

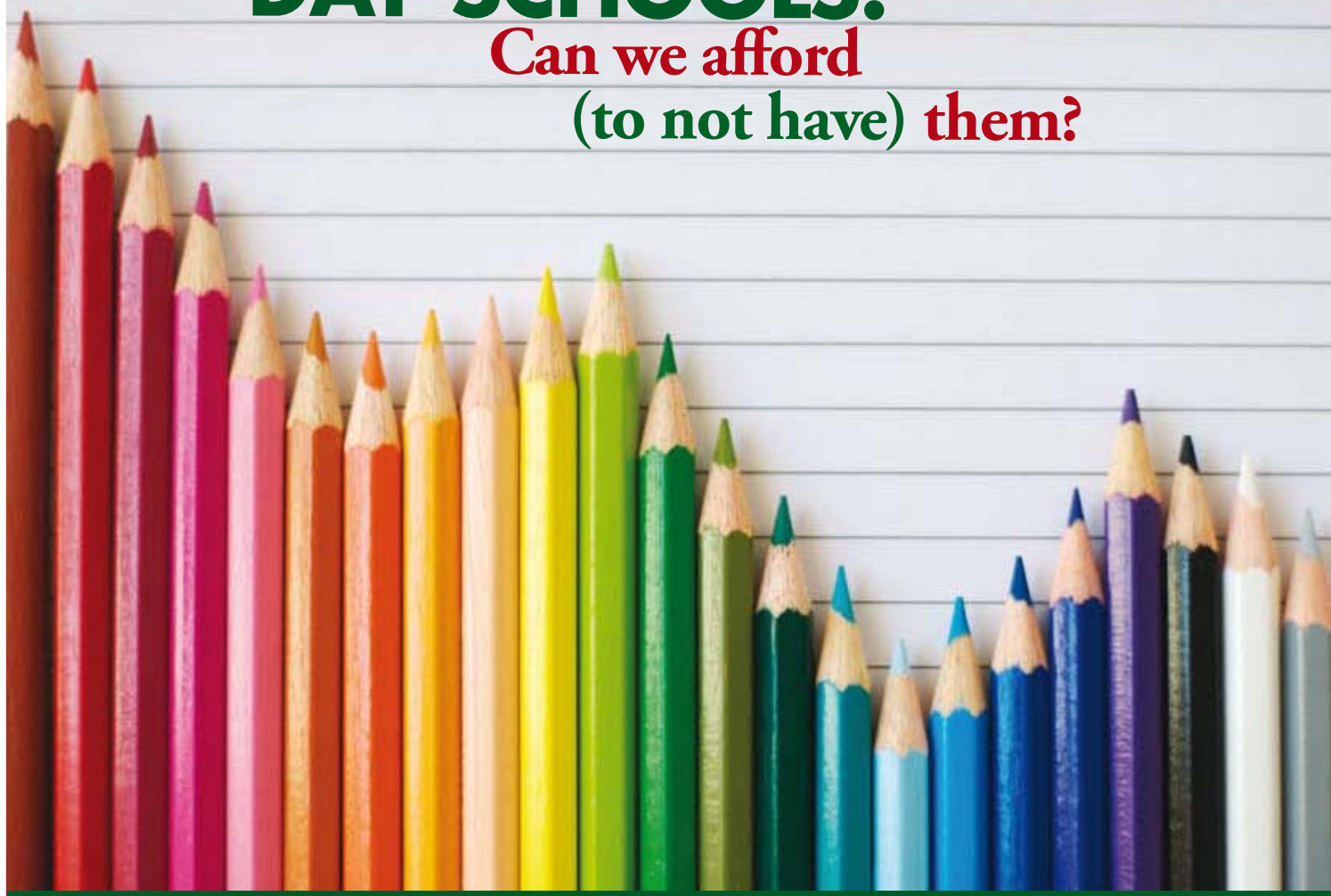
# JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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## DAY SCHOOLS:

**Can we afford  
(to not have) them?**



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### ***Perspective on Jewish Education***

Charles (Chip) Edelsberg



# Jewish Education and Economic Downturn: Lessons from the Great Depression

Jonathan Krasner

*Historian Jonathan Krasner looks to the impact of the Great Depression on Jewish education in North America for guidance in the current era.*

## Introduction

Commenting recently on the impact of the Great Recession on day school education, Ravsak executive director Marc Kramer struck a dour note. “This is the ‘perfect storm’ for day schools: Enrollment is down, requests for financial aid are up, attrition is up, new applications are down, donor dollars are down and the costs associated with health care are up. I know one should never say, ‘Things couldn’t get worse,’ but it is starting to feel that way” (Cohen, 2009).

Listening to Kramer, one is reminded of the ruinous impact of the Great Depression on American Jewish education in the 1930s. The stock market’s abrupt collapse in October 1929 heralded a decade of economic hardship that would only lift completely with America’s entry into the Second World War. Even today, the generation that came of school age in the 1930s is characterized as the most Jewishly ignorant of the twentieth century. At that time it was the communal supplementary school, the Talmud Torah, rather than the day school, which



was the mainstay of intensive Jewish education. The impact of the Depression on the Talmud Torahs was nothing short of devastating. Enrollment figures that were slowly rising throughout the 1920s declined back to pre-World War I levels. Layoffs at schools and educational agencies were *de rigueur*, while the salaries of those who remained were cut and sometimes

unpaid for months at a time. Struggling schools were forced to shut their doors and the work of supporting and coordinating central educational agencies was severely curtailed. Equally disturbing to Jewish educators was the rapid abandonment by schools of educational standards, administrative improvements, teacher licensing requirements, and efforts to

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promote safer and more hygienic facilities (Rosen and Chipkin, 1931; Krasner, 2005: 130-134).

Reflecting on the Depression years is useful at this juncture, and not only because it makes the current crisis seem modest in comparison. Behind the grim statistics and gut-wrenching stories are some useful lessons that professionals and lay leaders would do well to take to heart:

it began to dawn on Jewish educators that they were facing a protracted downturn that threatened to roll back the considerable advances of the 1910s and 1920s. During those decades, modest improvements in enrollment rates were accompanied by a rise in teacher salaries, the establishment of licensing boards and other innovations meant to professionalize the field. This was the era when the first

centered curriculum, catering to the elite, resulted in a wide achievement gap with an overwhelming majority of students leaving school with little to show for their experience.

Some schools were run by *maskilim* who were raised in Eastern Europe and were influenced by the burgeoning modernized *heder* (*heder metuqan*) system that developed at the turn of the

**When times are good, the relative free flow of financial and human resources often serves to sustain marginal institutions and shield them from scrutiny. When those resources dry up, however, the problems are not only exposed but frequently exacerbated.**

- Recessions tend to expose already existing problems within the system. Most vulnerable are the schools and institutions that are already in trouble.
- A recession can be good time to take stock of what works in an education program and what doesn't.
- Recessions underscore the importance of cultivating broad-based communal support, and not relying exclusively on the good will and largesse of big funders.

### **Recessions expose existing problems**

When times are good, the relative free flow of financial and human resources often serves to sustain marginal institutions and shield them from scrutiny. When those resources dry up, however, the problems are not only exposed but frequently exacerbated. Projects and organizations that are deemed to be insufficiently impactful or are simply not cost efficient lose support that was frequently dictated by habit or goodwill. Consequently, stakeholders are compelled to make uncomfortable – though often inevitable – decisions, sometimes with far-reaching results. These decisions are all the more painful when people are lulled into a false sense of security, as they were during the Roaring Twenties.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, few realized that the American economy was headed into a prolonged period of decline and stagnation. It wasn't until the latter half of 1930 and early 1931 that

Jewish education central agencies were created and many of the oldest Hebrew teacher colleges established. These organizations, along with Hebrew teachers unions, helped bring order to the chaotic hodge-podge of community-supported afternoon schools, congregational schools and one-room *heders*. The result was a discernable improvement in the standards, teaching methods and conditions in the larger schools. Administrative reforms and increased attention to hygienic and aesthetic concerns accompanied the adoption of new subjects like Jewish history, current events and music, and the teaching of Hebrew using *Ivrit beIvrit*, the natural or direct method (Ben-Horin, 1969: 51-100).

With few exceptions, the Depression had a crippling effect on Jewish educational institutions across the board. Especially hard hit, however, were the Talmud Torahs, the communal, four or five day a week supplementary Hebrew schools. Before the mainstreaming of day schools, Talmud Torahs – usually under nominal Orthodox auspices – provided an intensive education to tens of thousands of elementary school age children in virtually every medium and large sized Jewish community in North America. Many of these schools adopted a Hebraic curriculum and utilized *Ivrit beIvrit*. During their heyday, the best of these schools stood out as centers of Yiddishkeit and Hebrew learning. Admittedly, however, the high rate of student attrition, coupled with an inflexible language-

twentieth century. Luminaries among the small but dedicated cadre of American Hebraist poets and essayists, including A.H. Friedland and Ephraim Lisitsky, supported their families by operating Talmud Torahs, as did dedicated but often rigid pedagogues like Israel and Meyer Abrams, who introduced *Ivrit beIvrit* to Boston. According to Daniel Elazar, whose father Albert was a member of this coterie and the longtime superintendent of the United Hebrew Schools of Detroit, "For most of them the study of Hebrew language and literature plus history replaced traditional Jewish textual study as the foundation for survival." As a group these pedagogues tended to be zealous in their devotion to their vision. They were personified by the Abrams' colleague, Zvi Slobbins, a creative but impatient Talmud Torah principal in the Dorchester section of Boston who, at great personal expense, kept his school spotlessly clean, brightly decorated, and amply stocked with pictures, manipulatives and other teaching aids, despite the grinding poverty of his immigrant neighborhood (Mintz, 1993: 130; Ben-Horin, 1969: 62-67; Hurwich, 1999: 50).

By the 1920s, the Europeans were joined by a younger generation of American-trained educators, many of whom were influenced by the educational theories and orientation of philosopher John Dewey, of Columbia University Teachers College and Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan at the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and mentored by Dr. Samson Benderly of the New York Bureau

of Jewish Education. The Bureau piloted a string of progressive Talmud Torahs that inspired similar schools in New York, and other cities like Philadelphia and Chicago. Palpable tensions existed between the two groups, centering in part on the validity and applicability of the progressive methods championed by the younger generation, but more fundamentally on the older generation's fears of displacement. What both groups shared

educational activities. The jewel in the synagogue center's crown was typically its religious school, which was used to woo families with young children, their most promising demographic. The exodus from the Talmud Torahs began in the 1920s and their fate was finally sealed by rapid suburbanization in the 1950s. But the drain of students and tuition income during the Depression hastened their decline and demise.

worried the Institute's directors, who toyed with relocating to the Bronx. But the rapid hemorrhaging between 1929 and 1933, when the register plummeted to fewer than 250 students, rendered the Institute financially unsustainable. Declining enrollments not only denied the Institute tuition revenue, but it also jeopardized the yearly allocation it received from the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, which accounted for the lion's share of its operating budget. (Ironically, just as its budget was stretched to the breaking point and the Talmud Torah became all but unsustainable, the Institute became more vital than ever as a recreational center for Jewish youth. Throughout the Depression, the building remained a hub of activity, as underemployed youths from all over the city flocked to clubs, classes, and recreational activities.)

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in common, however, was a commitment to cultural Zionism and a conviction that American Jews' unswerving love affair with public education rendered intensive supplementary education the only viable educational approach to ensuring Jewish continuity in the United States.

At their height, in the late-1910s, communal Talmud Torahs were the schools of choice for about 60% of children who received a formal Jewish education in the Jewish immigrant population centers like New York. By the mid-1930s, however, the percentage of students attending these schools was cut in half. In New York, between 1928-1929 and 1934-1935, the number of students in the Talmud Torahs dropped by almost one-third, from 15,904 to 10,686. Indeed, almost half of the overall attrition during these years came from the communal schools. By contrast, congregational schools, which were also hurt by the Depression, only lost about one-fifth of their enrollment.

To be sure, the decline of the Talmud Torahs was not initiated by the Depression. But the economic downturn certainly accelerated their downfall. The Talmud Torah was an integral part of the immigrant ghetto landscape. As second and third generation Jews abandoned these neighborhoods for middle class enclaves, they flocked to synagogue centers, which, unlike the immigrant *hevras*, offered a range of recreational and

A case in point is the Central Jewish Institute, a progressive Talmud Torah and recreational center in the Yorkville neighborhood of Manhattan, next door to the venerable Orthodox synagogue, Kehilath Jeshurun (See Krasner, 2009; Stern, 2007: 147-174). At its height, in the early 1920s, the school served about 600 students. As working class Jews living to the east of Lexington Avenue, who made up the bulk of the Institute's clientele, began abandoning their tenements for the tree-lined streets of the Grand Concourse, and other middle class neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn, enrollment gradually declined. The long-term implications of the downward trend

By 1932, the Institute's annual budget was below where it stood in 1919. Economies included layoffs and doubling the work of remaining staff members. Teachers' course loads were increased, while their paychecks were reduced. Paid club leaders were replaced by volunteers or overextended teachers and staff members. Efforts in the early 1930s to keep the budget balanced, through layoffs, slashed paychecks and doubling the work of remaining teachers and staff members, eventually gave way to ballooning deficits, as administrators and board members found there was nothing left to cut.





Most painfully, perhaps, they were forced to confront the reality that the centerpiece of their curricular program, the *Ivrit beIvrit* or natural method for teaching Hebrew simply did not work for many students, at least not in a supplementary school setting.

More fundamentally, the dispiriting statistics repeatedly drove the board to extended episodes of organizational soul searching, in which the very mission of the institution was questioned. As one of the lay leaders, Harry Fischel, pointed out in the midst of one contentious argument: “The only reason people are tearing their hair out is that there aren’t enough children.” Facing a massive budget cut in 1932, the dispirited director, Albert Schoolman, toyed with closing the Institute. He was ultimately dissuaded by close friends and colleagues in Jewish education. “In a situation such as we face today, it is not numbers that need to be protected as much as quality and standards,” Israel Chipkin counseled. “The institution[s] which we represent, which we have helped to build in the last twenty years seem to be falling all around us. There is a feeling of loneliness, disappointment, discouragement and futility which sometimes oppresses us. It has been our lot, however, to serve as the pioneers for an idea, for a cause. We must be careful not to take the right move at the wrong time. Our position has been

reduced to that of spiritual watchmen, to defenders of the leaders of retreat, to protectors of the cause.” Schoolman relented and the Institute remained open, albeit in a much reduced capacity. Yet, it emerged from the Depression in a severely weakened position and effectively closed its doors in 1944 when its building was sold to the Ramaz School, although its mission effectively lived on until the 1980s through its daughter institution, the Cejwin Camps.

### **Recessions are a time to take stock**

The impact of the Depression on American Jewish education cannot be gauged entirely through statistics of dwindling enrollments, shrinking payrolls and declining Federation allocations. Jewish educators were placed on the defensive, compelled to justify their activities to the larger community. This process encouraged introspection, self-criticism and angst. Some educators succumbed to romancing the past, overstating the accomplishments of the previous twenty years. Most, however, were willing to acknowledge

that their successes had been uneven at best – school administrative reforms and improvements to the physical plants far outpaced amelioration in the critical areas of pedagogy and curriculum. There was a broad consensus, at least among the Americanized educators, that John Dewey’s child centered and functionalist approach to education should guide any consideration of pedagogy. Jewish educators conceded that these ideas were no longer novel. Yet they admitted that previous efforts to effect change along these lines had been mostly unsuccessful. Most painfully, perhaps, they were forced to confront the reality that the centerpiece of their curricular program, the *Ivrit beIvrit* or natural method for teaching Hebrew simply did not work for many students, at least not in a supplementary school setting.

While various approaches to the teaching of Hebrew and other subjects were vigorously debated, many of the leading educators were setting their sights even higher, capitalizing on the state of uncertainty and flux to advocate for a

wholesale re-conceptualization of the design and nature of the Jewish school. The leadership of the National Council for Jewish Education and the editors of *Jewish Education* encouraged this exercise in wistful utopian visualization. The planners of the 1932 NCJE conference chose “The American Jewish School of Tomorrow”

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as their theme, and invited papers on the topic from many of the leading lights in Jewish education, including Samson Benderly, Mordecai Kaplan, William Chomsky, Jacob Golub, Leo Honor and Emanuel Gamoran.

Exercises in envisaging the school of tomorrow channeled some of the creative energies of Jewish education professionals whose work was stymied by the effects of the economic downturn. “[S]eeds have been planted which will sprout in their due season,” Jacob Golub hopefully predicted. The tone was set by Benderly’s keynote address, which he delivered “in his characteristic ‘shock’ method,” according to the conference proceedings. Benderly contended that the economic decline had brought with it “two blessings” for the Jewish teaching profession: it had weakened the resolve of those in the community who resisted change, while shaking up complacent educators, encouraging them to once again become “pioneering and adventurous” in their work (Eisenberg, 1932: 180).

One notable outcome of this period of soul searching was that it compelled many day school skeptics to rethink their positions. While many remained convinced that the majority of Jews would not soon sour on their commitment to public education, they were forced to admit that implementation of progressivist pedagogical reforms and *Ivrit beIvrit* were stymied in the afternoon schools by inherent structural and organizational problems. Even the best Talmud Torahs suffered from a lack of time, the lateness of the hour, a high elimination (or drop

out) rate, and the pervasive devaluation of Jewish education by both children and their parents. Others were little more than bar mitzvah factories.

In the course of an extended presentation on the ideal Jewish school program, Cincinnati Bureau of Jewish Education director Jacob Golub and Chicago College

of Jewish Studies (later renamed the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies) superintendent Leo Honor tacitly acknowledged the impracticable nature of their prescriptive curriculum for the supplementary school when they singled out for praise the “interesting” experiments with “Jewish private schools.” The 1927 opening of Yeshiva of Flatbush, in Brooklyn, N.Y., heralded the arrival of the Zionist modern Orthodox day school where the pedagogical merits of *Ivrit beIvrit* (*Ivris beIvris* in many schools until the at least the late 1940s, and in some cases well into the 1960s) could be fairly tested. A handful of progressive Jewish day schools were also founded in the interwar years, including the Center Academy of the Brooklyn Jewish Center (1928) and the

Brandeis School (1931) in Woodmere, NY (Golub and Honor, 1932).

Golub and Honor were quick to add that they were not suggesting that the community give up on the supplementary school, but their encouraging words about day schools presaged a communal-wide reassessment that began even before the Depression completely lifted. In the midst of the recession of 1937, two new day schools opened: Ramaz, in Manhattan, and the Yeshiva of the Rockaways, later known as the Hebrew Institute of Long Island. In New York City, where the day school movement had the most traction, between 1928-1929 and 1941-1942, enrollment grew from 4,290 to 6,270 pupils. These numbers are especially impressive given that the total Jewish school-age population declined during that same period from 321,665 to 250,000. The increasing interest in day school education in the years prior to the war continued to snowball in its aftermath. By 1955, almost 1 in 10 Jewish students receiving a Jewish education were enrolled in a day school. The vast majority of the schools were Orthodox-affiliated, and a fair number were *haredi* (both Hasidic and non-Hasidic). But a few progressive academies, community day schools and Conservative-affiliated schools existed, and the more modern day schools were attracting a substantial number of non-

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Orthodox students (Nardi, 1944; Dinin, 1955; Schiff, 1966).

## **Recessions underscore the importance of cultivating communal support**

Of all the setbacks during the 1930s, arguably the most painful for Jewish educators was the decision by many federations to disproportionately slash central agency and Talmud Torah association budgets. Since 1917, when leaders of the newly established New York Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies agreed to reverse their policy against supporting religious and cultural organizations, and subsidize the Bureau of Jewish Education and the largest Talmud Torahs, federations and community chests around the country were increasingly opening their coffers to schools and bureaus. In some cities, financial support was offered in the form of scholarships for needy children, while in others, institutions were offered direct support. To be sure, federations in some cities, like Cleveland, continued to hold out, but the more typical pattern was Chicago, where the Jewish Charities' support for the local bureau of Jewish education and affiliated Talmud Torahs soared from \$38,000.00 in 1923 to \$130,000.00 in 1929 (Krug, 1954: 22).

Jewish educators interpreted the increasing level of support as an indication of broad acceptance of their assertion that the financing of Jewish education must be a community responsibility. They were quick to label their opponents as "assimilationists," and took solace in the belief that they were a noisy but ineffectual minority. In truth, however, widening financial support for Jewish education in the 1920s was more accurately a reflection of good economic times, when federations were flush with surpluses and could afford not to be discriminating about their allocations. Many funders continued to question why community dollars should be spent supporting ideologically based educational programs.

In the early years of the Depression, even as schools were under increasing stress, bureau directors tried to maintain a steely confidence in the face of adversity. Those

bureaus that fell under the aegis of local federations were, by and large, not being asked to bear a disproportionate burden of the budget cuts. "One cannot help thinking of the ... Jewish proverb: 'God sends his remedy before the plague,'" Chicago Board of Education director Alexander Dushkin observed in 1931. "The efforts made during the past decade to get the communities to assume responsibility for Jewish education, either by the local Federations of Charities or by the Jewish Education Associations, has been fully vindicated in this time of trial." In light of the progress of the previous twenty years in raising the quality of most schools, Dushkin and his colleagues considered it almost unimaginable that the Jewish community would abandon education as a funding priority.

But as conditions continued to decline, what was once inconceivable was being touted in some quarters as commonsensical. Sporadic but enduring donor support for restricting Federation dollars to charity purposes gained considerable momentum over the next two years. "We must not permit the cry of 'bread versus education' to undermine our spirit and cause irreparable cultural harm to the growing generation of our children," Dushkin implored in a radio talk delivered in April 1932, marking the occasion of Jewish Education Week. "Dignity, faith, self-understanding, and self-respect are as important to the normal human being as is life itself. We must provide not only for the body alone, but for the spirit also." The highest profile showdown occurred in Dushkin's own city, Chicago, where a newly appointed Federation director was unable to withstand pressure from prominent philanthropists to cut funding for the Board of Jewish Education and its affiliated schools. According to a new protocol, adopted in 1932, they would only receive those Federation monies that donors specifically earmarked for Jewish education. This arrangement, which precipitated Dushkin's departure from the Chicago BJE, remained in effect until 1934 (Dushkin, 1975: 84-87).

The Chicago experience seemed to expose as "superficial" the successes that Jewish educators enjoyed in the 1910s and 1920s.

The reality, educator and philosopher Isaac Berkson (1932) concluded, was that "the idea of a community supported Jewish education has not taken real root. In a sense, Jewish education remains a parasitical plant, on philanthropy on the one hand, on congregational organization on the other hand." Berkson's point was reiterated by the Jewish Charities leader, who told Dushkin: "We would not be in our present jam on this whole problem if there had been either community education or if our board had been thoroughly convinced. Even among the ardent friends of Jewish education there is very little knowledge as to how the money is spent, and what we, in terms of what is done, mean by 'systematic organization of Jewish education'" (Goldsmith, 1933).

In the long run, the willingness and resolve of many federations to jettison or disproportionately slash funding for educational and cultural programming during the early 1930s, was instructive. There was a serious chasm between educators and community leaders. Each side was highly suspicious of the others' motives and viewed the other as an impediment to realizing a suitable Jewish educational program. The experience convinced most central agency leaders that it was essential to work within the existing system to place Jewish education on a firmer footing. Lay leaders, they argued, needed to be brought into the education enterprise as collaborators, not simply as check writers (Rosen, 1937).

At the 1936 NCJE conference, longtime Philadelphia Associated Talmud Torahs director Ben Rosen found a partner in the federation world who shared this conviction and was eager to work with him to open the lines of communication between the two groups. New York Jewish Federation leader Joseph Willen and Rosen were panelists in a session dedicated to "Financing Jewish Education." Rosen resonated with Willen's frank assessment that the "moneyed groups" needed to be disabused of their "erroneous impressions of Jewish education," while Jewish educators were obligated to exhibit more receptivity to the concerns and views of the philanthropists if they wished to secure more than a token amount of

funding. Both men endorsed the idea of establishing a lay group affiliated with the NCJE that would work in tandem with educators to develop a program of Jewish education and be charged with promotion and fundraising within the community. An exploratory committee was organized to drum up interest for such a group within the larger Jewish community. The following spring, fifty powerful lay people, representing many of the larger Jewish communities, founded the American Association for Jewish Education, forerunner of the Jewish Education Service of North America. In 1943, Rosen was appointed as the AAJE's first full time executive director (Eisenberg, 1936; Rosen, 1937a).

In the contemporary era, when family foundations have largely taken the initiative in setting the Jewish educational agenda, lay leaders and professionals should take care not to overlook the continued importance of Jewish public opinion and strong professional-lay relations in sustaining the educational agenda and safeguarding the long-term growth and success of even the most effective programs and organizations. The recent fallout from the triple punch of the recession, the contraction of the banking sector, and the Madoff scandal was to some extent reminiscent of the 1930s. With scores of family fortunes wiped out and a few foundations forced to close their doors, storied institutions and organizations suddenly found themselves in deep financial trouble, often exacerbated by funding models that eschewed the cultivation of small scale donations as inefficient. While the reliance on large gifts will necessarily remain a cornerstone of Jewish educational funding strategy, the long term viability of programs and institutions will rest on their ability to attract community buy-in.

## Conclusion

It is too early to write a postmortem on the Great Recession of 2008-2009. But its impact in the sphere of Jewish education, both from the structural and strategic perspectives will surely be felt for years to come. The extent to which funders, policy makers and the larger community embrace

and internalize the lessons of the Great Depression, they will be poised to more adeptly navigate contemporary challenges with an eye towards a healthier future.

As in the 1930s, there is evidence that the economic climate has forced policy makers to reassess their agendas with an eye towards Jewish public opinion. At a forum on the impact of the current economic downturn on Jewish education at Yeshiva University, sponsored by the Network for Research in Jewish Education, the shadow of the Great Depression was much in evidence. Indeed, the Depression was invoked repeatedly by the speakers, who seem to be attentive to its lessons. For example, Sacha Litman, founder of the consulting firm Measuring Success, pointed out that, while day school enrollments in the non-Orthodox sector were projected to decline, and some schools were forced to or in danger of closing their doors, data from the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education indicates that the hardest hit schools are those whose quality was already mediocre or whose fundamental economics were previously unsound. Similarly, Yossi Prager, executive director of the AVI CHAI Foundation, sounded a hopeful note about the future. Some cost cutting now is healthy, he argued. When things turn around there will be efficiencies in place and a greater degree of financial transparency. This, in turn, will result in long term sustainability and greater public trust.

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