

Publisher's Note



IVILIZATION,” wrote the great scholar of Judaism, Jacob Neusner, “hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding.”

In a recent discussion with colleagues, we offered thoughts on what keeps us up at night. Sadly, there was much to discuss. Neusner’s warning rattled around in my mind: Are we in the midst of the precise stumble he warned us about so presciently?

No matter where one resides on the vast spectrum of Jewish ideologies, the primacy of education used to be a consensus position. Historically, the thirst for education animated Jewish life. Our legacy as Jews was neither territory nor vast cathedrals. We had no crown jewels of which to boast. Until relatively recently there had been no military victories or heroic quests. Our achievements were intellectual. Our heroes were dedicated to study. A common aspiration was affording the time to delve into the Talmud, the Zohar, Yiddish literature, and Midrash. “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray,” Tevye tells us. “And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. And that would be the sweetest thing of all.”

When our forebears reached North America, they knew that the

only possibility they had to offer their children a better life was to embrace higher education. Our grandparents and parents sacrificed to afford college for their children. Today, Jews in America are at the top of the list of religious groups regarding educational attainment.

So how is it that the freest, wealthiest, and, secularly, the most educated Jewish community in history is also, by many measures, the most Jewishly illiterate?

We have all but given up on teaching Hebrew, making American Jews a historical anomaly—a Jewish community without a distinct language. Jewish day schools, though often excellent, have failed to significantly increase their market share outside the Orthodox community, which represented just 9 percent of American Jews in 2020. Congregational schools are in desperate need of reengineering: The current generation of parents has no way to explain to their children why they are sending them there—other than a dispiriting, “If I had to go, you have to go.” Holiday observance is becoming a meal, largely devoid of content or context.

Why do we lack the will and imagination to make high-quality Jewish day-school education universal and affordable? Is there any scenario in which the American Jewish community continues to thrive, to be a hub of cultural creativity, without a grounding in what this people is all about?

And as we abandoned *Jewish* education, secular education abandoned us. The elite secular schools and universities that used to be our refuge are increasingly becoming our adversary. A proud Jew is no longer a sought-after citizen on some campuses, either as a student or a faculty member. On others we are barely tolerated—and only if we keep our opinions about Israel to ourselves. Critical thinking is not an aim. It’s a threat. Diversity of opinion is welcome only if that diversity occupies about 10 percent of the ideological spectrum.

These are the twin challenges that this volume of SAPIR will explore: the two sides of education that have meant so much to us. Our aspiration is not to merely raise issues, but to begin a discussion that helps solve them. *