

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

History of the Day School Movement in America (1654 – 1785)

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Introduction

There is no question that the widespread existence of day schools, yeshivas, and Bais Yaakovs has been a key factor in the development of the vibrant Orthodoxy that we see today in America. Virtually all Orthodox Jewish parents realize that a substantial Jewish education, which can only be obtained in such schools, is crucial to their children growing up to be committed Jews. However, the successful establishment of such schools only began in the latter part of the 19th century and did not see real success for several decades.

Alvin Irwin Schiff in his 1966 comprehensive study *The Jewish Day School in America* published by the Jewish Education Committee Press writes “The Jewish Day School in America has exhibited five distinct stages of development. These are:

1654-1785: Colonial Times

1786-1879: Century of Growth and Decline

1880-1916: The Pioneer Yeshivot

1917-1939: Emergence of the Modern American Yeshivah

1940-1964: Era of Great Expansion.

Although there were Jewish Day Schools in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the present Jewish Day School is not an offshoot of any earlier type of Jewish all day school in this country. It bears little resemblance to the school founded in New York City in the eighteenth century by the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, Shearith Israel, or to the all-day school conducted by this synagogue from 1755 to 1775, or to the day schools that flourished in the mid 1800's under the sponsorship of German and Polish congregations, or to the ‘mission’ school of the Hebrew Free School Association established in 1865. For the most part, the Hebraic curriculum of these schools was limited to rote Hebrew reading, translation of a few portions of the Pentateuch and Prayer Book, a little catechism and the cantillation of the Torah and prophets. The major areas of study of the present yeshivot—Hebrew language, Jewish

history, Bible and Talmud with commentaries were nowhere in evidence in these institutions.”

In this article we will focus on Jewish education during colonial times.

Jewish Education 1654 - 1785

“The development of the Jewish Day School in the United States, before the beginning of the modern Jewish Day School movement, was sporadic and uneven. Prior to the War of Independence Jewish children invariably studied under private tutors or attended small Jewish schools, since all non-Jewish schools were denominational. Although the Hebrew studies received primary attention, particularly before 1755 when they were taught to the exclusion of any other subjects, the level of instruction was not high in terms of current day school standards. *Siddur* reading and translation and synagogue rituals were often the extent of a child's education. From approximately 1755 on, the Jewish schools began to include secular studies in their curricula because they wanted to avoid secular training under non-Jewish sectarian auspices.

“Little is recorded about the sponsorship, organization and leadership of the schools prior to the Revolutionary War. From available knowledge one might surmise that there were no all day schools of note. Whatever schools were established followed the existing pattern of individual tutelage or small private or congregational units which placed increasing emphasis on secular studies towards the end of the Colonial Times period.” (Schiff)

A major contributing factor to the low level of Jewish education during this period was the lack of good teachers. “Few masters of their profession came here. *Hazzanim* frequently had to be drafted to conduct the schools. Although a few of them were learned men, most were ignorant persons who could only read Hebrew by rote and who could teach only what they themselves knew. When a professional teacher was secured, he invariably moved on to some other place where he received a higher salary or where he rose into the class of *Hazzanim*. The step from teacher to *hazzan* was an easy one, especially in an expanding country with new communities being organized and needing men to lead them.”¹

The result of all these factors was that the Jewish school was in a constant state of flux, so that its development was retarded. Therefore, the possibility of positive achievements was very difficult.

Shearith Israel's Early Jewish Education

New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, often called The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, was founded in 1654 when the first Jews arrived in what was then New Amsterdam. “For clarity, the experience of Shearith Israel as an agency for Jewish education must be divided into two large periods. The first of these began early, probably in the seventeenth century, and continued until the American Revolution; the second

began with the Revolution and, for our purposes, ended with 1860. The Revolution is an excellent dividing line because it wrought many changes in the Jewish community besides seriously affecting Jewish education.

“In the earlier period, a Jewish child in New York City almost invariably was educated by the Jewish community. All non-Jewish schools in New York at this time were denominational; Jews, therefore, could not have attended them. Some Jewish children may possibly have received private instruction in English from tutors, or, later, at the private schools that began to appear in the middle of the eighteenth century. On the whole, however, Jews avoided secular training which was not given under Jewish auspices. In the earliest part of this period, from 1654 to 1755, in keeping with the traditional outlook and practice of the Jews of Europe, Hebrew and allied subjects were the only ones taught.

“In 1755, New York Jews opened one of the earliest schools combining secular and Hebrew education, a practice unheard of at that time in Germany, Poland, and many other countries. With a few intermissions and interruptions, the school continued to exist until the Revolution, when most of the Jews left New York. The subjects taught at this school were Hebrew, Spanish, English writing and arithmetic. Most of the school day was undoubtedly devoted to Hebrew; English writing and arithmetic could not have taken more than an hour a day, and Spanish, at most, another hour. Thus at least three hours of each day remained for the teaching of Hebrew.

¹ **The Rise of The Jewish Community of New York, 1654 – 1860**, Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945