BOOK REVIEWS


In every generation, Jewish education has a distinct and specific focus. In recent decades, in both the United States and in Britain, the focus has been on the Jewish day school system. There has been a remarkable shift away from supplementary education to full time Jewish education, and we can relate that shift to political, environmental, educational and communal agendas.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the needs of the Jewish community were quite different. The mass immigration of Eastern European Jews from the 1880s until the start of the First World War into both the United States and Britain caused a fundamental question for those new immigrants: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both citizens of their new adopted country and Jewish, how to be both part of wider society and distinct from it.

In both the United States and Britain, the question was the same, but Samson Benderly’s journey had taken him from Safed, in then Palestine, to Baltimore in the United States in 1898, and so it is on the United States that his story is focussed. Originally in the States to pursue his Medical studies, Benderly soon realised that his passion was for Jewish Education. Benderly was preoccupied with a dual school system - a new system of Jewish education built on principles underlying the life of all American Jews. For the rest of his life, Benderly sought to modernise Jewish education by professionalising the field, creating an immigrant-based supplementary school model and by pushing community responsibility for Jewish education. Benderly trained teachers, principal and bureau leaders and it is these young men who became known as the “Benderly Boys”. There were “Benderly girls” too, and Krasner’s book should be read together with the 2010 book “*The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education, 1910–1965*” (Brandeis). Edited by Carol Ingall, it comprises portraits of influential female Jewish educators, including a chapter on the Benderly girls.

Jonathan Krasner has written what must be seen as the definitive biography of one of the most important figures in American Jewish Education. His volume is a substantial and compelling story of Benderly’s
vast contribution to the Jewish education landscape in the United States. Krasner traces how Benderly shifted the Jewish education emphasis from heritage and content transmission to enculturation and social environment adjustment. The book tells the stories behind the creation of both institutions and curriculum, of both Federations and Camps. Krasner has coined the term: the “Benderly Revolution” and he sympathetically and rigorously chronicles that revolution through the four hundred pages of this book. Events and people are described and analysed in depth, and the book draws the reader in from the very first – the absorbing story of Temima Gezari, one of the first immigrants to be touched by the Benderly revolution – through to the final days of Benderly’s life in 1944.

Benderly’s philosophy and methods were creative and ambitious, and Krasner shows how his strategies made concessions to both the voluntary nature of religious education in the United States and to the realities of family life. His emphasis on flexibility, experimenting with everything from a three day a week to a two hour a week programme, valued family needs and priorities.

But Benderly’s efforts did not stop at organisational principles and curriculum. His establishment of teachers’ colleges and a professional journal were huge achievements and quite literally changed the face of Jewish education in the States. Krasner chronicles Benderly’s achievements with warmth and certainly celebrates him as a pioneer of modern Jewish education. But he does recognise the failings of the Benderly revolution, and arrives at a mixed conclusion. Benderly's scheme of modernization, professionalization, and standardization did not produce the educated American Jews that he and his “boys” tried to develop. Nevertheless, without their efforts Krasner acknowledges that Jewish American immigrants would have been challenged to have safeguarded Jewish continuity.

With enormous energy, Benderly’s main purpose was to organise, modernise and Americanise Jewish education. His role models, friends and colleagues were icons of twentieth century Jewish history: Judah Magnes, Henrietta Szold, Barnett Brickner, Solomon Schechter, Jacob Schiff, and Mordecai Kaplan. Benderly stood with the great and the good of his time.

And this is where, as a British Jew, I am puzzled. Jewish education academics and practitioners in Britain know of Henrietta Szold and they have read about Mordechai Kaplan. Virtually nobody has ever heard of Samson Benderly. How can this giant of Jewish Education, a man of such vision and drive that he revolutionised half a century of Jewish education in the United States, be so virtually unknown outside of the States? Krasner’s biography should somehow find its way to the UK (and
beyond). It should be required reading for both students of Jewish education and students of history and sociology. Not only is it a fascinating exploration related to a specific environment, but the issues facing American Jewry at the start of the twentieth century are very relevant to the situation that existed in the UK at that time.

By the 1960s, the era of the Benderly boys was over. The formulation of the purpose of Jewish education had shifted again, from adjustment to survival, and Jewish education was elevated to a communal priority, with the main aim being to stem the assimilationist drift in an open society. The emphasis on supplementary education was being replaced by a growth and belief in the need for Jewish day schools. But for a half a century or more Benderly and his boys were the dominant force in American Jewish education. The system wide revolution directed by Samson Benderly and his protégés touched hundreds of thousands of lives. Jonathan Krasner has contributed a seminal work to the library of the history and sociology of Jewish education. It should be read and discussed by all those who are invested not just in the past, but in the future.

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