

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part __)

The Founding of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from **A Follow Up Study of the Graduates of One of the Oldest Existing American Jewish Day Schools: the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School**, by Irving I. Pinsky. Thesis (Ed.D.) -- Ferkauf Graduate School of Education, Yeshiva University.*

Introduction

“In 1901 a few individuals who wished to give their own children an intensive Jewish Talmudical education, engaged one Hebrew teacher and one English teacher, and opened a school under the name Beth Sefer Tifereth Jerusalem (Glory of Jerusalem School). It was organized because ‘the ordinary Talmud Torah was unable to give a complete mastery of the history, literature and the precepts of our religion’ and because ‘there was no school in which a complete secular education could be given, without reducing the time needed for religious training.’”¹

The person most instrumental in the founding of this yeshiva was Russian born Rabbi Shmuel Yitzchok Andron (d. 1930). He had received a thorough Jewish and secular education in his native country. Indeed, he was noted for his broad Jewish scholarship, “had taught French and German in Russian schools, had published a book on pedagogy in Russian, and had written for many Hebrew periodicals.”² He served as President of the yeshiva from its inception until 1914.

“When Rabbi Jacob Joseph, [the Chief Rabbi of New York City,] died in 1902, Rabbi Andron assembled Jewish laymen and community leaders and won support for expansion and for change of the yeshiva name to perpetuate the memory of Rabbi Jacob Joseph.” (Page 21)

Setting the Pattern for Yeshivas of the Future

The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School was unique in that it was the first *elementary* parochial school that taught basic Jewish studies as well as Talmud. Yeshiva Etz Chaim, founded in 1886, was an *intermediate* school that enrolled boys at least nine years old who already were somewhat proficient in Chumash and Rashi. Yeshiva Etz Chaim’s goal was to give its students a thorough grounding in Gemara and Shulchan Aruch. In addition, it provided some limited secular studies in the late afternoon. The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School was different in that in addition to providing a first rate religious education, it also sought to

provide its students with an excellent secular education at least equivalent to that offered by the public schools of the time.

(In reading what follows, one should keep in mind that the approach to Jewish and secular education taken by the RJJ School, while commonplace today, was groundbreaking at the beginning of the twentieth century.)

Nonetheless, *Limudei Chol* (secular or “English” studies) was considered much less important than *Limudei Kodesh*, and this attitude was clearly displayed in the constitution of the school. It required that there be two principals, one for each department.

The responsibilities of the *Menahel* (Hebrew school principal) were carefully spelled out.

Among his duties are the supervision of studies, conduct, attendance, advancement of the student in the Religious department, reports to the Hebrew education committee, supervision of the teaching staff, and periodic examination.

It is interesting to note that Section II [of the school constitution] includes the provision that:

No person shall be appointed principal unless he be a recognized Talmudic scholar and well-versed in rabbinical literature. No person shall be appointed or retained as principal unless he conduct himself in a strictly Orthodox religious manner and shall have been approved first by at least six members of the Hebrew education committee.

While the duties of the *Menahel* occupy fully twenty-two lines in the constitution, the duties of the English school principal take up only five and provide only a minimal amount of detail. The founders of the RJJ School felt that it was sufficient that the secular department meet the standards set up by the New York City Board of Education, and left it at that.

The Curriculum

Limudei Kodesh (religious studies) consisted of the material covered in Eastern European yeshivas at the time. The language of instruction was Yiddish.

There was emphasis on Talmud with the goal of producing Talmudic scholars. Beginners were taught to read the *Rashit Da'at*, the Siddur, and then began the study of the Bible. The Sedra or weekly Bible portion was studied in the upper grades together with the classical Rashi commentary. The *Kitzur Shulhan Aruk* was studied weekly.

Study of Gemara began in the sixth grade for boys who were 10 or 11 years old.

No formal attempt was made to teach Isaiah, Jeremiah, or any of the other important Prophets. Courses in Jewish history were not included in the curriculum. The attitude of both board members and faculty was that these subjects were relatively simple in comparison with Talmud and required no formal instruction. They felt that the student could master such subjects by himself after attaining proficiency in Talmud. (Pages 22 – 23)

The secular curriculum was essentially the same as that given in the public schools, save that certain subjects that were considered “unnecessary” were not taught. All secular instruction was in English. Most of the secular teachers were young men who taught in the public schools until 3 PM. Secular instruction took place between 4 and 7 PM, *Sunday* through Thursday. Thus a total of 15 hours per week were set aside for instruction in secular subjects.

Thus the first part of the school day, from 9 AM until about 3 PM, was devoted to *Limudei Kodesh*, whereas the rest of the day was devoted to acquiring basic skills in the English language, history, mathematics, and science. The decision to devote the first part of the day to religious studies was motivated by the fact that the children were “at their best” during this time. In addition, the decision to put secular studies in the afternoon permitted the use of public school teachers as instructors.

During the 1920’s the Religious department was divided into two sections -- a Hebrew and a Yiddish section. From interviews and talks with individuals, it would seem that gradually a demand developed on the part of younger parents to have their children learn more Hebrew. It is probable that Hebrew-taught classes started slowly and developed into a separate but parallel department through the elementary grades. The parents insisting on a Hebrew education for their children seem to have been more Zionist in outlook. By introducing Hebrew as a language of instruction, the school adapted some of the methods of the *Heder Methukkan* (the improved school). For this purpose, teachers with a thorough knowledge of Hebrew, language, grammar, and pedagogy were needed. This tendency was interpreted by some educators as the Haskalah (age of enlightenment) influence upon the Yeshiva curriculum. However, the teachers who were engaged were all orthodox men devoted to Torah and Mitzvot.³

The curriculum of the Yeshiva expanded rapidly and changed to fit the needs of the Jewish community. Every new term brought changes and modification. Often the school board and administration worked on a trial and error basis, for no guiding principles or precedents in Yeshiva education on the American scene were available to them.

A Successful Endeavor

The educational approach taken by the directors of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School met with considerable success. By 1910 there were 500 boys enrolled in the school! The

great majority of the pupils were immigrant children who previous to coming to America had received religious instruction in Russia and Poland.

Many of the students traveled a considerable distance to get to the Lower East Side, where the school was located. Carfare was provided for some of them. A “kitchen fund” was established by the “Ladies Auxiliary” associated with the school so that those in need were provided with breakfast and lunch.

Those daring men who pioneered this bold experiment in Jewish education felt that through a thorough grounding in Judaism supplemented by a good secular education, they would produce students who, while remaining true to Torah Judaism, would also be able to function well in American society. Time has proven how right they were. “Their faith and courage played a major role in creating the Yeshiva movement in America.”

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¹ **Jewish Education in New York City** by Alexander M. Dushkin, The Bureau of Jewish Education, New York, 1918, page 75.

² **RABBI S.I. ANDRON DIES IN PALESTINE**, *The New York Times*, February 27, 1930, page 18.

³ “It is simply not accurate to say that all of the Judaic teachers were Orthodox men, etc. When I attended the yeshiva in the 1940’s there were several who definitely fit into the Haskalah category.” Personal communication from Dr. Marvin Schick, 11/26/07.