Eduard Israel Kley, "The Spirit in Israelite Elementary Schools" (1821)

Abstract

This excerpt speaks to the core of German-Jewish intellectual culture in the long nineteenth century. Since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, calls had gone out for the general education of Jewish youth. These calls intensified after 1815, when full civic equality for Jews became a topic of public discussion throughout the lands of the German Confederation. But the type of education that appealed to Jews, especially to Jews in the developing middle class, featured not only practical instruction for trade or occupation. A well-rounded humanistic education would ensure that young people entered adult life not merely as units of economic productivity but as fully flourishing individuals, whose endowment of gifts had undergone a comprehensive and lasting refinement. Theorists such as Eduard Israel Kley (1789–1867) argued that this emphasis on cultivation, or *Bildung*, would make Jews not only better Jews, but also better Germans—ones more palatable to those who had persistently excluded them from social, cultural, and political life. This, at least, was the hope and stratagem of bourgeois Jewish assimilationists until well into the twentieth century.

Source

V. The Spirit in Israelite Elementary Schools[1])

If outward existence, along with its situations, is to be worthily shaped, whether it be for individuals or whole classes of mankind, in the great bodies of the community, peoples, or nations, then it must be conditioned by due regard for the quality of inner existence and be developed appropriately out of it.

The individual's actions depend on his insightfulness and the formation of his intellect, whether in relation to himself or to others. Further, the level of knowledge expressed in more or less all the parts of a constructed body authenticates the total formation of the whole, from which alone can emerge the common striving and cooperation of all toward one and the same purpose, as well as the general welfare. If we apply this, universally valid, statement to the Israelite coreligionists in Germany, it merits in this case more than others the strongest endorsement, for it illuminates the fact that nowhere more than in this instance do external circumstances impinge so greatly upon inner life.

So many voices have been raised in the last five years both for and against the civil improvement of the Israelites, and so varied have been the judgments uttered concerning this matter, yet all are agreed that the first concern must be for an improved education of youth, for the development and refinement of the next generation. How strongly this necessity is felt by all enlightened and fair-minded Israelites is demonstrated by the progress made in instruction by various institutions, so blessed with success, in the past 20 or 30 years; and this is so not only in states where equality of civil rights has completely succeeded or where it exists with a few qualifications and where such an important concern as school instruction is placed under the supervision and the solicitude of governments, but even in those states where Israelites still long for a determination of their circumstances by august governments.

And, in fact, what would granting equal status for them mean? What could prove more useful, purposeful,

beneficial to themselves and to Germany—of which they comprise a significant class—what, through great care and zealousness in the work, could be more important than that which leads to the development and the shaping of inner life, that is, to true education, to moral and religious nobility? For, from the outside, from the top down, only external circumstances can be determined and formed; if the inner life does not conform to these conditions, the most humane intentions will achieve scarcely half their desired effect and expose conflicts all the more keenly. Inner life can form only from within. As frequent experience shows, it is not enough simply to better educate the individual, preparing him for a dignified future profession in human society, as has been the practice up until today. Rather, the entire mass of today's youth must be refined and consigned to more meticulous care. Appropriately equipped and purposefully led elementary schools are the single, essential means to this end and therefore the most pressing demand of our time.

These should not be merely instructional institutions but rather educational institutions. Everyday experience shows us that even with much knowledge a person, while he may not be uneducated, is not yet truly educated, indeed, what is even worse, can be falsely educated. Knowledge one owes to instruction, but education alone forms the person. It is not the extent of knowledge but rather the correct application of it to life and what is best for the individual no less than for the totality that determines the level of education: youth in the elementary schools should therefore not only be instructed but much more so educated.

Here men should not be prepared for a particular caste or profession or become practiced in specialized skills and business dealings with which to gain profit or honors; nor should their minds take on the attitudes and peculiar ways of thinking that characterize this or that class of people. The mind, given such one-sided direction, on the one hand through a surfeit of knowledge that so often overwhelms the heads of the young, and on the other hand completely neglects their hearts, seldom produces more than shallowness and superficiality and thus miseducates instead of educates. In the elementary schools, independent of any specific caste or vocation, the inner life of the human being should unfold and take shape, open to all the directions and external influences of which it is capable. To this end and before all else the young generation ought to become educated and refined. Out of this refined humanity will come forth a refined Israelite and a refined citizen.

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NOTES

[1] This interesting treatise, which was published on the occasion of the official inspection of the Hamburg Israelite Free School, deserves wide circulation and will be much welcomed by our readership. The editors. [Footnote in original text]

Source of English translation: Eduard Israel Kley, "The Spirit of the Israelite Elementary Schools," in: *Sulamith: A Periodical for the Advancement of Culture and Humanity among the Israelites*, 6 (1821), ed. by David Fränkel, pp. 383–98. [Excerpt from pp. 383–86] (translated by Richard S. Levy), edited in Key Documents of German-Jewish History, https://dx.doi.org/10.23691/jgo:source-27.en.v1

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