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WAGING WAR ON IGNORANCE

RABBI HENRY BERKOWITZ, PH.D.

Chancellor, the Jewish Chautauqua Society.

The glory of the New World above the Old World is the absolute separation of church and state. Therefore, while all teaching in our public schools must be moral, none may be sectarian. This is the distinct province of the home and religious schools. But it is charged that these have failed so largely that, therefore, the state must intervene. Against this charge I enter my earnest protest and denial. The fact is that the interference of the state tends to rob the home and the religious school of their opportunities by so absorbing the time, interest, and zeal of the pupil that mere fragments of these are left for the specific task of character building. The religious school is the stepchild of the education system. Consciously or unconsciously, both children and parents are led to feel that its claims are subordinate. This you know to be true, from the carelessness and indifference with which the demands of the religious schools are treated as compared with the scrupulousness with which those of the secular schools are obeyed. Yet we know that the whole fate of the child as an individual depends not on our success in imparting knowledge to him, but on the effective inculcation of right principle; and we know that the whole fate of the republic rests not in the culture, the skill, or the money-making propensities of the people, but in their strength of character.

Let us give up the attempt to inject religion into the public schools. At best, this is but a mere toying with a serious problem. Instead of this, I propose that the two systems of education, the secular and the religious, be kept strictly apart, but be coördinated in effecting the proper development of the child. How shall this be done? I have a definite and practical proposal to make, which I should like to see inaugurated in Philadelphia. Let a commission be appointed by the Superintendent of Public Education, consisting of himself and representatives of the educational work of all our religious and ethical schools. Let this commission agree upon a plan by which credits shall be accorded to each pupil in the secular school for work done in the religious school. Already a similar plan has been put into operation in Oregon and elsewhere, giving credits to boys and girls for tasks performed in the field, the shop, the garden, and the home, thus dignifying even the menial

services as a part of the education for life. How much more, then, should religious education be similarly exalted!

Just as credits are given for a knowledge of Greek and Roman history, so also let credits be given for a knowledge of Jewish history or church history. As credits are given for a knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, and German, why should not credits be given for a knowledge of the Hebrew language? As we exact an acquaintance with the literatures of the various peoples, why not honor with equal respect the greatest literature of the world—Biblical literature? Secure for these and other studies of the religious schools their just valuation, and you will standardize these schools. Then, behold how they will rise in the esteem of the people! The homes and religious schools will be vitalized to fulfill their grave responsibility. Parents who have no religious affiliations will be spurred on as never before to conform to the impulse given their children by this new system of character building.

This plan is practical. Already Columbia University gives credits to students for work done in the Jewish Theological Seminary; Cincinnati University, for the work of its students at the Hebrew Union College; Texas University, for that at the Austin Seminary. The University of Missouri has entered into this movement, and that of North Dakota has proceeded farthest by granting recognition for similar efforts made beyond their walls in Sunday schools, churches, and clubs. These experiments point the way for an expansion to include a similar recognition by all universities and high schools, as well as secondary schools.

By this means the homes and religious schools of all denominations will be left free to exercise that distinct function which the secular schools may not and must not touch upon; that is, to impart those sanctions of conduct and grounds of obligation which infuse into morality a vital and imperative force. Each religion has its own effective modes of impressing those sanctities which seize upon the souls of its devotees and constrain their impulses toward right action and noble endeavor.

Consider, for example, what a tremendous impulse would, by these means, be imparted to the Jewish people in this country to educate themselves and their children in their own wonderful history and religion. It is because of their grave ignorance of these that hosts of Jews are lacking in self-respect and invoke the contempt of others. How can we expect to combat successfully the prejudice and misunderstandings which feed upon ignorance, unless we are equipped with the proper knowledge and inspired by a true

appreciation of our heritage? To this end, we need to be banded together in a great movement for popularizing the knowledge of our own law and religion. A recognition of this fact prompted me, twenty years ago, to venture upon such an undertaking. In order to stimulate the scattered Jews of this land to inform themselves and their children on Jewish subjects, the well-known and well-tried methods of the Chautauqua system of education were adopted. Thousands of persons have been reached and supplied with simple and practical modes of self-instruction. The standards of teaching in our Jewish schools, in villages and towns throughout the country, have been materially influenced for good by the Jewish teachers' institutes convened from year to year. All this effort has crystallized in the organization of a correspondence school, which has already enrolled more than seventy students working under a faculty of experts. Of this faculty Rabbi Landman has recently become a member, instructing the course on the Hebrew Prophets.

Doctor Krauskopf has devoted himself to the laudable enterprise of educating Jewish farmers at the National Farm School. The Jewish Chautauqua Society helps to keep them on the farm by making it possible to educate their children as Jews. We have a paid director in the farming colonies of South Jersey; another who is serving the farmers of North Dakota, traveling over an area of some two hundred miles.

A field secretary has been for years traveling through all the sections of the country, from Maine to California, bringing the message of Judaism to the scattered communities of Israel.

At the request of the United States Commissioner of Education, we have been sending lecturers and instructors to impart Jewish knowledge to the students at the summer schools of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Their wonderful success calls for a further expansion of this important work as the funds shall allow.

The outstanding feature of the Chautauqua work has been the popular assembly. These assemblies have met year after year in various communities from the Atlantic to the Pacific, providing an open forum for the free discussion of all Jewish subjects by men and women, rabbis and laymen, Jews and Christians alike.