Hermetically Sealed Learning: my experience of Jewish schools

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ABSTRACT This article looks at the cultural impact of faith schools on their pupils in terms of what it teaches them about their own identity, and what it fails to teach them about the identities of people whom they live among in the wider society. On the basis of personal experience it attempts to tease out the assumptions on which such an education is based and the limitations it places on those who pass through this kind of system.

When it comes to the vexed question of faith schools I can claim inside knowledge, even if it is dated. In 1960 I lived with my extended family, above a shop in Hackney, a deprived inner-city area that today boasts a multiplicity of ethnic and religious groupings, with around 300 languages spoken by its school students. That year I was sent to the nursery of Clapton Jewish Day School. I progressed to the infants and juniors and left in 1969 having had a distinctly 'Jewish' education in an institution proud to be hermetically sealed from the surrounding population.

At that time my parents were among the minority of Jewish parents in Britain opting to give their children a Jewish school education. In the days when most parents were happy to send their children to the local school, before shopping for schools became a London if not an urban disease nationally, most Jewish parents were happy to do the same, even if the local school was Church of England. They were content to leave the Jewish side of their children's education to supplementary school – the *kheder* – which their children would go to three times a week for two hours at a time.

In Britain today, the majority of Jewish families affiliated to synagogues are opting to send their children to Jewish schools. Various reasons have been suggested to explain this, from a firm commitment to Jewish cultural and religious continuity, to parents' lack of confidence in being able to transmit Jewish culture in a highly secularised society, through to social snobbery, wanting their children to be in more middle-class and less multiracial educational settings. And as the trend has shifted, peer group pressure in

communities that still largely confine themselves within particular geographical areas undoubtedly plays a part.

My extended family was traditional rather than deeply religious. (My father usually worked on Saturdays and we were not regular synagogue attendees. If my mother were asked if she believed in God, her answer would invariably be 'I'd like to'.). Their decision was not social snobbery. My parents were part of a working-class community, and the families at Clapton Jewish Day School, though they included the upwardly mobile self-employed, were largely working class.

My parents' reasons were more mundane. There was a community school round the corner but it was in considerable turmoil, struggling with language issues thrown up by a large influx of Greek Cypriot families very locally. This was several years before schools could access high-quality professional support for students with English as an additional language. An acquaintance who worked at the school admitted these difficulties to my mother and said if she had the option at this time, my brother and myself might find it easier if we went to the Jewish school a bus ride away, which is how I found myself having more Hebrew than English lessons a week, saying Jewish prayers in assembly and needing to take off my tsitsis (religious undergarment with fringes, worn by boys over the shoulders) when I changed for PE.

Part of the curriculum was also a weekly Jewish studies lesson with a Rabbi Ehrenberg, who doubled as the cricket teacher in the summer term. Jewish festivals were celebrated extensively and creatively but festivals of other religions were simply ignored and never mentioned. Despite the solid foundations of an all-embracing Jewish culture in the school, there was no room for any comparative religion. And yet the religion we were presented with in these lessons was not particularly hard line – a set of Old Testament stories and festival traditions rather than threats of burning in hell or excommunication if we didn't follow the law to the letter. In contrast, a friend who attended a Catholic school told me her first qualification was an A Level in Guilt.

Boys were not required to keep their heads covered except during lunchtimes when prayers were said after meals. Music and singing lessons were replete with Hebrew tunes but not particularly religious ones. Modern secular Hebrew songs about birds, weather, water, and love were far more prominent, with a few token English songs added in. I cannot recall learning any songs from any other cultures, although at the time Hackney was becoming home especially to a significant Caribbean population.

Outside of the schools of Jewish ultra-orthodoxy, where heavy-duty religion dominates, alongside ambivalence about Jewish nationalism (Zionism), most Jewish schools in Britain now combine religion and Zionism in fairly large doses. Clapton was clearly far more oriented to Zionism than to enforcing a strict religious adherence. The Semitic language of Hebrew was presented as *the* Jewish language, even though most grandparents and some parents of my contemporaries had spoken a European Jewish language – Yiddish – as their mother tongue. Special guests for assemblies during the year were always Jewish

and often associated with Israel. Some of these guests spoke at us in Hebrew as if Hebrew was our first language and we mainly sat there bemused, having developed little more than a very basic vocabulary. Apart from a very small minority of Israelis at the school, none of us used Hebrew as a living language; rather it was the language of prayer, which we learned well enough to be able to read fluently but with little if any grasp of the content.

The emphasis on Israel and Zionism was carried through in our history studies, which concentrated on biblical history and Israel's history post-1948, with no attention paid to the creative and multifaceted diasporic-based existence in the intervening two millennia. I don't recall much attention paid to British history either.

And yet, the Jewish diaspora was evident among the staff. Alongside one black non-Jewish teacher, the Jewish teachers came from several countries such as India, Burma, Hungary, Germany, Italy and Israel. We learned little if anything about the Jewish communities in these or other countries of the diaspora.

It still surprises me that the one prize I earned as a student there – for general progress – was a book of Maori stories, but perhaps it did reflect a wider educational vision that our late and rather disciplinarian head teacher shared beyond that which was immediately obvious to me as a primary student. Our head teacher, Rose Stiftel-Lipman, was a leading figure in the local Labour Party, who has been memorialised by having both a library and a community centre named after her, neither of which are Jewish institutions.

It is undoubtedly the case that in my primary school days I felt at home with friends who looked familiar, used similar expressions, shared similar humour and interests, and ate similar food. The school succeeded in drawing and presenting the world as an entity divided essentially into Jews and non-Jews. Outside of school though, I had a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish friends but grew up with a wariness towards non-Jews that I attribute partly to my family's influences (they lived through periods of much stronger, often physical anti-Semitism in their youth), and partly to a school that kept us away from and in the dark about the existence of other peoples, their identities, ways of life, achievements, histories and philosophies.

By the time I reached secondary school we had moved out of the inner city into suburban Ilford on the north-east edges of Greater London. Ilford had a large Jewish community and even though I attended a non-denominational boys' secondary school, some 20% of the children were Jewish. It was a still a considerable culture shock, getting to know and differentiate between many of my Christian classmates who had the same looks, same straight haircut and mostly seemed to be called 'John'. This school managed to have one Jewish teacher.

As I got to know my classmates better I felt they had considerable advantages – they were more worldly-wise, less ghettoised, and more culturally at one with the teachers and their environment. They were academically advantaged too when we started to learn French, as most of them had had

weekly lessons in French for two years at their local primary schools, while I had been learning Hebrew.

Jewish life was ignored by this school as an institution as much as non-Jewish life had been in my Jewish school. I had moved out of the ghetto into a more mixed environment religiously but not one that had any respect for multiculturalism. The school somehow managed to stay almost exclusively white despite a growing south Asian and Afro-Caribbean pattern of settlement locally.

Today that has changed. Perhaps in some schools multiculturalism and anti-racism remain more a paper policy than a living reality, but schools nowadays in Hackney and Ilford are far more mixed. Most of them celebrate that fact and try to make it relevant to the learning process.

As the families of my generation of Clapton students gradually deserted Hackney for the suburbs, Clapton Jewish Day School eventually closed. But a working-class Jewish remnant remained and young Jewish families returned to sections of the borough that had become more gentrified and trendy. An annexe of the school (formerly used by infants) in Stoke Newington became the successor school to Clapton Jewish Day School, and it is now called the Simon Marks School (and, coincidentally, the head is my cousin).

Other ultra-religious Jewish schools are continuing to expand locally, but the number of Jewish children in ordinary local primaries is dwindling. In Ilford, the school I attended has become more ethnically mixed but more socially selective. When others around were turning comprehensive it remained as a four-form entry grammar school and retains that status today. But far fewer Jewish children attend, as they prefer to frequent one of a range of Jewish schools available locally.

Do I regret going to a denominational school? Yes. Did it cause irreparable damage? No. If the intention was to mould me into a religious Jew and a Zionist, either I wasn't paying attention – or I was paying too much attention and have rejected both. Would I send my own children to a denominational school? No. Did my children express any desire to go to a denominational school? No, I'm pleased to say that they didn't!

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