

From the Writings of Shraga Arian, Z"l Our Hero in Jewish Education

CHAPTER I : Underlying Philosophy "I Chose Jewish Education"

At various stages in my youthful dreaming I wanted to be a writer, a kibbutz farmer, an actor, a community leader. Two contrasting moods played within me. I yearned to serve mankind in the name of a great ideal, but I also dreamed of hearing the sound of my name reverently repeated by masses of people.

My favorite pastime was daydreaming.... I am standing with a large group of people looking out toward the horizon. Everyone is saying that it can't be done; that we can never reach the far-off mountains. I step out of the crowd and announce that it can be done; that I am now going to walk toward the mountains and take with me those who are unafraid and undaunted. I turn my back to the crowd and with head held high, I walk toward the mountains. Twenty or thirty clear-eyed young men and women break out of the crowd; they beg me to take them with me. I say nothing; together we walk toward the horizon as the group behind us stares at us in awe and wonder.

As I grew older I learned not to feel guilty at having a need for the adulation of others. I realized that this feeling need not be destructive if tempered by a concern for others. I longed to bind myself to such a concern and I searched for a sacred cause.

As I searched, the cause was taking life and breathing within me. But it was too much a part of me for me to realize it. I should have known it when as a child I became Yehuda Hamakabi in the Hebrew School play. Or when as a teenager I sat within a circle in a darkened room and sang passionate songs of longing for a return to the Jewish homeland. Or when as a college student the crushing indictment of the poet Tchernichowsky of the weak-willed galut Jews made my heart break.

I suppose I was like the boy who lives next door to a girl he has known all his life. I was too close to recognize what I really felt. I didn't realize then that my love was my own Jewish people; my sacred cause was the cause of Jewish destiny.

Meanwhile, I was told I had some talent in acting and writing and that I was effective with young children. So I authored, directed, and acted in all kinds of plays and worked with children in Jewish summer camps. Soon I became fascinated with the history and literary expression of my people and I began to study Judaism with a new sense of involvement.

Slowly, inexorably, my personal interests and my sacred cause were drawn to each other and finally merged. Jewish education was the marriage broker, the force which let me marry my personal talents and inclinations to a sacred cause. I

saw the cause as the most exciting imaginable—inspiring a new Jewish generation to walk down the same path that Abraham, Moses, Akiba and Rashi had walked.

But how did one draw young people toward the path of these great ones? I discovered that there were very few set forms and techniques; that one had to utilize ingenuity, creativity and imagination. Of course there was formal Hebrew classroom teaching but even this demanded the most creative planning in order to significantly touch students. I had finally realized my daydream—I was walking toward a mountain while others behind me stood rooted in Jewish apathy. But, despite my commitment to the ideals of Jewish education, I was not forced to sacrifice my personal interest in writing and drama. These forms now became my allies. An effective teacher must be an actor if he is to make his teachings live. I learned to apply acting skills in the classroom. I discovered the power of the dramatic form to convey ideas, moods and feelings. I began to structure special programs, ceremonies and plays.

I experimented with other forms as well, such as group work and camping, to instill Jewish knowledge and evoke Jewish passion in my students. I projected my school as a Jewish hothouse, where all of our people's cultural expressions could find a hospitable welcome: the classroom, camping, group work and artistic form.

Today the framework within which I work includes an elementary afternoon Hebrew school of 400 students, a Hebrew High School of 150 students, an all-day school of 115 students, a Hebrew day camp of 100 children, and adult, college, youth, drama, choral and dance groups.

I have fought the temptation of becoming a pencil-pushing administrator. Obviously, within such a large structure the director must organize, direct and coordinate all aspects of the program. Yet I have realized that I must also work directly with the most significant element within such a program—the individuals themselves. People—teachers, students and parents—despite our attempts to categorize them, are the most unpredictable and therefore the most exciting element possible with which to work. Jewish education, whose goal is to influence the individual, encourages one to savor this excitement of people.

Of course there are frustrations. When children blithely leave after age 13, when parents remain indifferent to what you consider precious, when effective Hebrew teachers are difficult to find—one is bound to feel thwarted. Yet, despite these disappointments, I can think of no more fulfilling and satisfying work. To know that you have influenced a family to commit itself to the Shabbat; to know that you have inspired a 15-year old to return to Jewish study after having quit two years previously; to know that you have had a hand in influencing an adult to give up his business career in favor of Jewish teaching—these are fulfillments which are not only personal victories but triumphs for the Jewish heritage as I know now that had I chosen to indulge my personal interests without binding them to a great

cause—I would have found my life interesting but shallow. **The other day, when my young son remarked that he might become a meteorologist when he grows up, I said to him, 'Good, you'll make me very proud. Then there will be two of us looking up at the stars.'**

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