

Book Review

The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education

Jonathan B. Krasner

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Jonathan B. Krasner's exhaustive exploration details through comprehensive research and engaging prose the unlikely rise of Samson Benderly, a Palestine-born immigrant who brought his own understanding of American innovation into a traditional Jewish educational framework. A trained physician, Benderly's vision helped create an educational system both uniquely Jewish and unequivocally American, a distinct and inimitable identity for modern Jews in the United States. Benderly's vision extended beyond his immediate circle of protégés. As Jewish educational systems evolved through the latter half of the 20th century, Benderly's ideology of the professional, progressive, and American Jewish school model remained constant, a beacon of pedagogical quality and a preservation of Jewish cultural life. As an educational history, *The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education* is a comprehensive analysis of archival material from multiple rabbinical colleges and libraries as well as urban historical societies. It achieves its goal of synthesizing voluminous textual sources into a readable narrative that can also serve as a reference for other scholars interested in this uniquely American and totally Jewish educational approach. As ethnography, the text explores the emerging cultural identity of American Jews during what can be considered the Benderly period from 1910, when Benderly founded the first Bureau of Jewish Education in New York City until Benderly's death in 1944. As an educational history and ethnography, then, the text, under Krasner's deft prose, allows Benderly to emerge as an unparalleled protagonist. Krasner argues that Benderly's role in elevating the practice of Jewish education contributed to the overall stabilization of Jewish life in modern, and then postmodern, America.

As a biographical portrait of Benderly, the volume lends itself as a study in leadership. His unrelenting and innovative methodology was fueled by his own innate understanding of the power of education to a people in diaspora. Benderly developed modern curricula, invested in professional education for teacher training, and communicated clearly the urgency of his mission, which was to create American Jewish education from whole cloth. It is a model for focused and uncompromising excellence in administrative educational settings. For the scholarly reader, then, the book is a narrative that meets the needs of academics seeking a good model for how to explore other distinct American subgroups and their own cultural trajectories. For the general reader, it is a mirror on the history of a specific educational movement, its outcomes, and its lasting and still-relevant impact.

Krasner pays particular attention to the method by which teachers in the Benderly system

were educated. This type of inquiry is not unfamiliar to modern educational instructors in their quest to refine and further elevate teacher education. Urban families who entrusted the Benderly system with the future of Jewish Americanism increasingly demanded professionalism from his program. Columbia University Teachers College in New York was the favored site for moving members of the Bureau for Jewish Education through teacher preparation, including graduate and doctoral studies. Rather than align students solely with an institution like The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York, Benderly opted for a more secular paradigm in his vision of Jewish identity, a position that earned him more than a few critics. Solomon Schechter, the powerful president of the JTS, was his most notable detractor. Schechter could not be convinced that the mission of his school and those of Benderly's could coexist peacefully. Both men and women in Benderly's program studied highly intricate and thoroughly modern aspects of education such as curriculum development, sociological issues in education, and educational history and psychology. Through their immersion in the theoretical framework and organizational structure of Teachers College, they were studying with the preeminent forces in their fields: Edward Thorndike, whose work was foundational in educational psychology; Frank M. McMurry, who developed what is now commonly known as the student teaching model; and the legendary John Dewey, the powerhouse of American progressive education.

In examining this critical aspect of Benderly's philosophy—the formalization and professionalization of the role of educator—Krasner explains the genesis of how American Jews came to vigorously champion education as the means by which their community could offer to its members, immigrant and native-born alike, equal footing with their non-Jewish neighbours in employment opportunity and the resulting economic and social capital. Benderly's teachers understood their role in the cultural transmission of Judaism as not only a faith system but as an ideology, an identity, and a conduit of community connectivity. Albert Schoolman, an early Benderly adherent, wrote, “There we were, amidst grass roots aspirations of the Jewish populace, to transplant, to nurture and to preserve the Jewish way of life of other places and of other climates. We, too, felt these stirring impulses of the community” (as cited in Krasner, 2011, p. 81). The foundation of education as the means by which all personal success and community growth flowed was solidified in the Benderly model and Krasner uses that foundation as his assertion that the same is true in modern Jewish life.

Perhaps the most fascinating history Krasner details is the Jewish culture camp, that summer siesta still so familiar to many Jewish families with school-age children. In the warm months away from the demands of the academic year, Jewish cultural literacy and social capital was transmitted by immersion into the daily lives of campers at both day and sleep away camps just outside well-known American cities that housed large Jewish populations like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Such camps emphasized natural and communal experiences with Judaism through curriculum that included music, story hours, robust physical recreation, and “the art of Jewish living” (p. 282). Often, kosher diets and participation in Sabbath services (*Shabbat* or *shabbos*) were included even for children whose parents were not as observant at home. In doing so, camp leaders normalized Jewish values, symbolism, and languages common to many Jews, such as Yiddish and Hebrew, in daily communication. Their focus was to teach their campers how to approach the problems and joys of daily life through the Jewish lens. The whole-child approach camp facilitators used with participants was an educational and philosophical movement and it spilled inevitably into other facets of Jewish life with perhaps unintended consequences. Nowhere was this truer than for young women, whom Krasner notes were far more empowered at summer camp than perhaps in their own homes. The ritual of the

bat mitzvah, the outward and public acknowledgement of a 12-year-old girl's assumption of her Jewish identity, responsibilities, and behaviours, emerged out of the Jewish camping movement years before it became a common urban cultural event. This discontinuity between the personal agency young women experienced at camp and the roles they were often constrained by at home created dissonance for some young women and a zeal for transformation in others. Krasner reveals all of these nuances with sensitivity in his prose and deep positioning within his narrative.

The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education is an essential text for readers interested in educational history, religious movements, or cultural studies in modern and postmodern America. Krasner's multifaceted endeavour shows that Benderly's influence is still present in Jewish educational settings across the United States, despite his own feeling, near the end of his life, that his work was incomplete. Richly detailed in its research and salient in its relevancy, the book is perhaps the most definitive exploration of the Jewish educational phenomenon to date.

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