

Which School?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

All parents have to go through the “which school” agony, often several times for every child. For many parents it is a double agony, because the issue is not simply one of what choice will most affect a child’s career, but how that choice will affect a child’s soul as well.

The first question is what the priorities are. In a dream situation, parents, teachers, and pupils all share the exact same vision. This rarely happens. Most settle for a compromise. If one belongs to a particular religious sect or dynasty, then there will be no question. But even then, for parents whose children do not fit in or are challenged in some way, or if there is any doubt about the ideology, this sort of education just will not necessarily succeed.

Schools which are committed to a very high and competitive academic program, geared to bright children, would be unsuitable to anyone not highly motivated or with an average IQ. To force a reluctant child into such an environment is a recipe for frustration and a sense of failure. My father loved to say that “for the average Jewish parent there is no such thing as an average Jewish child”.

City and state schools set out to achieve a balance, academically, socially, and culturally. There is a great deal to be said in their favor where they work. But this usually depends on the pupil intake, quality of teachers and social context. Everywhere there are some excellent state schools, and parents battle to get their children into them. But the majority of State schools are inadequate. The bigger issue is the cultural and behavioral degradation that seriously affect one’s child’s academic and moral development.

The failure of the state system almost everywhere is why so many Jews in countries where there are options, send their children to Jewish schools even when they are not religiously committed, themselves. They believe the social environment is less threatening. And the cost is massively subsidized by the state, unlike in the USA. But the trouble is that this leads to conflicting agendas. Non-observant Jewish parents only want the school to provide a Jewish social context, not to educate their children to become religious. The school, on the other hand, wants to enhance Jewish religious commitment. Such a conflict of interests undermines the homogeneity and Jewishness of the school.

A typical problem for parents in the UK is whether to opt for a school, like the JFS in London; academically excellent, outstanding facilities, but 90% of its pupils are not interested in Jewish education, what do you do as a parent? You might find a private Jewish school with good academic results, but the social may be problematic because the student body will tend to be highly materialist and less motivated.

If you can afford it, you might send your child to a private ("public" in the UK) school where the academic results will be excellent; but a non-Jewish environment during the crucial period of a child's emotional and social growth has other side effects. There are some such schools with outstanding academic records and a very significant Jewish minority that provides a sense of solidarity. But in my experience it works only with really motivated secure children with a highly supportive home environment. And here's another issue. Too often children forced into highly academic environments and succeeding in them end up having the creativity and independence squashed out of them.

Many Jewish religious schools may discourage academic excellence (even where they encourage good exam results). Religious girls' schools discourage going to university. On the other hand, the pupils will have the security and warmth of a protected and religiously secure environment where they will not feel outsiders, inadequate, or old fashioned, and later on they can make other choices.

When I had to choose for my children, I went for religious schools, even though I knew full well their academic (and even their Jewish) limitations. Those of my children who were academically motivated pushed themselves to succeed. Those who were not simply marked (I might say "wasted") time until, at a later date, they themselves grew into motivated adults. I thought that feeling comfortable in a social environment was more important than a strong academic program. All the more since my experience has told me that success comes in many different guises and personal success is more important than academic success.

In the USA, the choice is much harder because of the phenomenal cost of Jewish education. Very Orthodox schools, within an ethos of communal charity and support, find ways of subsidizing pupils. But for the rest it can be as much as \$35,000 a year per child. Home Schooling is another growing option but this requires such willing, dedicated and knowledgeable parents, it is not always possible.

In the USA there is the further issue of whether one should patronize Hebrew charter schools, state-funded private schools patronized mainly but not exclusively by Jewish or Israeli children. The social environment might be conducive, but certainly not religious. It is like sending one's child in Israel to a secular state school. And we have seen how much impact that has on Jewish identity.

In the end, there are no guarantees or certainties. Every school and every child is different, and every family situation is different. The needs of one are not the same as the needs of others. Bringing up children is a tough, stressful and risky enterprise.

When all is said and done, as an ex-headmaster, I do not much like schools. For every inspirational teacher there are twenty duds. Thank goodness most kids are resilient and survive them. What counts are parental love and discipline(!). The rest is up to the Almighty! No wonder the Talmud says it's in God's hands.