

Jewish Education: It's Time to Rock the Boat

This speech was delivered by Aryeh Rubin on January 11, 2005 at the International Conference of Jewish Education, organized by the Lookstein Center of Bar-Ilan University and hosted by The Shul of Bal Harbour (Bal Harbour, FL). Targum Shlishi was a sponsor of the conference.

Good evening,

My name is Aryeh Rubin, and I am the director of Targum Shlishi.

As one of the sponsors of this event, it gives me great pleasure to join in welcoming you to the International Conference of Jewish Education.

Much has been said about the continuity of the Jewish people. Meetings have been held, committees have been set up, and more than a billion dollars has been spent in the last ten years to stem the tide of assimilation. However, most would agree that significant progress has yet to be made.

But it's crystal clear to me, that you, sitting in this audience, those of you who teach our youth, are the answer. Statistics don't lie – and we all know the facts. The Population Study of 2001 shows that the assimilation rate for Jews who attended day school is seven percent, while the national average is forty-seven percent. Yet, as important as Jewish education is to our survival and mission, more and more families are struggling to keep up with tuition costs, despite the fact that American Jews earn on average twice the median American income.

Day school enrollment among the Orthodox continues to grow, and we have twice as many students enrolled as we did forty years ago. Yet, you are overworked, under-paid, less appreciated than you should be, and the likelihood is that you will not have your own children enter the field of Jewish education.

If after you attend this conference you go back merely feeling somewhat stimulated and continue to go about the business of teaching and administrating, then it will have been another conference like all the others. And the conflicts and challenges will be there at your next conference and the one after that. What I would like to see happen instead is a *Mahepechaa* revolution. I would like to see some *chutzpa*.

We need to go back to the establishment and *shrei gevalt*, cry out. We are hurting, we are losing our youth. We cannot keep up with the good private schools. We need to urge the funding organizations to up the ante.

As a people we have had crushing failures in the recent past. Our leadership failed us during the Holocaust, with the crisis of assimilation, and with the Israeli/Palestinian public relations debacle. We cannot allow the education of our Jewish children to meet a similar fate.

We should learn from the success of the Soviet Jewry movement. The establishment in the early 1960s

insisted on a “quiet diplomacy.” It was universal. The World Jewish Congress, the Rav at Yeshiva University, and even the Chassidic Rebbes, they all insisted that we *za shtill*, that we keep quiet. But along comes Jacob Birnbaum in 1964, and along with some college students starts the SSSJ, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. He organized the early rallies, got the momentum going, and it was *amcha* that got the establishment to get moving. Once the establishment signed on, they, in turn organized the marches on Washington, and the rest is history. Soviet Jewry was saved, and it was the beginning of the empowerment of American Jewry. If we are to turn the tide in Jewish education, it will have to come from us, the *amcha*.

Anecdotal evidence shows that a majority of the board members at many Federations do not send their children to day schools. If these schools were of the caliber of, say, Dalton, St. Albans, or Pinecrest, perhaps they would. But as it stands, the quality of our education is clearly not the priority it should be at the funding organizations. True, these umbrella organizations have to feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, and care for the elderly. But we must reexamine our priorities if we are to have the continuity that we all claim is crucial. More resources must be made available for Jewish education.

The assets are there. According to *Moment Magazine*, some twenty-five billion dollars is sitting in Jewish foundations. Yet a recent report indicated that only eleven percent of major gifts from such organizations go to Jewish causes. We, they, all of us, are not trying hard enough. You, you, and you, both individually and collectively, have to go to your boards, your Baal Hebatim your local CAJE’s and demand more resources, take out ads, and start alternative funding campaigns. Do what it takes to make this happen. Because if we do things *shtila heit*, quietly, they will not listen. They haven’t in the past and won’t in the future—unless they feel the pressure.

Last year we ran an ad about the need for improvement in Jewish education in a publication for the Jewish Film Festival here in Miami. The ad, which you can view on our website (www.targumshishi.org), generated some controversy and I believe it will lead to positive results.

This is the time for action. If we do not take action we will not get the resources, and if we do not have the resources the unaffiliated will not be part of the system, and regrettably many will never learn of the grandeur and majesty of our heritage.

We need to be righteously indignant. Without the cooperation and support of the umbrella funding organizations, we cannot pull it off. For as much as we strive to perfect ourselves as individuals, history will judge us not on our ideas or beliefs but on the community and society we have created. And that can only come about through a reinvigoration of our educational system, which is dependent on how wide we spread that net.

We need to rethink what we expect our children to know, and what we should be teaching them. The stimuli available to a ten-year-old today was unthinkable only fifteen years ago. We have to rethink how we will make learning more effective and how we will force-feed technology and its capabilities on our somewhat archaic system of pedagogy.

When all of the extant Jewish literature, from the *Tanach* to the Yiddish literature of the Haskala, from the *Rishonim* to the Jewish encyclopedias, can all fit on one of the new DVD-Blues, and is all instantly recallable, perhaps we need to rethink what learning means. I know that we don't have the answers, but we need to ask the questions.

To accomplish this all we need are two things:

- The ability to think outside the box
- Money

With training and foresight, many of you are willing and do think outside the box. As for the second element, money, that is where you, who are in the trenches, have not been fighting for your share. What we need is for teachers, principals, boards, and parents to unite within your own communities and light that magical fire and force the hand of the established funding organizations.

It is written in *Pirke Avot*:

Kol machloket sh'he leshem shomayim, sofa l'hitkayem

“Every dispute that is for a heavenly cause will eventually endure.”

I, for one, cannot think of a more heavenly cause.

Good night and may you enjoy and benefit from the wisdom of this education conference.

Thank you for listening.