Avar ve' Atid

A journal of Jewish Education,

Culture and Discourse.

Hanukkah 5757, Vol 3 - N. 2

Dec. 1996, pp 45 - 55

"Tali" is the Hebrew acronym for "augmented Jewish studies" (Tigbur Limudei Yahadut), *and the chain of Tali schools and parallel classes in existing schools, are part of the state's general educational system. Currently, some 9,500 pupils attend this framework. Though only two additional weekly hours are added to the Tali curriculum, the school atmosphere helps to imbue an appreciation for a critical appraisal of sacred texts as well as for religious pluralism.*

How The *Tali* Schools Began

Lee Levine

The idea of founding a school that would reflect an approach to Jewish education different from what was available in the Israeli public school system was first conceived by a group of American *olim* and native Israelis following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This was a time when many people searched for ways to make a contribution to Israeli society. Some considered returning to military service, others opted for politics or for various social and communal causes. Given the fact that many of us, as recent *olim*, had neither the requisite skills nor a particular proclivity in any of these directions, we decided to draw upon our backgrounds and experience in formal and informal Jewish education to make our contribution in this area.

It was clear that the growing rift between the religious (i.e., Orthodox) and secular elements of Israeli society was an issue that required urgent attention, and that one of its root causes and manifestations was the greatly divergent educational trends servicing each of these sectors. The challenge was whether we could develop a serious alternative Jewish education that would also be liberal and pluralistic, one that would cultivate tolerance yet instill a sense of identification and attachment, an openness together with a commitment to Jewish tradition.

Openness and tolerance are not hallmarks of the prevailing religious stream in Israel, nor is a comprehensive and integrative conception of what ought to constitute Jewish studies and culture. The approach to Judaic

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subjects in these schools is narrowly defined, based almost exclusively on traditional commentaries, concepts, educational approaches, and texts in vogue during earlier generations. More modern attitudes to the study of history, religion, or Jewish sources are viewed with alarm, if not considered anathema. Comparative literature and history, a sophisticated and critical reading of Jewish history, or the cultural interaction of Jews with the surrounding world are topics foreign to this school system and are consciously and systematically eschewed.

On the other hand, secular schools, while often excelling in general studies, see little if any value in introducing a serious study of rabbinical texts or religious thought, and fail to foster any deep sense of identification with the Jewish people, its history, traditions, customs, or values. At best, these schools address select Zionist-Israeli issues which are bereft of any critical Jewish content or substance.

Given these alternatives, a number of us set out to try and establish a school that would combine the best of these two options — offering a serious Jewish and general education while avoiding the deficiencies of each. At the outset, we held a series of informal meetings over a number of months in 1974 and 1975 to discuss these problems and to formulate possible courses of action. Discussions were facilitated by the fact that most of us lived in the same area of Jerusalem, namely French Hill and Ramot Eshkol, and even attended the same synagogue, Ramot Zion, which oft-times provided the venue for our conversations.

It is quite conceivable that our discussions would have remained theoretical for a long time had we not established contact with Yosef Gadish, Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem under Teddy Kollek. Gadish had a well-deserved reputation in the municipality as an effective, straight-talking, clear-thinking, and tireless worker. In fact, he was regarded as the mayor's right-hand man, helping to formulate and implement many policies in crucial areas of city administration. In our meetings with Gadish over the summer and fall of 1975, he encouraged us to move quickly and decisively in order to establish such a school, promising his full backing. Although not observant himself, Gadish saw the need for such a religious alternative, not only for the indigenous Israeli soceity, but also for helping to attract potential Western *olim* to whom such an education was familiar and important. This, he felt, was something the municipality should and would promote and support. However, Gadish stated time and again that he was really not interested in getting involved with one particular shcool, but rather envisioned a network of such institutions that would eventually become a viable educational alternative in Jerusalem, if not the norm.

During the months of preliminary organization in the fall of 1975, a

elementary school or a high school? On the one hand, the high school option was an area with which we all felt more comfortable in terms of our experience and background; it was also a framework in which we could deal with many of the issues in Jewish studies and Jewish identity on a sophisticated level. In short, it played to our strengths and allowed for the fullest expression of the nuanced approach to Jewish education that we hoped to achieve. The major drawback with this option, however, was that we would not be building an educational institution from the ground up; the question was whether, after attending eight years in either a secular or religious framework, students would be interested in coming to a different type of school. And if they did, what would be the intellectual, cultural, and psychological baggage they would bring to it, and would it allow us to realize the kind of educational format that we hoped to achieve? On the other hand, starting at the elementary school level, would mean setting out on a long road of building from the very beginning; however, it would be a more natural growth pattern and probably would be easier to carry out administratively and politically. It was after much discussion that we opted for the latter alternative.

A PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SCHOOL?

The second decision to be made was whether the school would be private or public (in the Israeli context, the latter could also receive government funding). This option was indeed proposed to us at one point in order to mitigate opposition by Orthodox political parties to the founding of a non-Orthodox religious school in Jerusalem. Realizing our determination to move ahead despite opposition, an offer was floated to allow us to open a private school on French Hill with the proviso that we would not ask to open any others in the future. After exploring these options, we decided to move ahead within the public school framework, fully aware of the pros and cons of this decision. Working within the system would clearly limit the autonomy we would have in determining the school's policies, staff, and programs. We would be placing ourselves squarely in the matrix of the city's and Ministry of Education's bureaucracies, with all the pitfalls, obstacles, and frustrations that would inevitably be encountered. On the other hand, by being part of the educational establishment, we wished to ensure the future growth not only of the first pilot school but of others that would hopefully follow; this would happen if we succeeded in convincing parents that ours was a meaningful and significant educational alternative for their

A third issue we had to deal with was the choice of the framework within the Israeli educational system in which we would establish our school — the religious, i.e., Orthodox, or the secular. Our first inclination was to turn to the religious school system, since we, too, were addressing Jewish education with a definite religious component. However, in speaking with a number of officials, ranging from local school principals to the municipality appointee in charge of religious education, we encountered a uniformly negative response. Only then did we turn to the general school system and received the necessary support enabling us to continue on to the next stage.

Moving into high gear by early 1976, with the hope of opening our school in September of that year, we began considering its location. The French Hill neighborhood in northern Jerusalem seemed to be the obvious choice; most of the organizing group lived there and, being a new neighborhood (established only in 1971), we assumed that many of its residents would be open to this kind of educational alternative. At this point, we divided into smaller groups, working simultaneously on a number of fronts. One committee explored the physical arrangements of where and how the school would exist; it became clear from our negotiations that we would have to begin as a branch of the existing secular public school on French Hill, with the intention of becoming an independent entity later on. The municipality had already slated two general schools for this neighborhood, hence our hope that we would eventually become the second school. The French Hill option became even more attractive since there were already a number of temporary structures in place that had been used by the existing school before its permanent building was completed. These could become available for our use. Thus, we would have the best of both possible worlds: being annexed to an existing school and yet being physically separate, thereby having de facto autonomy.

A second committee began scouting for teachers for the three grades we proposed to start with, and worked with them on a curriculum that would reflect the uniqueness of our program.

A third group worked on recruiting other parents to register their children in this new framework for the coming school year. This last task proved to be more difficult than we anticipated. Many Israelis could not understand an approach that is "neither-nor" — neither Orthodox nor secular — but rather one that aspires to address Jewish studies and religious experiences seriously and nondogmatically, and is open to children of all backgrounds. We decided to hold a series of weekly sessions at various homes, hoping to bring together groups of parents for an in-depth presentation of the school. The first sessions were sparsely attended and we began to be concerned; we were convinced that parents should be interested, but not sure how we ought to reach out to them. It was only several weeks later, in February of 1976, that

we received an unexpected boost. This came in the form of a vitriolic attack by the Orthodox rabbis of northern Jerusalem on the proposed school and the potential poisonous effect they claimed our kind of education would have on children's minds and hearts. Posters were plastered on neighborhood billboards, and leaflets were distributed in mailboxes. These rabbis accused the organizers of the school of being Conservative Jews who, having failed in America (and thus having caused assimilation and intermarriage!), were now trying to spread this cancer to Israel as well.

Much to our delight (and chagrin), these attacks created a serious wave of interest among parents of school-age children regarding the nature of our alternative Jewish education; as a result, weekly evening meetings were suddenly flooded with inquisitive parents. We had often joked about such a situation in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict — that if the Arabs felt that something was rejected by Israelis then it must be good for them, and vice versa. This, sadly, is precisely what happened here. Secular, traditional, and even liberal Orthodox Israelis, witnessing these vituperative attacks leveled by the rabbinical establishment, had their curiosity aroused enough to explore what option it was that made these rabbis, for whom most had little respect, so hostile. This spurt of interest allowed us to reach scores of interested families, and by the end of March 1976 we had a list of parents of some two hundred children who had expressed interest in the school.

By the spring of 1976 it seemed that we were in good shape to open our new school the following September. However, our optimism was premature. After procuring the support of the municipality regarding the physical facility that would house the school, signing up more than enough parents, and having lined up a potential staff, we were (only!) missing the formal and official sanction of the Ministry of Education to inaugurate this new educational enterprise. One issue was legal in nature. There was no precedent within the Israeli school system of a school being initiated by parents. It was only after spending much time at the Ministry, and particularly with its legal advisor, that the necessary legal underpinning was discovered. Decades earlier, a ruling had been made that seventy-five percent of the parents of a particular class or school could determine up to twenty-five percent of the curriculum! This, then, was the proviso invoked to provide the legal basis for establishing the school.

A second issue was strictly political in nature. Would the Minister of Education, Aharon Yadlin, who, we were told, was sympathetic towards this kind of educational experiment, be willing to give us his political backing in the face of Orthodox opposition? The latter viewed the creation of a religious school outside their framework as anathema, particularly one that was non-Orthodox in its orientation. In a speech to the Knesset, Zevulun Hammer, then Minister of Social Welfare and leader of the religious-Zionist

party, was quoted as saying, "Over my dead body will such a school arise." This was in July 1976.

In light of this vigorous opposition, Mr. Yadlin wavered. Time became a significant factor as the summer slowly passed. Most parents lost faith that the enterprise would get off the ground in September and proceeded to register their children in other schools. Throughout July and August we kept pressing for a decision, and also tried to maintain pressure on the government by mobilizing friends in the United States to lend their support. It was only one day before the beginning of the school year, i.e., August 31, that we finally received the green light. Our dream would now become a reality. At that time only thirty-three children remained registered in the first three grades, barely enough to justify opening the school; nonetheless, this is how the first *Tali* school began.

I use the name *Tali* because that has become the official name for these schools over the years, but in its initial stages the school was called *masorti*, i.e., "traditional." According to most polls conducted at the time and it remains largely true to this day), some forty percent of Israelis defined themselves as *masorti* (as against Orthodox or secular). Thus, the name was selected precisely because of its positive connotation vis-à-vis religious traditional customs among a large percentage of the citizenry and its disassociation from any part of the religious establishment that often repels large segments of the population. It was only some six years after we had launched the first school that the Ministry of Education insisted that the name be changed from "masorti" to the more neutral *Tali* (a Hebrew acronym for "Augmented Jewish Studies"). There was concern among some in the then Orthodox-controlled Ministry of Education — whose Minister was now Zevulun Hammer — lest these schools become associated in the public eye with the Conservative Movement in Israel, which by 1980 had adopted the name "masorti."

THE PROGRESS OF *TALI* SCHOOLS

The development of the *Tali* schools over the last eighteen years can be divided into three stages. The years 1976-81 constituted the first stage; the pioneering *Tali* school on French Hill consolidated and grew dramatically in numbers from year to year, while developing unique programs and curricula for its various grade levels. An educational steering committee met monthly, papers and suggested curricula were discussed, and the interaction between parents, teachers, and the principal was as remarkable as it was fruitful. In Thought at the Hebrew University); for the last seventeen years Barbara Levin has been its dynamic and creative principal. During these years, other *Tali* schools opened as a result of parental initiative and with the help and support of the founding committee members. Such was the case in Kfar Saba-Hod Hasharon, Ramat Gan, and Beer Sheva. Many more schools might have opened had local parent groups possessed the requisite tenacity and resolve to put together the various elements needed, namely, the cooperation of both the local municipality that is in charge of the physical plant, and the Ministry of Education, that has control of the educational budget. Working with these two bureaucracies is a ycoman task and demands unfaltering attention right up to the first day of the school year. Many parental groups either lacked the necessary determination to overcome opposition or were stymied at one point or another in their efforts.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the *Tali* schools is their extensive parental involvement. Because each school began as a result of parental initiative, the latter's concern for the growth and development of these schools was natural and often quite prominent. In the first years, this was evident — especially on French Hill and in Kfar Saba — in the fact that parents worked together with the principal and teachers on various aspects of programming, including the development of curricular materials and educational approaches to the teaching of holidays, Jewish texts, and other subjects. Parents volunteered to plan and organize extracurricular activities, such as trips and holiday celebrations. Moreover, given the unique approach of the school, parents were often involved in the selection of the principal and, at times, of teachers. Regarding the French Hill school, later renamed the Samuel and Jean Frankel School, this required ongoing negotiations with the Jerusalem authorities as well as with the Ministry of Education. In those early years, there was a recognition by the officials of the legitimacy of parental involvement in making these appointments, owing to the unique nature of these schools.

On the local level, it is to the credit of the principal and staff of each school that they were not only open to this kind of parental participation but also welcomed and encouraged it. Needless to say, many discussions took place regarding the delicate line between parental involvement and their intervention in school affairs. Both parents and staff were sensitive to this distinction, and all recognized the value of the former and the problematics of the latter. It was because of this sensitivity that tension or confrontation were avoided. The extent of parental involvement will, of course, differ from school to school depending on the stage of development at each institution as well as on the personalities involved. With the growth of the schools and their greater professionalization, some

more recently, by other frameworks that were created to offer support to the *Tali* system (see below).

THE SECOND AND THIRD STAGES

The second stage in the development of *Tali* schools was between the years 1981 and 1986. This period began with great hopes and aspirations, although as time went on, the growth in the number of schools slowed considerably, and there were some who even questioned their viability in the long run.

In 1981, the Minister of Education, Zevulun Hammer, invited the founders of the French Hill school to a meeting at which he expressed — unlike his earlier opposition — his gratitude and appreciation for their initiatives; he recognized the value of *Tali* education and indicated a willingness to aid and support this educational endeavor. According to him, this was the type of education that most Israeli children should have and would want to have. There will always be individuals who prefer a more Orthodox approach and, at the other end of the spectrum, those who prefer a strictly secular education. But for the vast majority (he used the number sixty percent), this type of education was the most appropriate. In fact, he claimed, this is precisely the kind of education that he would have wanted to initiate, although, given his Mafdal party affiliation, any attempt by him to introduce such a program into the general public school system would have been opposed on the grounds of religious coercion. The Minister expressed a willingness to appoint someone who would promote *Tali* education throughout the country, and encouraged us to continue our involvement and to work together with the Ministry. As a measure of good will, he asked us to recommend someone who could fill the position of *Tali* supervisor within the Ministry of Education.

His one request, however, was that the schools not be publicly identified — orally or in writing — with the Conservative movement. Such an association, while formally inaccurate, was easily understandable. Since most of the founders of these schools hailed from American Conservative backgrounds, and the educational approach adopted was one that reflected a Conservative orientation, it was often claimed that the *Tali* schools were indeed part of the Conservative movement. At that time no one was interested in starting a third "stream" within the Israeli school system, and denominational association was considered not only unjustified but problematic. Hammer was particularly sensitive to this accusation by members of his own party, as well as to the pressure brought to bear from American Orthodox circles, which cautioned him against the introduction of Conservative Judaism into

Following this upbeat meeting, the future of *Tali* education in Israel seemed most promising. However, to our chagrin, this momentum was largely reversed because one of Hammer's close advisors, who was less than enthusiastic about religious pluralism and promoting the *Tali* approach, was appointed head of the department in the Jerusalem district that dealt with Jewish education in the general school system.

The person responsible for the *Tali* schools at the Ministry was also replaced. As a result, the person we had recommended to coordinate *Tali* left the job after three months, and the second one lasted only nine months. It was clear to both individuals that not only was there no support for the *Tali* approach, but, in fact, a wall of antagonism and hostility existed regarding the development of future *Tali* schools. Thereafter, in certain respects, a state of limbo existed for a number of years, not only putting a damper on the development of the existing schools but also compounding the problems encountered by parental groups trying to launch new *Tali* schools.

There were other problems as well. Many parental groups that wished to start such schools not only had to deal with the municipal and educational bureaucracies, but also with the ongoing opposition to their initiatives from officials to the right and the left. Orthodox officials, both within the municipality and the Ministry, opposed the school on religious grounds, while some of the more extreme secularists balked at the thought of having any kind of religious "indoctrination" introduced into the secular school system.

Despite these obstacles, this period witnessed several important developments. In the early eighties, ongoing meetings with city officials led to the granting of permission to *Tali* schools to use whatever curriculum they wished, be it from the general or Orthodox curricula. Until then a school officially had to follow one model or the other. Now, *Tali* institutions could choose from either, for both Jewish and general subjects, and could even create their own models. Moreover, during these years, a committee comprised of principals, school supervisors, educators, and Ministry officials developed a document defining the educational philosophy and norms of a *Tali* school.

By the mid-eighties, several new *Tali* schools opened in Haifa, Netanya, and in the Gilo neighborhood of Jerusalem. Of particular significance was the successful launching of a junior-high and high school in Jerusalem. This was not an easy enterprise. For a number of years *Tali* parents sought an appropriate framework for post-elementary school *Tali* education. An attempt was made to introduce a *Tali* track within a larger high school, but this proved to be unworkable. It was only after several years of frustrating attempts — and a number of "lost" classes within a school — that permission

fledged junior and high school boasting today some six hundred pupils under the leadership of Dr. Avi Lavsky. Together with the establishment of a series of *Tali* kindergartens (also achieved not without a sustained effort in overcoming bureaucratic and political obstacles), *Tali* education now covered all the school years, from preschool through twelfth grade.

A third stage in the development of the *Tali* schools began in 1987, and continues to this day, with the establishment of a special foundation for the purpose of supporting, encouraging, and promoting *Tali* education within the Israeli school system. This step was motivated by the realization that certain individuals in the Ministry of Education were largely indifferent, if not at times outright hostile, to the future of the schools. It was clear that the entire enterprise would never progress if independent funding was not procured in order to deepen the education in existing schools and help parents establish new ones. A number of foundations abroad were approached, and a positive response from the Bronfman Foundation as well as from the Jewish Agency enabled us to move forward. These monies were used to establish the *Tali* Education Fund (TEF). It was soon realized that for such an educational foundation to be maximally effective, it should be affiliated with a recognized academic institution. Thus, the TEF was brought under the aegis of the Seminary of Judaic Studies, an academic-educational institution in Jerusalem affiliated wtih the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Masorti Movement. The TEF was to work closely with the Ministry of Education as well as with parent groups and school principals in order to maximize the impact and effectiveness of *Tali* education.

The work of the TEF over the last seven years has indeed been impressive. Under the able direction of Etti Saruk, and currently of Joseph Ben-Rahamim, the number of schools with *Tali* tracks throughout the country has increased to thirty, serving over 9,500 pupils in some 260 classes from Kiryat Shmona in the north to Beer Sheva in the south, with concentrations in the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv areas. The TEF provides these schools with various educational materials, including a weekly Portion of the Week study sheet for both elementary and junior high school pupils and their families. A syllabus for grades one to nine has just been completed after several years of work by an academic-educational team headed by Avigdor Shinan, professor of midrash and liturgy at the Hebrew University and the Seminary of Judaic Studies. In this curriculum, all Jewish subjects to be taught (Bible, Midrash, Talmud, Jewish customs and lifestyles, etc.) are closely coordinated for each grade level, as is a rational and logical progression in the development of skills and the level of knowledge from year to year. Earlier efforts had been made in curricular development under the direction of Professor David Zisenwine of Tel Aviv University, but they were never as comprehensive in scope as the TEF provides extensive teacher training via pedagogic supervisors who work with the teachers, and through an extensive program of in-service teacher training on local, regional, and national levels.

In addition, the TEF gives considerable attention to other dimensions of the *Tali* schools. Through the Seminary of Judaic Studies, it conducts a program for training professionals in informal Jewish education, which has proven to be of invaluable assistance to the schools. A great deal of effort has been expended in developing programs relating to the Sabbath, holiday celebrations, and other Jewish subjects for teachers, students, and parents alike.

Following the 1992 elections and the change of leadership at the Ministry of Education, the work of the TEF expanded significantly. A more open and supportive environment was created by the new Minister, Professor Amnon Rubenstein, and others, for implementing various educational initiatives. Many former Ministry officials who had serious ideological reservations about the liberal, pluralistic, religious-educational approach of *Tali* were replaced by more sympathetic ones. As a result, the cooperation between the TEF and the Ministry of Education increased immeasurably and proved effective in promoting and enhancing the *Tali* schools. It remains to be seen how Israel's new government, whose Minister of Education is once again Zevulun Hammer, will relate to these innovations. □