

Lost Generation

If you were to ask an average Jew, say, fifty or a hundred years ago, what made Jews different from others, you would almost certainly get an answer that had something to do with education. Throughout history, the conventional wisdom has always gone, Jews have placed a greater emphasis on literacy and intellectual mastery than any other people—and as a result have had a vastly disproportionate impact on a great many fields, from physics to economics to psychology. Education, which had always been a priority in classical Jewish life—Jewish children were trained in analyzing texts in even the poorest of Jewish communities over a period of many centuries—continued to be a mainstay of a Jewish upbringing even in the modern period, after most Jews abandoned their connection to other classical modes of Jewish life. The People of the Book was in fact a people of many books, and of the mind more generally.

How odd, then, that the Jewish state should have fashioned for itself so unimpressive an educational system. In recent years, a number of studies have confirmed what many Israeli parents have long suspected: That Israeli schools, which used to be among the finest in the world, today have fallen well behind those of most developed countries. According to a study published in 2004 by Beracha Karmarski and Zemira Mevarech of Bar-Ilan University, in a comparison of 42 leading nations, Israeli high-schoolers came in 30th in reading, 31st in math, and 33rd in science. Israeli tenth-graders, moreover, rank among the lowest in the Western world in terms of the demands placed on them by teachers: When students were asked

questions such as “How often do your teachers make you work hard?” and “How often do your teachers refuse to accept sub-par work?” Israelis fell far short of other Western countries, scoring a 3.3 on a scale of 1 to 10—well behind Great Britain (7.3), Russia (6.5), the United States (6.4), and Italy (5.7). “The Israeli schoolteacher spoon-feeds his students,” Mevarech told the daily *Ha’aretz*. “He pre-digests the material for them and demands little from the students themselves. The data suggest that Israeli teachers are willing to accept substandard work from their students.”

Things are not much better at the university level, where an enervated learning culture serves to discourage exertion and achievement. In one study comparing Israeli university students’ knowledge of world geography with that of students in other developed countries, Israelis scored an abysmal 44 out of 100—compared with an average score of 65. And when individual professors attempt to raise standards on their own, they are often met with a wall of opposition from students and university administrations alike. Such was the fate of a professor at one of Israel’s most prestigious colleges who attempted to impose a higher standard of study on his students: In addition to readings, attendance, and a final exam, he required three five-page papers to be written during the semester. The response was something close to a riot. “Students started shouting me down in class, in order to keep me from teaching,” he said, speaking on condition of anonymity. “When I asked for support from the department, I was told to give the kids a break. The students just aren’t used to having to work that hard.” To make matters worse, Israeli universities today find themselves in the thick of a fiscal crisis that has resulted in the closing of departments and the reduction of educational quality. “The universities are cutting back on doctoral students, failing to pay stipends, and professors are being made to teach classes of three hundred students instead of thirty...” said Sergio Hart of the Hebrew University’s school of economics in an interview with the news website *ynet.com*. “It reduces the incentive to stay in Israel.”

True, the news is not all bad. In the last few years, for example, the proliferation of colleges has opened up the market of higher education to

greater competition, and the direct result has been a far higher level of enrollment in B.A. programs than ever before. Israel is a world leader in public spending on education as a percentage of GDP, and in certain fields—such as economics, architecture, high-tech, and archaeology—Israeli scholarship and achievement continue to resonate worldwide. Yet these positive notes do little to mitigate the fact that in the key measures of academic achievement, Israeli schools have fallen far short of what Jews and Israelis had once come to expect.

How can we account for this failure? If the Jews have always excelled in education, why has the Jewish state not similarly excelled?

Part of the answer can be found in the report of the Dovrat Commission, appointed by the Israeli government in 2003 to recommend sweeping reforms of the national educational system. The report is remarkable in its candor about the state of Israeli schools: The data “show a striking lack of achievement among Israeli students in the most fundamental areas: Language, mathematics, and science.... Generally speaking, the achievements of the Israeli student are below those of almost all the OECD countries... in every field of study and for every age group evaluated.” In the commission’s view, Israel’s failure to educate its children “raises serious questions about the human capital developing in the country and its ability to compete in the future with developed and developing countries.”

The Dovrat report suggests a number of causes for the lackluster performance of Israeli schools, including the decline in respect for teachers among students and parents, the vast inequities in resource allocation among different sectors in Israeli society, and the excessively long vacations which students enjoy. Yet the most important causes detailed in the report—which result in the most radical changes in its proposals—are of a different sort, focusing on three central issues: (i) The inability of the system to fire bad teachers and maintain high standards of teaching; (ii) the inability of school principals to allocate resources according to their own needs;

and (iii) an evaluation process in which educational success is judged by the resources invested rather than the results attained.

Put another way, Israel's educational system suffers from the classic maladies of its socialist origins. Failing teachers cannot be fired because the teachers' unions are too powerful, annually placing the educational system under a threat of strikes, and insisting that job security be placed above pedagogical responsibility; school principals cannot allocate resources effectively because decision-making authority is hoarded at the top, in the classic manner of the centralized state; and the assumption that good intentions and huge spending are the central criteria for success—the classic Achilles' heel of the old-style welfare state—has similarly prevented the emergence of a results-based evaluation process. And indeed, the most revolutionary elements of the Dovrat proposals seek to remedy these very problems: By giving principals far greater authority over budgets and hiring; by creating incentives for excellence in teaching, both for individual teachers and for whole schools; by rooting out vast inefficiencies in the system, eliminating repetitive levels of governance and streamlining decision making; by encouraging innovation at the local level; and by setting clear goals of educational achievement at all levels.

These proposals are sensible and should be implemented. By insisting that schools and teachers be accountable for their students' achievements, the Dovrat proposals offer a reliable mechanism for the improvement of Israeli schools where none exists. But the debate that has ensued since the Dovrat report's publication may reveal a far deeper problem than can be addressed simply through the machinery of accountability. It seems that a great many Israelis have simply lost the Jewish passion for, and expectation of, academic excellence. Instead of offering alternative views on how to make Israeli students learn more, the commission's most vocal critics seem to have abandoned the goal of academic excellence entirely, instead invoking alternate principles such as equality of outcome and a sense of community. Some, like Yossi Dahan of the Adva Center, accuse its authors of adopting a corporate view of education, one that substitutes the supportive, egalitarian

atmosphere of the socially supportive school with factory methods for the mass-production of high test scores. “The ideology hovering above the report is a market ideology,” he warned, “whose central principle is to view schools as competing units according to the rules of free competitive markets.” “If the recommendations are implemented,” cautioned Arie Arnon of Ben-Gurion University’s economics department, “it will create a system that reproduces and exacerbates inequality in society.” Opposition to the proposals peaked in the past year, when the Education Ministry began laying off teachers as a first step in implementing the reforms. An intensive campaign headed by the teachers’ union and social-minded public-interest groups succeeded in derailing the program’s implementation, and for the current school year, at least, it has been put into place in only a handful of districts, and with elections in the air, risks being shelved indefinitely.

One should not dismiss the critics’ concerns out of hand. Few would disagree that the reduction of societal gaps; the creation of a warm, safe, inclusive environment which leaves no child behind; and the inculcation of values such as peace and democracy—that all these are not merely laudable but also indispensable elements of a good school system for the Jewish state. Yet it is a terrible mistake to allow these noble goals to obscure what should be the most important aim of an educational system: To *educate*. The matter of standards and achievements is not simply one of many areas in which Israeli schools should excel but do not; it is the central one. As has been demonstrated by successful education reforms around the world in recent years—notably in Sweden, New Zealand, and New York City—the Dovrat reforms offer precisely the kind of results-based, accountability-driven effort that is essential to rescue a failing school system and making educational excellence a possibility. However, getting from possibility to reality requires something additional: A commitment not only to standards, but to high ones; not only administrative accountability, but also a demand for excellence.

Why is excellence so important? For some this is an obvious point; today, however, it certainly bears repeating. On the most basic level, education offers the tools for a successful economy, as better-educated workers and entrepreneurs place businesses in a better position to compete in the global market; this has a direct bearing on the inflow of investment, the creation of high-paying jobs, and the resultant improvement of the basic welfare of a nation. But beyond the economic benefit, excellence is important in any democracy, and especially so in a young one such as Israel's. The founders of what has become the dominant form of government in the West knew well what many of its defenders today frequently forget: That democracy means making the quality of rule dependent on the wisdom of the public. In a democracy, every generation lives according to its wisdom; and as such, every generation is handed either a gift or a burden from those who came before, in the quality of education it receives. To pick great leaders, citizens in a democracy must know enough about history, economics, science, religion, civics, and law—some of which will likely be learned only in school—to tell good policies from bad ones, to judge the qualities of their leaders, and to know when they are being deceived. “Whenever the people are well informed,” Thomas Jefferson wrote, “they can be trusted with their own government.”

Excellence in education is thus the secret strength of a healthy democracy. But it is also absolutely essential for a Jewish state. Such excellence is central to the mission of Zionism, which always sought to channel the greatest strengths of the Jewish people—especially their strengths of mind—into the task of building a vibrant, creative Jewish civilization in its own sovereign land, one that can channel resources to further advancing the Jewish spirit and mind. This is what compelled David Ben-Gurion to invest much of Israel's energies in the state's early years—at a time when Israel's strategic and economic footing was far less secure than today—in order to build a superior Israeli educational system. This effort was, in its day,

remarkably successful, such that Israeli thirteen-year-olds, for example, came in first in the world in mathematics in 1964. For this reason, Ben-Gurion saw fit to describe Israel's 1953 State Education Law, together with the Law of Return, as one of the two "supreme laws of the State of Israel." In Ben-Gurion's vision, it was Israel's superior educational system which he believed would "spell out the main contours of our aspiration to be an exceptional people and an exemplary state."

Educational excellence—this is a central pillar upon which a Jewish state should stand, and the most important way Zionism has fallen short. The transformation of Israel's schools into among the finest on earth, from the elementary level to the universities, is the greatest challenge facing the Zionist enterprise in the next generation.

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