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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Reform Judaism is the official voice of the Union for Reform Judaism, linking the institutions and affiliates of Reform Judaism with every Reform Jew. *RJ* covers developments within our Movement while interpreting world events and Jewish tradition from a Reform perspective. Shared by 305,000 member households, *RJ* conveys the creativity, diversity, and dynamism of Reform Judaism.

DEAR READER

Charter School Charade

Some wonderful ideas are circulating these days about how to renew Jewish life, but creating publicly funded charter schools which teach Hebrew language and Jewish culture to children of all faiths is not one of them.

Philanthropic supporters of the three Hebrew charter schools that now exist in America (and the dozen more currently in the works) express two primary motivations, both of which are seriously flawed.

First, they say the high cost of attending Jewish day schools makes it difficult for most parents to choose that option; charters, on the other hand, can strengthen Jewish identity at no cost to parents.

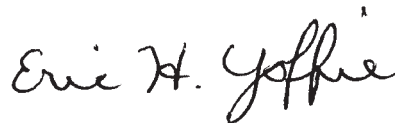
The problem here is that Hebrew charter schools cannot promote Jewish identity and commitment without running afoul of church-state separation restrictions. As a result, Jewish education at these schools becomes an elaborate charade. When the staff of a school cannot openly proclaim its commitment to strengthening Jewish identity, involving parents in the process, the endeavor is doomed to failure.

Second, charter advocates make a virtue of offering Jewish cultural education that is stripped of religion, not only because it allows for public funding, but also because some Jews are more comfortable with Jewish culture than with Jewish religion.

But these two pillars of Jewish life are inextricably intertwined. Cultural Judaism invariably includes holiday observance, commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and even study of religious texts—all of which are severely circumscribed in a charter school setting. Any effort to isolate culture from religion distorts the very essence of Judaism.

Similarly, studying the Hebrew language will not in and of itself create a lasting Jewish identity. The power of Hebrew comes as much from unlocking the treasures of Jewish religious tradition as it does from forging ties to Jewish peoplehood.

If Jewish philanthropists wish to assure our Jewish future, I suggest they make it possible for every Jewish child to attend two years of Jewish nursery school or two summers of Jewish camping. Free from the constraints of public financing, such reasonably priced educational experiences do what charter schools cannot: they deepen Jewish identity; strengthen Jewish peoplehood; and produce proud, affirming, committed Jews.



Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie
President, Union for Reform Judaism



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