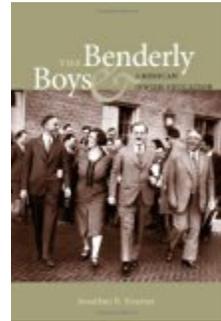


Jonathan B. Krasner. *The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011. xii + 498 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-966-2; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-983-9.

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## Reinventing Jewish Education for the Twentieth Century: Samson Benderly and His “Boys”

To people who maintain an interest in Jewish education, the name Samson Benderly is familiar, but until now the story of how he and his protégés revolutionized American Jewish education has not been fully recounted. Jonathan B. Krasner’s *The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education* fills in the gap.[1] Safed-born Benderly forsook the medical career for which he trained in Lebanon and Baltimore for the unremunerative and far less prestigious field of Jewish education. His educational modernization in Baltimore Talmud Torahs drew the attention of Judah Magnes, who invited him to direct the nascent New York Kehillah’s Bureau of Jewish Education. Strongly influenced by Ahad Ha’am’s cultural Zionism, which Mordecai M. Kaplan and Israel Friedlaender adapted to the American situation, Benderly accepted the challenge.[2] He then introduced innovations tested in Baltimore. With the objective of professionalizing and centralizing Jewish education, he recruited gifted students, all, regardless of sex, designated “The Benderly Boys.” Attracted by his charisma and determined to insure a future for American Judaism, they pursued Benderly’s new program. Enrollment in the Teacher’s Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary would achieve mastery of the Hebrew language and classical and modern texts. Study at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, would familiarize them with progressive education.

At the onset of their professional careers, all scrupulously adhered to Benderly’s germinal principles: American-Jewish integration, cultural Zionism, commu-

nal responsibility for Jewish education, and pedagogic progressivism. Implementation involved the following: weekend and after-school Hebrew classes; community-run rather than congregational schools; child-centered instruction intended to advance self-determination and socialization; the teaching modes and aesthetics of New York public schools, among them standardized graded curricula, attractive schoolrooms, textbooks, and devices, and stirring music; Hebrew-language acquisition through the natural method (*Ivrit b’Ivrit*); and experimentation in laboratory schools.

Neither a collective biography nor an institutional history, the book is an amalgam of the two. Krasner traces the diverse organizations set up to promote communal education, and the challenges that they faced, first from immigrant rabbis and *melamdim* (tradition teachers of children), later from entrenched Talmud Torahs, and always from local federations that valorized social service over Jewish education. He outlines the accomplishments of individual Benderly Boys as well as their personal and professional contacts with one another. To paint a faithful portrait, Krasner examines the blunders that inevitably materialized, each reflecting the personal predilections and objective circumstances of an individual. Three examples will have to suffice. To prepare for a career as principal, bureau chief, and (later) camp director, Alexander Dushkin studied educational administration. After a stint at the New York bureau, he moved to Chicago to head that city’s Board of Jewish Education,

where he enjoyed the freedom to improve Benderly's model of a citywide Jewish educational system. Later in life he directed the Jewish Education Committee of New York and edited *Jewish Education*. Ultimately he settled in the new state of Israel. Equally inventive was Dushkin's friend and sometime adversary Isaac Berkson. The latter was the principal intellectual of the group, responsible for articulating the purpose and program of various organizations, but better with words than human relations. After Benderly's death both considered themselves the master's primary disciple. Emanuel Gamoren followed a different trajectory. Reluctantly he accepted the assignment of reinventing Reform Judaism's educational system. His valorization of ethnicity over denominationalism and concomitant introduction of Zionism into the curriculum ruffled the feathers of the classical Reformers. At the same time, he more than proved his worth by reformulating the Reform curriculum and commissioning the best Jewish textbooks of the day

It soon became evident that supplementary education was unequal to the task of creating a Jewish community dedicated to the preservation of Hebraic culture. Several Benderly Boys seized the opportunity to exploit the American predilection for summer camping and created a full-time Jewish experience through educational camping. Their first enduring camp was Cejwin, founded by Albert Schoolman, the group's primary advocate of Jewish educational camping. Backed by New York's Central Jewish Institute, a major educational center in New York, Cejwin flourished. Following Schoolman's advice, Dushkin and Berkson purchased Camp Modin. Formal classes were balanced by conventional camping activities. Although not commercial successes, Modin and, to a lesser extent, Cejwin produced a core of knowledgeable, committed Jews. In time their activities became the template for Jewish summer camps sponsored by religious movements, Hebrew teacher colleges, and Zionist and Yiddishist organizations.

Benderly's star began an uneven descent in 1920. His final achievements were the formation of the Marshaliah Hebrew High School and an experimental camp on his own property in upstate New York. By the time of his death in 1944, American Judaism faced new realities that forced the modification of some of his priorities. Foremost among them was the valorization of communal education over synagogue schooling.[3] To Berkson's chagrin, the less ideological and pragmatic Benderly Boys welcomed congregational schools in systems under their direction. *Ivrit B'Ivrit* was successful in Marshaliah, for example, but in few other supplementary schools. When

Jewish day schools were founded after World War II, some Benderly Boys enrolled their own children. By that time laboratory schools, the slimmest link in Benderly's educational chain, had become a distant memory.

It is difficult to argue that a well-written, deeply researched, and richly annotated volume of nearly five hundred pages should be even more extensive, yet I found several important omissions. One is the reason for drawing lines. There is no explanation of the Benderly crowd's decision to ignore Yiddish language schools that, though not Hebraic, embraced Jewish ethnicity while sheltering Reform schools, which did not. Another, reminiscent of Hasidic history, designates generations, but offers few details. Krasner assigns some individuals to a third generation but does not name second generation Benderly followers. A third is the overemphasis on New York and the mere mention of only a few boards of Jewish education in other cities, whereas others were also spawned by Benderly Boys and their disciples.

Krasner arrives at a mixed conclusion. Although he does not hesitate to give Benderly his due as a pioneer of modern Jewish education, he considers his achievement a mixed bag. Sadly, Benderly's scheme of modernization, professionalization, and standardization did not produce the educated American Jewry that he and his acolytes strove to construct. Nevertheless, without their efforts it is doubtful that the Jewish public would have maintained consistent loyalty to Jewish ethnicity, religion, and Israel. It is nearly certain that absent the basic knowledge acquired in Talmud Torahs, congregational schools, and educational camps under the Benderly Boys' aegis and passed on to subsequent generations, present-day Jewish studies would be less acceptable in academic circles and consequently less widespread and productive.

#### Notes

[1]. Krasner's book recapitulates some data and conclusions from his three-part article "Jewish Education and American Jewish Education," pts. 1-3, *The Journal of Jewish Education* 71, no. 2 (2005) : 121-177; 71, no. 3 (2005): 279-317; 72, no. 1 (2006): 29-76.

[2]. Magnes was likewise influenced by Ahad Ha'am. See Deborah Dash Moore, "A New American Judaism," in *Like All the Nations? The Life and Legacy of Judah L. Magnes*, ed. William M. Brinner and Moses Rischin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 47-55; Israel Friedlaender, "The Problem of Judaism in America," in *Past and Present: Selected Essays* (New York: Burning Book Press, 1961), 159-184; and Baila R. Shargel, "Kaplan

and Israel Friedlaender: Expectation and Failure,” in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, ed. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 99-106. [3]. Early on, Kaplan had indicated the impossibility of sustaining Jewish ethnicity in the absence of religious instruction (See Krasner, *The Benderly Boys*, 78, 410-411).

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