

JEWISH EDUCATION IN KIMBERLEY

written by Leon Chonin, Toronto May 13, 2019

INTRODUCTION

With a comparatively small Jewish community in Kimberley Jewish education was limited to three sources of instruction. The cheider school, shul services and the youth movement. No formal Jewish education was provided by government schools.

It was the tradition in Eastern Europe for the Jewish youth to attend what could be regarded as cheider as these schools fell under the control of the shuls. The Rabbonim administered and taught at the schools which only covered Jewish studies. My father who was born and educated in Utena, Lithuania attended a cheider. Secular schools were not officially open to Jewish children hence they received no tuition in other languages, the sciences or any of the arts.

JUDAIC STUDIES

When the Eastern European Jews migrated to Kimberley, they brought this tradition with them in order to ensure that their children would receive a Jewish education. However, attending government schools was not only open to the Jewish community it was compulsory to attend a secular school until the age of sixteen. It was therefore necessary to schedule cheider classes after the close of the government schools which was around 2pm in the afternoon. However, most government schools would then arrange for school sport to commence soon after the close of teaching classes. For many Jewish children this posed a huge problem because they could either enjoy their sport or otherwise choose to attend cheider classes after the school program. It was one of the reasons that not every child would attend cheider. There were also other activities that many children preferred over attending cheider such as dance, music lessons or other arts topics such as drama and elocution. Because the time restrictions precluded a curriculum that covered every aspect of Judaism, cheider classes tended to focus on teaching reading and writing of Hebrew, biblical studies and tefilla (prayer). There was no time to devote to the actual speaking of Hebrew. From memory I recall that classes were no longer than an hour and commenced after school around 2pm until around 5pm. The classes were divided into age groups and there were at least two teachers taking these classes. When Kimberley had two religious leaders during the time of Rabbi Goldberg both would take classes but after Rabbi Goldberg retired to the Cape the community was left with only one Hebrew teacher until Rabbi Werner was appointed when his wife who was also a Hebrew school teacher was also able to instruct some of the classes.

In 1950 the Community Hall and Cheider Classes were erected and Geraldine Auerbach recalls that at that time a female Ivrit teacher was employed to supplement the teaching staff.

The boys were provided with barmitzvah lessons and the girls in later years were offered batmitzvah classes. It was almost standard practice that once a boy or girl completed their barmitzvah or batmitzvah they ceased attending cheider for the very reasons already explained and also because furthering their studies in Hebrew offered no incentive in the secular schooling credits towards their matriculation. However, children who attended Jewish Day Schools in the larger cities and who wrote the Joint Matriculation Board examination were able to obtain credit for Hebrew in their final examination.

The shul service also offered a limited exposure to Judaism however the majority of congregants did not understand Hebrew and had to rely on the English translation. The Rabbi's sermon was perhaps for those who did not attend cheider the only real lesson they received in Judaism but many of the young people would choose this time to exit the shul to socialize.

Although cheider classes provided instructions in tefilla it was very limited in scope and most of the Jewish youth finished their education without being able to conduct any of the services covering the morning, afternoon or evening prayers. While cheider provides a very basic level Jewish education it is far short of the results achieved by Jewish Day Schools for the reason that the hours of tuition are very limited. Active attendance at the shul was not a high priority not only amongst the youth but with their parent generation as well. There were a handful of religious congregants who attended very Friday night and Saturday morning and of those only a few could conduct a full service. Jock Awerbuck and I were the only two barmitzvah boys that I can recall that were able to conduct the entire Friday night service.

The youth movement was also another forum where some Jewish traditions were taught to the youth. During my period as Rosh Madrich of Kimberley Habonim movement the focus was more on Israel, Hebrew songs and social games.

SECULAR STUDIES

Since secular education was segregated between English and Afrikaans speaking students and between boys and girls, the majority of Jewish students attended the English schools of Kimberley Boys High or Kimberley Girls High and their feeder primary schools Belgravia Junior and Kimberley Junior Schools. Those who could afford private education attended the only two that were Roman Catholic controlled namely Christian Brothers College (for boys) and Convent Girls High. Many Jewish students from the surrounding rural areas and from smaller towns and villages would be enrolled at the school hostels that were Francis Oats House and Bishops House for boys and Beit House for the girls.

Some government schools offered Christian religious instructions, but Jewish students were not required to participate and were allowed to excuse themselves and use this period for homework preparation. Where separate classrooms were not available the Jewish students would have to sit in the back rows of the class which regretfully did expose them to Christian theology and their interpretation of the Old Testament. It was also a daily requirement to attend assembly at the start of the day which opened with Christian prayers followed by school announcements. Jewish

students were not expected to be present during the Christian prayers but needed to be present for the school announcements. I recall in my earlier years that during Christian prayers the Jewish students gathered in one classroom for reciting tefilla which on occasion was led by the Reverend but in my later years at high school this practice seemed to have discontinued and it became a social gathering. Geraldine Auerbach confirms that a very similar program was followed at Kimberley Girls High.

Because Jewish students were permitted to stay away from school on all Jewish holidays as it was expected that they should attend shul services, Geraldine Auerbach recalls that shul attendance during Jewish holidays was bolstered by the youth who at least became familiar with the prayer service.



There were some incredibly talented Jewish academic students. Some names that come to mind was Velva Schrire* (who later created the cardiac unit at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town and worked with the transplant team) who received the highest marks in the country for his matriculation in 1933 as well as an award for Hebrew studies in the senior certificate examination. In later years Samuel Klein, Trevor Toubé, Harold Hecht, Michael Witepski and Jock Awerbuck at Kimberley Boys High and Brenda Frank and Josie Shapiro at Kimberley Girls High received civic awards for their top marks. Helen Maresky (later Brown) was the first Jewish girl to pass her Hebrew

matriculation examination in 1933.

We have no pictures of the classrooms or the Communal Hall. But Leon sent this picture from 1953 of himself and his friends in Bnei Zion uniforms waiting for the Mayor (who was a Jewish one at the time Gussie Haberfeld) to come and open the new Communal Hall and classrooms. You can see in the background what came to be known as the Minor Hall where the 'Brochas' were held after services. Leon says, 'the young boys are me in the front, then Jock Awerbuck, Stanley Eberlin, and could be Leonard Hammar; the girls in front were the Garsh sisters, Gill and Brenda. We can also see Beverly and Lynette Buirski. The Madrichim are Leslie Stein, Maureen Kroll and Sarah Cohen.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Jewish education is a very vital ingredient in promoting ties to religious life as in very many cases those who chose not to attend cheider classes were at risk of assimilation and losing their Jewish identity. I witnessed assimilation within my own family and the risk escalated where Jews lived in very small rural communities or towns. It was one of my motivating reasons for not returning to Kimberley after I completed my university qualifications. I was adamant that my children would attend a Jewish Day school at least during their primary years in order to provide them with a solid foundation in Hebrew and Judaism.

Today I regret moving my children from King David Primary to a government high school not only because it cut short their Jewish studies, but the academic excellence provided by the Jewish Day Schools exceeds the standard offered by many of the government schools. In fact, my younger daughter was subjected to peer bullying at the government school because she was a bright student who excelled in her studies whereas her peers lacked the incentive to strive for excellence and wanted her to conform to their standards of achievement.

In hindsight I believe that opportunities could have been pursued to have included Jewish studies in the matriculation curriculum for children in the smaller towns and rural areas like Kimberley by either correspondent courses or expanding the cheider program. Jewish education is at the centre of the struggle to prevent assimilation and as the South African Jewish community shrinks because of emigration the greater should the emphasis be placed on promoting the Jewish Day School movement. I am proud that my grandchildren all attended Jewish Day Schools in the United States and in Canada. It has instilled in them the love of Judaism and of the Jewish people. They have all visited Israel and have developed a bond with the ideals of the Jewish people. They are able to proudly identify themselves as practicing Jews and will be able in time to take leadership roles in their respective communities.

Leon Chonin, Toronto, May 2019

*Velva Schrire went on to create the outstanding Cardiac Clinic at Groot Schuur Hospital in Cape Town that enabled Christiaan Barnard to perform the first Heart Transplant operation. You can read his profile https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kimberley/Schrire_2.html

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