

JEWISH EDUCATION PRIORITIES

Your question:

Moshe, wouldn't you agree that Jewish education for our youth should be the community's highest priority?

My answer:

Actually, I do not agree with that. The highest priority should be the continuing Jewish education of adults. That is where the need is most critical, for the reasons given below.

1. Jewish adults today are woefully undereducated in history, laws, and philosophy. This has some really serious consequences. For example:
 - *They don't know much at all, are confused by what little they have heard, and often carry a very minimal and unsatisfying image of Judaism.*
 - *They cannot instruct or answer the questions of their children.*
 - *Their ignorance and lack of interest in Jewish studies sets a bad example and conveys a destructive message to the young. How can children conclude that Judaism is valuable if their parents don't spend any time studying it?*
2. Jewish education should start in the home anyway and be primarily accomplished there by two knowledgeable parents. It seems self-evident to me that if there is no Jewish life at home, no amount of Hebrew school will do any good.
3. The practice of dropping off the kids for an hour or two of Jewish instruction, during which the parent goes off to do a variety of chores, detracts from the education spirit and process. The parents should set an example by also taking at least as many hours of classes during the week and preferably during the same time period. Also, how can the parent adequately evaluate the children's Jewish education if he or she is not in a position to discuss what has been presented in the latter's classes? In my opinion, the congregation should look with some disapproval at parents who seek their children's Jewish education but not their own.
4. I also need to mention that the love or fear of G-d should not, in my opinion, be a major goal of children's instruction. Rather, ethical development, along Jewish lines, together with history and culture, are the proper areas of emphasis. Discussions of divinity should be left for later, maybe the teen years, early adulthood, and for the more mature. So, my first priority is adult Jewish education. After that is adequately set up and running smoothly, with a variety of classes and significant numbers of congregants enrolled, should the attention be turned to the children. I would much prefer to have precious resources allocated in this way.

It would be hard to imagine the loss of Jews, young and old, to assimilation or miscellaneous competing spiritual paths, if the community made sure that the parents, for starters, had a non-trivial knowledge of, or were at least seriously interested in, what Judaism has to offer.

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