

The Reform Jewish Educator *Then and Now*

by Alan D. Bennett, R.J.E.

Almost thirty-five years ago, one hundred and one men and women — members of the Eastern Seaboard and the Midwest Region of Reform educators — met in New York to create a national professional association of Reform synagogue educators. Thus was born the National Association of Temple Educators, originating a profession and a career: Reform Jewish education.

Our motives were as complex as they were varied. Some longed to end a sense of occupational aloneness. Some sought structured and institutionalized ways to learn from peers. Some sensed the importance of a status-enhancing organization. Some understood that career components like salary, retirement benefits and placement depended on common effort. Yet all of us were determined to speak *peh echad*, with one professional voice, about Reform education, its emerging agenda and its centrality to our Movement and to Jewish survival.

The early fifties were seminal years for American Jewry. Post-war community and synagogue building changed forever Jewish life and Jewish influence. Religious schools were expanding in size and number at an incredible pace. Temples searched — frequently in vain — for school directors who, in the end, were begged and borrowed from public schools, Jewish centers, academia and occasionally from the rabbinate. Most of us came from “the outside” and had little or no preparation for a career in Jewish education. Most were male, nearly all were part-timers. Many struggled with too-crowded classrooms and outdated texts. Curriculum and pedagogics lagged far behind public education models, which themselves were in the throes of agonizing reassessment. Teachers were precious, highly motivated, inadequately prepared colleagues in an educational effort of vast and burgeoning magnitude. There was no central research program. There was no significant mechanism for colleagues to share experiences and information despite the high quality but all-too-modest activities of the UAHC education department and *Jewish Teacher* magazine.

Colleague contacts were few and sporadic within the Reform Movement and near zero with Conservative and Orthodox educators. Articles by Reform educators

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were almost never found in *Jewish Education* or *Pedagogic Reporter*. Reform educators held no major position in Bureaus, Federations or other communal agencies (A notable exception was Nathan Brilliant's directorship of the Cleveland Bureau of Jewish Education, starting in 1946. From his retirement in 1960 to my 1978 appointment to head the same agency, there were no others.)

Despite the problems and the handicaps, the Reform education enterprise grew and managed to advance itself. UAHC regions brought educators together for sharing and planning. The fledgling camp movement provided centers for teacher development programs. The understaffed UAHC education department began to publish modern texts, teacher guides, pupil workbooks and audio-visual materials.

From the outset, educators were in-

to experiment towards educational excellence. The Fellow in Religious Education (FRE) title, administered through the Commission, encouraged many NATE members to reach ever higher levels of competence and excellence.

Yet, as forward looking and as demanding as the FRE was, it did not fully satisfy the quest for recognized excellence. That need is now met through the Reform Jewish Educator (RJE) program, which rewards the very highest standards and recognizes that the educator is competent in all aspects of synagogue education, not only in the religious school.

Not only Reform education has been furthered by our professional efforts. Today, Reform educators are found in Bureaus, day schools, Federations and national agencies. Moreover, Reform professionalism has led to partnership participation in every Jewish educational forum and to dialogue with colleagues in other Jewish education associations. Reform educators also author texts and teacher guides whose users are not limited to Reform programs.

Of special importance is the emergence

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cluded in the UAHC's appointees to the Commission on Jewish Education, harbinger of their increasingly important role in educational planning. The Commission today is a tripartite body in which UAHC, CCAR and NATE are equal partners. The Warwick Think Tank, which preceded the curriculum development process, included many educators who also chaired task forces whose work culminated in the Schuster Curriculum. NATE members became frequent contributors to *Jewish Teacher* and, later, *Compass Magazine*. They became as well field test supervisors for Schuster Curriculum units and evaluators of new materials. Reform education is today able to respond to change because of the insights and skills the educator brings to the effort.

Reform education has been transformed as well by NATE's profound preoccupation with professional standards. When first efforts to provide correspondence and regional study through HUC-JIR did not succeed, NATE devised its own professional development programs, utilizing educational colleagues and rabbis and linking membership requirements to professional growth. School certification standards were enunciated, standards which still serve NATE's school accreditation teams. Curriculum award projects (Gamoran, Kaminker and Chapman Awards) continue to motivate educators

of significant day school education opportunities under Reform auspices. It happened slowly and, often, against vociferous opposition. But it did come, and the Reform day school changes the way we now see ourselves in the Jewish world. Now Reform, like other ideologies, offers intensive Jewish education for those who want it and, therefore, contributes in new ways to Jewish vitality.

In other spheres, Reform led the way. It was first to recognize that Israel experiences are infinitely valuable educational activities. It was first to understand and to integrate youth group activities as logical concomitants of classroom learning. It was first to integrate family learning curricula into the school experience. It was first — and only — to conduct a proper curriculum development process which began with goal-definition and continues to this day to experiment with age-appropriate and subject-appropriate learning activities.

In the beginning, Reform Judaism was an educational innovator. It is today as well. On its pioneering paths, Reform encouraged and abetted NATE's founding, welcomed the education professional and formed a productive and lasting partnership with the Reform educator. That, perhaps, was the most important educational change in recent decades, for that change made the others possible. ★