

Growth in Jewish Private Schools Celebrates Complex Mix

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By PETER APPLEBOME

The head of school comes from a family of Methodist ministers. The principal is a former dentist from a fellowship program in Jerusalem that trains Jewish educators. And the 19 inaugural students come from Reform, Conservative and Orthodox families across the metropolitan sprawl of Atlanta.

The New Atlanta Jewish Community High School, which greeted its first students this month, is hardly the picture of the traditional Jewish yeshiva. But as Jews across the country prepare to celebrate the Jewish New Year on Wednesday, the school offers a window onto a striking resurgence in Jewish education that has seen nearly 40 Jewish private schools open in New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, New Haven, Minneapolis and Cleveland in the last six years, with many others on the way. At least 10 new Jewish high schools opened this month.

And later this month, a coalition of major Jewish organizations and philanthropists is expected to announce a \$36 million effort to found 20 more Jewish day schools, all part of a movement the Jewish newspaper The Forward calls "one of the most significant trends in American Jewish life in decades."

The schools range from traditional Orthodox yeshivas, where students focus intensely on Judaic studies during a school day that can last until 6 P.M., to more modern

Orthodox schools and nondenominational schools, like this one, with a greater focus on college preparatory courses. The vast majority of schools, which enroll more than 200,000 students, are Orthodox, but non-Orthodox schools are the fastest-growing area.

The very range of schools reflects a complex mix of educational, religious and cultural issues related to the direction and priorities of American Jews. At their heart is perhaps the central challenge of Jewish life in America: how to maintain a Jewish identity amid the temptations of secular American society and how to respond to the wave of intermarriage that many see as imperiling the survival of American Jews.

Though avoiding intermarriage is an explicit goal of the movement toward Jewish private schools, officials at the fledgling school here say if the schools do not have a larger purpose than that, they will not survive.

"We can't be a product of deficit thinking about combatting intermarriage and assimilation," said Simcha Pearl, principal of the Atlanta school, which opened this fall in temporary quarters on the second floor of a Jewish community center. "So we die out? So what? This has to be about something positive about the importance of a Jewish identity, about how to live a Jewish life that's wonderful and meaningful. If we don't have a positive purpose, there's no reason to be here."

The growth in the schools is also driven by a resurgence in Jewish culture, by doubts about the quality of public schools and by dissatisfaction with private school alternatives, as well as by demographic trends leading to record school enrollments over all. Along with the new schools, many existing Jewish day schools are reporting record enrollments.

Even proponents say the movement faces enormous skepticism from Jews who doubt that the fledgling schools can instantly be academically credible or can compete with the best secular ones, from those committed to public schools and from those who see Jewish schools as unnecessary and even counterproductive in American life.

But the movement has evolved in recent years as a major priority in Jewish life, with the emphasis shifting from pushing the concept of the schools to supporting them financially. In a show of support for Jewish education, 10 prominent Jewish philanthropists, including Michael Steinhardt, Charles Bronfman and Edgar Bronfman, and two of the largest Jewish organizations are expected to announce gifts and challenge grants on Oct. 21 that are part of an effort to raise \$36 million for new Jewish private schools.

"We have a remarkable window of opportunity right now if the Jewish community can get behind these schools," said Yossi Prager, executive director for North America of the Avi Chai Foundation, which was formed in 1984 to promote a commitment to Judaism and has been a major proponent of the Jewish day school movement.

The trend toward Jewish private schools has many antecedents, but one major impetus was a 1990 study commissioned by the Council of Jewish Federations that showed Jews marrying outside their faith at a rate of 52 percent. Other researchers have since disputed the figure, but the study helped focus attention on the intermarriage issue and ways to maintain Jewish identity.

A widely circulated study by Avi Chai in 1993 concluded that at least nine years of Jewish education constituted the most important factor in lifelong Jewish involvement and that full-time Jewish day schools "are the only type of Jewish education that stands up against the very rapidly growing rate of assimilation."

This fall, the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston opened its doors with 48 students, 18 more than had been anticipated. The Stella K. Abraham High School for Girls in Hewlett Bay, N.Y., began the year with 255 students, up from 38 when the school opened in 1993. Shalhevet, a Jewish high school in Los Angeles, opened its doors five years ago with 25 students. This fall, it had 138. The Solomon Schechter School in White Plains, N.Y., has grown from 450 students to 610 in the last five years. This year, it had to have a lottery for new kindergarten students because there were not enough places to meet the demand.

The Solomon Schechter Day School of Nassau County/Solomon Schechter High School of Long Island this year will announce a \$25 million capital campaign for a new campus in Old Westbury, the largest effort ever for a Jewish private school.

The new high school here, though not necessarily typical, reflects the diversity of the schools. Its academic and religious goals are symbolized by the two leaders of the school, who, in effect, share the position of principal. Dick Hanson, the head of school, comes from a long career in secular private schools and is not Jewish. Mr. Pearl grew up in a Jewish high school and came to the school here directly from Israel.

The vast majority of the 600 Jewish private schools in the country are affiliated with Orthodox Jews, the most observant of the Jewish denominations. But the school here is one of perhaps 50 nondenominational Jewish schools, whose goals include not just maintaining Jewish identity, but bridging gaps between different Jewish movements.

"We are in a society in which there are tremendous opportunities for divisiveness," said Michael Rosenzweig, chairman of the school's board of trustees. "What we are trying to create is an oasis that will leave the future leadership of the Jewish people appreciating in an entirely different way what we have in common as well as our differences."

But even the most ardent supporters concede that selling the schools to the most academically ambitious students is not easy.

"Few Jewish day schools compete with the best private schools, and funding is a big part of that," Mr. Prager said.

Eduardo Rauch, an assistant professor of education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, said, "How are we going to create the kind of ethos that's needed in order to sustain communal life if all the communities are going to have their own school and the public schools are going to be left to the poor, to the immigrants, to the dispossessed?" Still, in an age of identity politics, many Jews find the schools appealing. Jonathan Ginburg and Lora Dagi, both ninth

graders, lounged on a sofa one recent afternoon, talking about the importance of Jewish identity.

"It's important to be open-minded and to know about other cultures, but you have to start by knowing who you are," Miss Dagi said. "If you don't know who you are, how can you ever hope to understand anyone else?"