

Jewish Identity *and* Religious Commitment



**The North American Study of Conservative Synagogues
and Their Members, 1995-96**

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MY HERO: INSIGHTS INTO JEWISH EDUCATION

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Can you name two people, alive or dead, that you consider to be Jewish heroes? The answers provided by Conservative teens to this question offer rare insight into the success of Jewish religious education. They reveal much about the knowledge students take out of the classroom and what significance they attach to it. The question actually illuminates how young people process a curriculum.

Until now, we have had little sophisticated information evaluating Jewish religious education. Though such education has two goals—to transfer knowledge and skills, and to socialize students to think and behave within a Jewish framework—recent studies have focused on socialization alone. Any appraisal of student knowledge levels has been strikingly absent. Even the socialization information has been limited at best. For example, in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the evaluation of different forms of Jewish education became a crude measure of the intermarriage rates of the graduates.

The survey of the b'nai and b'not mitzvah class of 5755 is the first realistic and penetrating assessment of the impact of different types of Jewish education. By asking young people about Jewish heroes, the survey evaluates both their socialization and their knowledge.

The results, analyzed below, reveal the success of Conservative religious education at every level: day school and supplementary school students share an attachment to Jewish values and a firm level of knowledge. The survey also pinpoints several areas needing attention.

Facts and Figures

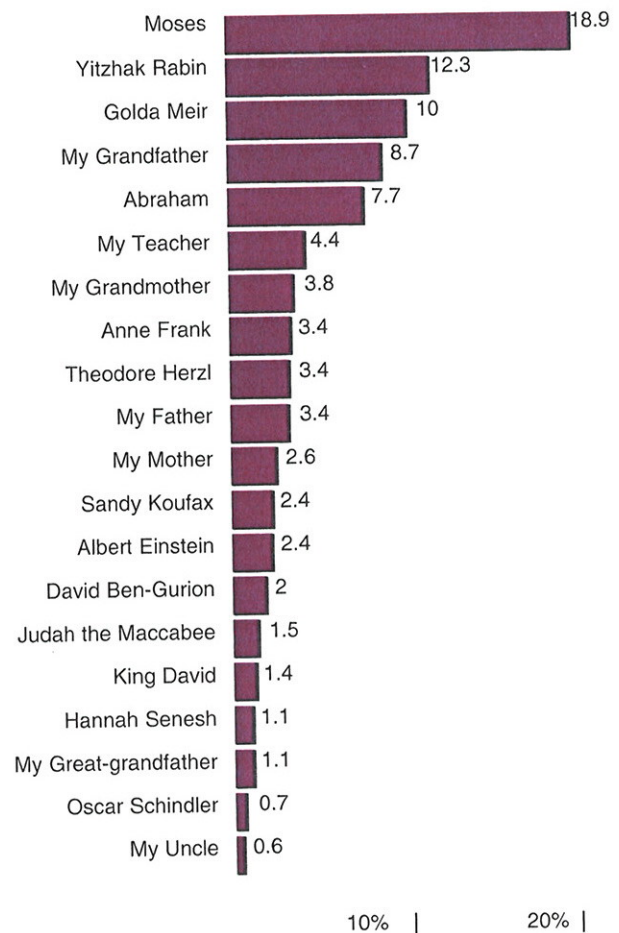
The study included 1429 young people who were asked to name their heroes about halfway through a fifteen minute telephone interview. They responded with 1,996 recognizable heroes, and the top 20 selections are featured in Table 1. Eighty-three percent, or 1,182 students, offered at least one hero. Fifty-seven percent, or 814, named two heroes. A handful of students refused to answer while 15 stated they had no Jewish heroes.

Our Heroes

Students certainly agree about who belongs on the list — the top twenty figures account for nearly 92 percent of all the choices made. With only two exceptions, they are culled from four general areas: the Bible, the State of Israel, the Shoah and respondents' families. The two exceptions are respondents' teachers and the American baseball legend Sandy Koufax, who refused to play in the World Series on Yom Kippur. (We did

not count Judah the Maccabee as an exception, although strictly speaking, he is a non-biblical figure for Jews.) One hero who made the list, Oscar Schindler, is technically misplaced — he is a hero for Jews rather than a Jewish hero. (See Chart 1)

Chart 1 Top Twenty Heroes



Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study

Measuring Success — Who's In and Who's Out

Now that we know who the heroes are, what do these answers reveal about the success of religious education generally and about Conservative Jewish religious education in particular?

For starters, all of the heroes chosen, apart from Oscar Schindler, reflect the themes of contemporary American Judaism, and particularly Conservative Judaism. Heroes are selected from the Bible, Israel, the Shoah and family. Along with reverence for teachers, they are all included in basic bar/bat mitzvah curriculum guidelines. A nearly obligatory exercise in genealogy may account for the heavy emphasis on family in this survey.

The inclusion of the teacher in the panoply of heroes reflects an important Jewish value that is taught. Our tradition and texts abound in veneration of teachers. Moses, the number one choice of these young people, is commonly referred to as "Moses our teacher." From this survey, we can begin to postulate that this principle is being deeply ingrained in the value systems of these young people.

Recognizing who is absent from the list also offers a measure of success. What can we learn from the figures who were not selected? Celebrities, entertainers and media personalities like Jerry Seinfeld are strikingly absent. While such responses might have revealed a focus on popular culture and popular values, their absence reflects that these students have developed both an attachment to and an understanding of Jewish values.

However, the pool of biblical personalities chosen is narrow, and great figures such as the Hebrew prophets, the matriarchs, King Solomon, Maimonides, Hillel and Rashi fail to appear. This reflects the lack of emphasis in the pre-bar and bat mitzvah curriculum on an intellectual appreciation of Judaism—a bias that must be redressed when these young people grow older.

Very far down the list, receiving only one or two votes are some highly visible contemporary Jewish leaders who are not Conservative, such as the late Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher rebbe, indicating the successful transmission of the philosophy of Conservative Judaism.

Different Education, Same Choices

In order to test whether the type of formal education received affected student choices, the complete list of heroes was divided into general categories and responses were compared. Ninety-one percent of the participants have received five or more years of formal Jewish education. Nine percent are currently in day school; 33 percent attended day school in the past; and 58 percent have attended only synagogue supplementary religious school.

Even a brief glance at Table 1 reveals a startling outcome. There is hardly any difference in the pattern of choices arising from the three types of schooling. Statistical

tests endorse this conclusion. There is a slight tendency for day schools to produce more Zionist heroes and fewer teacher heroes, but this trend does not affect the rather unexpected overall finding that differences in types of schooling fail to produce different patterns of Jewish heroes.

Table 1 The Heroes of Children in Different Types of Schools

Type of Hero	day school now (199 responses)	past day school (669 responses)	syn. school only (1128 responses)
Family	31 responses 16%	136 responses 21%	258 responses 23%
Bible	61 responses 30%	224 responses 33%	366 responses 32%
Teacher	3 responses 1%	26 responses 4%	59 responses 5%
Arts & Entertainment	1 response --%	12 responses 2%	13 responses 1%
Science	7 responses 4%	8 responses 1%	31 responses 3%
Zionism	81 responses 41%	212 responses 32%	307 responses 27%
Sports	3 responses 1%	15 responses 2%	31 responses 3%
Holocaust	10 responses 5%	34 responses 5%	57 responses 5%
Jewish History	2 responses 1%	2 responses --%	6 responses --%

Where Have All the Female Heroes Gone?

A second striking pattern emerges when we divide the responses in Table 1 by the gender of the heroes chosen. (See Table 2.) More than three out of every four Jewish heroes is male. Every category except the Holocaust has a clear male bias. One reason for this trend could be that students chose their role models according to their own gender—55 percent of the class of 5755 were boys and only 45 percent were girls. This hypothesis is tested in Chart 2.

Moses is the hands-down favorite of the boys, but the girls are more divided. Among boys Moses, in first place, leads Rabin, in second place, by 88 votes. Among girls, Moses leads second-placed Golda Meir by only two votes; exactly the same gap that separates Abraham from Anne Frank. The girls may be searching for women role models comparable to Moses and Abraham, but the options fall short. Moses remains their favorite, but just barely. A perceived lack of Jewish women role models probably accounts for this pattern. Either the students are receiving the message that women in the Bible are not heroes or they are processing them as non-heroes.

The heavy emphasis on heroes from the Holocaust is also

Table 2 Types of Heroes (Female Hero)

	day school now (43 responses)	past day school (157 responses)	syn. school only (259 responses)
Family	12 responses 6%	46 responses 7%	89 responses 8%
Bible	1 response --%	3 responses -- %	8 responses --%
Arts/ Entertainment	-- responses --%	-- responses --%	1 response --%
Zionism	21 responses 11%	79 responses 12%	111 responses 10%
Holocaust	9 responses 5%	29 responses 4%	50 responses 5%

remarkable. The Holocaust as a primary Jewish experience is open to question on any number of grounds, but it is especially problematic when it reinforces the stereotype of Jewish women as victims.

This survey raises an important educational question for the contemporary Conservative movement: How can Conservative educators overcome the present restricted notion of femininity in the educational material it presents to its young people while maintaining integrity to the tradition?

Conclusion

A number of useful general conclusions can be drawn from this exercise. First, during the course of the survey, we found that b'nai mitzvah students were articulate and enthusiastic respondents who appreciated the opportunity to air their opinions and knowledge. Second, their parents also welcomed the serious interest taken in their children's education. Obviously, educators need to engage students and parents in a dialogue if they are to succeed — and we have discovered a medium that accomplishes this goal. This finding in turn suggests that a longitudinal study involving further surveys of this teenage population would be a valuable investment for Jewish educational research.

Table 2 Types of Heroes (Male Hero)

	day school now (156 responses)	past day school (512 responses)	syn. school only (869 responses)
Family	19 responses 10%	90 responses 14%	169 responses 15%
Bible	60 responses 30%	221 responses 33%	358 responses 32%
Arts & Entertainment	1 response --%	12 responses 2%	12 responses 1%
Zionism	60 responses 30%	133 responses 20%	196 responses 17%
Holocaust	1 response --%	5 responses 1%	7 responses --%
Science	7 responses 4%	8 responses 1%	31 responses 3%
Jewish History	2 responses 1%	2 responses --%	6 responses --%
Sports	3 responses 1%	15 responses 2%	31 responses 3%
Teacher	3 responses 1%	26 responses 4%	59 responses 5%

Chart 2 Type of Heroes of B'nai and B'not Mitzvah

Source: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study

