

PROJECT

GENERAL AND JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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To Irving and David

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## INTRODUCTION

There was a child went forth every  
day,  
And the first object he look'd upon,  
that object he became,  
And that object became part of him  
for the day or a certain part  
of the day,  
Or for many years or stretching  
cycles of years.....

-Walt Whitman

In the first chapter of this thesis I shall review literature concerning goals and methods of general nursery education. In some cases I shall cite personal interviews or workshops personally attended. Chapter II will deal with goals and methods of Jewish nursery school, again, through the literature and personal interviews. In Chapter III I shall list my observations of a sampling of Jewish nursery schools in the metropolitan area. The sampling will include different types of Jewish nursery education. Chapter IV will deal with some problems and possible solutions regarding Jewish education.

I became interested in this topic as the result of being a teacher for three years in a Jewish nursery school and for three years in a general nursery school. I was also a teacher three summers in a Jewish nursery day camp and was a director of a Jewish nursery day camp.

## CHAPTER I

### General Nursery Education

When the voices of children are  
heard on the green  
And laughing is heard on the  
hill,  
My heart is at rest within my  
breast,  
And everything else is still.  
-William Blake

The quantity of books, periodicals and articles written about children in the last ten years alone, is quite overwhelming. With Sputnik came an urgency on the part of some American educators to speed up the acquisition of knowledge - booklearning - and to begin this at an age that was never thought possible before. Bruner's theory that anything could be taught to anyone at any age was interpreted by some to mean that formal education must begin several years prior to first grade and that things normally taught in a first grade class ought to be taught in a nursery school.<sup>1</sup> This, of course disregards Bruner's contention that learning must be geared to the developmental level of the child.<sup>2</sup>

One has just to look at the advertisements in a Sunday TIMES Book Review for evidence: HOW TO TEACH YOUR BABY TO

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<sup>1</sup>Jerome S. Bruner, The Process of Education, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, Inc., 1960), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>ibid., p. 33.

READ, by Dolman; SKYROCKET YOUR CHILD'S GRADES IN SCHOOL, by Schwartz; GIVE YOUR CHILD A SUPERIOR MIND, by Siegfried and Engelmann; or an ad that reads: "Instant Learning... courses that turn your cassette tape recorder into an automatic learning machine!" Aside from the effect on children, one wonders about the effect this pressure has on parents. Parents may feel terribly inadequate and frustrated not knowing what and when and how much to teach their child. Nursery schools are being pressured by parents to use work books, have the children sit at empty tables while a teacher is "up front" instructing, or insisting that the school teach reading and writing. Unfortunately, too many nursery schools have fallen into this trap, and because of parental pressure are not permitting children to be children.

This could be illustrated by a recent incident in my school. Mrs. J. came to class with little John, age 3.5. "Listen, Roberta, John is a genius - he knows the alphabet, from Sesame Street. Go ahead, John, recite for Roberta." "A, B, C, D...." Mrs. J. beamed - as if John had just enunciated the Theory of Relativity. John babbled on as if he were reciting magic words or formulas. He had no real conception of relationship between the alphabet and reading, language or dictionary skills.

The above illustrates the cleavage that exists today in early childhood education. One group of educators favor "educational practices based on concepts of the

child in relation to his whole emotional-cognitive development..." and others "who favor practices aimed only at developing certain measurable skills defined as 'intelligence'".<sup>3</sup> I must state that I belong to the former school of thought. My own experience has shown that young children can not be taught in a vacuum. To accept the old theory that children's minds are "blank slates" to be inscribed by their elders is ridiculous. Children are living, thinking beings with wills of their own. They are ready and eager to learn, but learn what is appropriate for their level of development. Teachers must learn that children are not "little adults," but individuals with their own unique psychology and world view.

A primary force in educational thinking today are the theories of the Swiss "genetic epistemologist", Jean Piaget. In Piaget's view, "mental development is a continuous construction comparable to the erection of a vast building that becomes more solid with each addition....It may be likened to the assembly of a subtle mechanism that goes through gradual phases of adjustment in which individual pieces become more supple and mobile as the equilibrium of the mechanism as a whole becomes more stable."<sup>4</sup>

Piaget is concerned with the development of the total self of the child. He enumerates four primary influences on intellectual development and learning:

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<sup>3</sup>Milton J. E. Senn, "Early Childhood Education: For What Goals?" Children, XVI, 1, (January-February, 1969), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Piaget, Six Psychological Studies, trans. by Anita Tenzer (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967), p. 4.

- (1) The child's physical structure, that is, the body and its functions;
- (2) Experience, in the form of activity, involving interaction of the child with his environment;
- (3) Social experiences involving the learning of behavior related to a specific sociocultural environment; and
- (4) The self-regulatory mechanism, 'equilibrium,' which produces a balance between the assimilation of new experiences and accommodation of them to what is already known at any given developmental level.<sup>5</sup>

The child learns through sensory-motor and operational activities. All of his senses - hearing, feeling, seeing, smelling and tasting - are involved. Frequently, with nursery school age children this learning takes place through the medium of play. To become overly task-oriented and attempt to teach the child only concrete material; numbers, names of objects, etc., through drill and rote at this stage ignores the differences in the child at various stages of development. It deprives him of his childhood, of the opportunity to explore, investigate, to grow in a natural manner. Piaget did not directly relate his theories to the field of education; however, many in the field of education agree with this approach. A known member of this group is Jerome S. Bruner. Bruner is concerned with matching teaching methods to the child's stage of development. Bruner's statement that any subject can be taught to any child at any stage of development,

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<sup>5</sup>Lawrence B. Schiamberg, "Piaget's Theories and Early Childhood Education," Children, XVII, 3, (May-June, 1970), p. 114.



has often been interpreted to mean that Bruner is in essential disagreement with Piaget regarding the necessity of age-bound (as opposed to sequence-bound) stages of development. On the contrary.... Misinterpretations of Bruner arise from failure to recognize that any subject can be taught to any child only when the method of instruction is in accord with the child's developmental level.... Although a child may not understand or be ready to learn a concept at the operational or logical level, he may be ready for basic 'understanding' of it, in the form of sensory-motor manipulation or perceptual experience.<sup>6</sup>

Nursery "crash programs" have come into being for the "culturally disadvantaged" to bring these children up to middle-class standards - whatever that may be. However,

Piaget's sequential theory of intelligence suggests that such programs may be doomed to failure because they may not be developing the kinds of skills that will build upon one another in the sequence of sensory-motor, perceptual, and operational levels. They attempt to rush into a particular subject matter with symbolic methods that may not be transferrable to other areas.<sup>7</sup>

In an article in the New York Times, Fred Hechinger reports on Piaget's recent speech at the Graduate Center of the City University. Piaget reaffirmed his disagreement with trying artificially to speed up a child's learning process. He warned that no matter how fast the pace, all children must pass through the same phases of understanding and skipping or reversing those phases is liable to pose a risk to the child's development. Piaget is concerned with

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>7</sup>Op. Cit. See also, Milton J. E. Senn, "Early Childhood Education: For What Goals?" pp. 8, 9.

creating men who are capable of doing new things. "This is attained by a mixture of discovery and subtly controlled structure, leading through the natural succession of phases."<sup>8</sup>

Appreciation of the sensory-motor aspects of learning in early childhood education is not new. Maria Montessori regarded experiential learning of the utmost importance. Writing over fifty years ago she states: "The sensory functions through which, receiving sensations from his environment, he (the child) lays the foundations of his intelligence by a continual exercise of observation, comparison and judgment. In this way he gradually comes to be acquainted with his environment and to develop his intelligence."<sup>9</sup>

While I do not feel that the Montessori School is the ideal nursery school, I do feel that her premise - education through motor-sensory materials - is essentially valid. Montessori was overly concerned with cleanliness,<sup>10</sup> neatness<sup>11</sup>, perfection.<sup>12</sup> Being task oriented and extremely structured, she left little room, if any, for

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<sup>8</sup>Fred M. Hechinger, "Excess Is Not The Way," The New York Times, October 22, 1972, Sec. 4, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Maria Montessori, Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1986), pp. 34-36. First published 1914.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 11, 64, 136.

imaginative play. The "didactic apparatus" she developed was magnificent - only she wanted the children to use them a specific way. For example, her wooden cubes might only be used for the specific purpose of building a tower in graduating order: largest block on bottom to tiniest on top.<sup>13</sup> However, in the play-oriented nursery school we leave the building of the tower to the imagination of the child who is building it. If he alters the sequence of the blocks, that is his privilege - it is his tower and he can build it as he likes. We respect his individuality and creativity.

Many of Montessori's materials are self-correcting - and that is good. She has a case of ten cylinders each the same height but whose diameters are different. The child takes them out and mixes them up (without letting them fall and without making too much noise<sup>14</sup>) and has the task of putting them back in the holes into which they fit. He does this by trial and error - the way little children learn many things. No one has to tell him he is right or he is wrong. He sees this; he feels this. He has learned to do it himself. This material serves to educate the eye to distinguish difference in dimension.<sup>15</sup> All her materials serve purposes such as this one. She says, "the educative process is based on this: that the control of the error

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

lies in the material itself, and the child has concrete evidence of it."<sup>16</sup>

I would like to state here that Montessori based her educational theories on her work as a physician to retarded children and seven years of study in anthropology and psychology.<sup>17</sup> She was influenced by Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller and devised a method of education which builds on the senses.<sup>18</sup> Certainly she was a revolutionary of her time.

In agreement with the above theories, the State Education Department of New York realizes the importance of play on the pre-school level. What learnings can come from block play? In building with blocks, a result of the activity is the feeling of accomplishment as the child or children step back to admire the completed structure. The early childhood materials are designed to develop positive self concepts. Aside from the good feeling the child has as a result of his achievement, he has overcome the problems of balance, proportion and design in order to erect his building. Safe, spacious settings, equipment that can be used independently, and adequate supervision which allows independence but assures safety are the conditions provided to foster self-reliance.<sup>19</sup>

Nursery schools are equipped with a variety of versatile

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>19</sup>The University of the State of New York, Child Development Guides for Teachers of 3-, 4-, and 5-Year Old Children, (Albany, N. Y.: The State Education Department, Bureau of Child Development and Parent Education, 1968), pp. 15, 16.

materials especially designed to offer first hand experiences and to stimulate learning through observation, manipulation, experimentation and exploration. Books are read to the children. Contact with people of varied interests and occupations help children gain an understanding about the services they perform. Trips into the neighborhood are planned so that children can learn through observation, seek out answers to questions, and stimulate new interests. Opportunities to verbalize these experiences are provided throughout the day through discussion. "Play permits children to act out the knowledge they have gained about the real world, relate it to information acquired earlier, consolidate it, and incorporate it into an meaningful structure."<sup>20</sup>

When Co-op City Children's Center opened in January 1970 I was called upon to speak to the parent body on "readiness". None of the teachers in the school believe our task is to prepare children for first grade. Whether a child learns to read at age 5 or age 8 is immaterial. Whether he writes at age 6 or age 9 is again immaterial. We like rather to believe we are helping the child prepare himself for life. The sensory experiences a child gets from using a variety of art materials, singing and dancing to all kinds of music, dramatic play, all contribute to the child's aesthetic growth.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the curriculum of block building, waterplay and sandplay, dramatic play, language arts, art experiences, music,

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

all serve to accomplish the goals of the early childhood program.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the child does get "readiness" skills in the nursery. When the child picks up a book and begins leafing it from left to right (in reverse for Hebrew), and does not tear the pages, and does not scribble on the pages, we consider this a reading readiness skill. When he notices his name on the upper left-hand corner (upper right-hand corner for Hebrew) of all his art work, we consider this a reading readiness skill. When he sits attentively through a story, this is a reading readiness skill. When he asks what any of the many printed signs in the classroom say, this too is a reading readiness skill. When Ira tells you you made the tail on the "a" in his name too long - it looks like a "q" - you know he has gained a reading readiness skill.

Before a child is ready to pick up a pencil to write, he must have thousands of experiences manipulating a variety of materials with his little fingers. Did you ever notice the size of nursery easel brushes? A good size is about 10" - 12" long. The child grasps it not like a pencil, but with all his fingers. Sometimes he even holds the brush with both hands. As awkward as it seems, this is a writing readiness skill. When he fingers manipulative toys such as wooden puzzles, Play Tiles, Build-A-Shape, all kinds of pegs which fit into holes, and shapes which fit into similar spaces; when

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 43-53. See also, The University of the State of New York, Beginning Steps in Planning Schools for 3- and 4-Year Old Children, (Albany, N. Y.: The State Education Department, Bureau of Child Development and Parent Education, 1967), pp. 17-21.

he finger paints or when he strings beads or when he messes with paste - he is learning writing readiness.

Regarding older children, Dr. Montessori states:

One might say that all their previous education is a preparation for the first stages of essential culture - writing, reading, and number, and that knowledge comes as an easy, spontaneous, and logical consequence of the preparation - that it is in fact its natural conclusion.... Our children have long been preparing the hand for writing. Throughout all the sensory exercises the hand, whilst cooperating with the mind in its attainments and in its work of formation, was preparing its own future. When the hand learned to hold itself lightly suspended over a horizontal surface in order to touch rough and smooth, when it took the cylinders of the solid insets and placed them in their apertures, when with two fingers it touched the outlines of the geometrical forms, it was coordinating movements, and the child is now ready - almost impatient to use them in the fascinating 'synthesis' of writing.<sup>23</sup>

For mathematics readiness, children play with Carolyn Pratt or kindergarten blocks. A standard block is equivalent to two half-size blocks, or four quarter size blocks. Two standard size blocks equal one double size block. In other words, they are proportionate. The children soon learn this through building their block structures. When the shelf of standard blocks is exhausted they have to turn to another size and eventually come to realize such mathematical concepts as "two halves equal a whole". There are many shaped blocks used to make structures more interesting: cubes, cylinders, prisms, etc. All are called by their correct names, so that later on these mathematical

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<sup>23</sup>Montessori, pp. 138, 139.

terms are not alien.

When the cookie bowl is passed around and the monitor asks for another cookie because there are only five cookies and six children - he is learning principles of addition and subtraction. Or if each child takes a cookie and there is only one left for two children, and they share the remaining cookie, they are learning the principles of division.<sup>24</sup>

Writing for the Association for Childhood Education International, James Hymes asks: "What is the purpose of nursery school?" He then answers: "To help three- and four-year olds learn and to do this in such a way that the youngsters live their third and fourth years of life in the richest, most satisfying, most constructive way possible."<sup>25</sup>

Also writing for the Association for Childhood Education International is Mary Moffitt. She says that one of the goals "Should be to develop a competent creative person who will be able to function effectively as a human being.... The child must be considered as a 'whole person,' with equal attention paid to his physical, social, emotional as well as his intellectual development." Her method? Play: "Nursery school curriculum should be based fundamentally on play activities, because it is through self-selected play that children can develop physically, socially, emotionally and

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<sup>24</sup>Frances Loeb, "Specific Science and Mathematics Activities" (Talk presented at Science Workshop at Co-op City Children's Center, Bronx, N. Y., (October 20, 1972). Recorded.

For a fuller description of mathematics readiness games, see Cornell Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School Before Six: A Diagnostic Approach, (Ithaca, N. Y.)

<sup>25</sup>James L. Hymes, Jr., "Whys and Wherefores of Nursery School," Nursery School Portfolio, (Washington, D. C.: Association for Childhood International, 1969), Leaflet No. 1, p. 3.



intellectually in ways consistent with their individual needs."<sup>26</sup>

Helen Beck concurs:

Through...play activities, a child learns to cope with the world within and the world outside himself. Playing, he recreates the pleasures of enjoyable experiences and attempts to gain mastery over unpleasant occurrences as he actively recreates what he had at first passively endured. In this way a child tries out more effective solutions for unsatisfactorily resolved experiences.<sup>27</sup>

Children need to have a place where they are appreciated for what they are, not for what they have learned. She agrees with Piaget and Bruner that hurrying a child through his stages of growth is likely to create disorder in his development and decrease rather than increase his ability to cope with stress.<sup>28</sup> She further denounces rote learning on the basis that it does not arouse curiosity, nor does it lead to understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Eda LaShan writes,

Educators have known about these values in play for as long as there have been researchers in psychiatry and psychology, and the encouragement and enrichment of play have been of central concern to the large majority of educators throughout the past fifty years. I do not believe that most of the specialists who work in the field of nursery education have lost their commitment, their enthusiasm, for a child's right to his

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<sup>26</sup>Mary W. Moffitt, "What Is The Nursery School Curriculum?," Nursery School Portfolio, Leaflet No. 4, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>27</sup>Helen Beck, "Pressure in the Nursery," Children Today, I, 5, (September-October 1972), p. 20.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 20, 21.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

play anymore than I have; but they seem to have become less vocal about it in the past few years. I think that all of us have been too easily intimidated by a small but very vocal minority of educators and psychologists who offer today's parents the alternatives that so many parents want most - that seem to alleviate their anxiety about a child's academic achievement. Today's parents, caught in the general hysteria about the need for a college education are open to any voice that promises a magic formula for making children learn quickly. The rest of us, too reasonable and too open-minded, I am afraid, have become passive spectators while our children are fed to the technician-lions.<sup>30</sup>

For the past three years, including one summer, I have taught at Co-op City Children's Center. In a brochure put out by our Center, we state that our program is geared to meet the social, emotional and intellectual needs of the pre-school child and that our program responds to, and builds upon the strengths and creativity each child brings when he comes to us. "We recognize that a child's play is his work, his fun, and his intellectual experience." This is accomplished through block play, painting, domestic play, and many other activities. We recognize each child as a unique individual with unique qualities and value his growth. We allow a child his right to a childhood and see his sometimes boisterous fumbling and rich fantasy play as important stages in his growth.<sup>31</sup>

In a survey taken during the Spring of 1972, it was the

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<sup>30</sup>Eda LeShan, How Do Your Children Grow?, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1971), p. 47.

<sup>31</sup>Co-op City Children's Center, "Our Own Nursery School," (Bronx, N. Y.: 1972), Mimeographed.

parents' desire that the Co-op City Children's Center include more science activities in its curriculum. To this end we conducted a science workshop on October 20, 1972. Not only did our entire staff participate, but we also invited the four other nursery schools housed in Co-op City. Three of our teachers (including myself) demonstrated specific concept games for the teaching of taste, color, astronomy and weather to our three- and four-year old children. A fourth demonstration on mathematics was conducted by Mrs. Frances Loeb, Early Childhood Consultant. The games or activities were taken from the manual School Before Six: A Diagnostic Approach developed by the nursery staff of Cornell University. We also devised our own games and activities. Below I shall illustrate one game or activity from each category to show how the three and four-year old child learns from play.

Tasting Game. Uses: Sensory Discrimination. At juice time, give each child a different kind of juice in a plastic cup with a top that has a place for a straw, in such a way that the type of juice cannot be determined from the outside. Have the children identify their type of juice. Use grape, apple, orange, grapefruit, pineapple. Older children can have combination juices like orange-pineapple or pineapple-grapefruit. Ask child not only to guess his type of juice, but to describe it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Cornell Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School Before Six: A Diagnostic Approach, (Ithaca, N. Y.), Sec. F-2.

Colored Cellophane Tubes. Uses: Concept - Color

Mixing. Cover one end of cardboard tube with colored cellophane. The cellophane can be attached to the end with rubber bands. Use a variety of interesting colors. These could be fun to use as "telescopes" or could be left in the doll corner to encourage dramatic play. Children may like to experiment with two tubes of the same or different colors of cellophane. By using a flashlight at the end of the tube, colored spots can be thrown on the wall or ceiling, and with two flashlights and two tubes it is possible to move two colored spots toward each other and merge them to produce a mixed color. The teacher will need to demonstrate the first time and discuss the meaning of the experiment.<sup>33</sup>

Looking at Cloud Shapes. Uses: Concept - Weather, Geography, Visual Discrimination, Shapes. Children and teacher lie on their backs in the play area (outdoors) and look at the interesting shapes the clouds form in the sky. If it is an especially good day for clouds, draw their attention to the different varieties of clouds. Note if the wind is blowing and its effect on the clouds. Many children will enjoy finding "things" (animals, monsters, story characters, etc.). Help them share their findings with other children. Encourage them to find other things in the sky besides the clouds (planes, birds, insects, moon, blowing leaves).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., Sec. S-5.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., Sec. O-19.

Measuring Games. Uses: Mathematical Concepts. With a measure of yarn or ribbon have the children find who has the longest index finger, e. g., in the class; who has the biggest waist, who is taller than whom, who is tallest, who is shortest. How many lengths of ribbon is the room long? How many lengths of ribbon is the room wide? How many footsteps long is the room? Using spools, have the children build a tower, say four spools high. Using either larger or smaller spools, build a tower next to the first. Even though you used the same number of spools, the towers are different heights.<sup>35</sup>

Through this workshop we attempted to show that nursery school is not only exciting fun, but educationally stimulating as well.

## CHAPTER II

### Jewish Nursery School Education

Train up a child in the way he  
should go,  
And even when he is old, he will  
not depart from it.  
-Proverbs XXII:6

Nursery school can play an important part in the education of the Jewish child. The question is: are the principles outlined in the first chapter for general nursery school valid for the Jewish nursery school?

Before this is discussed, however, it is perhaps necessary to analyse the term "play." Children spontaneously learn through observation, experimentation, manipulation and exploration at every level of development. A very young child will pick up an object; he will touch, smell, taste and visually explore. In this manner he is learning and internalizing information concerning his environment. Through this process he is also learning to differentiate between "self" and "other." As the child matures this random play may become more structured and organized by the child himself. The ritualized street play of the older child may even be said to transmit a childhood street culture. Children do not learn these games and rituals from adults, but from other children. Thus, play at every level of childhood is a vehicle for learning, for gaining new experiences, for exploring the environment and learning from this exploration.

Play, as an approach to nursery school education, takes on a somewhat different meaning. The child's instinct to play and learn through sensory perception is used as a foundation for this approach. The teacher becomes an enabler and catalyst in the learning process. He helps set and prepare the environment (the classroom) from which the child will learn. This approach is certainly child centered but not to the exclusion of an active role for the teacher. The teacher is an active participant with the child in an exciting learning process geared to the developmental level of the child. Thus, the spontaneous play of childhood becomes a real and disciplined educational approach, taking into account that children are not "little adults" but individuals with their own unique psychology and world view.

The primary goal of both the play and instruction-oriented approaches are to help the child learn. Yet, there is a vast difference in basic philosophy and concept. To again quote Milton Senn, "One group of educators (play) favor 'educational practices based on concepts of the child in relation to his whole emotional-cognitive development...' and others 'who favor practices aimed only at developing certain measurable skills defined as 'intelligence'".<sup>36</sup>

It would seem to me that the instruction-oriented approach is primarily teacher and data centered. There is frequently an emphasis on rote learning of material. The teacher rather than engaging the child in a learning process

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<sup>36</sup>Senn, p. 8.

appropriate to his level of development will tend to present material that emphasizes data and habit, with little concern for attitudes and feelings. An attempt is made to impose instruction upon the child, rather than helping him observe, experiment and learn from his environment.

Neither of these approaches exist in pure form. In both the teacher plays an active and important role. The key difference becomes the awareness of the developmental stage of the child, respect for the child as a unique individual who is striving toward self-awareness and a sense of identity. In the "play approach" the child, teacher and environment should function together and interact with each other in a learning process. The other approach may attempt to force material upon the child with little regard or respect for his uniqueness. The play approach, of course, does not preclude concern for content or, at times, the teacher "instructing." The attempt is always made to try to introduce the material through the learning process, and at the natural developmental level of the child.

I believe that the play approach is valid for the Jewish nursery school. It is vitally important for the child to develop the proper attitudes and feeling towards being a Jew. Other than the home, the nursery school provides the best environment for this process. Judaism has a strong sense of history and has many ceremonies. The ritual and observances are an integral part of Judaism. Attitude, feeling, sense of history and ritual observance are intimately intertwined in Judaism. One cannot exist without



the other. To attempt to provide proper attitudes and feeling, without ritual and history or the reverse is an exercise in futility. Therefore, the play approach in the Jewish nursery school may require the teacher to use more direction and instruction than in the general nursery school; a very difficult, but attainable task.

Shirley Steinberg, in discussing goals of Jewish nursery education, states:

We are concerned with the overall development of the child rather than with the acquisition of information. There must be opportunity to explore, to create, to live with emotions as well as body and mind. Good nursery school teachers help children learn through discovery and through utilization of the five senses; yet many teachers continue to ignore the many possibilities in Jewish programming which appeal to these senses.<sup>37</sup>

This approach is supported by Gerald Bubis quoting Simon Greenberg who states:

The fundamental goal of Jewish education has from time immemorial been that of training the young so that they would identify themselves as Jews and with the Jewish people (a) positively - rather than merely by accident of birth, (b) happily - rather than reluctantly; and (c) significantly & rather than peripherally.<sup>38</sup>

Bubis then says, "This is not only the business of formal Jewish education. It has been and must continue to be the business of early childhood educators as well."<sup>39</sup> He goes

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<sup>37</sup>Shirley Steinberg, "Jewish Enrichment in the Pre-School Program," Jewish Community Center Program Aids, Fall, 1971, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup>Simon Greenberg, "New Approaches in Jewish Education," Jewish Education, 37:162-8 No. 4, 1967.

<sup>39</sup>Gerald B. Bubis, "Value Building in the Pre-School Years," The Pedagogic Reporter, Fall, 1972, p. 3.

on to say, "The educative process in pre-school captures the child at the peak of his formative years in both value building and identity formation. The two cannot be separated."<sup>40</sup> He says:

Cognitive learning is important but the rabbis understood what what is understood best must be practiced and whatever is practiced must be understood. (The need for Kavanah - intention - is upheld, and learning by rote is frowned upon. Isaiah 29:13 and Yeb. 109b.) Parents who send us their children do so voluntarily. They are of our schools even if they are not in them....They are exposed through their children to a unique educational institution. The pre-school provides a living laboratory where knowledge acquired, whatever its source, can be applied. Abstract values, such as justice, truth, equity, find day to day applicability in the informal settings and processes present in the school.<sup>41</sup>

Gloria Cherney, a nursery school director in Canada, says:

If the pre-school child is to achieve any success along the road to intellectual achievement he must first 'know himself.' Too often adults see learning as pumping information...rather than understanding the 'from within' process, the imitation, the reproducing, and the symbolic process which are natural steps towards further learning in early childhood....It is difficult to like other people when you don't like yourself! It is not necessary to teach tolerance, respect for differences among people, if children can grow up with a respect for themselves.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>42</sup>Gloria Cherney, "Learning About Ourselves," Jewish Community Center Program Aids, Winter 1969-70, p. 6.

Shirley Steinberg insists on knowing the philosophy of the agency or the institution's function. Then the teacher can express that philosophy through the play method. She asks, "As we take a walk and feel the wind on our face or admire the beautiful leaves or blue sky, do we acknowledge the things that God has made and are we listening to the child's perception of God?"<sup>43</sup> She concludes the article by her hope

to emphasize the importance of Jewish programming flowing within the general program rather than as a compartmentalized unit tucked into a corner of our day and that it must be based on our present day knowledge of how young children grow. If emphasis were put on experiences rather than on lessons and if creativity and discovery were encouraged through the utilization of the five senses, perhaps we might discover a sixth sense - a sense of Jewishness!<sup>44</sup>

This, of course, does not happen without help from the teacher. He must prepare the environment to arouse the curiosity of the children so that they will discuss and ask questions. For example, in preparation for Tu Bishvat the teacher may set out plates of seeds or plants. The children seeing these materials would ask, "How come seeds during the winter?" The teacher would then help the children develop the discussion, bringing in other materials along the way. This is certainly different from the teacher just telling the children about Tu Bishvat rather than inspiring and "doing" with them on a multi-sensory level.

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<sup>43</sup>Steinberg, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

At the Hebrew Educational Society Nursery School doing comes first. "It is...this active involvement with Jewish symbols on a sensory level...that makes Jewish symbols so meaningful to the children."<sup>45</sup> Jewish symbols, such as candlesticks, menorahs, chalah cover and other ritual objects lend themselves to play. They can be held, felt, manipulated, smelled (b'somim), tasted (chalah), heard (grager) and so become part of their play materials. Again, the Jewish nursery school teacher must instruct the children in what these objects are. The director wants the child to have...

joyful memories associated with the fact of his being Jewish...to have enjoyed positive and pleasurable experiences to act as a solid foundation upon which the more formal intellectual study of later years can be built....If one views the child as a total personality, provision...has to be made for putting him in touch with his cultural heritage.<sup>46</sup>

In an outline printed for the Jewish Community Center of Camden County, Sabbath observance should always be a beautiful occasion.

The child learns through his experiences.... Principles of learning through participation is emphasized. The religious and historic meanings of holidays are not important to him. He is interested in what he and the people around him do during the holiday.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Florence Ellenbogen, "A Meaningful Jewish Program in the Center Nursery School," Jewish Community Center Program Aids. Fall 1971, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>47</sup>Jewish Community Center of Camden County, "Nursery School." Mimeographed. Undated., p. 1.

Here, again, the emphasis is on doing - sensory-motor activities.

At the Nursery School of Temple Israel in White Plains there are many experiences of Jewish living which lay the foundation for future abstract learning:--Jewish ethical values are implicit.

Hechnasat Orchim - Welcoming the stranger.

Tzedakah - Sense and respond to another's needs.

Tzaar Baalei Chayim - Feed the gerbil perhaps even before he sits down to eat.

Ahavat Aym - Stop momentarily and wonder as the mother bird feeds her young.<sup>48</sup>

Again the director uses the motor-sensory or play approach in carrying through these aims.

In a personal interview with Asenath Rosenberg, Director of Early Childhood Department, Board of Jewish Education, New York, she emphasized that we must always bear in mind the child's developmental level. She told me the following story: She was visiting a school a week or so before Chanukah. Clay was on the table. Usually a teacher does not interfere with the way in which the child uses the medium, but today the clay was to be used for the specific purpose of making a Menorah. One little boy had an aversion to the clay and refused to touch it. However, Mrs. Rosenberg noticed that the child was very interested in the large dry cell batteries. She demonstrated how they work and the boy was delighted. Later she suggested to the teacher that since the boy would not use the clay, perhaps he could make an electric menorah,

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<sup>48</sup>Madeline Preiss, "Creating a Living Environment," The Pedagogic Reporter, Vol. XXIV No. 1, Fall 1972, p. 8.

since he showed interest in the batteries. The teacher had never done this before, but secured a "How-To" book from the library and within a few days the child, with the teacher's guidance, had made a dandy battery operated electric menorah.<sup>49</sup> Here the teacher is engaging in a directed play process with the child.

Also supporting this view is Bea Chankin, director of Kehillath Israel, Paul P. Gelles Nursery School in California:

The Jewish Nursery School offers an unparalleled opportunity for establishing a foundation of cultural identity and positive self-image. When one is three, four and five years old, programs and activities which develop loving identification are those which bring a sense of joy and accomplishment.<sup>50</sup>

"The human being who is a Jew can have no complete life unless he takes cognizance of his Jewish relationships, accepts his Jewishness readily, and knows how to direct his Jewish life toward the completeness of his life as a human being."<sup>51</sup> Alexander Dushkin wrote these words as a general aim of Jewish education - not specifically nursery. But if we go on the premise that nursery education prepares one for life, then we have to accept this as valid for nursery, too.

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<sup>49</sup>Asenath Rosenberg, Interview, December 12, 1972.

<sup>50</sup>Bea Chankin, from "Idea Forum: Jewish Programming in the Pre-School", prepared by Fradle Freidenreich. The Pedagogic Reporter, Vol. XXIV No. 1, Fall, 1972, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup>Alexander Dushkin, "Aims of Jewish Education in the Diaspora," Jewish Education, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Fall 1947), p. 6, cited by Gerald B. Bubis, "Today's Role of the Jewish Community Center in Jewish Education," Journal of Jewish Communal Service, XLIV, 1, (Sept., 1972), p. 48.

If education begins from the moment a person is born, so must the Jewish child's Jewish education begin the moment he is born. Therefore, the Jewish nursery school serves a vital function of providing Jewish education in a manner a three- and four-year old can absorb it:--namely, through play based on sensory-motor activities.

My own belief is that the primary purpose of the Jewish nursery school is to help the child learn that he is a Jew and to give him some idea of what it means and feels like to live as a Jew. This should be the premise on which to build in the future grades. As a strong supporter of the day school, I do not think his Jewish education should stop at the nursery level, but advance throughout life. If children received the same quality and quantity of general education that the average parent gives his child of Jewish education, it would be a sorry world, for we would be breeding ignoramuses and virtual illiterates.

In the nursery school the child constantly should be reminded of his Jewishness. We must take into consideration his developmental level - intellectual, physical, social, emotional. Children of three do not think in abstract terms. We must give him concrete objects to see, feel, taste, smell and hear. We must consider his attention span. He cannot sit through long stories and explanations. His world is the here and now. We must always consider his age - just yesterday he was in diapers but he has a world of tomorrows ahead of him.



How do we help the child learn that he is Jewish? How do we help him learn what it means and feels like to live as a Jew? First of all, we must have committed teachers who are knowledgeable enough to impart Jewish knowledge at the nursery level:--through play. The housekeeping corner is the simplest place to begin: A set of candle sticks, candles, an apron with Shabbat Shalom embroidered on it, if it is an Orthodox nursery food boxes with U-O on them, perhaps a talith<sup>52</sup> and skull caps, tzedakah box.

The game corner: Lotto cards depicting Jewish ceremonies and Jewish holidays. If the teacher cannot buy them, he can make them himself. If the school has Israeli lotto cards, so much the better. The children can compare similar scenes. They will learn that Israel has special Jewish significance when the teacher produces the box of Israeli lotto cards. They do not know where Israel is, but by the teacher's attitude in speaking about Israel, the children will sense its importance. This is a step on which further learning will build throughout their schooling.

The library corner: Why not have Hebrew books there, too? The children cannot read them any more than the English books, but I am sure they can tell them apart. In fact, an interesting game is to have many books of each language and have the children sort them according to language. Talk about books in general. Did books always look like these? Show them Torah scrolls and megillot. Make a scroll.

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<sup>52</sup>Steinberg, p. 9.



Nature and science: Make your own candles for Shabbat or Chanukah. Plant seeds. Talk about the weather here and in Israel. We cannot plant trees here on Tu Bishvat. The earth is too hard or snow covered. How then are trees planted in Israel on Tu Bishvat?

Music time: Play Yiddish music, Hebrew songs - both liturgical and folk.

Trips: Visit temples and synagogues. Bring them into succot. When you walk down the avenue, point out the sign that says, Basar Kosher - tell them they are Hebrew letters. Visit the vegetable store and buy buksor, figs, pomegranates, and Jaffa oranges. When you return, eat them at snack time. Remember, of course, to tell them these are fruits which grow in Israel.

Practically everything in the nursery lends itself to being Jewish. Even when the children wash for snack, they do so because it is the Jewish thing to do. They do not think of God the same way an adult does, but that will come in time. Just acknowledging that there is a God by saying "Baruch Atah Hashem..." is sufficient at this stage. And in the block corner, I remember one teacher avoiding a skull crushing by reminding a little one: "Jews don't go around hepping people over the head!" We also must not forget cooking time: If the school believes in observing kashruth, the children ought to be told that Jews can eat certain foods and not others. Show them the different dishes and silverware. Teach them to look for the hechsher before bringing foods to

class. (Of course, if this is not the philosophy of the school it would not matter.) Bake challah, hamentaschen. Share these with others. (Tzedakah and mishloach manot.)

Arts and crafts: Make flowers for the Sabbath table. Vases, candlesticks and candles make excellent arts and crafts projects. In fact all the holidays lend themselves well to arts and crafts. The teacher must be sure that the projects are simple enough for the child to do himself and that the child will gain a feeling of success and pride in his accomplishment. No project should be so difficult as to frustrate the child or that the teacher has to do most of the work.

Very important is the teacher's attitude when talking about things Jewish. He must not only be pleasant and patient, but exude pride and enthusiasm. When I had my "Sunday only" class I wore my best clothes, used my most aromatic perfume, and made sure every hair was in place. When my children complimented me I said, "Thank you. I like to look my best when I'm with you. You are my very special children. This is my Jewish class. I feel good that I'm Jewish and I want you to know it."

So the children play at being Jewish with the help of the teacher. They play out Shabbat, they play they are building a temple, they play they are planting trees in Israel, when they sort Hebrew letters from English, they are playing; when they wear the talith in the dress-up corner, they are playing praying. And surely the world of

the child is his play. Let us not deny him that privilege:-- only build on it. In the Jewish nursery we not only provide - through play - math readiness, science readiness and reading readiness, but also Jewish readiness.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the play approach outlined in Chapter I is valid for the Jewish nursery school, with some modification. Because of the importance of ritual and history in Judaism the teacher must provide some instruction to introduce these elements into the child's universe. However, the expectation is not that the child will learn this by rote, but that ritual and a sense of Jewishness will become part of his being, a part of his store of sensory information. The teacher is active with the child as part of an ongoing process; he does not impose upon the child.

Theoretically, this view has gained some acceptance in Jewish nursery school education. As I will attempt to show in the next chapter, this is merely lip service and is rarely put into practice. The emphasis remains on rote learning of material presented in a dry, unimaginative way or excellent play-oriented nursery schools under Jewish auspices, devoid of any Jewish content.

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### CHAPTER III

#### Observations

If one learns as a child,  
what is it like?  
Like ink written on clean paper.  
If one learns as an old man,  
what is it like?  
Like ink written on blotted paper.  
-Ethics of the Fathers, IV:25

My sampling of schools consisted of sixteen nurseries in Manhattan, Bronx and Queens under Jewish auspices. With the exception of two, they were located in upper-middle to upper class neighborhoods. The remainder were in middle class neighborhoods.

Four of the sixteen were not affiliated with any religious institution. The remaining twelve were affiliated with a temple, a synagogue or a day school, and were equally balanced among Reform, Conservative and Orthodox auspices.

The purpose of visiting the schools was to see to what extent the theories outlined in the first two chapters were being used in actual practice. Chapter I explores in some detail the play approach vis a vis other educational methods and sets out in some detail the theoretical and practice base of the play approach. Chapter II explores how Jewishness can be presented in a play setting - at least theoretically. These criteria were used as a guide in observing the schools visited:

- 1) Was it a good nursery school of the kind described in Chapter I?

2) How was Jewishness handled?

3) How was the play approach evident? Were any conflicts apparent between play and Jewishness and if so, how were they handled?

On the whole the schools measured up very well to my expectations set forth in Chapter I, general nursery school criteria. I saw very happy children in large, bright surroundings conducive to promoting physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth. I noted the following exception:

School "A" is part of an Orthodox Yeshiva. Its program is not based on child development as evidenced by the observation below. This was the first nursery I was in where the children did not appear to be happy. There were smileless faces and restless body movements. I attribute this to poor early childhood methods.

The teacher outlined for me the goals: recognition of letters in Hebrew and English, brachot, tefillot, colors, shapes, things that grow.

Instead of the usual hour to hour and a half good nursery series leave for a free play period, here it was much less. Some children arrived earlier by school bus, but the class officially starts at 9:00 o'clock. Some children do not arrive until 9:30. At 9:15 the teacher called a halt to free play. This means that for some, there is not even a short play period. The nursery is poorly equipped. There was one easel, but no paints. I saw no evidence of blocks - a basic necessity for all early childhood classes. The library was scant. Most of the few books were borrowed from the

Public Library.

After clean-up time came davening. The first grade teacher called me in at that time, so I did not witness the beginning. When I came back all the children held up their right hand and then covered their eyes to say Shma. They knew the first sentence very well but not everyone knew the entire V'shavtah. One child reminded the teacher they had forgotten to say Ma Tovv, so they said it then. Most knew it. Then the teacher handed a Torah to the leader of the day and she brought it around to each child to kiss. A tsdaka box was shaken in rhythm to a song with English words - something to the effect of "Give a penny like a good Jew." Some indeed did remember to bring in tsdaka.

"Show 'N Tell" came next. "Show 'N Tell" is considered a poor activity because the children are forced to sit and listen to things that may not be important to those other than the one who is showing and telling. If one child brings in something really nice, it might make for jealousy or inferiority on the part of other children. In fact, on that particular day one boy said he brought in his shoes for "Show 'N Tell" and the teacher giggled a little.

A circle game came next in which all children had to participate - the "Hokey Pokey" using Hebrew nouns: "You put your left yad in", etc. Then a second circle game, "How Do You Do My Partner."

The teacher wanted to read a story about the Sabbath. She wanted all the children to sit together and be absolutely attentive. She called all the children together, and at

first, all but one sat in front of her. "Moishe, sit down." "No," he said, "I want to play at the sink." "Not now. I'm going to read a Sabbath story and you must listen." Moishe: "I'm listening." The teacher began reading the story but interrupted it after every two or three sentences to quiet "recalcitrant" children who had other plans in mind. It was difficult for me to follow the sequence of the story because of the constant interruptions and I doubted its value to the children. Then the children sang a song or two about Shabbat selected by the teacher.

One would think the Shabbat party would logically follow next, or at least setting the tables for it, but this was not the case. Instead the teacher produced a bag of plastic fruit, asked their names (English names) and taught the bracha for fruit. It was not too difficult to learn, as the children knew that fruit grow on trees and they knew etz was a tree from their Tu Bishvat studies. The only word they did not know was pre which they grasped easily. I was sure that there would be at least one fresh fruit at each table for the children to examine and eat after learning the bracha, but instead, the teacher distributed a stencil with the words "Borey pree haetz" and pictures of a few fruits. The children were instructed, "Let's see if we can be very careful and stay in the line."

After the coloring within the lines - and commenting on each - the teacher directed a quarter of the class to get their notebooks. (That is, a group of four.) They sat at one table with the moreh while the rest of the class had

to sit at tables working wooden puzzles. They were restricted to the tables and could only walk around to change puzzles. The small group reviewed the Hebrew vowels, which they did almost flawlessly. They also reviewed the letter Aleph using the vowels. The pages were spirited from Mealef v'ad Taf, by A. Langsam. After this review of reading Hebrew the teacher wished to review rotze and rotza. First she said, "I want a cat (or a book, etc.)" and the child answered, "Ani rotze (or rotza) chatul."

What I just described took two hours. I left then with the impression that indeed the teacher was certainly going to accomplish her goals but that her methods for three to four and a half year olds were poor. All the activities were teacher directed. They did not follow in a logical sequence. They did not allow for play experiences. The children were restless and seemed not to be having the fun I think they are entitled to. If they are not allowed their play at age three and four, when are they?

The goals of the teacher was to teach recognition, names of, and reading Hebrew and English letters; brechot and te-fillot, colors, shapes, things that grow. In general, the goals of the school may have been appropriate but the method was inappropriate. There seemed to be a lack of understanding of the needs of three to four and a half year old children. The teacher seemed interested in only having the children learn specific material by rote. She used very little in the way of sensory-motor activities. There was undo emphasis on sitting and listening. For example, instead of the children



learning about the properties of geometric shapes by playing with blocks in a natural way that young children play with them, she had various two-dimensional shapes pinned to an easel with their names tagged along side of them. There was no block play. In her teaching the bracha "borey pree haetz" the children learned the words of the bracha but I doubt whether they understood or felt the connection between the words and the fruit. Here was an opportunity for the children to actually touch, smell, see, and taste something real, but this teacher used plastic fruit and right away put them back in her closet. A play-oriented teacher would have had real fruit on the tables for the children to handle, etc. and would have said, "Now children, we as Jews have something to say before we eat the fruit." That way the bracha would take on real meaning and would have followed an actual experience. Later, a play-oriented teacher may have used artificial fruit in the household corner for the normal play activity of the children.

This school failed to meet the criteria for a good nursery school. From my point of view the Jewish aspects of the program were poorly handled. The emphasis was on rote learning with no awareness of the developmental level or needs of the child. The sponsoring agency of the school is Torah Umesorah. I interviewed Dr. Alfred Schnell of that agency, who told me one of the purposes of the nursery is to give the youngster some basic Hebrew vocabulary.<sup>53</sup> Torah Umesorah

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<sup>53</sup> Alfred Schnell, interview, November 21, 1972.

literature sets forth goals that could be appropriate to the play approach, e. g. Jewish celebrations.<sup>54</sup> However, in practice emphasis was on rote learning and primarily teacher imposed and very much restricted.

In contrast to this school is nursery "B" under the sponsorship of an Orthodox congregation. It is a model school which any board of education can be proud of. It utilizes the open classroom approach. The children are free to choose whichever room they want, when they want, including the adjoining outdoor play area. One huge room is a "noisy" area for block building, woodwork, musical instruments. An adjoining room is for quieter activities, like table games, and housekeeping. Even at snack time the children have a free choice as to which room they want to have their snack. Two tables in each room are designated for this purpose. After snack the children may choose to remain in either the noisy room or the quiet room for the remaining forty minutes of their school day. They may not, however, return outdoors. The children range from three and a half to five years, as the director feels they can learn from each other. It is truly a living laboratory for young children and based on the child's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development.

The Jewish program is equally impressive. It is integrated in the general curriculum of the school. I wish here to relate a conversation I heard a few sessions before

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<sup>54</sup>Rather Galupkin, A Guide for the Kindergarten Teacher and Parent, Part II, Torah Umesorah, New York. Undated, p. 3.

Tu Bishvat. The science corner had on the table a bag of soil and several different types of seeds in petri dishes. Two children entered, ruddy from the cold outdoors.

One: Hey, let's see what's here.

Two: Something's going on.

One: What is it?

Two: I dunno. Look's like seeds.

One: No, dopey. It's cold out. Could we plant them in the snow?

Two: You're the silly one. We can't plant them in the snow. They'd freeze to death.

One: (Who had been rolling the seeds in his hands all this time and now tasted them.) Pokey. Let them freeze. They taste awful.

Two: Look at them. So many different kinds. Wonder what they are.

One: Seeds!

Two: Let's ask the teacher.

One: Hey, teacher, what are these?

(Enter teacher and another child.)

Teacher: What do you think they are, Michael?

Michael: Seeds?

Teacher: Robert, what do you think?

Robert: I think they're seeds, too.

Girl: But it's cold out. My father says we can't plant on the terrace 'til the last frost is over. It's too cold for them to be seeds. I think they're different kinds of gerbil feed. Here, I'm going to feed

the gerbils.

Teacher: Ellen, your daddy is right, It is too cold to plant outdoors. But it isn't cold everywhere. Remember we spoke about Israel? In Eretz Yisroel the weather is just right for planting. In fact, they're having a holiday soon.

Michael: A present holiday?

Teacher: No, not really. It's a planting holiday; it's tree planting time.

Robert: What's it called?

Teacher: In Hebrew it's called Tu Bishvat.

Robert: Tu Bish - what?

Teacher: Tu Bishvat. We can't plant outdoors here; but we can start plants indoors - in pots.

(Teacher opens cabinet and produces several pots and clay shards.) More children enter and gather around the science table. They are wide-eyed with excitement.)

Teacher: While you're planting, I'll tell you more about the holiday and later we can read a story about it from K'tonton.

As discussed in Chapter II, the teacher prepares the environment in order to stimulate the interest of the children, and developed the lesson from this natural interest. The children were encouraged to use all their senses in a learning experience with the teacher. Of course, the teacher did "instruct" in answering the children's questions and in preparing the appropriate materials but the attempt was not made to impose learning by rote or

to impose material on them inappropriate to their interest or stage of development. In this school the play approach seemed to be the natural one for teaching Jewish content.

Nursery "C" is a unique school. It is a play group which meets for an hour and three quarters a week. It has one very definite goal: to expose a small group of children to the Hebrew language in a play group setting. I observed no less than fifteen games following one right after the other during the session. For example, to expose the children to numbers the teacher used two toy telephones. She used one and the other was passed around from child to child. She illustrated the dialing and said some Hebrew numbers, followed by a Hebrew conversation, like, "Hello, how are you? I have a cough; my belly hurts."

There were many songs to go with each activity, and I do not know if she planned it this way, but each activity, or game seemed to flow naturally; or was relevant to the next. For example, to teach Sleep and Awake, a child lay on the floor pretending to be asleep and the others sang "Kum Echur Atzel." When the game was over - that is, when each child was awake - the teacher played it was time to stretch and exercise and as she and the children did this, she named the parts of the body they were touching. When their hands were stretched up over their heads, she brought them down gracefully and slowly, "like raindrops" and then began a "weather" game. The teacher's chart depicted different weather conditions. A song accompanied the game and the children acted out raindrops, sunshine, throwing snow, etc. Because it was

cold out, she produced a picture of a bowl of hot cereal, and then followed a "breakfast" game showing many different foods people eat for breakfast. For snack she brought along juice and a dry cereal. She instructed the children not to eat until they said the bracha shehakol. While they were eating she told them a story in Hebrew translation from a familiar English language Golden book. Many of the students were familiar with the book (in English). The story was about various farm animals waiting to be fed. After the farmer fed them they each made a sound to symbolize they were saying "Thank you." By the time the story was over, the children were finished with their snack and each one repeated "Todah."

A series of activities, songs and games followed, culminating in an arts and crafts project, relevant to farm animals. At this point the teacher exposed the children to printed Hebrew by printing their names on the projects and by printing the names of the animals drawn.

The children were happy. They were eager to come. The teacher used good nursery school methods and certainly fulfilled the aim of exposing the children to the Hebrew language. The teacher played an active part in preparing the setting. Learning took place through the media of children's play. Ideally, a teacher ought not to be so directive, but due to the limited goal, it was necessary for the teacher to play the active role she did.

Among the remaining thirteen schools there was a wide variety of levels of Jewishness. Those with low Jewish

content were characterized by having only a minimal Shabbat party or holiday observance. This seemed to be the extent of their Jewishness. The range of Jewish activities was wider on the high Jewish content side. That is, in addition to a very meaningful Shabbat or holiday observance, they also said a daily bracha before eating, or may have had a high exposure to Hebrew songs or in some cases, Hebrew language. While each school was unique I could group them in two categories: low Jewish content; high Jewish content.

Low Jewish Content: Schools "D" and "E" had no Sabbath observance whatsoever. Both were under Jewish auspices but not affiliated with a religious institution. One school's flyer reads, "Through a variety of program media and through holiday observances, the Jewish child is helped to enjoy and understand his rich cultural heritage."<sup>55</sup> However, what the brochure does not mention is that non-Jewish holidays - including Chinese New Year, Christmas and Easter are likewise observed. The "observance" is an arts and crafts project. In the other school having no Sabbath observance, there was little holiday observance as well.

I visited this school the afternoon of the first night of Chanuka. When the children were dismissed I was surprised that the teacher/director did not wish the children or their parents a Happy Chanuka. Later the teacher/director told me she did not like the Chanuka story as it was filled with

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<sup>55</sup>Bronx House Nursery School and Kindergarten, pamphlet, (Bronx House, New York), mimeographed, undated, p. 4.

violence. Was there any Jewish content? Yes; centering around the Yiddish language. In the normal course of the day the teacher/director would translate an English song or game into Yiddish. However, the school is non-sectarian with a higher percentage of non-Jews one would expect to find in a Jewish school. Therefore, Spanish songs were sung as frequently or perhaps even more often than Yiddish ones.

I visited the school a second time several weeks later. It is very well equipped, the sponsoring Jewish agency willing to pay for anything requested. Yet there was not a Hebrew or Yiddish or Jewish subject book or record to be seen. I think it was for my benefit that after rest time the teacher/director sat the children in a semi-circle and sang, "Zing, kinderlach, zing." The children knew the song and responded enthusiastically. When she sang, "Zing, maidelach, zing" all the girls got up and sang. "Tance, yingerlach, tance," brought all the boys to their feet "tancing." This four or five minute session was the only Jewish content I observed.

Were I the teacher of this Yiddishist school I would have had both Yiddish and English books on the shelves so the children could play sorting games with them. I would have put their Yiddish names on the children's art work as well as their English names. And at story time I would certainly read Yiddish stories translated into English and tell the children that they are just that. I would also have a collection of Yiddish records that the children



could play by themselves and when they would ask I would tell them enthusiastically that it is Yiddish they are hearing.

The following three schools fit into the category of "Sabbath and holiday observance only." All three are under the auspices of Reform temples:

The director of School "F" wants her children to have "a good feeling about being Jewish." I smiled when she said that, as that is one of the basic aims I outlined in the previous chapter. Friday is a special day. Instead of the usual snack time, there is a party. The table is set with a cloth and flowers. The special treat is made by the children (pudding, cookies, etc.). A bracha is recited at candle-lighting time, for grape juice and chalah. During the week no bracha or "thanks" is made for snack. There is no painting on Friday and the children can therefore dress up a little more. I observed in the school directly after Tu Bishvat so I questioned the director as to how it was celebrated in the school. She told me that Tu Bishvat is an Israeli holiday and therefore is meaningless for American children. She also said that since it is a Reform school, Israel has no place in the curriculum. I had to remind her that Hebrew Union College has a branch in Israel.

Monday through Thursday this nursery resembles any other well run general nursery. There is nothing particularly Jewish about it.

I question the value of Friday as a no-paint, dress-up day. Painting is one of the most relaxing, therapeutic

activities of a nursery school. I cannot see why it should be denied to the child.

Since the nursery is part of a Reform Temple, I should think there ought to be something Jewish happening in it every day - even if it is just a nursery rhyme translated from Hebrew into English, or a folk story or song, or a short prayer of thanks at snack.

The director of School "G" told me the emphasis of her nursery is geared to promoting the physical, emotional and social growth of the child. Reading readiness is not stressed as the children come from upper class, cultured homes where they have already been prepared for reading skills. As for Jewish content, the children are starting to learn (through play) about the holidays as they approach. A Kabalat Shabat is held each Friday.

When I entered the classrooms I saw very happy children playing with the usual early childhood equipment. I looked through the book shelves but could not find a single Jewish content book. The candlesticks and Kiddish cup were high on a shelf beyond the children's reach. At snack time there was no thanks said for the milk and cookies. Thus, Jewish content would appear to be peripheral.

It seems to me that in this school particularly - because the children are so well prepared academically and ready for cognitive learning - that basics of Reform Judaism can be "taught" in other ways than just at holiday time or Friday. I think a prayer of thanks, expressed by the child in his own words, is something that could be done each day

and is simple enough even for the youngest in the group. And I would certainly add picture books, like books on ceremonial objects, to the shelves. Just as there are science tables with different kinds of objects from nature, there could be a discovery table of Jewish objects. I feel this kind of stimulation would add much to the program.

While the equipment was excellent, School "H" lacked sufficient space per child. The children seemed to get in each other's way, which made for unnecessary conflicts. Teachers screamed at the children and talked down at them. One child was punished by being put in a corner. Therefore this school did not meet either the social, emotional, physical or intellectual needs of children in a general nursery school. I was told that Jewish content consisted of a Sabbath party and an "introduction" to holidays. The teacher did not seem to want to elaborate.

One school on the "low" scale was in a class by itself as it was poor both as a general nursery and a Jewish nursery. School "I" is part of a Conservative day school. There were two teachers for about thirteen - four year olds, a good proportion. However, the room was small and lacked basic equipment to provide intellectual stimulation. There was no wood-working area and a gross lack of scientific equipment such as funnels, measurers, scales and balances. The number of blocks was far too small to provide for adequate block play - a basic necessity in a good nursery. The two teachers were licensed, but not in early

childhood. Their frustration in getting the children to cooperate at cleanup time, for example, was evident and caused by a lack of understanding in the psychology of young children. They were trying - in vain - to use methods adaptable to a much older child. Hence, the adults ended up doing all the work, while the children ran around aimlessly chasing each other.

The children's Shabbat party was not very impressive. There was a paper tablecloth which did not cover the entire table. Two used candles were placed in simple holders, one at each end of the table. Sliced challah, referred to as bread, was in a basket at the center of the table. The boys who wanted to, wore "kipas" (sic) and the girls wore scarves. The teacher read, from transliteration, the brachot borey pree hagafen, lhadlik ner, and hamotzi. The children had a fascination for the word hamotzi, but neither teacher could explain it to them, nor did the teachers make any effort to find out what it means.

I felt the school was offering little more than custodial care to these children. The teachers are certainly capable of doing more for the children if they had better equipment and teacher training and even a basic Jewish background.

High Jewish Content: There were two types of schools which I considered very good Jewish nurseries. One was a group of schools in which there was beautiful Sabbath and holiday observances, directed by committed, knowledgeable teachers attuned to the developmental level of young children; but

little or no Hebrew language content. The other group, in addition to beautiful Sabbath and holiday observances, directed by committed, knowledgeable teachers attuned to the developmental level of young children, also had an enriched Hebrew language program.

Reform "J", Conservative "K", and Orthodox "L" typify the group of nurseries where I saw beautiful Sabbath observance; where holidays were celebrated in something more than an arts and crafts project; where a bracha was said at snack time each day and where the teachers showed pride in their Jewishness. (For example, the daily bracha was not just said routinely, but was talked about during snack time.) All three were excellent general nurseries of the type described in Chapter I.

Most typical of this group is School "J". The director told me the emphasis of the school focuses on social and emotional growth of the child. Cognitive learning will come in time. The children learn through their play. Children this age need lots of physical play, so a gym period is provided during the day and there is a large outdoor area. In the near future a father will design a platform of a kind so the outdoor area might be used in otherwise inclement weather.

The school's flyer lists religious and Judaic experiences as part of its program. This includes a weekly Oneg Shabbat, holiday activities, prayers, blessings, Hebrew phrases, traditional celebrations, stories, songs, music, arts and crafts - all on a level that has meaning for

young children.<sup>56</sup> In this regard, the director informed me that blessings at snack time were recited daily. Holidays, both major and minor, are celebrated; very little Hebrew is taught. Once a year the Rabbi holds a service with the children. Model Sedarim are held.

The children were engaged in free play when I entered the younger of the two classes. On the wall I noticed a mural made by the children. A big "Shalom" was printed in the center by the teacher. I noticed the book Good Shabos on the library shelf. Also on a shelf were the chalah, candles and candlesticks.

I entered the older group as they were about to have their Oneg Shabbat. A Shabbat mother arrived, and I was introduced as a Sabbath guest, too. In the center of the table was a lovely centerpiece made by the children in honor of the Sabbath. Most of the boys wore kipot. As the children recited Lhadlik ner, the Sabbath mother lit the long, narrow, tapered candles. The room had been dimmed and the children ate their chalah and drank their grape juice by candlelight. (The chalah had not been cut until the Oneg, but remained in its twisted form for the children to examine, ponder over, and question if they so desired.) They made a motse over the chalah and the teacher emphasized that lechem means bread and that chalah is a special bread for the Sabbath:- A little four-year old had questioned where the word chalah is in the bracha! They sang some songs in

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<sup>56</sup>Nursery School, pamphlet, (Temple Shaaray Tefila: New York), undated and unpagged.

English about the Sabbath and also "Zum Gali Gali". I had never heard of most of the songs and when I inquired about them, the teacher told me she had made them up herself. The children sang them with zest.

When the party was over some children went into another room with one of the teachers. For those who remained an action song/game was played which I soon realized was in preparation for a Purim celebration. It was a simple singing and action game about a king choosing his queen. It was kept short and simple. Later I spoke to the director who told me that though it was too early (February 16) to tell the children a holiday is approaching, this action song will be a springboard for developing the Purim story.

Schools "M", "N", "O" and "P" fit into a group of high Jewish content and high Hebrew language emphasis. However, it should be understood that even in these schools in which there is a high degree of Hebrew language, none of the schools has as its goal to teach specific words or phrases. What they are trying to do is familiarize the children with the sound of the Hebrew language through songs, games and records. They are also trying to build a love for Eretz Yisrael - through films on Israel, stories, posters. All - even a non-religious Zionist school - have beautiful Sabbath observances and an enriched holiday program. Two of these schools are part of a Conservative congregation, one Orthodox and one non-religious Zionist school. A description of two of the four schools follows.

In my interview with the assistant principal of non-

religious Zionist day school "N", I learned that an aim of the school is to expose its students to two cultures - American and Jewish. It is not a religious school. A heavy stress is on Bible and its commentaries as literature and as part of Jewish heritage. It is strongly Zionist.

The fairly well equipped nursery practices excellent early childhood methods. The child-teacher ratio is 9:2. Furthermore, the teachers are bi-lingual. I would estimate about one-fifth of spoken dialogue is in Hebrew, increasing from grade to grade. A strong stress is placed on holidays. A Shabbat party is held weekly. The brachot for chalah and candles are recited. I also noted that a prayer of thanks was said before a snack of milk and crackers.

There are lotto games from Israel, Hebrew anagrams, Hebrew language picture books, Jewish holiday books readily available in the classroom. On the day I observed, the children were scheduled for a trip to the school library where they saw a filmstrip on the Pied Piper. The tables were arrayed with a variety of picture books, both in English and in Hebrew. A few of the children from the kindergarten class knew how to read and were encouraged to choose books from a second grade shelf. I saw an Israeli child select two second grade Hebrew books.

The library was plastered with posters showing Israeli scenes, Zionist leaders, Hebrew calendars, Israeli calendars, "Israel Has a Place For You" slogans.

Back in the classroom I noted a variety of good children's records, both in English and in Hebrew, which the



children could select by themselves, put on the phonograph by themselves and listen to by themselves. Finger plays were done in both English and Hebrew and "Frere Jacques" was sung in French and Hebrew.

I enjoyed my visit to Nursery "N" very much. I think it is doing an excellent job of fulfilling its aim to expose its children to the dualistic cultures.

When you walk into the office of Conservative Nursery School "P", you immediately know you are in a school which is really Jewish and really child oriented. Collages on Jewish motifs plaster the walls, as well as children's paintings which you might see in any nursery.

Once in the classroom you know unmistakably that this is a Jewish school - any day of the week - not only on Friday or before a holiday. A table is set in the corner with a cloth, a basket of fruit, and candlesticks. On another table is a pile of matching skullcaps. The library contains Hebrew books as well as English books.

When I arrived the children were sitting at their snack tables doing finger plays - in Hebrew. It was a finger play in which you had to touch some part of the body with another. The children knew all of the parts of the body - in Hebrew. When it was time for snack they said the bracha in Hebrew. The boys all wore yarmelkas, which some removed after snack was finished.

To end rest period, they acted out "Kum Bacher Atzel". One child wanted to sing another song about boker and then I discovered they knew at least three or four songs about

"boker".

Many activities were suggested by the children themselves - an excellent early childhood practice. I got the feeling the teachers were well trained in teaching through play.

The director is very proud of her school. She said that these children come from upper-middle class homes and are prepared enough at home for general education. But she feels that Jewishly, many are "culturally deprived" and she sees her school as a sort of "Headstart" in Judaism and Hebrew. She does not set down a specific goal in language - but rather a very general goal is to familiarize the child with the sound of the Hebrew language. Another goal is to instill a pride in a Jewish identity.

When a child graduates from the nursery, he is expected to follow through in the Center's religious school. While they are not put ahead vertically, like skipping second to go into third grade, they are rather given an enriched program. The teachers can spot the nursery graduates immediately by their positive attitude and their preparedness. If this is true - and I have no reason to doubt it - certainly the goals are being satisfied.

The best of the Jewish nurseries employ teachers who help children learn through discovery - the motor-sensory approach. They are able to integrate Jewish material into the general program. Information is not imposed upon the child but learned from the natural curiosity of the child learning about himself and his environment. It is an ex

experiential program based on knowledge of how children grow. These experiences are positive and pleasurable and "act as a solid foundation upon which the more formal intellectual study of later years can be built."<sup>57</sup>

The majority of the schools were adequate as general nursery schools but from a Jewish point of view were not fulfilling their aims of preparing children for future Judaic studies or to live as Jews. In many cases Jewish materials were absent and teachers were poorly trained in Hebrew or Jewish studies and even apathetic to Jewish commitment. It is outrageous that in nurseries administered by a religious school or a day school that teachers are untrained in meeting the Jewish aspects of the program. Even where there are trained and committed teachers materials are lacking in many cases. Most notable is the paucity of books on Jewish subjects geared to the developmental level of the child. In too few schools did I find teachers who took time to make their own puzzles, games and books. To show further indifference, in a book just published by Federation's Commission on Synagogue Relations, Jewish Communal Services in the United States: 1960-1970, a Selected Bibliography, in the whole section on Jewish education, nothing is mentioned for early childhood.

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<sup>57</sup>Ellenbogen, p. 13.

## CHAPTER IV

### Conclusion

'Tis education forms  
the common mind;  
Just as the twig is bent  
the tree's inclin'd.  
-Alexander Pope

There are many problems evident in Jewish education today. Some are:

- 1) Poorly trained teachers.
- 2) Teachers who lack commitment to Judaism.
- 3) Willingness of parents to accept minimal Jewish education for their children. This would seem to indicate that many Jewish parents are interested in only the lowest common denominator in surviving as a Jew.

- 4) Lack of Jewish early childhood materials, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

How could these situations be remedied?

- 1) Schools should only hire teachers who have an early childhood background and who are knowledgeable in Jewish content.
- 2) Schools must hire not only teachers who are committed to the values of nursery education, but who are also committed to Judaism.
- 3) Nursery schools must provide parents with some kind of adult education. There must be newsletters and workshops dealing with Jewish holidays and celebrations.

Parents can be brought into the classroom to participate in a simulated Shabbat or other Jewish observance. The director, through workshops, etc. acts as a liaison person between getting Judaism from the early childhood classroom into the home.

4) Perhaps a board of Jewish education can offer a stipend of a sort for the best, publishable early childhood materials.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I am afraid that the dreary picture of Jewish nursery school education is typical of Jewish education in general. The American Jewish community, the richest in the history of Jewry, lacks the will to provide adequate education for its children. With the exception of a few thousand day school pupils, most Jewish children terminate their education at Bar Mitzvah or earlier. Many receive no Jewish education. In terms of Jewish educational level American Jewry is functionally illiterate. Perhaps one of the keys to the solution to this problem is a strong commitment to good Jewish nursery school education. Perhaps in this way a firm foundation can be laid and the depressing circle of Jewish illiteracy and lack of commitment to "Ahm Yisrael" can be broken and reversed.

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## SCHOOLS VISITED

Bronx House Nursery and Kindergarten  
2222 Wallace Avenue, Bronx, New York

Congregation B'nai Jeshurun Nursery  
270 West 89 Street, New York City

Forest Hills Jewish Center Nursery  
106-06 Queens Blvd., Forest Hills, N. Y.

Hillcrest Jewish Center Nursery School  
80-15 Kent Street, Jamaica, New York

The Jewish Center  
131 West 86 Street, New York City

Kinneret Day School  
2510 Valentine Avenue, Bronx, New York

Park Avenue Synagogue Nursery School  
50 East 87 Street, New York City

Ramaz School Nursery  
22 East 82 Street, New York City

Riverdale Temple Nursery School  
246 St. and Independence Ave., Bronx, N. Y.

Stephen Wise Free Synagogue Nursery School  
30 West 62 Street, New York City

Temple Rodeph Sholem Nursery School  
7 West 83 Street, New York City

Temple Shaarey Tefila Nursery School  
250 East 79 Street, New York City

Ulpan for Tots  
1328 Allerton Avenue, Bronx, New York

Workmen's Circle Nursery School  
150 Dreiser Loop, Bronx, New York

Yeshiva Kindergarten and Nursery  
1328 Allerton Avenue, Bronx, New York

Yeshurun Nursery and Kindergarten  
82-19 Lefferts Blvd., Kew Gardens, N. Y.













