VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE AND THE AMERICAN JEWISH SCHOOL

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Vocational Guidance has come to mean in certain quarters a very definite procedure — that of finding an individual's life work. Vocational Guidance counselors attempt to determine the abilities of an individual from personal interview and by means of objectives tests. While this type of work is important, the newer trend in vocational education is to teach the individual how to decide for himself, rather than to make a choice for him. The latter is usually called vocational orientation and it is with this type of vocational education that we are concerned.

Vocational guidance is not foreign to Jewish education. Indeed, vocational education has received considerable stress in historic times — "Whosoever does not teach him (his son) a trade, teaches him to steal" is probably the most trenchant argument ever forwarded for vocational education. In spite of the important place that vocational guidance occupied in the life of the Jewish people in the past, Jewish education of today is completely indifferent to the vocational problems of the Jewish child. The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the importance of the problem of vocational guidance, describe some of the present vocational maladjustment of Jews in America and its

1 Read at the Conference of the National Council for Jewish Education, Phila., May 1932.
ous differences between the occupational distribution of Jews and non-Jews. Niles Carpenter \(^2\) compared the proportion of Jewish foreign-born with the proportions for non-Jewish foreign born in certain selected occupations, as found by the 1920 census. His data covered only a selected number of states — those in which the proportion of foreign born was high — and a selected number of occupations. His data are, therefore, only suggestive of the differences between the nationalities studied. Furthermore, he dealt only with those foreign-born Jews who gave Yiddish as their mother tongue. According to this study, the Yiddish speaking males, comprised 5.66% of the total number of foreign-born studied. If the Yiddish speaking males had not been different from the other foreign born in their occupational distribution, we would expect that the proportion of Yiddish speaking males in the various occupations would be approximately 5%. Instead, a wide diversity exists between the proportions of Jews and non-Jews in the various occupations.

There are eight times as many Jews as expected in the clerical pursuits (such as salesmen in stores), five times as many Jewish professional men (physicians and surgeons), three times as many Jews in managerial pursuits (such as foremen), and three times as many in the pursuits of skilled mechanics. Carpenter’s conclusions are as follows:

"There seems to be a clear disposition among the men and women of this (Yiddish speaking) ethnic group to avoid heavy manual labor and farming, and to engage in skilled and semi-skilled work, and in commercial, clerical, managerial and professional pursuits."

Yiddish speaking females too, differ radically in their occupational distribution from the other foreign-born females. They constituted 17.5% of all the foreign born females studied, and this proportion would be the expected one in the various occupational groups. Instead, there were 2\(\frac{1}{2}\) times as many as expected in the clerical pursuits (stenographers and typists), and ten times as many in the pursuits of the semi-skilled operatives in clothing factories.

Since a significant proportion of the Jewish population is foreign-born, the above data are still quite pertinent. What conclusions may be drawn from these facts? The obvious conclusion is that the forces that determine the distribution of Jews among the various occupations are somewhat different from those that operate in the case of non-Jews. If it had no definite social consequences, this difference between Jews and non-Jews would be worthy of attention simply as a social phenomenon. When, however, this difference entails discrimination and suffering, it does more than evoke our scientific curiosity. It demands attention and calls for remedial efforts.

The figures themselves are, perhaps, provocative of no controversial issues. The economic system, at least until a few years ago, seemed to get along fairly well with the general distribution of occupations, despite the murmurings about racial and religious discrimination. If the present crisis were only temporary, it could be concluded that the distribution is reasonably satisfactory. There are, however, two considerations which militate against such a conclusion. First, the distribution of occupations is not static, but changes from generation to generation. The changes in the distribution of occupations among Jews are so rapid and cataclysmic that a complete revolution in occupation between one generation

and the next is the rule rather than the exception. Hence, even if the "status quo" distribution of occupations among Jews were satisfactory, the distribution in the next generation of Jews will be quite different. It is important to gauge the direction of the change and to bring corrective educational influence to bear upon it.

The second consideration is perhaps even more basic. There is a growing feeling among progressive thinkers that the present distribution of occupation is at the core of the world-wide crisis that is now depressing our economic welfare. No system of education, Jewish or general, can remain indifferent to the implications of this statement. Let us first examine the evidence for the expected wide divergence in occupational distribution between Jews and non-Jews in the next generation.

The disparity between the forces that determine the distribution of occupations in the Jewish population as compared with those that determine the distribution in the total population reaches its maximum when the educational ambitions and vocational choices of Jewish and non-Jewish students are compared. In comparing Jewish and non-Jewish students, the most striking difference is the percentage of college and university students among Jews and non-Jews. Thus, whereas Jews constitute only 3.4% of the total population of the country they constituted fully 10% of the student-body of the country, as revealed by a study conducted by the Bureau of Jewish Social Research in 1919. More recent data are not available and it safe to assume that the above proportion is certainly not less but probably greater today. The raw comparison is of course not entirely justifiable, since Jews are primarily an urban people while the country at large is only 56% urban. It might be conjectured, however, that the proportions would not be changed radically when corrections for this factor are applied. It may, therefore, be concluded that Jews contribute at least more than twice their share to the college student population of the country. It is becoming more and more evident that the urge for education and for knowledge for its own sake, is in itself a poor excuse for higher education. Studies in the distribution of education and its effect, are beginning to cast doubt upon the advisability of offering a college training to all comers. Just what percentage of the Jewish students who now obtain a college education ought to be advised not to go to college from the point of view of the returns that they can expect in terms of increased economic productivity and happiness, is a matter which demands inquiry. Education, like economics, is subject to the "law" of diminishing returns, and the determination of the marginal value of a college education is a problem which is of great importance for society.

What are the occupational preferences of Jewish students? No data on vocational preferences of Jews for the country at large are available. Some data are available \(^{a}\) for Freshmen in a college which is about 80% Jewish and in another which has a small percentage of Jews. In the "Jewish" school, fully 96% of the freshmen chose one of the following four professions—medicine, teaching, law and dentistry. In the non-Jewish school only 54% of the freshmen selected one of these four professions.

Another rather striking difference between Jewish and non-Jewish students is revealed by the comparison of

\(^{a}\) Sparling, Edward Jr., "Do College Students Choose Vocations Wisely?" (An unpublished dissertation at Teachers College, Columbia University.)
the occupations of the parents of both groups. While only 3% of the "Jewish" pre-professional students had parents who were professional men themselves, fully 10% of the "non-Jewish" parents were in that class. Thus, not only are there proportionally more pre-professional Jewish students, but a greater proportion of them are subject to the hazard of not having intelligent parental guidance. Naturally, a father who does not understand the requirements of his son's profession can be of little help to him. Furthermore, the repressions of Jews in Eastern Europe have thwarted the professional ambitions of many of the parents. The quest for the vicarious fulfillment of their own vocational ambitions on the part of such parents, often leads to tragedy, since many of these students are not equipped with the personality and intelligence that are required for the profession. The result is that a good number of Jewish mis-fits and leitmenshen emerge annually from our universities. This is especially tragic in the case of families that have slaved in order to send their sons through college.

The vocational preferences of college students, are, however, poor indicators of the occupations which they finally enter. More pertinent data are available in the study made by the Bureau of Jewish Social Research referred to previously, giving the distribution of Jewish and non-Jewish students in professional schools. The Jewish student tends to limit his choice to one type of profession—one in which his ability as an entrepreneur is the basis for success, rather than the recognition of his services by an employer, corporation or board of directors. We thus find that such fields as medicine, law, dentistry and pharmacy, which are in a sense small business establishments, are jammed with Jews, while such professions as engineering, agricultural pursuits, forestry, attract only a small number. In fact, in the study referred to, 75% of the Jewish students were preparing themselves for the personal, service type of profession (medicine, law, etc.), while only 20% of the Jewish students selected the impersonal service type of profession (engineering, etc.). Comparing these percentages with the percentage of Jews in the total student body, it is found that there are proportionately twice as many Jews as expected in the personal service type of professions and only a small fraction of the number of Jews expected in the impersonal service type of profession. Whether Jewish students tend to prefer the personal service type of professions, or whether they gravitate to these professions by dint of antisemitic pressure, is not an easy question to answer, and calls for intensive study on the part of Jewish educators.

Of special interest to us is the environmental factor of racial prejudice. If, instead of complaining only about the ethical problem involved, we were also to point out the economic fallacy involved in racial prejudice, we could probably reach a greater portion of the intelligent thinkers on the problem.

In dealing with the distribution of occupations among Jews, we need to take into consideration not only the general factors that operate in the case of every individual but also of the specific factors that operate in the case of Jews only, such as discrimination, historical preferences, etc. It is these specific considerations that demand inclusion in the curriculum of the Jewish School.

What can Jewish education do about all of these problems? There are two specific functions for the Jewish educator in this field. First, he can by means
of research determine the actual distribution of Jewish occupations in this country and the various causes shaping this distribution. Upon the basis of established facts, information about the abilities and disabilities of Jews in the various occupations can be disseminated in the Hebrew high schools, among Jewish young people's societies, and in schools of higher learning. "The second function is that of the development of a proper attitude towards special abilities and disabilities of Jews in the various professions. A proper historical background giving the development of the various disabilities as well as the various advantages would permit a Jewish young man to adjust more happily. If he is highly endowed, he would, on the one hand, carry the advantage that his native endowment bestows more gracefully and with less arrogance, and would, on the other hand, bear less animosity to those who prevent him from making full use of his abilities. Rabbi Wise has ironically expressed his attitude with regard to anti-Jewish discrimination in the following dictum: "The only profession I know of that does not bar Jews, is the rabbinical profession." The recognition of the 'status quo' as such is the first step in the solution of the problem. What can the Jewish school do about it? It can call attention to the general phenomenon of racial prejudice existing in this country and directed not only against Jews but also against Catholics, Japanese, Chinese and Negroes. As long as intolerance exists as a general characteristic of the American people, no amount of anti-defamation and anti-discrimination propaganda will be of any avail. It is quite possible that Julius Rosenwald did more to reduce anti-semitism by aiding the general cause of tolerance through endowing negro education, than all the direct anti-anti-semitic propaganda has accomplished. The removal of racial and religious prejudice is of course an ideal which the school should, and perhaps already, does aim to attain. The more specific task of the school is to prepare the Jewish youth with a shock absorber for his first attack of anti-semitism. He must perhaps be told that it is not enough for him to be just as good or a little better than his non-Jewish competitor for a given job, but that he must generally be his superior by a wide margin.

What can Vocational Guidance do for the Jewish school? Modern education separates itself from the past by an insistence that the child rather than the curriculum should be the center of attention. This means that the felt needs of the child rather than the felt needs of the parent or community should form the basis of education. The curriculum of the Jewish school has made much progress in the direction of satisfying the felt needs of the child, but much of the curriculum is still a "felt need" only for the teacher and adult Jewish community. In view of the importance of the choice of a career in the life of the individual, and in view of the many specifically Jewish problems involved in this choice, the Jewish school should reckon with it more and more. The emphasis placed upon battles, heroes and persecutions in present day teaching of Jewish history can well accommodate itself to the inclusion of economic Jewish history and the contributions of Jews to the various sciences, arts and professions. The story of Maimonides the philosopher and law-interpreter is taught in some schools in great detail. The story of
Maimonides the physician is hardly taught. Yet, what greater motivation for further knowledge about Maimonides and his period can be had, than to introduce him in the course on Choosing a Lifework as one of the best known physicians of the Middle Ages. We teach our children much about the vagaries of the rabbis of the Talmud. Does it ever occur to us that the fact that Rabbi Chanina in the 2nd century was the first to insert artificial teeth, that optometry owes much to Jewish genius, are facts that will perhaps link up the seemingly dead Jewish past with the modern advances in medicine and dentistry. Samuel, the oculist, Rab, the anatomist, can hardly remain dead, uninteresting figures when they are presented as promoters of science and as the forerunners of the modern Ehrlichs, Wassermans and Goldbergers. The injecting of new vitality into the curriculum of the Jewish school can be accomplished in no better way than through the introduction of the problem of vocational guidance at the time when the children begin to appreciate its significance and feel a need for it.

**SUMMARY**

To sum up, vocational guidance of Jewish youth is essential for four reasons. Firstly, Jews present certain specifically Jewish problems as a result of the tendency to concentrate on a few occupations. Secondly, the Jewish school must do its share in helping to bring about a planned economic order and an equitable distribution of occupations. Thirdly, the Jewish school must do its share in removing racial, religious and social prejudice from the field of occupational distribution. Fourthly, the problem of the pre-professional Jewish student is aggravated by the fact that the incidence of professional parents among Jewish pre-professional students seems to be much smaller than the incidence of professional parents among non-Jewish pre-professional students. Coupled with the inordinate demand on the part of the Jewish parent that his son or daughter go into certain selected professions rather than into others, the accentuated lack of parental guidance results in considerable friction and maladjustment. The removal of this source of maladjustment is definitely a function of Jewish education.

Vocational guidance affords Jewish education an opportunity for investing the classic-laden Jewish curriculum with new life and motivation. A study of how the preference of Jews for certain vocations developed and what the contributions of Jews to the various occupations are, will serve both as valuable information for the child as well as a source of new interest in the Jewish past.