Translation / Traduction
Yankev Leshchinsky’s *Dos natsyonale ponem fun goles-yidntum* and Canadian Jewish Education in the First Half of the Twentieth Century
Translator’s Introduction

The 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada found that 43 percent of Canadian Jewish adults had attended a full-time Jewish day school, making Canada a world leader among diaspora countries in Jewish education.¹ What remains unclear is when Canadian Jewry surged ahead in this regard. Yankev Leshchinsky, head of the Economics and Statistics Section of Vilna’s famed Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut (Jewish Scientific Institute, or YIVO) and European correspondent for the New York Jewish daily Forverts (Forward), sheds light on this question in a 1955 Yiddish-language work, Dos natsyonale ponem fun goles-yidntum (The National Character of Diaspora Jewry).² In the following excerpt, drawn from a section on education (khinukh), Leshchinsky shows that the surge in day school attendance began sometime between 1943 and 1948, and continued until at least 1953, the last year for which he provides data.

Leshchinsky mentions three reasons why the surge took place. First, he asserts that the Jewish birth rate experienced an uptick in the period just before the surge. We can dismiss this claim because census data show that annual births per 1,000 Jews declined quite steadily from 15.3 to 13.6 between 1926 and 1936.³ Leshchinsky is on safer ground when he mentions the national-religious awakening that took place in the second half of the 1940s. The urge to rebuild the Jewish people was strong after the Holocaust. The establishment of the State of Israel provided additional inspiration, as well as a source of personnel in support of Jewish education in the diaspora. Surprisingly, Leshchinsky says little about the significance of yet another factor, perhaps the most important of all, namely Jewish population growth due to immigration, especially from Eastern Europe. Mainly because of the postwar immigration boom, Canada’s Jewish population grew fully 24.2 percent between 1941 and 1951, greatly stimulating demand for Jewish education and building a foundation for later growth.⁴
חצר אין קאנדארת

אינו פרט מפת אוסטריה-殒יעות ודרורונות ש Scarborough קאנדארת בע"י וידעה ресторан

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מעט זכאות ז"א. לבירון, דוער דלעתא איבנברעלים פוז ז"א 1953 ז"א

"קאנדארת בלילוב" (901 משל שבירון 1953) ג'ור א"ש: "משארלד צו בנג'ן רע

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Robert Brym / Yankev Leshchinsky's Dos natsyonale ponem fun goles-yidntum and Canadian Jewish Education in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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In national-religious education, the Jewish community of Canada certainly competes favourably with all other diaspora communities. There are countries (notably Mexico and Uruguay) that can perhaps compare to Canada in terms of the percentage of Jewish children who receive a Jewish education. However, in terms of the quality of education, the deep-rootedness of educational institutions, and the security of their budgets, Canada takes first place.

In Canada there are close to 20 yeshivas—unfortunately, I do not have the precise number. A 1953 overview in the Keneder Odler (9 September) mentions “the Lubavitch Yeshiva, the Merkaz–Hatoyre Yeshiva, the Rayshis Khokhme Yeshiva, all in Montreal, and also yeshivas in Toronto, Winnipeg, and other cities. They are the best witnesses of the religious-spiritual zest of Jewish youth in Canada.”

These are all large yeshivas, where mature adolescents learn just like they once used to. Here is an example that shows us how seriously learning is taken in the yeshivas. In the Keneder Odler (28 June 1953) we find the following: “It is not the first time that the young men of Merkaz–Hatoyre make various wagers on reciting twelve sheets of the gemora by heart. This time the Talmud student Ruvn Silver managed to recite half the gemora tractate Beitza by heart in the presence of a group of the yeshiva’s learned scholars. They interrupted the young man in the middle of his recitation and asked him a question concerning a toysefes. The young man responded most capably.”

A certain suitable atmosphere is necessary for a young man to enter the study of the gemora in such a way, and as we see, it does not involve rote learning but an understanding of content. And if one student can know half a tractate by heart, it is a sign that all students study the Talmud seriously. They study with love and devotion and certainly of their own free will. It is doubtful that all of these young men, who at the same time are receiving a general high school education and often a university education, will remain students of the gemora. But a certain number of them are preparing to become teachers or rabbis, and there is no doubt that a completely new type of teacher and a new type of rabbi is emerging here.

About 100 students study in the Merkaz–Hatoyre yeshiva. Many more study in the Lubavitch Yeshiva. According to the Keneder Odler (18 March 1952), “Nobody thought that the small number of ‘green’ yeshiva students of the Lubavitch type, who used to look quite strange in their new milieu, would in the course of a few years so deeply root themselves in the local environment. Altogether, 600 students now study in the Lubavitch Yeshiva.” The yeshiva has both an elementary school and a high school,
“and there is no tension between studying in the *yeshiva* and general education” (*Keneder Odler*, 30 March 1955).

The yeshivas make no compromise and are proud to “not only teach Yiddishkeit but practice it.” However, just how well they adapt [to their new environment] becomes clear from the following (*Keneder Odler*, 30 March 1955):

> Even sports and athletics are not neglected. All is according to local custom. But this pertains only to things having to do with pedagogical method. The spirit of the school is like that of a *cheder*, that is, strictly religious. And in this you cannot negotiate for less with the Lubavitcher. The Lubavitch *yeshiva* has already become settled in the consciousness of the local Jews as one of the most important educational institutions in our community.

The last phrase is very important. Have the yeshivas actually become an organic and integral part of Jewish education in the countries of the Americas? Would that it be as the just-quoted newspaper editor asserts! Without exception, the Canadian yeshivas are no more than ten or eleven years old. They are all a product of the national-religious awakening after the Holocaust, and their existence and development is supported by the establishment of the State of Israel. The yeshiva students are the surest future readers of Hebrew—and perhaps not only Hebrew readers but Hebrew writers.

About 1,500 students study in Canada’s yeshivas. Up to 1,000 of them are more than fourteen years old. They include a very few girls. Most students come from religious homes but an appreciable number are from homes where religious *mitzvot* are very weakly observed.

Let us now turn to secular education. Again we will cite figures—but first a few brief words about the character of schools in Canada. There are a great many day schools where both Hebrew and Yiddish are taught equally. In Winnipeg there is an exclusively Hebrew school that has already celebrated its 40th year. However, Hebrew is taught in depth in all Jewish day schools. One can confidently assert that children graduate from these schools with a foundation in Hebrew that gives them a good chance to become Hebrew readers. Regarding Yiddish, this is a certainty because in Canada Yiddish is commonly spoken in the home, much more than in the United States. These are mainly labour-Zionist schools, and not just Hebrew but also the State of Israel assumes a very important place in the education of the children. Most children remain in these day schools more than five years and therefore the schools grow deeper roots in the hearts and souls of the children than do the schools in the United States. They are *day*–schools! This means that children take all their schooling in a Jewish school and, even if the majority later transfer to a public middle–school,
they take with them enough Yiddish–Hebrew nourishment to last many years and have results that are reflected in their adult relationship to the day-schools.

Let us now glance at the numbers, which are certainly still far from the ideal to which diaspora Jewry now aspires but nonetheless give hope for the future.

In all of Canada in 1954, there were around 30,000 Jewish children of school age (between the ages of 6 and 14). Of these, 25,500 attended public school and 4,500 (15 percent) attended Jewish day school where they also learn general subjects. Of the 25,500 Jewish children attending public school, some receive some form of Jewish education in afternoon school and Sunday school. Still, it is sad that only half of Jewish students receive some form of Jewish education.

Table 1 shows the approximate distribution of school-age children in the various types of Jewish school. Nearly a third of children in Jewish schools attend schools with the maximum Jewish content, approximately four times the percentage in the United States. If we were to add the children attending yeshivas, the percentage would be even higher. Some 55 percent of children in Jewish schools study in afternoon schools, mainly Talmud Torahs, where they study more days per week and more hours per day than in the United States. The Talmud Torahs in Canada also have a more traditional-religious character than in the United States. Finally, 15 percent of children attending Jewish schools are in Sunday schools, three times the percentage for the United States. Students study Jewish subjects 11–12 hours per week in day schools, 7 hours per week in Talmud Torahs, and 2–3 hours per week in Sunday schools.

One can form a picture of the development of education among Canadian Jews by considering growth in the number of Jewish students in the day schools of Montreal, where nearly half of Canada’s Jewish population is concentrated. Table 2 displays the number of Jewish children in all of Montreal’s schools and the number in day schools from 1928 to 1953.
Change in the total number of students is partly a result of a decline in the birth rate in earlier years and an increase in the past decades. However, we will not concern ourselves with this issue here. We are chiefly concerned with the number of Jewish students in day schools, where they are enveloped in a Jewish atmosphere and receive maximum exposure to Jewish studies. Until 1943, growth was very slow—just 673 students were added to the total from 1928 to 1943. In the latter year, they comprised only 7.5 percent of Jewish children in Montreal’s schools. However, from 1943 to 1953, the number of students in day schools grew by 2,589. In 1953, they constituted 22.1 percent of Jewish students in the city’s schools.\textsuperscript{11}

Unfortunately, we cannot dwell on the financial side of Jewish education in Canada even though it plays an important role. Montreal Jews pay taxes in support of the general school system and must themselves support the Jewish schools. The expense is large. Canadian Jewry spends more than a million dollars a year on Jewish education.\textsuperscript{12} For such a small community this is a huge sum.

We are regrettably compelled to limit information on the Canadian Jewish education system to the foregoing. We will only add that in the last few years Hebrew instruction has developed substantially in Canada. Summer camps like Camp Massad and Hebrew evening courses have been established, and in all types of schools Hebrew instruction has become more intensive. Also in the Jewish Public Library the number of Hebrew readers has increased.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Children in Jewish schools as a percent of Jewish children in all schools</th>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>15,567</td>
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</table>

\textbf{Robert Brym}, FRSC, is SD Clark Professor of Sociology Emeritus and an associate of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto. Since 2017, he has been translating Leshchinsky’s works into English, including \textit{The Jewish Worker in Russia} (Bloomington IN: Slavica, 2018 [1906]); “The development of the Jewish people over the last 100 years,” \textit{East European Jewish Affairs} (2020 [1928]: 50, 1/2) 157–242; \textit{The Last Years of Polish Jewry}, vol. 1: \textit{At the Edge of the Abyss: Essays, 1927–33} (Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023 [1947]); and “Jewish economic life in Yiddish literature,” \textit{East European Jewish Affairs} (2023 [1921]: 53, 1), the last two works translated with the assistance of Eli Jany.


5 The Keneder Odler (Canadian Eagle), published in Montreal, was the country’s leading Yiddish newspaper until 1977, when it ceased publication.

6 The *gemora* is the second part of the Talmud, consisting of rabbinical analysis of, and commentary on, the first part, the *mishna*.

7 A *toysefes* is a supplementary commentary on the Talmud.

8 *Yiddishkeit* refers to the Jewish way of life.

9 This is an underestimate. Already by the time of the 1931 census there were more than 30,000 Jews between the ages of six and fourteen in Canada. Moreover, in 1951, although Canadian children were obliged to stay in school until age fourteen, public school continued until grade 12 (grade 13 in Ontario), when most students were seventeen years old (eighteen in Ontario). See Rosenberg, *Canada’s Jews*, 46.


11 Ibid., 2.

12 In January 1953, $1 million had the purchasing power of more than $11.2 million in January 2024. Bank of Canada, “Inflation calculator” (2024).