-1920s, *Ivrit b’Ivrit* in the United States was actually *Ivris b’Ivris*. According to two Kvutzah members, the adoption of Sephardic Hebrew “was quite a hardship on Dr. Benderly himself who spoke *Sephardit* [Sephardic-inflected Hebrew] with a strong Ashkenazic accent, but he persisted.”

The lapsed Hasid had never picked up Sephardic-inflected Hebrew growing up in Safed. When, in 1889, he left to study in Beirut, the Sephardic pronunciation was not yet widely adopted in the new Jewish settlements of the first *aliyah*, let alone the Ashkenazi enclaves of the Old Yishuv. When he returned to Palestine thirty years later, however, Benderly was mercilessly teased for his accent. After his educational institutions in New York adopted the Sephardic accent, it was soon embraced by Hebrew school systems in other American cities, including Boston and Minneapolis. Boston BJÉ director Louis Hurwich and his wife Leah reportedly spoke Sephardic-inflected Hebrew at home to their children. Still, the spread of the Sephardic pronunciation in North America was uneven and gained momentum only after the establishment of the state of Israel.

The Kvutzah had its share of detractors, particularly at the Teachers Institute, where the faculty was furious that Benderly was skimming the cream off the top of the Hebrew high school classes, thereby depriving the Institute of the best students. Led by Leo Honor, who served as an instructor of Jewish history and TI’s registrar, they implored Kaplan to confront Benderly and compel him to cease and desist. Kaplan found himself in an awkward position, caught between his institutional and personal loyalties. But his faculty was correct. What is more, as Honor pointed out, Benderly’s Kvutzah had the effect of exacerbating the gender gap within TI’s student body.

At first, Benderly tried to ignore the complaining. But when Kaplan suggested that there was no reason why the Kvutzah could not split its time between the Bureau and TI, Benderly responded with a face-to-face verbal evisceration of the faculty. As Kaplan’s staff sat slack jawed, Benderly laced into them and insisted that he alone could guide Kvutzah members’ training. “He characterized [Hebrew instructor Morris] Levine and [Bible and Talmud instructor Paul] Chertoff as unfit to teach and inspire the young people in the Institute. He told [Hebrew and Bible instructor Joseph] Bragin and Honor to their faces that they lacked the necessary personality to exercise the proper influence upon such as those whom he undertook to train.”
Kaplan evidently agreed with Benderly's estimations, since he did not rise to defend his faculty.²⁷ In his diary, he lamely placed the onus on the victims to stand up for themselves: “I squirmed in my seat to hear men so characterized to their faces. The very fact, however, that they had nothing to say in reply, proved the truth of his characterization.” Benderly’s takedown of Bragin, who worked alongside him at the Bureau, and Honor, one of his loyal protégés, must have been particularly painful to watch. Indeed, his treatment of Honor should put to rest any misconception that he was benevolently paternalistic toward his “boys.”²⁸

Teachers Institute faculty members were hardly his only critics. Benderly’s habitual Orthodox opponents were unmoved by the Kvutzah experiment and continued to question his motives. Even former Bureau worker Samuel Margoshes minimized Benderly’s accomplishments at Camp Achvah in the pages of Der Tog, pointing out that he was working with some of the brightest kids in the city. One could not expect that a Hebrew-speaking camp could be replicated on a larger scale. There was some truth to Margoshes’s criticism, as Benderly himself would learn after the onset of the Depression. When economic retrenchment at the Bureau forced him to abandon the Kvutzah in 1932, the camp was opened to the general Jewish student population, regardless of Hebrew competency. Like other camps, Achvah began to accept elementary school children as well as adolescents. While the camp’s emphasis on Zionism, Jewish culture, and the arts continued to be pronounced, the Hebrew-speaking aspect of the camp was dropped. Achvah became a more conventional summer camp, comparable in many respects to Schoolman’s Cejwin Camps. Benderly’s economic woes were magnified by his purchase of a one-hundred-acre site for Achvah in Godefray, New York. Little did anyone realize, in 1929, the extent to which this old Huguenot estate near the banks of the Neversink River would be a singularly poor investment. In the Godefray estate Benderly saw the potential to experiment with his “work-study-and-play” educational model on a much grander scale. According to Dushkin, Benderly aspired to turn Achvah into a “spiritual recruiting center.” His hope was to develop a working farm, where young people would split their time between raising crops and livestock, study, and recreation. “Unfortunately, all this was to be financed on a shoestring,” Dushkin explained. By the early 1930s, these plans had faded and the priority became “saving the camp from bankruptcy.” Although Benderly made the best of the situation by converting Achvah into a Jewish culture camp, “the weak financial structure of the camp was like a millstone around his neck.” Another setback came in October 1939, when a fire destroyed the sixty-five-year-old mansion that was serving as the Benderlys’ residence. The damage was estimated at $70,000, including antiques and other valuables that dated back to the original
owner, railroad baron Adolphus E. Godeffroy. Benderly’s personal papers were also destroyed, including most of the records from his years at the Bureau.²⁹

Benderly’s cousin Menahem Barshad, who became Executive Director of Achvah after Benderly’s death, liked to speak wistfully about the “clouds of glory from the kvutzah days.” He poetically recalled “the very trees and meadows of Achvah were alive with the personality of Dr. Benderly and with the sounds and sights of his folk pageantry, his soliloquies and his dreams.” Alas, the perspective of the campers post-1932 was far different. Although Benderly and his wife, Hemdah, lived on the Godeffroy campgrounds, and participated in the culture camp’s rituals, pageants, and ceremonies, he was perceived as a remote figure. Day-to-day direction of the camp was handed to his younger associates, including David Rudovsky and Samuel Citron. Few campers had any inkling of Benderly’s historic role in modernizing American Jewish education and popularizing Ivrit b’Ivrit. To them he was merely a figurehead; a short, rotund man, bearded and bespectacled, who sweated profusely in the hot and humid climate of the Minisink Valley. “On the bus going up [to Achvah] was much uncomplimentary talk of him by returning campers,” remembered one former camper, “along with the usual singing of camp songs”:

There’s an odor in the air,
You can smell it everywhere,
Is it Benderly? Yes it’s Benderly.
You can smell it everywhere!³⁰

Benderly never gave up hatching schemes to return Achvah to its glory days. In truth, however, even before the Kvutzah was formally disbanded in 1932, it was already unraveling. Financial exigencies forced Benderly to lower admission standards, withdraw the stipends, and abandon the small cohort-based organization. Perhaps, as a result of the initial setbacks or simply because of his general nature, Benderly’s interest in the Kvutzah diminished, and the program increasingly took on the feeling of a regular school. Dushkin recalled that “the psychic effect upon himself and his young ‘fellows’ was almost devastating.” On Benderly’s shoulders fell the awful responsibility of breaking the news to his devoted and talented charges that “the Jewish community was not ready to use their services.” Few jobs were available in Jewish education, and some institutions were reluctant to hire former Kvutzah members because they lacked an advanced university degree or other recognized credential, such as rabbinic ordination. The vast majority drifted out of Jewish education work, although about a third remained in the Jewish professional world as social workers and communal service professionals. A few
attended rabbinical school. Resentment against Benderly naturally ran high, and some Kvutzah members became completely estranged from Jewish life.31

 Particularly ill served were the female members of the Kvutzah. “At first, Dr. Benderly believed that they would be secretaries of leading Jewish organizations. Courses in typing and stenography were given at camp. Later he turned to the field of social service. Finally, he realized that his counsels to them had been misguided,” recalled Gannes and Shoshuk. Benderly’s career objectives for these women, while always nebulous, underscored that despite his support for the feminization of the Jewish teaching profession on the elementary level, he did not expect most women to assume positions in educational leadership.32

 A number of explanations have been offered beyond the onset of the Depression to explain the failure of the Kvutzah. In the end, as with so many of Benderly’s schemes, “the plan was poorly coordinated. It was grandiose on paper, or when expounded by Dr. Benderly, but never properly executed or in consonance with realities.”33 Benderly’s inability to act as a team player prevented him from creating cooperative relationships with existing organizations that might have supported and become the beneficiaries of an innovative leadership training program. Likewise, a partnership with the Teachers Institute could have accrued to the benefit of both institutions and would have made Kvutzah graduates more marketable.

 Yet none of this should detract from the vision behind the experiment and its initial achievements. As with many glorious failures, the seeds were sown for later successes. Achvah’s pioneering activity paved the way for later Hebrew-speaking camps, particularly the religious Zionist Camp Massad, which was founded in 1941 by Shlomo Shulsinger under the auspices of Histadrut Hanoar Haivri.34

 “Learning through Doing”: Camp as Education

 Historian Gary Zola identified four broad categories of theories and ideals that shaped the development of organized camping in North America. They include the conceptualization of camping as an educational enterprise focused on “learning through doing”; the conviction that camping could play an important role in improving social conditions and bettering the lives of the underprivileged; the notion of camp as an ideal setting for engendering religious and spiritual growth; and, finally, the belief that camping could instill a respect for and identification with America’s cultural heritage and foster a communitarian spirit.35 Each of these, in turn, played a part in shaping the development of Jewish educational camping. In some cases, principles and approaches were effortlessly tailored to the particular milieu, while in others they were modified in significant and telling ways.
From the outset, the conventional trappings of the Central Jewish Institute’s vacation home were enhanced by a program of informal Jewish education and Sabbath observances, ably directed by Leah Konovitz and her assistant, Stella Cohn. The recollections of youngster Alvin Rosenbaum reflect how organizers created an experience with a two-pronged mission of social melioration and Jewish enrichment. “To many of us this was the first journey out of the narrow streets, tall buildings and eternal noise of the city,” he explained, “and what a pleasant contrast to all this was the beautiful spot in the quiet, serene atmosphere of the Catskill Mountains. Days filled with joy, good healthy food, pageants of Jewish history, songs, Shabbos celebration, lighting of Shabbos candles by one of our girls, Kiddush by one of the boys, meal, gathering under starry sky for songs, stories, until we felt ourselves transplanted to a veritable fairy land.”

Schoolman appreciated the potential of informal education to influence youngsters’ affective and behavioral development. While at Teachers College, he came under the influence of Kilpatrick and Professor Elbert Fretwell, both of whom drew on Deweyan educational principles to advocate strongly on behalf of the scouting and organized camping movements. Camps, they taught, were ideal “embryonic communities” where “life situations” could become educative settings, where children could be socialized and prepared to become agents of social reform. In camp, a child’s natural interests and impulses, his creative play, could be harnessed for the purposes of education and character development. In particular, camps were recognized as ideal settings in which to utilize experience-based methodologies, as exemplified by Kilpatrick’s project method, in the service of constructivist learning. Schoolman approvingly quoted Kilpatrick’s assessment of the potentialities of camping in his own writings: “Opposed to the school, thus variously handicapped by practices left over from its past stands the camp relatively free. . . . Not being counted ‘educative,’ in the traditional sense, the camp is free—if it will—to be honestly and seriously educative in the true sense.”

In a 1922 appearance before the Women’s Auxiliary, Schoolman offered an early articulation of his growing conviction that camp could serve most effectively as “an experience in the art of Jewish living.” Lamenting what he called “the lack of any tangible expression of Jewish living” in the majority of Jewish homes, he held out the summer camp as a palliative. The child is brought into “an environment of our own making, and thru nothing more than happy, healthful, normal living, we may saturate him with a new life and with new interests that will help him to find himself in Jewish life. The camp becomes a training school for Jewish living. It is a complete training school. It is home and school and synagogue and movie theatre and street—it is everything that matters to the child and that leaves an impression upon him.” In a clear expression of the experiential approach, Schoolman added:
“Doing Jewish things with one’s hands is the surest way of conveying Jewishness to one’s mind.”

Schoolman’s language here is illuminating in a number of respects. His acknowledgment that camp was a manufactured landscape, “an environment of our own making,” anticipated contemporary scholarship on camping, which explores how camps were cultural landscapes, deliberately fabricated to advance definite social aims. Architectural historians such as Abigail Van Slyck point out that while camps often exude an aura of pristine nature, they are, in reality, carefully designed down to the minutest detail, from the arrangement of the cabins to the design of the campfire site. Indeed, far from undisturbed islands of wilderness, many camps were converted tracts of farmland that were purposefully “restored” to give the appearance of the wild. Many early camping figures were stirred by a deep anti-modernist sentiment, a response to the perceived social ills that accompanied urbanization and industrialization that was heightened by fears of the impact on the American character of immigration and what Frederick Jackson Turner contended was the closing of the American frontier. The irony, of course, was that most camps relied heavily on the trappings of civilization, from plumbing and electricity to provisions and medical expertise. The lifelines of residential camps were the miles of paved roads and railroad tracks that made possible the transportation of campers and supplies.

The pioneers of Jewish educational camping were stirred in part by the anti-modernism of the day. Dushkin and Berkson were inspired by the poetry of romantics such as Walt Whitman, who celebrated the great outdoors and decried the excesses of overcivilization. They treated the wilderness as a place of refuge and endowed it with the transformative power to Americanize the immigrant soul. But what especially attracted them to the isolation of the summer camp as an educational setting was the ability to simulate an idealized Jewish environment. Camp would serve as a “complete training school,” as Schoolman described it, unencumbered by the competing influences of home, school, and synagogue, as well as the centripetal forces of the street and the movie theater. “To the Jewish child in camp, life is a harmony, a unity as against the eternal dualism with which he is forever faced,” Schoolman declared in 1922. In other words, camp would be a total environment where exposure to external, potentially corrosive forces could be regulated and minimized. Jacob Wener expressed this idea by comparing the camp environment with that of a Jewish day school. “Now just think of it,” he told the guests at the Institute’s tenth anniversary gala: “here we have the fullest kind of parochial school.” Campers “spend every minute of the twenty-four hours of the day with us . . . in an environment that is completely and beautifully Jewish.”

In a similar vein, Schoolman referred to the summer camp as “an ideal situation
for social experiment. In the city one is never certain of the influences to which a child is subjected. . . . And from the Jewish standpoint the situation is even more precarious. We know that the overwhelming power of the environment is opposed to the scattered Jewish factors which are [acting] with very questionable results upon the young. Given an opportunity, therefore, of directing all the educative forces of the environment toward one end, their effect upon the child must be enormous.” If summer camps in general were “islands of childhood,” designed to cocoon youngsters from the “mainlands of adulthood,” Jewish educational camps were conceived as islands of Judaism, where campers would encounter and practice a vibrant Judaism, a countertype and an antidote to the outworn, lifeless, and mechanical Judaism of the urban ghettos.\textsuperscript{41}

The educators’ rhetoric consciously presented the camp as an idealized substitute for the camper’s wintertime abode. As Jacob Golub explained, one component of this archetypal home involved the effortless synthesis of “the more valuable influences of the American environment as well as the desirable Jewish elements.” Another concerned demeanor or affect in the performance of Jewish ceremonies and customs, which was to be joyous yet dignified. A third centered on the rituals themselves and other aspects of Jewish culture—music, art, ceremonial objects—which were to be aesthetically pleasing and emotionally compelling. In a 1925 letter to parents, Schoolman encapsulated these constituent elements in his description of life at the cji Camps as “an ideal and romantic adventure into inspiring Jewish feeling, fine Jewish thinking and beautiful Jewish living.” Golub’s emphasis on camping’s educative function, however, underscored that far from being a natural emanation from “the eternal fountain of the Jewish Spirit,” as Schoolman poetically told the parents, the camp environment was carefully contrived. “In an educational institution that which is assumed as unconscious in ordinary life processes must necessarily be made conscious and objective. The camp, therefore, is not merely a Jewish home, but training for a generally finer type of Jewish home that we might look forward to creating,” Golub concluded.\textsuperscript{42}

Creating a total Jewish environment entailed making Jewish observance routine and “Jewish values” normative. It meant holding up Jewish role models; incorporating Jewish motifs and symbols into camp activities and rituals, as well as informal play; using Hebrew or Yiddish words to define camp space and camp time; making camp a place of Jewish cultural production and consumption; and connecting Judaism to campers’ real life interests and concerns. It involved both pageantry and a “pedagogy of participation.” Some of these ambitions were easier to actualize than others. For example, the identification of sufficient numbers of Jewishly literate and engaged counselors who met other equally important criteria, such as age and maturity level, was a perennial difficulty at all three camps,
exacerbated during wartime and by the proliferation of summer employment options for college students in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, by virtually all accounts, efforts to create an absorbing total Jewish environment were very effective.

“Jewish life was interwoven into almost all aspects of camp life—almost seamlessly,” recalled Gladys Salpeter Kraft, who first attended the CJJ Camps in 1930. “Daily morning services were as much a part of the routine as calisthenics before breakfast.” Examples abound of the integration of Judaism and Jewish culture into camp life. Consider mealtime at Camp Achvah, where grace before and after meals was habitual and Hebrew singing a natural and regular facet; or the annual Dance Fete at Cejwin Camps, where interpretive dances on a Jewish theme were performed to Jewish music. One summer, the Hebrew melody “Boker” was so ubiquitous at the CJJ Camps that even the non-Jewish chauffeur went about humming it in a borrowed yarmulke. “Camp was Judaism! In all its aspects,” declared former Cejwinites Susan Addelston. “Our camps had Hebrew names; our divisions were named for Jewish heroes and heroines; we observed kashruth; made Jewish arts and crafts; and wore the colors of the Israeli flag before there was an Israel. The canteen was even shaped like a six pointed star.” Berel Lang agreed. “There was no doubting the atmosphere or spirit, so that even campers and counselors who otherwise weren’t closely connected with Jewish things (and there was a fairly high percentage of this at both levels) were conscious of the rhythms and texture.”

The islanding of Judaism occurred not only in space but also in time. Camp directors routinely moved the clock back an hour to standard time, which had the advantages of shortening Sabbath afternoons and allowing younger children to be put to bed when it was already dark outside. The different time schedule added to the sense that the camp existed as its own world divorced from the realities of everyday life.

The total environment educational strategy came with its own drawbacks and risks. Most notably, there was the problem of reintegrating campers into their actual homes and Jewish communities at the end of the summer. As Walter Ackerman argued, affecting a youngster in a controlled camp environment was relatively easy. It was, on some level, an abdication of responsibility for educational camps to abruptly terminate their involvement with the child’s Jewish development once he or she departed in late August. “A sensitive youngster will often feel that he has been used and will feel an aching emptiness as he attempts to recapture the spirit and mood of camp at home.” Similarly, psychotherapist Fritz Reall warned that the adjustment issues that accrued to residential camping sometimes outweighed its perceived benefits. “Just because camping is such a powerful drug, it also shares the properties of all other powerful drugs on the market. It is risky, if the wrong
person swallows it, or if the right one swallows too much of it, or at the wrong
time,” he wrote. Ackerman’s concerns were also shared by the dean of American
Jewish sociologists, Marshall Sklare, who, in the 1970s, famously blamed the alien-
ation from the suburban Conservative synagogue sown at the movement’s Ramah
camps for the advent of the Havurah movement and the publication of the Jewish
Catalog.44

Those who viewed both phenomena in a more positive light could argue that
Sklare’s example actually pointed to the generative power of the tension created
between the home and camp environments. In reality, the responses of campers to
the incongruities of camp and home varied. One poster boy for the type of
dissonance about which Ackerman and Sklare warned declined to attend his home
synagogue after experiencing worship at Cejwin Camps, going as far as refusing to
become a bar mitzvah there. His rebellion precipitated a fractious argument with
his father. Beside herself, his anxious mother finally turned Schoolman, implor-
ing him to allow the boy to celebrate his bar mitzvah at camp.45

The divide between camp Judaism and home Judaism was felt especially keenly
by girls, who were empowered at camp to a far greater degree than they were in
their home congregations and Jewish schools. Both Modin and Cejwin adopted
the bat mitzvah ceremony decades before it became mainstream practice. Initiated
in North America at Mordecai Kaplan’s initiative by his daughter Judith in 1922, it
became the norm within the Conservative movement only in the 1960s. Jessica
Shapiro Gribetz, who celebrated her bat mitzvah at Cejwin Camps in 1943, recalled
that even though her birthday was in January, the thought of observing the rite of
passage at her wintertime synagogue was inconceivable. Gribetz learned to read—
but not chant—her haftarah portion with a Jewish culture counselor. After the
service, she recalls that the Schoolmans hosted a reception in her honor at their
spacious bungalow.46

Not every bat mitzvah girl had a uniformly positive experience. Kinereth Dush-
kin Gensler, who celebrated her bat mitzvah at Modin in 1935, was traumatized
when she was forbidden to touch the Torah scroll because she was menstruating.
After weeks of anticipating lifting the Torah from its ark, carved into a living
oak tree at the edge of the lake, and holding the silver pointer “like a wand . . . over
its hand-lettered words,” she was left to ponder her status as a woman in Judaism;
the ritual succeeded only in reinforcing the message it was meant to cast aside.
She described her “rite of passage as a Jew” as a “withholding” and, years later,
found it ironic that her haftarah portion, a selection from Isaiah 54, spoke of a
barren woman who would be spared humiliation. Even at the relatively enlight-
ened Jewish camps, women were still treated as blemished. Significantly, how-
ever, most girls did not dwell on the lingering vestiges of inequality, preferring to
focus, as did Jessica Gribetz, on the virtually unparalleled opportunities for religious engagement.

Jacob Wener was likely correct that a percentage of nonschooled children who were turned on to Judaism over the summer compelled their parents to send them to Jewish schools or integrate Jewish rituals into their homes. Schoolman was transparent about his desire to utilize camp as an instrument to influence campers’ parents in the direction of increased Jewish engagement. But there were also plenty of children like Bev Cannold, whose exhilarating summers at Achvah only underscored the uninspiring nature of the Judaism that she found in her home and suburban Reform synagogue. Similarly, Maggie Bernstein, who described the environment at Modin as “magical,” found the disconnection between her Conservative home and camp to be jarring. The “joyous” approach to Jewish observance and Jewish culture that was taken for granted at Modin had no analogue in other areas of her life. “Parents of our generation were restrictive and reserved,” she contended, and while ethics such as *tzedakah* were practiced, Jewish ritual, to the extent that it was observed, was more mechanical. In due course, Cannold dealt with the disconnection by adopting a strategy of compartmentalization, while
Bernstein came to associate Modin with “an elite Jewish culture.” Both of these approaches helped them, consciously or unconsciously, to rationalize the culture conflict and seal the boundaries between camp and home. This was surely not the intention of camp leaders. And yet, aside from annual reunions that were more marketing tools than educational devices, very little was done to address the concern.48

One reason for the Jewish educational camps’ relative success in instilling campers with a positive attitude toward Judaism was their soft touch, especially in comparison with the Jewish school. “They didn’t force Judaism down your throat,” recalled former Cejwinite Irwin Gribetz, who attended the Crown Heights Yeshiva during the school year. “Judaism at Cejwin was not about prohibitions, it was not about ‘can’t do.’” It should be noted, however, that this assessment was not universally shared, particularly by those who came to camp with little Jewish background and for whom Sabbath observance of any kind seemed strange. Equally impressive to some was the spirit of Jewish pluralism that existed at all three camps.49

Perhaps the greatest testaments to the success of the camps in creating experiences in “the art of Jewish living” are the fond and vivid recollections of former campers up to eighty years after the fact. Marty Lazar, who attended Modin for six years as a child in the 1940s and later returned as a young adult, still associates particular Jewish songs with his camp days and speculated, only partly in jest, that his family was probably sick of his endless stories about Modin. “My experience at Modin represents, for me, Judaism,” he said, unequivocally. Similar sentiments were expressed by former Modinite Sherry Steger, who explained, “To this day, I call Jewish American camping ‘living Judaism.’” Even those campers who evinced little interest in Jewish culture and observance—some of them preferring, like Cejwinite Steve Kraft, for instance, to spend their time on the ball fields—credited the camps with infusing them with a positive Jewish identity. Of course, as Lang cautioned, nostalgia for summer camp, Jewish educational or otherwise, is fairly ubiquitous among alumni, particularly baby boomers.50

Undeniably, there were social misfits and “accidental campers.” Morton Nadler, for example, spent the summer of 1936 at Achvah and never quite overcame the initial shell shock. Nadler, who described his family as “fairly assimilationist,” immediately felt excluded. “The campers knew Palestinian folk dances, rollicking Hebrew songs, much that they had absorbed at home, mostly from Hebrew school environment. I was left out.” In fact, many more campers than Nadler realized—one-third, according to one estimate—had little or no Jewish schooling. And some that did, particularly those that came from an Orthodox background, found the culture in the camps utterly disconnected from their wintertime reality. As Nadler
admitted, his negative experience at Achvah was shaped largely by his interactions with his tentmates; the prudish Nadler was intimidated and appalled by their bravado, objectification of women, prurient sexual fantasies, and enthusiasm for masturbation.

More typical, overall, were the sentiments of Bob “Steppy” Cohen: “Camp was a place where I felt very comfortable being Jewish, proud to be Jewish. Hebrew school was a drudge. It was a hassle. This was easy. You had sports, camaraderie—being Jewish in camp was part of feeling good, feeling comfortable.”

“The Fact Is That We Are Running a Talmud Torah in Camp”

When Albert Schoolman initially developed an interest in camping, uppermost on his mind was the conundrum of how to manage the perennial disruption to students’ learning in the summertime. The cancellation of Hebrew school classes in the summer, when public schools were on break, seemed like a terrible waste. The typical problem of summer forgetting that vexed all schools appeared to be magnified in the supplementary schools. And yet the growth of summertime leisure and family vacations made keeping the Hebrew schools open an increasingly futile exercise. The vacation home seemed to provide a solution to the summertime dilemma or, as Schoolman put it, “enabled us to transform the problem into an opportunity.”

When the operation moved to Central Valley in 1921, Schoolman launched a bold experiment. An entire class of twenty-six students was relocated to the camp for a full ten-week season, regardless of ability to pay. In addition to participating in a rich panoply of athletic and cultural activities, the pupils continued their regular Hebrew school lessons for an hour or two a day. The students completed an entire semester’s worth of work during the summer. The mixture of the cognitive with the affective and the behavioral modes of learning resulted in an “integrated and “unified program.” Schoolman was elated with the results and repeated the experiment the following summer. Parents, too, were extremely supportive of the study-camp approach. Only the “excessive financial burden” forced Schoolman to abandon the program when the camp moved to Port Jervis. Essential as his educational goals were, maintaining the camp on a self-sustaining basis was an equally important priority.

Nevertheless, Schoolman held fast to a formal education program. It proved to be a popular selling point for the camp with the Institute’s board, which he and the camping committee chairman, Jacob Wener, exploited at every opportunity. Recognizing that many on his board viewed the Hebrew school as the core of the Central Jewish Institute enterprise, Schoolman declared unequivocally at a
January 1921 meeting: “No other single accomplishment could add as much to the progress of the school as the establishment of this vacation home. . . . Considering the more favorable circumstances—the lack of absence and lateness and the distraction of Public school, it is easy to see that a single summer of instruction would be far more effective than a whole year of teaching under less favorable conditions.” Schoolman’s argument evidently impressed at least some of his lay leaders. When clothier Morris Asinof complained at a meeting a few years later that the camp was quickly overshadowing the Talmud Torah, his board colleague Judge Isaac Cohen retorted: “You seem to lose sight of one fact. . . . The fact is that we are running a Talmud Torah in Camp.” In a report to the board the following month, Wener was careful to reiterate the argument: “Our camp is really a summer Talmud Torah for 600 children.”

Likewise, in the camps’ 1925 yearbook, Mahanenu, editor in chief Miriam Ephriam, who for many years ran the girls’ camp, was careful to include glowing reports about the formal educational program. She reprinted a letter from Stone Talmud Torah student Pearl Palley to her principal Harry Handler, in which Palley assured Handler that she was advancing in her Hebrew skills. “Although we do spend much of our time in these sports, we don’t forsake our Hebrew studies. Oh, no!” Palley wrote. She added: “On very fine days we’ll have our lessons outside.”

The need to make the camp palatable to conservative lay leaders did not preclude Schoolman’s genuine commitment to maintain formal classes. But figuring out an effective and workable implementation strategy was no easy matter. By this time, the camp was attracting many children who did not attend the Institute’s school. Some studied at other supplementary schools, while others were receiving no formal Jewish education during the winter. As a result, the average bunk of children was heterogeneous, both in skills and in knowledge base.

Schoolman turned over the camp’s educational program to his Talmud Torah principal Jacob Golub. Each child studied for an hour a day, four days a week, with a separate Oneg Shabbat program on Saturday afternoons. Recognizing that a uniform, graded system was out of the question, Golub initiated separate learning tracks for Hebrew school students and those receiving minimal or no formal Jewish schooling at home. At the same time, he articulated some general aims and objectives for all campers, regardless of background. All campers were expected to know how to read Hebrew and follow the camp’s daily prayer service before they left camp, while older children were expected to master Yiddish writing if they had occasion to speak the language at home.

Golub outlined his curriculum in a 1924 article in the Jewish Teacher. The Hebrew school group followed a curriculum that corresponded with the Institute’s Talmud Torah in terms of both content and pedagogy, although the teachers felt
freer to employ a range of child-centered and kinesthetic methodologies, including Kilpatrick’s project method, which seemed ideally tailored for the more informal and leisurely camp setting. As in the city, language and Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) classes were taught almost entirely in Hebrew. Care was taken to explore topics that were not part of the wintertime curriculum so as to allow students to reintegrate into classes with those who did not attend camp. At least one camp visitor, Dora Spiegel of CJJ’s Women’s Auxiliary, was utterly amazed by the level of a conversational Hebrew class that she observed: “That class awed me into the resolution that I must learn to speak Hebrew, as these children do, and I hope to carry out that resolution.”

By 1924, the larger group of students was following a curriculum that assumed little or no prior Jewish knowledge. Golub and his teaching staff took considerable care in developing the program. Here the language of instruction was English. Jewish-themed stories and in-depth study units on topics related to holidays and observances, Jewish history, and ethical and moral Jewish teachings were supplemented with thematically appropriate arts and crafts projects, dramatics, and other hands-on activities. Efforts were made to draw connections to camp life. For example, a unit on the Sabbath included an extensive discussion of how and why Sabbath was observed at camp. In both tracks, up to one-fifth of the program was devoted to music.

Golub and his Teachers Institute–trained staff were guided by the approach to Judaism and communal life elaborated by Mordecai Kaplan and Israel Friedlaender, and inspired by Dewey and Ahad Ha-Am. They were interested in exploring with the youngsters such questions as how traditional laws and customs might be reinterpreted and reconceived so as to make them meaningful in the modern world, and why Judaism must be a generative culture in order to remain vital and relevant. They emphasized performance over theology and Jewish unity over denominationalism. And they viewed the unfolding Zionist project in Palestine as a stirring drama of national rebirth, and the nascent Zionist culture as a source of spiritual inspiration and cultural enrichment for Diaspora Jewry.

Golub attracted a gifted teaching staff from the ranks of the Institute’s Talmud Torah as well as other New York City Hebrew schools, including Anna Grossman, one of the ablest and most creative of the younger crop of American-trained Hebrew teachers. It is impossible to know how faithfully these teachers adhered to the official curriculum. Nor can we ascertain how effective the classes were, save for the predictably favorable anecdotal accounts that appear in the board records and official camp publications. One assessment in the 1934 edition of Mahanenu indirectly acknowledged that at least some campers reacted apathetically to the prospect of formal summertime study.
By the late 1920s, modifications were in place that appear to have been designed both to support more constructivist project-based learning and to shore up the Hebrew-language program. Schoolman sought out teachers with expertise in both of these areas, including talented artist and teacher Fannie Nimtzowitz, who later gained renown under the name Temima Gezari. The element of choice was also introduced, allowing campers to gravitate toward personally compelling subjects and teachers. Nimtzowitz taught classes on the Jewish holidays and Jewish life in ancient and modern Palestine through the medium of arts and crafts. She also made an enduring impact on the campers through her own art. For decades, her enormous mural depicting the children of ancient and modern Palestine bringing their first fruits to Jerusalem adorned the “Syn-Aud,” Cejwin’s synagogue-auditorium. Another master teacher who spent many summers at the camps was the Institute’s Judith Gutman, whose course on the land of Palestine exemplified Cejwin’s potential as an innovative educational setting. While time constraints during the regular school year prevented her from spending more than an hour-and-a-half lesson on the geography of Eretz Israel, in camp she was able to offer an entire course on the subject. Utilizing the project method, Gutman’s campers constructed a topographical map of Palestine using wooden board or glass and colored styling clay. At CJ1, a similar project was relegated to an optional extracurricular activity.61

The camps’ appeal to the non–Talmud Torah–going population created a minor controversy on the board, instigated by those who believed that the camps should serve primarily Central Jewish Institute families. But as Schoolman and Wener explained, the business model they were following, which kept scholarships to a minimum while relying on economies of scale to keep down operating costs and ultimately tuition, demanded a far larger camper population than the CJ1 Talmud Torah could possibly provide. Moreover, outreach to families of Jewishly unschooled children was a point of pride among the camps’ most vociferous supporters, who believed that they were saving the children for Judaism. For many of those who felt frustrated by CJ1’s demographic challenges, the camp presented an innovative opportunity to shatter the traditional educational paradigm.62

Schoolman’s larger problem remained how to balance his educational objectives with general financial constraints and other costly priorities, such as capital improvements, that were deemed essential to maintaining the camp’s competitiveness in the market. The situation reached a critical juncture in the midst of the Depression. Like other camps, Cejwin experienced a precipitous decline in enrollments during the early 1930s, but it managed to weather the crisis better than other Jewish educational institutions. For those who could afford it, camp was increasingly viewed as an indispensable feature of summertime, providing a respite
for both children and their tired parents. The most serious concern was the camps’ obligation to its bond holders. As bond payments became due, Schoolman was compelled to significantly cut operational costs through staff reductions. One of the ultimate casualties was the formal education program, as Schoolman decided to let go of his teaching staff.63

At first, Schoolman experimented with having Jewishly literate counselors take the place of teachers, conducting weekly discussion sessions, but this proved unsatisfactory. When the Second World War ended and the camps’ financial outlook once again seemed bright, Schoolman resumed experimentation with a more formal educational component. Each division was assigned a Jewish culture instructor, and “Jewish culture classes” were scheduled into the regular program. This time, however, ambitions were more modest and the results were mixed.64

Still there were campers who counted the Jewish culture classes among their favorite activities. Joyce Saltman, for instance, asserted that they played a role in shaping her identity as a Jewish feminist, recalling that it was in those classes where she was first exposed to stories of Jewish heroines such as World War II parachutist Hannah Szenes and Hadassah founder Henrietta Szold. Even into the 1960s and 1970s, Jewish culture teachers struggled with how to hold their campers’ attention, with some turning to activities such as quiz games that blurred the lines between instruction and entertainment, and others gravitating toward “values clarification exercises” that were in vogue at that time. All the while Schoolman, as well as the succession of camp directors who operated Cejwin Camps after he stepped back from day-to-day operations, appeared dissatisfied with this aspect of the program. In 1954 Schoolman defended, on pedagogical grounds, the camps’ swing away from formal education. Like other camp directors, he concluded that the camp environment was poorly suited to traditional schoolwork. Instead, the camps would continue to focus on what they did best, namely, to enlist “all relevant camping activities . . . in the effort to create a pleasant environment for Jewish group living.” Likewise, in the postwar era, Schoolman began to shy away from the appellation “Jewish educational camp,” preferring instead to refer to Cejwin and its ilk as “Jewish cultural camps.” By this time his board’s composition had changed radically, and he felt little pressure to justify the camps’ existence by presenting them as an extension of the Hebrew school.65

Camp Modin, by way of contrast, never attempted to institute mandatory classes. It is unclear whether financial considerations played a role in guiding that decision. But there are other plausible reasons for the omission. Few private camps included formal studies, and some that did, such as Camp Marienfeld in New Hampshire, eventually abandoned them in favor of more informal and experiential activities. Like other camp directors, Berkson and Dushkin might have
believed that camp was best suited for a “learning through doing” approach. Even if they saw the virtue of formal study in camp, it is possible that they feared it would turn off prospective campers. In the 1940s, the Berksons employed a camp rabbi who organized interested campers and staff into study groups. However, the camp never went further than offering optional classes and bar mitzvah tutoring.66

At its best, between 1924 and 1934, Cejwin Camps’ formal education program was a wellspring of creativity where constructivist pedagogies were coupled with a commitment to fairly ambitious skills and content goals. Schoolman and his staff demonstrated that a substantive and appealing formal educational program could be successfully embedded into a Jewish camp environment, assuming the availability of inspired teachers and adequate financial resources. It was a lesson that later educational camps such as Ramah and Yavneh surely took to heart.

“Now, We Don’t Take Children for Free”—Camp’s Social Function

When in the spring of 1919 Tillie Hyman suggested to the Central Jewish Institute’s Women’s Auxiliary that it sponsor a two-week vacation for the Talmud Torah children of needy families, she was following a decades-old tradition of philanthropy that can be traced at least as far back as 1875, when Philadelphian Eliza Turner invited twelve “underprivileged” young girls to spend two weeks at her country farm in Chadd’s Ford, Pennsylvania. The patrons of vacation houses and fresh-air camps sought to remove city children from their environment and expose them to middle-class manners and mores. These and like-minded efforts were eventually tied up with a larger urban reform movement that was propelled by the engine of progressivism. While organized recreational activities were included in many of these vacation camps, the emphasis was on temporarily liberating youngsters from the heat, the crowded and unhealthful tenements, and the untoward influences the city streets. Fresh country air was thought to have curative powers. Children were often cared for by social workers and well-intentioned society ladies. Mothers were sometimes brought from the inner-city tenements to cook and keep house for the children, just as grateful parents and Women’s Auxiliary volunteers tended to these responsibilities at the Central Jewish Institute’s vacation house near Ellenville.67

In the earliest years the Institute’s vacation house resembled these efforts in many respects. Counselors Leah Konovitz and Stella Cohn often led the children on hikes through the countryside, or sometimes to neighborhood destinations.

“They would often stay away a whole day in the care of their teachers. Playing in the fields, gathering flowers or just roaming about, studying the various kinds
of trees, shrubs, birds and flowers, the time was very happily spent,” according
to an enthusiastic account. There were fishing expeditions, swimming outings
three times a week at a nearby lake, athletic competitions on Sunday mornings,
and pageants on Sunday afternoons. In addition, the children were taught self-
sufficiency and conventional middle-class etiquette. “Several mothers have written
to us since [thanking us] for having taught the children to serve at the tables, to
make beds and in general assist in the house keeping of their own homes.” As with
many such ventures, careful attention was dedicated to food preparation and
consumption. Konovitz and Cohn, who planned the daily menus, were sent by the
Institute to two courses in practical dietetics at Teachers College. Ample fruits and
vegetables were included in the children’s diet, as well as treats such as ice cream.68

After initially limiting the vacation home to girls, the program was considerably
expanded and opened to boys as well the following summer. Two farmhouses were
rented so that the boys and girls could be accommodated separately. Only high-
school-age boys were restricted from the program, because “we found it would be
undesirable to them to [have] them camp with the younger boys and girls.” The
Institute arranged to send nineteen boys between the ages of twelve and fourteen
to Surprise Lake Camp for two weeks at a cost of twelve dollars per child.69

The goal was to return the children to the city “tanned and chubby, happy and
inspired.” A fitting metaphor for the entire project was an event that was touted in
later reports as a highlight of the children’s stay. A few times over the course of the
summer William Dvorkind, an officer in the parents’ association, drove to the
vacation home in his large touring car. The children eagerly gathered around to
admire the automobile, and Dvorkind offered each child a long ride. “You can
imagine how delighted the children were on the occasion of their automobile
trips,” one witness explained. “To many of them, it was perhaps the first and only
automobile ride they had received.” Where the Institute’s vacation home diverged
from similar efforts, even by Jewish-sponsored settlement houses and social ser-
vice organizations, was in its effort to create a “wholesome Jewish atmosphere”
and to develop the children’s “Jewish personalities.”70

After the second summer, Schoolman successfully urged the Women’s Auxiliary
and his board of directors to take actions that changed the nature and scope of the
venture. The vacation home was expanded into a full-fledged residential camp
with a Jewish educational focus. It also began the transition from a charity project
to a self-supporting enterprise, with operating costs supported by tuition dollars.
The target clientele became the working and lower middle class. Tuition was set at
a reasonable fifteen dollars per week, and scholarships were offered as needed. By
1922, the camp was running a modest $3,000 profit.71
Still, the lay leadership was not entirely satisfied, and signs of what one scholar termed a “social class identity complex” were beginning to appear. The campgrounds in Central Valley were shabby compared with those of the private camps where the board and Women’s Auxiliary members sent their own children. The president of the Institute’s board, Jacob Rubin, came away from his visit with an even more strongly negative reaction, concluding that “it would not be desirable to lend the Institute name and prestige to a camp of the size of ours, conducted by the CJI in a place so unsuited from a sanitary and economic standpoint as the Central Valley property.” Schoolman reminded his critics that the type of campsite they had in mind would cost up to ten times as much in rent. “The class of people who go to our camp could not afford to pay more than we charge.”

When the board decided a year later to purchase a permanent home for the camp, it initially budgeted $5,000 for the cost of the property and $30,000 over three to five years for construction. Apparently, however, when Schoolman and Wener surveyed the farm on Martin’s Lake, they found the development potential of the seven-hundred-acre site too tempting to resist. And so a $35,000 or $40,000 project quickly ballooned to one of more than $100,000, including the cost of initial construction. The pair attempted to justify their extravagant purchase by suggesting that a working farm be maintained on the property to supply the camp with vegetables, eggs, and poultry. The lake was even stocked with twenty thousand fish “so that we can get our Friday gefilte fish from our own lake.” The hope was to sell the eggs to market during the winter. Wener hoped to net a healthy profit from the farm in a little over a year. Predictably, however, a fifteen-hundred-head poultry farm soon proved a greater headache than it was worth. The vegetable farm was maintained for many years, but it hardly relieved the camp of the burden of purchasing produce, contrary to what Wener and Schoolman had
envisioned. But in at least one respect, the pair evinced a keen business sense. The spacious property enabled them to build a large facility, which was critical, in the long run, to controlling operating costs.\(^7^3\)

By the mid-1920s, a business plan had solidified: Tuition was pegged at about two-thirds of the cost of most private camps. Costs were kept low through careful management and economies of scale. Fees were raised to twenty dollars per week, and scholarships were capped at a total of $5,000. On some level, Schoolman became the real-life embodiment of Vernon Hines, the time and motion efficiency expert in the 1954 musical *The Pajama Game*. Women's Auxiliary member Dora Spiegel recalled Schoolman in his camp office surrounded by charts. There were charts showing the cost per camper of every article supplied to the camp, “from meat and chicken down to salt and soap.” If a particular item rose in price, it was replaced by another of equal value. There were charts itemizing the cost per day and per week of camp maintenance. Schoolman even kept efficiency reports on staff members. In his quiet way, Schoolman had his finger on the camp pulse and appeared to know exactly what everybody was up to, even after the camps grew and capacity topped a thousand campers. Spiegel came away convinced that “[n]o large business concern could handle its business with more accuracy, care and
precision than this camp was being handled.” Schoolman was the picture of an administrative progressive.\textsuperscript{74}

A defining moment for the camps seemed to come in November 1925 when news reached the CJI board that the Orthodox Union’s women’s organization was contemplating opening a kosher residential camp for indigent children in Long Branch. The women had spent $17,000 the previous summer operating a fresh-air-style facility. Some CJI board members were unnerved by the possible competition and wondered whether the Orthodox Union’s women’s organization should be encouraged to forgo its plans and send the children, instead, to the CJI Camps. A vigorous debate ensued, with the majority ultimately deciding against opening the CJI Camps up to the charity cases. “Now, we don’t take children for free,” insisted one board member. President Jacob Rubin agreed: “We are not interested in children that physically need camp recreation. Other institutions have enough to do that. We are an educational institution.”\textsuperscript{75}

To be fair, the Institute continued to subsidize the camp tuitions of those CJI Talmud Torah students whose parents could not afford the cost. The board also raised the scholarship budget during the Depression, even as it struggled to cover operating costs, and in the late 1930s generously offered special scholarships to German Jewish refugee children. It also routinely accepted merit-based scholarship children sponsored by the Jewish Education Association and offered two-week scholarships as part of a promotional contest run by the Breakstone dairy company. In the latter cases, the sponsors completely covered the actual per child costs. In good economic times, however, the board actively limited the number of scholarship beds so that a greater number of full-paying customers could be accommodated. In 1925 Schoolman estimated that 90 percent of families were lower middle class. “Giving a child a vacation at $20 a week is a wonderful opportunity for the grocer, the butcher—even the people who are better wage earners in the clothing industry can afford to send the kids for a few weeks,” he argued. “If you allow the lower class to pay you have an opportunity to give them an education and make them support about 100 or 150 poor children.”\textsuperscript{76}

Nevertheless, Schoolman constantly struggled to define the middle ground between the private Jewish camps, such as his own Camp Modin, and the social-service-agency-operated charity camps. In 1929 he introduced horseback riding into the CJI camps, primarily because of the activity’s cachet. For a time the camps kept their own horses, but the upkeep and insurance rates proved too costly. The most glaring manifestation of the camps’ identity crisis was the change of name from CJI Camps to Cejwin Camps in 1933. The somewhat looser association with the Institute, especially for those who did not realize that the made-up name was a clever acronym for the Central Jewish Institute, made sense in light of the camps’
The inclusion of horseback riding helped Modin appeal to a middle-class clientele. Albert Schoolman briefly introduced horseback riding in Cejwin, but it was not financially sustainable. Courtesy of Howard Salzberg and Camp Modin.

financial and legal separation from the parent organization. Schoolman liked to quip that the name was changed to spare staff members the difficulty of finding rhymes for Central Jewish Institute in camp songs. In reality, however, it was primarily a business decision. Schoolman believed that the word “Institute” stigmatized the camps. Potential customer families associated the word “Institute” with institutional camps and assumed that CJI catered primarily to poor kids. Class-conscious middle-class parents were loath to take any action that would suggest to friends and neighbors that they were financially struggling. Nor did they want their children to associate with the indigent class. Schoolman found such attitudes personally distasteful, yet his experience at the CJI underscored that they were deeply ingrained and tough to resist. “Cejwin,” on the other hand, sounded Native American and suggested that the camps belonged in the same category with private camps having names such as Mah-Kee-Nac and Chipinaw.77

The class distinctions between Modin and Cejwin were revealed in numerous ways beyond the differences in size, cost, and ownership, the most obvious of which was location. Modin was nestled in the remote woods of upper Maine, in those days a two-day journey by automobile from New York City. Marty Lazar remembered the seemingly endless ride on the winding Taconic Parkway. One summer the family car broke down, and he and his parents were forced to spend
One legacy of Cejwin’s origins as a philanthropic venture was the daily malted milk squad, designed to bulk up scrawny city kids. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

the night by the side of the road. Those New Yorkers who did not drive took the train from Grand Central Station to Waterville, Maine, and then a bus to Canaan—a twelve-hour trip. Large contingents of campers also arrived from Boston, Toronto, and Montreal.78

Cejwin, by contrast, was situated only a couple of hours outside New York City and was easily accessible by train. Indeed, the Ontario & Western Railway’s connection between Port Jervis and Middletown ran through the camps’ property, and for many years campers from New York would ferry across the Hudson to Weehawken, where a specially chartered train would transport them directly to camp. (After 1933, the line was operated by the Erie Railroad.) Rare film footage from arrival day sometime in the 1930s shows dazed campers alighting from the railway cars with their hand luggage. Gladys Kraft recalled the “excitement, after waiting all winter, of arriving in camp covered in soot from the four-hour ride on the old O. &W railroad—with Mr. Schoolman there to welcome us.”79

Another telltale difference was the “malted milk squads” that used to fan out on the Cejwin grounds each afternoon. Scrawny kids were lined up for glasses of sweet-tasting, high-caloric shakes to help them bulk up. Exceptionally thin chil-
dren were placed at the end of the line and received double portions. The model
seemed to be the hale and hearty sabra children in Temima Gezari’s synagogue-
auditorium painting, which Cejwinites could not help but stare at during services
on Saturday mornings.80

Proper nutrition, portion size, and the general availability and variety of food
were a perennial issue at Cejwin, particularly in the early decades, with Schoolman
typically trying to control costs while Tillie Hyman and others pressed for greater
choice and more appetizing menus. Even during the Depression, fruits and vege-
tables were included at most meals. Feeding the children well was not simply a
matter of promoting good health; it was also good for business. Campers were
rarely treated to the typical postwar camp fare of hamburgers, hot dogs, and the
like. Instead, a 1932 menu was replete with delicacies such as beet soup and sweet
and sour tongue. Of course, tastes changed, hence the eventual replacement of
sardines and herring on Saturday evening with tuna salad and blueberries with
sour cream.81

Food also functioned as an Americanizing influence. Cejwin was the first place
where Isolde Blum tasted quintessentially American foods such as corn flakes,
chocolate milk, and white bread. She recalled the novelty of huge metal bowls with
sliced oranges at breakfast. “It was fascinating for me, and I loved it!” Cejwin
Camps played an important role in teaching many of its campers how to perform
their American-ness and conform to conventional gender roles. For boys like Steve
Kraft, who lived in cramped city apartments, this socialization process took place
first and foremost on the athletic fields. American boyhood for Kraft and boys like
him was defined by aptitude in organized sports, particularly baseball. For Blum, a
German Jewish refugee child, social cues were picked up from her native-born
bunkmates. She learned to giggle and tell secrets, and discovered that she had a
good singing voice. “Cejwin was where I learned to be an all American girl,”
she said.82

Modin, meanwhile, became the traditional Jew’s prestige camp and attracted
the children of some of the most prominent families on both sides of the U.S.-
Canadian border. Of course, not all children attending Modin were wealthy, and a
few were even on scholarship. The extent to which class figured into the social
dynamic between campers varied from tent to tent. For those have-nots who were
naturally more self-conscious about their humble circumstances, social intimacy
with children who took their social privilege for granted or, worse, wore it as a
badge of superiority could border on unbearable. For example, Israela Schussheim
refused to return to Modin after spending a few seasons there because she found
the girls to be too shallow and stuck-up. “I’ll tell you very truthfully what I think of
Modin,” she wrote in a letter to Bertha Schoolman. “There are many girls there
According to campers Steve Kraft and Isolde Blum, Cejwin Camps taught many immigrant and second generation children how to become Americans. Baseball player, courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Gladys Kraft (holding butterfly net) and her bunkmates at a nature activity, courtesy of Gladys Kraft.
that have a good sum of money. Consequently, everyone tries harder to tower over the next one. I find the girls very snooty.” Israela preferred to attend Cejwin, where “the girls don’t have anything to be snooty about.” Similarly, Maggie Bernstein found that while she made friends easily at Modin, her older sister, who was shaped to a greater extent by their family’s Depression-era struggles, much preferred Cejwin.83

Religious Growth

At home with their families, most children who attended Cejwin probably did not regularly observe havdalah, the traditional ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath and the commencement of the new week. But at camp, havdalah was one of the highlights of the week, a ritual that was conducted with careful consideration for aesthetics and symbolism. Tillie Hyman, who made frequent, extended visits to camp until her death in 1953, poetically described the ceremony as it was conducted during the 1938 season: The children assembled by division around the sides of the lake, with the song leader on a bridge between the groups. “Each group sang in succession, and the music resounded beautifully across the lake disappearing in the hills under a sky red with sunset on one horizon, and showing the first beams of moonlight on the opposite horizon, with the traditional three stars appearing between. After the singing, the traditional havdalah candle was lit, the service changed, and the campers quietly dispersed with the singing of taps in Hebrew. To witness this havdalah service but once is to remember it always.”84

A heightened religious and spiritual ambiance was an integral feature of the initial Jewish educational camps, as it was of many Christian-sponsored camps, including those sponsored by the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Christian Association. No figure played a more seminal role in bringing together physical education and spiritual development than the YMCA’s Luther Gulick. Under his stewardship, the Y adopted a guiding philosophy that was encapsulated in the motto “spirit upheld by body and mind.” One strategy that camps used to achieve this end was to hallow the mundane. Sumner Dudley, who organized the first Y camp in 1885, was mindful that a “Christian ethic” pervade all of the camp’s activities, not simply the daily devotions and Sunday morning services.85

Jewish educational camps adopted a similar approach, integrating Jewish practice and values into camp life in ways both subtle and direct. Daily prayer services were built into a morning ritual that also included calisthenics and flag raising. Mealtimes routinely began with the motzi, the blessing over the bread, and concluded with an abbreviated Grace After Meals. The camps also observed the Jewish dietary laws as a matter of course. Equally important was the modeling of Jewish
observance and values by staff members, particularly counselors. The intention was to make Judaism modish and accessible, to provide an alternative paradigm to the image of Judaism as foreign and old-fashioned. Myles Striar recalled being impressed by his interactions in the mid-1940s with Camp Modin’s rabbi, Elias Charry, “the first ‘cool’ rabbi I had ever met.”

In practice, the constraints of the market for upper-college-age counselors meant that the staff at all three camps was diverse. Zachary Heller recalled that one summer at Modin his counselor was a Jewish Theological Seminary rabbinical student, while the following year his cabin was led by a college student from Texas with little prior exposure to the Sabbath or kashrut. The two developed a symbiotic relationship. “He taught me how to hit a ball with a bat and I helped explain [to him] ‘all this Jewish stuff.’” Likewise, the intensity of a counselor’s Jewish background and knowledge base did not guarantee that these commitments would be conveyed to campers. In the 1930s, for example, many counselors at the camps were politically radicalized and more interested in sharing with campers their passions for socialism or the republican cause in the Spanish Civil War than their commitment to Judaism. In those days there were heated debates about the relative merits of volunteering for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain or working on a kibbutz in Palestine and devoting oneself to the cause of building the Jewish national home.

Mindful of their diverse population, the camps practiced the virtue of brevity in daily worship and mealtime grace. Golub counseled: “Camp services should be brief, should consist mostly of singing, and the vernacular should be employed with the exception of one or two Hebrew prayers. Above all, an attitude of fine decorum and respect on the part of the adults must be secured.” Over time, Hebrew prayers assumed greater prevalence, and the emphasis on decorum was somewhat relaxed. But the camps continued to uphold the tenets underlying Golub’s suggestions about ritual, including his radical endorsement of innovation, despite occasional resistance from parents and backers. Cejwin Camps’ second president, Ira Kaplan, was uncomfortable with the drastically abbreviated nature of daily services and the fact that the prayer leaders did not always don phylacteries. Schoolman, however, dismissed his criticisms: “As for services and tefillin, every interested father of grown children knows how much of a problem it is to retain even a vestige of the traditional observance. Yet at Cejwin, we have synagogue worship and ceremonial observance that must be regarded as beautiful and significant from every standpoint. The importance of these can be gauged best only when they are evaluated from an educational standpoint for children, rather than from the point of view of adults who have long established their religious peace with God and man.”
The distinction between religion and ethnic culture, if it existed at all in these camps, was vague. To be sure, camp directors distinguished between the equally extolled causes of spiritually uplifting the children and promoting their identification with the Jewish people and heritage. In practice, however, both goals and methods were intertwined. The camps bore the unmistakable stamp of Mordecai Kaplan’s Reconstructionist outlook, which animated the personal beliefs and practices of the Schoolmans, Dushkins, and Berksons. Kaplan was a frequent visitor at the camps and in his later years had his own bungalow at Cejwin Camps, where he taught teen groups and served as a figurehead and scholar in residence. Even in retirement the acerbic-tongued Kaplan was an intimidating presence, and staff members were terrified to sit at his table in the dining room. Reform Rabbi Max “Buddy” Hausen, who worked on Cejwin’s waterfront, was finally recruited to “keep Dr. Kaplan company.” Hausen remembered how Kaplan would shake his fist and rage at him: “Hausen—Tell your people they have to learn to read [Hebrew]! We are the people of the book and we are losing that.” A more accessible presence was Kaplan’s son-in-law, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, who spent weekends at Cejwin where his wife, Judith, was a music teacher. One summer, Eisenstein even took the role of Lord High Chancellor in a staff production of the Gilbert and Sullivan show *Iolanthe.*

The directors of the Jewish educational camps also shared Gulick’s conviction that the most effective way to bring children closer to religion was by first showing them a good time. While Gulick took a dim view of those who regarded the Y’s recreational work in purely instrumental terms, he subscribed to the tactic that one Ymca chapter described as “tickle them first and save them afterward.” Schoolman similarly asserted that “the key element of crucial value in educational camping is the campers’ association of the pleasuresome experiences in the general camping activity with the Jewish living-learning aspects of the program. This association is quite natural and normal in a fully integrated program of doing-learning-living. It is also pedagogically the strongest indigenous pupil stimulus to the learning-living process.”

The hallowing of the mundane was pursued alongside the strategy of punctuating the daily camp rhythm with powerful and poignant religious experiences, such as the ceremony described by Hyman. Boiberik’s Leibush Lehrer referred to them as “dramatized norms.” The havdalah ceremony incorporated a number of features that came to characterize Jewish practice at Cejwin, Modin, and Achvah as well as many of their successors: Rituals were typically designed to be participatory, even while they were carefully scripted and choreographed. Emphasis was on the affective as opposed to the cognitive, with effort made to create maximal emotional intensity, often through the use of the performance arts. Finally, rituals
and ceremonies actively capitalized on the inherent spirituality and beauty of the natural setting.91

No occasion was more important in contributing to the camp’s religious atmosphere than the Sabbath. The utmost effort was made to delineate the Sabbath as sacred time. A thorough cleanup was initiated on Friday afternoon. Cabins were hosed down and younger children lined up at basins, where their hair was checked for nits and shampooed by the camp mother. Linen was changed, beds were made, and cubbies straightened. Children and staff dressed in “Sabbath whites” and streamed to the flagpole where the flag was lowered. The dinner menu was more elaborate than it was the rest of the week and typically included traditional Sabbath dishes. The evening often concluded with the singing of zemirot (traditional Sabbath melodies), Palestinian Jewish folk songs, and hora dancing. Saturday, too, was distinguished from the rest of the week, often by a later wake-up time, a traditional Sabbath service, sibling visitation hour, and, for older campers, that quintessential of camp Sabbath activities, the “Shabbos walk” with one’s summer sweetheart.92

Each camp had its unique way of welcoming of the Sabbath, inspired by the Talmudic legend of the Sabbath Queen and her ministering angels in B.T. Shabbat 119a. At Modin, the boys would gather at “the point” at the edge of the lake, where services were held in front of the “Torah Tree,” a small Torah ark made of bark and built into a tri-trunk maple or oak tree. As the sun set over the lake, campers and staff would sing Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s poem “Shabbat Ha-Malkah” (The Sabbath Queen), set to a haunting yet gently lilting melody. “The sun on the hilltops no longer is seen. Come gather to welcome the Sabbath—our queen. Behold her descending: the holy, the blessed. With angels as cohorts—of peace and of rest.”93

The most elaborate ceremony probably took place at Achvah, where Benderly was a great enthusiast for pageantry. According to the longtime dramatics instructor, Samuel Citron, the entire camp assembled in front of the mess hall, where Benderly introduced the Sabbath by retelling the biblical creation story, with the visual aid of campers dressed to represent each of the days of creation. When the campers began to sing the “Lecha Dodi,” a hymn from the traditional Sabbath evening liturgy, “The Queen Sabbath, Shabbat Hamalkah herself, appeared from the woods. Walking slowly, in time to the singing of the campers, she approached the assembly. Dressed in flowing white robes, her head wreathed in flowers, she was followed by a retinue of the youngest campers, dressed as Sabbath angels. As she came near the gathered campers, the song changed to Hallelujah and out of the mess-hall came rows of brightly dressed girls, dancing a dance of welcome for the Sabbath Queen. A boy and a girl, the hosts, representing the camp, then welcomed
the Queen, led her up to the porch, from which she and her angels blessed the campers who were now singing Shalom Aleichem.” The ceremony was brought to a conclusion with Benderly’s chanting of the kiddush, the blessing over the wine, “in his distinctive half oriental, half Chassidic” intonation.  

With all its charming ritual, sumptuous food, and leisurely air, Sabbath posed something of a dilemma for Jewish educational camps. Although leaders typically did not dwell on the intricacies of Jewish law, there was an expectation that the Sabbath restrictions on work would be observed in the public domain. While rules were sometimes bent around the edges—for example, Schoolman permitted a Sabbath “dip in the lake” as long as there was no instructional swim, a policy that would not have been acceptable in a strictly Orthodox setting—the “spirit of the Sabbath” was maintained through strictures on organized athletic games. For the large number of children for whom the strict observance of the Sabbath was outside their realm of experience, there was a danger that Sabbath might be viewed as a tedious nuisance. As Jacob Golub recognized, “Possibly because the essence of the camp routine is pleasure and enjoyment, any change from that is most apt to be less attractive.” Golub admitted that there were no easy answers to this problem, but he insisted that care be taken, especially with children from nonobservant homes, to convey Jewishness in a pleasant manner. Noting that the Sabbath “is as rich in positive commandments as it is in prohibitions,” he warned of the “danger
of over-emphasizing the prohibitions and failing to bring out adequately the positive joyous features of the Sabbath.” The Sabbath, he hoped, could be promoted as “a rest day, a day for quiet and for leisure, on which one can take off time to read, to go for a walk, or just to sit around and lounge.”

Another quandary was posed by Tisha B’Av (the Ninth of Av), a fast day mourning the destruction of Solomon and Herod’s temples in antiquity. The only traditional holy day that fell during the camp season, it was nevertheless unknown to most campers. Moreover, as a commemoration for one of the great tragedies to befall the Jewish people, it seemed only to reinforce the image of the Jews as persecuted and powerless, which the camps were trying to play down. The traditional mourning customs associated with the nine days leading up to the fast, including prohibitions against swimming, eating meat and poultry, and laundering clothes, were a camp director’s nightmare. Typically, they gave a nod to the tradition with symbolic gestures such as prohibiting boating during the nine days and canceling breakfast on the fast day. Orthodox campers, of course, were free to more strictly observe the fast and the days preceding it.

The evening of the fast was utilized for maximal educational benefit, with Zionist themes playing on the paradigm of destruction and rebirth often at the fore. At Achvah, Benderly and his staff created a pageant titled “A Nation Reborn,” which was performed annually on Tisha B’Av night, wherein the “the entire sweep of Jewish history” was “portrayed in a grand manner.” Highlights included selections from the biblical book of Lamentations, chanted by the prophet Jeremiah; Mother Rachel weeping for her children; and a recitation of the oath “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,” by campers dressed as the exiles and sitting along “the Rivers of Babylon.” Significantly, however, the pageant climaxed with a scene representing the upbuilding of Palestine by the halutzim. Modin originated the spectacle of “burning Jerusalem” on the lake, which was later exported to Massad and other culture camps.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 left the Zionist camp directors wondering how their observance of Tisha B’Av should reflect the new political reality. Did the reestablishment of Jewish political sovereignty in the land of Israel render the day of mourning obsolete? Initially, at least, Schoolman decided, under Kaplan’s influence, to make its continued observance optional. Those who wished to fast and pray were undisturbed. But, for the vast majority of campers, the Ninth of Av became indistinguishable from other days.

By the late 1950s, however, some manifestations of the observance had been reinstated, and Tisha B’Av metamorphosed into a day when the camps engaged in Holocaust-related education, typically within the framework of a Zionist teleol-
ogy. A Tisha B’Av play performed in August 1960—only a few months after Nazi official Adolf Eichmann was captured by Israel’s secret service in Buenos Aires and brought to stand trial in Jerusalem—including a scene where Theodor Herzl warned that unless a national home were secured for the Jews “without a moment’s delay, we can look forward to nothing but sorrow and degradation.” His speech was followed up by the singing of “Ani Ma’amín” (I Believe), a song that became associated with the Nazi genocide, as a narrator invoked the annihilation of European Jewry.

 Yet, following a leitmotif familiar to Holocaust education before the 1970s, the mood of the play turned upbeat by the end as death and persecution were tempered by the celebration of Jewish heroism and triumph. The play climaxed with the singing of “Mi Yivneh Ha-Galil?” (Who Will Build the Galilee?) as a counselor dressed as Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, read from Israel’s Declaration of Independence. “Fulfillment at last! Redemption at last! Now we can return home,” the narrator concluded. “To think that we had the privilege to see the rebirth of Zion in our own day! Something that was denied even Theodor Herzl who pleaded its case and kept the people’s hopes alive for so many years!” Not surprisingly, the camps’ mixed message about the fast day left some campers confused. “Tisha B’Av always bothered me,” explained Jessica Gribetz. “Even today, I am troubled and I’m never sure what to do.”

“I Always Wanted the Carefree American Childhood”

The Shoah became integral to the camps’ educational programming by the late 1950s. When it was not ideologically linked with the creation of the Jewish state, it was treated as a universalistic object lesson about man’s potential inhumanity. The graphic film Night and Fog was shown at Cejwin during the 1958 season to children as young as nine years old. Some, especially those with little prior knowledge of the Holocaust, found the graphic images traumatizing. The events in Nazi Europe were also conveyed more subtly through the appearance of survivors as camp employees. As early as the 1946 season there were former concentration camp victims on the Cejwin kitchen staff. Although little was said about their experiences in Europe, there was an unmistakable air of tragedy about them. Some years later, as Alex Witchel recalled, “many of the gray-haired canteen ladies, who traded us Ring Dings for our snack coupons and clucked at our halter tops,” had green numbers tattooed on their arms. “I always wanted the carefree American childhood, not the one freighted with history and religion and social responsibility,” Witchel wrote. Until the mid-1930s, the camp directors seemed to believe that the
two were not mutually exclusive. In the aftermath of the Shoah and the heroic but costly battles for Israel’s independence and survival, however, Witchel’s wish became recognized as the antithesis of the camps’ mission.

During the Second World War itself, the threat to the Jews was typically discussed with the campers only in general terms; little was said publicly about the ghettos and the concentration camps. Counselors spoke of the latest news out of earshot of their charges, and even then often in hushed tones. Still, the arrival in camp in the late 1930s of German refugee children such as Isolde Blum, as well as refugee waiters in the dining halls, was a constant reminder of the plight of German Jewry under the Nazis. And Hitler became a favorite villain in many a children’s game of war. One boys’ bunk at Modin concocted a fantastically elaborate plan to capture and torture the Nazi fuehrer.

America’s entry into the war profoundly affected the camps in a number of respects. Mirroring its effect on the home front more generally, the role of women was greatly expanded. With most young men serving in the military, staff shortages became acute, and women were recruited for many positions that were formally held by men. A second, equally predictable consequence was the intensification and reinforcement of one’s American identity. Yet, at the same time, the Jewish contribution to the war effort was felt in an exaggerated way. Mail call was even more eagerly anticipated than usual, and news of the arrival of a letter from the front to a friend or sweetheart spread quickly. The prospect of counselors-in-training and junior staff shipping off to war colored the last days of camp during those years. Some staff members left for basic training directly from Cejwin, on the train that ran through the property. A mural inscribed with their names was hung in the canteen, and over the next few years stars were placed next to the names of those boys who would not be returning home. Long after victory was declared in the Pacific, the mural reminded campers of the camps’ intimate contribution to the war effort and heightened their feelings of patriotism and sense of American identification.

Wartime rationing resulted in shortages in food and supplies, particularly meat. When the girls’ camp infirmary at Cejwin was destroyed by fire in 1942, wartime inflation and a lack of building materials prevented Schoolman from replacing it despite collecting on an insurance policy. In general, staffs and parents took the disruptions and inconveniences in stride. According to one report, “Patriotic cooperation was the keynote reaction among all groups.” With the perception that democracy was under threat, the institution of summer camp was presented as “iconic of the possibilities of democratic American citizenship.” The war also affected parents’ decisions about where to send their children. Modin’s remote location became a selling point for nervous parents who feared German air attacks.
This 1942 advertisement for Camp Achvah, which ran in the Jewish Frontier, played on parents’ wartime fears. Courtesy of the Klau Library, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

on East Coast cities. Jewish education camps, like residential camps more generally, experienced enrollment growth during the war, as gas rationing, absent fathers, and the increase of women in the workforce discouraged family vacations and resulted in increased summertime child-care dilemmas.∞≠∂

The war was the overriding factor in Myles Striar’s parents’ decision to celebrate his August 1945 bar mitzvah at Camp Modin. “It was regarded as unseemly to have a big party with the war still on and my uncles Max, Howard, and Don still in it,” he explained. B’nai mitzvah at camp were not uncommon. Parents would typically arrange for their child to be prepared at camp by a tutor. In Striar’s case, the camp music teacher drilled him on his haftarah “until I was nearly mad, for he heard the first day that I was tone deaf,” while the camp’s rabbi, Elias Charry, helped him write his bar mitzvah speech. Striar admired the young rabbi, who told him that “he didn’t like stuffy, precocious Bar Mitzvah speeches.” The service took place on a gorgeous sunny day, lakeside, by the Torah Tree, and was attended by about thirty of his relatives as well as the entire camp. Years later, however, what stood out most in Striar’s mind was the coincidence of his bar mitzvah with the bombing of Hiroshima. As detailed news reports about the awesome devastation wrought by
the atomic weapon filtered back to the United States, the implications for the war effort in the Pacific became clear: an invasion of Japan would be forestalled. The excitement in the air was palpable. “Everyone in my family, especially my aunts, was overjoyed, because now my uncles would soon be coming home instead of being shipped from Europe to the Far East to fight.” A sixteen-millimeter film recording of the occasion captures one of Striar’s aunts dramatically throwing her arms around Rabbi Charry in excitement over the war’s imminent conclusion.\(^\text{105}\)

In hindsight, with a greater appreciation for the geopolitical consequences and moral implications of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing, Striar viewed the occasion with ambivalence. “It is most peculiar to look at the home movies from that day to see us celebrating Hiroshima,” Striar, who went on to become a peace activist, reflected. “We were all so happy in America for that atomic bomb and did not care at all about the ‘little yellow people’ who were killed.” During the war years, however, there were few qualms about the morality of the war itself or the tactics that the American government and military used in its prosecution. This was particularly true in total Jewish environments such as Modin, where campers and staff, uninhibited by fears of an antisemitic backlash, felt free to vociferously portray fascism not only as a threat to democracy but also as a mortal peril to the Jewish population of Europe.\(^\text{106}\)

On Halutzim and Indians

A year later, the eyes of campers and staff were focused on Palestine as headlines were dominated by Britain’s refusal to admit tens of thousands of Jewish displaced persons and the increasingly violent acts of resistance against British rule by Zionist underground organizations. That summer, on the weekend of July 27, the Cejwin Camps dedicated a special Sabbath service to the situation, designed to increase awareness and reinforce campers’ identification with the Zionist struggle in Palestine. The service, which included thematically appropriate responsive readings and a sermon by Bertha Singer Schoolman, projected defiance predicated on moral resolution. Utilizing language that approached the worst of what was said in the summer camps about the Nazis, Mrs. Schoolman excoriated the British for their acts of “betrayal” and “vicious atrocities.” She concluded: “Today more than ever we must continue the struggle so that the land of Israel may once and for all revert to the people of Israel in line with the old and honored tradition and the age-long hope and dream of our stricken people.”\(^\text{107}\)

Summer camps were engaged in heritage transmission from the outset. Offering patriotic models to youth was integral to the larger mission of character development and became increasingly central to the camping endeavor in the
1910s and ’20s. Many camps observed the Fourth of July, which fell toward the beginning of the camp season, with elaborate pageants reenacting key events in the nation’s history. Most ubiquitous were the celebrations of American Indian life (often more imagined than real). “Indianness” was performed in multiple settings and through a variety of media, including pageantry, dance, ceremonies, woodworking, games, and crafts. Many camps adopted Indian names and designated bunks or divisions as tribes. Even the camp director was sometimes known as the “Big Chief.” The architectural landscape of camps was likewise Indianized: Children slept in Indian villages; grew vegetables in Indian gardens; and held campfires and performed rites in the Indian council ring.\textsuperscript{108}

Historian Philip Deloria has convincingly linked the popularity of “playing Indian” during this period to the antimodernist anxieties precipitated by the ascendancy of the industrialized American city. The noble savage, vigorous and natural, was the antithesis of the effete, affected urbanite. “Amidst the steel skyscrapers of the alienating modern city, the Indian continued to lie in wait, always materializing when citizens gathered to proclaim American—and now modern—identities,” he wrote. By the time the CJI Camps and Modin were founded, playing Indian was a common feature at Christian- and Jewish-sponsored institutional camps, including the Hebrew Orphan Asylum’s Camp Wakitan and the Educational Alliance’s Surprise Lake.\textsuperscript{109}

The translation of Indian play to a Jewish camp setting posed little difficulty. As avid consumers of popular culture, immigrant Jewish youth were familiar with the tropes of the American frontier myth. On a psychological level, the attraction of such mimetic play probably was fueled more by a desire for social acceptance and a sense of belonging than by anxieties about the tenor of modern life. As one historian of camping succinctly put it: “Like jokes, songs, nicknames and special colors that were central to camp life, racial ‘outsiders’ helped to create a sense of being inside.” Political scientist Michael Rogin referred to this as painting one’s face black to wash one’s self white. It is no coincidence that minstrelsy was, likewise, a popular form of entertainment at many camps, Jewish and non-Jewish, private and institutional. Racial play, whether it involved dressing in Indian feathers or donning blackface, was designed to “socialize white children into modern American citizenship.” For Jews and other European ethnic groups struggling for social acceptance, particularly in the xenophobic environment of the interwar years, racial cross-dressing reinforced a sense of identification with the “Caucasian” majority culture by elevating the racial binary above all other markers of difference in the United States.\textsuperscript{110}

The first Jewish educational camps dabbled with Indian motifs in their earliest years. For example, a report of “color war” competition at CJI Camps in 1925
described team members donning war paint on their faces and engaging in various faux-Indian rituals: “First the chiefs went through the ceremonies which were befitting on such an occasion, and then they did proceed to dig out the hatchet, each removing a spadeful of earth in his turn. And when the hatchet was in full view, they did all grasp it and make the formal declaration of war. And their tribes realizing the seriousness of the occasion did disperse silently, each man going to his cabin or wigwam.” After the gold team emerged victorious, the chiefs symbolically buried the hatchet on the corner of the athletic field and smoked a peace pipe at the campfire. Significantly, however, Jewish educational camps drew the line at blackface minstrelsy. In the early 1940s, Abe Tauber, the boys’ head counselor at Modin, admonished a group of adolescents who wanted to write and perform a minstrel show: “He told us that minstrel shows were racist and comparable to the Abie stories bigots told about Jews,” a former camper recalled. Nevertheless, songs with their roots in minstrelsy, such as “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Shortnin’ Bread” (with their allusions to “darkies” hunting possums and eating shortening bread), were campfire standards and included in camp songbooks as late as 1963.111

Camp leaders viewed color war week as a character-building activity, honing “manly qualities” such as discipline, sportsmanship, and loyalty among the boys.
and “homely virtues” including order, cooperation, and cheerfulness among the girls. The girls’ head counselor asserted that color war “crystallizes our ways of doing and thinking through all the camp summer. . . . Every camper lives each moment to the full, yet is her whole being gladly merged in that super-being, the Team. From reveille to taps, from hour to hour throughout the long day, each is on the alert to serve the honor of Blue or of Gold.” These and other statements by head staff at Cejwin and Modin were reminiscent of the pronouncements of leading camping figures such as Luther Gulick, who wrote that “activities calling for cooperation and self-sacrifice form the natural basis upon which a life of service can be built.”

As we have seen, antimodernist anxieties fed especial concern about the socialization of boys. Theodore Roosevelt’s “doctrine of the strenuous life” served as a touchstone for those engaged in boys’ character education. Animated by the same concerns about the emasculating effects of “overcivilization” that wracked pioneering camp directors such as Ernest Balch and Gulick, and child psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall, “tr” (Roosevelt) became a tireless promoter of exercise and the sporting life. He and other champions of the new masculinity stressed vigorous struggle as an intrinsic virtue that they encouraged men to pursue in a variety of arenas including the wilderness, the battlefield, and the playing field. Roosevelt’s advocacy was afforded an added measure of credibility because he was famously a role model: a sickly, bespectacled weakling of a boy who mastered his body and came to “epitomize manly zest for the new imperial nation.”

TR’s “doctrine of the strenuous life” had especial resonance for interwar Jewish youth educators, who were operating in an environment tainted by the prevalence of antisemitic discourse, particularly stereotypes that feminized Jewish men. A 1930 CJJ Camps manual, titled “A Guide to Good Counselorship,” was heavily influenced by the new standard of masculinity. The authors were vitally concerned that male counselors discourage any behaviors among their boys that suggested softness, effeminacy, neurasthenia, and lack of self-control. It advised counselors to vigilantly combat such bad habits as nail biting and masturbation, and “psychic” problems such as bed-wetting and irregular bowel movements. “Habits are the tools by which we achieve health, happiness and efficiency,” the manual declared. “Good habits make good character. Bad habits usually render a person friendless, unhappy, inefficient, untrustworthy and poorly adjusted to conditions in the home and the community.” Boys should not be indulged or coddled, the authors warned. “Sentimentality hinders the development of the boys’ strength of character.” Instead, they repeatedly urged counselors to practice strict and consistent discipline, as long as it did not lapse into overregimentation, and to encourage campers to master self-control. Lineups, marching, calisthenics, and attention to
personal hygiene were all commended. Significantly, nowhere did the manual promote the inculcation of values that were identified as Jewish. Nor did it look to Jewish sources, classical or modern, for guidance or support. Authority was located in the disciplines of medicine and psychology.∞∞∂

Former campers confirmed that the manual was not merely prescriptive but captured the approach of many counselors. Steve Kraft, who began attending Cejwin in 1935, remembered his experience as “an unwitting introduction to military discipline.” “There was a lot of marching in line, calisthenics, and firm discipline,” Max Hausen recalled. Girls’ counselors were, apparently, somewhat less strict and more nurturing, looking the other way when water fights broke out in the washrooms and reading and singing to the younger children before bed. In the early years, staff members tended to be older and were referred to using the appellation of “Aunt” or “Uncle.” Many were high school teachers during the school year, and Kraft speculated that they simply “transferred to camp the behavior and interests of New York City public school teachers.” “A certain amount of regimentation was necessary at a big camp like Cejwin,” Gladys Kraft insisted. Of course, plenty of campers thrived in the highly disciplined camp environment. Former Modinite Sid Baumgarten credited the camp’s “regimentation and patriotism” for leading him into “many years of military service.” Counselors generally tried to imbue their campers with “camp spirit” and “group loyalty.” Only after these values were internalized did they begin to stress personal achievement. At the same time, they readily used the spirit of competition to motivate their campers to exert their best efforts, whether the activity was basketball or bed making.∞∞∑

In time, Indian and American frontier lore was replaced by Jewish historical iconography and imagery related to the Zionist project in Palestine. At cji Camps, divisions were named for Jewish heroes and heroines: Bar Kokhba, Herzl, Miriam, and Hadassah. When the camps grew and were divided in the 1930s and ’40s, they were each designated by Hebrew names: Yonim for the youngest group; Hadar/Hadas for the juniors; Carmel/Carmela for the intermediates; and Aviv/Aviva for the seniors.

In the 1930s, Maccabiad athletic competitions were introduced at the camps, which were loosely based on the quadrennial Maccabiad (later Maccabiah) games that were first held in Palestine in 1932. Tillie Hyman, who witnessed the 1938 Maccabiad at Cejwin, marveled at how it was “possible to connect up even athletics with information and inspiration to be derived from the new life being developed in the Holy Land.” Hyman described how the games commenced with the camper-athletes taking the “Maccabean Oath” before the American and Zionist flags: “We the campers of Cejwin, aware of all our obligations, and of the
import of our words, faithfully promise to bear high in the game of life, the noble traditions and ideals of our forefathers in Judaism.” The events ended with the formation by the campers of a huge Star of David, and the singing of “Hatikvah” and “America.” “Hope for the future, based on loyalty to the past constituted the underlying theme of the afternoon program,” Hyman asserted.116

The Maccabees, who, as the archetypal “band of brothers,” so epitomized the corporeal Jewish hero that they made the rabbis of the Talmud squirm, became favorite camp icons. They were valuable symbols of Jewish masculinity in an era when the revirilization of boyhood was elevated to a national obsession and Jewish men were commonly lampooned as feminine in antisemitic imagery and discourse. Camp Modin was named for the home village of the Maccabees, and the heroic deeds of the Hasmonean brothers frequently provided inspiration for artistic expression and thematic material for camp activities.

Plays about Jewish life in Palestine (and, later, the state of Israel) encouraged vicarious identification with the Zionist colonists. One particularly effective example from the 1950s was “Tel Daroma,” an “action-packed” story about the adventures of an American Jewish expatriate living on a border kibbutz. It was written by Cejwin dramatics counselor Helen Stambler, with original songs by a team including music instructors Seymour Silbermintz and Irene Heskes. At Camp Modin, in the early 1940s, campers and staff participated in an even more direct performance of halutziut. Under the leadership of Gershon Berkson, son of the Isaac and Libbie Berkson, older campers and counselors built a working stockade-and-tower kibbutz on land adjacent to the camp. Like the real-life stockade-and-tower settlements that were built by colonists in border areas during the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt, the Modin kibbutz was raised in a single night. For a few summers, the kibbutz operated as a minifarm school where older campers could grow produce and raise livestock.117

Younger campers would visit the kibbutz and, under the tutelage of the camp’s music director, Harry Cooperstsmith, learn to sing Hebrew and English Zionist songs, including David Sambursky and Natan Alterman’s “Watchman, What of the Night” (Ba’a M’nucha) and Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s “Tehezakna,” with a translation by Alexander Dushkin:

Oh, strengthen the hands of our comrades,
Rebuilding the Land of our Fathers
with the sweat of their brow.
Toiling courageous in the dream of the ages,
Shoulder to shoulder for Israel now.118
 Appropriately enough, a favorite of the younger children was Samuel Goldfarb and Samuel Grossman’s Jewish Home Institute song, “The Watchman of the Tower,” which embodied a childlike, romanticized view of the rugged individual frontier hero:

If ever enemy should come,  
No matter what his strength or might,  
I’d blow my fife and beat my drum,  
And I alone the foe would fight.

For I am the soldier, bold and strong,  
Who watches, and who watches,  
O’er the walls so long;  
And watches the towers great and tall;  
“The foe is beaten!” I would call. . . .  
And watches the towers great and tall;  
And “All’s at peace!” then, I would call.  

Coopersmith, who published Songs of Zion (Behrman House, 1942) during this period, was one of the early interpreters and popularizers of Zionist songs in the United States. The camp directors went out their way to hire staff members who lived in or had visited Palestine. Recent visitors to Palestine, including the directors themselves, brought back not only news and stories but also the folk culture of the Yishuv, particularly songs and dances. By all accounts, the impact was palpable. “Although I had been a member of Young Judea, it was at Modin that I really learned what a chalutz was,” one former camper explained. “We loved hearing the stories told after dinner on Friday nights by returnees from Palestine.” After the creation of the state of Israel, both Al Schoolman and Libbie Berkson hired Israelis to supervise various cultural activities and to act as a general presence at camp. According to Cohn, Berkson had a soft spot for the Israeli staff members and often turned a blind eye to instances of misbehavior and indolence.

In the 1920s and early ’30s, the noble Indian savage had his analogue in the Arab Bedouin. “Just as so many camps in this country have Indian symbols and methods of woodcraft, etc., Palestinian boys and girls have learned a lot about camping and nature lore from the Bedouins who spend their entire lives in low, black, goat-hair tents which they pitch near the Jewish colonies when they come for work at the time of the almond or grape harvest,” George Hyman explained to wide-eyed
campers in 1925. “For instance, the head-dress that Jewish boys and girls in Palestine are adopting is borrowed from the Arab ‘kufiyeh,’ a large scarf which hangs down over the back of the neck and protects one from the heat of the midday sun, the dust of the road and the cold of the evening.”

Hyman, the son of Samuel and Tillie Hyman, was an almost larger-than-life Zionist influence at the CJJ Camps, serving in a variety of staff and administrative positions until his life was cut short by testicular cancer in 1936. George spent a year in Palestine in 1921–22 and lived in Jerusalem with his wife, Isabelle Kitay, from 1928 until 1930, working as assistant registrar and secretary to Judah Magnes at Hebrew University. While there, the handsome, six-foot Hyman “went native” and reportedly cut a dashing pose on horseback bedecked in a flowing white Bedouin robe and headdress. In the early 1930s, while serving as Cejwin’s assistant director, Hyman rode a white horse at camp, often donning his Bedouin attire. Hyman fashioned a topographical map of Palestine on one of the athletic fields and tutored the children in Palestinian Jewish and Bedouin lore.

Hyman loved to regale the boys and girls with stories of life on Palestine’s “frontier,” including his heroic deeds in the face of the hostile natives. During the Arab riots in the summer of 1929, Hyman was effectively in charge of the university’s Mt. Scopus campus and was credited with preventing the loss of life and serious damage. According to one journalist’s account, “When the outbreak came, Hyman started to work at once. He obtained a rifle and a special constable’s brassard, and, armed with these badges of authority, began to move the American Jews in his neighborhood down the hill to the consulate. He made trip after trip over dangerous roads for two days, and brought many people to safety.”

Hyman and his wife were also involved in gunrunning for the Haganah. According to family member Susan Addelston, “Isabel put guns, bullets, and incriminating papers under [her son] Sam’s baby carriage mattress and wheeled him all over the city! [Jerusalem] wasn’t very big then, and as a woman with a baby, I guess she had more immunity.”

By the late 1920s, the dominant heroic image at the camps became the halutz. For example, in a 1926 CJJ Camps reunion magazine, counselor Florence Bernstein lionized the halutzim in an article about Jewish Arbor Day: “They are planting today in Eretz Yisrael—ploughing furrows in mud, in sand, even in soil that is stony. . . . we can almost see the stalwart young Chalutzim, bent over the stubborn ploughs, singing through clenched teeth, the workers’ songs. We see brown-armed girls leading donkeys laden with seed from workman to workman, and lending a willing hand when a great rock has to be torn from the earth.” Bernstein’s description ascribed values and ideals to the halutzim, such as industriousness,
perseverance, and selflessness, that were reminiscent of American pioneering imagery. Indeed, the summer camps’ version of the New Jew, which reflected American Zionist depictions of the *halutz* more generally, is best seen as a projection of an American Jewish ideal. While it drew heavily from the images and ideologies emanating from the Yishuv, it reveals more about the American Jewish psyche than any reality in Palestine. For many American Jews, the image of the “New Jew” as epitomized by the *halutz* exposed the spuriousness of popular American anti-Jewish stereotypes, thereby providing a defense against American antisemitism.125

American Jews largely understood the Zionist enterprise through the lens of American pioneering, actively promoting an image of the *halutz* that drew on popular myths about the American frontiersman. Frontier lore and imagery thrived alongside Indian play at American summer camps. The eclipse of the Bedouin by the *halutz* as an object of emulation surely indicated the growing tensions between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. But it also reflected interwar Jews’ need to present themselves as “100 percent Americans.”

Interestingly, Bernstein’s article simultaneously betrayed a touch of ambivalence about the supporting and, ultimately, limited role performed by American Zionists in upbuilding the land of Israel: “What do you suppose the children [of the Yishuv] are doing? Perhaps, they are in school, singing little songs about planting trees, like we do here on Arbor Day? No, they are not in school. You see, it is a holiday. Then they are playing in the street, or reading stories, or watching a ‘movie’—as we would do on a day when we have a vacation from school? Certainly not! When work is being done, they do not think of playing. The boys and girls of the colonies are in the fields with the workmen. Three or four of them are behind a plough, working in high spirits, for it is a great lark. They try to race in plowing, to see who can furrow in the shortest time, keeping it straight and deep.”126

Zionism was infused into the life of the camps in large part because it permeated the lives of their founders and directors. As we have seen, Benderly was a sabra who remained attached to the land of Israel and its culture, while the Dushkins and Berksons spent long stretches of their lives living in Palestine/Israel. The Schoolman family made frequent extended visits to Palestine, as well as financial investments in the development of the Yishuv. Bertha Schoolman was active in the senior leadership of Hadassah and, after her mentor Henrietta Szold’s death, was particularly involved in the management and oversight of its Youth Aliyah initiative, a resettlement program in Palestine for European Jewish refugee children. Their daughter Judith immigrated to Palestine shortly before the creation of Israel and raised a family on Kibbutz Sasa. Along with the Berksons, Dushkins, Chipkin, and other members of the Benderly group, the Schoolmans owned a parcel of grove land in Netanyah. Donald Gribetz, who had a long and intimate association
with Cejwin, observed: “The Judaism of the camps was parve. The real religion of the Schoolmans and their camp was Zionism—that was their Judaism.”

Isaac Berkson asserted that “the major problem of Jewish education in the United States is to give a firm foundation to Jewish life by developing and deepening the loyalty to Jewish institutions, not as objects of study merely, but as ways of living that add to the meaning and joy of life.” The summer camp in many ways proved to be a more felicitous environment than the afternoon school within which to realize the Benderly boys’ educational vision. The educational camp, by its very nature, is a total environment, a full-blown educational subculture. As educational philosopher Seymour Fox understood, it effectively compensates for the deprivation of “meaningful Jewish experiences” in the home lives of many Jewish children. The residential camp, observed a longtime camp director, is a setting that encourages and even demands attendees “to develop forms of engagement with all manner of circumstance—personal, material and intellectual—which are different and more intense from what is called for in other settings.” It was at Cejwin and its early imitators where Jewish education as “participation in Jewish life in all its aspects” was pioneered and arguably reached its apex.

Since camp was an essentially novel educational setting with no precedent in traditional Jewish life, the Benderly boys encountered comparatively little resistance in developing a progressive educational program designed to transmit Jewish culture and promote American Jewish socialization that utilized affective pedagogical models. It also proved particularly well suited for the type of Kilpatrick-inspired project-based learning that was often difficult to execute in a supplementary school environment.

The central figure in the early Jewish educational camping movement was Schoolman. It was he more than anyone else who was responsible for “molding the peculiar synthetic character” of the Jewish educational summer camp, which was “both Jewish and American in spirit” and “both public and private in organizational support.” Schoolman and his colleagues treated the wilderness as a place of refuge and endowed it with the transformative power to Americanize the immigrant soul. Schoolman hoped that the interwar educational camps would promote “the acceptance of the idea that camping is a significant instrument for Jewish education, that camping should be recognized by lay and professional leaders as a new dimension of vital force in the intensification of Jewish life and education, and that camping deserves the support of the organized Jewish community and of Jewish educational bodies in this country.” And in fact, Cejwin, Modin, and Achvah set the stage for and stimulated the growth of Jewish culture camping in the 1940s and ’50s.
Yet even today the potential of residential summer camping as an effective Jewish educational tool has not been sufficiently harnessed. Ninety years after the founding of Camp Cejwin, Jewish educational camping was being touted as “the next big idea in Jewish education” and “one of the most promising sources of Jewish rejuvenation.” In their 2002 Avi Chai report “Limud by the Lake,” researchers Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe tout Jewish residential summer camps as an “ideal venue for informal Jewish education.” They write that Jewish educational camps “seem to work ‘magic’—captivating children’s imaginations, building strong camp memories, and easily winning lifelong devotees.” Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, president of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, put the matter even more simply: “Rambam didn’t go to camp, neither did Hillel. But they certainly missed out.”

129
PART III

Between *K’lal Yisrael* and Denominationalism, 1940–1965
In order to appreciate the chasm between Jewish educators and rabbis during the postwar years, and their competing visions of American Jewish life, one need look no further than the discourse surrounding *K’lal Yisrael*. For the Benderly boys and their circle of educators, *K’lal Yisrael*—the Community of Israel—was a core concept, a “basic ingredient of Jewish existence.” In a 1952 article, Benderly acolyte Samuel Citron called it “the essence of Jewish life today.” Its emotional valence was profound and “charged with meaning. It brings to mind the flow of Jewish history through the ages.” *K’lal Yisrael*, he added, “motivates the Jew so strongly that it has become the major aim and emphasis in Jewish education. All that we teach is geared toward developing within our children a sense of identity with our past and a feeling of belongingness to *K’lal Yisrael*.∞

Rabbis and movement leaders in particular also recognized its conceptual power. However, they greeted its ascendancy with ambivalence and skepticism. “The term *K’lal Yisrael* is, to the best of my knowledge, not found in our classical or medieval literature,” the president of the University of Judaism, Simon Greenberg, cautioned at a 1962 conference of Conservative Jewish educators. “If it has been used somewhere by someone before modern times, its use was so rare and so unimportant that no dictionary of the Hebrew language, no anthology of Jewish thought and literature, deems it sufficiently significant to be listed as a separate item or even to include it under the rubric *k’lal or yisrael*.” Greenberg was correct. Indeed, the English equivalent of *K’lal Yisrael*, “Jewish peoplehood,” was only coined in 1942 by Mordecai Kaplan, although the concept was arguably in the air during the 1920s and 1930s. But Greenberg’s philological interest in the derivation of the term was hardly academic. He hoped to deflate the term of some of its emotional and rhetorical power. With the Conservative movement ascendant on the postwar landscape, Greenberg was interested in fostering denominational loyalties. Orthodox and Reform leaders, likewise, were intent on shaping distinct approaches to Jewish living, and particular responses to the challenges of modernity. A community-centered ideology was an unacceptable force for attenuation that blunted the movements’ edges.≤

The Conservative movement, in particular, was struggling with a laxity of religious observance among its growing laity. Greenberg and other Conservative leaders worried that the widening gap between elite and folk threatened to undermine the movement from within. It seemed that *K’lal Yisrael* was being used by
many to derogate any activity that did not command the support of an overwhelming majority of American Jews. Greenberg imagined it as a “powerful battering ram” that was being used “to break down standards, to level down values and undermine all criteria of judgment.” *K’lal Yisrael* Judaism, Greenberg concluded bitterly, was a Judaism of lowest common denominators: combating anti-Semitism, safeguarding Israel’s security, maintaining social welfare institutions, and cultivating Jewish pride, especially among the young. Shunted to the side were such “denominational activities” as “intensive Hebrew education, Sabbath observance and participation in the religious life of the Synagogue.” The synagogue, in particular, was disparaged by some as an “anti *K’lal Yisrael* institution,” in contrast to the Jewish community center, which provided programming and recreational activities for the entire Jewish community.³

Greenberg recognized that the early-twentieth-century leader of the Conservative movement, Solomon Schechter, had played an important role in laying the groundwork for the popularization of *K’lal Yisrael* with his promotion of “Catholic Israel” as a substitute for, and antidote to, *Am Yisrael* (the Nation of Israel), which had taken on uncomfortable nationalistic overtones in the age of political Zionism. “However,” Greenberg countered, “like every tool of the hand or the intellect,” the concept of *K’lal Yisrael* “can be used properly or improperly.” He implored Conservative educators “to teach that there are standards of conduct in Jewish life and some ways of living as a Jew are to be preferred to other ways, even though these ways may in some manner divide us off or separate us from large sections of the Jewish people. . . . We must resist the imputation that because we have standards we are violating the concept of *K’lal Yisrael.*”⁴

As Greenberg’s critique suggests, religious leaders had a difficult time appreciating educators’ unbridled enthusiasm for *K’lal Yisrael*. But whereas Greenberg viewed the synagogue as the preeminent American Jewish institution, a beacon of Torah and a bulwark against assimilation, many educators continued to view it with suspicion. The synagogue, in their view, promoted simple-minded theology, class-based divisiveness, and a narrow, religious conception of Judaism. Moreover, the supplanting of communal Talmud Torahs by congregation-based religious schools was leading to a reduction of teaching hours and concurrent decline in educational standards. Given this perception gap, it is hardly surprising that tensions rumbled just beneath the surface of relations between synagogues and education bureaus, sometimes inhibiting cooperation.

With this narrative as context, the extent to which bureaus actually facilitated the organization of supplementary education along denominational lines is all the more striking. It is undeniable that while the Benderly boys and their circle might
have lamented the direction in which the educational winds were blowing, they were full partners in the transformation of the system to accommodate the realities of suburbanization and denominationalism. At the same time, they took an active interest in alternative and complementary models of Jewish education, even making their peace with day schools.
CHAPTER 11

Unity in Diversity?

The Jewish Education Committee

More so than any of its predecessors, the Jewish Education Committee of New York (JEC) strove to be a pluralistic service agency. Prior to its inception in 1939, central Jewish education agencies in North America typically funded only a single type of Jewish education, the communal weekday afternoon school or Talmud Torah. In a few instances, for example the Board of Jewish Education in Chicago, bureaus opened their educational services to congregational schools. But the notion that communal monies would be used to directly subsidize supplementary education along denominational or group lines and even private all-day Jewish schools was unprecedented.

The JEC’s radical departure from the conventional bureau model was largely due to the vision of its first executive director, Alexander Dushkin, who pioneered the more limited service agency model in pre-Depression-era Chicago. Under Dushkin’s leadership, the JEC developed as the embodiment of what he called “unity in diversity.” His thinking at the time is best gleaned from a fourteen-page memorandum that he wrote for the board of directors of the JEC shortly after being hired. He argued that the agency’s commitment to community respon-
sibility for Jewish education required it to support the educational activities of any group that asked for it, regardless of ideological orientation, so long it stood for “the teaching of positive Jewish values.” He hoped that “achieving unity without infringing on the right to maintain differences” would be elevated to a community desideratum. To a large extent, his dream was realized.1

Yet even as the JEC quickly developed into the prevailing model for bureau organization across North America, the efficacy of “unity in diversity” became a source of vigorous and persistent debate. Critics seemed to fall into two general categories: those who defended the service model in principle but complained that bureaus should be given the power to shore up standards and, whenever possible, discourage community fragmentation; and those who opposed the prevailing model outright, advocating for the central agency to create educational institutions that eschewed denominationalism in favor of a singular communal philosophy.

Berkson and Dushkin: A Parting of the Ways

Leading the charge among the more fundamental opponents was Dushkin’s childhood friend and longtime colleague Isaac Berkson, whose criticisms were given added weight because of his intimate involvement in the JEC’s formation. It was Berkson’s 1936 report, prepared in consultation with a small group of communal leaders, that first conceived of the JEC. But, unlike Dushkin, Berkson envisaged it primarily as a vehicle for social amelioration. His vision of the organization placed a heavy emphasis on educational research and experimentation, to be largely stimulated by its administration of a number of laboratory progressive communal Hebrew schools.

The genesis of the Berkson-Dushkin feud was most obviously a debate over policy. The issues that were raised were meaty; indeed, they cut to the core of how the profession defined itself and its mission. The subtext was a dispute among Benderly’s protégés over their mentor’s legacy. The correspondence between the two men and their closest friends also reveals that the conflict was deeply personal. There was a strong element of pathos to the Berkson-Dushkin feud akin to the breakup of a marriage or the estrangement of extremely tight siblings. As we have seen, theirs was the closest of friendships, based on shared interests and a shared vision of the future. “I dream about you, what does that mean?” Berkson scribbled on a note to Dushkin. Dushkin was a year older than Berkson, and from the outset he adopted a big-brotherly concern for “Bill” that extended into their adult lives. For Berkson’s part, he made “Alex” his role model and his guide. In important respects, theirs was a relationship of complements, which facilitated their collaboration: Berkson was the philosopher, while Dushkin was the organizer; Berkson’s

Unity in Diversity? 329
spontaneity and passion were tempered by Dushkin’s coolheadedness and penchant for “tachlis,” practicality.

Even after they left the nest, moving on from their roles in Benderly’s Bureau of Jewish Education to graduate school and professional life, Dushkin continued acting the parts of the older brother and comrade. As each progressed in his career, however, Dushkin generally found success and fulfillment, while Berkson was repeatedly stymied and seemed congenitally frustrated. While Dushkin was earning accolades for his innovative work running the Chicago Board of Jewish Education between 1923 and 1935, Berkson spent the bulk of those years spinning his wheels, trying to run the Jewish school system in Palestine, perennially plagued by inadequate budgets and mistrusted by virtue of his American heritage by both Zionist leaders and the teachers. Even under the best of circumstances, Berkson’s administrative skills were not his forte. He was better suited for the academic life; but at that time university positions in the United States, particularly in the humanities, were difficult for Jews to come by. Berkson’s Zionist commitments and affection for Henrietta Szold also weighed heavily in his decision to accept and remain on the job long after its limitations became apparent.

When, in the early 1930s, Hebrew University began to explore the creation of a Department of Education, Berkson naturally took interest. The university’s insistence on hiring a German-trained scholar to teach educational philosophy was a source of considerable annoyance, but Berkson was especially piqued when he was passed over for a faculty position in the areas of educational methods and administration in favor of Dushkin. In Dushkin’s defense, there were indications that Berkson had made enough political enemies during his tenure at the Zionist Jewish Agency’s Department of Education to render his candidacy a nonstarter. The powerful head of the Jewish teachers union in Palestine, Aviezer Yellin, was dead set against his appointment. But, in Berkson’s view, Dushkin had abdicated his fraternal role and simply had not allowed his friend’s interests to stand in the way of his personal ambitions.  

Thereafter, signs of friction began to appear in their relationship. At first, these were relatively minor. But try as he might, Berkson could not let go of his sense of betrayal. Things deteriorated to the point where running Camp Modin together became impossible. While the partnership did not officially break up until the early 1940s, when the Dushkins and Schoolmans sold their shares of the camp to the Berksons, a vicious fight between Berkson and Dushkin’s wife, Julia, a few summers earlier had effectively made continued cooperation impossible. The breaking point between Alex and Isaac was the JEC. Their polar personality traits, which had for decades facilitated the most productive collaborations, were suddenly propelling them in opposite directions. Berkson and Dushkin were at long
last incapable of finding common ground. Most immediately, it was Berkson’s inflexibility and puritanism that accounted for the impasse, and his impetuosity that undermined the possibility of reconciliation. But Dushkin’s resort to expediency had a whiff of opportunism.³

Forging a New Approach to the Central Agency

On one level, the very creation of the Jewish Education Committee in the late 1930s seems to defy the conventional historical narrative. Historians present the period as rife with ideological dissent, making institutional cooperation and consensus building virtually impossible, even in the face of the escalating Nazi threat in Europe. Indeed, historian Henry Feingold described American Jewry in the 1930s as “a subgroup whose internal political life was so raucous as to be uncivil.”² While this characterization is not entirely unjustified, it obscures a concurrent, seemingly contradictory trend toward collaboration across social and ideological lines. The easing of the Depression and the rising tide of antisemitism provided momentum to educational, social, and cultural activities designed to foster Jewish pride and promote healthy socialization into American society. The sense of crisis encouraged greater cooperation between the traditional German Jewish elite and a rising generation of eastern European businessmen and professionals.

The prevailing spirit of cooperation was crucial to the long-term success of the JEC as well as the community’s receptivity to a service agency model. But its creation was occasioned by the philanthropic gesture of a single individual. Bachelor millionaire and B. Altman & Co. president Col. Michael Friedsam died in 1931, leaving instructions that his estate be donated “to the education of children or the care of the aged.” His Catholic business partner and the executor of his will, John Burke, took notice of Friedsam’s growing interest in Jewish education shortly before his death and decided to donate the bulk of his estate to improving Jewish religious schools.⁵

Since there was no single address for Jewish education in the city, the problem became to whom the money should be given. New York Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies executive Joseph Willen convinced Burke to approach state court judge Samuel Rosenman, a civic leader with close ties to the Roosevelt administration, and request that he convene a committee of philanthropists, communal workers, and religious leaders interested in education to determine how the money should be spent. Rosenman’s skill as a consensus builder enabled the ideologically diverse body of board members to operate largely through consensus.

With Burke’s blessing, Rosenman and his committee engaged Berkson, just
recently returned from Palestine, to conduct a survey of Jewish education in New York. Berkson spent much of the winter of 1935–36 poring over mounds of data covering everything from student enrollment and Jewish population demographics to the cost of education and teacher recruitment and training. He also made extensive use of earlier surveys of the educational scene, including Dushkin’s 1918 doctoral dissertation and a 1928–29 unpublished survey conducted by colleague Ben Rosen, director of the Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia.

In the “Summary and Conclusions” section of his 1936 survey, Berkson laid out a plan for the establishment of a new central Jewish education agency that would conduct educational research, establish demonstration schools, and provide educational, administrative, and financial support to existing institutions. Berkson’s plan urged collapsing Benderly’s moribund BJE and the struggling Jewish Education Association into the new body. As Berkson wrote to Dushkin, he made the recommendation with a heavy heart. It was with some justification that Berkson’s biographer, Henry Skirball, characterized the survey report as a double act of patricide and filicide. In Berkson’s defense, he was trying to realize the essential missions of both organizations by transplanting their cores into the new JEC. But this truth did not obviate his lingering sense of guilt, which was subsequently exacerbated when Dushkin jettisoned those aspects of Berkson’s plan that did not fit his “unity in diversity” service agency approach.

Dushkin liked to stress the continuities between the JEC and Benderly’s original Bureau of Jewish Education. And, indeed, the principle of community responsibility for Jewish education had been a central motivation for the Bureau’s creation by the New York Kehillah in 1910. But, in practice, Benderly’s Bureau was hardly the pluralistic service agency envisioned by Dushkin. Much of Benderly’s creative energy was channeled into educational experimentation at a number of Bureau-operated schools, an approach that would need to be abandoned in Dushkin’s estimation. Collaboration between the various groups and the new JEC could be fostered only in an atmosphere where it was seen as a neutral player. The JEC “could not ride two horses, the one being a communal organization and the [other] operating a model school,” Dushkin advised his board of directors. Dushkin was also privately convinced that his board would be unable to “create any unified model school, constituted as it was of men of fundamentally opposed ideologies. . . . I felt that if I attempted to establish a model school . . . I would have to fight continuously for ideas and principles, and at best settle for some non-viable compromises.”

Dushkin possessed a skill set that boded well for success. A man of deep convictions, he was above all else eminently practical in his approach. To him, unity in diversity was not simply a lofty philosophy but a sensible road map with
which to navigate the large and complex New York Jewish scene. Yet, in ruling out the creation of a network of JEC laboratory schools, Dushkin whipped up a storm of controversy that engulfed both his professional colleagues and his board.9

The JEC’s twenty-seven-member board of directors was composed of a select number of appointees designated by the various groups that would be lending their financial support,10 as well as representatives from the community at large. In its early years the board included a majority of members who were culled from the established Reform–German Jewish philanthropic base of the Jewish community and a minority representing the generation of successful eastern European businessmen who were rapidly rising to positions of community leadership and whose religious leanings were decidedly Conservative or modern Orthodox. Dushkin’s personal attitude toward his board and its commitments can be gleaned from his reflections in a 1965 article: “[T]he leadership of the JEC [in 1939] was largely in the hands of a group of notables, worthy men, not all of whom were deeply committed to Judaism and Jewish life and some of whom were openly opposed to Hebrew and Zionism,” he wrote, adding that a “powerful majority . . . had little or no contact with Jewish education and no real commitment to its tradition or to its future.” Dushkin was probably basing this latter assessment on the fact that some had declined to give their children any formal Jewish education. He may also have been leery of board appointees that were designated by the Federation.11

Prior to officially commencing his duties as executive director, Dushkin became acquainted with Rosenman, who led the board of directors, during an informal weekend stay at the judge’s summer home. Rosenman struck him as “a pleasant jolly person, of quick intelligence, broad social outlook, and much political and civic acumen. But he was evidently approaching the task of Jewish education from some distance, not ‘with a loving and aching heart,’ but as a civic trust which he accepted seriously, and in which he was determined to do as creditable a job as possible, for as long as he was connected with it.” Dushkin’s contention that “the problem of Jewish survival apparently did not trouble him” seems overly harsh given Rosenman’s heavy involvement in Jewish community life, including his commitment to the JEC.12

Dushkin went on to refer to Rosenman and other like-minded members of the board as “assimilationists,” a pejorative term that was meant to imply a non-Zionist political bent and a minimal level of Jewish home observance. Interestingly, members of this group were most disappointed with Dushkin’s decision to drop the laboratory schools from the JEC’s program. Joseph Willen of the New York Federation, for example, looked forward to helping the JEC birth a school that would be designed to attract the considerable number of Jewish children receiving no Jewish education—estimated by the Berkson survey as approximately

Unity in Diversity? 333
30 percent of the school-age population—including Willen’s own children. Another critic, Dr. Maurice Hexter, also of the New York Federation, lamented that Dushkin’s program seemed to be devoid of any creative initiative. According to a summary of his remarks in the minutes, Hexter said that “[w]e would be deepening the old furrow” and there was nothing in the program that could lead, in his judgment, to a new plan for Jewish education, which he thought was a “vital demand.” The JEC, he counseled, should be “sporting enough to take a chance” and establish its own schools. Board member Alan Stroock, who was appointed by Burke, put the question succinctly: “Are we going to do something new or are we going to do the old better?” Personally, Stroock was in the same camp as Willen and Hexter, doubting that even the best of efforts on the part of the JEC would lead to an influx of students into the “old schools.”

Hexter’s assertion that Dushkin’s reformulation of the JEC program “did not entice his interest in the least” might have given the new executive director some pause. As Hexter reminded the board, he was responsible for selecting Dushkin for the job. And although he quickly added that he “had no regrets for that appointment,” he also felt free to exert pressure on Dushkin by pointing out that the Friedsam gift had been made on the basis of the Berkson survey and its recommendations, “which had as one of its principal elements, the establishment of a model school or schools,” and that Judge Rosenman had sold the plan to the Federation by stressing that aspect of the report. But, ultimately, the misgivings of these board members only strengthened Dushkin’s conviction about the soundness of his judgment. “It was clear that what Dr. Berkson conceived as a model school differed very widely from what these men had in mind,” Dushkin wrote. “I think what they were after was some form of secular-aesthetic Judaism, strangely reminiscent of the kibbutzim and some Youth Aliyah villages in Palestine-Israel (without of course, all the daily Hebraic living that went along with it there).” Dushkin was more convinced than ever that the board would be unable to “create any unified model school, constituted as it was of men of fundamentally opposed ideologies, with the balance of power in the hands of minimalists-cum-assimilationists.”

Dushkin had a powerful ally on the board in Bernard Semel, a cotton merchant and philanthropist, who was close to Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Semel cautioned that the JEC should move carefully and deliberately in areas where community consensus could be reached before it tried to tackle more nettlesome projects. In his estimation, attempting “to establish a model school in near term would be a grave blunder.” But in the end Dushkin’s most crucial supporter on this occasion was Rosenman, who deftly assumed the role of mediator and peacemaker—a role.

Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism
that he also played in Washington, where he was called to arbitrate in intergovernmental agency squabbles. While expressing great sympathy for the positions of Willen, Hexter, and Stroock, he defused their arguments by framing the Dushkin memorandum as “a minimum for the first year.” In the end, Dushkin and Rosenman succeeded in placating these board members by devoting a portion of the organization’s energies to the creation of a home-schooling option for families that found the available educational options unappealing. The JEC also helped to create and advised a semiautonomous “Commission on New Approaches in American Jewish Education,” chaired by Stroock. As Dushkin predicted, however, none of these efforts succeeded in creating a new and enduring educational option for the children of the unaffiliated.15

Contesting the Benderly Legacy: Divergent Paths to Renascence

The extent to which Dushkin’s programmatic memorandum polarized the board may have taken Dushkin by surprise. That his choice of direction would frustrate other Jewish educators, including some of his closest friends, and cause a fissure among the Benderly boys was fairly predictable. We have discussed how Berkson’s fury with Dushkin was motivated in part by a sense of disillusionment with his best friend, role model, and protector, and in part by profound feelings of guilt for unwittingly playing a part in snuffing out what he considered to be the most compelling aspects of Benderly’s vision. But what shook him to his very core was the sense that Dushkin was somehow betraying the philosophy that had undergirded their work for the preceding thirty years.

Given Berkson’s belief in the fluidity of ethnic identity and the centrality of education in ensuring its perpetuation, one can appreciate why “unity in diversity” was anathema to him. He could not afford to be agnostic about the type of Jewish education that the community sought to promote. In his view, Jewish education should necessarily be supplemental to the public schools, because cultural pluralism and community theory posited the enrichment of American civil society as the raison d’être for ethnic cohesion. It should be carried out under communal rather than congregational auspices, so as to privilege the teaching of shared Jewish values and Hebrew culture over rituals and ceremonials, a sense of K’lal Yisrael, Ahavat Yisrael [Love of Israel], and a commitment to the upbuilding of Eretz Yisrael over allegiance to denominational ideology and parochialism. Finally, it should be intensive enough to facilitate linguistic and cultural acquisition yet modern in its pedagogy and concern for the physical health and psychological welfare of its charges. These were nonnegotiables, essential for bringing about the
Jewish renascence in America—the goal that he believed gave meaning to his and Dushkin’s work. “Unity in diversity” was the enemy of this holy project. It seemed to him as if Dushkin was eager to divest the JEC of any role as an agent for change.

Thus, for Berkson, the laboratory schools were a central rationale for the creation of the JEC and very much in line with the approaches of both Benderly and progressive education guru John Dewey. The $1 million Friedsam gift provided a unique opportunity to bring to life the types of farsighted educational endeavors about which Benderly and his protégés had dreamt. Berkson, in particular, had long advocated the creation of Jewish community school centers, along the lines of cji, that would combine educational, recreational, communal, and even religious functions under a single roof.∞∏

Virtually all the Benderly boys were in agreement with Berkson that the dominant Jewish school of tomorrow should be a variation on the progressive, communal, weekday-afternoon school model. In his survey’s concluding report, Berkson could hardly contain his disdain for the Reform Sunday schools, Yiddishist schools, and rigorously Orthodox yeshivas. And while he evinced sympathy for the modern, progressive day school, he viewed it as a marginal phenomenon. All these educational models were “minority types,” and though he endorsed the idea of a central agency extending educational and administrative services to all schools, he questioned whether those schools outside of the mainstream were deserving of direct communal subsidies.∞π

It was unfair of Berkson to characterize Dushkin’s actions as simply a craven placing of political expediency over principle. To be sure, Dushkin was guided by pragmatism. Nevertheless, far from being an abandonment of their philosophical orientation, Dushkin recognized that the “cultural pluralism” approach to American democracy essentially conceived of the principle of unity in diversity as an expression of citizenship. Dushkin believed that the same pluralistic approach should be applied within the Jewish community.∞∫ According to Dushkin, “A community program that will include the whole gamut of opinions and forms in Jewish education will not and should not obliterate differences; but it may raise them to more significant levels.” Just as each ethnic group could make a unique contribution to American democracy, so too could each denomination and ideological group within the American Jewish body politic enrich the whole through its particular expression of Judaism.

While in reality Dushkin was far from willing to concede the central agency’s prerogative and responsibility to stimulate educational improvement through experimentation, he insisted that such efforts must be initiated in cooperation with and under the aegis of existing community groups. Moreover, he argued, the JEC could not privilege the educational efforts of one group or religious movement

Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism
over another. Over the course of his first year as executive director, Dushkin’s ideas on experimentation further crystallized. The JEC would partner with each movement’s teaching seminary and other “central educational bodies” to develop educational projects including demonstration classrooms in a variety of school settings. Dushkin allowed that “[t]his sounds like a lot of ‘cooperating,’ and implies a complicated organization. But we feel that we have no right to speak in the name of the community and for community responsibility, unless we make a most earnest effort to work with the various groups in Jewry for projects cherished by them, or accepted by them at our suggestion.”

Dushkin’s approach stemmed, in large part, from a clear-eyed assessment of the unprecedented size and ideological diversity of New York’s Jewish community; Dushkin prudently concluded that the JEC would succeed only by adopting a nonpartisan service-centered approach. Fundamentally, he feared for the JEC’s ability to win the cooperation of the existing educational bodies and community leaders if it ran a competing network of schools. He also realized that as generous as the Friedsam gift was, it could not support the sheer number of JEC-sponsored laboratory schools that would be required to make the desired impact on the quality of Jewish education in the city as a whole. Equally important, as we have seen, he feared that the lack of ideological consensus on his board could result only in schools with a watered-down philosophy that would be of doubtful use as community models. And, finally, he believed that the time was not yet ripe for a new educational model. The community and indeed the world were in a state of turmoil as a result of the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of war in Europe. “A model school must be based upon a clearly conceived and well digested educational philosophy. At this juncture we do not know of any formulation of American Jewish outlook, which deals adequately and satisfactorily with the cataclysmic changes, which have taken place in our life during the past decade. . . . [I]t will have to mature in time and in experience.”

It is important to recall that the nonpartisan, service-centered approach to running a community educational agency was not new to Dushkin. He had experimented with a more modest form of “unity in diversity” during his decade-long tenure in Chicago. Over time, a strongly held philosophical outlook came to justify a position that may have been embraced largely because of expediency.

Dushkin recognized that he had wounded Berkson and hastily arranged for a meeting with his friend, to which he also invited Kaplan, Benderly, Chipkin, Schoolman, and a few others. Dushkin was especially eager to receive the blessing of his mentors. Opponents of the JEC plan were calling it a radical departure from the BJE experiment under the Kehillah. A stamp of approval from Kaplan and Benderly would provide an inestimable boost to his credibility. Dushkin tells us

Unity in Diversity? 357
that he achieved his objective. “There was general approval of my approach; Benderly even stated that whereas his model elementary schools, which by then no longer existed, had their value as preparatory training schools for his staff, they probably proved a hindrance in his total communal approach to New York Jewry.” One cannot read Dushkin’s account without a fair amount of skepticism, as it is extremely self-serving; but in its essentials it was confirmed by Berkson’s own recollections. Indeed, Berkson admitted feeling aggrieved that he was left to defend Benderly’s vision even after its abandonment by the master himself.22

One thing we can say with certainty is that the meeting brought no genuine reconciliation between Berkson and Dushkin. A showdown between the two came a year and a half later, at the 1941 annual conference of the National Council for Jewish Education. Reading the conference proceedings, it seems clear that their argument was no longer simply philosophical in nature but rather about Benderly’s legacy and which of the men could most legitimately lay claim to the title of heir. Berkson delivered a paper in which he lambasted Dushkin for forgetting or willfully rejecting “the guiding idea which had inspired [the] group of Jewish educators who gathered around Dr. Benderly a generation ago,” namely, that the primary function of the Jewish educator was to develop an indigenously American style of Jewish education, “to work out a program for ‘The Jewish School of Tomorrow,’ so to speak.” He accused Dushkin of moving the Jewish education profession “a step backward,” charging that “unity in diversity” was tantamount to the premise that “educational leadership” needed to be sacrificed for the sake of “communal unity.” On the contrary, “Real unity could be achieved only if we succeeded in working out a broad basic program suited to contemporary conditions of life in America and well tested in practice. For such a program alone was their hope of gaining progressively wide acceptance, and through such a program alone could Jewish educators make their contribution to Jewish unity.”23

Naturally, Dushkin took exception to Berkson’s remarks, though he conceded his deviation from Benderly’s approach by leveling a painfully harsh assessment of the New York Bureau’s record under Benderly’s stewardship. The BJÉ was “unable to achieve its basic task as a community agency because it concentrated on research and experimentation to the neglect of the other fundamental field of activity, namely, the education of the community and its organization on behalf of Jewish education.” Dushkin’s reputation as the Benderly boy who was willing to stand up to and even part company with “the chief” had been secured early on while working at the BJÉ in the 1910s. He had chafed at Benderly’s autocratic style, expressing his displeasure, among other ways, by walking out on at least one staff meeting in protest. But he was also fiercely loyal to Benderly, as is evidenced
by his willingness to resign from the JEC if Benderly were not retired with a proper pension.24

Over the next few years it became clear that despite the misgivings of Berkson and his supporters, Dushkin’s position would point the direction for the future of the central educational agency in North America. And yet the Dushkin-Berkson controversy did not recede into insignificance. On the contrary, it remained an ever-present tension that divided the profession. In the JEC it was a continual irritant that confronted Dushkin at virtually every turn and had the effect of blunting his attempts to foster unity. Thus, ironically, opponents succeeded only in reinforcing that aspect of the central educational agency which they found most objectionable, namely the agency’s need to privilege the narrow interests of its affiliates over the perceived good of the community as a whole.

“Where Angels Fear to Tread”:
An Elusive Search for Common Elements in Jewish Education

Dushkin’s critics are unfair to accuse him of promoting Jewish diversity by acting as a handmaiden to denominationalism while only paying lip service to the unity side of the equation. Indeed, one can argue that his efforts to hold together an ideologically diverse community organization impelled him to seek what Arthur Schlesinger called the “vital center.”25 Dushkin made repeated efforts with varying degrees of success to promote Jewish unity while directing the JEC. Among the most revealing was his determined effort to distill a bedrock curricular platform for the Jewish school. By the spring of 1944 the agency was successfully established, and the straitjacket imposed by an ideologically polarized board appeared to be loosening. Dushkin sensed that the time was opportune for the JEC to enunciate a platform of educational objectives, or “common elements,” that would define and bound the educational mission of the JEC’s various affiliates. “What are the limits within which a community can accept an educational activity as Jewish?” he wondered aloud. Dushkin was not interested in adopting broad pedagogical objectives, or “least common denominators.” Rather, his goal was to define a common curricular agenda that would, nevertheless, allow for differentiation in its interpretation and execution.26

Dushkin was trying, in part, to enunciate a rationale for withholding JEC subsidies from certain groups subscribing to “extreme” ideologies. On the far left there were what he called “Escapist Jews,” namely those he deemed indifferent or hostile to Jewish survival, including the communist Jewish People’s Fraternal Order of the International Workers Order; while on the right there were the ultra-
Orthodox Jews who rejected integration and the principle of “continuity and change” within Judaism. But, in practice, Dushkin’s common elements reflected his own cultural-Zionist, American integrationist proclivities. Moreover, his very interest in distilling such principles was motivated by his devotion to Jewish peoplehood, his tendency to view Jewish life through the lens of K’lal Yisrael. Dushkin wanted to replace the “unilateralist” and “pluralistic” conception of the American Jewish curriculum with one that was “organic.” “The American Jewish curriculum,” he asserted, “is not a set of different themes, so to speak, but rather a common theme with variations.” He likened it to a tree with multiple branches sharing a common trunk and root system.27

Between September and December 1944, Dushkin convened a series of meetings to formulate a “Statement of Basic Common Elements” from which the curricula of all schools should be fashioned, regardless of their ideological orientation. At first the meetings were opened only to JEC staff. But he later expanded the group to include other prominent educators on the New York scene. At the first meeting, he presented seven theses that reflected his own curricular criteria for a Jewish school wishing to work with the central agency. These included a commitment to teaching “the classical continuing tradition—Torah in its widest sense”; “the Hebraic element in Jewish tradition and life”; “identification with the Jewish people”; “rebuilding the Jewish community in Palestine and concern for Jewish life in other communities” as Jewish values; “concrete forms of personal Jewish living”; “responsible membership in the American Jewish community”; and “faith in a better democratic world and the divine will which is making for that better world.”28

At the first meeting, most of the participants cautiously reminded themselves and others that the goal was to reach a broad consensus. Dr. Max Kadushin, who served as principal of the Marshaliah High School and headed the JEC’s Adolescent Education Department, cautioned that “we must beware against dogmas or definitions, but approach the entire problem in terms of values in Jewish life that we want to develop.” But as discussion turned to Dushkin’s specific theses, personal ideological convictions repeatedly overwhelmed efforts at consensus building. Predictably, the planks on Torah, Hebrew, and Palestine generated the most discussion and controversy. District supervisor Judah Pilch, for example, clung to a classical, fairly narrow definition of Torah as “Biblical and Talmudic literature” that would satisfy the mostly traditional schools with which he worked. However, Yiddish school consultant Yudel Mark insisted on a most elastic interpretation. Torah, he opined, “needs no definition in that it is the living foundation of the Jewish spirit through the ages. . . . [A]ll cultural creativity of the Jewish people, if it is uplifting and sublime constitutes Torah, which should be taught to our chil-
dren.” To illustrate his point, he asserted that “[Y. L.] Peretz’s ‘If Not Higher,’ is also Torah.” Menahem Edelstein, who worked with the Talmud Torahs, vehemently disagreed. In a remark clearly directed at Mark and other defenders of the Yiddishist schools, he baldly asserted that “teaching **Humash** [the Pentateuch] is a must in all schools. It is the common dominator of all. Schools that do not teach it ought not to be considered as affiliated with a community agency.” This provocative view elicited cautious agreement from Philip Jaffe, the consultant who worked with Reform Sunday Schools. It is doubtful, perhaps, whether Edelstein would have considered the loosely translated and liberally elaborated Bible stories that were typically taught in Reform schools as **Humash**; he pleaded, however, that “there must be great latitude in the manner and amount taught.”

Dushkin expressed relief that no one was “willing to forgo the concept of Torah or the teaching of it” and steered the group toward an expansive view of Torah. But the vigorous debate set the stage for discussions of the more contentious planks. As discussants took up the second thesis, the teaching of “the Hebraic element in Jewish life,” attempts were once again made to sharpen the definition so as to exclude many Reform and Yiddishist schools. Judah Lapson, who spent much of his career advancing the teaching of Hebrew as a foreign language in the New York public schools, rejected the milquetoast formulation of “the Hebraic element in Jewish tradition and life” in favor of simply mandating the teaching of Hebrew. Edelstein went one step further, this time aiming his guns squarely at the Reform movement schools. “A school which does not teach Hebrew is **pasul** [unkosher],” he declared, adding, “We cannot limit ourselves to functional Hebrew alone.” A little later in the conversation he upped the ante, arguing that “Hebrew cannot be separated from the idea of Torah. We must have enough Hebrew so that there will be no ‘**Am-Aratzuth** [ignorance] among us. The Torah must be taught in Hebrew.” Kadushin, who a few weeks earlier warned against dogmas, essentially agreed with Edelstein’s maximalist definition. He flatly declared Hebrew to be a “**mitzvah hamurah**, a severe or weighty commandment. “We cannot be satisfied with translation. Hebrew must be emphasized and intensified in all schools. While we cannot exclude schools that have some Hebrew, we must indicate to them that it is not sufficient.” Dushkin readily agreed that “schools that reject the teaching of Hebrew in any form should not be considered as part of a Jewish Community school system.” But he was once again placed in the role of pulling his zealous colleagues back from the precipice. Similarly strong words were exchanged over the question of whether the common elements should express support for the aims of political and cultural Zionism, particularly the devaluing of Diaspora Jewish communities and their culture with respect to that of the Yishuv.

The exercise in delineating common elements mostly succeeded in uncovering...
the bedrock antagonism that many of Dushkin’s colleagues still felt toward Yiddishist and Reform education. It also laid bare the enduring chasm between those who chose pedagogy as a starting point from which to discuss curricular reform and those who were essentially guided by concerns over content. Not surprisingly, by the fourth meeting Edelstein and others were openly expressing their skepticism about the need or desire for common elements.

It is no wonder that consultants working with the Reform schools carved out their own separate sphere within JEC’s orbit. It was highly symbolic that the consultants serving the Reform movement worked out of separate offices at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations building and rarely attended general staff meetings. When the supervisory system was reconceived the following year along geographical as opposed to strictly ideological lines, the Reform and Yiddish schools were intentionally left out of the matrix and continued to be served by specialists. The balkanization within the JEC spoke volumes about the limits of “unity in diversity.”

After much wrangling, Dushkin succeeded in forging a “tentative formulation” of common elements. But the exercise in their delineation was at best a Pyrrhic victory. In an effort to spur a larger conversation about the merit and applicability of the “common elements” to bureau work and curriculum writing, Dushkin published his committee’s statement along with a detailed rationale in the November 1945 issue of Jewish Education magazine with an editor’s note “earnestly” inviting readers to send their “reactions and suggestions.” He underscored that the statement was “a first tentative formulation, intended as a basis for discussion.”

The feedback was instructive. In a symposium on the common elements, which appeared the following February, Dushkin’s “organic conception of the American Jewish curriculum” was rebuffed by Yeshiva University’s Jacob Hartstein. Defining the limits of cooperation between school and bureau far more narrowly, Hartstein told Dushkin not to “venture into pathways where the angels fear to tread, particularly when the available uncultivated soil is so extensive.” Orthodox cooperation with the bureau was possible only in instances where the working relationship with the other denominational partners safeguarded the “democratically-guaranteed right to differ” without validating each party’s beliefs. “The traditionalist . . . is happy to see those at the other extreme move towards him . . . but he has no intention of going out to meet them part of the way.” Adopting the idiom of the day, Hartstein asserted: “Our appreciation of our freedom under democracy should not motivate us to compromise cherished values in an attempt to over-democratize.”

Hartstein’s reaction, while grounded in Orthodoxy’s distinctive orientation toward Jewish law and its ambivalent posture toward modernity, nevertheless
reflected a widely held conviction that curriculum content was within the purview of the movement or ideological group. Dushkin’s “common elements,” indeed his larger project of promoting the acceptance of an organic conception of curriculum by all schools, was viewed as a breach of denominational autonomy. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, Dushkin took flack from Berkson and his supporters for declining to forward a bold and substantive educational policy for fear that it would be “presumptuous and undemocratic.”

Like Hartstein, Berkson, too, deployed the rhetoric of democracy, but in the service of an opposing educational vision. “It is the essence of the democratic educational process to bring the children from the various sections of the community together, to lead them to respect and understand each other,” he chided. “The prevalent educational philosophy tends to keep the children apart, to nourish divisions. . . . It is not the function of the Jewish school to make the Zionist, the Hebraist, the Yiddishist, the Orthodoxist, the Reformist; it should aim to make the child ‘a good Jew’.” Berkson’s critique drew inspiration from Horace Mann and Henry Bernard’s conception of the public school as crucible for community building.

“We Belong”: Jewish Education in Wartime

If ideological differences and denominationalism were formidable barriers to the meaningful translation of “unity in diversity” from slogan to modus operandi, political and social forces were acting as centripetal agents, militating toward greater cooperation. Dushkin and his colleagues found that while common ground appeared elusive in the areas of curriculum and educational philosophy, there was an unprecedented eagerness to cooperate on the basis of K’lal Yisrael. A wide spectrum of Jewish groups found that they could stand together behind a broadly conceived program of Jewish welfare and defense, which included rescue and liberation in Europe, unhindered immigration and political sovereignty in Palestine, and social amelioration and psychological adjustment at home. Only the communists and the American Council for Judaism, both of which rejected any manifestations of Jewish nationalism, and the rigorously Orthodox, who viewed cooperation with the non-Orthodox as tantamount to recognition, remained outside the consensus.

Consider world events and the resultant prevailing atmosphere as the JEC was being inaugurated. As conditions in Europe and Palestine deteriorated in the late 1930s, Jewish educators’ Depression-induced inward focus gave way to concern for the welfare of European Jewry and alarm over the diminishing prospects for a Jewish national home in Palestine. As Dushkin prepared to depart Palestine, the
British government issued a white paper with devastating implications for the Zionist movement, severely restricting Jewish immigration and effectively ruling out partition or any other scheme that would guarantee Jewish sovereignty over part or all of mandatory Palestine. Less than three months after he arrived in New York to assume control of the JEC, Germany invaded Poland, engulfing Europe in war and placing the centers of eastern European Jewish life in mortal peril.

The mood of American Jewish educators was encapsulated in the September 1939 issue of Jewish Education magazine, which carried a lengthy and far-ranging meditation on the impact of Nazism and the rise of domestic antisemitism on prospects of Jewish education in the United States. Jews were abandoning their Judaism because of the rise in social and economic antisemitism, philosopher Horace Kallen argued. This was especially true of the younger generation. He asserted education needed to be “the chief agent of immunization against the feelings of unworthiness.” Significantly, Kallen believed that the most effective means of shoring up Jewish self-confidence and pride was to stress the universality of Jewish principles and contributions of Jews and Judaism to Western civilization. Students needed to be provided with American Jewish role models who “embody the excellences that are required of Jewish Americans, of American Jews.” Advocating for an increased curricular emphasis on social studies and current events, he argued that the “present would have to take precedence over the past. . . . For in the conduct of life, actual example is the indispensable teacher: the living model which can be emulated outranks the verbal image, the logical precept.” Kallen held on to his social paradigm of cultural pluralism, which he believed held the most promise for producing an emotionally healthy and durable Jewish minority in the United States.33

Members of the Benderly group heartily endorsed Kallen’s program. “If we are to make an asset out of the liability of being a Jew, we must show those in our charge why the Jewish people is being used as a scapegoat, that the war against the Jews is a war of fascism against everything our civilization holds dear,” Sam Dinin wrote in the same issue. “We must gird them for war (not necessarily militaristic) and give them courage and strength to fight back. We must utilize the war against the Jews and turn it against our enemies.” Dushkin sounded a similar note in his private correspondence with Kallen. “Particularly helpful is your shift of emphasis from defense to ‘attack’; from emphasis on survival values to an emphasis on integration values, what you call ‘Jewish integrity.’” He observed that “Jewish educators and others have, in our time, been too ready to drive a bargain with the world for the sake of survival, and have not been sufficiently aware of the importance of teaching children an integrated outlook on life, based on the prophetic element in Jewish tradition which drives no bargain even for the sake of survival.” Dushkin assured Kallen that he and his JEC staff would encourage teachers and
principals to engage in a process of goals clarification that privileged the need to
give Jewish children and youth the necessary grounding and fortitude to respond
resolutely and confidently to the crisis. Soon after Kallen’s article appeared, Dushkin
authorized the publication of a set of Jewish American social studies readers,
designed to supplement public school American history courses with material
about the Jewish contribution to American history and “the Hebraic influence on
American ideals and institutions.”

Dushkin and his colleagues did not set aside their professional concerns during
the war. On the contrary, their agenda of educational reconstruction and fortification
became the major lens through which events in Europe were regarded. Con-
sider the January 1940 issue of Jewish Education, the first to be prepared after the
Nazi onslaught. Predictably, the magazine was dominated by war-related content
and heated rhetoric. The mood was set in the lead editorial. Penned by Rosen, and
titled “Democracy and Jewish Education,” it solemnly proclaimed that “the well-
being and destiny of the Jew is linked with the destiny of democracy. He must
therefore align himself with the progressive and liberal forces which are strug-
gling to preserve the democratic system in America and elsewhere.” He wrote that
the Jewish school needed to teach students about their rights and obligations as
citizens in a democracy. It needed to stress that despite any economic and so-
cial disabilities, Jews still enjoyed unprecedented freedom and protections in the
United States.

If Jewish educators’ defense of democracy was heartfelt and keenly appreciated
by the mostly first- and second-generation balebatim, efforts to associate Jews with
democracy and liberalism barely concealed a deep-seated anxiety about American
Jewish security. When Rosen observed approvingly that “Jewish schools have very
consciously and systematically introduced love for our country and its ideals into
their program of studies and activities,” he was endorsing a preemptive effort to
inoculate Jews from the calumnies propagated by isolationists and Nazi symp-
pathizers. The Jewish school, Rosen argued, was obligated to underscore the con-
gruence between Jewish values and America’s democratic ethos. In order to facili-
tate this, Jewish Education magazine devoted fourteen double-column pages to a
report prepared by a committee of Jewish educators for the Congress on Educa-
tion for Democracy, which was held in the summer of 1939 at Columbia University’s
Teachers College. Titled “The Values for Democratic Living to Be Found in
Jewish Education,” it expounded the democratic values that inhered in each of the
subjects taught in the Jewish school. The chairman of the committee and principal
writer of its report was Rabbi Eugene Kohn, a close ally of Mordecai Kaplan.
Committee members included leading rabbis and Jewish educators from the ma-
jor religious movements as well as agency executives.
Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into the war in December 1941 presented all educational institutions, including Jewish schools, teachers’ colleges, and central agencies, with new challenges. Jewish schools struggled to accommodate blackout schedules, loss of personnel, reduced budgets, curricular modification efforts, and “the special problems of Jewish morale.” The war may have hastened the feminization of the Jewish teaching profession, particularly in the younger grades and in cities such as Boston, where a large percentage of men were still employed in communal Hebrew schools. The draft caused less disruption in New York, where women were more heavily represented in the Jewish teaching profession, particularly in congregational schools. Another trend that the war accelerated was the reduction in teaching hours in the afternoon schools. Blackout schedules required schools to dismiss children prior to sundown, effectively eliminating a second shift, which many schools relied on to accommodate greater numbers of students and create full-time teaching positions for their staffs. The JEC worked with schools to devise schedules that minimized the loss in teaching time by utilizing Saturday as a day of instruction.37

Central agencies were called on to coordinate local readiness efforts including the distribution of first-aid kits and portable radios, the installation in schools of air-raid buzzers, and the conversion of school basements into bomb shelters. These activities took on added urgency at the JEC, which was working with by far the largest number of day schools and yeshivas. These schools were required to be at the same level of preparedness as the public schools. In many cases, wartime preparedness efforts were the first occasions for cooperation between the JEC and the more rigorously Orthodox yeshivas, which were initially wary of the JEC. They served as confidence-building measures that paved the way for more sustained cooperation in other service-related areas, including bus service and the school lunch program. Nevertheless, the added responsibilities taxed the JEC and other bureaus. By early January 1942, Dushkin was complaining that civilian defense work was placing a significant burden on his clerical staff.38

Bureaus were also approached by the United States Department of the Treasury to promote the sale of war savings stamps and bonds in Jewish schools and synagogues—a task that they generally embraced with gusto. More challenging was the question of how to retool school curricula to emphasize the intersection of democratic and Jewish values. Few school principals would quibble in principle with JEC assistant director Israel Chipkin’s contention that “[i]t has become necessary to make explicit in our teaching and behavior the axiom that a good and faithful Jew is ipso facto a desirable and loyal American.” In practice, however, they were reluctant to tinker with the grammar of Jewish schools.39

At first, many progressive Jewish educators contented themselves with the Kohn
report’s assurance that democratic values were already implicitly taught in the school curriculum. But even that report conceded that its description was “an idealized version of the facts, that it represents potentialities rather than actualities, the objectives of our educational efforts rather than their achievement.” With America’s entry into the war, pressure mounted for a more direct approach. Mordecai Kaplan advocated a curricular model designed to promote activism through Torah study. “The aim of education should be to qualify us in every way to contribute personally towards making the world a better place to live in,” he asserted in a commencement address at Chicago’s College of Jewish Studies. “Education for democracy” must instill social action “if it is not to lead to that rugged individualism which is bound to destroy all civilization.” Another curricular model designed to “make democracy explicit as doctrine and vision” in the Jewish school was formulated by Dushkin, who refused to see any dissonance between Torah and democracy and sought to weave the integration of the two into each of the traditional school subjects.40

A year after America’s entry into the war, Ben Edidin, who directed the JEC’s Extension Department, surveyed curricular initiatives to teach democracy in the Jewish schools. He took note of innovative courses in a handful of Hebrew schools and a number of recent publications including a dramatics script by Moshe Davis and Hayim Kieval titled “We Belong,” published by the JEC on behalf of its women’s auxiliary, Ivriah, wherein two Jewish children with the aid of the prophet Elijah travel backward in time through Jewish history to discover “why they belong to America and its democratic tradition, and how the Jews have treasured the ideals for which America stands.” But he also acknowledged that such efforts constituted only “the first beginnings.” Schools were far quicker to adopt the wartime rhetoric than to embrace substantive curricular reform. Edidin’s survey revealed once again the degree to which curricular change in the trenches lagged behind its conceptualization by the Benderly boys and their circle. In defense of the schools, the reticence they exhibited safeguarded against curricular faddism. Schools were far more receptive to special activities such as selling war bonds and holding blood drives. They celebrated the synthesis of Judaism and Americanism through pageantry and the creative arts, in club work and extracurricular activities.41

“Raising Our Voices Together”: The Children’s Community Assemblies

Jewish eagerness to aid the wartime effort on both the war front and the home front was exacerbated by the recognition that Hitler was waging a war against the Jewish people. When accounts of death camps and mass exterminations began to
appear in the Jewish press during the autumn and winter of 1942–43, educators were moved to public expressions of grief and protest. They encouraged schools to participate in events organized by local and national Jewish organizations, including a Jewish Fast Day on December 2, 1942. In some cities, the bureaus became conduits for the staging of interdenominational communitywide student-centered events. In New York, a broad coalition of Jewish educational groups, organized under the JEC’s aegis, arranged a Children’s Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest on Washington’s Birthday, 1943. Thirty-five hundred delegates from 518 schools participated in the demonstration at the Mecca Temple in midtown Manhattan.42

The program began with a procession of the United Nations’ flags, carried by Boy Scout troops, and the singing of the national anthem and “Hatikvah.” Performing in front of a large painted backdrop of a menorah with the Hebrew word Yizkor (Remember) flaming from its wicks, children’s choirs from the Talmud Torahs and the Workmen’s Circle middle schools chanted prayers and sang Hebrew and Yiddish songs of protest. The earnest expressions on their faces, captured by press photographers, conveyed the gravity of the occasion.43

The rally, which was carried live on radio station WNYC, was also addressed by dignitaries, including Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Yet the most moving part came when six refugee children shared stories of their families’ suffering at the hands of the Nazis. When they finished speaking the children lit memorial candles to commemorate those children who had perished, while Cantor Aaron Katchko intoned the traditional memorial prayer, El Maleh Rahamim. The assembly culminated with the reading of a “Declaration of Sorrow, Faith and Hope,” and the mass recitation of a pledge: “With all our hearts, we resolve never to forget our brothers and sisters in the lands across the seas, whose innocent lives have been taken by the wicked enemy,” the youngsters declared in unison. “We will remember their martyrdom, and the great ideals for which they died. We recall with solemn pride that our beloved country, and all the United Nations, is today doing battle for the same ideals. We proclaim our faith that Victory, which is sure to come, will establish brotherhood, freedom and justice among all the peoples of the earth, and will bring new hope and redemption to the Jewish people everywhere. We resolve to the best of our ability to help heal the wounds of our people and to help realize the ideals for which this war is fought.”44

Scheduled to coincide with Brotherhood Week, the community assembly was the climax of a weeklong program of school events designed to heighten children’s awareness about the suffering of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Teachers and principals in participating schools were guided by suggested curricula and school
assembly programs devised and disseminated by the JEC. The significance of the community assembly as an expression of Jewish unity was not lost on the organizers and participants. “This was perhaps the first time we could assemble not only children of every group, but also partisan Jewish educators, in one concentrated activity,” chief organizer Philip Gingold observed.45

Without detracting from the import of Gingold’s comments, it should be noted that they obscured the absence of certain groups from the Mecca Temple, most notably the Revisionist Zionists and the rigorously Orthodox. In the earliest planning stages, a conscious decision was made not to cooperate with the Revisionist Zionist group led by Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook), which was trying to organize a children’s demonstration at Madison Square Garden. Israel Chipkin characterized the Revisionists to his board as “an extreme political group” and warned that “any discussion with that body would be embarrassing to us.” With almost across-the-board opposition to the Bergson group from the fourteen other sponsoring organizations, political considerations, in this instance, trumped high-minded principle.46

A more potentially disruptive controversy raged in the weeks leading up to the assembly, when representatives from the Orthodox Vaad HaHinukh HaHaredi (Council for Orthodox Jewish Schools) refused to participate in the coeducational, interdenominational event unless public prayers and any other explicitly religious activities were omitted from the program. The participation in the assembly of the modern Orthodox leader of Kehilath Jeshurun, Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, as the presiding rabbi apparently did little to quell their opposition. The organizers rejected these demands, which they believed would irreparably “weaken the effects of the project.” Unity in diversity would not be secured at any price, particularly to obtain the participation of a group that did not recognize both sides of the equation as intrinsic values. Significantly, however, subsequent communitywide assembly programs were designed to take the Vaad’s sensitivities into consideration, thereby securing its cosponsorship. Even the communist iwo schools were permitted to send student delegates to the community assemblies, although the JEC assiduously maintained its distance from the network and declined its offer of cosponsorship.47

By all accounts the Children’s Solemn Assembly was a resounding success, winning plaudits from educators and garnering positive coverage in outlets such as the Herald Tribune and PM as well as the Jewish press. Dushkin called the Week of Sorrow and Protest “one of the finest things we have done as a single mass educational project.” He added that the solemn assembly “was a powerful lesson to the youngsters.” A writer for Der Tog concurred, describing it as a grand educational performance. Asserting that the assembly demonstrated the validity of
Mark Twain’s aphorism that schooling should not be permitted to interfere with education, he declared that one such afternoon was of greater educational value than two months of regular school classes.\textsuperscript{48}

The example of the Children’s Solemn Assembly was soon copied by bureaus in other Jewish population centers, including Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, and Rochester. Bureau staff in many cities rushed to create curricular materials on the Jews of Europe, including a ten-week intensive study program that was used in the Chicago schools. Concerned lest the children be left with a sense of hopelessness, Keren Ami groups were encouraged “to do their own share towards the rescue of Jewish children” by allocating their funds to the Youth Aliyah in Palestine. In New York, the communitywide assembly became an annual event until 1949. In subsequent years topics included Jewish resistance to the Nazis, the white paper and restricted immigration to Palestine, the plight of the Jewish displaced persons in the aftermath of the war, and the United Nations November 1947 vote to partition Palestine. Under the influence of \textit{JEC} performance arts consultants Harry Coopersmith, Dvora Lapson, and Samuel Citron, by the latter half of the decade protest had given way to pageantry and a more overtly educational thrust. But the theme of Jewish mutual responsibility remained a constant, and the annual assembly became a powerful demonstration of \textit{K’lal Yisrael}.\textsuperscript{49}

The assemblies are also notable because they demonstrate educators’ early efforts to create a culture of memorialization, to integrate commemoration of the Nazi genocide into school life and ritual. A few elements stand out. Most obvious, perhaps, was the directness with which the Jewish extermination was confronted. The 1946 assembly, which was devoted to the theme “Free Jews in a Free World,” also included a poignant memorial to those who had perished. Similarly, the 1947 assembly, which looked ahead “Toward a New Jewish Life” in Palestine, paused to look back at what it declared the greatest tragedy in the history of civilization, the virtual annihilation of European Jewry. Particularly powerful were the public declarations and pledges that were recited in unison at the assemblies by the delegates. “We shall never forget the suffering and martyrdom of our brethren, nor their courage and their hopes,” they declared in 1945, pledging also to “carry on the fight against hatred, terror and slavery.” In 1946, the delegates adopted a resolution proclaiming their joy that the war was over and their commitment to “the ideals to which the United Nations fought courageously against the Nazi forces of darkness.” It continued: “We turn to the leaders of our country and of all the other United Nations, demanding that they do not forget the horrible sufferings of the six million Jewish victims who died in the common fight against Hitlerism.” These assemblies provide compelling evidence that Holocaust commemoration in the aftermath of the war was not confined to survivors.\textsuperscript{50}
While the educators were quick to acknowledge the enormity of the catastrophe, there is little evidence that they internalized the Holocaust as an existentially and theologically unique event in Jewish history. That would come later. Instead, they contextualized the destruction of European Jewry in the light of other calamities in Jewish history. Summarizing the purpose of the assemblies, Dushkin asserted that the programs were crafted “with a view to bringing the reality of current happenings to the children, to help them to understand their significance, make them realize that the Jews have met similar situations in the past, and that their persecution is part of suffering humanity.” In Jacob Pat and Michael Gelbart’s Yiddish dramatics presentation *Courage!* which was performed at the 1945 assembly, Warsaw Ghetto fighters were juxtaposed with Jews in second-century Palestine who fought under the command of Bar Kohkba against the Roman emperor Hadrian’s army.⁵¹

Finally, there was a conscious effort to translate protest, commemoration, and education into activism. The impetus for this approach came from Rabbi Milton Steinberg, who observed during the planning of the 1943 Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest that a valuable educational opportunity would be lost if the passion and momentum that would be generated were not translated into constructive action. On that occasion, a delegation of students traveled to Washington, D.C., where they presented the assembly’s resolution to leading members of Congress. Likewise, schools were encouraged to ritualize a daily symbolic kofer (ransom) offering, with monies to be contributed by the students and donated to the United Jewish Appeal.

Subsequent years witnessed more ambitious efforts, including a school adoption project, launched in 1945, wherein Jewish schools in the United States were paired with schools in liberated territories. The project, which was initiated by the AAJE and JEC as part of the larger work of the Commission for the Reconstruction of European Jewish Cultural Life, was designed not only to aid in postwar reconstruction but also to promote American Jewish children’s identification with the victims of Nazism and investment in the work of cultural and spiritual rehabilitation. In the end, however, the adoption plan did not live up to expectations, in large part because Jewish life had been so thoroughly decimated that there were few schools with which to partner.

Organizers were more successful at creating a link between the catastrophe in Europe and the quest for Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. In conjunction with the 1944 assembly, schools collected funds to plant ten thousand trees in the George Washington Forest, in the Jezreel Valley, “as symbols of faith and freedom . . . to express our determination to keep open the gates of Palestine for the Jewish children of Europe and to build for them a new happy life in the Land of Israel.”⁵²
Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism

Building Children’s Self-Esteem in the Shadow of Destruction

Even as the children’s assemblies were effective tools for raising Jewish consciousness and teaching current events, educators were also mindful of their social purpose. As Dushkin explained to his lay leaders, the assemblies provided children from different schools an opportunity to meet one another. As the student delegates scanned the throng and bumped into friends and acquaintances from other Hebrew schools, Dushkin believed that they could not help but internalize a sense of community, and a sense that the Jewish school was part of the life of every Jewish child.53

Community building became a central focus of the education bureaus’ efforts in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, if the bureaus can be said to have embodied any ideology, it was that of K’lal Yisrael. The centrality of this concept was not merely a function of the service-oriented nature of the bureau structure, a lowest-common-denominator approach to Jewish life, although this certainly played a part. Nor, as we have seen, was it a novel trope for the cultural Zionist educators who were influenced by Kaplan, Friedlaender, and Benderly. But the message of Jewish unity took on greater urgency and found a more receptive audience during the war and its aftermath. The rhetoric of Jewish unity was a balm for the damaged Jewish psyche.

As World War II came to a close, Jewish educators surveyed the wreckage and tried to assess the trials ahead. Chipkin, who in 1945 assumed the directorship of the American Association for Jewish Education, outlined the challenges facing American Jewry: As the “largest and most potent center of world Jewry,” it would need to become a “reservoir of social and cultural services,” not only for its own communities, but also for those in war-torn Europe and Palestine. With the destruction of the Jewish cultural centers in eastern Europe, American Jewry would have no choice but to “carry on the great traditions of Jewish learning and intensify its spiritual energies, so that it may be worthy of the cultural and spiritual trust to which it has become heir, and so that it may contribute a quality of citizenship to America and to the United Nations which will help to strengthen both.”54

Jewish educators approached with gravity the responsibility of preparing the next generation for leadership. Yearbooks and graduation speeches from the late 1940s suggest that the message made an impact or, at the very least, that teachers raised with older students the implications of the war for the American Jewish community. A valedictorian at the Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia expressed, in June 1947, relief at the defeat of “the enemy of the Jewish people and of the civilized world,” while noting the awesome responsibility facing American Jewry as “the new center of Jewish life and culture.” He ended his speech by
“solemnly” pledging on behalf of his class “to prepare for sharing in the work of establishing a Jewish community in America—a community which will assume responsibility in Jewish leadership.”

Naturally, bureau workers across the country focused on the role that education should play in preparing the community to shoulder its new responsibilities. It was a measure of the depth of the trauma that American Jewry had sustained from the escalation of antisemitism before and during the war, as well as the shock of the as yet unnamed genocide in Europe, that many viewed their first order of business as lifting the spirit of the younger generation and reconciling them to their Jewishness. A name on many lips was that of Kurt Lewin, one of the scholars who had come to the United States as a refugee from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Lewin was a proponent of group dynamics. He took a special interest in Jewish maladjustment, its causes and potential treatments, and was engaged in experimental efforts, in conjunction with the American Jewish Congress’s Commission on Community Interrelations, to combat antisemitism and improve American ethnic group relations. He believed that resilience to antisemitism and other manifestations of group prejudice was enhanced by the early fostering of strong feelings of group identity. The “marginal Jew,” lacking such a sense of deep rootedness in both Jewish and American society, was condemned to “permanent inner conflict” and maladjustment.

Lewin felt passionately about the role of Jewish education in fostering the self-esteem of youngsters by introducing them to the richness of Jewish life. He argued that “an early build up of a clear and positive feeling of belongingness to the Jewish group is one of the few effective things that Jewish parents can do for the later happiness of their children.” He was also particularly disturbed by the ideological infighting within the Jewish community and the tendency of many Jewish schools and textbooks to promote insularity. Both of these tendencies, he believed, blunted the ability of parents and teachers to cultivate within children a sense of ethnic and religious pride. Naturally, educators such as Dushkin found Lewin’s approach compelling, as it provided “scientific” justification for a robust approach to Jewish education as well as an endorsement of “unity in diversity.” Lewin was scheduled to address a JEC-organized pedagogic conference in February 1947, but he died unexpectedly on the eve of the conference.

Antisemitism in the United States peaked in 1944 and dropped steadily in the postwar era. But Jews were slow to let down their guard. The wounds from the 1930s and early 1940s were still raw. Lewin’s work repudiated the “hush, hush” approach to antisemitism that was favored by the German Jewish elite and the American Jewish Committee. Dushkin, likewise, urged educators not to sweep antisemitism under the rug. “The Jewish educator cannot exclude anti-Semitism...
from the scope of his activities, or think that the child himself will find his own way, unaided, in dealing with his detractors and enemies. We must heal his psychic wounds both before the shock and after.” While he agreed with Lewin that “Jewish knowledge and joyous participation in Jewish living are the very best means of self-defense,” he added that educators should also “recognize the need for psychic therapeutics.”

Creating a Shared American Jewish Culture through the Arts

As Jewish educators searched for ways of enhancing Jewish schoolchildren’s sense of self-esteem, they increasingly turned to the arts. The arts specialists on staff at the JEC repeatedly extolled the arts as a means of empowerment and enhancing group identification. For example, dance educator Dvora Lapson spoke of how learning the folk dances of eastern Europe could strengthen intergenerational bonds between children and their immigrant grandparents, while art educator Temima Gezari believed that arts education promoted not only creativity but also leadership skills. According to the JEC’s director of music education, Harry Cooper smith, Jewish song experienced a veritable renaissance in the 1930s and 1940s, stimulated by the growth of the Jewish nationalist movement, an intensification of religious feeling brought about by the rise of Hitler and the onset of the war, and “an awakened concern on the part of educators and parents for the development of an integrated Jewish personality through curriculum providing for emotional as well as intellectual growth.”

The incorporation of music and drama into the Jewish school program was hardly a new phenomenon. Bloch Publishing Company began selling playlets for use in religious school classrooms in the 1890s, while music instruction was championed by Benderly and other progressive Jewish educators in the first decades of the twentieth century as an effective vehicle for teaching prayer and Hebrew language. To be sure, music occupied an ancillary place in the curriculum, and most schools could not afford to employ a full-time music teacher. New York Bureau music educator Samuel Goldfarb was essentially a field-worker, shuttling between the Bureau’s preparatory schools and cooperating Talmud Torahs to provide music instruction.

The place of the arts was enhanced in the 1920s and 1930s as the school increasingly replaced the home as the primary site of Jewish cultural transmission. Resistance continued to be offered by champions of the literary-centered curriculum who viewed the arts as a distraction from “serious” text-based learning. However, supporters of the arts were able to marshal evidence from the general field of education about the value of affective learning.
Coopersmith advocated on behalf of music by arguing that the Jews were “inherently a musical people.” The Jewish musical tradition was rich and varied, he asserted, and deeply rooted in both religious and secular culture. He approvingly cited the work of pioneering Jewish ethnomusicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, who wrote that Jewish music was traditionally appreciated as “a genuine echo of Jewish religion, ethics and history; of the inner life of the Jews and their external vicissitudes.” To a somewhat lesser extent, advocates for dramatics and dance were able to advance similar arguments.\textsuperscript{62}

The case for the visual arts in the Jewish school curriculum, however, was far more difficult to make. In traditional Jewish circles, where the biblical commandment against making graven images was interpreted broadly, art was viewed as taboo, a gentile diversion. When early childhood educator Hajnalka Langer introduced “ceremonial work” to the \textit{bje} in the mid-1910s, it was viewed purely in instrumental terms, intended to promote active learning and to engage the child directly in Sabbath and holiday observances. Individual teachers in Sunday schools and more progressive afternoon schools introduced art into their classrooms as teaching devices in the 1910s and 1920s. It is noteworthy, however, that when Gezari came to Benderly’s attention in 1925, he hired her as a general Jewish studies teacher in one of his girls’ preparatory schools rather than capitalizing on her talent to introduce arts and crafts as a discrete subject in the Bureau’s schools and extension education programs. Given Benderly’s cultivation of the performance arts, the lack of a fine-arts department at the \textit{bje} was conspicuous. By the 1930s the Bureau was employing specialists in music, dramatics, and dance. It was only in 1940 that the \textit{jec} became the first central Jewish agency to hire an art educator. Naturally, Dushkin turned to Gezari.\textsuperscript{63}

The Jewish arts were given a significant boost in the 1930s by Mordecai Kaplan’s promotion of Judaism as a civilization, a term that he defined broadly to include not only religious beliefs but the “\textit{tout ensemble} of all the elements that enter in what is usually termed the cultural life of a people.” Kaplan explicitly included what he called “esthetic values.” In an act that conferred further legitimacy on the fine arts, in 1935 he appointed Gezari as the first instructor in art education and art history at the Teachers Institute. Kaplan’s commissioning of Gezari, in 1936, to paint a two-hundred-square-foot mural on the rear wall of his synagogue, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, broke new ground in the area of synagogue decoration, contributing to a more liberal postwar synagogue aesthetic. Gezari recalled that the inclusion of human figures in the mural sparked considerable controversy, but Kaplan stood by her and spoke warmly at the unveiling about “the importance of the role of art in the life of a nation and of all human beings.” On another occasion, Kaplan asserted that “religion is the apex of the Jewish
civilization, but unless its base is nurtured and enriched by the contributions of art,” in its myriad forms, Judaism will wither.64

As an amateur cellist, raised in a family of musicians, Dushkin had a personal interest in cultivating the Jewish arts.65 Coopersmith, whom he brought from Chicago, and Gezari were among his first hires at the JEC. From the outset, however, a Jewish unity agenda permeated the work of the JEC’s Arts Department and became one of its primary rationales. Summing up the agency’s outlook, dramatics educator Samuel Citron asserted that the arts “tend to relegate to secondary importance the divisive factors operating within the Jewish community. They bring to the fore the integrative forces which are the common experiences and goals of all Jews, no matter what their ideology or nusach [style of prayer] may be.” In addition to teacher education, the creation of curricula and teaching materials, and consultation in individual schools, the arts specialists devoted extensive time and effort to the organization and staging of communitywide art shows, dance and music festivals, and a professional children’s theater. These events allowed for the “natural intermingling of Jewish children from all types of Jewish schools.” As with the communitywide assemblies, the JEC team hoped that through participation in such cooperative undertakings, which were made possible only by a coordinating central communal agency for Jewish education, “the children and their teachers [would] learn . . . to know each other and to feel that they belong to one people and to the same community.”66

Their earliest efforts were met with considerable resistance. When Coopersmith began planning the first Inter-School Music Festival in the spring of 1942, various school and communal leaders urged him to abandon the project. The prevailing wisdom was summed up by one well-meaning individual who warned him that “schools with various ideological tendencies will not wish to work together.” Years later, Coopersmith recalled that the advice was initially correct. Yeshivas were reluctant to have their students interact with supplementary school students; Hebrew schools were wary of working with Yiddish schools; and the location of the festival in a Reform synagogue drew howls of protest from traditional Jews, despite reassurances that all male children would don yarmulkes. Twenty-five schools ultimately agreed to participate that first year. “Gradually it was realized that matters of religious observance were not infringed on, but rather a common area was evolved through which Jews of different shades of opinion could find expression together.”67

Gezari came to relish the prospect of ideologically diverse schools working together and often designed her shows to maximize interschool collaboration. Gezari’s art exhibitions came to embody the unity in diversity principle. She reflected that “a very important positive factor as a result of the exhibition was a
complete identification on the part of children in one school with hundreds of children in many other schools all working together on one theme. There has, of course, always been an eagerness on the part of the children to come to the exhibition not only to see their work enjoyed and appreciated by the public but also to be able to see how different other children presented the same theme.”

Whereas ideological diversity was deemed essential when hiring general educational consultants, Dushkin handpicked arts educators who not only demonstrated the requisite creative and pedagogical talents but also shared his Reconstructionist orientation and viewed Jewish unity as a core Jewish value and “a basic ingredient of Jewish existence.” The arts, then, while valued as aids to cognitive learning, were prized not only for their ability to concretize the abstract and cater to multiple learning styles. They were also seen as providing necessary balance to traditional modes of Jewish study, which easily gave way to overintellectualization and a tendency to stress differentiation. The arts, these educators believed, were a leveling and an integrating force. As Citron put it, “The school arts, operating as they do through the emotional approach, serve to integrate the basic, existing, albeit submerged unities and bring them to the fore.” Gezari consciously used mural painting in many of her children’s art shows to heighten this process. Mural painting, she believed, forced children to “submerge their individual feeling for the good of the group, to share ideas and materials, to cooperate physically,
to think primarily of the job rather than of themselves.” Lapson, similarly, concluded her dance festivals with the entire audience joining hands in circles and dancing prearranged folk dances that all the school groups prepared for the occasion. Typically, the festival ended with the hora. “With arms on each other’s shoulders, forming circles within circles, they danced with vigor and joy this dance which expresses unity, symbolic of the spirit which dance brings into the Jewish school.”

The impulse toward unification also manifested itself in efforts at standardization, thereby contributing to the forging of a shared postwar Jewish culture. This could be seen in Lapson’s efforts to document and preserve traditional eastern European folk dances, which took on greater urgency after the Holocaust, and in Sam Citron’s publication of select original plays that were staged at the Children’s Theatre, explicitly to facilitate their use in schools and camps. Arguably, this urge found its most influential and enduring expression in Coopersmith’s publication of songsters, choral books, and music anthologies. While Coopersmith was a prolific composer in his own right, and some of his songs and arrangements of popular tunes endured long after his retirement, his greatest legacy was probably as a canonizer of Jewish children’s music. Coopersmith’s JEC collections, some of which were subsequently published by United Synagogue and Behrman House, played a significant role in creating canons of festival songs and young children’s music, and standardizing the musical portions of junior congregation services in Conservative and modern Orthodox synagogues. Likewise, his Songs of Zion (Behrman House, 1942), commissioned by the Department of Youth and Education of the Zionist Organization of America, played a similar role with Jewish nationalist songs from Palestine and the United States.

“Once songs ripened slowly and grew into the fiber of a people, were sung by father and son from generation to generation,” Coopersmith observed. “In our time, however, with change so rapid, more conscious efforts must be made to retain the tradition of Jewish song, which gives spiritual sustenance to us.” In a less sentimental moment, Coopersmith recalled the “chaos and confusion” that attended the conventional, improvised approach to music teaching. “At no time was it possible, for instance, to lead a heterogeneous group in singing, without getting back almost as many versions of a song as there were individuals participating.”

Coopersmith chose three hundred songs from a wide repertoire that included central and eastern European liturgical music, Yiddish and Hebrew folk melodies, Zionist songs, and English-language Jewish songs, grading them into a six-year curriculum. All his songsters included rich piano accompaniments. The choral books contained two- and three-part arrangements and were likewise graded for
complexity and difficulty. Prior to the publication of the choral books, few schools had active choirs. By the 1950s, however, chorus had become firmly ensconced in most schools’ extracurricular programs. Coopersmith was not trying to stifle innovation. Over time, new songs would inevitably be added and some older ones dropped from the core. Coopersmith himself contributed to this process when his New Jewish Song Book (Behrman House, 1965) sought, in part, to update his classic volume The Songs We Sing (United Synagogue, 1950). Rather, his goals were “authenticity,” “unity of style,” “simplicity,” and general “continuity,” so as to create “common song experience.”

Coopersmith acknowledged that establishing criteria for the inclusion of songs in a songbook is always difficult. Inevitably, personal taste plays a role. His books succeeded in part because his taste was eclectic. For example, in his section of Sabbath melodies in The Songs We Sing, traditional works such as Salomon Sulzer’s “Ki Mitziyon” and Eliezer Gerowitch’s arrangement of “Adon Olam” were included alongside newer songs such as Pinchas Minkowsky’s setting of Hayim Nahman Bialik’s poem Shabbat Hamalka (The Sabbath Queen) and Abraham Binder’s “V’Shamru.” He hoped that parents and children would sing these tunes together and “experience the warm feeling of continuity.” He was equally interested in popularizing the Zionist songs of Palestine/Israel. In the course of their frequent travels to and from Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, the Benderly boys brought back many songs that Coopersmith and his associates, including Goldfarb, Abraham Kalb, Leah Jaffa, Ben Aronin, Moshe Nathanson, and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, introduced to schools and camps, including Menashe Ravina’s rousing Hanukkah song “Mi Yimalel,” and Ravina and Israel Dushman’s children’s Arbor Day song “Hashkediya.”

Finally, Coopersmith was intent on nurturing the embryonic American Jewish musical tradition. “Much as we dislike to see it happen, a great deal of the song material which affected us and our parents no longer has meaning to our children,” he wrote in 1949. “It is . . . often ideationally, linguistically and even melodically alien to the American child and is becoming progressively more so.” Coopersmith argued that, to some extent, the songs could be adapted for contemporary use with new arrangements, harmonization, and, sometimes, translations of “difficult Hebrew and obsolescent Yiddish.” He added, however, that “of even greater value” would be the cultivation of authentic American Jewish musical voices. As such, he included many English-language Jewish holiday songs, Samuel Goldfarb and Samuel Grossman’s “My Dreydl” and Goldfarb’s “A Wicked, Wicked Man,” for example, as well as Hebrew-language American songs such as Idelsohn and Nathanson’s “Hava Nagila” and Americanized variations of Zionist songs,
among them his JEC assistant Julius Grossman’s version of Issachar Miron and Yehiel Hagiz’s “Tzena Tzena” and his own setting of “Zum Gali, Gali.”

Over the course of the 1950s the JEC Music Department, under Coopersmith, expanded into the area of phonographic records. By the mid-1960s six albums had been produced, with a total of ninety-seven songs covering most major festivals. Each album was designed for use in both the home and the school. The songs, virtually all of which were included with piano sheet music in previously published songbooks, were arranged both thematically and by level of difficulty. And each album included a pamphlet with the song lyrics.

In general, the JEC was eager to harness technology in the quest to reach a larger audience. In the mid-1940s the organization won wide acclaim for its experimentation with radio. Partnering with the Catholic Archdiocese and the Protestant Religious Council, in 1946 it inaugurated a program titled Your Child and Religion, which aired for a half hour on Sunday mornings on station WMCA. The JEC utilized the weeks devoted to Jewish programming to broadcast dramatized stories from Jewish history and literature as well as five-minute topical commentary by Shearith Israel’s senior rabbi, Dr. David de Sola Pool, who was an active member of the JEC’s board of directors. The success of this initial venture prompted WNBC to offer free airtime to the JEC for its own weekly program in late 1947. Under the supervision of Dramatics Department director Samuel Citron and public relations director Norton Belth, the JEC developed an innovative current events dramatization program titled World Over Playhouse. It lasted two years and garnered the highest ratings of any children’s program of its kind. In fact, its local listening audience, totaling about 150,000 homes, and the approximately five hundred letters per week that the program received from viewers, exceeded the comparable figures of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Eternal Light series. The World Over Playhouse was discontinued only because the JEC could not afford the production costs of a weekly program and did not find a permanent underwriter. Initially, the program was subsidized through private donations. Apparently, the JEC was reluctant to partner with a corporate sponsor.

Citron remained a strong believer in the power of dramatization as a teaching tool, which, he explained, encouraged participants to “vicariously relive” the events portrayed and integrate them into their individual “sense memories.” The concept of using dramatics to educate children about current and historical events endured in the low-tech Headline Parade, a subscription-based dramatization series for schools. By 1950, twenty-five scripts had been published and the series was reaching over two hundred schools. Many of the scripts were translated into Yiddish and published in the Pedagosher Bulletin.
One of the most important initiatives in Jewish children’s community building and the creation of a common public culture was the publication of *World Over* magazine. Initiated by Dushkin and his staff in 1940, the bimonthly children’s magazine—a Jewish version of *Junior Scholastic*, with a mixture of news, stories, games, and comics—progressively built its subscription base in the 1940s and 1950s. By 1948 it was reaching 40,000 subscribers, mostly congregational school children, about two-thirds of whom resided outside New York City. Ten years later the number of subscribers was approaching 100,000, and the magazine was reaching Jewish children in practically every state in the Union, as well as English-speaking countries overseas.

What distinguished *World Over* from earlier Jewish children’s magazines, beyond its much larger circulation, was its high production standards and its less didactic tone. The glossy covers, large photographs, and bold illustrations made the juvenile periodical far more attractive than its predecessors. And while *World Over* was still produced *by* adults *for* children, the editors by and large avoided a moralistic, goody-goody tone that would alienate young readers. The editors made a genuine effort to understand and appeal to their audience, adopting unprecedented techniques such as reader surveys and market research. As with the JEC’s other publishing and media ventures, the goal was to create a product that was comparable in quality to its analogues in the world of general education.

While *World Over* included some religiously oriented material, particularly related to the Jewish holidays, it was at first primarily designed to cover current events. When the magazine’s board was settling on a name, the top three choices were “Tidings,” “World Over,” and “Near and Far.” Over time, news took a backseat to fiction and nonfiction stories. Not everyone cheered the change in orientation. While it extended the magazine’s shelf life, it rendered *World Over* less distinguishable from its closest competitor, *Young Judaeans*, even if most critics agreed that the JEC publication was superior in both form and content. Inevitably there were critics, many of whom fixated on the magazine’s Zionist, yet unabashedly American Jewish, orientation. Some, for instance New York Times heiress Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, found its message of concern and responsibility for Jews in other countries troubling, even in the midst of the Second World War. The magazine, she thought, should avoid any implications that Jews harbored dual political loyalties and instead devote more space to “Americanism and the Jewish religion.” Diametrically opposed to Sulzberger were others, such as Rabbi Mordecai Lewittes at the Brooklyn Jewish Center, who believed that insufficient space
was devoted to “Palestinian matters.” Dushkin took it as a good sign that the extremes on both sides were disgruntled. If the JEC was to retain the goodwill of the broader community, its magazine would need to occupy the political center. “Naturally, you realize that since this is not an out-and-out Zionist paper, it is important to give Palestine its proportionate place in the scheme of Jewish life, particularly in a community of children whose parents differ as widely as do the Jews in New York,” Dushkin explained to Lewittes. 79

Even some JEC staff members doubted the possibility of producing a magazine that would politically satisfy all of the agency’s constituencies. Mindful of the Survey Committee’s recognition of the right of each Jewish group to adhere to its own beliefs and ideology, Israel Chipkin wondered aloud whether the best course of action might be to issue multiple magazines. “There is no reason why . . . there must be one pictorial newspaper to satisfy all shades of opinion or parties. It may be more costly to issue two papers, but cost can only be measured in terms of purpose served and results achieved,” he wrote in a memorandum to Dushkin. In fact, the board was extremely mindful of costs, and the magazine’s longevity was directly tied to its profitability as well as its perceived educational value. After an initial investment, the board aimed to make the magazine debt-neutral, a milestone that was achieved in the late 1940s. By the 1950s World Over was generating thousands of dollars a year in revenue, which was used to enlarge and upgrade the publication and support other projects. The prospect of separate Zionist and non-Zionist (or Orthodox and Reform) magazines was never seriously entertained on the board level. 80

Likewise, calls to introduce a Hebrew section to World Over or for the JEC to publish a separate Hebrew-language magazine were shot down. The former proposal threatened to dilute the readership, most of whom were not proficient Hebrew readers, while the latter was deemed unprofitable. Skeptics pointed to the anemic circulation figures of the Histadruth Ivrit’s Hebrew publication, Hadoar Lanoar, which, in 1941, stood at about 2,500–3,000 per issue. From a purely business standpoint, the potential audience for a Hebrew children’s magazine in the 1940s was too small to support the initiative. Intensive, Hebraic Talmud Torahs were on the decline and notoriously cash starved, while day schools still comprised a negligible fraction of the market. The case is interesting because it highlighted the dilemma of what criteria an educational service agency should use in determining how to spend communal funds. Did the educational value of particular initiatives justify their support regardless of the demand? This, of course, raised an even more basic question: How far should an educational service agency go in promoting what its professional staff or board considered salutary change within the existing system? Advocates of a Hebrew publication on the JEC board believed
that its potential educational value transcended its market value, and they eventually convinced their colleagues to vote a yearly subsidy to *Hadoar Lanoar* that was sufficiently generous to afford the JEC influence over the magazine's editorial policy. This approach was deemed an acceptable compromise, not only because it shielded the JEC from ultimate financial responsibility for the endeavor, but also because it was consistent with the JEC’s reluctance to directly oversee projects that advanced a particularistic educational vision.\(^81\)

It is important to emphasize, however, that the desire to keep *World Over* in the mainstream did not translate into an apolitical editorial voice. Initially, the war played an important role in defining the political consensus. Indeed, the war rendered largely anachronistic Chipkin’s concerns about satisfying the JEC’s diverse constituencies. Religious and ideological differences persisted, of course. But the Jewish community’s eagerness to adopt a patriotic posture encouraged a conciliatory mood. An important component in this lowering of the communal temperature was the neutralizing of Zionism’s critics. World events and demographic changes forced a reevaluation of Zionism on both the religious left and right, with outright opposition becoming relegated to the political margins.

*World Over*’s editorial policy was defined by a two-way process. On the one hand it reflected an emerging mainstream consensus, while on the other it sought to shape it. Three themes stand out in the magazine during the war years: Jewish Americanism, Jewish heroism, and Jewish unity and mutual responsibility. Not surprisingly, war news overshadowed all else. Some stories were clearly designed to celebrate the heroism of American forces, shore up confidence on the home front, and urge contribution to wartime drives and initiatives to support the troops. These could have appeared in any children’s magazine. “Do you hoard pennies?” the editor inquired, in an article publicizing a Treasury Department letter asking children to help put pennies into circulation to offset a scarcity of small coins, as copper was being diverted for use in making weaponry. “As a patriotic boy or girl, of course you don’t.” Frequently, however, patriotic duties were framed as consonant with Jewish values. “Carry out the old Jewish tradition of *bal tashchit*—thou shalt not waste,” urged another article devoted to the collection of scrap metal.\(^82\)

American Jewish war heroes were a favorite subject and often showcased with attractive photographs and suggestive illustrations. “Solo Blitzer Was ‘All Thumbs’ at Home,” read one headline, introducing a story about Corporal Bernard Kessel, who could “toss a Gen. Grant tank around in Oran, North Africa, with the ease of a baseball. But when he was a civilian, his friends say, he couldn’t even learn to drive a car.” The article was careful to point out that Kessel was a top Hebrew student at Lincoln High School prior to enlisting. Editor Maurice Spector aimed to both valorize and humanize the soldiers, to make them accessible heroes and
American Jewish role models. “*World Over* tries to approach the child in terms of his own experience and environment,” Spector explained.83

American Jewish soldiers were depicted, not only as patriotic American citizens, but also as loyal Jews. For example, “Sabbath on Guadalcanal” featured a report by Chaplain Jacob Rothschild describing how Jewish soldiers dependably gathered for Sabbath services even in the midst of battle. Rothschild, who later became a civil rights activist as rabbi of the Temple in Atlanta, Georgia, recounted how he would make a circuit of jungle outposts on Saturday mornings, holding services as close as possible to the front lines. At a post behind Henderson Field, often his first stop, Rothschild’s assistant hand-carved a Star of David and planted it atop a coconut stump to serve as a makeshift pulpit.84

At the same time, however, the magazine went to great lengths to stress that the Jewish contribution to the war effort was an expression of “brotherhood” and a repudiation of Nazi race theory as well as religious and racial prejudice in the United States. “Bullies” who attacked Jewish children on the streets and vandalized synagogues and other Jewish property were “Hitler’s messengers of hate,” the magazine declared. “Spreading falsehoods about different groups and particularly Jews is one of Hitler’s chief tricks to divide the American people.” Some articles sought to universalize Jewish suffering, pointing out that other groups had been scapegoated in the past. Others shared stories of non-Jewish heroism, particularly efforts of Danes, Swedes, Poles, and others to save European Jews. The magazine approvingly quoted American Jewish Committee leader Judge Joseph Proskauer’s assertion that “[s]oldiers at the front . . . do not ask whether a man is white or black, foreign or native born, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, but only whether he is a good soldier.” Similarly, in an article titled “My Brother Always Did Keep Swell Company,” the magazine extolled the practice of burying fallen Jewish soldiers side by side with their Christian comrades, so as to create a sea of Crosses and Stars of David, apparently unconcerned with the halakhic (Jewish legal) complications involved.85

Dushkin and Spector might have been mildly sensitive to the criticism, voiced in some influential quarters, that Jewish boosterism in relation to the war effort could backfire, or that it constituted another, albeit more benign, form of race and religious prejudice. “I do *not* like a photograph of Capt. Badt . . . saying that [he] figured ‘in many acts of rescue and mercy’ and that he’s a Jew. What has *that* to do with it?” complained one of Sam Rosenman’s confidants. “Suppose that Capt. Badt had the bad luck to run his ship aground and *Fortune* published his picture and said he is a Jew. Would we like it? If not, why do *we* say it of him when he affects a rescue? Will Capt. Badt himself like his picture published in the same issue with the bearded gentlemen studying ‘Chumesh with Rashi?’” On balance, however,
such observations had little impact on editorial policy. After all, the publication of the two photos in the same issue underscored precisely the point that the magazine was designed to get across.  

Finally, the magazine presented a powerful and sustained brief on behalf of *K'lal Yisrael*, offering its young readers an unvarnished source of news about Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe and advocating for Jewish action on their behalf. Only weeks after the content of the Riegner telegram, confirming Hitler’s genocidal policies, was made public in the United States by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the lead news article in the January 8, 1943, issue of *World Over* candidly recounted what was then known about the Nazi government’s actions. “In Poland, which has been made the principal Nazi slaughterhouse, the ghettos established by the German invader are being systematically emptied of all Jews except a few highly skilled workers required for war industries. None of those taken away are ever heard of again.”  

Frequent reports about death and destruction were balanced with stories of heroism on the part of Jews in Allied countries, as well as those under Nazi rule. The cover photo of the December 11, 1942, issue portrayed a Jewish family in Tel Aviv, all in uniform, gathered around the table, bringing in the High Holidays. According to the caption, all were on furlough. “Their faces express the firm determination of the Jews of Palestine to march to victory alongside the United Nations.” A poster reproduced under the photo, depicting Palestinian Jewish soldiers with their bayonets aloft, screams: “Enlist!” and carries a pointed adaptation of the verse from Genesis 4:10: “The blood of your brother cries out to you!”  

Acts of spiritual resistance were not ignored by the editors. A report about ghetto life in 1942 marveled that Jewish children were defying the Nazis and keeping their heritage alive through studying and writing poetry. The magazine reprinted a poem by a Jewish child in the Warsaw Ghetto that originally appeared in the *Jewish Frontier*. A few months later, it carried a report of how Ukrainian Jewish refugee Mendel Matlin rescued Torah scrolls from a burning Stalingrad synagogue during a Nazi bombing. Yet the magazine’s emphasis was squarely on physical acts of courage and bravery, with intent to combat the images of Jewish passivity and victimhood.  

Arguably, the most moving story to appear in the magazine during this period was an account of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The uncredited writer utilized the genre of historical fiction to great effect. When news of the latest deportation order reaches the ghetto’s Jewish Defense Council, the decision is made to fight:  

A low murmur of anger swept the group, but quickly died down as the leader spoke: “Men and women of the Defense Council, what shall it be? For me the
choice is clear. They want five thousand more victims for the gas chambers of the Treblinka Concentration Camp. There was once a half million of us in the ghetto. Forty thousand are left. Shall we go to the slaughter like sheep or shall we die fighting?"

“But we are a handful,” spoke a delegate in a low voice. “We are up against a mighty German garrison. We are alone. We shall be lost.” . . .

“I say it is better to die fighting on your feet than to die on your knees,” cried a young woman.

“Let that be our slogan!” exclaimed the leader. “What do you say?”

“Fight, fight!” came from the throats of all in the group.90

Readers subsequently learned about uprisings in Bialystok and other cities, and in the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor.91 “Revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto” was published only six months after the uprising, in the October 29, 1943, issue. The story, with its breathless showcasing of Jewish heroism, emphasis on physical resistance, and underlying universalistic message, aptly captured the tone of the magazine in these years.

In the aftermath of the war, World Over’s attention turned more directly to the quest for Jewish sovereignty over Palestine. News items focused on the political scene, briefing readers on the Anglo-American Commission, Aliyah Beth (illegal immigration), the United Nations partition plan, and the War of Independence, while fiction and nonfiction stories were designed to heighten their emotional attachment to the land and its people. In “Dawn to Dusk: How a Negev Colony Is Built,” author David Schreiber described the erection in a single day of a watchtower-and-stockade settlement. A two-page illustrated spread recounted a ten-step process, from enclosing the three-acre site with sandbags and a barbed wire fence to building the central building and dormitories, and from constructing the watchtower and hoisting the water tank to assembling for the dedication and raising of the Jewish flag. Reluctant to miss an opportunity to draw connections between the halutzim and the young American Jewish readers, the article began: “If you are at a summer camp right now, look around you. You will see a dining hall, bunks, and perhaps a few tents. Imagine all that going up in one day and then multiply by twelve, and you will have an idea of what went on in a single day in the Negev in southern Palestine, last fall.” In an effort to move the readers from interest to active engagement, the story was followed by music and lyrics to the song “Mayim, Mayim,” and instructions for the accompanying dance.92

If under the new editorial hand of Deborah Pessin and, later, the team of Norton Belth, Morris Epstein, and Ezekiel Schloss World Over became more unabashedly Zionist and relentless in its coverage of events in Palestine, it also re-
remained focused on the destruction of Jewish life in Europe. Indeed, Jewish na-
tional rebirth in Palestine was portrayed as consolation, if not compensation, for
the Holocaust. An issue devoted primarily to stirring photographs of prewar
European Jewish life, culled from the album The Vanished World, also included a
strikingly contrasting story about the Zionist workers’ colony of Nahalal, which
was converted from “barren plains and ruins” and “malarial swamps” into “green
fields and fertile meadows.” The juxtaposition of the two features sent an un-
mistakable message about the Jewish past and the Jewish future.Ω≥

Jewish heroism, both at home and abroad, remained a central theme in the
magazine’s pages. There was the continued valorization of wartime heroes, includ-
ing members of the Royal Air Force and the French underground. But there were
also celebrations of more trivial, if hardly mundane, heroes such as baseball slug-
ger Hank Greenberg of the Detroit Tigers, who took pride in his Jewish heritage
and Bronx roots. Strikingly, there were few female role models in World Over’s
pages. This might have been inevitable during the war, but it continued into the
late 1940s and early 1950s. The standout exception was an inspiring story about
parachutist Hannah Szenes in the February 8, 1946, issue. Even a female editor at
the helm seemed to make little difference. Perhaps the unremitting attention to
acts of male physical prowess and bravery telegraphed underlying insecurities
about Jewish masculinity.Ω∂

World Over’s insistence during the war that prejudice was un-American became
a central theme in the magazine by the mid- to late 1940s. In particular, the maga-
azine took a strong stand against American racism, which probably raised a few
eyebrows of Jewish educators in the South. World Over certainly ruffled feathers
with its forthright condemnation of southern senators for filibustering and ulti-
mately defeating President Harry Truman’s Fair Employment Practices bill, which
sought to ban racial discrimination in hiring. Discrimination against blacks, the
magazine argued, was antidemocratic and reeked of discredited Nazi racial theory.
The denunciation came in the context of the magazine’s larger interest in inter-
group relations and its overriding message that black or white, Jew or Christian,
“We are all Americans.” A 1946 editorial in commemoration of National Brother-
hood Week encapsulated the magazine’s argument: “Colin Kelly and Meyer Levin,
Irish pilot and Jewish bombardier, did not stop to ask each other what their
religion was before taking off together. . . . Neither did the bullets stop to ask
questions. They took our soldiers equally—white, Negro, Jew, Christian. The war
made clearer than ever the meaning of brotherhood. . . . Democracy won the war.
Our faith in the equality of man has grown stronger. Our principles of freedom
were weapons in the war we have won. They are the bonds bringing ever closer
together the people of America.”Ω∑
Thus, the magazine sought to balance its brand of ethnic boosterism, its own overriding interest in the religion of America’s bombardiers and baseball stars, with a message of American brotherhood and a forceful endorsement of American liberalism. This was hardly understood by readers to be a mixed message. Indeed, *World Over* provides strong confirmation that, by and large, Jews in the 1940s and 1950s did not view as discordant their dual commitments to Jewish national pride and Zionism, on the one hand, and social justice and civil rights activism, on the other.96

Ultimately, of course, the magazine’s concern for prejudice had less to do with African Americans than with American Jews. This is not to say that its support for civil rights was disingenuous or merely self-serving, but only that its bedrock interest was in discrediting antisemitism and promoting full Jewish integration into mainstream America. “The Americans whose ancestors came to Ellis Island are as important,” and as fully American, “as the Americans whose ancestors landed at Plymouth Rock,” the magazine asserted. Many of artist Ezekiel Schloss’s magazine covers during this period are highly suggestive illustrations of what historian Jonathan Sarna termed “the cult of synthesis,” designed to reinforce a wholesale and uncomplicated vision of American Jewish compatibility. In one, a boy with a baseball hat eats a candy bar while studying a Hebrew school book in his bedroom, surrounded with posters of airplanes and sports players, and a navy pennant. The cover of the Independence Day issue of the magazine in 1947 depicted three boys donning yarmulkes posed to evoke Archibald McNeal Willard’s *Spirit of ’76*, one playing the drum, a second with a flute, and a third between them holding an American flag.97

With its large reading audience *World Over* became a significant force for Jewish unity and the concretization of a common American Jewish children’s culture. With its emphasis on ethnic pride, American Jewish integration, social justice, Zionism, and K’lal Yisrael, and its inattention to religious doctrine and God, *World Over* defined the “good Jew” and helped to shape the Jewish identities and Jewish sensibilities of the emerging baby boom generation. For a generation that grew up in the 1940s and 1950s attending communitywide arts festivals and reading *World Over*, marching in solidarity with Israel and on behalf of Soviet Jewry in the 1960s and 1970s became an almost reflexive activity.

*The Creation of Israel and the Elusive Search for Redemption and Consensus in American Jewish Education*

The creation of the state of Israel, in May 1948, held out much promise for American Jewish educators but also became a test of the “unity in diversity”
principle as they wrangled over the implications of the momentous event for American Jewish education and Israeli politicians tested the limits of Jewish unity with their obdurate promotion of American *aliyah*. When the United Nations voted on November 29, 1947, to partition Palestine, Dushkin was exuberant. The spring 1948 issue of *Jewish Education* carried an extended editorial titled “Implications of the Jewish State for American Jewish Education.” “Great and important has been the period through which we have just passed,” he declared. “We are on the threshold of an even greater period ahead.” While allowing that “New Judea” would probably not win converts among the avowed non-Zionists, be they rigorously Orthodox or classical Reform Jews, Dushkin predicted that the vast majority of American Jews, who were broadly sympathetic to Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish state, would “probably become more fervently Zionist than ever before.” Certainly their faith would be affirmed at a time that was otherwise characterized by existential crisis. “They will continue with greater conviction and with greater clarity to serve as ‘partners of the Almighty’ in shaping the *Bayit Shlishi*, the Third Home of the Jewish people and of the Hebraic spirit.”

Dushkin envisaged the Jewish state playing an “enormous” role in American Jewish education. Its very creation would give youngsters renewed faith in “the ultimate triumph of right” and the “essential goodness of life.” It would enhance Jewish dignity and self-assurance, providing an antidote to self-hatred; endow the Bible and Jewish history with new relevance; help to revitalize American Jewish culture; provide a new impetus for the study of Modern Hebrew; and supply new content for a tired Jewish school curriculum, in the form of “new events, new heroes, new stories, poems, songs, dances, dramas, that will keep coming to us as a result of the buoyant creative energy of the new State, especially since these will have in them the quality of earthiness and fullness of Hebraic living in the land of the Bible.” Dushkin implored his colleagues to encourage the mitzvah of *aliyat regel*, or pilgrimage, and to inculcate their students with “the ideal of service . . . in or on behalf of the Jewish State,” in order to foster connections between young American Jews and the Jewish homeland.

Given Dushkin’s misgivings about the chauvinistic manifestations of nationalism, it was all the more remarkable for him to be swept away by the drama and the romance of the moment. No doubt the salvific effect of the rise of Israel barely three years after the liberation of the death camps profoundly moved him and his colleagues, along with many others: “The proud but true boast of the Yishuv is that within one generation the shame of wilderness and desolation was removed from our land and the shame of exile and ghetto from our souls.” Nevertheless, his predictions about the impact of Israel on American Jewish education were a generation premature.
Many contributing factors can be cited for the failure of Israel to transform American Jewish education as Dushkin hoped it would. After a decade-long preoccupation with the momentous events in Europe and Palestine, American Jews in the late 1940s and 1950s turned their attention to hearth and home. American Jews were nesting, community building, and attaining the economic success and security that had eluded them during the Depression and the war. The culture of the Cold War also discouraged any foreign dalliances that had even a whiff of disloyalty. American Jews may also have had a difficult time relating to post–War of Independence—but pre–Leon Uris—Israel: a small, besieged socialist outpost, personified by David Ben Gurion, its hard-bitten prime minister. Many devotedly bought Israeli bonds and gave donations to the United Jewish Appeal. But they also recognized the distance between the spartan Israeli lifestyle and their own aspirations for suburban living.

Then there was the thorny question of what it meant to be a Zionist in the Diaspora after the creation of the Jewish state. Ben Gurion believed that the concept was oxymoronic. Like many Israelis, he was a firm Negator of the Exile, utterly convinced that America was irredeemably galut—a more benign galut, perhaps, than his native town of Pinsk, but one where Jewish life was no less doomed. For most American Jews, these sentiments played no better coming from the Israeli prime minister than they did when they occasionally spewed forth from their children’s Hebrew school teacher. Dushkin himself was well aware of the potential for a shelilat ha-galut (Negation of the Exile) message to alienate American Jews. Reporting about his trip to the 1947 World Conference on Jewish Education, in Jerusalem, he observed how difficult it was for the non-American delegates to understand his insistence that America not be conceived of as an Exile and that aliyah not be “the only or even the primary aim of American Jewish education.” When Dushkin addressed the conference, he emphasized the danger of a pedagogy based on shelilat ha-galut. “In the free lands of democracy, a community cannot continue to live and create if it is convinced that it is living a slow death and that there is no reasonable permanency to its efforts,” he warned. “The essential aim of Diaspora education should be to teach Jews to live their lives as Jews wherever they are, and to visit Palestine regularly.”

Some American Jewish critics, including ardent Zionists, lambasted Dushkin and his American educator colleagues for acquiescing to conference resolutions that called into question the long-term viability of American Jewish life. Philanthropist Frank Cohen, who generously supported many projects in the Yishuv, was outraged by a resolution asserting that the goal of Jewish education in the United States should be aliyah. He complained of the “impertinence” of educators living outside the United States to attempt to set the American Jewish educational
agenda, and declared that any American Jewish educator who endorsed the resolution should be hounded from the schools. Another detractor, an American Jewish educator, implored his colleagues to “surrender the naïve belief that out of Zion will come forth not only Torah, but also a . . . Judaism made exactly to the measurements of American Jews.” He added: “Our children in America will never be happy if we teach them that as long as they live here they are in Galut. To create and intensify a sense of homelessness in children is to complicate their lives with a debilitating sense of self pity.” Dushkin essentially agreed with this view. It was only his sense of fair play and democracy that caused him to accept the will of the majority at the conference. He also understood that the resolutions were non-binding and would have little practical effect on the situation on the ground in the United States.104

Dushkin’s trip to Palestine in 1947 affected him deeply. It was his first visit since he assumed the directorship of the JEC in 1939, and the changes that he witnessed were breathtaking, but also thought provoking. On the most basic level, the Jewish presence had grown immensely, but so had the atmosphere of conflict and the militarization of civilian life. There were other differences between 1939 and 1947. A decade earlier, the Jewish population of the Yishuv was relatively homogeneous and more united, at least in Dushkin’s estimation. The arrival of refugees from Europe, many of whom were scarred by their wartime experiences, was affecting the character of the Yishuv in potentially disturbing ways.105

None of this diminished Dushkin’s romance with the Zionist project, nor did it cool his desire to relocate to the new state of Israel when he was ready to move on from the JEC. But it did reinforce the idea that Israel alone would not be a panacea for the post-Holocaust Jewish people. Jewish survival would depend on the vitality of two complementary Jewish centers, in Palestine and North America. The Jewish encounter with American civilization bred a pragmatic, democratic spirit—a culture that respected pluralism and was on its way to overcoming the myopia and siege mentality that had been reinforced over centuries in the European ghettos. These were qualities that Dushkin found salutary and even necessary for Jewish continuity in the modern world, particularly in the Diaspora. Yet, for various reasons, they were in short supply in Palestine. Dushkin’s outlook amounted to a sound rejection of shelilat ha-galut and a challenge to the prevailing Zionist ethos. But it also entailed a momentous test for the postwar American Jewish community, which would need to transcend its philanthropic role and become a significant center of Jewish ideas and culture. The Jewish community in America, Dushkin believed, could become a model of minority living in a tolerant host culture. But it would need to take itself more seriously, and engage in a process of confidence building.106

Unity in Diversity? 371
The educational implications of Dushkin’s position were clear. He envisioned a curriculum organized around two foci: Israel and American Jewish life. The former component would primarily involve Hebrew-language instruction, preferably using the natural method, although he readily admitted that this might not be possible in many congregational schools. The latter would utilize a variety of disciplines, including Bible, history, and social studies, to explore “Jewish life relationships” in four discrete areas: home and family; synagogue, Jewish community, and Jewish people; non-Jewish neighbors; and the self, which would involve cultivating a Jewishly informed attitude toward the individual’s responsibility to humanity and toward God.∞≠π

When Dushkin presented his ideas to his staff, however, he found that just as he had been overconfident five years earlier about the ability of American Jewish groups to settle on a set of “common elements,” so, too, was he underestimating the allowance that would need to be made for ideological diversity. His formulation, in its broad strokes, would probably be acceptable to those schools that were aligned with centrist movements, especially the Conservative congregational schools. However, it would fail to satisfy the needs of many in the Jewish nationalist, Orthodox, Reform, and Yiddishist camps. Speaking for the Hebraist-nationalists, consultant Noah Nardi summarily rejected the dual-center concept. Adopting the position of the majority of educators at the World Conference, he endorsed a Hebraic-centered curriculum that was designed to promote halutziut (pioneering spirit) and aliyah. Predictably, this elicited protests from various quarters. Yudel Mark, who worked with the Yiddish schools, rejected the equation of Judaism and Zionism, while Elijah Bortniker, who mostly consulted for Conservative schools, responded that few American Jewish parents would knowingly enroll their children in an educational institution that promoted shelilat ha-galut and aliyah. Nardi revealed his own detachment from the currents of American life when he insisted that it was the educator rather than the parent or the community that should play the determining role in the development of curricular philosophy and outlook.∞≠∫

Bortniker insisted that Dushkin’s foci could never truly be given equal weight in the American Jewish school “in light of the realities of the American scene.” These included not only the need to prepare children to live largely synagogue-centered Jewish lives but also the size, limited schedule, and lack of Hebraically fluent personnel in many congregational schools. Meanwhile, David Rudavsky, who worked with the Talmud Torahs, questioned Dushkin’s implied acquiescence to the trend toward congregation-based education. The debate continued in weekly Monday morning staff meetings over the following month, some lasting four and a half hours, with little resolution. In its final stage, Samuel Grand, who focused on
extension education, suggested that the group approach the problem as “one of educating for change, and seek a method for effecting such change on the Jewish scene.” Jewish education, he asserted, would involve “teaching the means for attaining the ideal.” He added that this would entail “evolving the structure of the ideal through teaching the agency which made its attainment possible.” While Grand’s activist conception of education was appealing, it only underscored that each Jewish group would define the ideal according to its own Jewish outlook and values. Diversity would triumph over unity. Grand insisted that it was the task of the educational service agency to constantly push the boundaries of the “common ground” and “postpone the process of differentiation until the time is ripe for it.” On this final point, there appeared to be broad agreement.∞≠Ω

To its partisans, “unity in diversity” was nothing less than a redeeming formula for American Jewish renascence. To the philosophy’s detractors, however, “unity in diversity” was, at best, an empty slogan and, at worst, an inhibitor of educational experimentation and new approaches—an excuse for maintaining the status quo. Oscar Janowsky dismissed it derisively as “a cliché which passes for a principle,” adding that, in truth, “there is little unity in Jewish education and not much diversity.”110

The experience of the JEC in the 1940s and early 1950s suggests that both viewpoints were partly correct. Through its organization of communitywide assemblies and art exhibitions; its sponsorship of a range of nonpartisan teacher services, from a uniform code of practice and an insurance plan to pedagogical conferences and teacher education courses; and its ever-growing list of new media ventures and educational publications, headlined by the popular World Over magazine, the JEC succeeded in promoting a spirit of K’lal Yisrael and the contours of a shared Jewish children’s culture. At the same time, however, the organization’s need to stay within the mainstream, to avoid advocating for any initiative or program that smacked of parochialism, limited its ability to promote a bold vision of Jewish life. At best, it could push for change only in an incremental, sometimes surreptitious fashion. Likewise, there were central facets of Jewish life, most notably religious ideology and practice, that it was compelled to cede to the movements. Inadvertently, then, this contributed to the promotion of a postwar Judaism where ethnicity and Jewish pride were often privileged over ideology.

Berkson’s contention that a central educational agency must act as a force for innovation and development through a robust program of experimentation remained compelling to many Jewish educators. Thus, even as Sam Dinin adopted much of Dushkin’s service agency approach and rationale when he built up the Bureau of Jewish Education in Los Angeles, he did not abandon the concept of the
bureau as a lever: “A common curricula core cannot be imposed by a central educational agency. . . . However, if we are to effect an improvement in the quality of instruction and to develop the American Jewish school of tomorrow, a central educational agency must be more than a service agency. . . . The central educational agency, in short, must cease to be merely a midwife for all the groups in the community and produce something of its own which represents the best conceptions of the best educators.”

Dushkin responded to this line of criticism by supporting experimentation on the denominational or party level. His initiative, which is discussed in the next chapter, produced mixed results.

The JEC’s promotion of K’lal Yisrael and Dushkin’s attempt to elaborate a program based on “common elements” demonstrated his commitment to finding equilibrium between unity and diversity. When Dushkin’s successor, third generation Benderly acolyte Azriel Eisenberg, tipped the balance more in the direction of diversity, Dushkin was dismayed. Eisenberg justified his abandonment of various transpartisan initiatives on the grounds that principled fealty to K’lal Yisrael often stood in the way of educational improvement. But his opponents insisted that while diversity should be respected, “it need not become a fetish.” They warned that “[m]uch of what passes as diversity is no more than vested institutional interests” and insisted that the bureaus should not be in the business of enabling long-term “disunity and fragmentation” in order to achieve short-term results.

Perhaps Dushkin and Eisenberg were simply playing out a Jewish version of the broader argument that was being waged in postwar America between advocates of the so-called liberal consensus and critics who charged that political orthodoxies merely bred conformity and crushed social and cultural innovation. Dushkin might have counseled an embrace of fuzzy Jewish peoplehood as a basis for a Jewish “end of ideology.” But Eisenberg could quote the admonition from Yeats’s 1921 poem “The Second Coming,” which apparently served as Arthur Schlesinger’s inspiration for his advocacy of a “vital center.” Yeats wrote:

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. . . . The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.
Rebuilding, Renewal, and Reconciliation in the Postwar Era

The Jewish arrival in suburbia portended significant shifts in Jewish educational patterns. As early as 1950, sociologist Will Herberg proclaimed that a “religious revival” was underway: A synagogue building boom that dwarfed even the construction activity in the 1920s was in full swing; Jewish families were affiliating and sending their children to Jewish schools in significantly greater numbers than in the 1920s or 1930s; and the child-centered atmosphere that sociologist Herbert Gans detected in a postwar Jewish bedroom community outside Chicago was becoming a hallmark of postwar life.\(^1\)

Jewish educators who might have been expected to welcome the postwar trends were considerably more skeptical than Herberg and Gans. Los Angeles Bureau chief Samuel Dinin reminded Jewish Education readers in 1955 that behind the seemingly rosy picture was a far less encouraging set of statistics. Over half of the Jewish population remained unaffiliated, and many of those who did belong rarely attended services. Nor did the increase in membership bring about “as yet a

Above: A science class at the Ramaz School during the 1950s. Setting the pattern for other modern day schools, Ramaz alternated general and Judaic studies classes throughout the school day rather than teaching Judaic studies in mornings and secular studies in the afternoons. Courtesy of the Ramaz School.
corresponding increase or improvement in observance or piety or ethical behavior.” As for Jewish education, the 40 percent attendance rate at any given time was a vast improvement over the 25 percent rate of a generation earlier, but it masked the “deterioration of intensive weekday Jewish education,” the steady growth of Sunday schools at the expense of afternoon schools, and the reduction of teaching hours per week in the latter institutions. Sunday school was an accepted part of the suburban ritual. Jews built synagogues and sent their kids to religious school in order to fit in with their gentile neighbors. Gans’s data suggested that parents wanted a school that instilled ethnic pride in their children as an inoculation against antisemitism, while declining to make demands about Jewish observance in the home.≤

Some of the trends that took hold in the postwar era actually began to crystallize in the mid- to late 1930s, including the sinking fortunes of the community Talmud Torah and the concomitant ascent of the congregational school; the move from five-day-a-week to three-day-a-week instruction in the afternoon school; and the gradual replacement of the Hebraic curriculum with a Hebrew reading/English translation, content-driven curriculum. “Is the Talmud Torah Doomed?” asked the uncharacteristically sensationalist title of a November 1946 Jewish Education article by JEC educational consultant Judah Pilch. His answer was, to a large extent, yes. The extent of student hemorrhaging reached the point where most schools were unable to offer a graded program and/or ability-based grouping. Meanwhile, the schools’ greatest strength, their intensive curriculum, was also being watered down. Pilch’s gloomy diagnosis was based on a number of social and demographic factors that would only become exacerbated over the next ten years, including the increase in native-born parents; the influence of Americanization; the rise of an aggressive ultra-Orthodoxy that eschewed public education and had no use for the nationalistic curriculum of the “Treifa [non-kosher] Talmud Torah”; the embourgeoisement of the Jewish community, which, among other things, steered its orientation toward leisure-time activities; and the movement of Jews to less dense, middle-class, religiously heterogeneous neighborhoods.≥

One area of the country where the Talmud Torahs held out a little longer was the Mississippi Valley. Schools in a dozen or so small and midsize communities survived into 1960s and 1970s. Local conditions encouraged cooperation across denominations. Moreover, many of these communities were too small to support day schools and continued to look to the communal school as the only intensive educational option. Still attenuation was inevitable, for the Midwest was not immune from the forces that hastened the Talmud Torah’s decline in cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore. By the 1950s even the venerable Minneapolis Talmud Torah, which maintained strong enrollment figures, had cut its extracurricular
program, reduced its hours, and saw its academic standards decline. Only the United Hebrew Schools of Detroit, under Albert Elazar, managed to retain its vibrancy into the 1960s by co-opting many of the area’s Conservative and Orthodox synagogues. By operating the congregational schools as branches of the Talmud Torah association, Detroit became the exception that proved the rule.4

A key reason for many Jewish educators’ attachment to the Talmud Torah was that it held the potential for an intensity level of Jewish education that most congregational schools could never hope to deliver. Many veterans feared that the congregational afternoon school was merely a transitional stage to the Sunday school. In the mid- to late 1940s, their concerns were understandable. Sunday schools were growing faster than congregational Hebrew schools, especially outside the Northeast corridor. Nationwide, a plurality of students receiving a Jewish education attended a one-day-a-week school. These schools attracted the majority of students in growing western cities, including Dinin’s Los Angeles, and were especially dominant in the smaller Jewish communities. “It is in the smaller community that one can see the shape of Judaism to come,” Dinin wrote in 1946. “There it is always the least common denominator upon which Jews act.” Actually, concerted efforts by Conservative rabbis and educationalists were able to reverse the tide in the 1950s. Weekday congregational schools grew more quickly than Sunday schools in the 1950s, albeit with three-day-a-week (as opposed to five-day-a-week) schedules. But Dinin was correct that the overall trend was toward attenuation of the education program.5

As Chicago educator Irving Barkan pointed out, the congregational schools—particularly those housed in postwar suburban synagogue centers—boasted important advantages over the communal Talmud Torahs: The synagogue was the dominant Jewish institution on the postwar landscape. Absent the ethnic neighborhood, the suburban synagogue center became the location for one-stop Jewish shopping; its “total program” of religious, educational, social, and recreational activities provided “the only Jewish environment for children outside of their homes.” And with the steep decline in ritual observance, the home itself was becoming less distinctively Jewish. From a functional perspective, the synagogue was increasingly the only place in the child’s orbit where participation demanded knowledge of Hebrew, prayers, and a degree of Jewish cultural literacy. Since many parents were synagogue members and had independent relationships with the clergy team and staff, the relationship between school and home was usually stronger than in the Talmud Torah. Moreover, the synagogues had a greater ability to compel attendance by threatening to deny bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies to those who did not complete their minimal requirements.6

Far less sanguine than Barkan, the American Association for Jewish Education’s
director of research and information, Uriah Engelman, made the case that by its very nature the congregation was ill equipped to run a school. Unlike conducting religious services and coordinating social and recreational activities, all of which required a relatively simple organization and procedures, managing a school required “an involved apparatus, a high degree of democratic authority, a willingness and readiness for cooperation on a community level, and a kind of specialized competence, which congregations . . . do not possess.” Furthermore, frequent changes in lay and professional leadership and fluctuations in membership conspired to thwart “the normal development of a Hebrew school system.” Engelman went on to cast doubts on the qualifications of many lay leaders on synagogue education committees to make informed decisions about school curricula and policy, a concern that was reinforced by the results of a 1954 United Synagogue National Survey on Synagogue Leadership. He also argued that any inclination to raise school standards was canceled by the synagogue’s competitive urge. In its desire to attract the greatest number of members, standards inevitably fall by the wayside.⁷

Many within the Benderly orbit were willing to make their peace with the ascendancy of congregational education and larger drift toward denominationalism. They recalled that Benderly himself recognized the trend as early as the 1920s and adjusted his thinking accordingly. One of the prime counselors of reconciliation was Dushkin’s successor at the JEC, Azriel Eisenberg. In a confidential memo to his staff, Eisenberg repudiated Dushkin’s effort to delineate “common elements,” a unified core curriculum that could unite Jewish schools regardless of affiliation. The emphasis on common elements only tended “to obscure and obliterate significant distinctions,” which served no defensible educational purpose. “As I see it, the JEC, having so many other problems on its hands, is not in a position to become the banner waver of the so-called community emphasis in Jewish education.” The forces of denominationalism, as represented by the synagogues and seminaries, and Jewish unity, as represented by federations and defense and welfare organizations, were undeniably in tension, but affected an uneasy coexistence. “We ought to choose such methods and approaches which will keep our skirts clean in the struggle between these two conflicting forces,” Eisenberg wrote.⁸

Eisenberg admitted that his stance was dictated by practical considerations rather than high principles. He pointed out that attempts to organize consultation services along district or neighborhood lines were far less successful than working separately with each denomination or ideological group. Any interdenominational cooperation was generally of “a comparatively innocuous nature.” When it came to “the things that count—course of study, uniform testing, in-service semi-
nars, and the like, the screens and barriers have not been breached.” Eisenberg cited specific examples where insistence on the “community principle” would have stymied educational advancement, albeit along denominational lines. He further argued that by winning over the confidence of educational institutions, the central agency would be in a better position to bring them into cooperation on initiatives and programs that did not impinge on ideology. Eisenberg did not hide his interest in forging stronger bonds with the Orthodox day schools, and he surely recognized Orthodox leaders’ reluctance or outright opposition to a community approach that was premised on mutual recognition and pluralism.9

Some central agency directors found Eisenberg’s approach pusillanimous and bordering on treacherous. They insisted that while cooperation with the congregational schools was necessary, it was up to the bureaus to fight a rearguard action against “divisive denominationalism and congregational parochialism which threaten the integrity of the Jewish community.” Walter Ackerman singled out ongoing bureau-synagogue antagonism as the most important challenge facing the central educational agencies, and implored his bureau colleagues to reconcile themselves to the realities of American Jewish life.10

But, to get to the heart of the Benderly group’s discomfort with the congregational school, one must understand that it and the bureaus emerged from competing impulses within the community. As Dinin recognized in 1946, postwar Jewish communal life seemed to be animated by the contradictory forces of communal centralization and denominationalism. The bureaus, of course, exemplified the first trend. The postwar era was the heyday for the central education agency. After a decade and a half of paralysis and retrenchment, the bureaus were “on the march.” Between 1941 and 1945 Jewish education surveys were conducted in seventeen communities—as many as in all the previous years combined—as a preparatory step toward the creation of central education agencies. A decade later the number of central agencies in North America had more than doubled to forty. Concurrently, Jewish supplementary education was increasingly falling within the domain of the synagogue. By the early 1950s, children in synagogue schools—Sunday schools and afternoon schools combined—accounted for 85 percent of the entire Jewish school population. The bifurcation of responsibilities often resulted in conflict between bureau leaders and rabbis, each party concerned with guarding its prerogatives, as well as in simultaneous efforts in many cities to minimize friction by delineating the scope and the pattern of healthy collaboration.11

Beyond the power struggles and cooperation blueprints lay profound philosophical differences about the nature of community. From the perspective of the bureaus, the congregations were overly concerned for their autonomy and overly parochial in offering their primary allegiance to their movement. In communities
large enough to support multiple congregations, the synagogues tended to be competitive, often resulting in divisiveness and elitism. Rather than bolstering communal institutions, the movements poured money into their own organizations, seminaries, and teachers’ colleges. The bureau directors also viewed with dismay how the increasingly bourgeois synagogue effectively wrote off the working class. They had serious questions about the depth of the religious revival over which the synagogues were presiding. In short, most bureau directors remained confirmed Kaplanians, K’lal Yisraelniks. Unlike Eisenberg, they were unapologetic partisans in the clash of ideologies that animated the forces of unity and denominationalism, despite their realization that Protestantization was rendering postwar American Jewry more amenable to conscious identification along religious rather than ethnic lines. The most astute observers recognized that even as postwar Jews were remaking Judaism in the image of suburban Christianity, they continued to act like an ethnic group.∞≤

The trend toward denominationalism and parochialism only reinforced the convictions of the bureaus’ partisans that the central agency was a necessary countervailing force for community building, cooperation, and unity. They took umbrage at the notion that the bureau was merely a service agency. The bureau was a “functional agency,” conducting and sponsoring educational activities such as Hebrew high schools, classes for the mentally disabled, Hebrew preschools, teachers’ colleges, and summer camps that may have been viable only on a community-wide basis.∞≥

Reluctantly Letting Go of the Past

Despite their misgivings about the drift toward denominationalism, bureau directors and staff were not willfully blind to demographic trends. As in the case of local federations, population studies played an integral role in central educational agency planning. Most bureau chiefs well understood the implications of suburbanization for the long-term viability of the communal Talmud Torahs and did their best to facilitate the strengthening of the weekday congregational schools.

Nowhere is this effort clearer than in New York. With close to 40 percent of the American Jewish population and a disproportionate percentage of Orthodox Jews, New York was somewhat anomalous. Old Jewish neighborhood schools were able to hold on longer in New York than in other cities. Likewise, one-day-a-week schools were vastly outnumbered by weekday schools, while day schools were a formidable force on the Jewish educational scene.∞∂

Nevertheless, the trend lines in Greater New York between the 1930s and the
1950s were unambiguous. Embourgeoisement, suburbanization, and the baby boom were profoundly affecting population size and distribution, resulting in an overall spike in enrollment and the growth of congregational weekday and Sunday schools at the expense of the communal Talmud Toras. Even prior to the Depression, the congregational school overtook the communal Talmud Torah as the predominant type of weekday supplementary school; by 1955, eight out of every ten supplementary school students were learning in congregational schools.15

The impact of the baby boom on enrollment in Greater New York began to be felt in the early 1950s. Between 1951–52 and 1954–55, the Jewish school population on the kindergarten and elementary school level swelled from 91,620 to 120,174, a 31.2 percent increase. Significantly the growth took place almost exclusively in Queens and the suburbs, which were the epicenter of the baby boom and boasted much higher rates of synagogue affiliation and Jewish school attendance. The growth of one-day-a-week schools, from seventy-seven schools serving 31,389 students in 1951–52 to ninety-five schools serving 45,406 students in 1954–55, was also an almost exclusively suburban phenomenon. Student retention remained a daunting challenge in both communal and congregational weekday supplementary schools, while enrollment remained steadier in day schools and, to a lesser extent, one-day-a-week schools.16

The JEC’s response to these trends is instructive. Whereas Berkson’s 1936 survey urged that Federation monies be gradually withdrawn from declining communal schools, Dushkin felt obligated to continue providing direct subsidies to the schools in the form of scholarship assistance. The communal schools served a disproportionately needy clientele. Dushkin also recognized that financial support would buy the JEC cooperation and goodwill from schools. Thus, he positioned himself in the middle ground in an ongoing debate between those JEC board members who wished to entirely phase out the JEC’s philanthropic role and focus all its money on its service agency functions and those who viewed financial support of schools as the organization’s primary raison d’être.17

As the improving economy and Jewish socioeconomic mobility reduced the scholarship demand, Dushkin felt more comfortable asserting the priorities of educational innovation and improvement of standards, and consistently warned against underfunding the JEC’s Experimental Research and School Supervisory Aid department. Dushkin and JEC chairman Sam Rosenman agreed in principle that the larger Talmud Toras should be weaned off Federation funding so that the money could be used more broadly to encourage projects designed to promote educational innovation and enhancement. The communal Talmud Toras would eventually become self-sufficient or close their doors.18
In fact, the JEC treated the Talmud Torahs gingerly, maintaining financial support for some time after the federations gradually withdrew their funds in the mid- to late 1940s. It also assigned a full-time supervisor, David Rudavsky, to work with the Talmud Torahs on fund-raising, board restructuring, and administrative efficiencies designed to ease the transition. The sympathetic treatment came at the urging of some JEC board members, but it also stemmed from the reality that a considerable number of Jews, mostly from the working and lower middle classes, remained behind as their neighbors sought greener suburban pastures or moved their children to day schools.\(^{19}\)

Undeniably, there were voices on staff as well as on the board of directors calling for the JEC to divest itself completely from financial obligation for the older Talmud Torahs. These individuals were primarily motivated by philosophical outlook or demographic trends rather than animus. Leo Goldberger, who served as president of the JEC from 1950 to 1952, believed with justification that the organization was spreading itself too thinly by splitting its budget between subsidies and service activities, and should shift its focus solely to the latter. Staff members generally eschewed such “either-or” arguments. But many questioned the wisdom of financially propping up deteriorating schools in declining neighborhoods rather than investing resources on growing communities. Not surprisingly, this tack was advocated by school consultants such as Rabbi George Ende, who were tasked with servicing growing areas. But it was also supported by Harry Handler, the longtime principal of the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.\(^{20}\)

Brownsville in many ways epitomized the dilemma that the JEC faced. This neighborhood, which in the 1920s was known as “the Jerusalem of America” because of its large, vibrant Jewish population, was undergoing rapid transformation by the 1950s: as African Americans moved in, younger Jews streamed out. Between 1939 and 1951 alone, the neighborhood lost twenty-two synagogues. Two of the largest, Beth Medrash Hagodol and Thilim Kesher Israel, which served as anchors for the religiously traditional segment of the community, were torn down to make way for public housing projects. “Desperation is the mood of most residents in the Brownsville–East New York section,” observed a 1955 *New York Times* series titled “Our Changing City.” “The vast majority of inhabitants in this predominately tenement area would, if they could, gladly follow tens of thousands of others who have gone.” Jewish women were increasingly afraid to walk on Stone Avenue, which once hummed with Jewish life. City councilman Sam Curtis predicted, “In five years, ten at most, this will be another Harlem.” And, yet, the neighborhood was still heavily Jewish and remained so into the 1960s. However, it was quickly graying, and its average income level was on the decline. Could the JEC
abandon those families that could not escape their working-class circumstances? Could it afford to throw money at a lost cause? There were no easy answers.\footnote{21}

In the mid-1940s, the JEC began providing funding for educational community councils in older neighborhoods with the requisite lay organization. For example, it subsidized an extensive public relations campaign for area Talmud Toras, coordinated by the local Jewish educational council in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bensonhurst and Mapleton. In 1945–46, the council organized a variety of interschool activities, including a basketball tournament, newspaper, field day, music festival, Punch and Judy shows, and a baseball outing to Ebbets Field to cheer on the Brooklyn Dodgers. It is unclear from surviving documents whether the council’s activities resulted in increased enrollment or a decline in the attrition rate in the neighborhood’s Jewish schools. But community leaders and JEC staff members were certainly encouraged by the work.\footnote{22}

Board member Isaac Allen, a supporter of the Talmud Toras, raised a critical question in 1947, when he wondered aloud whether the impending financial crisis would mobilize the lay leadership of the Talmud Toras into action on their own organizations’ behalf. Clearly he was skeptical, because in a subsequent meeting, later that same year, he recommended that the Talmud Toras be taken over from individual management and consolidated under a single board of directors, with a unified curriculum and standards. The JEC lacked the authority to implement such a scheme, of course. Nor did many of its board members wish to implicate the organization so closely in what they rightfully believed was a costly, ideologically parochial, and, ultimately, doomed enterprise. They need not have worried, as local leaders were not about to cede control over their schools. In 1946 the JEC under Dushkin helped to organize a voluntary loose federation of schools, the Associated Talmud Toras of Greater New York, dedicated to promoting educational reform and financial sustainability. Eighteen schools joined, including most of the larger Talmud Toras. Early efforts to raise standards and redesign curriculum, which were coordinated by JEC educational consultant Menahem Edelstein, ultimately amounted to little. On the financial side, the promises of an ample lay organized maintenance fund never materialized. Equally important, school leaders were reluctant to take necessary structural steps, such as mergers, federations, restructurings, and school board consolidations, which would have created smaller, leaner, and more vital institutions. By the early 1950s, the Talmud Torah association’s record of accomplishments was decidedly meager. As the schools’ deficits continued to mount, many were reduced to “ineffective shells.”\footnote{23}

One measure of the Talmud Toras’ sinking fortunes was their willingness to cooperate with the JEC. Three decades earlier, many of the same institutions had been perennial thorns in Benderly’s side, thwarting his reform efforts at every...
Now hemorrhaging students to suburban schools and yeshivas, and financially hobbled, these schools could ill afford to alienate the JEC and risk losing financial support. To be sure, some within the Orthodox community remained as wary of the JEC as they had been of Benderly’s BJE. Orthodox opponents of the JEC set up a rival Jewish Orthodox Education Committee, the Vaad HaHinukh HaHaredi. Yet the two organizations soon came to a rapprochement. The Vaad’s relationship to the JEC further improved when it became an affiliate of the accommodationist modern Orthodox Zionist Mizrahi organization.

The JEC’s efforts on behalf of the communal schools did not assuage the frustrations of those who viewed the slow death of the Talmud Torahs as a severe blow to intensive Hebraic education. Some, exhibiting misplaced anger and narcissism, scapegoated the JEC. The most notorious attack came from Moshe Feinstein, the dean of Herzliah Hebrew Academy, who launched into a venomous diatribe against the JEC at a conference, sponsored by the PEN Hebrew Writers Association, on December 24, 1942. His speech was printed in the Hebrew newspaper Hadoar and picked up by the Morgen Journal, where it attracted considerable attention.

According to Feinstein, the JEC’s transpartisan approach amounted to a betrayal of the Jewish nationalist cause. He accused the JEC of propagating “a new theology without Judaism . . . and a kosher education without Zionism and Hebrew.” Although he declined to name names, Feinstein singled out “the chief officer [of the JEC], who is an assimilationist,” an obvious reference to chairman Sam Rosenman. He charged Rosenman and his board with rejecting Zionist applicants for staff positions if they would not promise to separate their ideology from their work. But his bitterest words were reserved for the “turncoat educators” who sold out their principles and staffed central agencies because “assimilationist education pays better.”

Feinstein’s specific charges were distortions or outright fabrications. If candidates were asked about their allegiance to Zionism, it was certainly not a bar to their employment. Virtually every member of the staff, from Dushkin on down, identified as a Zionist. As for Feinstein’s objection to the “unity in diversity” philosophy of the JEC, it placed him in good company. But it was hardly a reason to question the motivations and sincerity of its defenders and of the JEC staff. Likewise, his use of the slur “assimilationist” in relation to Rosenman and the board was grossly unfair. Many were tireless workers on behalf of Jewish causes. More accurately, Feinstein objected to the non-Zionist, conservative Jewish politics of the American Jewish Committee and many Federation leaders. As for Rosenman, his non-Zionism was no secret, but by the time Feinstein unleashed his tirade it was already under active reconsideration, in light of Hitler’s war against
the Jews. In fact, Rosenman befriended Chaim Weizmann, and when he rejoined
the Roosevelt administration some months after the Feinstein controversy blew
over, he acted as “a friendly intermediary” between Weizmann and senior Ameri-
can officials, including President Roosevelt and, later, President Harry Truman.27

Predictably, the publication of Feinstein’s speech caused an uproar. Dushkin
and his staff promptly responded to the “insulting and unfounded” attack in a
letter that was published in Hadoar. They decried those “who wrap themselves in
an all-blue talith,” accusing Feinstein of self-righteousness and hypocrisy. In the
course of a lengthy JEC board meeting it was decided that Rosenman and the other
German Jewish members would not honor Feinstein with a response. Instead,
Isaac Allen, an Orthodox Zionist member of the board with credibility in Hebraist
circles, would write a rebuttal in Hadoar. Allen tried to turn the tables on Feinstein
and his supporters by calling attention to their perceived failings. He upbraided
the Hebrew-nationalists for their abandonment of religious rituals and beliefs,
while vigorously defending the principle of Jewish pluralism: “I turn to all those
who, without much thinking denigrate with the name ‘assimilationists’ those who
have another approach to the question of education. There is a danger to our sur-
vival in education that does not emphasize the observance of mitzvot ma’asim
[the norms of traditional observance], just as there is a danger in education that
denies Jewish peoplehood . . . education that shuts its eyes to the observance of
mitzvot ma’asim and centers most of its attention on a knowledge of Hebrew
language will lead to assimilation in the Diaspora. . . . And, yet, we do not call these
educators ‘assimilationists.’”28

Feinstein was uncowed, however, and fired back on a number of fronts. Zevi
Scharfstein, likewise, came to Feinstein’s defense, and a few rounds of letters flew
back and forth between the parties in Hadoar and the Morgen Journal. To the
Benderly group and the wider NCJE community, the PEN controversy quickly took
on the character of an embarrassing spectacle. From the sidelines in Chicago, Leo
Honor and Sam Blumenfield implored Dushkin and Chipkin to refrain from
further public discussion. The spat in the press was only acceding to Feinstein’s
desire for publicity. “They have much better access to the press than our group and
no matter what we say they will distort it and give their own version of the
controversy,” Blumenfield warned.29

Dushkin eventually tried to bring Feinstein before a “committee of honor”
convened by the National Council. Feinstein sent conflicting signals about his
willingness to cooperate if a truly impartial or, at the very least, balanced group
could be assembled to hear the case. But eventually he balked, and the matter was
handed to the NCJE Grievance Committee on Professional Issues, which investi-
gated the incident, declared Feinstein and Scharfstein’s accusations baseless, and
censured them for unprofessional conduct. The Pen controversy took a sufficient toll on the reputation of the JEC in some quarters to stimulate a robust public relations campaign, including the hiring of a publicity writer and the initiation of a monthly JEC Bulletin promoting its activities. In retrospect, however, the Pen controversy was an isolated incident, which served only to underscore the degree to which many skeptics were prepared to cooperate with the JEC, thereby vindicating the service agency approach.

Embracing the Future

Even as the debate over supporting the Talmud Torahs raged, the JEC was already shifting its attention to growing neighborhoods, particularly in Queens and the suburbs. When Dushkin rejected the laboratory schools proposal, the Educational, Administrative, and Financial Services Department became the heart of the JEC enterprise. In particular, he and Chipkin gave great care to pedagogic support. Supervision “will probably loom largest in terms of the quantity of work as well as in its community appeal,” Dushkin wrote in his initial program memorandum to the board. In a subsequent meeting, he explained that his interest in supervisory or consultation services—the latter term was not only less threatening to schools but descriptively more accurate—was explicitly designed to respond to the growth of the congregational schools. Educational consultants could be of immeasurable help to schools led by overextended rabbis who knew little about education, he said. The consultant would work with teachers in the areas of curriculum, methods, and classroom management. “The typical teacher,” Dushkin believed, “was the neglected teacher.”

A detailed memo prepared by Chipkin elaborated a comprehensive school consultation program that covered the areas of curriculum, personnel, administrative procedures, school plant, parent relations, and financial affairs. The contours of the consultation system evolved over the next few years as JEC leaders struggled with finite budgets that prohibited adequate coverage. Much of the consultation work became extensive, rather than intensive. Consultants generally chose a few schools in which to concentrate their efforts, striving to serve the rest through group supervision, in-service training, the organization of regional assemblies and conferences, and other general activities. Individual work with teachers became the purview of a few critic-teachers, the librarian, and the arts specialists, who could not possibly honor the many requests for assistance.

The JEC also strove to balance the logic of organizing the consultation system geographically, through a system of districts, with the imperative of tailoring its work to schools’ ideological affiliations. Schools often resisted cooperating across

386  Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism
denominational lines, and district work retained a de facto ideological tinge as consultants operated through local movement-based school councils and regional movement-affiliated boards of education. A transpartisan approach to supervision and consultation was undermined by the consultants themselves, many of whom argued “that they could only function effectively . . . if they themselves were personally in harmony with the specific ideological orientation of the school involved and acceptable to the ideological group with which the school was identified.”

District work across denominational lines was somewhat more successful in outlying suburban areas where power was more diffuse and ideological divisions less entrenched. However, divergent interests eventually compelled schools to organize into more homogeneous, if not always strictly denominational, groupings. Westchester County presented the typical pattern. In the early 1950s, district consultant Lillie Rubee was able to organize a series of transdenominational laymen’s conferences with representatives from virtually all the county’s twenty-four Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox congregational schools, as well as the single Orthodox day school. School leaders found that they were confronting many of the same challenges, including a shortage of competent teachers, transportation difficulties, and confusion in delineating lay board and professional responsibilities. Over the next few years, Rubee continued to work successfully across the movements. As school leaders acknowledged, many of the families that they served had “no clear cut ideological leanings.”

By 1954, however, the Conservative and modern Orthodox congregational schools, under the leadership of Samuel Silverstein of Beth El Synagogue in New Rochelle, formed their own Hebrew school association and began convening lay conferences on subjects with a narrower appeal, including “The Role of the Hebrew School in Developing a Successful Congregation” and “Are Girls Second Class Citizens in Our Hebrew Schools?” Over the next few years the association collaborated with Rubee on enrollment campaigns, streamlining curricular goals, and elaborating a statement of standards and objectives, including a uniform bar mitzvah requirement.

As Dushkin predicted, the JEC’s school supervision and consultation services were primarily focused on congregational schools, which predominated in the newer areas. According to associate director Louis Ruffman, who worked extensively with the Conservative schools, synagogue schools “from the outset, showed the greatest readiness to use the supervision offered by the JEC.” When the Jewish population grew in the 1950s and became ever more diffuse, the JEC responded by decentralizing its services and setting up satellite centers in Queens, Long Island, and Westchester. Moreover, as demand for supervision increased and the JEC was forced to turn schools away, priority was given to those that seemed most likely to

Rebuilding and Reconciliation  387
achieve “tangible results,” including “newly organized schools in growing neighbor-
bhoods which can be guided from the beginning to build on the basis of ap-
proved standards.”

In his “valedictory” address before the board, Dushkin asserted that the JEC “conceived of our community as if it were a tapestry. . . . Instead of trying to fight the parties and to neglect them, we not only accepted them but we wanted to strengthen them.” Not only did the JEC support congregation-based education through its consultation program; it also stimulated the movements to organize locally for educational purposes. It viewed local ideologically based education committees as necessary interlocutors to support and help guide its supervisory work, particularly in the area of curriculum. In the absence of such committees, the JEC effectively helped to create them de novo. For example, it initiated the creation of a Conservative United Synagogue school committee, which was reconstituted in the late 1940s as the Board of Education of the Metropolitan Council of the United Synagogue of America, as well as a citywide Conservative principals’ council. In the case of the Reform movement, the JEC not only encouraged the organization of a local education committee but also became the catalyst for the creation of its parent body, the New York Federation of Reform Temples.

By all accounts, the JEC’s efforts with these groups achieved tangible results. In some cases, progress was enhanced by the work of a limited demonstration school program that the JEC initiated in the early 1940s, in conjunction with local teacher-training schools and national organizations such as the Jewish Welfare Board. Originally designed to compensate for the controversial rejection of the proposed laboratory school component of the Berkson plan, the demonstration schools piloted a variety of projects spread across the various movements and school types that aimed to raise standards, improve teaching methods, and devise curricula. School sites and projects were jointly selected by the JEC and the partnering institution.

A standout example included an initiative at the West End Synagogue, affiliated with the Reform movement, to add an optional afternoon class meeting to the one-day-a-week school; work with parents to reintroduce Jewish home-based ceremonial observances, folkways, and customs; and devise curricular units in a variety of subjects including customs and ceremonies, Bible, and Jewish social studies and history. The experiments, which were coordinated by Toby Kurtzband, were not without their challenges. Student attendance in the afternoons rarely exceeded 50 percent of the register, and many parents “confessed to a psychological inability” to perform Sabbath eve and festival ceremonials themselves, although some allowed their children to lead the family in these rituals. Nevertheless, numerous teaching units, and a textbook on Jewish festivals by teacher Rose Golub,
were devised and published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations’ Commission on Jewish Education.39

The JEC Reform consultants, led by Philip Jaffe, built on this beginning. They organized in-service teacher education programs, helped schools raise their standards through an accreditation program, and offered curriculum workshops that, likewise, resulted in units and projects that were published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations or described in its teachers’ magazine. Most importantly, following the example of the West End Synagogue experiment, they worked with Reform temple schools to introduce optional weekday classes. By 1964, over 50 percent of pupils in Greater New York Reform synagogue schools were enrolled in one or two midweek sessions in addition to the regular Sunday school. In some schools, the extra sessions were devoted to Hebrew study, while others used them for extracurricular activities such as chorus, dramatics, and art.

The JEC’s initiatives with Conservative synagogue schools demonstrated the potential of Dushkin’s simultaneous vertical and horizontal approach to consultation. Working with the United Synagogue’s regional education group, the Board of Education of the Metropolitan Council, consultant Louis Ruffman conducted a survey of existing conditions in Conservative congregational schools. The results helped to crystallize a three-pronged action plan, which included the development of a standard curriculum, uniform school achievement and administrative standards, and the creation of a citywide program of activities that would foster cohesion without violating individual schools’ autonomy. Over the next few years, Ruffman, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary Teachers Institute, produced a standard Curriculum Outline for the Congregational School of the United Synagogue, which was subsequently published by the Conservative lay organization’s national Commission on Jewish Education in 1948 and revised in 1959. When the curriculum was initially introduced in New York–area schools, district supervisors and teacher-critics working with local United Synagogue–affiliated synagogue school organizations in Queens, Brooklyn, and other areas facilitated its implementation through in-service training programs, teacher conferences, and individual teacher consultation. The most useful initiatives to emerge from this effort were detailed teacher syllabi for the first four years and a uniform series of tests, all devised by the principals of nine Queens schools under the guidance of JEC consultant Rabbi George Ende and published by the JEC. District supervisors also worked with schools on raising standards.40

While critics condemned the bureaus’ collaboration with the synagogue schools as tantamount to abetting the attenuation of Jewish education, Ruffman and his JEC colleagues were hardly apologetic: “Deploring this development and trying to wish it away leads nowhere.” Ruffman refused to be drawn into an argument about the
inherent weaknesses of a congregation-based school system. He knew them well from his experience working with the schools. But he was also not about to allow his colleagues to engage in nostalgia for a so-called golden age of community-based Jewish education that never really existed. In his estimation, the best congregational schools compared well with the best communal Talmud Torahs of the 1920s. In a statement that further rankled opponents, Ruffman contended that in mid- and large-size Jewish communities where the religious movements were deeply rooted and synagogues had become the basis of Jewish identification, the rationale for a community-based education system lost its force. Nor could financial considerations be ignored, he added. Synagogues, particularly the affluent suburban synagogue center, offered the most solid financial base on which to build a school system. A “community sponsored school system” was “out of the question” because “central financing was not in sight.”

By the mid-1950s, a number of advances were discernible: Most Conservative schools had eliminated Sunday schools for children over the age of eight or nine and were offering a three-session-per-week program in the middle and junior high school divisions; the proportion of licensed teachers and professional principals had markedly expanded; and an awards program had been established to incentivize student achievement, attendance, and punctuality. At the same time, however, serious problems remained that seemed to be beyond the powers of the consultants and their partners to rectify, including pupil retention and a yawning gap between the percentages of boys and girls that attended weekday schools.

As for the United Synagogue curriculum itself, considerations of its efficacy vary depending on how one measures success. As an agent for standardization at a time when rapid movement growth and comparatively weak organization could have resulted in programmatic chaos, the curriculum was a triumph. According to one estimate, it was likely the most widely used congregational school curriculum for over two decades. Its critics, however, led by Conservative educator Ackerman, lambasted it for “attempting to do too much in too little time.” In addition, its myriad shortcomings included a confusion of “Bible instruction with Hebrew language instruction in a way which left pupils with precious little knowledge of either,” its “misunderstanding what is involved in the teaching of history and thereby denying young people the opportunity of attaining even a minimal appreciation of the Jewish experience” and finally, its lack of “any real conceptual progression in the treatment of holidays, ritual and prayer.” To conclude, according to this view, that the curriculum “fell disappointingly short of its goals,” was to engage in charitable understatement.

Ackerman’s assessment of overall student achievement in the Conservative congregational schools was equally scathing. The reasons were myriad, and extended
far beyond the weaknesses of Ruffman’s curriculum. Thus, to lay the blame for this solely or even primarily at the bureaus’ doorstep is misguided. But, to the extent that the disappointing results stemmed from uninspired and incompetent teaching, as opposed to systemic problems or external factors that were beyond the control and influence of the JEC, they highlighted the limitations of the consultation system. Nathaniel Entin, whose unpublished institutional biography of the JEC is refreshingly unsentimental, is rightfully critical of the “piecemeal implementation” and “superficiality” of the consultation program. Not only was there a “diffusion of effort”; Entin also contended that the staff “never really came to grips with the question of what supervision really was.” The copious consultants meeting minutes reveal little or no evidence that the staff articulated a philosophy or method of supervision. Nor were there any references to the general scholarly literature. “In short, the JEC exhibited none of the educational ferment that existed in general education during the 50’s and 60’s,” he concluded.⁴³

The Modern Day School as Heir to the Progressive Talmud Torah: The Case of Ramaz

Those who grieved the decline of the communal Talmud Torah and the ascent of the congregational school, on the grounds that it portended a diminution in the overall quality and intensity of Jewish education, often failed to take note of the more than compensatory impact of the concurrent rise of the modern Jewish day school. Indeed, one can argue with justification that the modern day school was the child of the progressive Talmud Torah.

At first blush, an argument of kinship may seem far-fetched, since the genesis of the modern Talmud Torah can be traced in part to progressive Jewish educators’ conviction that the masses would never accept day schools. The modern day school movement was seen as upsetting the prevailing Jewish educational consensus. In the words of historian Jenna Weissman Joselit, interwar Jews, including many who self-identified as Orthodox, were “committed passionately to the public schools as the \textit{sine qua non} of their acculturation.”⁴⁴

Conventional historical accounts correctly point out that Benderly and his disciples—the architects of the progressive Talmud Torah—were unabashed opponents of the day school, although they tend to overstate the unanimity and endurance of this opposition. By the 1930s a reassessment was well under way. Indeed, some Benderly disciples, including Samuel Dinin and Israel Chipkin, sent their own children to day schools. Chipkin was instrumental in establishing a nursery-to-third-grade “foundation school” in 1939, Beth Hayeled, which later became a full-fledged elementary day school and bore his name. His colleague Leo
Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism

Honor was involved in the founding of the first all-day community Jewish high school, Philadelphia’s Akiba Academy, in 1946. Berkson gave his blessing to progressive Jewish day schools in his 1936 study, overtly tying his support to the imminent decline of the Talmud Torahs. While he retained his misgivings about yeshivas that kept their children until seven or eight o’clock at night, he asserted that their more Americanized counterparts were “performing an excellent educational function” and had “at least the same right to exist as other private schools.”

Dushkin, who wrote dismissively of day schools in his 1918 dissertation, later recanted, and in 1943 editorialized in favor of day schools in *Jewish Education* magazine. All these men continued to believe that supplementary schools would remain the dominant force on the Jewish education scene for the foreseeable future. Yet they also forcefully debunked the arguments of day school opponents, who questioned the schools’ patriotism and commitment to full Jewish integration into American life.

Despite considerable opposition, twenty-three day schools espousing a diversity of ideological approaches were founded between 1917 and 1939. The modern day school was exemplified by the Ramaz Academy, which was founded in 1937. The relationship between Ramaz and the Central Jewish Institute underscored a more general connection between the two types of institutions. Ramaz rented space from CJI in the early 1940s and finally purchased the CJI building in 1944. Like CJI, Ramaz grew out of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun. Indeed, the school’s name memorialized Rabbi Moses Z. Margolies, who died in 1936 at the age of eighty-five. Margolies, who initially adopted a skeptical approach to Berkson and Schoolman’s methodological and curricular innovations at CJI, was eventually persuaded of the modern Talmud Torah’s utility. Nevertheless, he long viewed any supplementary school program as a concession to prevailing social conditions and did not hide his preference for “Jewish parochial schools.” As the effects of the Depression were subsiding, his grandson-in-law, Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, realized his dream, opening a fledgling day school with six first graders, including Margolies’s great-grandson Haskel. Tensions between Ramaz and CJI were palpable as the former institution’s unanticipated success coincided with the latter’s final decline. CJI was a casualty of changing neighborhood demographics. Lookstein’s push for increasing space in the CJI building to accommodate the day school’s growing register was interpreted by some as rubbing salt in an open wound.

Yet CJI and Ramaz shared remarkably consistent ideological orientations and pedagogical approaches. Like CJI, Ramaz was founded as an Americanized alternative to more traditional educational institutions that tended to reflect immigrant sensibilities. In both cases, the founders looked to paradigms of progressive general education as much as Jewish antecedents when shaping their institutions.
For Berkson, it was the New York City public schools, the settlement houses, and Dewey’s laboratory school in Chicago, while Lookstein set his eyes on college preparatory independent schools such as Horace Mann and the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in Riverdale, New York. Both men also recognized the importance of aesthetics in making an educational statement. Just as Hyman’s modern, well-appointed building with its airy, spacious classrooms and gymnasium was meant to differentiate CIJ from the dilapidated buildings and vestry rooms that housed most traditional Talmud Torahs, so too did that building help Ramaz distinguish itself from the conventional yeshivas. Just as the building was featured prominently in CIJ’s promotional literature, so too did it assume a starring role in Ramaz’s publicity brochures.  

More fundamentally, perhaps, the “Judaism and Americanism” slogan over the building’s entrance was equally apropos after Ramaz took possession. As the school’s historian, Jeffrey Gurock, aptly concluded, “Ramaz’s notion of and commitment to its students’ comfort, integration, and success as Jews within American society, once established in the late 1930s, dominated the school’s outlook during the thirty-five year principalship of Rabbi Joseph [Lookstein].” Gurock observed that the school’s “policy consistently was that, unless proven otherwise, this country’s social mores and cultural patterns were always worth emulating.” Ramaz’s philosophy found no better expression than its emblem, which superimposed a Stars and Stripes shield on an open Torah scroll. Lookstein proudly asserted that a primary objective of the school was to “remove from [students] the consciousness of being different.” To that end, in a move reminiscent of the Central Jewish Institute’s hiring policy, Lookstein actively recruited teachers who “could serve as examples of the integration of Judaism and Americanism.” He insisted that “teachers must possess more than Jewish learning, [they] must in appearance, speech and training exemplify the bearing of an American Jewish gentleman.”

Ramaz’s schoolwide assembly celebrations of American national holidays, which were designed to “emphasize the relation of American and Jewish ideals,” bore more than a passing resemblance to CIJ’s holiday pageants. Both schools were also unapologetically Zionist and committed to the use of Ivrit b’Ivrit in most Judaic studies classes. They likewise shared an orientation toward socialization that manifested itself in their formal and informal curricula. In both cases, they were catering to students from home environments where one could not take for granted that Yiddishkeit (Jewishness) would be picked up through osmosis. As such, the Ramaz curriculum was freighted with precisely the same sort of experiential learning and Jewish literacy training that Rabbi Moses Hyamson derided as “nonsense” in the CIJ program. Incidentally, these activities often also served to reinforce conventional Jewish gender roles. While boys practiced cantillation
The annual model seder at the Ramaz School with its emphasis on experiential learning and its reinforcement of traditional gender roles was reminiscent of holiday celebrations at the Central Jewish Institute. Courtesy of the Ramaz School.

melodies for their bar mitzvahs, domestic science classes helped girls learn their way around a kosher kitchen.49

There is more than a touch of irony to the fact that the school that won KJ’s sponsorship adopted many of the same practices that had so chagrined the synagogue’s outspoken balebatim when CJJ embraced them only two decades earlier. Ramaz touted its coed classes and extensive sports program. As it added upper grades and eventually a high school, it also sanctioned social activities with mixed dancing, girls’ cheerleading squads (in miniskirts!) at basketball games, and female vocalists in mixed choirs, all of which violated traditional Jewish customs and laws associated with modesty and conduct between the sexes. If Ramaz defined itself as unabashedly modern Orthodox, as opposed to CJJ, which went out of its way to eschew a formal denominational label, this was more a function of the changing times than an indication of substantial differences in day-to-day practice.50

Reaching Out to Orthodox Day Schools

Bureau relations with day schools tended to intensify over time. In the early years bureau and day school often inhabited different worlds. Day schools, like Yiddish schools, were viewed as a “minority” or specialized form of education and therefore less deserving of community support. There was also some residual anti–day school feeling stemming from bureau and federation leaders’ strong support for public education. Yet many bureau chiefs were personally sympathetic. Despite the impressive statistical rise in the number of students studying in day schools between 1918 and 1940, the total remained modest, about 7,700 students. The schools
were concentrated in seven North American cities, and 95 percent of the students lived in Greater New York. By 1960 the picture had changed dramatically: 52,500 students from eighty-seven different communities were studying in day schools, with about one-third of enrollment in cities outside the New York metropolitan area. Day school enrollment made up about 8 percent of total Jewish school enrollment—26 percent in Greater New York—and was continuing to grow steadily. As early as 1954, Philadelphia Bureau chief Abraham Gannes predicted that day schools “will—not without struggle—be granted community financial assistance in the same manner as the Talmud Torah was financed in the first three decades of this century.”

For the growing number of bureaus that adopted the service agency model with its unity in diversity philosophy, the argument for extending services to day schools was self-evident, although relations were sometimes retarded by mutual suspicions and a lack of funds. For bureaus in large cities with multiple day schools, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Montreal, Toronto, Baltimore, and Miami, the day school phenomenon could not be avoided. These central agencies usually developed working relationships with local day schools over time. In due course, the level of engagement increased, although it varied widely from community to community and depended greatly on direction from the local federation. Dinin’s Los Angeles Bureau, for example, began offering day school subsidies by 1960. That year, however, the majority of central agencies were still declining to provide direct subsidies or services to day schools.

In some cases, federations bypassed central agencies entirely in granting subventions to day schools. By 1970–71, fifty-six community welfare funds were providing direct subsidies to eighty-two day schools. Moreover, the pace of support for day schools was growing at a rate of 25 percent per year, an impressive figure that was mitigated only by the ballooning size of day school budgets. Certainly, it would be unfair to argue, as some have in the past, that the bureaus harbored unmitigated hostility toward the day schools.

Nevertheless, the JEC’s very early engagement with day schools was an important exception. Naturally, the need for a modus operandi was most immediately felt in New York, with its considerable day school population. By the early 1960s there were more students studying in New York City day schools than there were in one-day-a-week schools. In fact, the JEC was involved in day school education almost from the outset. However, the level of its engagement and concern grew substantially between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s.

The JEC’s policy on day school funding was formulated in the context of a behind-the-scenes tug-of-war between the Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies, which initially conditioned its support for the JEC “upon
the understanding that financial benefits and services will not be furnished to Yiddishist or All-Day Schools,” and JEA representatives, including Bernard Semel and Samuel Rottenberg, who advocated a continuation of their organization’s policy of nondiscrimination. Semel, in particular, was disturbed by “the slur that seemed to be cast upon the Americanism” of the day schools, and on the “cultural and spiritual values of the Yiddish language and literature.” In the case of the day schools, they conceded, funding should be limited to the Jewish studies component of the program. Ultimately, the Federation backed down and a compromise was hatched whereby day schools and Yiddishist schools were extended consultation services and scholarship funds. One of the Federation’s top executives, Joseph Willen, who served on the survey committee and was a founding board member of the JEC, admitted that the agency’s attitude toward the day schools was “difficult to defend . . . in view of the fact that the Catholics were definitely committed to the parochial schools.” Federation leaders were assuaged by Berkson’s argument that an “inability to pay the tuition should not limit the parents’ freedom of choice of the type of school to which the child is sent.”

Under Dushkin’s influence the funding policy was further liberalized. Day schools, along with Yiddishist and one-day-a-week schools, were made eligible for direct grants-in-aid. Indeed, by the late 1940s day schools were receiving a disproportionate percentage of the grant monies, and by 1955 they were being awarded more grant money per year than the weekday supplementary schools. The explosion in the number of day schools led to an increase in the number grant requests, particularly for building repairs involving the removal of code violations that jeopardized their operation. In 1953, the JEC attempted to alleviate the escalating pressure on subsidy funds with a Revolving Loan Fund for capital needs. But the number of grant requests continued to substantially outpace the growth of the subsidies budget, resulting in smaller and smaller awards. Significantly, however, when a board committee appointed to study the problem suggested that the grants policy be modified to limit the number of awards while increasing the size of the grants, the day school advocates demurred. “Any change in policy will alienate a good many of [the day schools] and not accomplish the ultimate objective of improving their standards,” warned Rabbi Emanuel Rackman of Far Rockaway, Queens, a leading spokesman for modern Orthodoxy.

The JEC’s grants policy did not officially distinguish between modern day schools and traditional yeshivas, and even the most rigorously Orthodox schools applied for funds. However, relations with the yeshivas were limited by their reluctance to associate with a non-Orthodox organization. The Benderly group’s greater enthusiasm for the modern, progressive schools was given tangible expression in the decision to choose Ramaz as one of its original demonstration schools,
the only day school to be granted such a distinction. “We were very interested in yeshivas and we saw this Ramaz School as being a very promising school in developing an integrated curriculum for the yeshivas,” Dushkin recalled in his final address to the board. The choice was made in conjunction with Dr. Pinchus Churgin of Yeshiva College’s Teachers Institute. Dushkin took credit for helping Ramaz financially upright itself at a time when “no one was helping it.” The 18 percent of the total Ramaz budget covered by the JEC in the 1940–41 and 1941–42 academic years was a considerable contribution, and represented more than what the school was receiving in subsidies from its parent congregation, Kehilath Jeshurun.56

The close relationship between the two institutions in the early to mid-1940s was mutually beneficial. On Ramaz’s side, the budgetary pressures that accrued from adding a grade every year were considerable. In addition, its student population was growing more quickly than initially expected. The grants were instrumental in helping it plan and staff its Junior High School Department. The cordial relationship between Dushkin and Lookstein was also a factor in the JEC’s acceptance of both Ramaz and the Yeshiva of Flatbush into its teachers’ group health insurance program. Finally, the JEC helped to lubricate negotiations between CJI and Ramaz over the sale of the Eighty-fifth Street building. The property was ultimately sold to Ramaz at a price considerably below its market value.57

The JEC also stood to benefit from its connection to Ramaz. It was eager to burnish its reputation as a friend to the day schools. Dushkin admitted as much to Lookstein in a letter requesting that the JEC’s financial support and endorsement of Ramaz be acknowledged on all “fitting occasions, whether in word or in print.” The typically meticulous Lookstein’s failure to comply might have been an oversight, as he insisted. However, his carefully worded apology pointedly did not commit to refer to the JEC in the school’s promotional literature, suggesting that Lookstein might have been concerned that the association with the JEC could aggravate the school’s fragile relationship with the more extreme elements within the Orthodox community.58

Tensions between the JEC and the yeshiva world were exemplified by its dealings with Torah Umesorah, the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools. In the mid-1940s, the JEC significantly increased routine contact with day schools when it began administering government-subsidized lunch and transportation programs. Over time, the food services program, in particular, became very lucrative for the JEC. As the number of day schools continued to grow, the organization was determined to further intensify its level of engagement. When the JEC under Azriel Eisenberg resolved in 1951 to respond to the growth of the day school movement by expanding its consultation services through a new Yeshiva Department, it hoped
to work in collaboration with a representative day school commission, creating parallelism with the congregational school services it provided in conjunction with Metropolitan United Synagogue and with the Sunday school consultation it ran with guidance from the New York Federation of Reform Temples. No such representative day school body existed, but the JEC attempted to reach out to Torah Umesorah and establish a cooperative relationship.59

More than any other institution, Torah Umesorah was instrumental in the founding and support of traditional yeshivas and day schools throughout the United States. It was established in 1944 by Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the head of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, and was led after his death, in 1948, by Torah sage Rabbi Aaron Kotler of Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey. Torah Umesorah was perennially balancing necessary pragmatism in its dealing with schools with the rigid views of its policy-making committee, the Rabbinical Administrative Board, which was dominated by rabbis with close ties to the ultra-Orthodox, non-Zionist Agudath Israel. Kotler was the chairman of the Agudah’s Council of Torah Sages.60

The JEC’s initiative to Torah Umesorah was revealing. It would have been far easier, for example, for Eisenberg and the JEC to establish the partnership with Mizrachi, the Orthodox Zionist organization, and its educational arm, the Vaad Hachinuch. Although it lacked the single-minded commitment to day school advancement that characterized Torah Umesorah, Mizrachi explicitly adopted a cooperative policy vis-à-vis local community agencies such as federations and education bureaus. What is more, its commitment to Ivrit b’Ivrit and strong support for the state of Israel made it an ideologically easier fit with the commitments of the JEC’s professional staff. But Eisenberg and his staff recognized that Mizrachi could capture the allegiance of only the more modern Hebraic day schools. Torah Umesorah, on the other hand, cast a much wider net. Moreover, even Mizrachi partisans such as Rabbis Lookstein and Rackman admitted that Torah Umesorah’s activities in promoting day schools outshone those of the Orthodox Zionists. “Torah Umesorah succeeded because of its mesirat nefesh [selfless devotion], which Mizrachi didn’t have,” Lookstein observed. The JEC could not escape the conclusion that its credibility with the rigorously Orthodox would be enhanced through cooperation with Torah Umesorah.61

Torah Umesorah’s leaders were similarly beset with trepidation. Although many of the German Jewish founding board members of the JEC had long since retired, and there were discernible efforts to increase the board’s Orthodox representation, the central agency remained an unapologetically transpartisan organization. It viewed its commitment to furthering Jewish life in broad terms that often involved pursuing policies that were anathema to those groups, for instance Agudath Israel,
which could not countenance Jewish religious and cultural pluralism. Nevertheless, cooperation came with financial rewards. Torah Umesorah leaders felt stymied by a lack of funding. If JEC’s “vast financial reservoir” could be used to seed day schools in the New York area, Torah Umesorah would be able to entirely devote its own resources to the rest of the country. This argument resonated, in particular, with Torah Umesorah lay leaders, some of whom also served on the JEC board, including textile executive Moses Feuerstein and Barton’s kosher chocolate company founder Stephen Klein.\footnote{62}

Torah Umesorah’s Rabbinical Administrative Board, however, was split. The dilemma was one that Rabbi Kotler would repeatedly confront: how far could the organized Orthodox Jewish community go in cooperating with the other movements for the larger communal good or even to achieve its own ends? In 1956 Kotler finally decided to altogether ban any accommodation; the Agudah’s Council of Torah Sages issued an edict designed to halt Orthodox participation in interdenominational cooperative ventures. In particular, the ruling was aimed at modern Orthodox leaders involved in the Synagogue Council of America.

On this occasion, however, Kotler hoped that some type of arrangement with the JEC could be reached. The two organizations agreed to organize an independent Association of Yeshivas, a lay board that would act as a commission on day school education, advising the Yeshiva Department, overseeing the creation of curricula, and engaging in other activities designed to enhance the day school system. But Kotler also insisted that the JEC abide by some extreme conditions that violated its established precedents, including granting the Yeshiva Department complete autonomy and surrendering to it control over the grant allocation process for all day schools. It is unclear whether Eisenberg and the JEC board of directors ever countenanced such an arrangement, although Torah Umesorah leaders seemed to believe that their demands were met. Some type of agreement was certainly reached, because Torah Umesorah’s professional director, Rabbi Joseph Kaminetsky, was placed on the JEC payroll (the organizations agreed to split the cost of his salary). In addition, the organizations agreed to hire Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld as a full-time educational consultant for the Yeshiva Department. His salary was paid entirely by the JEC. However, there is no evidence that the JEC board agreed to let the Yeshiva Department directly control the grants allocation process. Day schools continued to compete for general JEC grants-in-aid with other types of Jewish schools.\footnote{63}

The Association of Yeshivas never materialized, and in less than a year the partnership between the JEC and Torah Umesorah fell apart. The occasion for the split was a Bible workbook series for middle school students, by JEC pedagogic specialist Dr. Sampson Isseroff, that the Rabbinical Administrative Board deemed
Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism

heretical. With financial support from Barton’s candy company, Eisenberg went ahead and published the books anyway, and they became ubiquitous in many day schools for over two generations. Eisenberg insisted that the JEC would not be bound by the decrees of the Rabbinical Administrative Board, which he viewed as a fig leaf for the Agudah’s Council of Torah Sages. Clearly the JEC was not going to allow Torah Umesorah veto power over its activities, even when they were aimed at day schools. The Yeshiva Department would not be a puppet of Torah Umesorah or the Agudah.64

But even prior to the workbook kerfluffle, tensions were flaring over an even more fundamental issue. Torah Umesorah insisted that the JEC’s Yeshiva Department confine its activities to funding new schools, funding renovations to existing facilities, and providing students with needs-based scholarships. Apparently, it wished to directly control all educational services to its affiliated schools. Eisenberg and Rosenfeld, however, viewed the consultation services to existing schools and the preparation of quality teaching materials as core to the Yeshiva Department’s mission. No doubt, both Torah Umesorah and the JEC were each vitally interested in raising their institutional profile by cultivating direct relationships with school leaders and teachers. But the mundane conflict of interest was exacerbated by Torah Umesorah’s deprecating attitude toward the JEC and the Federation. Eisenberg and his board came to believe, with some justification, that Torah Umesorah was primarily interested in extracting its money for day schools without openly acknowledging the debt of the Orthodox to the organized Jewish community. As with Ramaz, a decade earlier, the JEC believed that it was not receiving adequate recognition for its work from within the Orthodox world. “We submit that a mention is due to us of our accomplishments [in the area of day school education] thus far, simply as a matter of justice,” JEC leaders complained to their Orthodox critics.65

Even without Torah Umesorah’s cooperation, the portfolio of the Yeshiva Department continued to expand. By the mid-1950s it was working closely with about twenty schools and more superficially with dozens of others. The JEC’s grants program continued to attract applications from a broad array of day schools and yeshivas. In 1954, for example, recipients ranged from the ultra-Orthodox Beth Jacob girls’ school, in Crown Heights, to the Labor Zionist Kinneret National Day School.66

Whatever misgivings the Benderly group once had about day schools were long since forgotten by the 1960s. Azriel Eisenberg and Louis Ruffman had no compunction about hailing the day school in the JEC’s twenty-fifth anniversary promotional literature as “the most amazing educational institution of the last quarter century.” JEC leaders took pride in the increasing range of services that the agency

400 Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism
provided to the day schools and insisted that it deserved considerable credit for “the soaring upward curve in Yeshiva education” in Greater New York. At the same time, however, they expressed frustration at being caught between Orthodox critics who excoriated the JEC and, by extension, the Federation for not devoting more resources to shoring up the day school movement, and reticent Federation leaders who remained unsold on the idea of pouring substantially more money into Jewish day schools. “A massive education job is required to change the thinking and feeling of the Federation community leadership, and to persuade the Yeshivah leadership to enter the Federation Family in order to work from within instead of carping from without,” Eisenberg and Ruffman argued. “We are in the unhappy position of finding ourselves on both sides in this battle.” While the JEC would continue to “exhort Federation to loosen” its purse strings, it would also persist in reminding the Orthodox that the purse “must be filled before it can be emptied.”

Unlike the day school movement, which at first grew independently of the central agencies, the first Jewish foundation (i.e., nursery and early elementary) school, which emerged on the eve of World War II, was conceived by Israel Chipkin and sponsored by Ivriah, the woman’s auxiliary of the Jewish Education Association, which was incorporated in 1940 into the Jewish Education Committee of New York. Beth Hayeled immersed youngsters in a bilingual, bicultural environment until third grade, when they were mainstreamed into the local public schools. Jewish education continued on a supplementary basis in special classes at the Ansche Chesed congregation on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The school was a hotbed of experimentation and attracted the attention and praise of William Heard Kilpatrick, a source of great pride for his students Dushkin, Chipkin, and Dinin. Dushkin lauded Beth Hayeled as a third way, between that of day schools and supplementary schools. “What happens at present seems to me like letting our children, at a very early age, fall into a great Divide which to them seems to separate the American culture of the street and the public school, from the Jewish culture of the home and the Jewish school. . . . The Beth Hayeled [program] purports to be a Bridge over this childhood Divide, a Bridge which is to permit a child to cross over intelligently and painlessly from the intimate world of his family to the strange great world outside.” If the bilingual environment of the foundation school promised, as the name suggests, to provide students with a solid foundation for their subsequent study of Hebrew in the supplementary school, the school was also attractive because it seemed to offer yet another avenue for tackling the problem of social adjustment that loomed so large well into the 1950s.

As a “special project” of the JEC, Beth Hayeled received frequent plaudits in Jewish Education magazine. Especially gratifying was the influence that the Beth
Hayeled program had on scores of other preschools. More so than any other Jewish laboratory school created by Benderly and his disciples, Beth Hayeled exemplified Benderly’s lever theory in action. By the early 1950s Jewish preschool programs numbered in the hundreds, and encouraging experiments with bilingual nursery school education could be seen in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other large cities. In important respects, the phenomenon of Jewish preschools realized some of the long-cherished goals of progressive Jewish educators: Many were “Center-schools” that integrated Jewish learning and informal play and cultural activities. The educational program usually focused primarily on socialization and affective learning. Yet it was no doubt frustrating that parents were willing to support this type of education only for the very young.70

Bureaus, Federations, and the Rhetoric of Community Responsibility

By the mid-1950s the postwar pattern of Jewish education was set. Congregation-based supplementary schools of varying degrees of intensity dominated the landscape, with day schools emerging as a dynamic alternative for those seeking a more intensive and, in the case of the more progressive schools, integrative education. Bureaus served as both a helpmate to the congregational schools and a counterweight to denominationalism. They were the embodiment or primary expression of the organized community’s responsibility for Jewish education. Typically and crucially with federation support, the bureaus provided school services and administered communitywide educational programs and initiatives including teacher services and training, accreditation and licensing, testing, pedagogical libraries, community high schools, and mass assemblies and festivals. In many cases they acted as a conduit for the distribution of federation funds. Many, including the JEC in New York, were federation affiliates.71 The larger central agencies, in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Boston, wrote curricula and produced educational materials. A few ran or helped to support Hebrew teachers’ colleges and training programs. In Detroit and smaller communities, some continued to adhere to an older model, acting as school associations or operating their own communal school systems. While some bureaus remained centers of research and innovation or focused on building a particular form of supplementary American Jewish education, most adopted the service agency model initiated in interwar Chicago and fully elaborated in 1940s New York.

In the 1950s and ’60s, the pattern was stoutly defended on sociological and organizational grounds. Supporters of Jewish education recognized the system’s faults, which were documented in a widely publicized 1959 national study, but they took heart at growing enrollment figures, improvements in retention rates, better-
trained teachers, and higher-quality teaching resources including audiovisual materials such as filmstrips and phonograph records. As time went on, larger bureaus were also able to attend to underserved populations including preschoolers, teens, and the disabled. As long as the system of Jewish education was growing, momentum was on the side of those who advocated adjustment and fine-tuning as opposed to systemwide overhaul and regeneration.

It was only in the 1970s that this pattern came under sustained attack from numerous quarters, led by a scathing critique of the education system in the 1969 American Jewish Year Book. Opponents cited an array of problems, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of effectiveness, and absence of vision on the part of the bureaus. They were equally critical of lagging student achievement, ambiguous or unrealistic educational goals, and lack of integration into the larger life of the synagogue in the case of the congregational schools. It is no coincidence that this new crisis mentality began to set in precisely when the system was feeling the shock of contraction as birthrates declined and the desegregation and deterioration of urban public schools contributed to the further growth of day schools, including those under non-Orthodox auspices.

The main complaint coming from the bureaus in the 1950s and early 1960s was a lack of adequate funding from community welfare funds. The battle over the appropriateness of federation funding for Jewish education, which peaked during the Depression, appeared to have been definitively settled in favor of support. It is also undeniable that, on average, community welfare funds were increasing their level of support for Jewish education. According to one estimate, federation and welfare fund allocations for Jewish education in twenty-nine of the largest cities rose from 6.1 percent of total locally earmarked allocations ($524,000) in 1936 to 8.8 percent ($2,181,000) in 1947. By 1957, ninety-seven communities were allocating 11.8 percent of their local funds ($3,508,000) to Jewish education, and the level rose to 12.6 percent ($4,280,000) of total local allocations by 1961.π≤

The numbers, however, are somewhat misleading. Federations in smaller communities where bureaus operated community school systems tended to be far more generous than those in larger communities. In 1955–56 the jec received only about 4.9 percent of the New York Federation’s allocation budget earmarked for local needs. While this represented an improvement over the 3.3 percent that it had received a decade earlier, any gains were more than offset by the evaporation of the Friedsam fund. The Federation’s stinginess severely impeded the agency’s ability to effectively operate its consultation services and provide adequate direct grants to needy schools. By the mid-1960s, the Federation’s allocation actually dropped to 4.72 percent of its local funds. As even Kaminetsky of Torah Umesorah conceded, in 1963, it was difficult to fault the agency for giving the day schools roughly
$50,000 in direct grants when the entire grants budget was only $100,000 and the total Federation allocation to the JEC amounted to a “nominal” $750,000. The four largest communities after New York—Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston—had a better track record, although their allocations remained below the average. Combined figures for these cities indicate that community welfare funds increased their allocations to central educational agencies, from funds available for local needs, by 2.6 percent between 1945–46 and 1959–60, from 7.9 percent to 10.5 percent.73

Another way to measure the federations’ level of support for Jewish education during this period would be to compare it to other categories of local aid. Using this measure, it becomes obvious that its prioritization of Jewish education, as compared with other local needs, was relatively low. For example, in 1961, the same ninety-seven communities that contributed an average of 12.6 percent of their local budget to Jewish education allocated about 22 percent each to health services, including Jewish hospitals, and to child and family welfare services. Such transparent statistics arguably rendered hollow Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds General Assembly (CJFWF) resolutions supporting Jewish education, such as its 1962 proclamation that “[t]he strengthening of Jewish education in quality and effectiveness is of the utmost importance to the future of our communities and of Jewry in America.” “One would think that the Jews of 1965 are the helpless immigrants of a half century ago, in need of social and economic relief instead of spiritual and cultural sustenance,” Samuel Blumenfield, head of Chicago’s College of Jewish Studies, caustically remarked. Longtime CJFWF executive Charles Zibbell, who devoted much attention to promoting federation-bureau cooperation, was at great pains to explain to educators that federations’ consensus-driven decision-making approach necessarily made any shift in funding priorities excruciatingly gradual. But he added that federations recognized that education was a complex enterprise, much of which was controlled by local congregations. “Is it possible to do planning in a field crisscrossed with national competing ideologies, autonomous local congregations which proliferate without apparent study and operate with almost total anarchy?” he wondered aloud.74

Federations and community chests were conceived as social welfare organizations, a vehicle for noblesse oblige, which allowed the wealthy minority to care for the health and security needs of the impoverished immigrant masses. To the extent that federations were involved in Jewish education, it was largely to ensure that no child was turned away from school because of an inability to pay the tuition. In tough economic times, the logic behind federations’ raison d’être dictated severe cuts in educational funding in order to sustain more basic needs. New York Kehillah veterans Judah Magnes, Mordecai Kaplan, Samson Benderly, and their
disciples had a much more expansive conception of the role of the federations. For better or worse, they recognized the federation as heir to the Kehillah, and viewed the promotion of culture and education—the content of Jewish life and its perpetuation—as integral to its mission. This basic disagreement resulted in much misunderstanding and accounted for the bitter mistrust that many stalwart educators harbored for communal service professionals and lay leaders.\footnote{Rebuilding and Reconciliation}{75}

By the late 1950s, however, federation leaders were reenvisioning the role of their organizations in ways that effectively brought them closer to the Magnes-Kaplan-Benderly vision. As Jonathan Woocher explains, the embourgeoisement of the Jewish community effectively erased the distinction between contributors and beneficiaries. In the words of one federation’s annual report, the very meaning of the term “welfare” had shifted: “Until a generation ago, welfare service was something the well-to-do provided for the poor. Nowadays welfare service is something that all of us provide for ourselves.”\footnote{Rebuilding and Reconciliation}{76} There were other forces at work in encouraging this metamorphosis. In the wake of the Holocaust, American Jewry, as the largest and wealthiest community, felt an added obligation both to recover what had been lost and to engage in cultural renewal and regeneration. Increasing government involvement in welfare activities, a trend that continued with President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society in the 1960s, also facilitated the shift in emphasis.\footnote{Rebuilding and Reconciliation}{77}

Federation work became more about creating Jewish meaning; philanthropy became an “instrument of Jewish self-expression and development for the community as a whole.” In 1960, the CJWF founded the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. That same year, at the General Assembly, CJWF executive director Philip Bernstein publicly affirmed federations’ commitment to Jewish education. As communal leaders in the early 1960s were influenced by the same social trends that so alarmed Jewish educators, what some might call the “Judaization” tendency within the American Jewish polity accelerated. According to Woocher, by the mid-1960s “the issue of Jewish identification and commitment—especially of young Jews—was a fixture at General Assemblies.” Federations had embraced the shift in emphasis from adjustment to survival.\footnote{Rebuilding and Reconciliation}{78}

Regardless of federations’ change in orientation, critics maintained that central educational agencies’ reliance on federations was, at best, a mixed blessing: it relieved the agencies of the obligation to raise funds while often seriously curtailing their growth and ability to adequately deliver core services. “Though there may be a question in some communities as to whether the funds allocated to Jewish education are spent in the wisest way,” observed Los Angeles Bureau chief Sam Dinin in 1960, “there is no doubt, at least in my mind, that Jewish education and central agencies for Jewish education are not getting the funds needed to do even...
the minimal job that has to be done.” One result of the dearth of funds was the gradual reduction of the proportion of the central agency’s budget devoted to subventions to schools. To cite an extreme example, Los Angeles reduced its direct school subsidies over a fifteen-year period (1945–1959) from about 90 percent to 40 percent of its budget. By the early 1960s, grants-in-aid made up only about 15 percent of the annual budgets of the bureaus in New York and Chicago. The reduction in subventions paralleled and was mitigated by Jewish suburbanization and embourgeoisement. However, it created a dilemma for those bureaus that wished to respond to the needs of day school families. Tuitions for day schools were far higher than those for supplementary schools, taxing the resources of even middle-class families. The problem was particularly acute in New York, where inner-city traditional yeshivas served large numbers of ultra-Orthodox families with marginal incomes. Given their budgets, bureaus could not possibly meet the scholarship needs of the growing number of day school families. It is no wonder that most central agency leaders threw up their hands at the prospect of extending services to day schools.πΩ

Federation funding of bureaus created a further problem, which did not become apparent to many until the bureaus increasingly came under fire in the 1970s and ’80s. Freeing central educational agencies from the need to raise funds had the effect of restraining them from building up constituent support within the Jewish community. This predicament was exacerbated by the nature of the services they provided and the clients they served. “The work they do is removed from the public eye, difficult to assess in terms of success or failure and even when done well does not always produce immediately apparent results,” one astute observer summed up.∫≠

All this has a ring of familiarity to it, of course. Central agencies’ reliance on community welfare funds during the interwar years arrested their growth and stymied their ability to build popular support, which could have been marshaled with effect when they faced disproportionate budget cuts and, in some cases, a complete withdrawal of community funding during the Depression. The gradual shift in postwar communal priorities toward educational and cultural activities was no guarantee of continued federation support for bureaus. On the contrary, as federations became more interested in education, many began to set up their own internal education commissions and retained greater control over the allocation of grants to schools, camps, and other educational institutions.∫∞

Naturally, the bureaus’ claim to survival was not sacrosanct but, rather, dependent on their effectiveness and adaptability to a changing educational landscape. Here, again, reliance on the beneficence of federations rendered bureaus impervious to change. Thus, the closure or reorganization of a growing number of
bureaus since the 1980s should be approached with a level of equanimity. Had they been required to do their own fund-raising, they necessarily would have been more responsive to attitudinal and demographic shifts. In some cases, the reliance on fund-raising might have forced them to narrow their missions. But it also could have resulted in greater clarity of vision. Finally, it would have made them directly responsible to their constituents, thereby incentivizing interest groups such as day school supporters to follow the tenor of Azriel Eisenberg’s advice and either put up or shut up.

It is useful to bear in mind, in relation to central agency and federation support for day schools, that the need for relief far outweighed the capacity to provide it. If, in 1975, federations had suddenly resolved to earnestly confront the day school funding crisis and had annually underwritten half of the combined annual day school budget, it would have eaten up their entire domestic spending budgets. Surely, even the staunchest of day school advocates would have needed to concede the impracticality of such a solution. More promising in recent years has been the support for day schools provided by private foundations, a trend that was initiated by Joseph and Carolyn Gruss in the 1970s.82

There is a final and crucial point that is often lost in discussions about community support for central agencies and, indeed, for Jewish education in general. Since the 1950s there has been an operating assumption in communal life that financial support for Jewish education is a desideratum. Indeed, the gradual and ultimately widespread acceptance of this premise was in no small part an accomplishment of the Benderly boys and their colleagues in the bureaus as well as the professional and lay leaders of the AAJE. Dushkin, who defined community as a body of people engaged in “a common way of life,” with “common interests and common rights,” took a broad view of community responsibility for Jewish education. Not only did he perceive the community’s role as one of expanding and equalizing educational opportunity; he also averred its interest in raising educational standards and providing educational functions that would be financially inefficient or prohibitive if executed on an individual scale.83

While his view became the default position, it was never a consensus view, even among Jewish educators. On the one hand there were consequentialists who, like Benderly himself, believed that mass Jewish education must be made affordable for the masses. Jewish education, Benderly argued, was a “commodity,” and parents should be offered a range of choices about how much of the commodity they wished to purchase: a two-hour curriculum (one-day-a-week school), a five-hour curriculum (three days a week), a ten-hour curriculum (five days a week), and so on. “It will be the task of the community to educate those Jewish parents, who are able but unwilling to pay for the Jewish education of their children, that they
should want this commodity for their children, and want enough of it,” he wrote. Community-supported financial aid should be reserved only for the neediest cases. On the other hand there were deontologists, such as Louis Hurwich, who were content to create an elitist system of Jewish education regardless of the material or human costs, because they viewed the cultivation of a leadership class as essential to Jewish survival. Hurwich agreed with Benderly that parents should pay as much as they could afford and, also, that the community should offer a range of educational settings of varying levels of intensity. But he believed that, “from the democratic point of view,” school choice should not be tied to financial means. Despite its support, the community had no right to direct indigent children to less costly forms of Jewish education. Rather, it was up to the community to facilitate whichever type of education parents saw fit for their children regardless of the cost. While consequentially the two might not have been far apart, Benderly emphasized affordability, while Hurwich asserted that Jewish education was both “an inherent right” and “the sine qua non condition for the perpetuation of Jews from age to age.”

Was Jewish education a right? Was it a communal obligation? Or was the Talmudic presumption that a child’s education was the responsibility of the parent a more defensible stance? Each of these visions could be defended (and refuted) on philosophical as well as practical grounds. Unfortunately, rarely if ever were supporters of “community responsibility,” of varying stripes, called on to justify their premises on philosophical or practical grounds. Rather, arguments were often framed in the context of emotional appeals for safeguarding Jewish continuity. Not surprisingly, absent any soundly articulated justification for “community responsibility,” it failed to become deeply ingrained in the consciousnesses of many American Jews. A 1975 survey of Jews in Boston, for example, found that while most agreed that providing a Jewish education to their children was important, few considered Jewish education a central priority for federation spending. Even at the turn of the twenty-first century, when fears about Jewish continuity propelled Jewish education to an increasingly prominent position on the community’s list of priorities, Jewish leaders continue to dodge these essential questions. Yet, with the cost of day schools, summer camps and other intensive forms of Jewish education continuing to skyrocket, a clearheaded and forthright examination of the “community responsibility” shibboleth is more timely than ever.
Conclusion

The Benderly Revolution: “A Mile Wide and an Inch Deep” or “A Dream Not Quite Come True Yet Still a Dream”?

Shortly before Benderly’s death in July 1944, Alexander Dushkin made a pilgrimage to his ailing mentor’s home in Godfrey, New York. Years later he was still haunted by their conversation. “Dushkin, I do not know whether I did you boys any good personally by drawing you into the profession of Jewish education!” Benderly confided. Dushkin did what he could to reassure him, while internally lamenting: “What a sad summary this was for the beneficent life of a great educator, guide and mentor!” Benderly bemoaned how the Federation had forcibly retired him in 1941, effectively declaring him obsolete and sentencing him to long hours of solitude far removed from the corridors of the Jewish Education Committee. But at heart he was burdened by the realization that his “dream had not yet
come true.” His memoir, which remained unwritten, was to be titled “A Dream Not Quite Come True Yet Still a Dream—Observations and Reminiscences of the Dreamer, Samson Benderly Ashkenazi.” He planned to dedicate the book to his “fellow townsman” from Safed, sixteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Solomon Halevi Alkabetz, whose “pregnant phrase ‘last of deed, first in thought,’” from his Sabbath poem Lekhah Dodi (Come My Beloved) was to be the memoir’s theme. In moments when Benderly was less consumed by self-doubt or self-pity, he was able to take solace in the generation he had raised to carry on his work. The JEC, AAJE, NCJE, and Jewish Education had sprung forth as natural outgrowths of his “dream” and were being led by his disciples largely working out of his playbook.

The stories behind the creation of these institutions, as well as modern Talmud Torahs such as CJJ and culture camps such as Cejwin and Modin, demonstrate the fealty of the Benderly boys to their teacher’s vision as well as their disagreements about how it could best be realized. They highlight substantive differences in interpretation and outlook within both the immediate circle of Benderly disciples as well as the somewhat larger educational community that comprised the NCJE. The divide between the pragmatists and the purists was genuine, if somewhat fluid depending on the particular issue.

Yet there is no denying that even by the end of his disciples’ careers, the Benderly revolution was at best incomplete. Benderly and his boys were up against formidable obstacles, not least of which were the inherent limitations of supplementary education. External events, such as the Great Depression and the Second World War, also powerfully influenced communal priorities and the availability of resources, inevitably reshaping the educational agenda. So too did demographic trends and the Jewish community’s relentless drive toward Americanization and embourgeoisement.

If the Benderly boys had little power over these forces, they certainly controlled their reactions to them. For all their reputed dogmatism on issues such as Ivrit b’Ivrit and the primacy of the communal school, most of them—including, especially, Dushkin, Rosen, Honor, Dinin, and Gamoran—were capable of remarkable flexibility, so long as they could reconcile their attitudes and actions with the spirit of Benderly’s vision. For example, while these men were prone to condescension in their attitude toward the balebatim and the “assimilationist” German-Jewish elites, they also learned from experience that success depended on collaboration.

Nevertheless, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Mordecai Kaplan was prescient in 1914 when he wrote that Benderly’s fundamental constraint in effecting meaningful Jewish educational reform was his failure to truly understand the American Jewish community, and this despite his frequent assertions that Jewish education in the United States must be “built upon principles underlying the life
of all American Jews.” Kaplan wrote: “The whole scheme of Dr. B. I believe is based upon a fallacy, viz., that it is feasible to maintain distinct Jewish groups in the Diaspora, that shall unite in themselves two coordinate cultures of a national character. In my opinion this cannot possibly be realized. It can only have a short lived existence among the recently arrived immigrants and in their children, but not in the third generation. Only by giving Jewish culture a distinctly religious significance in the true modern sense of the term is there any hope of Jewish education being built up in this country.”

Benderly recruited Americanized young men and women to replace the culturally foreign melamdim, but he imbued them with a cultural nationalism essentially devoid of religious spirit and an allegiance to an education system grounded in the forms and culture of the immigrant ghetto. In their heart of hearts, the Benderly boys were confirmed K’lal Yisraelniks, and devotees of a communal education system housed in school centers. It is a testament to the pragmatism of Benderly disciples, notably Dushkin, Dinin, Gamoran, Honor, Eisenberg, and Chipkin, that they adapted themselves and their institutions to the realities of the postwar suburban landscape, including the congregationalization of Jewish education.

American Jews in the mid-twentieth century were not by and large antithetical to Zionism, but what truly animated them was their acquisitiveness of middle-class manners and morals. The Benderly boys were never truly reconciled to this incontestable fact, and did not adequately take it into account in their educational policy planning. Nor were most of them capable of exuding religious spirituality or speaking about education in a language of ethics and values that American Jews found reassuring.

On July 9, 1944, Samson Benderly died at the age of sixty-eight. He had been battling cancer for some time, so his death could not have come as a shock. Nevertheless, it was a profoundly emotional moment. An obituary written by Dushkin appeared as the lead editorial in the September 1944 issue of Jewish Education, with Benderly’s name set between black borders. As Dushkin explained, “To many in the Jewish educational profession he had been a teacher, guide and friend. To some of us he was more than that—he was ‘Abba,’ our progenitor in Jewish education. For it was he who struck the initial spark of interest and faith in many now responsible for Jewish educational leadership, and fanned that spark with his own warm, imaginative enthusiasm.” Dushkin asserted that through his work as director of the New York Kehillah’s Bureau of Jewish Education, Benderly’s name became synonymous with “Americanizing Jewish education.” Dushkin credited Benderly with popularizing the notion that Jewish education should be a communal responsibility, a cause for which Dushkin himself became the main standard-bearer while directing the Board of Jewish Education in Chicago and the Jewish
Education Committee of New York. But he failed to mention another idea that Benderly often championed: operating a small number of laboratory schools that could act as a lever, raising the quality of the Jewish education across the board. Whether or not Dushkin was conscious of his omission, it is clear that the efforts of the students to define their teacher’s legacy were already underway.³

One of Dushkin’s final acts as editor of *Jewish Education* prior to immigrating to Israel was to assemble a memorial issue devoted entirely to Benderly (volume 20, number 3), which was published in the summer of 1949 to coincide with the fifth anniversary of his death. Dushkin had long contemplated writing a full-scale biography of Benderly and his impact on Jewish education, and even found an eager publisher in Solomon Grayzel of the Jewish Publication Society, but he was waylaid by other projects and responsibilities. His decision to put out the memorial issue stemmed in part from the recognition that he might never realize his more ambitious plan.⁴

Dushkin encouraged surviving members of Benderly’s inner circle to contribute remembrances. Quite a few accepted the invitation, and though their tributes were inevitably repetitive and inclined toward hagiography, careful reading elicits fascinating gleanings that invariably reveal as much about the writers as their subject. Mordecai Kaplan, the sole surviving member of the original clique that created and guided the original Bureau of Education, offered a generous reassessment of Benderly’s mission. As in the past, he conceded that Benderly’s opponents were not completely off base when they criticized the BJE director’s and his protégés’ indifference to Judaism as a religion.⁵ Yet he also asserted that Benderly’s *paideia* was more radical than he initially assumed. Benderly was no mere follower of Ahad Ha-Am, whose conception of Diaspora Jewish life was shaped by conditions in eastern Europe. Benderly firmly believed that Jews could thrive, not merely survive, in America. In subscribing to this conviction, he evinced more the romantic spirit of the immigrant than the outlook of a Zionist prophet.

Kaplan found it difficult to resist refighting the old battles of the Kehillah days. In particular, he was intent on combating a long-enduring misperception in both Orthodox and Reform circles that Benderly’s hidden agenda was to convert American Jewish youth into rabid Zionists, maladjusted to the American milieu and intent on *aliyah*. In fact, Benderly subscribed to a brand of cultural nationalism that presumed a continued vital American Jewish presence. “Though Palestine was for him the cynosure of Jewish hopes and strivings, he never considered Diaspora Jewry as destined either for Palestine or for absorption into the general population. He looked to Jewish education in this country to enable American Jewry to find a way of integrating itself into the cultural and social environment, with-
out losing its group individuality and its sense of unity with the Jewish people throughout the world.”

Consider, also, the keenness with which his disciples rushed to burnish his reputation as “the father of Jewish education.” To be sure, Benderly’s influence on myriad facets of American Jewish education was profound. But his accomplishments would not have been diminished in any way by the acknowledgment that he was not working within a vacuum. Berkson, in particular, seemed eager to puff up Benderly’s contributions even at the expense of his colleagues in the leadership of the New York Kehillah, including Rabbi Judah L. Magnes. While Dushkin plausibly suggested that Benderly began thinking of Jewish education in community terms and as a community responsibility after his initial contact with Magnes, Berkson preferred to believe that the idea came to Benderly de novo. He likewise wrote offhandedly about “several earlier attempts here and there” to introduce Ivrit b’Ivrit before Benderly popularized the instructional method.

There is something touching about Berkson’s worshipful prose when taken in concert with his deep grievances against Benderly, which were aired in private letters to Dushkin. It seems that the depth of Berkson’s esteem stirred the intensity of his anguish. But more so than his comrades, Berkson was forthright about where he differed from his mentor. Benderly, he wrote, made “a crucial error” when expediency persuaded him to work with the congregational schools. For Berkson, the essential aspect of the community educational model was the formulation of a “non-partisan,” “non-denominational,” broadly Jewish curriculum and school culture. In Berkson’s purist estimation, Benderly was deluding himself and betraying his vision. Berkson’s younger colleague Dinin was gentler in his assessment: “Like the Biblical figures [Benderly] loved, his eyes too grew dim with the passing years. But like so many whose sight is weak, he was a man of great vision who saw better than he built and built better than he saw.”

Dushkin was more willing to accept Benderly as “a conglomerate of personalities, which sometimes supplemented, but more frequently conflicted with each other.” But, then again, as the director of the Chicago BJE and, later, the Jewish Education Committee of New York, Dushkin, too, had laid aside Berkson’s precious “community theory,” in favor the more nebulous credo of “unity in diversity,” which sought to apply Horace Kallen’s model of cultural pluralism to the American Jewish world. Like Benderly, by the late 1930s Dushkin reluctantly concluded that the community supplementary school had no future in the United States. Dushkin continued to insist that there was more that united the various Jewish factions than divided them. Moreover, he believed that these commonalities could serve as the basis for a shared educational platform. But as the standard-
bearer of the pragmatist camp within the Benderly constellation, he understood that community responsibility for Jewish education could be sustained only in an environment that respected Jewish pluralism.  

Both Dushkin and Berkson were, in effect, competing to be recognized as the authentic heir to the Benderly revolution. Berkson closed his article by admonishing the next generation to recapture the spirit that animated the “early creative adventurous days” of the Benderly revolution: “efficient administration and pedagogical expertise, however important, must in the end be futile and come to naught if these are not interpenetrated with a vision of the rebirth of Jewish life; for it is only through the vision of renascence that the breath of life can be breathed into the material body of practical achievement and organization.” No one could mistake this parting shot across the bow of Dushkin’s jecc, which Berkson decried as soulless.

Yet Berkson’s criticisms did little to dissuade Dushkin that he, above all others, was Benderly’s professional heir. In a 1964 letter to Hemdah Benderly, marking the twentieth anniversary of his mentor’s death, Dushkin referred to himself as Benderly’s “spiritual Kaddish,” adding that “perhaps even more than his other disciples, I have tried to follow in his footsteps and to work in his spirit.” Dushkin confided that “I feel closer to him than ever. Not infrequently, when in a new situation, he serves again as my guiding spirit; I ask myself: How would Benderly have acted in that situation?”

Dushkin’s wistful mood was prompted not only by Benderly’s yahrtzeit but also by the recognition that the ranks of his own generation were thinning. Ben Rosen was the first of his generation to pass away, in 1945, followed by Chipkin (1954), Honor (1955), Barnett Brickner (1958), Golub (1959), and Gamoran (1962). Dushkin was also grieved by his strained relationship with Berkson, which never completely healed. The families maintained intermittent social contacts, mostly through the initiatives of Libbie and Alex, but Isaac’s unassuaged hard feelings often bubbled to the surface. Libbie’s death in 1970 left Berkson bereft and forlorn. Without his keel and goodwill ambassador he found it more difficult than ever to reach out to his old friend. Schoolman reported to Dushkin, in 1973, that Berkson had become a frequent guest for Sabbath and holiday meals. “He always speaks of you reminiscently and nostalgically, and asks about you and the family. He sort of ‘waits’ for a letter from you, but he feels concerned that his last letter to you quite some time ago kind of had a negative effect from what he had intended—so he worries and worries. . . . Poor fellow, he is all broken up and depressed without Libbie. Well, you know his nature and his problems.” Berkson died in 1974. Hajnalka Winer, who remained close to members of the “Bureau bunch” and occasionally organized reunions, outlived almost all of her colleagues, passing away in
1987 at the age of ninety-eight. The last surviving member of the first generation of Benderly disciples, Rebecca Brickner, died in 1988 at the age of ninety-four.13

Dushkin's cross-Atlantic relationship with Schoolman remained strong until his death in 1976. Schoolman survived Dushkin by four years. As the years passed, their frequent correspondence increasingly turned to family news and health issues, rather than professional business. But even after both men retired, they remained keenly interested in the American Jewish educational scene and seemed to relish their positions as professional sages, whose opinions about the issues of the day were actively sought by the younger generation. Their considered judgment about the more recent development of the institutions they had built was decidedly mixed. When, in 1973, the New York Federation (unsuccessfully) attempted to restructure and severely curtail the activities of the Jewish Education Committee's successor, the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, while consolidating select educational activities under its direct aegis, Dushkin and Schoolman remained silent. Their reticence, despite pleas from the Board's new executive director, Alvin Schiff, was explained in their private letters. While they considered the plan flawed, they blamed Dushkin's successor, Azriel Eisenberg, for allowing the organization to drift. “Our ‘friend’ had done so little and that so poorly, after he took over from you, that the present criticism of the BJEd is altogether understandable,” Schoolman declared. They likewise derided Eisenberg's successor, Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld, for his parochialism and lamented that the priorities of the organization had increasingly become focused on the Orthodox community. But, most poignantly, they appreciated the irony of their colleagues' outcry in the face of Federation engagement, after years of encouraging the philanthropic agency to take an active interest in Jewish education.14

Jewish educators' shifting mood over the 1950s closely tracked that of American educators more generally. Shocked out of their relative complacency by Russia's launch of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, in October 1957, American educators rushed to strengthen science and mathematics curricula in the public schools and threw their support behind the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which stimulated education, training, and research in the sciences and “eventually did more to pump federal dollars into the educational establishment than anything in previous history.”15 Coming on the heels of the publication of John Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society, a stinging critique of America’s consumption-oriented society, many interpreted Sputnik as “a rebuke to America’s material self-indulgence.” Edward Teller, “the father of the hydrogen bomb,” reportedly called Sputnik “a technological Pearl Harbor.” Once roused, the education establishment did not limit its attention to science and math. An initially overlooked
book by Rudolph Flesch, titled *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, began flying off bookstore shelves.\(^{16}\)

It was in this environment that Alexander Dushkin embarked on a yearlong project to analyze the findings of the First National Study of Jewish Education and write a summary report. Conducted under the sponsorship of the *AJJE* by Uriah Engelman and Oscar Janowsky, the study surveyed thirty-three Jewish communities of varying sizes.\(^{17}\) Dushkin’s report also synthesized data from a roughly analogous study of New York City, also conducted in the early to mid-1950s, by Israel Chipkin and Louis Ruffman for the *JEC*.

The picture Dushkin painted was devastating, if not entirely surprising. With painstaking detail, he revealed the ineffectual state of the elementary congregational schools—the backbone of the Jewish educational system. Despite rising enrollments, improved facilities, greater availability of quality teaching materials, and even increasing parental engagement, the teaching and learning process in these schools was fundamentally broken.\(^{18}\) Most disappointing was how little Jewish cultural content students actually came away with from their school experience. In the most oft-quoted line from the study, Dushkin wrote that “American Jewish schooling is like a shallow river, ‘a mile wide and an inch deep.’”\(^{19}\) Approximating the discourse in the general education world, the summary report was unflinchingly frank but hardly defeatist. Indeed, Dushkin summed up the attitude that pervaded the study as follows: “We must know the worst to do our best. For it is only in light of facts, in light of knowledge, that value judgments and social policies can be properly formulated and their attainment sought and validated.”\(^{20}\)

*Jewish Education*’s coverage of the study was emblematic of the Benderly boys’ general approach over the previous half century. It epitomized their fascination with quantitative data, their progressivist conviction that Jewish education’s troubles could ultimately be resolved through scientific investigation and experimentation. At its best, it showcased the Benderly disciples’ willingness to ask difficult and uncomfortable questions of themselves, their profession, and the Jewish community. It also underscored some of their endemic weaknesses, particularly their tendency (with the notable exception of Berkson) to devalue educational philosophy and educational visioning, their tendency to give more attention to means rather than ends, to instrumental values rather than intrinsic ones.

Samson Benderly and his “boys” revolutionized American Jewish education, in part, by shifting the emphasis from heritage or content transmission to enculturation or social environment adjustment. In the 1960s, as the Benderly era was drawing to a close, the formulation of the purpose of Jewish education shifted yet again, to identity construction and reinforcement. The new emphasis on survival

416  *The Benderly Boys*
reflected a wider realignment within the organized Jewish community. As in America generally, by the late 1950s there was restlessness in the air. The anomic of suburbia, exacerbated by the hollowness of the postwar religious revival and the culture of conformity, left many searching for meaning. American Jews were also only beginning to come to grips with the implications of the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel. For some, this dawning consciousness brought to the surface anxieties about assimilation and attenuated Jewish identification among the younger generation.

Social adjustment and group survival needed not be opposing ends. Indeed, for Benderly, Mordecai Kaplan, and their circle, a key component of the project of adjustment involved the reconstruction of Judaism on American soil so as to stave off its ossification. They were also avowed cultural Zionists, and if their appreciation of Zionism as an agent of American acculturation was, at best, unconscious, they understood a Jewish cultural center in Palestine to be critical to the long-term vitality of Judaism in North America.21

But Benderly soon recognized that the two sides of the adjustment equation were unequal; the process of forging integrated Jewish Americans was complicated and even undermined by the overpowering allure of American culture relative to Jewish tradition. American Jewish educators, he asserted, would need to play a major role in compensating for this imbalance.22 Educators learned a strangely elusive lesson that should have been evident to any student of John Dewey’s child-centered pedagogical approach: “Active adjustment of the environment to the needs of Jewish education must be made not only by the teacher but more so by the individual taught; it is he who must know himself as a Jew, must want to live as a Jew in the modern setting, and be ready to adjust his environment to that purpose.”23 Thus it is no wonder that veteran Jewish educators in the 1960s were generally heartened by the new emphasis on Jewish identity and did not view it as a repudiation of the Benderly revolution. As Dushkin explained: “We know that this is not a completely new phenomenon, but rather bringing to a boiling point what has been simmering in American Jewish life over many years.”24

In retrospect, the 1960s seemed to be both the best of times and the worst of times for Jewish education. The shifting communal agenda, from adjustment to survival, meant that Jewish education was elevated to a communal priority. Its star would only continue to rise in the 1980s and 1990s as the community was jolted by grim intermarriage statistics. But education’s rising profile meant that existing educational agencies and institutions were placed in the community spotlight and charged with defying the forces of nature—stemming the assimilationist drift in an open society.

Alvin Schiff, an astute reader of the relationship between developments in

Conclusion 417
Jewish education and wider educational trends, drew a connection between the public school reform in the 1960s and the experience in Jewish schools. In both cases reform initiatives stemmed in large measure from the fact that the schools had been charged with addressing social ills. And in both cases the reforms fell short, and the public's attention became focused on the appalling conditions in the schools. In the case of Jewish education, the schools “were providing neither the necessary inspiration nor the needed models for Jewish living that Jewish children required.” The scapegoats, said Schiff, became the central agencies for Jewish education, just as city boards of education bore the brunt of the criticism for America’s failing public schools.\textsuperscript{25}

Walter Ackerman’s devastating 1969 American Jewish Year Book essay, “Jewish Education for What?” which was written in tight, biting prose, reinforced and intensified the portrait of Jewish education that emerged a decade earlier in the Dushkin and Engelman survey. In particular, he documented the underlying weaknesses in the congregational school system. The “academic aspirations” of the mostly Reform one-day-a-week schools were dismissed as “either a colossal joke or an act of cynical pretentiousness,” while graduates of the three-days-a-week school, typical of the Conservative movement, often had little to show for their efforts. They demonstrated “only the most infantile notions of biblical thoughts and ideas, and a capability in Hebrew which hardly goes beyond monosyllabic responses to carefully worded questions.”

In some respects, more ominous was the utter lack of evidence for a cause-and-effect relationship between Jewish education and enhanced Jewish identity.\textsuperscript{26} Education had been elevated in many minds to a magic bullet for the plagues of alienation and assimilation. Were not Jewish educators being set up for failure, as Schiff warned? “Educators, for their part must learn to avoid extravagant claims,” while “[c]ritics of Jewish education must come out from behind the shield of exaggerated demands whose fulfillment is beyond the power of any school.” What was needed, Ackerman concluded, was “candor” about the realistic limitations of the schools, and a redefinition of education in the public mind to encompass a wide range of informal as well as formal activities and programs. Finally, he implored, bureaus needed to adjust themselves once and for all to the reality of a congregational school system, let go of their “inspectorial” role, and concentrate instead on research and experimentation in partnership with federations. Jewish educators needed to overcome their reflexive distrust of federations and acknowledge federations’ legitimate prerogatives in the area to educational planning.\textsuperscript{27}

With a touch of irony, perhaps, Ackerman suggested that the “most legitimate and vital use for community funds is the establishment of model schools, supervised by a bureau of Jewish education together with a Hebrew teachers college,
where one exists.” It was precisely this function that was abdicated by Alexander Dushkin at the JEC. Surely this recommendation must have evinced a chuckle from septuagenarian Isaac Berkson. But Ackerman’s recommendation was meant not as a repudiation of Dushkin and the bureau model that he and his colleagues helped to spread. Rather, it was a cautionary reminder that the conditions that were responsible for birthing and shaping the bureau system no longer existed, and institutions must adjust to the times. Dushkin’s insistence that the lay leadership of the JEC in 1940s would never have allowed him to create the kind of model school system he wanted was likely true then—but not anymore. As Philip Bernstein wrote, “The pupils were no longer ‘someone else’s children.’ They were the children of the board members themselves—of the federations, bureaus and synagogues.” The era of the Benderly boys was over.

If Ackerman’s indictment indirectly pointed to what the Benderly boys and their circle had left undone as well as those aspects of their program that had, by 1970, outlived their usefulness, Dushkin’s oration at the fortieth anniversary conference of the NCJE told a story of achievement. In forty years, the infrastructure of Jewish education had been transformed; the principle of community responsibility for Jewish education had at long last been unequivocally embraced; progress had been made toward professionalizing the field; a modern curriculum responding to the exigencies of a postemancipation world and the birth of the Jewish national home in Palestine had been developed; a panoply of formal and informal educational programs and movements, from educational camps and youth groups to Jewish foundation schools and Hebrew high schools had been created; and the value of K’lal Yisrael had been elevated to first principle in the American Jewish civil religion. (Indeed, the Benderly group’s unstinting commitment to the value of K’lal Yisrael provides a much needed counterweight to the contemporary drift toward facile, self-indulgent spirituality and what Robert Putnam aptly described as the predisposition for “bowling alone.”) To be sure, credit for many of these achievements does not belong to the Benderly boys alone. But for a half century or more they were the dominant force in American Jewish education, directing and presiding over its Americanization. The systemwide revolution wrought by Samson Benderly and his boys (and girls)—for all its imperfections—continues to provide inspiration and instruction.
Notes

The following abbreviations are used throughout the notes.

ADP  Alexander Dushkin Papers
AH   American Hebrew
AJA  Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH
AJAJ American Jewish Archives Journal
AJCOHC William E. Weiner Oral History Library, American Jewish Committee, New York Public Library
AJH  American Jewish History
AJHS American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY
AJYB American Jewish Year Book
BJENYP Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York Papers
BRBP Barnett and Rebecca Brickner Papers
CAHJP Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem
CHEI Cathedra for the History of Eretz Israel and Its Yishuv
EGP  Emanuel Gamoran Papers
FH   Mamie Gamoran, “A Family History,” manuscript, 1984, American Jewish Archives
FWP  Felix Warburg Papers
HEP  Hyman Enelow Papers
HHAAAB Hebrew Hospital and Asylum Association of Baltimore
HJEC Harold Korey, “The History of Jewish Education in Chicago” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1942)
JAP  Jerome Abrams Papers
JC   Jewish Comment
JCh  Jewish Child
JE  Jewish Education
JEC  Jewish Education Committee of New York
JECP  Jewish Education Committee Papers
JEFW  Walter Ackerman, Jewish Education—for What? And Other Essays, ed. Ari Ackerman, Hanan Alexander, et al. (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2008)
JEN  Jewish Education News
JENYC  Alexander Dushkin, Jewish Education in New York City (New York: Bureau of Jewish Education, 1918)
JEx  Jewish Exponent
JJE  Journal of Jewish Education
JLMP  Judah L. Magnes Papers
JSP  Jacob Schiff Papers
JT  Jewish Teacher
JTSA  Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, NY
LB  Alexander Dushkin, Living Bridges: Memoirs of an Educator (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975)
LLHP  Leo L. Honor Papers
LMP  Louis Marshall Papers
MJ  Menorah Journal
Mjo  Morgen Journal
MLJ  Modern Language Journal
MMKJ  Mordecai M. Kaplan Journal, Rare Book Room of the JTSA
NMAJH  National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia, PA
NYJJ  Jenna Weissman Joselit, New York’s Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)
NYT  New York Times
PAJHS  Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society
PJAC  Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Temple University, Paley Library, Philadelphia, PA
RATC  Joseph and Miriam Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, JTSA
SFP  Schoolman Family Papers
SH  Sheviley Ha-Hinukh
SPSC  David Kaufman, Shul with a Pool: The “Synagogue Center” in American Jewish History (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1999)
Introduction

1. The story of Temima Gezari’s induction into the Bureau of Jewish Education’s Girls Preparatory School No. 3 appears in Temima Gezari, Mama, Papa and Me (Rocky Point, N.Y.: Studio Workshop Press, 2002), 41–43, and also was related in an interview with Gezari that is on file at the New York Public Library. See Temima Gezari interview with Vivian Siegel, September 26, 1990, AJCOHC.

2. Gezari interview with Siegel; Gezari, Mama, Papa and Me, 42.

3. Gezari interview with Siegel.


12. Ibid., 258.

**Part I: Making Order out of Chaos**


**Chapter 1: The Making of the Master**

2. Benderly’s biographer Nathan Winter conducted interviews with Benderly’s wife Hemdah Benderly and his cousin Menahem Barshad in which he culled some information about Benderly’s family background. See *JEPS*, 27–32. The other source about Benderly’s childhood is Alexander Dushkin, “The Personality of Samson Benderly—His Life and Influence,” *JE* 20 (Summer 1949), 6–7. Dushkin presumably based his account on his conversations with Benderly and his wife. There are some minor inconsistencies between these sources, but Winter’s account appears to be most reliable.
4. *JEPS*, 30–31; Dushkin, “The Personality of Samson Benderly,” 6. Dushkin mistakenly refers to the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut as the American College, probably because the school’s name was changed by the Board of Regents of the State University of New York to the American University of Beirut on November 18, 1920.
7. Dr. Harry Friedenwald, who like his father was a noted ophthalmologist, served as president of the Federation of American Zionists from 1904 to 1918, the predecessor to the Zionist Organization of America, while educator and Jewish Publication Society general editor Henrietta Szold would found, in 1912, Hadassah, the Woman's Zionist Organization of America. Benderly also taught twenty-three-year-old Bertha and twenty-one-year-old Adele.

8. One of the leading traditional German synagogues in the city, Chizuk Amuno, was led by Rev. Dr. Henry Schneeberger from 1876 to 1916. The other prestigious traditional German congregation was Oheb Shalom, led by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Szold from 1859 to 1892.

9. Dushkin writes that in 1899 Benderly was “asked to interest himself in a little Hebrew school conducted . . . in the basement rooms of the Lloyd Street Synagogue” (Dushkin, “The Personality of Samson Benderly,” 7). But he is probably in error since the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation sold the Lloyd Street Synagogue building to St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church in 1889. The building did not revert back into a synagogue until 1905, when it was occupied by Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh, one of Baltimore’s Orthodox immigrant congregations. It seems likely that Benderly’s school alternated between the synagogues commonly known as the Chizuk Amuno Synagogue and the Eden Street Shul, which at that time were occupied by congregations B’nai Israel and Aitz Chaim respectively. The synagogue on the corner of Lloyd and Lombard streets was originally dedicated by Chizuk Amuno in 1876. After Chizuk Amuno outgrew the facility and moved to McCulloh Street, the synagogue became the home of the Russische Shul (B’nai Israel). Aitz Chaim Congregation, which was commonly known as the Eden Street Shul, moved into its Eden Street location in 1902.

10. It is very difficult to reconstruct Benderly’s early years as a Jewish educator in Baltimore. Accounts from his wife and two associates recorded after his death are contradictory and confusing. In my efforts to reconcile these accounts I would like to acknowledge the assistance of archivist Jonathan Roscoe and educator Deb Weiner of the Jewish Museum of Maryland, who shared with me their considerable historical knowledge of Jewish Baltimore. The key accounts are Rebecca A. Brickner, “As I Remember Dr. Benderly,” JE 20 (Summer 1949), 53–59; Dushkin, “The Personality of Samson Benderly,” 7; JEPS, 35–44, which is based in part on Winter’s interviews with Hemdah Benderly; and Raymond Bloom, “History of Jewish Education in Baltimore during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” (Ph.D. diss., Dropsie University, 1972), 114–124, which is based primarily on accounts in the Baltimore Jewish press and the reports of the Federated Jewish Charities of Baltimore. On the Society’s name change see JC, November 2, 1900, 7. On the size of Benderly’s student body and number of staff see AJYB 1900–1901, “Directory of Local Organizations,” 278.


12. Ibid., 56; Board of Officers Minutes, HHAAB, vol. 7, August 6, 1900, box X-142, AJA.


23. Ibid.
25. The “natural method” was popularized by the Berlitz language schools. It was adapted in the postwar era and is often referred to as the “direct method.” It remains the favored method of many foreign-language teachers and is used with great effect on the university level by Middlebury College and other language immersion programs.
31. Benderly, “Jewish Education in America,” 82, 84.
32. Ibid., 82.
33. The exact address was 125 Aisquith Street. Jackson Street was closed off some time ago and no longer exists. E-mail correspondence, Jonathan Roscoe to author, April 26, 2007.
40. Brickner, “As I Remember Dr. Benderly,” 56.
41. Ibid., 55.
44. Brickner, “As I Remember Dr. Benderly,” 54.
46. Federated Jewish Charities of Baltimore, First Joint Report, 99ff.; Brickner, “As I Remember Dr. Benderly,” 56. Brickner writes that the Hebrew typewriter was made up for Benderly by the Remington Company, adding: “I believe it was the first Hebrew typewriter in the world.” But Winter was unable to verify this claim with the Research Department of Remington Rand. See JEPS, 46, n. 37. According to Balfour Brickner, the typewriter was created by the Underwood Corporation.

Chapter 2: The New York Bureau and Its Critics

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.


8. NYJ, 34–56, esp. 36, 40. The story of the Kehillah experiment has been told with great insight and erudition by Arthur Goren and need not long detain us here save for its direct relation to the affairs of the Bureau of Education.


11. Ibid., 8–9.

12. The 24 percent statistic did not include those children who were tutored privately, because no reliable figures were available. Two years later, Benderly estimated that 10,000 students were learning privately. But he also upped the estimate of the number of school-age children to 200,000 by including fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds in his calculation. Consequently, his overall estimate of the number of children receiving a Jewish education at any one time (25 percent) did not differ significantly from that of Kaplan and Cronson. Samson Benderly, *Aims and Activities of the Bureau of Education of the Jewish Community (Kehillah) of New York, 1912*, issued as publication no. 5 of the Bureau of Education, reprinted in *JE* 20 (Summer 1949), 94.


428 Notes to Pages 37–42

17. Benderly to Magnes, March 9, 1910, 111. The New York Foundation administered the $1 million bequest of Louis Heinsheimer, a late partner at Schiff’s banking firm Kuhn, Loeb and Company.


19. Benderly to Magnes, February 8, 1911, folder 1665, JLMP, CAHJP.


21. Schiff to Magnes, March 20, 1911; Schiff to Magnes, March 24, 1911, folder 1665, JLMP, CAHJP.

22. Magnes to Schiff, March 23, 1911; Magnes to Schiff, April 28, 1911; “Subscriptions to the Bureau of Jewish Education of the Kehillah—Payable in 5 Yearly Installments,” April 1911; Warburg to Magnes, April 25, 1911, folder 1665, JLMP, CAHJP; *NYJ*, 176, n. 52.


24. Quoted in *NYJ*, 99, and *JEPS*, 81.


27. Edelstein, *Jewish Teaching Profession*, 26; Phillips quoted in *JEPS*, 82.


30. Ibid., 101; Edelstein, *Jewish Teaching Profession*, 27; *NYJ*, 130. Margolies had a falling-out with Kehillah leaders over kashruth policy.


32. *MJo*, May 22, 1914, 4; Magnes to Marshall, May 25, 1914, box 1607, LMP, AJA.


38. *WHWJ*, 107; Harry Fischel to Jacob Schiff, February 27, 1914, box 440, folder 6, JSP, AJA.

39. Fischel to Schiff, February 27, 1914.


42. “The Root of the Trouble,” *Morgen Journal* (February 24, 1914). Translation from the Yiddish in box 660, folder 6, JSP, AJA.


44. Elias Cohen and Henry Glass to Jacob Schiff, February 24, 1914, box 440, folder 6, JSP, AJA. Schiff quoted in “Fischel to Resign from Talmud Torah”; *WHWJ*, 109; *MJo*, May 22, 1914, 4; Benderly to Fischel, February 23, 1914, quoted in Goldstein, *Forty Years*, 115–116.

**Chapter 3: A Few Good Men (and Women)**


4. Ibid.


7. RIETS merged with Etz Chaim Yeshiva in 1915 and later became known as Yeshiva University. It grew to include a high school division, undergraduate schools for men and women, a teachers’ college, and multiple graduate and professional schools.

8. MMKJ, October 3, 1914.

9. Ibid.

154. For a somewhat different take on the purpose of the Menorah Society see Seth Korelitz, “The Menorah Idea: From Religion to Culture, from Race to Ethnicity,” AJH 85 (March 1997), 75–100, esp. 79–82. Note Korelitz’s view that Menorah was not a purely academic group and his contention that the Menorah idea was similar to philosopher Horace Kallen's conception of cultural pluralism. Kallen was an early member of the original Menorah Society at Harvard.


12. LB, 3.


15. Lebow, Bright Boys, 29, 35. Quote on 29.


18. LB, 7. On Samuel Dushkin see “Samuel Dushkin, 82, Violinist and Introducer of New Works,” NYT, June 26, 1976. Dushkin’s other brother, David, was also a musician, who operated the School of Musical Arts and Crafts in Winnetka, Ill. He later opened the Kinhaven Music School in Weston, Vermont.

19. Quoted in LB, 8, n. 6. Roosevelt’s oft-quoted line from his speech at the 1918 Republican Convention is: “There can be no fifty-fifty Americanism in this country. There is room here only for 100 percent Americanism, only for those who are Americans, and nothing else.” It is worth noting that the context of the speech was America’s involvement in World War I and the fear of dual loyalties among German Americans. Nevertheless, “100 percent Americanism” became a rallying cry for groups that equated successful immigrant absorption with the shedding of ethnic identity and/or altogether opposed immigration of non-Anglo-Saxon groups. For the entire text of Roosevelt’s speech see, “Speed Up the War, Roosevelt’s Text,” NYT, July 19, 1918, 6.


22. MMKJ, October 3, 1914.

23. LB, 5, 8–9.

24. Ibid., 9.


29. Ibid., 9–12.
30. Magnes to Benderly, October 23, 1912, folder 1668, JLMP, CAHJP; MMKJ, August 24, 1914.
32. Berkson’s given first name was Isadore, which he used on all official documents. His Hebrew name however was Yitzhak Dov, and he commonly went by Isaac Baer or simply “I. B.” Close friends and family called him Bill or Billy.
35. IBBJE, 8, 17.
38. Hajnalka Winer to Alexander Dushkin, April 16, 1945, folder 127, ADP, CAHJP.
40. In fact, at least one of his “girls,” Rebecca Bricker, did attend Teachers College.
42. Schwartz, “Rebecca Aaronson Brickner,” 71.
43. Samson Benderly to Rebecca Brickner, February 7, 1927; Samson Benderly to Rebecca Brickner, April 18, 1921; Samson Benderly to Rebecca Brickner, May 13, 1921, box 6, folder 2, BRBP, AJA.
44. IBBJE, 57–62.
46. Albert Schoolman, “Some Footprints on the Paths of Jewish Education in the United States during the Twentieth Century,” unfinished memoir; Albert Schoolman, handwritten biographical notes, n.d., box 1, folder 8, SFP, AJHS.
48. Ibid., 69–70.
52. Samuel Dinin, “Samson Benderly—Educator,” JE 20 (Summer 1949), 34; “Minutes of the
Meeting of the Trustees of the Bureau of Jewish Education, September 19, 1912,” folder 1667, JLMP, CAHJP; IBBJE, 18. Those who earned Ph.D.s included Samuel Margoshes (1916), Alexander Dushkin (1918), Isaac Berkson (1919), Emanuel Gamoran (1924), Leo Honor (1926), Jacob Golub (1928), Mordecai Soltes (1928), and Mervin Isaacs (1933). Rabbi Barnett Brickner, who received two master’s degrees from Columbia University (1914), earned his Ph.D. at the University of Cincinnati (1935). Julius Drachsler, who worked in the Bureau’s short-lived School of Jewish Communal Work, received his doctorate from Columbia University’s Department of Political Science in 1921. Among Benderly’s later disciples who received Ph.D.s were Samuel Dinin (Columbia University, 1933), David Rudavsky (New York University, 1945), and Abraham Gannes (Dropsie College, 1952).

53. MMKJ, October 4, 1914.

54. LB, 10, 12.


56. Israel Friedlaender to Solomon Schechter, January 24, 1912; Solomon Schechter to Israel Friedlaender, February 15, 1912; Israel Friedlaender to Cyrus Adler, June 7, 1915, quoted in PD, 130–131.

57. MMKJ, October 4, 1914.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. MMKJ, October 4, 1914.

61. MMKJ, February 20, 1915; May 5, 1915; IBBJE, 22. According to Kaplan, the enrollment in the first “special class” at TI included Aaronson, Berkson, Brickner, Chipkin, Dushkin, Honor, Isaacs, and Ben Rosen.

62. Kaplan’s Teachers College course attracted sixteen students, most of whom were associated with the Bureau, and was repeated the following academic year along with a class in postbiblical literature.

63. MMKJ, May 5, 1915; October 31, 1915; June 29, 1916.


65. LB, 15; NYJ, 119.


67. MMKJ, February 14, 1915.


71. JCh (November 30, 1917).

72. JCh (December 7, 1917).
73. Rebecca Brickner to Barnett Brickner, April 25, 1932, and April 26, 1932, box 10, folder 5, BRBP, AJA.
74. IBBJE, 123; Sue Rosen to Ben Rosen, October 29, 1932, box 37, folder 20, SFP, AJHS.
75. Libbie Berkson to Alexander and Julia Dushkin, January 28, 1929, folder 4, ADP, CAHJP; Rebecca Brickner to Barnett Brickner, July 8, 1932, box 10, folder 5, BRBP, AJA; LB, 37–41, 47–53.
76. LB, 29; Libbie Berkson to Alexander and Julia Dushkin, January 28, 1929, folder 4, ADP, CAHJP; Rebecca Brickner to Barnett Brickner, May 17, 1932, box 10, folder 5, BRBP, AJA.
77. Rebecca Brickner to Barnett Brickner, May 25, 1932, box 10, folder 5, BRBP, AJA; Sue Rosen to Ben Rosen, October 29, 1932, box 37, folder 20, SFP, AJHS.
78. Isaac Berkson, quoted in IBBJE, 172, 174.
79. FH, 117–118; Rebecca Brickner to Barnett Brickner, April 12, 1932, box 10, folder 5, BRBP, AJA; LB, 41–47; Kaplan quoted in Noam Pianko, Zionism and the Roads not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 117. On Kaplan’s conception of nationalism and its relationship to his understanding of Judaism as a civilization see Pianko’s entire chapter on Kaplan, 95–133.
80. LB, 45–46.
81. Rebecca Brickner to Barnett Brickner, April 22, 1932, box 10, folder 5, BRBP, AJA; Israel Chipkin to Leo Honor, December 30, 1937, LLHP, PJAC.
82. Julia Dushkin to Albert and Bertha Schoolman, November 4, 1935, box 4, folder 9, SFP, AJHS.
83. Israel Chipkin to Isaac Berkson, April 4, 1934, box 23, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA; Alexander Dushkin to Isaac Berkson, April 18, 1932, folder 9, ADP, CAHJP.

Chapter 4: The Struggle for a Modern School System

4. Benderly, “Introduction,” 4–5; Hyman Grinstein, “The Memoirs and Scrapbooks of Dr. Joseph Isaac Bluestone of New York City,” PAJHS 35 (1939), 61–62; Hurwitz quoted in Handler, “Yisud Agudat Ha-Minahelim,” 42. Grinstein asserts that the Central Board was formed in 1905, but Alexander Dushkin points out that this first effort was abortive. See JENYC, 93. The Central Board may be the same organization that Jeffrey Gurock claims was initiated by board members of the Uptown Talmud Torah in 1908. See WHWJ, 103.
6. Ibid.
17. The original affiliates were the Downtown Talmud Torah, the School of Biblical Instruction, the Uptown Talmud Torah, and the Rabbi Israel Salanter Talmud Torah. JENYC, 109.
20. JENYC, 318; Israel Friedlaender, “Report of the Committee on Education,” Jewish Community (Kehillah) of New York City Third Annual Report (1912), 31, box 1607, LMP, AJA.
21. NYJ, 105; Magnes to Warburg, February 13, 1913, box 164, folder 11, FWP, AJA.
22. Benderly to Marshall, April 22, 1914; Benderly to Schiff, April 14, 1914, box 1607, LMP, AJA.
25. Hyman Enelow to Samson Benderly, December 10, 1914; Samson Benderly to Hyman Enelow, December 11, 1914, box 2, folder 4, HEP, AJA.
26. Samson Benderly to Hyman Enelow, December 11, 1913; Samson Benderly to Hyman Enelow, February 6, 1914; Samson Benderly to Hyman Enelow, March 24, 1914; Hyman Enelow to Samson Benderly, December 15, 1914, box 2, folder 4, HEP, AJA.
27. Falk Younker to Hyman Enelow, February 25, 1914, box 440, folder 6, JSP, AJA; Samson Benderly to Hyman Enelow, January 28, 1914; Hyman Enelow to Samson Benderly, February 5, 1914; Samson Benderly to Hyman Enelow, February 6, 1914, box 2, folder 4, HEP, AJA.
29. Benderly to Magnes, March 9, 1910, 112.
32. Benderly to Magnes, June 21, 1916; Benderly, Aims and Activities, 107; Jewish Communal
Register, 371; “Report of Fifth Annual Convention of the League of Jewish Youth of America,” n.d. (c. 1921), JLMP, folder 1698, CAHJP. In the mid-1910s, Leah Klepper served as principal of girls’ school no. 2, and Sarah Solomon supervised girls’ school no. 5. Libbie Suchoff coordinated the League for the Jewish Youth of America from 1917 to 1921. It is unclear whether Benderly would have felt equally comfortable appointing women to supervisory positions in coeducational or boys’ schools. Women supervisors working at the Bureau were generally confined to so-called softer departments such as early childhood, the arts, and extension education. Compare this with the position of women in public education. See David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 180–201. Note Tyack and Hansot’s observation that women often acquiesced to sexual inequities because they bought into normative gender-based assumptions about female competencies and the impropriety of married women in the workforce (191–193).

33. Benderly, Aims and Activities, 102.
34. Ibid., 107–108; JENYC, 107, 112–114.
37. JENYC, 157, 250–253, 432, 437.
39. MMKJ, June 1915.
40. The Bureau was able to keep per capita costs artificially low because it did not pay for rent or upkeep of the buildings in which its classes were housed. In 1918, Alexander Dushkin estimated the typical annual per capita cost of Hebrew high school education at about $50. JENYC, 234.
41. Benderly to Magnes, June 21, 1916; Benderly to Judge Irving Lehman, May 24, 1918, folder 1690, JLMP, CAHJP.
42. Benderly to Magnes, June 21, 1916; Israel Friedlaender, “The Problem of Judaism in America,” reprinted in Past and Present: A Collection of Jewish Essays (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing Co., 1919), 390–391. Rebecca Brickner tells of a similar recruitment effort that she and Suchoff undertook on behalf of the League of the Jewish Youth of America (see below). It is not clear whether these were two separate scouting initiatives or Brickner’s memory was faulty. See Brickner, “As I Remember Dr. Benderly,” 58.
43. In the third year, prospective Sunday school teachers continued their study of Bible and liturgy while also studying pedagogy. The club leader track offered supervised fieldwork and courses in storytelling and the teaching of singing, dancing, sewing, and art. The social workers were trained in sociology, psychology, and organizational dynamics, and provided internships at Jewish communal institutions. Berkson, “A System of Jewish Education for Girls,” 107–111.
44. Benderly to Schiff, February 10, 1914.
46. The policy proved to be a mixed blessing, in part because it was burdensome to some teachers, including Kaplan, but mainly because it inhibited students from expressing sophisticated ideas in their classes. Mel Scult, Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 113–114, 120–121.
47. Brickner, “As I Remember Dr. Benderly,” 56; Zevi Scharfstein, Forty Years in America, 173.
50. Benderly to Magnes, March 9, 1910, 111.
52. Judah Magnes, Notes on Girls Schools, n.d., folder 1706, JLMP, CAHJP.
55. Ibid., pp. 784–786.
56. Ibid., pp. 785, 790–791.

Chapter 5: The Organization of a Jewish Education Profession


8. Isaac Berkson interview with Arthur Goren, October 28, 1965, AJCOHC.


11. MMKJ, July 28, 1919; July 27, 1920; *LB*, 59. There is a discrepancy between Kaplan’s journal and Dushkin’s memoir on the timing of Benderly’s business ventures. My account follows Kaplan’s chronology.


13. Berkson to Dushkin, March 17, 1921; Berkson to Dushkin, January 2, 1922, folder 8, ADP, CAHJP.


18. Judah Magnes, “Memorandum on Conversation with Dr. Dushkin,” October 27, 1921, folder 1702, JLMP, CAHJP; Dushkin to Magnes, October 30, 1921, folder 8, ADP, CAHJP; *LB*, 56; MMKJ, May 5, 1921; May 6, 1921; May 9, 1921; May 12, 1921.

19. Berkson to Dushkin, March 17, 1921; Magnes to Benderly, August 14, 1921, folder 1682, JLMP, CAHJP.


21. Berkson to Dushkin, January 2, 1922; *LB*, 47–55; Dushkin to Magnes, October 30, 1921; Judah Magnes, “Memorandum of Conversation with Dr. Benderly,” November 7, 1921, folder 1682, JLMP, CAHJP; Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Temporary Organization Committee for Jewish Education, November 1, 1921, box 1, folder 2, BJENYP, AJA.

22. Berkson to Dushkin, January 2, 1922, folder 9; Berkson to Dushkin, March 17, 1921, folder 8, ADP, CAHJP. A fourth mentor, Israel Friedlaender, was murdered on a relief mission to the Ukraine in 1920.
23. Felix Warburg to Judah Magnes, May 28, 1920, folder 1685; Israel Unterberg draft letter to Arthur Lehman, April 5, 1921, folder 1733, JLMP, CAHJP.

24. Minutes of JEA Executive Committee, March 12, 1924; Minutes of JEA Executive Committee, April 22, 1924; Minutes of JEA Executive Committee, June 26, 1924, box 1, folder 5, BJENYP, AJA; LB, 54–55.

25. Berkson to Dushkin, January 2, 1922; Magnes, “Memorandum of Conversation with Dr. Benderly.”


31. Ibid., 70–71, 111–112, 161–167; Ackerman, “From Past to Present,” 142.

32. Hurwich, Memoirs of a Jewish Educator, 103, 179; Ackerman, “From Past to Present,” 147, 152. In his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, Jonathan Sarna suggested that Boston’s relatively high percentage of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants might have made it particularly amenable to Hurwich’s approach.


34. Ibid., 52, 185–187.


40. Originally, the Federation agreed to construct a total of six educational buildings along a similar center model. But this ambitious plan was a casualty of the Depression.

41. Jacob Billikopf to Louis Levinthal, September 9, 1927, box 1, folder 6; “Minutes of Committee of Fifteen,” June 8, 1925, box 5, folder 11; Julius Greenstone, “A Turning Point in Jewish Education in Philadelphia,” Bikkurim, June 1954, box 8, folder 8, United Hebrew Schools and Yeshivos Papers, PJAC.

42. Ben Rosen to Billikoff, October 29, 1929, box 8, folder 10, United Hebrew Schools and Yeshivos Papers, PJAC; Hurwich, Memoirs of a Jewish Educator, 172–175.

43. Ben Rosen to Jacob Billikopf, February 23, 1927, box 1, folder 6, United Hebrew Schools and Yeshivos Papers, PJAC.


45. Ben Rosen, “Recent Surveys of Jewish Education,” JE 2 (June 1930), 87–88; Ben Rosen, “Jewish Education in Philadelphia—1936,” JE 9 (April–June 1937), 63; Ben Rosen, “A Study of Turnover in the Elementary Schools of the Associated Talmud Torahs, 1936–1939,” box 5, folder 13, United Hebrew Schools and Yeshivos Papers, PJAC. It is useful to remember that the Jewish school system was voluntary and that even the public schools, with their mandatory attendance laws, suffered from student attrition. According to one study of Philadelphia’s public school system during the 1930s, where attendance was mandatory until age 17, 91 percent of students graduated from eighth grade, while only a third graduated from high school.


48. Louis Cahn to Alexander Dushkin, July 2, 1923; Alexander Dushkin to Louis Cahn, July 12, 1923, folder 10, ADP, CAHJP. Dushkin was recommended to Cahn by sociologist Julius Drachsl, a friend and former Bureau colleague.

49. Alexander Dushkin to Isaac Berkson, June 5, 1923, folder 10, ADP, CAHJP; LB, 90.


51. Dushkin to Benderly, November 6, 1923.

52. Alexander Dushkin to Samson Benderly, April 3, 1924, folder 11; Dushkin, “Jewish Education in Chicago, 1924,” ADP, CAHJP.

53. HJEC, 144–145, 159–160; Dushkin to Benderly, June 27, 1926, folder 14, ADP, CAHJP.
56. Harry Bricker and Simon Marcson, *Jewish Education in Chicago* (Chicago: Jewish Charities of Chicago, 1940), 107; Benderly to Dushkin, November 12, 1923, folder 10, ADP, CAHJP; *LB*, 77–78.
58. DCAJEC, 59–60; Honor quoted in *HJEC*, 147.
59. DCAJEC, 60–63.
60. *HJEC*, 147.
61. *LB*, 78, n. 5.
62. Jacob Golub to Leo Honor, April 28, 1936; Jacob Golub to Leo Honor, April 30, 1936, box 2, “Correspondence of Special Interest, 1919–1945,” LLHP, PJAC.
63. Daniel Elazar, “The National Cultural Movement in Hebrew Education in the Mississippi Valley,” in Alan Mintz, ed., *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 129–154. The fortunes of various schools were often a result of happenstance, although Elazar pointed out that the majority of the *maskilim* were of Lithuanian origin and plausibly suggested that those cities with higher concentrations of Lithuanian Jews tended to have better schools.
67. Henry Slonimsky to Alexander Dushkin, May 19, 1922, folder 9, ADP, CAHJP.
70. Gamoran, “Recent Tendencies in Education and Their Application to the Jewish School.”
71. Samuel Schulman to George Zepin, February 29, 1924, box 46, folder 8, UAHC Papers, AJA; Samuel Schulman to Emanuel Gamoran, March 19, 1924, Emanuel Gamoran Collection, AJA; Samuel Schulman to David Philipson, March 19, 1924, box 2, folder 1, David Philipson Papers, AJA.
73. Louis Wolsey to Emanuel Gamoran, July 22, 1930; Louis Wolsey to Emanuel Gamoran, August 26, 1930, SC-3857, EGP, AJA.
74. Emanuel Gamoran to Louis Wolsey, September 5, 1930, SC-3857, EGP, AJA.
75. Emanuel Gamoran to Louis Egelson, January 1, 1935, SC-3854, EGP, AJA.
76. Emanuel Gamoran to George Zepin, January 11, 1935; Ephraim Frisch to George Zepin, January 16, 1934; Irving Reichert to George Zepin, December 31, 1934, SC-3854, EGP, AJA.
77. Jerome Mark to Louis Egelson, January 9, 1935; Emanuel Gamoran to George Zepin, January 11, 1935, SC-3854, EGP, AJA.
78. Samson Benderly, Aims and Activities of the Bureau of Education of the Jewish Community (Kehillah) of New York, 1912, issued as publication no. 5 of the Bureau of Education, reprinted in JE 20 (Summer 1949) 106.
83. FH, 133.
87. Samson Benderly to Alexander Dushkin, May 22, 1925, folder 12, ADP, CAHJP.
88. Samson Benderly to Alexander Dushkin, September 21, 1925, folder 12; Alexander Dushkin to Isaac Berkson, November 2, 1925; Samson Benderly to Alexander Dushkin, March 12, 1925; Samson Benderly to Alfred Sachs, April 3, 1925; Samson Benderly to Alexander Dushkin, May 8, 1925; Jewish Education News Proposal, n.d., folder 13, ADP, CAHJP; LB, 90.
89. LB, 90; Benderly to Dushkin, May 8, 1925; Samson Benderly to Alexander Dushkin, March 5, 1926, folder 2; Alexander Dushkin to Samson Benderly March 8, 1926, folder 14, ADP, CAHJP.
91. Ibid., 5–19.
92. Ibid., 3–4.
93. Benderly to Dushkin, March 5, 1926.
94. Dushkin to Benderly March 8, 1926.
95. HJE, 160; LB, 89–90.
Chapter 6: Progress under Threat

2. Israel Unterberg, “A Year of Progress in the Face of Difficulties,” Jewish Education Record 2 (December 1930); Israel Chipkin to Leo Honor, July 8, 1931, box 22, folder 4, BJENYP, AJA.
3. Israel Chipkin to Ben Rosen, September 28, 1931; Israel Chipkin to Leo Honor, October 5, 1931, box 22, folder 4, BJENYP, AJA.
4. Israel Chipkin to Samuel Rottenberg, October 21, 1931, box 22, folder 4, BJENYP, AJA.
9. Bessie Evans to JEA Budget Committee, July 29, 1933, box 22, folder 4, BJENYP, AJA.
10. S. Blank, J. Levitsky, S. Pitlik, et al. to Ben Rosen, September 19, 1930, box 1, folder 6, United Hebrew Schools and Yeshivos Papers, PJAC.
11. Chipkin to Honor, October 5, 1931.
12. Leo Honor to Israel Chipkin, n.d. (c. October 1931), box 22, folder 4, BJENYP, AJA.
13. Israel Chipkin to Albert Schoolman, July 29, 1932, box 22, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.
14. Ibid.
15. Albert Schoolman to Israel Chipkin, August 10, 1932; Israel Chipkin to Albert Schoolman, August 17, 1932; Israel Chipkin to Albert Schoolman, August 31, 1932, box 22, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.
17. LB, 84–87.
18. Alexander Dushkin to Samuel Goldsmith, March 6, 1933, folder 112, ADP, CAHJP; Alexander Dushkin, “The Jewish Charities and Jewish Education,” address to the Annual Meeting of the Chicago Board of Jewish Education, January 14, 1931, folder 1, ADP, CAHJP; Louis Cahn, “Statistical Statement of Activities and Finances of the Chicago Board of Jewish Education,” delivered at the annual Meeting of the Board of Jewish Education, January 14, 1931, folder 1, ADP, CAHJP.
19. LB, 76, 96–100; Alexander Dushkin to Gerson Levi, January 22, 1928, folder 3, ADP, CAHJP.
20. Dushkin, “The Jewish Charities and Jewish Education.”
21. DCAJEC, 51–52; Alexander Dushkin to Samuel Goldsmith, October 11, 1932, folder 107, ADP, CAHJP.
22. Dushkin, “The Jewish Charities and Jewish Education”; Alexander Dushkin, “Jewish Education—a Community Responsibility,” radio talk delivered over station WMAQ, April 5, 1932, folder 1, ADP, CAHJP.

23. Dushkin to Berkson, June 25, 1931; Louis Cahn to Alexander Dushkin, July 13, 1931; Dushkin to Berkson, February 4, 1931, folder 6, ADP, CAHJP; DCAJEC, 48.


25. Chicago Rabbinic Association Resolution on Jewish Education and the Jewish Charities, n.d. (c. Fall 1932), folder 109, ADP, CAHJP.

26. Petition of the Staff of the Board of Jewish Education to James Davis, November 2, 1932; Alexander Dushkin to Maurice Karpf, November 21, 1932, folder 109, ADP, CAHJP.

27. Alexander Dushkin to James Davis, unsent letter, January 3, 1933, folder 112, ADP, CAHJP.

28. Alexander Dushkin to Isaac Berkson, January 9, 1933, folder 112; Isaac Berkson to Alexander Dushkin, December 5, 1932, folder 107, ADP, CAHJP.

29. Berkson to Dushkin, December 5, 1932.

30. Samuel Goldsmith to Alexander Dushkin, March 3, 1933, folder 107, ADP, CAHJP.

31. Ibid.; Berkson to Dushkin, December 5, 1932; Maurice Karpf to Alexander Dushkin, January 19, 1932, folder 109, ADP, CAHJP; Samson Benderly, “Statement Concerning the Relation of the Problem of Jewish Religious Education in NYC to the Federation of Contributors to Philanthropic Institutions,” May 5, 1916, folder 1429, JLMP, CAHJP.

32. Karpf to Dushkin, January 19, 1932.

33. LB, 86.


41. “Judaism as a Civilization”—Panel Discussion,” 159, 166.


43. Ibid., 133.

45. “Statement of the Jewish Teachers’ Association with Regard to Its Participation in the May Day Parade of 1936,” May 12, 1936, box 1, folder 6, Abraham H. Friedland Papers, AJA; Israel Rappaport to Israel Chipkin, June 15, 1933, folder 107, ADP, CAHJP.


52. Karpf to Dushkin, January 19, 1932.


55. George Rabinoff to Samuel Grand, September 30, 1941; Israel Chipkin to George Rabinoff, October 8, 1941, folder “Chipkin II,” LLHP, PJAC.

56. Israel Chipkin to Leo Honor, October 8, 1941; Leo Honor to Israel Chipkin, November 5, 1940; Leo Honor to Israel Chipkin, October 9, 1941, folder “Chipkin II,” LLHP, PJAC.


**Part II: Jewish Learning for Jewish Living**


2. Ibid.


Chapter 7: Education as Enculturation

2. JCh 5 (January 18, 1918).
3. JCh 1 (August 1, 1912); JCh 1 (August 30, 1912); JCh 1 (September 15, 1912); JCh 1 (November 13, 1912).
4. JCh 1 (August 30, 1912); JCh 1 (October 30, 1912); JCh 1 (February 6, 1913); JCh 2, (June 5, 1914); JCh 5 (May 18, 1917); JCh 5 (August 10, 1917).
5. JCh 1 (August 30, 1912); JCh 2 (May 1914); JCh 2 (June 1914); JENYC, 116.
6. JCh 1 (October 2, 1912); JCh (November 13, 1912); JCh (November 29, 1912).
7. Samson Benderly to Alexander Dushkin, March 12, 1925, folder 13, ADP, CAHJP.
8. Ibid.
9. FH, 41–43, 57.
17. BCAB, 151, 154.
18. Ibid., 84; JCh 6 (August 16, 1918); Israel Chipkin, “Dr. Samson Benderly, Reminiscences and Reflections,” JE 20 (Summer 1949), 23; Maurice Samuel, “The Awakening of the Jewish Youth of America,” n.d. (1917), folder 1696, JLMP, CAHJP.
20. BCAB, 49–51, 135, 148–149; JCh 6 (August 16, 1918); JCh 6 (August 23, 1918); Samuel, “The Awakening of the Jewish Youth of America.”
21. BCAB, 176, 185; Brownsville District Office Card, League of the Jewish Youth of America, folder 1697, JLMP, CAHJP.
22. Israel Goldfarb and Samuel E. Goldfarb, eds., The Jewish Songster (Brooklyn: Congregation Beth Israel Anshe Emes, 1918), 24, 55.
23. Jewish Circle 6 (August 16, 1918).
24. Ibid.; JCh 6 (August 30, 1918).
25. JCh 6 (November 15, 1918). Dillon’s last name appeared as Dellon in some newspaper accounts. On the controversy surrounding her death, see Gil Ribak’s unpublished paper, “Murdered in a Fight for the Jewish Flag: The Death of 13-year-old Sadie Dellon and the Images of Irish Americans among Jewish Immigrants in New York City,” delivered at the 40th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, December 2008.


29. By the mid-1920s, the Zionist orientation of both the League and Circle became so fundamental that they were renamed Hanotim (the Planters) and Habonim (the Builders) and reconceived as purely Zionist youth movements, calling into question the rationale for the separation between Young Judaea and the Bureau movements. See Soltes, “Dr. Benderly’s Projects in Extension Education,” 31–32.


Chapter 8: The Jewish School Curriculum and the Limits of Progressive Reform


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


11. Ibid., 27.


15. See, for example, Jacob Golub, “Ha-Shitah Ha-Individualitat,” SH (old series) 4 (April 1928), 27–33; Hirsch Gordon, “Ha-Shitah Ha-Proyektivit,” SH (old series) 1 (June–July 1925), 13–20; (October–November 1925), 14–19; (February–March 1926), 18–34.


18. William Heard Kilpatrick, The Project Method: The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educa-


27. TSPAE, 220; Berkson, "Some Dewey Ideas" (March 1927), 23; Beineke, And There Were Giants in the Land, 100–101; Samson Benderly, "The School Man's Viewpoint," address delivered to the UAHC, Cleveland, 1927, reprinted in JE 20 (Summer 1949), 90.

28. Although I employ it here for lack of a better translation, the word "charity" imperfectly conveys the meaning of the Hebrew word tzedakah, which is a derivation of the Hebrew root for justice. Tzedakah implies an obligation, an act of social justice, whereas charity connotes a gift freely given.


30. Ibid., 68–69.

31. Ibid., 69–73.

32. Ibid., 71–73; Mahanenu (1934), box 1, folder 29; "Keren Ami Fund of the CJI Talmud Torah and the CJI Camps: Collections and Disbursements for the Years 1927 thru 1932," box 4, folder 4, JAP, RATC.


34. See, for example, Dorothy and David Explore Jewish Life (Cincinnati: UAHC, 1938); Dorothy Alofsin, The Stream of Jewish Life (Cincinnati: UAHC, 1943); Deborah Pessin, Michael Turns the Globe (Cincinnati: UAHC, 1946); Ben Edidin, Jewish Community Life in America (Hebrew Publishing Co., 1947).

36. For a more in-depth treatment of the individual method, especially the experiments in Winnetka and at the Dalton School, see TSPAE, 295–298, and Tyack and Cuban, Tinkering Towards Utopia, 94–97.


43. Jacob Golub, In the Days of the Second Temple (Cincinnati: UAHC, 1929); Jacob Golub, Israel in Canaan (Cincinnati: UAHC, 1930); Jacob Golub, In the Days of the First Temple (Cincinnati: UAHC, 1931).


45. Ibid.


50. Adele Berlin, Marc Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds., The Jewish Study Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 380. The emblem typically appears on the Jewish Home Institute’s published materials. See, for example, the cover of After You—What?


52. General Guide for Associate Teacher: Jewish Home Institute Festival Course (New York: Bureau of Jewish Education, 1927), 3–5, box 64, folder 5, BJENYP, AJA.

53. Ibid., 7; Jerry Kirkpatrick, Montessori, Dewey and Capitalism: Educational Theory for a Free Market in Education (Claremont, Calif.: TLJ Books, 2008), 64, 107–108; Margery Franklin,

54. The weekly assignment guides and supporting educational materials of the Jewish Home Institute’s Festival Course are preserved in box 64 of the BJENYP, at the AJA.

55. This Aramaic idiom is an adaptation from the words of the *Yekum Purkan* prayer from the Sabbath liturgy. Dushkin might have been quoting from a song that was traditionally sung to a new father in synagogue upon news of the birth of his child. I am indebted to Devora Steinmetz for this derivation.


59. Ibid.


**Chapter 9: The Central Jewish Institute**

1. Previous accounts of the Central Jewish Institute include *NYJJ*, 125–133, and *SPSC*, 153–159. See also Miriam Heller Stern’s excellent dissertation, “‘Your Children—Will They Be Yours?’ Educational Strategies for Jewish Survival, the Central Jewish Institute, 1916–1944” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2007), which appeared after this chapter was completed.


4. *MMKJ*, June 20, 1916; Minutes, Ninth Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors, January 13, 1927; Benderly to Schoolman, November 20, 1922, SFP, AJHS; *SPSC*, 154.


22, 1918; Jacob Rubin, “Report of the President,” February 24, 1918; Isaac Cohen, “Report to the Board of Directors at the Tenth Anniversary,” November 20, 1927, SFP, AJHS.


12. “The Central Jewish Institute,” AH, February 22, 1918. While the article ran without Schoolman’s byline, it was later included in a collection of his essays.


15. Cohen, Jacob H. Schiff, 224–237. By mid-1917 Schiff was engaged in serious discussions with Zionist leaders about points of affinity and mutual cooperation. While Schiff never joined the Zionist Organization of America and retained his dogged opposition to political Zionism, he greeted the Balfour Declaration and became increasingly sympathetic to the aims of cultural Zionism.

16. Felix Warburg, “Address,” February 24, 1918, SFP, AJHS.


20. Board Meeting Minutes (stenographic version), December 12, 1926; CJI Promotional Pamphlet, 1943; CJI Souvenir Booklet, 1920, SFP, AJHS.


23. Ibid., 100–102.


25. Ibid., 269, 276, 277.

26. TA, 103.

27. Ibid., 90.


29. TA, 107, 185–187.

30. Ibid., 210, 212, 213.


33. *TA*, 104, 183-184. Kaplan’s bitter experience at the Jewish Center seemed to bear out Berkson. But in the long run, the synagogue center idea proved to be far more enduring than the school center. See *SPSC*, 163, where Kaufman refers to the story of CJI as “a lost chapter in the history of the American Jewish community.”

34. *TA*, 109. For Friedlaender’s perspective on Ahad Ha-Am see “Ahad Ha’am,” in *Past and Present*, 399–422.


36. Berkson, “The Community School Center,” 224–226; Ira Kaplan, “Report of the Gymnasium Committee,” October 21, 1920, SFP, AJHS. Nevertheless, CJI’s example encouraged the Ninety-second Street Y to reconceive its role as a Jewish community center, and strengthen and increase its Jewish cultural programming. See Board Meeting Minutes, January 22, 1928, SFP, AJHS.

37. *JENYC*, 541–543; Board Meeting Minutes, March 13, 1924; October 21, 1924; November 14, 1926, SFP, AJHS. By the late 1920s, bowing to the inescapable demographic realities, critics of expanding the Institute’s extension programs had relented. But a decision to reorient the work of the Institute toward adolescents and young adults was thwarted by the Depression. See Jacob Rubin, Report of President, January 26, 1930; Isaac Cohen, “Report on Extension Activities,” December 7, 1930, SFP, AJHS.

38. The former narrative was encapsulated in “Historical Synopsis of the Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun,” printed in the program distributed at the installation of Rabbi Elias Solomon in 1919. The latter was included in Berkson’s doctoral dissertation and was recounted at CJI anniversaries and celebrations. See, for example, Transcript of CJI Tenth Anniversary Dinner, November 20, 1927, SFP, AJHS.

39. “Schi√ Urges Jews to Be Americans,” 11; H. Fischel to M. Asinof, January 21, 1927; Minutes of conference held at home of Rabbi Moses Margolies, December 19, 1927, SFP, AJHS.

40. According to the minutes, the ringleader of the opposition at KJ was Joseph Polstein. CJI’s board even tried, to little avail, to assuage Polstein’s criticism by bringing family member Isaac Polstein onto the board. Board Meeting Minutes, December 12, 1926, SFP, AJHS.

41. Board Meeting Minutes (stenographic version), January 22, 1928, SFP, AJHS.

42. Board Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1924; Board Meeting Minutes, January 22, 1928, SFP, AJHS.

43. *JT*, 225; *TA*, 187; Board Meeting Minutes, February 24, 1918; Board Meeting Minutes, March 13, 1924; Board Meeting Minutes, January 7, 1926; Board Meeting Minutes, November 12, 1925, SFP, AJHS.

44. Isolde Sommer Blum, interview with the author, February 27, 2006; Frances Abramson, interview with the author, February 24, 2006.

45. Board Meeting Minutes, December 3, 1925; Edward Epstein, “Talmud Torah Committee Report,” December 12, 1926; Board Meeting Minutes, October 14, 1928, SFP, AJHS.
47. Board Meeting Minutes, April 15, 1920; January 6, 1921; Edward Epstein, “Report of the Talmud Torah Committee,” March 8, 1921; December 8, 1921, SFP, AJHS.
49. Ibid.
51. Board Meeting Minutes, October 31, 1924, SFP, AJHS.
52. Board Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1924, SFP, AJHS.
55. TA, 196–197; “Talmud Torah Curricula,” 1922, SFP, AJHS.
56. TA, 198–200; “Talmud Torah Curricula,” 1922, SFP, AJHS.
59. The term “pedagogical progressive” is borrowed from David Tyack who, in describing the larger progressive educational reform movement, distinguished this group of child-centered advocates from administrative progressives such as George Strayer and social reformers such as George Counts and John Childs. See David B. Tyack, The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 182–198.
62. TA, 195.
64. TA, 202.
67. Albert Schoolman, “History of the Jewish People (Second Cycle),” SFP, AJHS.
68. Ibid.

70. JENYC, 276–277, 389; CJI Souvenir Booklet, February 15, 1920; “A Review of Jewish Life in the Old Home and the New Home” (Publicity Pamphlet), c. 1925, SFP, AJHS; Mary Singer, American Weekly Jewish News, November 29, 1918; MMKJ, October 8, 1928. Motivated in part by an admitted preference for teaching “the tougher human material present in the male,” Kaplan was also concerned lest the rising proportion of women further marginalize the Institute in the Jewish Theological Seminary. The father of four daughters, Kaplan admitted being influenced by his sense of being surrounded by women in all aspects of his life: “Girls in the home, girls in the school. That is too much for me.” Perhaps he viewed his male students on some level as surrogate sons.

71. CJI Souvenir Booklet, February 15, 1920; “A Review of Jewish Life in the Old Home and the New Home” (Publicity Pamphlet), c. 1925, SFP, AJHS; Singer, American Weekly Jewish News; Schoolman, “History of the Jewish People (Second Cycle).”


74. Sonny Sonnenfeld, interview with the author, February 24, 2006; Arthur Auster interview with the author, February 24, 2006.

75. Intriguingly, at the beginning of the new millennium, American Jews were witnessing a resurgence of the community approach under the guise of post- or transdenominationalism.

Chapter 10: “An Environment of Our Own Making”

1. Florence Kummel to Joan Sencer, n.d., c. 1925, reprinted in Mahanenu (Central Jewish Institute Camps, 1925), 35, box 36, folder 8, SFP, AJHS.

2. Ibid.


7. *JCh* 1 (August 19, 1912) and (August 30, 1912).

8. *JCh* 1 (August 1, 1912) and (August 19, 1912); *JCh* (June 12, 1913).

9. *JCh* 1 (August 19, 1912); Susan Addelston, correspondence with the author, July 17, 2009; Minutes of the Central Jewish Institute Board of Directors Meeting, October 21, 1920, box 35, folder 11, SFP, AJHS.

10. CJI Board Meeting Minutes, October 21, 1920; Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, February 6, 1946, box 18, folder 10; Jacob Wener, “Camp Committee Report to the Board of Directors,” October–November 1924, box 36, folder 7; Minutes of the Camp Committee, October 25, 1927, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS. Other historical accounts claim that the camp was open in Central Valley for the 1923 season while the Port Jervis site was being developed, but this is clearly contradicted by the board minutes and reports. On the pre–World War I influx of Jewish boardinghouses and hotels in Ellenville, New York, see Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 54–55.

11. Jacob Wener, “Camp Committee Report to the Board of Directors,” October–November 1924, box 36, folder 7; Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, December 12, 1938; Ira Kaplan, “Report of the President, May 21, 1940; Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, February 6, 1946, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS.


15. *LB*, 64.

16. Ibid., 63–64; Dushkin, “A. Schoolman—the Story of a Blessed Life,” 74; Albert Schoolman to Jacob Rubin, April 23, 1923, box 36, folder 13, SFP, AJHS. On the Jewish Education Association see chapter 4.


19. *IBBJE*, 87, 90; *LB*, 69; Ted Cohn, correspondence with the author, June 29, 2009. Berkson’s biographer, Henry Skirball, claims that Sam Kadison was brought into the partnership as early as 1946. But his chronology is contradicted by Cohn.

20. This perception was not entirely accurate. The Chicago and Boston bureaus, for instance, became training grounds where promising graduates of Hebrew teacher colleges were groomed for future leadership.

22. The Achvah Players were eventually organized by the Kutais into a professional company, the Theatron Hanoar, which performed in venues throughout the New York area. Gannes and Shoshuk, “The Kvutzah and Camp Achvah,” 65.


25. The growing proportion of female students relative to males was worrisome to Kaplan, who wrote in his diary of his fears that TI would become “a women’s seminary.” MMKJ, October 8, 1928.

26. Ibid.


28. MMKJ, October 8, 1928.


33. Ibid.


35. See Zola, “Jewish Camping and Its Relationship to the Organized Camping Movement,” 3–11. Zola includes the betterment of society as a distinct, fifth category, but since there is considerable overlap between this and the second and fourth categories, I have chosen to simplify his template.

36. Alvin Rosenbaum, “A Day at Camp,” n.d. (c. 1920), box 4, folder 33, JAP, RATC.

38. Albert Schoolman, “The Central Institute Camp,” n.d. (c. 1922), box 4, folder 7, JAP, RATC.
40. IBBJE, 9; Schoolman, “The Central Institute Camp”; Jacob Wener, “Report on the Central Jewish Institute Camps at the Tenth Anniversary,” November 20, 1927, box 1, folder 9, JAP, RATC. The similarities between day school and camp have more recently been elaborated by Michael Zeldin in “Making the Magic in Reform Jewish Summer Camps,” in A Place of Our Own, 92–94.
45. “M” to Schoolman, January 7, 1958, box 20, folder 17, SFP, AJHS. (The letter was redacted to shield the names of the child and his parents.)
46. Jessica Gribetz, interview with the author, July 30, 2009. Gribetz and her family attended Temple Beth El in Rockaway Park, Queens, which was led by one of the Conservative movement’s foremost leaders, Rabbi Robert Gordis.
48. Minutes of Central Jewish Institute Board of Directors Meeting, November 14, 1926; Albert Schoolman interview with Alexander Dushkin, March 25, 1962, box 1, folder 10, SFP, AJHS; Bev Cannold, interview with the author, July 30, 2009; Maggie Bernstein, interview with the author, June 22, 2009. The potential conflict between camp and home was raised in 1954 by Cejwin board
member Dr. Harold K. Addelston. But, apparently, the matter was not pursued. Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, June 9, 1954, box 18, folder 12, SFP, AJHS.


50. Martin Lazar, interview with the author, July 27, 2009; Sherry Steger, correspondence with the author, July 17, 2009; Steven Kraft, interview with the author, July 28, 2009; Berel Lang, correspondence with the author, July 14, 2009.


52. Schoolman, “The Jewish Educational Summer Camp,” 16.

53. Ibid., 19; Schoolman interview with Dushkin.

54. Albert Schoolman, “Memorandum on the Current Activities of the Central Jewish Institute,” January 6, 1921, box 35, folder 12; Minutes of the Central Jewish Institute Board of Directors Meeting, November 14, 1926, box 36, folder 9; Jacob Wener, “Report of the Camp Committee,” December 1926, box 18, folder 9, SFP, AJHS.

55. Pearl Palley to Harry Handler, Mahanenu (1925), 36.

56. Jacob Wener, “Camp Committee Report to the Board of Directors,” October–November 1924, box 36, folder 7, SFP, AJHS.


58. Ibid.; Hyman Solomon, “How Goodly Are Thy Tents, O Jacob! Camp Study Clubs,” Mahanenu (1925), 15; Dora Spiegel, “A Day at the CJI Camp,” n.d. (c. 1922) SFP, AJHS. While Spiegel’s lack of Hebrew knowledge might cause one to question the reliability of her account, it is safe to assume that the content of the class was described to her by the teacher or a chaperone.


62. Minutes of Central Jewish Institute Board of Directors Meeting, November 14, 1926.

63. Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, November 20, 1933; Jacob Wener, “President’s Report,” November 5, 1935; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting, November 12, 1935; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting, May 12, 1936, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS.

64. Donald Gribetz, interview with the author, July 27, 2009; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, February 6, 1946; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting,
December 22, 1946, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS; Berel Lang, correspondence with the author, July 14, 2009.

65. Joyce Saltman, correspondence with the author, July 13, 2009; Eleanor Dovadany, interview with the author, August 4, 2009; Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, April 12, 1954, box 18, folder 12, SFP, AJHS; Schoolman, “The Jewish Educational Summer Camp,” 16–19.


68. “Notes on Vacation Home,” n.d. (circa 1920), box 4, folder 7, JAP, RATC; Alvin Rosenbaum, “Camper Address at Board of Directors Meeting.”


72. Stern, “Your Children—Will They Be Yours?” 243; Minutes of the Central Jewish Institute Board of Directors Meeting, November 3, 1921, box 35, folder 12, SFP, AJHS; “Suggestive Steps in Preparation for the 1923 Camp,” n.d., box 4, folder 21, JAP, RATC.

73. Minutes of Conference on CJI Camps, December 13, 1922, box 4, folder 7; “Report on Camp,” n.d. (circa 1923), box 4, folder 7; Jacob Wener, Report to Women’s Auxiliary, December 15, 1923, box 4, folder 21, JAP, RATC. The Martin’s Lake property was purchased for $31,500 (in later documents the cost was incorrectly put at $35,000). By 1926, Wener estimated that CJI had spent $160,000 on the camps. Jacob Wener, “Report of the Camp Committee,” December 1926.


75. Minutes of Central Jewish Institute Board of Directors Meeting, November 12, 1925 (emphasis added).

76. Women’s Auxiliary Report, October 25, 1927, box 36, folder 9; Jacob Wener, “President’s Report,” November 11, 1934, box 18, folder 10; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting, May 3, 1937, box 18, folder 10; Jacob Wener, “Camp Committee Report to the Board of Directors, October–November 1924; Minutes of Central Jewish Institute Board Meeting, December 3, 1925, box 36, folder 7, SFP, AJHS; Albert Schoolman to Ira Kaplan, July 12, 1938, box 1, folder 17, JAP, RATC.

77. Minutes of CJI Camps Committee Meeting, October 30, 1929, box 36, folder 9; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting, November 12, 1935; Minutes of Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, November 20, 1933, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS; Susan Addelston, correspondence with the author, July 17, 2009.

79. “Instructions on Departure,” 1930, box 1, folder 10, JAP, RATC; Cejwin Camps: Through the Years (Cjejwin Camps, 1984); Gladys Kraft, correspondence with the author, July 19, 2009; Susan Addelston, correspondence with the author, July 16, 2009.


81. Minutes of CJI Camps Committee Meeting, December 20, 1928, box 36, folder 9; Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Board of Directors Meeting, March 5, 1939, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS; Ira Kaplan to Albert Schoolman, July 11, 1938; Albert Schoolman to Ira Kaplan, July 12, 1938; Ira Kaplan to Albert Schoolman, July 14, 1938, box 1, folder 17, JAP, RATC; “Menus, Week of July 10, 1932,” box 21, folder 15, SFP, AJHS.

82. Isolde Sommer Blum, interview with the author, March 7, 2006; Steve Kraft, interview with the author, July 28, 2009.

83. Joseph Loewenberg, correspondence with the author, June 23, 2009; Rebecca Greenberg Goz, correspondence with the author, July 9, 2009; Mary Schussheim to Bertha Schoolman, July 16, 1936; Isrela Schussheim to Bertha Schoolman, August 20, 1936, box 22, folder 8, SFP, AJHS; Maggie Bernstein, interview with the author, June 22, 2009.


87. Zachary Heller, correspondence with the author, June 24, 2009; Max Hausen, interview with the author, July 30, 2009.

88. Golub, “An Educational Program for Jewish Camps,” 1; Ira Kaplan to Albert Schoolman, July 11, 1938; Albert Schoolman to Ira Kaplan, July 12, 1938, box 1, folder 17, JAP, RATC.

89. Gladys Kraft, interview with the author, July 28, 2009; Helen Finck, interview with the author, July 28, 2009; Susan Addelston, correspondence with the author, July 17, 2009; Judi Sonshine, correspondence with the author, July 28, 2009; Max Hausen, interview with the author, July 30, 2009; Donald and Edith Gribetz, interview with the author, July 27, 2009.

90. Eells, History of Organized Camping, 16; BCAB, 80–81; Schoolman, “Jewish Educational Camping,” 82.


92. The Sabbath camp ritual was described by many interview subjects and also appears in previously cited published accounts about all three camps.

93. Gershon Berkson, correspondence with the author, July 4, 2009; Zachary Heller, correspondence with the author, June 24, 2009; Joyce Saltman, correspondence with the author, July 13, 2009. Informants do not agree on the species of the Torah Tree. Based on photographic evidence as well as the recollection of the current co-owner, Howie Salzberg, the tree was either an oak or a maple. After the 1991 summer season, Modin moved from Canaan to Belgrade, Maine.

95. Schoolman interview with Dushkin; Golub, “An Educational Program for Jewish Camps,” 1.

96. Donald and Edith Gribetz, interview with the author, July 27, 2009; Max Hausen, interview with the author, July 28, 2009; Judi Sonshine, correspondence with the author, July 28, 2009; Philip Levy, correspondence with the author, July 1, 2009.


100. Ibid.; Jessica Gribetz, interview with the author, July 30, 2009.

101. Rob Selden, online correspondence, March 21, 2001; Alex Witchel, “Feed Me: Childhood Was Just around the Corner,” NYT, August 23, 2006.


103. Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting, January 9, 1944, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS; Judi Sonshine, correspondence with the author, July 28, 2009.

104. Ira Kaplan, “Report to the Board of Directors Meeting,” May 26, 1942; Minutes of the Cejwin Camps Executive Committee Meeting, December 12, 1942; Harold K. Addelston, “Memorandum to Executive Committee,” January 9, 1944, box 18, folder 10, SFP, AJHS; Paris, Children’s Nature, 266.


113. E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revo-
Notes to Pages 315–322

114. CT Boys, “A Guide to Good Counselorship,” 1930, box 1, folder 9, JAP, RATC.


117. Zichronot (Deb-Herzl Yearbook), 1956, Box 22, Folder 1, SFP, AJHS; Martin Lazar, interview with the author, July 27, 2009; Zachary Heller, correspondence with the author, June 24, 2009.


120. Myles Striar, interview with the author, July 20, 2009; Ted Cohn, correspondence with the author, June 29, 2009.


122. Susan Addelston, correspondence with the author, July 17, 2009.


**Part III: Between K’lal Yisrael and Denominationalism**

1. Samuel Citron, “They Live Together through Dramatics,” *JE* 23 (Fall 1952), 49.


4. Ibid., 143–145.

**Chapter 11: Unity in Diversity?**

1. Alexander Dushkin, “Next Decade of Jewish Education in New York City,” *JE* 12 (September 1940), 68–71. See also Alexander Dushkin, “Memorandum on Implementing the Program of the New York Committee for Jewish Education,” September 18, 1939, 7, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

2. Isaac Berkson to Alexander Dushkin, February 22, 1934; Isaac Berkson to Alexander Dushkin, March 27, 1934, folder 114; Isaac Berkson to Alexander Dushkin, December 4, 1935; Maurice Karpf to Alexander Dushkin, December 5, 1935, folder 143, ADP, CAHJP.

3. Isaac Berkson to Albert Schoolman, August 20, 1936, box 22, folder 8, SFP, AJHS; IBBJE, 193.


5. There is disagreement in the sources as to whether the $1 million Friedsam Fund gift to Jewish education represented the entirety of the estate or only one-third of its value. Bernard Semel, who participated on the organizing committee and signed the survey report, insisted that Burke divided the money between Jews, Protestants, and Catholics. Dushkin asserted, however, that “the bulk of the estate” would be earmarked for “Jewish religious education.” In his institutional study of the JEC, Nathaniel Entin insisted that Semel’s view was mistaken; the Friedsam Fund was allocated entirely to the JEC. My review of the JEC minutes, as well as contemporaneous newspaper accounts, supports Entin’s view. See “Minutes of the Executive Committee of the JEA,” June 4, 1936; *LB*, 144; and *JCEEn*, 26–27. See also Noah Nardi, “The Jewish Education Committee of New York,” in *JB*, 314.


7. See Dushkin, “Memorandum on Implementing the Program of the New York Committee for Jewish Education,” 7, and “Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Directors of the JEC, Inc.,” October 11, 1939, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.


9. See Dushkin, “Memorandum on Implementing the Program of the New York Committee for Jewish Education,” 7, and “Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Directors of the JEC, Inc.,” October 11, 1939.

10. New York Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies (5 appointees); the Brooklyn Federation (3 appointees); the Jewish Education Association (5 appointees); and
the Friedsam Foundation (5 appointees). The community at large also held 9 seats on the board. Later on, while this balance was officially maintained, the board became mostly self-perpetuating.


12. JEC Minutes, June 26, 1939; LB, 147. For a somewhat different but more in-depth take on Rosenman see JECEn, 144–150.

13. JEC Board of Directors Minutes, September 21, 1939, and October 11, 1939, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

14. JEC Board of Directors Minutes, October 11, 1939; Hexter approached Albert Schoolman to discuss Dushkin’s suitability and availability for the position and later negotiated terms with Dushkin. But the actual offer was made by another Federation member who served on the JEC board, Dr. Solomon Lowenstein. See LB, 145–146; Schoolman, “Dr. Alexander M. Dushkin at Eighty: Some Intimate Behind-Scene Experiences,” JE 41 (Summer 1971), 51.

15. JEC Board of Directors Minutes, September 29, 1939, and October 11, 1939, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA; JECEn, 146, 151–154.


17. Ibid.


19. See Dushkin, “Next Decade of Jewish Education in New York City,” 70, 73–75. Dushkin conceived of a fifth demonstration classroom in a Yiddishist school, but the Nazionale Arbeiter Verband could not settle on an agreed-upon project with the Sholom Aleichem Volk Schulen and the Arbeiter Ring.


28. The discussion of the meetings in the following paragraphs is based on staff meeting minutes. See “Minutes of Discussion of Common Elements in Jewish Education,” September 28, 1944; November 2, 1944; November 9, 1944; November 15, 1944; and November 22, 1944, folder 50, JECP, YIVO.
32. Ibid.
34. Samuel Dinin, “The Role of Jewish Education in the Present Crisis,” JE 11 (September 1939), 103–104; Alexander Dushkin to Horace Kallen, December 26, 1939, box 16, folder 2; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, February 11, 1940, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.
38. Israel Chipkin, “War Time Changes in the Jewish School,” 3–4; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, January 7, 1942, and April 6, 1942, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.
43. “Children Proclaim Sorrow and Protest,” 6; Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest against Nazi Atrocities, program, February 22, 1943, folder 104, JECP, YIVO.
44. “Children Proclaim Sorrow and Protest,” 6; Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest against Nazi Atrocities.
46. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, January 6, 1943, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.
47. Philip Gingold and Judah Lapson to Yudel Mark, January 6, 1943, folder 104; Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Committee of the Third Annual Children’s Assembly, February 1, 1945, folder 105, JECP, YIVO. Although Vaad-affiliated schools pulled out of the assembly, Orthodox Talmud Torahs, modern Orthodox congregational schools, day schools, and the HaShomer Hadati religious Zionist youth group were amply represented.


49. Ben Edidin, “Educational News and Events,” JE 15 (September 1943), 54; various assembly programs, folders 105–106, JECP, YIVO.


51. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, February 3, 1943, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA; Third Annual Children’s Community Assembly Program, February 22, 1945.

52. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, February 3, 1943; Week of Protest and Sorrow: Outline of Program for Schools, folder 105; Philip Gingold, David Rudavsky, and Judah Lapson to the Joint Committee on the European Emergency Situation, March 22, 1943, folder 104; Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Committee of the Third Annual Children’s Assembly, February 1, 1945, folder 105; Children’s Community Assembly on the Palestine White Paper, program, February 22, 1944, folder 104, JECP, YIVO; Israel Chipkin, “The School Adoption Plan,” JE 17 (June 1946), 5, 23; Minutes of Meeting of the Committee on Postwar Reconstruction in Europe, n.d. (c. March, 1945), box 15, folder 15, BJENYP, AJA.

53. Minutes of JEC Board of Directors Meeting, March 3, 1948, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.


55. Seymour Friend, “Valedictory Address,” Sh’nathon (June 1947), Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia, PJAC.


62. Ibid., 25, Idelsohn quoted on 25; see also Abraham Z. Idelsohn, Jewish Music: Its Historical Development (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 492; D. Lapson, “They Dance Together,” 60. One
advocate of Jewish drama observed that a number of prominent Jewish leaders in the 1930s and ’40s, including Abba Hillel Silver, Barnett Brickner, and Chipkin, made their public debuts on stage in the dramatic productions of the Dr. Herzl Zion Club. Citron, “Two Projects in Educational Dramatics,” 49.


65. Dushkin’s middle brother, Samuel Dushkin, was a violinist virtuoso, and his youngest brother, David, was a leader in progressive music education who cofounded the Dushkin School of Musical Arts and Crafts in Winnetka, Ill.


67. Harry Coopersmith, “They Sing Together,” JE 23 (Fall 1952), 59.


75. JEC Holiday Records Catalog (1966), box 105, folder 37, BJENYP, AJA.

76. Minutes of the Board of Directors and Executive Committee Meetings of the JEC, Decem-
ber 12, 1945; December 4, 1946; November 5, 1947; January 7, 1948; April 7, 1948; March 9, 1949; June 29, 1949, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.


79. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, February 7, 1940, box 3, folder 1; Israel Chipkin to Alexander Dushkin, box 15, folder 7; Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger to Solomon Lowenstein, January 17, 1941, box 16, folder 3; Alexander Dushkin to Mordecai Lewittes, May 9, 1940, box 16, folder 2, BJENYP, AJA.

80. Israel Chipkin to Alexander Dushkin, April 4, 1940, box 15, folder 7; Minutes of JEC Board of Directors Meetings, June 5, 1940; December 4, 1940; April 6, 1942, box 3, folder 1; December 1, 1943, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

81. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meetings, March 5, 1941; April 16, 1941, box 3, folder 1; November 7, 1945, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.


83. “Meyer Levin Wins Silver Star for Gallantry at Coral Sea,” WO 4 (October 30, 1942), 14; “Solo Blitzer Was ‘All Thumbs’ at Home,” WO 4 (November 27, 1942), 7; “A Hero of Guadalcanal,” WO 4 (December 11, 1942), 7; “Today and Yesterday” (caption), WO 4 (March 5, 1943), 5; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, April 6, 1942, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.


86. Samuel Rosenman to Alexander Dushkin, March 13, 1940, folder 133, ADP, CAHJP.


88. Cover, WO 4 (December 11, 1942).


97. Cover, WO 6 (December 14, 1945); Cover, WO 7 (July 3, 1947).


99. Ibid.

100. See, for example, Dushkin, “Next Decade of Jewish Education in New York City,” 65–68.


104. Frank Cohen to the editors of the *Reconstructionist*, December 12, 1947, box 15, folder 12; Samuel Blumenfield to the editors of the *Reconstructionist*, n.d. (c. December 15, 1947), box 14, folder 9, BJENYP, AJA.


107. Minutes of JEC General Consultants Meeting, January 31, 1949; February 21, 1949, folder 65, JECP, YIVO.

108. Minutes of JEC General Consultants Meeting, February 7, 1949; February 14, 1949, folder 65, JECP, YIVO.


Chapter 12. Rebuilding, Renewal, and Reconciliation in the Postwar Era


9. Ibid.


17. Berkson, “Summary of Data on Enrollment,” section 2: 5–6, 21–22; Alexander Dushkin, “Next Decade of Jewish Education in New York City,” JE 12 (September 1940), 77; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, May 1, 1940; April 16, 1941; September 9, 1942, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

18. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, May 8, 1946; Minutes of JEC Committee on Budget Meeting, February 13, 1947, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

19. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, January 7, 1942, box 3, folder 1; December 12, 1945; March 13, 1947; June 11, 1947, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

20. Minutes of the JEC Staff Meeting, April 19, 1950, folder 66, JECP, YIVO.


23. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, June 11, 1947; December 3, 1947; May 8, 1946; October 2, 1946; March 13, 1947; March 18, 1948; November 3, 1948, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA; JECEn, 320.

24. *MJo*, October 1, 1940; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, October 9, 1940; December 4, 1940; January 8, 1941; February 5, 1941; September 29, 1941; February 4, 1942; March 18, 1942, box 3, folder 1; September 13, 1944; December 12, 1945, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.

25. JECEn, 173; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, April 7, 1943, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA. As principal of Herzlia, a struggling Hebrew high school, Feinstein was hardly a disinterested critic of the JEC, and his ranting could be dismissed as that of a man with a “personal axe to grind.” The New York Federation and, later, the JEC supplied virtually the entire budget for Marshaliah, the communal Hebrew high school of New York, but granted only a token subsidy to Herzliah.


27. Samuel Rosenman to Nathaniel Entin, December 7, 1971, quoted in JECEn, 176.


29. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, January 6, 1943; Alexander Dushkin to Samuel Blumenfield, March 19, 1943; Alexander Dushkin to Samuel Blumenfield, April 8, 1943; Samuel Blumenfield to Israel Chipkin, March 19, 1943, box 14, folder 9, BJENYP, AJA.

30. Samuel Blumenfield to Alexander Dushkin, March 24, 1945; Samuel Blumenfield to Alexander Dushkin, April 13, 1943; Samuel Blumenfield to Alexander Dushkin, April 29, 1943; Samuel Blumenfield to Albert Schoolman, June 4, 1943, box 14, folder 9, BJENYP, AJA; JECEn, 176; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, January 6, 1943; Nathan Belth, “Memorandum on the Creation of a Publicity Project for the JEC, n.d. (c. December 1943), box 14, folder 2, BJENYP, AJA.


32. Israel Chipkin, “Guidance and Supervisory Services,” June 2, 1940, box 3, folder 2, BJENYP, AJA; Minutes of JEC Consultants Meeting, June 7, 1944, folder 60; September 25, 1944; December 6, 1944, folder 61, JECP, YIVO.

33. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, October 3, 1945; February 6, 1946; January 26, 1949, box 4, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA; “Notes on Our Program of Supervision, January 1948, folder 78; Louis Ruffman, “Memorandum on JEC Consultation Service,” n.d. (c. 1950), folder 73A; Minutes of JEC Consultants Meeting, June 7, 1944, folder 60; September 25, 1944; December 6, 1944, folder 61; Minutes of the JEC Staff Meeting, May 2–9, 1949; June 12–29; March 7, 1950,
folder 66; “Minutes of the Consultation Service Committee,” November 14, 1955, folder 69, JECP, YIVO.


37. Alexander Dushkin, Address at the Executive Board Meeting of the JEC, April 5, 1949, typescript copy in possession of the author.

38. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, February 7, 1940; June 5, 1940, box 3, folder 1, BJENYP, AJA.


43. JECEn, 437–441.

44. NYJJ, 124.


47. NYJJ, 134, 136.


55. JECEn, 208, 210–214.

56. Dushkin, Address at the Executive Board Meeting of the JEC, April 5, 1949; Alexander Dushkin to Pincus Churgin, June 18, 1940; Joseph Lookstein to Alexander Dushkin, April 28, 1941 (with attached estimated budgets for 1940–41 and 1941–42); Jack Horden to Alexander Dushkin, May 20, 1941; Alexander Dushkin to Joseph Lookstein, September 4, 1941; Alexander Dushkin to Joseph Lookstein, October 14, 1946; Samuel Schneierson to Joseph Lookstein, November 6, 1947, box 17, folder 10, BJENYP, AJA.


58. Alexander Dushkin to Joseph Lookstein, October 5, 1944, box 17, folder 10, BJENYP, AJA.

59. Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, February 2, 1944; Minutes of the JEC Board of Directors Meeting, January 3, 1945, box 4, folder 1; Meeting of the JEC Executive Committee, April 5, 1951, box 5, folder 2, BJENYP, AJA.


62. Ibid., 147.

63. Gurock, Orthodox Jews in America, 223–224; Kramer, The Day Schools and Torah U’Mesorah, 147–148; Meeting of the JEC Executive Committee, April 5, 1951; Minutes of the JEC Executive Committee, September 11, 1951, box 5, folder 2, BJENYP, AJA.
64. Kramer, *The Day Schools and Torah U’Mesorah*, 148–149; Minutes of the Meeting of the Publications Committee, November 2, 1953, box 5, folder 4, BJENYP, AJA.


66. “Report Submitted by the Department of Yeshivot,” March 15, 1952, box 5, folder 3; Minutes of the Meeting of the JEC Committee on School Loans, October 14, 1954; Meeting of the JEC Grants Committee, October 14, 1954, box 5, folder 5, BJENYP, AJA.


71. With the Friedsam Foundation money mostly spent, the JEC affiliated with the New York Federation in 1948.


78. Woocher, Sacred Survival, 52, 59.

79. Dinin, “Central Agencies for Jewish Education,” 13–14. In the case of New York, during the 1950s the JEC provided schools, including day schools, with $50 for one out of every three scholarship cases above the first 10 percent. JECEn, 206.

80. Walter Ackerman, “Protecting the Past or Facing the Future?” JE 58 (Fall–Winter 1990), 6.


82. Harold Himmelfarb, “Jewish Education for Naught: Educating the Culturally Deprived Jewish Child,” Analysis 51 (September 1975), 259; Bernstein, To Dwell in Unity, 121.


84. Benderly, “Can a System of Jewish Education in America be Self-supporting,” JT 1 (December 1917), 207.


Conclusion


6. Ibid., 17.


philosophy see TA. Dinin himself offered the “peacemaker” characterization in an interview with


10. For an extended discussion of the evolution of the central Jewish education agency in the
United States and the Dushkin-Berkson controversy, see Abraham Gannes, Central Community


12. Alexander Dushkin to Hemdah Benderly, July 8, 1964, folder 141, ADP, CAHJP.

13. Alexander Dushkin to Albert Schoolman, December 18, 1957, box 3, folder 4; Alexander
Dushkin to Albert and Bertha Schoolman, April 19, 1968, box 3, folder 7; Albert Schoolman to
Alexander Dushkin, January 2, 1973, box 37, folder 8, SFP, AJHS. Herbert Winer, interview with
the author, November 13, 2006. Julius Drachsler, a member of the Benderly boys’ inner circle who
left Jewish education and social work for a tenure track teaching position in economics and
sociology at Smith College, died tragically of tuberculosis in 1927. On Drachsler, see his obituary
in the NYT (July 23, 1927), 13.

14. Albert Schoolman to Alexander Dushkin, March 31, 1970; Albert Schoolman to Alexander
Dushkin, January 30, 1973, box 37, folder 8, SFP, AJHS.


625–626.

17. A description of how the study was organized and designed appeared in JE’s Fall 1958 issue.
Dushkin’s recollections about his involvement in the study see his memoir, LB, 238–242.

(Autumn 1959), 4–23, 33.

(Autumn 1960), 4, 45.


21. For Benderly and his protégés, “education as adjustment” also meant tapping into the
American environment and applying the latest “educational concepts, approaches and technol-
ogy” to the Jewish school.

22. Samson Benderly, “The School Man’s Viewpoint,” address delivered to the UAHC, Cleve-


24. Ibid., 22.


Identity,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice (Waltham,

Bad news for Jewish educators came also in the form of declining enrollment statistics. In the
initial years, much of the drop was probably due to declining birthrates. But attrition could also

Notes to Pages 413–418 477
be blamed on assimilation. An AAJE census identified a 6 percent decline between 1962 and 1966, which was reported in a 1968 article. The issue did not become a major concern for educators until the 1970s. See Azriel Eisenberg, “The AAJE’s National Census of Jewish Schools,” JE 38 (June 1968), 5.

30. Bernstein, To Dwell in Unity, 108.
Index

Note: Page numbers in *italics* refer to figures.

AAJE. *See* American Association for Jewish Education
Aaronson, Rebecca. *See* Brickner, Rebecca Aaronson
Abrams, Samuel, 13
Abramson, Frances, 253
academic schedule, standardization of, 96
accommodationism, accusation of, against Benderly, 114–16
acculturation: debate on, 219; and Jewish education, 96; postwar trend toward, 8. *See also* Americanization
Ackerman, Walter: on Benderly program, 3, 6, 7, 10, 205; on central agencies, challenges facing, 379; on Central Jewish Institute, 260–61; on JEC consultation, 390–91; on Jewish education, 128, 130, 418–19
Addelston, Susan, 285, 319
Adler, Cyrus, 38, 134
*Adventures of K’tonton* (Weilerstein), 236
affordability of education, Benderly’s focus on, 113–16, 407–8
*After You—What? A Message to the Jewish Mothers of America* (Benderly), 231
Agronsky, Gershon, 85
Agudath Ha-Morim Ha-Ivrim B’Nu York V’Sevivoteha (Hebrew Teachers Union of New York and Vicinity), 47–49, 56, 177, 179, 213, 219
Agudath Morim Muvtalim (Union of Unemployed Teachers), 179
Ahad Ha-Am (Ginsberg, Asher): *Hashiloah* and, 34; influence on Benderly and group, 4, 23, 25–26, 78, 299; influence on Berkson, 245, 249, 262; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 77; on Palestine cultural center, 249
Aitz Chaim Congregation, 425n9
AJC. *See* American Jewish Committee
Akiba Academy (Philadelphia), 392
Alkabetz, Solomon Halevi, 410
Allen, Isaac, 383, 385
American, Sadia, 209
American Association for Jewish Education (AAJE), 181–83, 352–53
American Council for Judaism, 343
American Indians, playing of, in Jewish culture camps, 313–15, 314
Americanization: Benderly’s support for, 27, 35, 100, 115–16; community theory of (Berkson), 244–46; as conscious product of Jewish education, 345; critics of, 205; day schools and, 392, 393, 396; food and, 301; Jewish culture camps and, 301, 302, 312–13; JTA acceptance of, 214; Principals Association support for, 96. *See also* Jewish-American identity
Americanized Zionist youth movement, 65
American Jewish Committee (AJC), 38–39, 353
American Jewish Congress, 353
*American Jewish Year Book* of 1969, 403, 418
American Jewry, postwar responsibilities of, 352–53
American Judaism: Benderly’s faith in, 15; development of, 8, 205, 224; foundation of Israel and, 370–73; possibility of, 174. *See also* Jewish-American identity
American Palestine Company, 120–21
American School of Oriental Research, 85
Anti-Missionary League, 69
antimissionary work, 193
antisemitism: and debate on Jewish-American identity, 176; education as antidote for, 344, 353, 376; and Jewish unity, 331; responses to, 320, 353–54; stereotypes and, 315, 317, 320; in World War II period, 344, 353; youth organizations and, 202
Arabs in Palestine, attitudes toward, 87–88
archival sources, 8–9, 280
Aronin, Ben, 359
Aronson, Julia. See Dushkin, Julia Aronson
arts: in curriculum, 354–55; preservation efforts, 358–60; and unity of Jewish community, 354–60
Ashkenazi, Hakham Zvi Hirsch Benjamin Jacob, 18
Ashkenazi, Leah (mother of Samson Benderly), 18
Asinof, Morris, 46–47, 290
assimilation: Ahad Ha-Am on, 26; Benderly boys’ failure to address, 41; Benderly’s views on, 10; Central Jewish Institute opposition to, 263; and declining enrollment, 477n27; Dewey on, 4; Jewish education as effort to stem, 41, 60, 224, 246, 417, 418; of Western gender roles, 231–32
Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago, 139
Associated Talmud Torahs of Greater New York, 383
Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia, 132–34, 165
Association of Yeshivas, 399
audiovisual aids: Benderly boys’ use of, 101; Orthodox opposition to, 52–53
Babani, Reb Hayim, 23
Bailyn, Bernard, 3
Balch, Ernest, 315
Balfour Declaration, 82, 82–83, 203
Baltimore, Benderly’s early career in, 17–35; education career, 20–22, 425n10; medical career, 17, 19–20, 21–22. See also Hebrew Education Society schools
Baltimore Hebrew College, 32–33
Barkan, Irving, 377
bar mitzvahs, at Jewish culture camps, 311
Barshad, Menahem, 19, 280, 424n2
bat mitzvah, at Jewish culture camps, 286–87, 287
Baumgarten, Sid, 316
Beatty, Willard, 226
Behar, Nissim, 23
Belth, Norton, 360, 366
Benderly, Hershel (father), 18, 19
Benderly, Jacob (brother), 120
Benderly, Jennie “Hemdah” Miller (wife); and Benderly boys, 80, 414; Brickner (Rebecca) and, 71–72; as information source, 424n2; and Jewish culture camps, 280; and Jewish Home Institute, 230, 233, 235; marriage, 33; teaching career, 33
Benderly, Samson, 17, 36, 117, 172; on affordability and cost-effectiveness of education, 113–16, 407–8; After You—What? A Message to the Jewish Mothers of America, 231; appearance, as young man, 17, 19, 20–21; and arts curriculum, 355; background, 2; Benderly boys and, 5, 64, 69, 73, 80, 410; and Bureau of Jewish Education, establishment of, 43–44; business ventures, in World War I, 120–21; on career, 409–10; character of, 14, 34, 64, 68, 74, 76, 156, 281; childhood and early life, 17–20; critiques of, 111–16, 112, 124–25, 189, 205, 410–13; and curriculum reform, 93, 94, 96–97, 101; death of, 411; educational program, development of, 22–28; education career, beginning of, 20–22, 425n10; education of, 18, 19; experimental methods of, 21; family of, 18; on Federation role, 119, 404–5; fundraising by, 46, 66; and Gary plan, 207, 208–9; goals, inherent contradictions in, 111–12, 218, 232–33; and Great Depression, 165; and individual method, 226, 228, 277; influence on Jewish education, 3, 413; intellectual influences on, 22–26; and JEA, 122; and JEC, 337–38; on Jewish-American identity, 5, 10, 76, 412–13; and Jewish culture camps, 270, 277, 278, 280, 306–7, 308; and Jewish Home Institute, 235; and Kaplan-Cronson report, 42, 43; and Kvutzah, 276–81; legacy, struggle for claim to, 338, 414; medical career, 17, 19–20, 21–22; midlife crisis, 120–21; and NCJE, 155–56; and New York Bureau as national office, 153–54; obituary, 411–12; on Orthodox opposition, 54; professionalization of Jewish education as goal of, 13–14, 55–58, 75, 122; and progressivism, 15, 25–26, 43, 205, 229; recruitment of teachers, 13–15; retirement of, 409–10; Sephardic Hebrew, adoption of, 278; on social adjustment, 417; spending, excessive, 15, 44, 111–13; study on New York schools’ financial condition, 44; and Talmud Torah graduation ceremonies, 107; and youth organizations, 195, 200; Zionism of, 4, 15, 31–32, 76, 100, 320, 412, 417
Benderly boys: accomplishments of, 419; on antisemitism, 344; Benderly and, 5, 64, 69, 73, 80, 410; camaraderie among, 81, 164;
and congregational schools, 378–80; on day schools, 391–92, 396, 400; and denominationalism, 326–27; dissemination across nation, 142–43; education of, 75–76, 79–81, 82, 432–33n52; as elite leadership, 126; flexibility of, 410, 411; general approach of, 416; and Great Depression, 161–65, 170, 178; impact on Jewish education, 5–6; inner circle (Chayil), 72; and JEC, 335–36; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 78; and K’lal Yisrael, 5, 411, 419; opposition to, 9–10; in Palestine, 82–90; recruitment of, 58–68, 72–74; romantic spirit of, 67–68; salaries of, 75; as term, 5; and World War I, 121; and Zionism, 205, 320–32, 359, 417

Ben Gurion, David, 370
Bentwich, Norman, 85, 476n7
Ben Yehuda, Eliezer, 23, 26
Berger, Sophia, 85, 86, 89
Bergson, Peter (Hillel Kook), 349
Berkson, Gershon, 317, 409
Berkson, Isaac Baer, 59, 69, 409; anticlerical bias of, 248; background of, 63, 67; on Benderly, 4, 10, 413; and Benderly legacy, 414; on Bureau’s service agency approach, 8; Bureau work of, 103; career of, 330; and Central Jewish Institute, 237, 241–42, 244–50, 254–64, 266; and Chicago reform efforts, 137; on community support for education, 170; community theory of Americanization, 244–46, 247; and cultural diversity, 5; and day schools, 392; disillusionment of, 124–25; and Dushkin, 329–31, 337–38, 414; education of, 79, 433n52; and Gary plan, 208; on girls’ education, 116; and JEA, 121–22, 122–23, 124; and JEC, 329, 331–32, 335–36, 337–38, 343, 373–74, 381; and Jewish culture camps, 269, 273, 283, 293–94, 330; on Jewish education, 216–19, 223, 246–49, 257, 321, 335–36; on Jewish home, 188; on Jewish state, 88; and JTA platform, 214; marriage, 72; in Palestine, 84, 85, 87, 89; and progressivism, 6; recruitment of, 68; teaching career, 80–81; *Theories of Americanization*, 78, 218, 244–46; and youth organizations, 197–98, 204; Zionism of, 320
Berkson, Libbie Suchoff, 69, 409; Bureau work of, 49, 436n32; and Camp Modin, 275–76, 318; and Central Jewish Institute, 266; at Congregation Emanu-El, 101; Dushkins and, 414; in Palestine, 84, 85, 87, 89; post-war career, 126; recruitment of, 68–69; recruitment of students for Hebrew High School, 109–10, 436n42; role in Benderly group, 70, 72; and youth organizations, 196, 204; and Zionism, 318, 320
Bernstein, Florence, 319–20
Bernstein, Maggie, 287–88, 303
Bernstein, Philip, 405, 419
Beth Hayaled school, 401–2
Billikopf, Jacob, 133, 134
Binder, Abraham, 468n70
Bingham, Theodore A., 38–39
BJE. See Board of Jewish Education (Chicago)
Bliss, Daniel, 19
Bloh and Behrman House (publishers), 151
Bloh Publishing Company, 354
Bluestone, Joseph, 92, 93
Blum, Isolde Sommer, 253, 301, 302, 310
Blumenfeld, Samuel, 196, 385, 404
Board of Education of the Metropolitan Council (United Synagoga of America), 388, 389
Board of Jewish Education (Chicago), 137–42, 155; congregational schools, work with, 140–42, 328; and Great Depression, 166–73; and progressive experimentation, 220; resistance to reforms of, 138–39
Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, 415
Board of License, 48–49
Bobbitt, Franklin, 6
Bortniker, Elijah, 372
Boston, educational organization in, 127–31, 135–36
Bourne, Randolph, 206
Boy Scouts of America, as model for Jewish youth organizations, 198–201, 202, 204
Bragin, Joseph, 74, 96, 109, 215, 276–77, 278–79
Brandeis Camp Institute, 270
Braverman, Libbie, 187
Brickner, Barnett, 277; background of, 61, 65–66, 433n52; Bureau extension activities by, 66–67; death of, 414; on denominationalism, 175; and education on, 193, 194; fundraising by, 66; and Jewish education, 174, 187; oratorical skills of, 65–66; and project method, 221, 222, 223; recruitment of, 60, 65
Brickner, Bessie Furman, 65–66
Brickner, Rebecca Aaronson, 55, 79, 101; on Benderly, 31–32, 33, 106; Bureau work, 70;
death of, 415; married life, 70–71; in Palestine, 84, 85, 86, 87–88; postwar career, 126; recruitment of students for Hebrew High School, 436n42; relationship with Benderly, 71–72; romanticism of, 68; on teaching materials, 33

Brilliant, Nathan, 66–67

Bureau bunch, 5, 72

Bureau of Jewish Education (Boston), 128–29

Bureau of Jewish Education (Cleveland), 131–32

Bureau of Jewish Education (Los Angeles), 373–74, 395, 405–6

Bureau of Jewish Education (New York): apprenticeship program, 80; Benderly supporters in, 4; and Central Board of Jewish Education, 92–93; and Central Jewish Institute, 259; competition with Jewish Theological Seminary, 75–76; Dushkin on, 338; establishment of, 43–44; Extension Department, 196; and Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies, 118–19, 125, 164–65, 402, 403–7; financial aid programs, 97, 113; financial difficulties, 15, 112–13; fundraising efforts, 42–43, 45–46; Gary plan and, 207–10; girls’ programs, 1–3, 103–4; Information Department, 193; JEC and, 332; and Kehillah, 118; mature educators in, 73–74; as model for other cities, 126; music staff, 354; as national office, 136–37, 153–54; opposition to, 15–16, 76–77; prioritization of leadership preparation, 142; and professionalization of Jewish education, 13; recruitment of leadership, 58–68; recruitment of students, 2; recruitment of teachers, 13–15; and service agency model, 7–8; summer programs, 270; Tuition Collections Department, 96; women employees at, 72; and World War I, 117–21. See also Benderly boys; women among Benderly boys

Bureau of Jewish Education (New York) reforms: critiques of, 111–16; focus on larger Talmud Torahs, 97; opposition to, 47, 49–54, 98–102; popularity with public, 51; and public relations, 46–47; reliance on Talmud Torahs, 91–92; retreat from, 100–101

Bureaus of Jewish Education: commitment to K’lal Yisrael, 380; critiques of, 418; as expression of community responsibility for education, 402; philosophical opposi-

tion to denominationalism, 379; postwar role of, 402; response to demographic trends, 380; support for day schools, 395, 407

Burk, Frederic, 226

Burke, John, 331

Cahn, Louis, 136

camp. See Jewish culture camps; residential summer camp movement

Camp Achvah: campers’ experience at, 287–89; establishment of, 270; fire at, 9, 279–80; management of, 279; opening of, to general Jewish population, 279; opposition to, 278–79; program at, 276–78, 285; religious observances at, 306–7, 308

Camp Boiberik, 270

Camp Cejwin. See Cejwin camps

Camp Kinderwelt, 270

Camp Kohut, 273

Camp Massad, 270, 281

Camp Modin, 268, 274; camper experiences, 288; and educational experimentation, 275; establishment of, 270, 273–74; management of, 275–76, 330; name of, 317; programs and activities, 293–94, 299, 310, 317; religious observances at, 286, 306, 307, 308, 311; social class of campers at, 299–301; staff of, 72; and Zionism, 318

Camp Ramah, 270

Cannold, Bev, 287–88

Catholic parochial schools, as model, 27, 28

CCAR. See Central Conference of American Rabbis

CCNY. See City College of New York

Cejwin Camps: and Americanization, 301, 302; camper experience at, 288; and Central Jewish Institute, 238, 269; discipline at, 315–16; establishment of, 271, 289–90; farming at, 295–96; fire at, 9, 310; food at, 300, 300–301; formal classes at, 289–94; Great Depression and, 292–93; Keren Ami collection at, 225; management of, 295–98; medical staff, 297; naming of, 272, 298–99; programs and activities, 281–89, 293, 298, 302, 309, 313–14, 314; and readjustment to home life, 286; social class of campers at, 294–96, 299–301; success of, 321; Zionism and, 312

Central Board of Jewish Education, 92–93

Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), 144, 146
central education agencies: popular support, failure to obtain, 406; in postwar era, 379; as scapegoat for 1960s social ills, 418. See also Central Jewish Institute; entries under Bureau of Jewish Education


Cherry, Elias, 304, 311–12

Cherkoff, Paul, 278

Chicago, educational organization in, 127, 136–42, 173

Chicago Rabbinic Association, 169

child-centered culture, postwar, 375

The Child Centered School (Rugg and Shumaker), 220

Children's Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest, 328, 347–51, 352

Chipkin, Israel, 35, 59, 172; and AAJE, 181–83; and community support, 180–83; and day schools, 391; death of, 414; flexibility of, 411; and foundation schools, 401; and Great Depression, 159–60, 163, 164, 165; home life of, 178; and JEA, 125; and JEC, 337; on Jewish education, 416; on Labor Zionist organizations, 88–89; and Palestine, 84, 85, 89; on postwar role of American Jewry, 352–53; on radicalized teachers, 177–78; recruitment of, 13–14, 60, 68; and Reform educational reform, 148; on Revisionists, 349; salary of, 75; and wartime curriculum, 346; on World Over magazine, 362; and youth organizations, 196, 199, 204

Chizuk Amuno Synagogue, 20, 425n8, 425n9

Churgin, Pinchas, 215–16, 397

Circle for Jewish Children, 73, 195–204, 266, 447n29

Citron, Samuel, 280, 325, 350, 356, 357, 358, 360

City College of New York (CCNY), recruitment of Bureau leadership from, 58–60, 62–65

civil rights, World Over magazine coverage of, 367–68

CJE. See Commission on Jewish Education

CJFWF (Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds), 404, 405

CJI. See Central Jewish Institute

cleanliness, Benderly's obsession with, 29

Cleveland, educational organization in, 127, 131–32, 135

Cleveland conference (NCJE, 1926), 155–56

Cleveland Hebrew Schools, 131

clubs, 192–93, 240, 266

Code of Ethics and Standards (JEA), 178
codes of practice, 135

Coe, George Albert, 79

Cohen, Bob "Steppy," 289

Cohen, Frank, 183, 194, 370

Cohen, Isaac, 251, 290

Cohen, Morris Raphael, 61–62

Cohen, Naomi, 76

Cohn, Stella, 282, 294–95

Cold War, curriculum and, 368

College of Jewish Studies (Chicago), 140–41

Commission for the Reconstruction of European Jewish Cultural Life, 351

Commission on Community Interrelations (American Jewish Congress), 353

Commission on Jewish Education (CJE), 143–53; Benderly boys and, 10; textbooks, 148–49, 150–53, 220–21

Commission on New Approaches in American Jewish Education, 335

communal self-sufficient, Great Depression and, 165

communist schools, 343, 349

community, postwar debate on nature of, 379–80

community organization(s): need for, 38; purpose of, 39–40; Zionist views on, 40. See also New York Kehillah

community responsibility for education: acceptance of, Benderly boys and, 407, 419; Benderly on, 15, 91–92, 407–8, 411; blossoming of, in 1920s, 157–58; in Boston, 128;
Bureaus of Jewish Education as expression of, 402; cultivation of community support, 180–83; Dushkin and, 411–12; educational innovations of Benderly group and, 187–88; girls’ education and, 109; Great Depression and, 161, 162, 165–73; Hurwich on, 408; inability to inculcate, 125; Kaplan on, 77–78; ongoing debate on, 408; opposition to, 182–83

community theory of Americanization (Berkson), 244–46, 247

Congregational School Board (Chicago), 141

congregational schools: bureau’s postwar support of, 10, 380; and Chicago’s Board of Jewish Education, 140–42, 166; critiques of, 416, 418; educators’ concerns about, 377–80; Great Depression and, 161–62; JEC support for, 386–91; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 77–78, 175; natural method in, 101–2; postwar rise of, 376–80

Congress on Education for Democracy, 345

connectionism, 221

Coopersmith, Harry, 73, 317–18, 350, 354, 356, 358–60

correspondence courses. See Jewish Home Institute
cost-effectiveness of education, Benderly’s focus on, 113–16, 407–8

Council for Orthodox Jewish Schools, 349

Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds (CJFWF), 404, 405

Council on Jewish Education (Philadelphia), 134

Courage! (Pat and Gelbart), 351

Cremin, Lawrence, 206, 262

criminality: accusations against New York Jews, 38–39; Jewish education as effort to stem, 38

Cronson, Bernard, 41

Cuban, Larry, 222

cultural diffusion, Jewish culture and, 7

cultural pluralism: Benderly’s commitment to, 4; Dewey on, 4, 261–62; and Jewish-American identity, 40–41; Kallen (Horace) on, 244–45; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 175; Roosevelt (Theodore) on, 62, 431n19; youth organizations and, 204

curriculum: in 1910s, 191; arts in, 354–55; Benderly on, 23; at CJI, 254–64; Cold War and, 415; establishment of Israel and, 372–73; in Hebrew Education Society schools, 31–32; at Hebrew High School, 110–11, 436n43; at Jewish culture camps, 290–91; postwar changes in, 376; World War II and, 346–47, 350

curriculum, standardized: Bureau and, 97, 100–101; Chicago’s efforts toward, 141; in cities outside New York, 129, 130; development of, 92–97

Curriculum Outline for the Congregational School of the United Synagogue, 389

curriculum reforms: Dewey on, 189; motivations underlying, 188–89; opposition to, 15, 47, 49–54, 92, 98–102, 138, 329, 337, 384–86, 390–91

Curtis, Sam, 382

Dalton plan, 6
dance, and Jewish unity, 354, 358

Davis, James, 155, 169

Davis, Moshe, 347
day schools: and Americanization, 392, 393, 396; Benderly boys on, 391–92; Benderly on, 9; Berkson on, 247; bureaus’ support for, 407; cost of, 406; independent evolution of, 9; initial impracticality of, 27; Orthodox, JEC support for, 395–402; rise of, 391–94, 394–95

Deloria, Philip, 313
democracy: and cultural diversity, 4, 342–43; Jewish identification with, in World War II, 345, 346–47
demographic trends, postwar, and Jewish education, 380–86
denominationalism: and balkanization of JEC, 342–43; Benderly boys and, 326–27; Berkson on, 335–36; central bureaus’ philosophical opposition to, 379–80; Dushkin on, 336–37; educators’ concerns about, 377–80; Gamoran reforms and, 152; Kaplan-inspired debate on, 175; vs. K’lal Yisrael, 325–26; postwar tendency toward, 8. See also nonpartisanship

Department of Synagogue and School Extension (DSSE), 144

Derech Emunoh synagogue (Arverne, New York), 270–71

Der Tog (periodical), 47, 349

Dewey, John: on Americanism, 261–62; and Central Jewish Institute, 259, 261–62; critiques of, 216–19; Gary plan and, 206; influence on Benderly and boys, 4–7, 75, 79–80, 112, 147, 194, 262, 277, 282, 291; and Reform education reform, 144; relevance

484 Index
to Jewish education, 189; on role of education, 189, 218; *The School and Society*, 189, 206

dietary laws (kashruth): disputes over reform of, 49; observance of, at Jewish culture camps, 303

Dillon, Sadie, 202, 446n25

Dinin, Samuel, 178–79; on Benderly, 413; and Beth Hayaled foundation school program, 401; and day schools, 391, 395; education of, 276, 433n52; flexibility of, 410, 411; on funding of Jewish education, 405–6; on Jewish communal life, 379; on Jewish education, 375, 377; and JTA platform, 214; and Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education, 373–74; and progressivism, 6; on responses to antisemitism, 344; and youth organizations, 196

Dorman, Pearl, 201

Downtown Talmud Torah (New York), 36, 44, 91, 103, 109, 115, 193, 270

Dr. Herzl Zion Club, 13, 60, 65, 131, 195

Drachsler, Julius, 60, 61, 63, 110, 118, 433n52, 476–77n13

drama, Jewish: JEC radio programs, 360; in school curriculum, 354; as teaching tool, 360; as unifying force, 354, 358

DSSE (Department of Synagogue and School Extension), 144

dual school system: coordination with public school curriculum, 29, 35; and home reinforcement, 231; limitations of, 26, 28, 220, 222–23, 229, 266; as necessary compromise, 27–28

Dudley, Sumner, 303

Dushkin, Alexander, 59, 86, 137, 172, 409; on American education and Israel, 370–72; on antisemitism, 344, 353–54; background of, 60–63; and Benderly, 338–39, 419; on Benderly, 80, 409–10, 411–12, 413, 425n19; on Benderly boys, 76, 419; and Benderly legacy, 411–12, 414; and Berkson, 67, 329–31, 337–38, 414; and Beth Hayaled foundation program, 401; career of, 51, 330; character of, 220; and Chicago Board of Jewish Education, 136–42, 166–73; on Children’s Solemn Assemblies, 351, 352; on community responsibility for education, 407; and day schools, 392, 396, 397; death of, 415; disillusionment of, 124–25; education of, 79–80, 433n52; flexibility of, 410, 411; and Great Depression, 162, 165, 166–73; at Hebrew University, 173; and individual method, 226–27; and Israel, 90, 369; and JEA, 121–22, 124; on JEC funding priorities, 381–82; and Jewish arts, 356, 357; and Jewish culture camps, 269, 273, 274, 275–76, 283, 293–94, 330; on Jewish education, 27, 158, 196, 336–37, 344–45, 416, 417; and Jewish Education Committee, 328–29, 332–43, 346, 388, 419; on Jewish Home Institute, 233; Jewish unity, efforts to promote, 339–43, 353, 357, 361; and Keren Ami, 224; later life, 415; marriage, 85, 124; and NCJE, 154, 155, 156; and Palestine, 82, 84, 88, 89–90, 371; and PEN controversy, 385; and progressivism, 6, 220; on public schools as model, 263–64; recruitment of, 60; and Reform education reform, 144; return to Bureau, 125; Schoolman and, 415; and service agency approach, 7–8; and Talmud Torahs, support for, 382, 383; teaching career, 64, 101; and unity in diversity philosophy, 332–33, 336, 337, 353, 374, 413; and wartime curriculum, 347; on Week of Sorrow and Protest, 349; and *World Over* magazine, 361, 362, 364; and World War I, 118; and youth organizations, 197–98, 204; Zionism of, 320, 371; at Zionist Organization of America, 120

Dushkin, Julia Aronson, 86, 137, 409; in Chicago, 170; and Jewish culture camps, 275–76, 330; marriage, 85, 124; and migration to Israel, 90; in Palestine, 88, 89; Zionism of, 320

Dushkin, Kinereth. See Gensler, Kinereth

Dushkin, Samuel, 62

Dvorkind, William, 295

Edelstein, Menahem, 341, 342, 383

Eddin, Ben, 140, 224, 347

Educational Alliance, 193–94

educational organization: indicators of potential success, 127; organization outside New York, 126–36. See also Talmud Torah model of educational organization

education center model. See Central Jewish Institute

Ehrlich, Elma, 70

Eisenberg, Azriel, 73, 196, 374, 378, 397–400, 407, 415

Eisenstein, Ira, 176, 305
Eisenstein, Judith, 305, 359, 468n70
Eisner, Mark, 181
Elazar, Albert, 377
Ember, Aaron, 32
Emden, Jacob, 18
emotional response, and routinization of behavior, 221–22
Ende, George, 382, 389
Enelow, Hyman, 101–2
Engelman, Uriah, 378, 416
enrollment rates, 135–36, 158, 160
Entin, Nathaniel, 391
Ephraim, Miriam, 196, 290
Epstein, David, 67, 68, 366
Epstein, Edward, 243
Epstein, Izhak, 23, 24, 26
Epstein, Sarah Baum, 238
ethnic survival: accommodation and, 115;
Benderly’s views on, 130; Berkson on, 246;
cultural diversity model and, 4, 40–41;
Dushkin’s devotion to, 62; as goal of Jewish education, 94–95, 111, 412–13; Hur- wich’s views on, 130; leadership class and, 408; North American Judaism and, 371–72; postwar Protestantization and, 8, 380; reform leaders’ rejection of, 148–49; vs. social adjustment, 416–17
Ettinger, William, 209, 210
Euclid Avenue Temple (Cleveland), 187
Evans, Bessie, 162–63
Exile and Estrangement (Kaufmann), 173–76
extension programs: in Boston, 129; of Bureau, 66, 69, 103, 105–6, 111, 114; of Central Jewish Institute, 266; in Chicago, 140; evolution of, 193–94; in New York, cost effectiveness of, 114; in Philadelphia, 134; professional conferences as, 156; summer programs, 194; Teachers Institute and, 56 extracurricular activities, 192–93; clubs, 192–93, 240, 266; dissemination of, 193; opposition to, 216; youth movements, 194–204. See also extension programs
Fairchild, Blair, 62
Federated Jewish Charities (Boston), 128–29, 131, 134
Federated Jewish Charities (New York), 31, 128–29, 131
Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies: and Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, 415; Bureaus’ affiliation with, 118–19, 125, 164–65, 402, 403–7; debate on role of, 404–5; and funding of Jewish education, 395–96, 401
Federation of American Zionists, 39, 66
Federation of Jewish Charities (Cleveland), 131–32
Federation of Jewish Charities (Philadelphia), 132–34, 163, 164
Feingold, Henry, 331
Feinstein, Moshe, 384–86, 472n25
Feuerstein, Moses, 399
fire drills, 34
First National Study of Jewish Education (Engelman and Janowsky), 416
Fischel, Harry, 50–54, 52, 53–54, 251
Florence Marshall Fund, 109
Florence Marshall Hebrew High School, 2, 109, 228, 276. See also Hebrew High School
foundation schools, 230–36, 232, 234, 401–2
Fox, Seymour, 321
Franklin, Leo, 144
Fretwell, Elbert, 282
Friedenwald, Aaron, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 425n7
Friedenwald, Harry, 20, 30, 35
Friedlaender, Israel: and Benderly boys, 13, 79; Brickner (Rebecca) on, 86; and Bureau financial problems, 112; and Bureau reforms, 99; death of, 112; and extension education, 266; influence on Berkson, 260–62; on Jewish-American identity, 245–46; and Jewish culture camps, 291; and Jewish renascence as goal, 4; and recruitment of Bureau leadership, 60, 65, 66; on role of synagogue, 248; and Schechter-Benderly feud, 76–77; and Teachers Institute, 56; and youth organizations, 195, 200
Friedland, Abraham H., 117, 131–32, 153
Friedman, Ben-Zion, 19
Friedsam, Michael, 331
Friedsam Fund, 331–32, 334, 336, 337, 403, 464n5
Frisch, Ephraim, 150
Frishberg, Israel, 215, 216
Froebel, Friedrich, 23, 26
fundraising: central education agencies and, 406–7; JEA and, 122, 125; in World War I, 117–19
Index
halutzim, Jewish American attitudes toward, 319–20
Ha-Mitlamed (The Self-Teacher) textbooks, 226–27
Handler, Harry, 93, 96, 97, 290, 382
Hanslot, Elisabeth, 58
Harris, Maurice, 210
Hartstein, Jacob, 342–43
Hashiloah (periodical), 34, 35
Hashishah Hativit. See natural method
Hausen, Max "Buddy," 305
havdalah, at Jewish culture camps, 303, 305
Havurah movement, 286
Headline Parade series, 360
Hebrew education: Berkson on, 217–18; at Camp Achvah, 277–78; at Central Jewish Institute, 261; Gamoran (Emanuel) on, 153; immigrants’ lack of interest in, 26–27; individual method, 227–28; JEC debates on, 341–42; in Jewish culture camps, 289–92; JTA policy on, 214–15; opposition to, 30–31, 34; other schools adopting, 35; Sephardic Hebrew, adoption of, 278; supporters of, 30. See also natural method
Hebrew Education Society (HES), history of, 20
Hebrew Education Society schools: Aisquith Street elementary school, 28–29; Benderly’s early teaching at, 20–22; Benderly’s transformation of, 22–28, 34; curriculum, 31–32; facilities, 28–29; Federated Jewish Charities’ support for, 31; instructional methods, 29–32; national recognition of, 34–35; Orthodoxy critiqued by, 31; removal of poor students from, 31; Saturday classes, 31, 32, 33; student enthusiasm, 31–32; teacher training, 32–33; teaching materials, 33. See also dual school system
Hebrew Free School for Poor and Orphaned Children, 20, 21–22
Hebrew High School: curriculum of, 110–11, 436n43; establishment of, 106–7; funding of, 109; marketing of, 107–9; recruitment of students for, 109–10
Hebrew Sabbath School Union, 144
Hebrew Sunday School Society (Cleveland), 134
Hebrew Teachers College (Boston), 128–29
Hebrew Teachers Union of New York and Vicinity (Agudath Ha-Morim Ha-Ivrim B’Nu York V’Sevivoteha), 47–49, 56, 177, 179, 213, 219
 Hebrew University, 85
Hed Ha-Galil (periodical), 203, 204
Heller, Solomon (Zalmen), 47
Heller, Zachary, 304
Henderson, Dr., 18–19
Hennes, Gottlieb, 24–25
Herber, Will, 8, 375
Herzl, Theodor, 13–15, 149, 309
HES. See Hebrew Education Society
Heskes, Irene, 317
Hexter, Maurice, 131, 171–72, 334
high school programs: in Boston, 129; in Chicago, 141; for girls, 105–6, 109, 110; obstacles to, 106. See also Hebrew High School
Hillel’s Happy Holidays (Gamoran), 151–52
histories of American Jewish education, critiques of, 3–4
history instruction: at Central Jewish Institute, 263, 265; individual method for, 228–30; justifications for, 265
History of the Jews in the United States (Levinger), 148–49
holidays: home instruction in, 233; programs for, 191, 192; U.S., Jewish celebration of, 243–44
Holocaust: and birth of Israel, 367; education about, at Jewish culture camps, 308–10; memorialization of, 350–51; wartime news of, 365–66
home schooling, Jewish Education Committee and, 335
Honor, Jennie, 84–85
Honor, Leo Lazarus, 55, 59; and AAJE, 182; background of, 61, 63, 65; and Benderly’s boys camaraderie, 81; Benderly on, 278–79; and Central Jewish Institute, 265; and Chicago Board of Jewish Education, 141, 163; and cultivation of community support, 180–83, 181, 182; and day schools, 391–92; death of, 414; education of, 79, 433n52; on ethnic survival, 4; flexibility of, 410, 411; and Great Depression, 163, 165; on Jewish unity, 405n18; and JTA platform, 214; and Kvutzah, 278; in Palestine, 84; and PEN controversy, 385; personality of, 81; in Philadelphia, 134; recruitment of, 60, 64; at Teachers Institute, 126
Hurwich, Leah Konovitz, 84, 129, 266, 278, 282, 294–95
Hurwich, Louis, 114–16, 127–31, 154, 278, 408
Hurwitz, Henry, 59, 96, 155
Hurwitz, Schmarya Lieb, 92

488 Index
Hyamson, Moses, 256
Hyman, George, 203, 318–19
Hyman, Matilda “Tillie” Endel, 271, 294, 301, 303, 316
Hyman, Samuel, 46, 238–41
Idelsohn, Abraham Zvi, 355
identity construction and reinforcement, as focus of Jewish education, 4, 416–17
“Imitation and Assimilation” (Ahad Ha-Am), 26
immigration: and Johnson Act of 1924, 244; to New York, 38, 61; to Palestine, 312, 343–44
Indians, playing of, at Jewish culture camps, 313–15
individual method, 225–30
instructional methods: at Hebrew Education Society schools, 29–32, 34; individual method, 225–30; project method, 6, 221–25. See also natural method
Intercollegiate Menorah Association, 59
Interdenominational Committee on Weekday Religious Instruction, 210
Inter-School Music Festival, 355
Isaacs, Mervin, 60, 63, 68, 118, 192, 195
Ish-Kishor, Ephraim, 96
isolationism, Benderly on, 27
Israel: Benderly boys’ views on, 88; establishment of, and American Jewish education, 368–73. See also Palestine
Israel Salanter Talmud Torah (New York), 44, 92, 193
Isseroff, Sampson, 399–400
Ivriah, 347, 401
Ivrit b’Ivrit. See natural method
Jacobs, Ben, 266
Jaffa, Leah, 359
Jaffe, Philip, 341, 389
James, William, 221
Janowsky, Oscar, 373, 416
JEA. See Jewish Education Association
JEC. See Jewish Education Committee
Jewish-American identity: Benderly on, 5, 10, 76, 412–13; Berkson on, 260–61; Central Jewish Institute and, 240–44, 255, 262–63; establishment of Israel and, 369–71; female role models, 367; Friedlaender on, 245–46; Gamoran on, 148; Jewish education and, 4, 416–17; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 176, 411; Magnes on, 40–41; role models for, 344, 363–64, 367, 393; in World Over magazine, 363–64, 367, 368; World War II and, 310, 346–47, 363–64. See also acculturation; Americanization; assimilation
Jewish Americans, postwar responsibilities of, 352–53
Jewish Catalog, 286
Jewish Center, 248–49
Jewish Charities of Chicago, 136, 137, 166–71, 173
Jewish Child (periodical): antisemitism and, 202; and dissemination of Benderly methods, 193; revival of, 140; use in Bureau curriculum, 192; and youth organizations and programs, 194, 196, 197, 199, 201; and Zionism, 82, 102
Jewish Communal Register, 118
Jewish education: 1960s reforms in, 418; Ackerman (Walter) on, 128, 130, 418–19; Benderly’s hierarchical approach to, 110–11; Berkson on, 247; blossoming of, in 1920s, 157–58; clarification of objectives for, 94–95; as commodity, 116, 407–8; conflicting priorities in, 111–12, 218, 232–33; Dushkin on, 27, 158, 196, 336–37, 344–45, 416, 417; establishment of Israel and, 369–73; ethnic survival as goal of, 94–95, 111, 412–13; golden age of, 188; Great Depression retrrenchments, 159–65; history of, in New York, 36–37; as Jewish home surrogate, 188–90, 255, 282–83, 321, 354, 393;
Index

Kaplan-Cronson report on, 41–42, 94; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 77–78, 188, 189, 347; postwar, 375–86; and prevention of assimilation, 41, 60, 224, 246, 417, 418; public schools as model for, 29, 151, 222–23, 263–64, 264; and self-esteem, 353; shifting focus of, 416–17; socialization as goal of, 95, 99, 130, 188–90, 217, 221, 246, 255, 393; suburbanization and, 375–76, 380; in World War II, 343–47; and Zionism, 242, 249. See also Jewish education, professionalization of

Jewish Education (periodical): Benderly obituary in, 411–12; Benderly retrospective issue, 412; and Beth Hayaled foundation program, 401–2; as Bureau organ, 162; on day schools, 392; disputes in, 171; establishment of, 156–57; and founding of Israel, 369; Keren Ami and, 224; on state of Jewish education, 375, 376, 416; and teacher activism, 177; and unity in diversity movement, 342; and World War II, 344, 345

Jewish education, professionalization of: Benderly boys’ strategy for, 126; as Benderly goal, 13–14, 55–58, 75, 122; and establishment of NCJE, 153–57; JEA and, 124; professional journal and, 156–57; progress toward, in 1920s, 158

Jewish Education Association (JEA): Code of Ethics and Standards, 178; and day schools, 396; establishment of, 121–26; functions of, 123; fund raising goals for, 122, 125; and Great Depression, 159–60, 162–63; JEC and, 332; limited success of, 125; publicity campaigns, 182

Jewish education centers, in Philadelphia, 133

Jewish Education Committee (JEC, New York): art programs of, 356–57, 360; balkanization of, 342; board of directors of, 333; and Children’s Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest, 348; and common curriculum, 339–43; consulting work, postwar emphasis on, 386–91; establishment of, 331–33, 337–38; and Jewish unity, 356, 373–74; lunch and transportation program administration, 397; mission of, 328–29, 336–37, 381; as model, 8; model school, decision to forego, 333–34; Music Department, 360; opposition to, 329, 337, 384–86, 390–91; and Orthodox day schools, 395–402; and Orthodox leadership, 397–400; outreach efforts, 360; postwar funding priorities, 381–84; Ramaz Academy and, 396–97; response to postwar demographic trends, 381–84; and service agency model, 136; support of congregational schools, 386–91; women’s auxiliary (Ivriah), 347, 401; World War II and, 346

“Jewish Education for What?” (Ackerman), 418–19

Jewish Education News, 154

Jewish Education Service of North America, 181

Jewish Education Week, 159, 168

Jewish Fast Day (1942 Holocaust memorialization), 348

Jewish/Hebrew atmosphere: Benderly on, 250; in classroom, 49, 67, 167; in extracurricular activities, 194, 201; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 238. See also Jewish culture camps

Jewish home: Berkson on, 247; education in, 230–36; family education, 238, 247–48; Gamorans (Emanuel and Mamie) on, 152, 153; Jewish culture camps as surrogate for, 284; Jewish education as surrogate for, 188–90, 255, 282–83, 321, 354, 393

Jewish Home Beautiful movement, 235

Jewish Home Institute, 230–36, 232, 234

Jewish Homemakers’ Association, 70, 230–31

Jewish Institute Quarterly, 216

Jewish “international,” 242

Jewish Orthodox Education Committee (Vaad HaHinukh HaHaredi), 384

Jewish pride, youth organizations and, 201–2

Jewish Teacher (periodical), 197, 200, 290

Jewish Teachers Association (JTA), 177, 179, 213–16, 219

Jewish Theological Seminary (JTI), 13, 57, 75–76. See also Teachers Institute

Jocotot, Joseph, 24

Johnson Act of 1924, 244

Joselit, Jenna Weissman, 235, 391

JTA. See Jewish Teachers Association

JTI. See Jewish Theological Seminary

Judaism, as culture, 245–46, 248

Judaism as a Civilization (Kaplan), 173–76

Kadushin, Max, 340, 341

Kaiser, Alois and Caroline, 21

Kalb, Abraham, 359, 468n70

Kallen, Deborah, 84

Kallen, Horace, 175, 244–45, 344

Kaminetsky, Joseph, 399, 403–4

Kaplan, Ephraim, 47

490 Index
Kaplan, Ira, 304
Kaplan, Judith, 286
Kaplan, Mordecai, 59; on American Judaism, 241–42; on Benderly, 120, 410–11, 412, 476n7; and Benderly boys, 75–76, 78, 79, 80–81; and Central Jewish Institute, 238–40, 252, 260; character of, 305; critiques of, 124; on Federation, 119, 404–5; and Goldstein (Herbert), 240; and Great Depression, 165; on Hebrew high schools, 111; Hyman (Samuel) and, 239–40; influence of, 3, 145, 277; and introduction of bat mitzvah, 286; and JEA, 122, 123; and Jewish Center, 248–49; on Jewish community, 173–76; and Jewish culture camps, 291, 305, 308; on Jewish education, 77–78, 188, 189, 347; and Jewish renascence as goal, 4; on Jewish state, 88; Judaism as a Civilization, 173–76; and Kaplan-Cronson report, 41; and K'lal Yisrael, 325; and Kvetzah, 278–79; and recruitment of Bureau leadership, 58, 63–64, 64–65, 73; on Reform movement, 10; and Schechter-Benderly feud, 76–77; on social adjustment, 417; support for Bureau reforms, 50–54; on synagogue, 174–75; and Tall mud Torah graduation ceremonies, 107; and teachers’ Board of License, 48; and Teachers Institute, 56; and women’s education, 264, 455n70; on Zionism, 77
Kaplan-Cronson report on Jewish education, 41–43, 94
Karpf, Maurice, 171–72, 181
Katchko, Aaron, 348
Kaufmann, Yehezkel, 173–76
Kehilath Jeshurun synagogue (KJ), 49, 122, 237, 250–54, 392, 394, 397
ekhillah, debate on nature of, 174–76. See also New York Kehillah
Kelly, Colin, 367
Keren Ami (Fund for My People), 224–26, 350
Keren Ami Bulletins, 225
Khayders, 26, 27, 36–37, 41–43, 125, 178
Kieval, Hayim, 347
Kilpatrick, William Heard, 172; and Benderly boys, 80, 147, 198, 282; and Beth Hayaled foundation program, 401; progressivism of, 6; and project method, 221–24; and Reform education reform, 144
Kitay, Isabelle, 319
KJ. See Kehilath Jeshurun synagogue

K'tal Yisrael (Community of Israel): arts as unifying principle, 354–60; Benderly boys’ devotion to, 5, 411, 419; Children’s Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest and, 350; education bureaus and, 352; history of term, 325; Jewish Education Committee and, 373–74; rabbis’ concerns about, 325–26; and wartime unity, 343–47; World Over magazine promotion of, 365
Klausner, Joseph, 86
Klein, Philip, 49
Klein, Stephen, 399
Kleinman, Philip, 60, 63, 68
Klepper, Leah, 84, 126, 276, 436n32
Kohn, Eugene, 345
Kолодный, Soltes and William, 202
Konovitz, Israel: background of, 74; cooperation with Bureau, 103; Hurwich (Louis) on, 115; on Jewish education, 36; and JTA platform, 215; and Principals Association, 93, 95, 96; Vaad Horabbonim accusations against, 49–50
Konovitz, Leah. See Hurwich, Leah Konovitz
Kook, Hillel (Peter Bergson), 349
Kotler, Aaron, 398, 399
Kraft, Gladys Salpeter, 285, 300, 302, 316
Kraft, Steve, 288, 301, 302, 315
Kronish, Ronald, 6–7, 259–60
Krug, Mark, 227–28
Kummel, Florence, 268–69
Kummel, Rosé, 268–69
Kurtzband, Toby, 224, 388
Kutai, Ahuva, 277
Kutai, Ari, 277
Kvetzah, 276–81
laboratory (unit mastery) approach, 228–30
laboratory schools: Benderly’s plans for, 43, 44, 54, 58, 102–3, 111–12; excessive experimentation in, 112; expansion into network, 103; as feeders for Teachers Institute, 44, 55, 103, 111–12; Sunday school lab, 101; teaching apprenticeships at, 80. See also preparatory school programs
Labor Zionist organizations, secularism of, 88–89
laity, efforts to engage, 123, 154, 180–83. See also community responsibility for education
landsmanshaften, 91
Lang, Berel, 285
Langer, Hajnalka, 69–70, 230–31, 355
Index 491
Index

Lapson, Dvora, 350, 354, 358
Layton, Judah, 73, 341
Lazar, Marty, 288
leadership training: and ethnic survival, 408; 
Kvutzah and, 276–77; postwar American 
Jewry and, 352–53
League of the Jewish Youth of America, 69, 
195–204, 197, 266, 447n29
Learsi, Rufus (Israel Goldberg), 159
Leblang, Joseph, 125
Lederman, Mildred, 202
Lefi Hataf (Yellin), 26, 95
Lehrer, Leibush, 305
Lehrman, Bella Goldfarb, 203
Levin, Meyer, 367
Levine, Max, 209
Levine, Morris D. (Moshe Halevi), 79, 278
Levinger, Lee, 148–49
Levy, Isadore, 209
Levin, Kurt, 353
Lewittes, Mordecai, 361–62
Lilien, Ephraim Moses, 82
Loeb, Morris, 43
London Society for the Promotion of Chris-
tianity Among the Jews, 18
Lookstein, Joseph, 349, 392–93, 397, 398
Lowenstein, Sol, 172
loyalty to America, as issue, 96, 117–18, 241, 
246, 310, 370
Machlowitz, Anna, 276
Machzike Talmud Torah, 48, 92, 106
Macleod, David, 200
Magnes, Judah L., 36, 59; Benderly and, 35, 
413, 476n17; and Benderly boys, 9; and 
Bureau of Jewish Education, 46; critiques 
of, 124; and curriculum reforms, 99; and 
Der Tog, 47; and establishment of Jewish 
education in New York, 42–43; on Feder- 
aton role, 404–5; fundraising by, 66, 112; 
and Gary plan, 210; and JEI, 122, 123, 124; 
on Jewish-American identity, 40–41; and 
Jewish renascence as goal, 4; and JTA plat- 
form, 214; and New York Kehillah, 39, 40; 
and Orthodox opposition, 47, 50, 53; poli-
tics of, 117; and recruitment of Bureau 
leadership, 60; support for Bureau, 15; and 
Talmud Torah graduation cere-
monies, 107
Mahanenu, 290, 291
Maimonides, 18
Malachowsky, Hillel, 35
Margolies, Moses Z., 49, 251, 392
Margoshes, Samuel, 31, 118, 148, 279, 433n52
Mark, Jerome, 150
Mark, Yudel, 340–41, 372
Marshalian Hebrew High School. See Florence 
Marshall Hebrew High School
Marshall, Louis: and AJC, 38, 39; as attorney, 
50; on CJI, 259; and Der Tog, 47; funding 
of girls’ education, 109; Gary Plan and, 
210; and natural method instruction, 101
maskilic Hebrew teachers, 15, 35, 36
Matlin, Mendel, 365
Maximon, Shalom Baer, 79
Maxwell, William, 61, 107–9
McClellan, George B., 39
McMurry, Frank M., 79
memorialization, culture of, 350
Mendlowitz, Shraga Feivel, 398
Menorah Society, at CCNY, 59, 59–60, 62, 
64–65
Meserole Street Talmud Torah (New Y ork), 
extracurricular innovations. See School of 
Biblical Instruction
Meyer, Michael, 146
Midwest: expansion of Jewish education in, 
143; Talmud Torahs in, 376–77
Midwestern Federation of Hebrew Teachers, 
143
Miller, Julius, 253
Minneapolis Talmud Torah, 143, 158, 193, 278, 
376–77
minstrelsy, in summer camp play, 313, 314
Mitchel, John Purroy, 211–12
Mizrachi, 398
model schools. See laboratory schools
Modern Language Association of America, 25
Morgen Journal, 42–43, 47, 50, 53, 384, 385
Morrison, Henry Clinton, 228–29
Morrison method, 228–30
music, Jewish: at Central Jewish Institute, 254, 
256; collection and preservation of, 358– 
60; in curriculum, 191–92, 354–55, 468n70; 
at Jewish culture camps, 291, 306, 314, 317– 
18; Jewish Home Institute songs, 234–35; 
renaissance of, 354; youth organizations 
and, 201, 203; Zionism and, 366
“My Dreydl” (Grossman and Goldfarb), 235– 
36, 359
Nadler, Morton, 288–89
Nardi, Noah, 372
Nathanson, Moshe, 359
National Conference of Jewish Social Service, 154, 155
National Council for Jewish Education (NCJE): and Berkson-Dushkin debate, 338; establishment of, 153–57; and Great Depression, 161, 162, 177–78; issues of concern to, 155; and Jewish Education magazine, 156–57; and Jewish Home Institute, 235; and Kaplan’s Judaism as a Civilization, 173–75; Laymen’s Section, 180–81; limited effectiveness of, 172; and PEN controversy, 385–86
National Council for Jewish Women, 141
National Council of Federations and Welfare Funds (NCFWF), 180, 182
National Defense and Education Act of 1958, 415
National Education Association, 154
National Foundation for Jewish Culture, 405
nationalism, Jewish, in Palestine, secular nature of, 88–89
National Society for Hebrew Day Schools (Torah Umesorah), 397–400
natural method: adoption of, in standardized curriculum, 95; basic principles of, 23; Benderly and, 23–26, 34, 99–100; in Boston, 131; at Central Jewish Institute, 254, 256, 257–58, 261; in congregational schools, 101–2; debate on, in U.S., 24–25; history of, 23, 426n25; individual method replacing, 227–28; JTA on, 214–15; limited propagation of, 100; opposition to, 98–102, 138; other schools adopting, 35; playtime learning in, 30; at Ramaz Academy, 393
NCFWF. See National Council of Federations and Welfare Funds
NCJE. See National Council for Jewish Education
Neumann, Zvi Hirsch (Zundel), 35
New Deal, and funding of Jewish education, 40; and JEA, 122; Kaplan-Cronson report on Jewish education, 41–43, 94; mission of, 39–40, 41; Orthodox views on, 47; World War I and, 117–18; Zionist views on, 40–41. See also Bureau of Jewish Education
New York Times, 210
Night and Fog (film), 309
Nimtzowitz, Fannie (Fruma). See Gezari, Temima
Nimtzowitz, Israel and Bella, 1–2
nonpartisanship: Benderly and, 15; community support for Jewish education and, 167; as goal, 5, 139, 155; youth organizations and, 197–98, 200. See also denominationalism
North American Review, 38
Nudelman, Edward, 226, 227
Ohab Zedek Congregation, 49
“On Children of Israel,” (Teller), 201
Orthodox leaders: and Children’s Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest, 349; criticisms of Benderly, 31, 34, 47; and JEC, 397–400; and K’lat Yisrael, 325–26; on Kvutzah, 279; opposition to education reforms, 15, 47, 49–54, 98–99, 138; postwar rise of ultra-Orthodox leaders, 376; supporters of Bureau reforms, 50; and Zionism, 31
Orthodox principles, Benderly’s support for, 31
Orthodox schools, JEC and, 342–43, 379, 395–402
Outlook (periodical), 235, 236
Palestine: attitudes toward Arabs in, 87–88; Benderly boys in, 82–90; daily life in, 84; Hebrew instruction in, 26; Jewish homeland in, World War II and, 351; pairing of U.S. Jewish schools with schools in, 351; secular nature of Jewish nationalism in, 88–89
Palley, Pearl, 290
parents, opposition to curriculum reforms, 97–98
Parkhurst, Helen, 6, 226
Pat, Jacob, 351
Pereira Mendes, H., 210
Pessin, Deborah, 177, 366
Pestalozzi, Johann: influence on Benderly, 22; and natural method, 23, 24, 26, 30; on teaching materials, 33
Philadelphia, educational organization in, 127, 135, 163
philanthropists, Benderly boys’ contempt for, 121–22
Philipson, David, 144, 145, 148
Phillips, J. M., 48
Pilch, Judah, 340, 376
platoon school plan. See Gary plan
playtime, structured, 29–30
Poale Zion, 88
Pollak, Jacob, 155
Pool, David de Sola, 124, 360
Prashker, Louis, 60, 68
prayers, teaching of, at CJI, 257, 257
preparatory school programs: cost effectiveness of, 114, 426; as feeder programs for teacher training, 33, 44; for girls, 105–6, 109; graduation ceremonies, 107; laboratory schools as, 58. See also laboratory schools
preparatory summer camp programs. See foundation schools
Principals Association, 93–97, 106, 109
“‘The Problem of Judaism in America’” (Friedlaender), 40, 245–46
professional conferences, Benderly on, 156
progressive educational experimentation, 220–36; impediments to implementation, 220, 222–23, 266; individual method, 225–30; Jewish culture camps and, 272–73, 275, 282–83, 321; parental education, 230–36; project method, 6, 221–25. See also Central Jewish Institute; natural method
Progressive Education Association, 220
progressivism: critiques of, 215–16; and Gary plan, 205–6; influence on Benderly, 25–26, 43, 205, 229; influence on Benderly boys, 6–7; and Jewish youth organizations, 204; and urban reform movement, 294
project method (Kilpatrick), 6, 221–25, 282, 292, 321
Proskauer, Joseph, 165, 364
Protestantization, postwar, 380
public schools: Benderly’s support for, 27, 34; Berkson on, 247; desegregation of, and growth of Jewish day schools, 403; Jewish views on, 211, 222–23, 391; as model for Jewish education, 29, 151, 222–23, 263–64, 264. See also dual school system
Purim, celebration of, 187
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), 58
Rabbi Jacob Joseph Talmudic Academy, 73
Rabbinical Administration Board, 400
Rabbis, and K’lal Yisrael, 325–26
Rabinoff, George, 182–83
Rabinowitz, M., 50–51
Rabinowitz, Zena, 230
Rackman, Emanuel, 396, 398
radio, JEC programming on, 360
Raisin, Max, 144
Ramah camps, 286
Ramaz School, 375, 392–94, 394, 396–97
Ranson, Marius, 223
Rappaport, Israel, 182–83
Rappaport, Jewish, as: goal, 4, 25–26, 67, 68, 100; and Jewish survival, 95; and Zionism, 15
Reshevsky, Samuel, 166–67
residential summer camp movement, 269, 281, 294
retention rates, 135, 230, 381
Reichert, Irving, 155
Revisionist Zionists, 349
RIETS. See Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary
Robinson, James Harvey, 79
Rogin, Michael, 313
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 173
Roosevelt, Theodore “Teddy,” 204, 315
Rosen, Ben, 172; and AAJE, 183; at Associated Talmud Torahs, 72, 122–34; background of, 33; cultivation of community support, 180, 181; death of, 414; flexibility of, 410; and Great Depression, 161, 163, 166; and JEC, 332; on Jewish education, 345; and Jewish Home Institute, 233; and NCJE, 154
Rosen, Sue, 84–85, 87
Rosenbaum, Alvin, 282
Rosenfeld, Leonard, 399, 400, 415
Rosenman, Samuel, 331, 333, 334–35, 381, 384
Rosenwald, Julius, 166–67
Rothschild, Jacob, 364
Rottenberg, Samuel, 396
rutinization of behavior, emotional response and, 221–22
Rubee, Lillie, 387
Rubin, Jacob: and Bureau of Jewish Education, 46; and Central Jewish Institute, 243, 249, 251, 253, 256; and Jewish culture camps, 296, 298
Rubinow, Isaac, 165
Rudavsky, David, 278, 280, 372, 382, 433n52
Ruffman, Louis, 387, 389–90, 400, 416
Rugg, Harold, 220
Russell, William F., 79–81
Russian pogroms of 1903–1906, 38
Sabbath observance: and employment, 240; at Jewish culture camps, 306–8
Sabbath schools, Benderly on, 27–28
Sachs, Alfred, 154
Salerntalmud Torah (New York). See Israel Salanter Talmud Torah
Sales, Amy, 322
Saltman, Joyce, 293
Sampter, Jessie, 85
Samuel, Herbert, 203
Saphirstein, Jacob, 47, 50
Sarna, Jonathan, 4, 368
Saxe, Leonard, 322
Scharfstein, Zevi, 74, 75, 83, 112, 154, 205, 216, 385–86
Schatz, Boris, 85
Schechter, Jeanne, 192, 193
Schechter, Solomon, 36, 57, 76–77, 239, 263, 326
Schiff, Alvin, 415, 417–18
Schiff, Jacob H., 45, and AJC, 38; and Central Jewish Institute, 241; and Der Tog, 47; funding of Jewish education, 42–43, 45–46, 113; opposition to natural method, 99, 100; and Orthodox opposition, 52, 54; and professionalization of Jewish education, 13; Teachers Institute and, 57; and World War I, 117; and Zionism, 267, 452n15
Schiff, Morltimer, 198
Schloss, Ezekiel, 366, 368
Schneeburg, David, 68–69, 194, 195
The School and Society (Dewey), 189, 206
Schoolman, Albert, 55, 172, 409; background of, 62; on Benderly boys, 81; and Central Jewish Institute, 126, 237, 241, 250, 252–54, 256–63, 265, 267; death of, 415; education of, 273, 276; on Gamoran (Emanuel), 146; and Great Depression, 164, 165; and JEA, 122; and JEC, 337; and Jewish culture camps, 6, 269, 272–76, 282–301, 304–5, 308, 318, 321, 330; and JTA platform, 214; later life of, 414, 415; and Palestine, 84–85; 89; recruitment of, 72–73; and youth organizations, 197–98; and Zionism, 318, 320–21
Schoolman, Bertha Singer, 88, 89, 275, 301, 312, 320, 330, 409
Schoolman, Judith, 320
School of Biblical Instruction (Meserole Street Talmud Torah), 44, 193
School of Jewish Communal Work, 110
Schreiber, David, 366
Schreiber, Sarah, 192
Schulman, Samuel, 148–49
Schussheim, Isrela, 301
Schwartz, Shuly, 71
scientific management: Benderly’s faith in, 58, 81, 114; and Gary plan, 206–7; and NCJE, 155
scout movement, Jewish, 88
Sefer Ha-Talmid (primer), 74–75, 100
self-esteem: arts and, 354; as postwar priority, 353
Semel, Bernard, 172, 334–35, 396, 464n5
Sephardic Hebrew, adoption of, 278
service agency model of educational organization, 127; in Chicago, 136–42, 337; CJE and, 143–53; critics of, 402–3; Dinin on, 374; Dushkin on, 337; issues in, 362–63; Jewish Education Committee and, 328–29, 337; opposition to, 329, 333–34; postwar dominance of, 402
Shaare Zion school (Brooklyn), 35
Shaharut (periodical), 83, 191
“Shalom Aleichem” (Goldfarb), 203
shelilat ha-galut (Negation of the Exile), and American Judaism, 370–72
Sherman, Anna Grossman, 276, 291
Shevile Ha-Hinukh (periodical), 74, 215, 216, 219
Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, 270
Shoshuk, Levi, 277, 281
Shulsinger, Shlomo, 220
Silber, Saul, 138
Silver, Abba Hillel, 138
Silvermintz, Seymour, 317
Silbermintz, Seymour, 317
Silver, Abba Hillel, 13, 144
Silverstein, Samuel, 387
Singer, Bertha, 72
Singer, Mary, 265
Singer, Max, 151
Skirball, Henry, 72, 332
Sklare, Marshall, 286
Slonimsky, Henry, 145
sociables, 192
social adjustment, vs. survival, 416–17
socialism, teachers’ attraction to, in Great Depression, 177, 179
socialization: as goal of Jewish education, 95, 99, 130, 188–90, 217, 221, 246, 255, 393; Jewish culture camps and, 301, 313, 315; Jewish home and, 247; and masculinity ideals, 315, 317
Social Security, 165, 173
social welfare circles, 240
Society for Educating Poor and Orphan Hebrew Children, 20
Society for the Advancement of Judaism, 123, 355
Soloff, Mordecai, 229, 230
Solomon, Elias, 56
Solomon, Sarah, 436n32
Soltes, Mordecai, 73, 82, 126, 199, 433n52
Songs of Zion (Coopersmith), 358
The Songs We Sing (Coopersmith), 359
Sonnenfeld, Sonny, 266–67
Spaulding, Frank, 114
Spector, Maurice, 363–64
Spencer, Herbert, 22, 32
Spiegel, Dora, 291, 297–98
Sputnik, 415
Stambler, Helen, 317
Steger, Sherry, 288
Steinberg, Milton, 351
Stone Avenue Talmud Torah (New York), 2, 50–51, 98, 193
Straus, Manny, 125
Straus, Oscar, 38
Strauss, Nellie, 85
Strayer, George Drayton, 79
Striari, Myles, 304, 311–12
Stroock, Alan, 334, 335
Stuyvesant Pledge, 165
subject divisions, conventional, efforts to abolish, 222–23
suburbanization of Jews: Benderly boys and, 326–27; and centrality of synagogue, 377, 381; in Cleveland, 132; and decline of Talmud Torahs, 382; and JEC mission, 386–87; and Jewish education, 375–76, 380
Suchoff, Libbie. See Berksen, Libbie Suchoff
Sulzberger, Iphigene Ochs, 361
Sunday schools: Benderly on, 27–28; in Boston, funding of, 128–29; educators’ concerns about, 377; Gamoran on, 145; Great Depression and, 161–62; NCJE and, 157; postwar rise of, 376, 377
supplementary school framework. See dual school system
synagogue: Berkson on, 248; class conflict in, 380; educators’ concerns about, 326; expansion of role in family life, 140; Kaplan-inspired debate on, 174–75; postwar importance of, 375, 377, 381; postwar Protestantization of, 380
Syrian Protestant College, 19
Szenes, Hannah, 293, 367
Szold, Benjamin, 20, 425n8
Szold, Henrietta, 86; background of, 20; Berkson and, 330; and Bureau financial problems, 112; career of, 32, 120, 425n7; and Jewish renascence, as goal, 4; in Palestine, 85, 89, 124; as role model, 293; and Talmud Torah graduation ceremonies, 107; and youth clubs, 192–93
Szold, Sophia, 20
Talmud Torah model of educational organization, 127, 158; in Boston, 128–31; in Cleveland, 131–32; in Philadelphia, 132–34; as transitional model, 136
Talmud Torahs: attrition rates, 93–94, 440n45; Berkson on role of, 246; and Bureau reform efforts, 44–45; Bureau’s reliance on, 91–92, 113; in Chicago, reform efforts, 138–39; curriculum reforms, resistance to, 92; funding for, 91, 92; Great Depression and, 161, 164–65; independent evolution of, 9; JEC and, 383–84; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 77–78; male focus of, 103; modern day schools as heir to, 391; and natural method, 35; postwar decline of, 376–77, 380–84; principals, high quality of, 92; reputation of, 27; will to reform in, 92
Tammany Hall, 211–12
Tauber, Abe, 314
Taylor, Frederick, 6
teachers: Benderly’s views on, 32, 55–56; Berkson on, 254; Great Depression and, 161–62; health and life insurance for, 135; immigrant, and fear of Bureau reforms, 47–49; and JEA Code of Ethics and Standards, 178; licensing efforts, 48–49, 56–57, 97, 135, 158, 161; progressive innovations and, 223, 229; radicalization of, in Great Depression, 177–79; recruitment of, 13–15;
salaries of, 48–49, 97, 135, 141, 161–62, 163; training requirements, 141; unionization of, 177, 179; World War II and, 346
Teachers College (Columbia University): Benderly boys at, 75, 79–80; and Central Jewish Institute, 259; and progressive experimentation, 220–21
Teachers Institute (TI): art education at, 355; Benderly on, 44, 56–57, 58, 276; Central Jewish Institute and, 254; efforts to upgrade, 56–58; female students at, 264; Hebrew high schools and, 111; instruction in Hebrew, 111, 437n46; Kvutzah and, 278–79, 281; laboratory schools as feeders for, 44, 55, 103, 111–12; recruitment of teachers through, 69–70, 72, 73; steady improvement at, 72; students at, 3, 57; teacher training at, 44, 55–58
teachers’ union. See Hebrew Teachers Union of New York and Vicinity
teacher training: at Baltimore Hebrew College, 32–33; for licensing exams, 48; Talmud Torah associations and, 135; at Teachers Institute, 44, 55–58
Teller, Chester, 201
Temple Beth El (New York), 148
Temple Emanu-El (New York), 39, 101–2
Theories of Americanization (Berkson), 78, 218, 244–46
Thorndike, Edward, 6, 75, 79, 112, 221
TI. See Teachers Institute
Tisha B’Av (Ninth of Av), at Jewish culture camps, 307–8
Torah, JEC debates on definition of, 340–41
Torah Tree (Camp Modin), 306, 307, 311, 461–62n93
Torah Umesorah (National Society for Hebrew Day Schools), 397–400
Touroff, Nissan, 128, 131, 154, 215, 216
tuition: collection of, 96, 138; Great Depression and, 161; standardization efforts, 141–42
Turner, Eliza, 294
Turner, Frederick Jackson, 283
Tyack, David, 58, 222
UAHC. See Union of American Hebrew Congregations
Union Institute camp, 270
Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), 143–44, 151, 220–21
Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU), 239
Union of Unemployed Teachers (Agudath Morim Muvtalim), 179
United Synagogue of America, 239, 388–91
unity mastery (laboratory) approach, 228–30
unity, Jewish: arts and, 354–60; lack of, in 1930s, 331; lack of, in 1940s, 353; and World Over magazine, 361–63, 368; World War II and, 343–52, 363. See also unity in diversity philosophy
unity in diversity philosophy: Berkson on, 335–36, 338; critics of, 373, 374, 384; debate on, 329; Dushkin on, 332–33, 336, 337, 353, 374, 413; Israel’s creation as test of, 368–73; JEC and, 328, 332, 339–43, 356–58, 374; and support for Jewish education, 8. See also denominationalism
Unterberg, Israel, 46, 122, 124
Uptown Talmud Torah (New York), 35, 49, 50–54, 56, 73, 91, 109, 193–94
urban reform movement, 294
Vaad Horabbonim (Board of Orthodox Rabbis), 49–50
“The Values for Democratic Living to Be Found in Jewish Education” (1939), 345
Van Slyck, Abigail, 283
visual arts, in curriculum, 355
Waldenstein, A. S., 34, 35
Waldman, Morris, 128
war bonds and stamps, Jewish sales of, 346
Warburg, Felix, 46, 99, 119, 242–43
Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 365–66
Washburne, Carleton, 226
“The Watchman of the Tower” (Goldfarb and Grossman), 318
“We Belong” (Davis and Kieval), 347
Week of Sorrow and Protest, 349
Weilerstein, Sadie Rose, 236
Weizmann, Chaim, 385
Wener, Jacob, 253–54, 271, 283, 287, 289–90, 292, 296–97
Westbrook, Robert, 207
Willen, Joseph, 180, 331, 333, 396
Winer, Hajnalka Langer, 126, 276, 414–15
Winter, Nathan, 424n2
Wirt, William, 205–6, 210
women: and employment, in Great Depression, 163; Jewish-American role models, 367; in Jewish Teachers Association, 213; responsibility for Jewish education, 231–32; as teachers, in Central Jewish Institute, 264
women, education of: in Palestine, 85; at Ramaz Academy, 394; teacher training, 32–33. See also girls, education of
women, role of: Benderly on, 104–5, 110; World War II and, 310
women among Benderly boys, 68–72; archival sources on, 9; Benderly’s expectations for, 70–72, 104, 281; postwar careers, 126; status within group, 70–72, 104, 435–36
Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, 235, 236
Woocher, Jonathan, 405
World Conference on Jewish Education, 370
World Over (periodical), 328, 361–68
World Over Playhouse (radio program), 360
World War I: Benderly and, 117, 120–21; Bureau of Jewish Education and, 117
World War II: Children’s Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest, 328, 347–51, 352; and Jewish culture camps, 310–12, 311; and Jewish education, 343–47; and Jewish unity, 343–52, 363; in World Over magazine, 363–66
Yellin, Aviezer, 330
Yellin, David, 26, 95
Yeshiva Department, 400
Young Judaea, 13, 195, 198
Young Judaeo (periodical), 361
Younker, Falk, 101–2
Your Child and Religion (radio program), 360
youth movements, 194–204
Zepin, George, 144, 145, 148
Zibbell, Charles, 404
Zionism: of Benderly, 4, 15, 31–32, 76, 100, 320, 412, 417; Benderly boys and, 205, 320–21, 359, 417; of Berkson, 242, 249, 258, 261–62; communal schools and, 142; and community organization, 40; Gamoran and, 145, 146, 149; Jewish culture camps and, 291, 308–9, 312, 317–20; and Jewish education, 242, 249; Jewish Teachers Association and, 214; and Jewish youth organizations, 195, 203–4, 447n29; Kaplan (Mordecai) on, 77; opposition to teaching of, 31, 34, 145, 149, 167; tension between Benderly program and, 15; World Over magazine and, 366–67; World War II and, 363
Zionist music, popularizing of, 359
Zionist Organization of America, 120, 143, 358
Zionist schools, Hebrew instruction in, 26
Zionist society, at CCNY, 62–63, 64, 67
Zola, Gary, 281