

The Tali Schools: Education for Pluralism

by Charles Hoffman

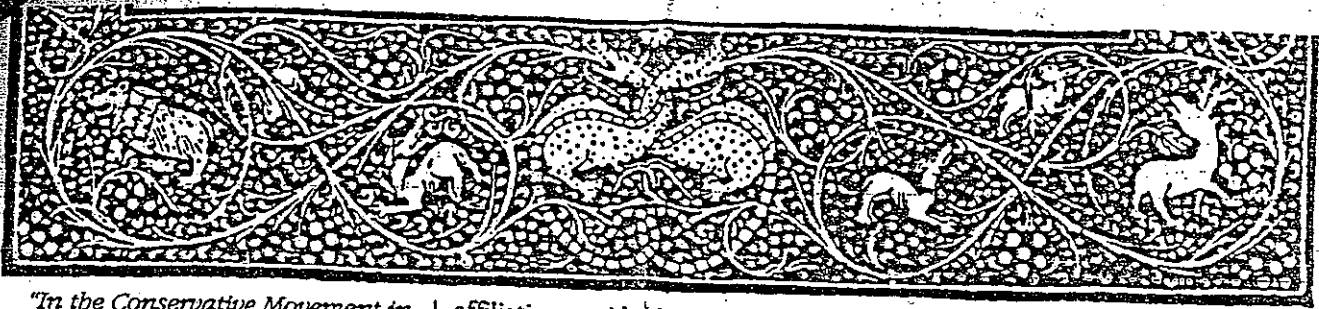
It is a sad but pointed commentary on the religious situation in Israel that the idea behind the Tali schools could only have come from the American Jewish scene. Only the cultural milieu found there could have generated the educational and religious models that have become the basis of this positive approach to liberal and tolerant Jewish religious living and education. The need for such a school had not been noticed by the educational and religious establishment here, but it was painfully obvious to a small group of American Jews of Conservative background, most of them rabbis and educators, who came in the large wave of western aliyah after the Six-Day War.

Ray Arzt, a Conservative rabbi and educator who spent many years in the Camp Ramah movement, was one of the founders of the Tali schools. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, most North Americans coming to Jerusalem moved into the French Hill-Ramat Eshkol areas. Arzt, who

made aliyah in 1971, recalls: *"When we looked at the educational options that were available for our children, we were not happy. The weaknesses of both systems were clear.*

"The state-religious schools were dogmatic and imposed religious behavior on children and their families. They didn't deal with Jewish tradition in its historical context, and they couldn't cope with the pluralistic nature of a broad spectrum of interests in Jewish culture. The state-secular schools didn't take Jewish tradition seriously. They lacked a Jewish experiential element, and were basically Western public schools in Hebrew."

It was not difficult for those in the founding group, who had children of school age, to envision an alternative to this situation, based on tolerance and pluralism, the treatment of Jewish texts in their historical context, and religious education based on actual experience. *"We had worked in American society and this kind of approach was second nature to us — with one major difference.*



"In the Conservative Movement in the U.S., it was our duty to tell our members that 'we think you should observe Shabbat,' or other kinds of Jewish observance. Since our idea became part of the state schools here, we could not do that. We could not impose a specific pattern of behavior on pupils or their families. We can say, however, that 'we think Jewish tradition is important,' and that we teach Judaism through the religious experiences that we create, such as prayer. But we can't turn children against their parents."

The idea developed by this group of newcomers eventually became "Tali," an acronym that stands for "Tigbur Limudei Yahadut" (Enhanced Jewish Studies). Fighting the educational establishment to get this idea accepted and translated into reality was not easy. The Tali network started in 1976 with three classes (37 children) housed in asbestos shacks. Today there are 2,600 pupils in fifteen Tali units all over the country, which include primary schools, kindergartens, and combined junior-high and high school. Four new schools are now in the works.

Arzt now serves as the director of the Tali Education Fund, which was established by the Foundation for Masorti (Conservative) Judaism in Israel. Contributions from "Friends of Tali" abroad are channeled to the schools through this fund, which works in conjunction with the Ministry of Education. The schools themselves, Arzt stressed, have no formal

affiliations with the Masorti Movement.

Looking back from today's perspective, Arzt says that *"When we started the whole thing, we didn't know if it was just the mishegos of some olim who wanted to solve their own problems. But now we know that there is a broad cross-section of people who want to take part in their Jewish heritage, provided it is handled in a totally different way than in the state-religious schools."*

Barbara Levin, principal of the first Tali school (the Frankel school in French Hill), was also part of the group of parents that got the project going. She is a graduate of the Jewish educators' program run jointly by Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, and served as a synagogue educational director before making aliyah in 1969.

She recalls the endless round of meetings and arguments with the municipal and governmental authorities in 1974-75, not to mention the struggles of later years to expand and sustain the network. *"Before Zevulun Hammer became Minister of Education, he'd said 'over my dead body' when the idea of the Tali schools first surfaced. But once he became Minister in 1977, he was very positive, and helped us overcome the resistance of the educational bureaucracy, which tends to fight any kind of change. He apparently regarded what we were doing as part of his broader plan to introduce more Judaism into the schools."*

"It's incredible what we went through in those early years, with constant battles and threats of closure, not to mention a very ugly campaign against us by the Chief Rabbinate," recalls Levin. The group's struggle seems to have been marked by a very American combination of idealism, naivete, and dogged insistence on securing their rights as parents to determine a portion of the educational content of the schools — a right which is indeed laid down in the State Education Law of 1953, and which had been largely forgotten until revived by Tali. This provision later served as the basis for the formation of the Labor Movement School in Jerusalem's Katamon quarter.

Levin recalled the *compliment paid to the group's persistence by Yosef Gadish, the late deputy mayor of Jerusalem. "We were in his office about two or three times a week in those years. He once told us that most people, who wanted something badly from the municipality would usually try to get it by turning over tables. 'You people are unique,' he said, 'because you managed to change things while acting like menschen.'"* It is largely thanks to the support of Hammer and Gadish, she said, that the Tali schools exist today.

Levin's professional connection with the Tali schools began in September, 1977, when her daughter Rachel began first grade. This spring, Rachel and about 15 other children from that group of "guinea pigs" are graduating from the Masorti High School, an outgrowth of Frankel School. Rachel's class is the first group



to go all the way from first grade to twelfth in the Tali framework.

Levin noted that the Tali schools have introduced not only a new approach in religious education but other educational innovations as well, most rooted in the American experience. "When I first came here and sat in on classes in the schools, what I saw blew my mind. The art department in the Ministry of Education would decide what pictures the children would draw, and at what time of the year, in all schools all over the country. This was really extreme centralization. In our school, we vary teaching styles and encourage creative teaching."

"One of the reasons some ministry officials opposed Tali in the beginning was that it was heavily based on parent involvement. Some of them were aghast at this. They said, 'You've got to be crazy to let parents into the school.' In our school the parents cooperate with the staff. Some teach the activity groups, help out with reports, and even assist in developing curriculum guidelines. The experiential element is part and parcel of our curriculum, including celebration of Shabbat and holidays, and we couldn't do this without strong parent participation."

Levin said that the pluralism and tolerance encouraged in the religious sphere has also influenced the general social atmosphere in the school. "With us it is naturally understood that people can be different. This applies to all areas of life. Over the years children who've gone through some trauma or who are different have been referred especially to us. And we also have more children of olim than any other primary school in town."

A by-product of intensive parent involvement was the formation of enrichment classes, years before the Ministry of Education stigmatized this as "gray education." Levin says: "No kids are left out of these classes, which now cover subjects that used to be taught in regular school hours. The families that can't pay are subsidized by the rest. We can afford to do this

because we have a high proportion of parents participating."

Another olah with a background as a Conservative rabbi and educator who has contributed to the development of Tali is David Zissenwine, chairman of the Jewish Education Unit at Tel Aviv University. Zissenwine, who proudly says that he has worked in Ramah camps for 26 summers, made aliyah in 1976. For the past eight years he has headed the special curriculum development for the Tali schools.

The materials produced so far include units on the holidays, humanistic and democratic values as taught through the weekly Torah portion, and a curriculum for the Tali high school that integrates rabbinic literature, history, and Israel social studies. A curriculum on prayer is now in preparation.

"In American education, we are encouraged to look at the totality of a society. Everything is related. The system here looks at things in narrow compartments, even at university level. It wouldn't occur to the religious schools, for example, to relate history and Talmud, or to derive modern moral lessons from traditional texts. They stress mastery of the text and traditional commentaries. We want to see how Jewish life developed throughout the ages, and to see how Jewish life was connected to the general culture in each era."

"In 11th grade, for example, the kids study Medieval responsa literature. The aim here is not just to study texts, but to understand that Jewish society at that time had to answer a lot of questions about how to relate to the Gentile world, and that Judaism is not something divorced from the world. In our study of prayer, we look at all sorts of contemporary creations, like the poetry of Naomi Shemer and Leah Goldberg, which are really 'secular prayers' that one day may be incorporated into the prayerbook."

"The general lesson that we try to convey to the pupils is that you can make changes, but that to change you must first know the principles on which tradition is based." Zissenwine articulates the educational aim of the Tali schools in a way that is also very American. "Our aim is to produce well-educated, committed Jews and Israeli citizens. We hope they'll choose to be observant, but if they don't, this should not be regarded as a failure of the schools. We want them to be able to make an informed choice, not to conform because they have been indoctrinated. We want them to understand and appreciate Judaism by having studied and experienced it. We hope to cultivate the kind of commitment that allows for tolerance and consideration of other views."

Charles Hoffman was born and raised in Texas, graduated from Brandeis University ('68), and made aliyah in 1970. He serves as the Jewish Affairs Editor of the Jerusalem Post.

