

# Bringing Order to Chaos, the centralization of Jewish Education in Toronto

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“The history of Jewish Education, like the history of the Jewish peoples is a story of continuity through change. In its struggle for self-preservation, the Jewish people found the ability to adjust as necessary as the power to conserve. In fact adjustment was often the means by which the end, group preservation, was attained.”<sup>1</sup>

Jewish communal leaders in North America sensed by the first decade of the 20th century that the largely decentralized and often fragmented nature of Jewish life was unable to deal with the large numbers of immigrants arriving and demanding help and services. If the reality of Jewish autonomy in Poland was a distant and primarily nostalgic memory, some form of old world communal authority had become more desirable than the haphazard and often competing forces that vied for Jewish leadership authority.

In the United States, the most noteworthy effort at centralization was made in New York City in what has come to be known as the Kehillah experiment. Under its aegis in 1909-1910 a survey of Jewish education was undertaken by Professor M. Kaplan of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Dr. Bernard Cronson, a New York public school principal. They reported that “the demand for Jewish education was comparatively small and the means available to satisfy even this small demand are far too inadequate to meet it”.<sup>2</sup>

They reported that the main forms of Jewish education available were (1) the Talmud Torah (2) institutional schools (3) congregational schools (4) Sunday schools (5) the Heder, and (6) private tutors. Of the estimated 200,000 Jewish children of school-age not more than 42,000 or 21% were attending some form of Jewish education. This dismal picture was followed by a call for a central organization established by the New York Kehilla to oversee and organize Jewish education efforts.

On October 1, 1910, the Bureau of Jewish Education of the Jewish Community of New York was established. “Concerns which had led to the forming of the Kehilla, notably a charge by New York’s Police

Commissioner Theodore A. Gingham that 50 percent of New York City's criminal classes were Jews, also played a role in the activation of the Bureau".<sup>3</sup> It was widely believed in non-Jewish circles and to some extent by Jews, that Jewish young people were hanging around, open targets for trouble. The Jewish schools would hopefully make a positive incursion into this problem.

The work and accomplishments of the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York City were varied and many, largely due to the leadership of Dr. Samson Benderly, generally acknowledged as the creator of modern Jewish education in America.

The founding of this central bureau marked the beginning of communal responsibility for Jewish education, a concept previously unaccepted for any but the poorest in Jewish society.

It is difficult to say whether so many of the subsequent achievements of the New York Bureau would have been possible without the special talents of Dr. Benderly. Because he came not from Eastern Europe, but Israel (then Palestine) and had a secular education in a university in the United States, he had a rather unique background for the American Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> His contact with John Dewey and the progressives at Columbia University encouraged him to modernize technique in the classroom and bring "science" to Jewish education.

All of the central bureaus for Jewish education that developed in other North American centres, including Toronto, were indebted to the model of the New York BJE. "In the course of its existence (1910-1941), the Bureau under Benderly pioneered in putting forth contracts for teachers . . . in laying down and enforcing certification requirements, in promoting *ivrit-h-b'ivrit* (the teaching of Hebrew subjects in Hebrew) methods as a widely recognized practice; in stressing community responsibility for Jewish education; in evolving forms of Camping experiences for children . . ., in using audio-visual aids in classroom instruction; in creating the Hebrew High School; in founding the Circle of Jewish Children and the League of Jewish Youth, and in forming the Jewish Parents Association (*Elternverband*) of New York."<sup>5</sup>

Benderly's lasting influence on a national scale came from his influence on a group of young men who decided to make Jewish education their career not because they could do nothing else but because they were inspired by him to commit themselves to the continuance of their community.

In the late 1930's and early 40's the New York BJE was under fire by the increasing denomination of American Jewish life. Reform synagogues found the BJE schools and approach too Orthodox and Zionistic. From the opposite

side of the religious spectrum, religiously orthodox segments accused the central agency of being too secular by not using Hebrew as a religious textual language, and by incorporating educational methods that differed from the Jewish European models and followed a philosophy found in the general school system of the United States.

The New York BJE epitomized a continuing process of adaptation in a new environment. For its time, this bureau represented a semblance of order and respectability for Jewish education in the United States. It was not, however, the only model of organization for Jewish education in North America. The models that evolved in subsequent years and in other communities borrowed to some extent from the ideas pioneered in the New York experiment.

### **Jewish Education in Toronto**

The New York experience provides a context into which the Jewish education situation in Toronto can be better understood.

Jewish schooling in Toronto began as a congregational undertaking. Toronto's Holy Blossom had a Sunday school by 1900. With greater Eastern European immigration came the models of the old country; the *Heder*, the *Talmud Torah*, and the private teacher. Primary records of the early *Heder* schools have not survived and what remains is largely second hand reminiscence and folklore. Louis Rosenberg in his demographic studies of Canada's Jews estimated that in the late 1920's nearly 20% of Jewish pupils were receiving their training at home by private teachers.<sup>6</sup>

Like the *Heder*, the *Talmud Torah* was an importation from Europe. The first Talmud Torah appeared in Toronto in 1907 on Simcoe Street after which it was known. The spiritual founder of this school was Rabbi Jacob Gordon. A graduate of the Valozhin Yeshiva, he brought the spirit of the *Heder Meteukhan* (modern Heder) combined with Lithuanian Jewry's commitment to study to Toronto. This made the Talmud Torah less a charitable institution for the poor and orphaned than a respectable center for Jewish education in Toronto.

Efforts to form a communal Talmud Torah prior to 1907 had not born fruit. Although unprecedented cooperation between Anglicized elements from Holy Blossom and newly arrived Eastern Europeans had evolved, the spark and the funds necessary to truly mount such a venture did not materialize.<sup>7</sup>

No secular subjects were taught at the Simcoe Street school, following the pattern of similar supplementary programs in the United States. Children, of course, were enrolled in the universal and compulsory public school system. The teachers in the *Talmud Torah* were traditional, but emphasized modern Hebrew and Zionism. There was a healthy respect for Jewish subjects beyond

the traditional fare such as modern Hebrew literature and Jewish history as well as strong encouragement to be loyal “to one’s adopted land”.<sup>8</sup>

The Simcoe Street Talmud Torah had been intended to serve the entire East European Jewish community. Because it had been invented by Lithuanian and Russian Jews, however, a split eventually developed. At first the Rabbi of the Galician Jewish community requested separate classes for his charges. Later, however, these students withdrew over the issue of modern Hebrew as the language of instruction rather than Yiddish. An attempt to start a separate school never materialized and the students were left to the less qualified private teachers who taught in Yiddish.

These intra-ethnic rivalries in the Jewish community continued. By 1915, the Polish part of Toronto Jewry was large enough to form its own *Talmud Torah*. Surprising the detractors in the community, the school succeeded to the extent that it had to move twice in three years because it lacked space for its students. The D’Arcy Street Talmud Torah, or Eitz Chaim, as it was officially known, was a successful Orthodox alternative to the ‘modernist’ Simcoe Street school. Yet, this split at a time when community education dollars were scarce would later hurt both schools. Eitz Chaim’s permanent presence signaled the end of any hopes for a unified traditional Jewish school program.

In 1911, prior to the formation of the Eitz Chaim Talmud Torah, the secularists in the community formed the Jewish National Radical School. Its founders came from various parts of the left political spectrum. Their common bonds lay in their identification with the working class, secularism, and belief in maintaining Jewish culture through the Yiddish language. These schools attracted many students from the poorest parts of the community because low tuition fees were charged. By 1913, there were 300 students attending.

Given the tuition policy, and lacking a well-to-do constituency to draw upon, the school went bankrupt in 1916. The I.L. Peretz Workmen’s Circle agreed to take over the school in that same year. By 1917 with revived Zionist activity generated by the Balfour Declaration, the Labour Zionists and Territorialists withdrew from the Bundist Workmen’s Circle and created their own school.

The unending battle between secularists and traditionalists had by 1912 provoked the synagogues (e.g. Goel Tzedec, Holy Blossom) to consider reorganizing their own schools to maintain their own student body and meet the challenge of Christian missionaries.

*The Jewish Times*, a local Toronto newspaper, reported that the Simcoe

Street Talmud Torah facility was in poor condition, leaving “a most unpleasant impression”. Intense Jewish education in this setting could not draw enough students nor convince enough parents that it was worth the tuition charged. It appeared at this juncture that neither parents nor synagogues were prepared to support the struggling Talmud Torah as a central communal institution for Jewish education in Toronto. The Toronto Jewish community lacked the maturity to mount such a program. The majority of Toronto’s Jews were in no economic position to contribute heavily to the Talmud Torah’s upkeep. Community organization was a secondary priority. It might be argued, however, that the general fractiousness between different community groups retarded the development of coordinated Jewish education developing in other Canadian centres such as Winnipeg and Calgary.

By 1937 there were at least ten Jewish supplementary schools functioning in Toronto. The first known survey of Jewish education in the city was conducted by the Education and Culture Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Central Region. The survey found that of the estimated 7254 Jewish children between the ages of 5 and 14 some 3,500 were receiving some Jewish education (48%). This percentage was higher than most other North American cities of similar or larger size.<sup>9</sup> No single or obvious factor explains this situation. It suggests, however, that the Toronto Jewish community, at an early point in its development recognized the importance of Jewish education in its new setting.

The most popular form of school was the supplementary weekday afternoon institution. The schools ranged in ideology from orthodox to secular and operated six to 10 hours per week after public school hours. Some were synagogue affiliated, others were independent bodies established by parents and volunteers. About 14% were enrolled in congregational Sunday Schools and less than 2% were attending the single all-day school which was mainly pre-school oriented.<sup>10</sup>

Of the existing schools four were Orthodox. The Brunswick Avenue Talmud Torah (formerly Simcoe Street, later known as the Toronto Hebrew Free School), Eitz Chaim Talmud Torah, Euclid Avenue Talmud Torah, and the Torath Chaim Yeshiva. Four of the schools professed a “secular-culturalist” approach: the I.L. Peretz-Workmen’s Circle School, the Jewish National Workers Alliance School, the Morris Winchevsky School, and the Borochov School. Several Sunday Schools were functioning most notably Holy Blossom, Goel Tzedec, and Adath Israel. The Hillcrest Progressive School, the single Jewish “parochial school” of this period

combined modern methodologies with an integrated curriculum of Jewish and general studies. This school was not community supported.

During the depression the financial strains felt by the community and therefore by the schools caused severe financial hardship. In 1936, the Toronto Hebrew Free School (Brunswick Ave.) suspended operations for a few months. But the fate of Jewish education was not unusual. Almost all communal institutions suffered under the difficult economic climate.

The formation of the United Jewish Welfare Fund in 1937 and its acceptance of the various communal schools into its funded family marked a major change in Toronto's attitude toward communal responsibility for Jewish education. Prior to 1938, schools had each by itself carried on a valiant struggle for existence. The formation of a single funding agency to collect for all the schools meant that ideally Jewish families with children in schools would no longer be harassed by door to door fund raisers. More important by controlling the purse strings the Welfare Fund leadership might exert some control over the activities and planning priorities of the schools.

From 1939 to 1949, the United Jewish Welfare Fund made annual allocations to the subsidized schools,<sup>11</sup> through a sub-committee of the Welfare Fund Executive responsible for community education and culture. This subcommittee was designated as Division II, and it acted as a sort of budget and finance committee for school requests. To this group yearly budgetary submissions and emergency financial assistance were presented.<sup>12</sup> Division II's membership was divided equally between school representatives and community-at-large representatives. The operations of the Division were handled by community volunteers. There was no paid professional educator with knowledge of the real educational requirements of the schools to advise the committee. The early demands on these laymen may have been manageable, but by 1943 there was a request by Welfare Fund members for a survey of Jewish education in Toronto in order that the funds at their disposal might be properly distributed.

The survey was undertaken in 1943 by the local Canadian Jewish Congress Education and Culture Committee but its findings never reached the executive committee of the United Jewish Welfare Fund.<sup>13</sup> Its enrollment findings were an enrollment drop for 1943 of 12.8% or 463 pupils. The survey, however, noted an overall drop in the number of schoolage children from 8,770 to 7,145 or 18.5%. Therefore, including estimates of private tutoring, between 40-50% of the children eligible for Jewish education in any one year were receiving instruction in 1943.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of World War II discussions surrounding Jewish education

focused on upkeep of facilities, teacher salaries, and the ever increasing financial demands of the various schools. Some of the schools were requiring more and more physical repair overrunning budgets. New schools had been established which demanded community support. This created an especially competitive atmosphere in which schools and individuals were pitted against one another. The Division II apparatus, while representative of school interests, lacked vision objectivity, and the time to initiate a proper planning. In September of 1945 Mr. E.E. Gelber, a powerful figure in Toronto Jewish life, requested a "central planning body for Jewish educational programs" be established.<sup>15</sup>

Priorities were shifting within the community. The shock of the Holocaust plus intense politicking for a Jewish national homeland in Palestine forced local issues to a "back burner". It was anticipated that new Jewish immigration to Canada, would require a Jewish education component as well as increased social services. Representatives of Division II of the Welfare Fund brought forth their budget recommendations on February 22, 1946. Nearly every school was operating on a deficit basis. Eitz Chaim was seriously in arrears, unable to meet its teacher salary payments. The secular-culturalists were complaining of over-crowding and the need for new facilities.

There was immediate concern over the teacher situation. Teacher employment conditions were described as chaotic. Laymen argued over how to improve the status of the Jewish teaching profession and the problems of attracting people of a higher caliber to the field.<sup>16</sup>

By November 1946 the Welfare Fund Executive recommended that a survey of Jewish education in Toronto be done by an outside expert. Executive Committee discussions mentioned specifically, the formation of a "Central Agency in the field of Jewish Education vested with authority for planning and supervision."<sup>17</sup> To substantiate this need for a central agency, examples were brought of unplanned and perhaps more importantly unauthorized growth. The creation of a Bureau of Jewish Education in Winnipeg was cited as a possible model for Toronto. This new survey would be more comprehensive in scope going beyond the statistics of 1937 and 1943 to an evaluation of curriculum and school programs. Indicative of UJWF attitudes toward previous CJC efforts in this area was the apparent disregard of the earlier education surveys done in Toronto.

In March of 1947, the mechanisms for initiating a survey of Jewish education were put into motion. Confronted from all sides with issues that required "immediate response" Division II representatives were unable to

keep pace. The survey sub-committee was formed to hire a “surveyor” and work out the details of the study. Individuals appointed to the committee included representatives from both the Welfare Fund and Canadian Jewish Congress.<sup>18</sup>

On December 11, 1948 it was reported to the Executive Committee that Dr. Uriah Z. Engelman of the American Association of Jewish Education had been engaged to do the survey at a fee of approximately \$2000.<sup>19</sup> This survey went further than any other in assessing the needs of Jewish education in the community. Dr. Engelman visited every school, reviewed budgets, enrollment, administrative functioning, and teacher salaries. A preliminary report submitted July 21, 1948 states as a first priority the “need of a Central Agency for Jewish Education.”<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Engelman focused on three issues he saw as deficient in the Toronto case. He maintained that each school saw itself as a central organization with little or no contact with other schools. He argued that there was no Jewish school system “in the community sense of the term”. Further, Engelman stated that existing schools operated without central coordination and frequently duplicated programs and competed for the same students with one another. He viewed this as obviously counter productive because only one-half of the eligible Jewish children were being reached and on the secondary school level the enrollments were negligible. His final point emphasized the lack of a “coordinated program of promotion of Jewish education on a community wide basis.”<sup>21</sup>

To solve these and other problems Engelman proposed the Central Agency concept. This move to centralize control was greeted positively by Welfare Fund leadership for several reasons none of them necessarily having anything to do with the improved education orientation of Engelman.

Firstly such an organization would provide a formal control mechanism over school actions by a central community organization. The Division II set up had responded to school demands but lacked the authority to engage in planning and truly controlling action. The Welfare Fund leaders also desired to bring fiscal order to the community’s schools. Events of the previous forty years in Toronto had brought bankruptcy and near bankruptcy to a number of institutions. There was also the desire to use the central agency for fiscal restraint on the schools whose budgets had been growing steadily since the war. It was at that time fashionable in the United States to have a local Bureau of Jewish Education. Perhaps, Toronto was eager to join the majority of North American Jewish communities, in this regard. Lastly, there was a strong desire among some members of the Welfare Fund executive board to

diminish the frequency and often predominance of Jewish education matters on their agendas. The Executive leadership were not all negative to Jewish education, but the social service requirements for new immigrants and the struggle for Israel needed more time than had been allotted. A central agency in charge of education would, they hoped, take the load off.

Perhaps sensing the preoccupations of his audience, Engelman in his report addressed educational issues first. The central agency would “plan, promote, coordinate, support, guide and help finance all the educational institutions in the community.”<sup>22</sup> The kind of centralization Engelman recommended, however, was not uniformity but a unity in diversity. This philosophy of Jewish educational organization was popular at the time as the path of least resistance, although it was only one among several possible models. An idealistic “framework within which all creative elements working in the field of Jewish education could function effectively”<sup>23</sup> was imagined.

This central agency concept assumed that the Jewish community at large had at least as much stake in the success of Jewish education as did parents, congregations and organizations. This assumption would allow the community to impose a partnership upon the schools which meant, as Engelman saw it, the right to exert control on the schools. In a community where school independence and competition had been institutionalized since 1907, this contention would likely be contested.

The role of the community was outlined in thirteen points, none obviously contentious. The functions of the central agency were described in terms of service. Only by implication, did the report focus on topics that one might assume required improvement in one or more schools. Areas mentioned included registration, record keeping, sanitary standards, supervision, and new educational materials. While he was painting an idealized picture of what might be, Engelman made recommendations beyond the formal school, following the lead of the New York Bureau 30 years earlier. Youth and adult education were mentioned. Parent education and a communal Parent Association were also recommended.

The role and importance of the teacher was recognized. Professionalism and standards were stressed with an emphasis on introducing new methodologies to the Canadian Jewish school. The central agency would also be required to act as a public relations agency for Jewish education. Finally Engelman recommended that this central agency supervise all Jewish education in the Province of Ontario as well as Toronto. For this, additional staff would be required.

Only as the final point did Engelman raise the issue of financial support to schools. He commended the community for taking responsibility in financing all types of Jewish schools. He criticized, however, the methods employed in allocating funds. "If anything, these methods penalize the schools which would aim at maintaining or raising its standards by engaging qualified teachers, or by attempting to grade satisfactorily the children, or by offering better supervision."<sup>24</sup>

Engelman's study discovered that per capita grants were allotted without any "rational" criteria ranging from \$23. per pupil to \$86. per pupil. To drive home his point he cited one school with the highest per capita grant had the lowest record for average length of stay of the children in the school and the qualifications of teachers. A review of requests made to the Welfare Fund directly indicate that those who "yelled the longest and loudest" were the winners. All parties concerned did not greet the prospect of a central agency with joy. The school representatives were pacified by having their deficits retired by the Welfare Fund.<sup>25</sup> Teachers distrusted the emphasis and impact of standards, but lacked the political clout to change the process.<sup>28</sup>

Although minor adjustments were made in the mandate of this central agency, the Bureau of Jewish Education was established in late 1949. Both the United Jewish Welfare Fund and Canadian Jewish Congress Central Region agreed and approved the formation of the Bureau. On November 1, 1949, Dr. Joseph Diamond became the founding Director. Mr. Sam Posluns, who had acted as lay chairman of the Engelman survey became its first president.

In Jewish literature, there is a saying "Eyn Navi b'iyro," (No one is a prophet in his own city). The establishment of a Central Bureau of Jewish Education had taken more than thirty-five years since the initial call of Barnet Stone, a Galican clothing manufacturer active with the Goel Tzedec congregation, to form a "united Board of Education." It was only when a communal professional, unfamiliar with Toronto and Canada, would call forth the necessary data that a centralized organizing and planning body for Jewish education in Toronto would be established.

The formation of a Bureau complete with professional director was a function of necessity. It was hoped that it would put a disorderly house in order. The Bureau also marked a new level of maturity for Toronto Jewry in which it was envisaged that normally competitive elements might work together for the benefit of all.

In a general sense it marked another stage in the Jewish story of adapting to new lands and cultures. As the general education system had found it

more efficient to centralize operations, so the Jewish community perceived the same thing. In Canada, prior to World War II the predominant ideology in education was one of Anglo-conformity.<sup>27</sup> The role of the Jewish school during this period was cultural maintenance. That such a variety of Jewish schooling could be created in this atmosphere is directly attributable to historical precedents for such schooling in previous diaspora communities. As other ethnic communities in Canada struggle to maintain ethnic school attendance past the second generation, Jewish schooling in Toronto continues to grow.<sup>28</sup> Other ethnic groups have had to create, for the first time, schools to perpetuate their identity. The Jewish community had only to adapt existing models. The Bureau of Jewish Education in Toronto is an example of taking the kehilla model from Europe, learning from central agency models in the United States, and fitting it to the Canadian milieu.

The evolution of the Board of Jewish Education continues thirty-five years later. Its growth and importance is demonstrated by a multi-million dollar budget and the more than 30 schools that affiliate with it.<sup>29</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Gamoran, Emanuel; *Changing Conceptions in Jewish Education*, MacMillan & Co. New York, 1924, p.1.
2. Ben-Horin, Meir "From the Turn of the Century, *A History of Jewish Education in the United States*, ed. Pilch, Judah, 1969 (AAJE) p. 67-70.
3. *Ibid*, p. 71.
4. See Nathan H. Winter, *Jewish Education in a Pluralistic Society*, New York, 1966.
5. Op.cit. Ben Horin, M. p. 74.
6. The Heder was a one room "school" overseen by an individual who taught the rudiments of Jewish knowledge sometimes to individual children, sometimes to a small group. The Talmud Torah in Europe had been a community run school for orphans and the children of poor families. The private teacher or 'melamed' was, in North America, usually an individual who trained boys in basic Hebrew reading for Bar Mitzvah often for lack of skills to do other work. See also Hart, A.D. *The Jew in Canada*, Jewish Publication Ltd., Montreal/Toronto, 1926.
7. Speisman, Stephen, *The Jews of Toronto*, Toronto, MacLelland & Stewart, 1979, p. 169.
8. *Ibid*, p. 172.
9. Op.Cit. Ben-Horin, pp. 82-83.
10. Zweig, David Norman, *Jewish Education in Canada*, unpublished MA Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 1948; the figures he used are stated to be taken from the report. The remaining percentage were in private home tutorials.
11. At this time, this referred to weekday afternoon schools meeting 4 or 5 days a week. Congregational Sunday School like Holy Blossom were not subsidized.
12. Interview with Mrs. Florence Rosichan (ne. Huttner) second executive director of the United Jewish Welfare Fund of Toronto, December 29, 1984. There were Divisions in the Welfare Fund: 1) Community Services/Community Chest (e.g. Jewish Family and Child Service, Home for the Aged, Jewish Vocational service, etc.); 2) Educational and Cultural Services; 3) Canadian Jewish Congress; 4) Overseas Services and Relief; 5) Non-Local Agencies (e.g. Canadian Friends of Hebrew University).
13. Inspection of UJWF minutes for 1943 shows no mention of this report nor was Ms. Huttner

Rosichan familiar with it.

14. Op.cit. Zweig.
15. Minutes of United Jewish Welfare Fund, Sept. 1945 Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto TJC/CJC.
16. Minutes of UJWF Executive Committee. February 22, 1946. Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto/TJC/CJC.
17. Minutes of UJWF Executive Meeting November 1946; Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto/TJC/CJC/
18. Representatives included S.J. Granatstein, E.E. Gelber, J.I. Oelbaum, and Sam Posluns.
19. It later turned out to cost more than this figure, the yearly salary of a Jewish teacher in the system.
20. From "Recommendations of Preliminary Report on Survey on Jewish Education in Toronto" July 21, 1948 by Dr. U.Z. Engelman, Ontario Jewish Archives.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.* p.a.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
25. Interview with Sam Posluns, April, 1953.
26. Interviews with Jack Burke, Dr. L. Jacober, Summer, 1985.
27. In 1950 there were 3,768 students enrolled in Jewish schools in Toronto, in 1967, 9,200, and in 1984 over 13,000. Information from booklet, "Eighteenth Anniversary of the BJE" 1949-1997. Appreciation to Dr. J. Diamond for copy.
28. Harney, P. and Troper, H., *Immigrants*, (Toronto), pp. 109-113.
29. Information from the Board of Jewish Education of Metro Toronto, 1984.