

A Stronger School System

The public schools opened this week, not amid much applause.

Nevertheless, nine out of 10 Jews in the San Francisco area, in poll after poll, continue to strongly believe in the principle of the public schools. They continue to affirm that a prime function of the organized Jewish community is to try to strengthen the public school system. The sentiment is just about as strong among Jewish parents who are currently disenchanted with the public schools for their own children. Why? There is some historical subconscious at work.

Take the Russian pogroms of the turn of the century, culminating in the Kishinev massacre. The anti-Jewish riots of 1881-1882 spread like the plague from district to district through some 150 towns and villages. Alexander III did not order the pogroms, but in the words of Abraham Cahan, written at the time of the Kishinev:

"An impression rapidly gained ground among the blind illiterate peasantry, that the crusade had been ordered by the Czar, and that a document containing the imperial ukase to that effect would be sent to every town and village in which a single Jew was to be found . . . The object of that 'imperial ukase' was, in the belief of these ignorant people, to turn over 'the ill-gotten wealth of the Christ-killers to the beloved children of the Czar, the peasants of Orthodox Christian faith.' . . . These rumors spread like wildfire, and the ferocity of the mob invariably reached its highest point when their target was the population of the slums, poor hard working mechanics, whose 'ill-gotten wealth' consisted of their tools and the contents of their wretched hovels."



Raab

Ten thousand such episodes have demonstrated this: general ignorance is the chief enemy of Jewish security, of civilized life in general. And the social-science evidence is overwhelming: the better educated people are, the less willing are they to blame the Jews for their problems. It is not that they like Jews more. But they are a little better acquainted with the real world, and are less likely to accept preposterous reasons to explain away their problems.

For example, seven out of 10 American adults who have only a grade school education, believe that "people can be divided into two distinct classes - the weak and the strong." Only five out of 10 Americans with a high school education, and two out of 10 Americans with a college education hold that simplistic belief. Those with only a grade school education are twice more likely than college graduates to say: "I don't like to hear a lot of arguments I disagree with." And in line with the same kind of simplism, less educated Americans are twice more likely than high school graduates to believe that "Jews have too much power in the United States" - and high school graduates are twice more likely than college graduates to believe that "Jews have too much power."

These results suggest one of the critical social values of good, functioning, free, common school systems. Some of those systems seem to be seriously faltering. Perhaps that is partly because we have saddled them with too many failure-bound experiments. But perhaps the school machinery is simply struggling through a difficult transitional period. Underneath the apparent mess, there are children, of all population groups, who are getting a better education than ever before; there are new and better programs; there are new and better teachers.

The chances are that we have already imperceptibly turned the corner, and in another decade will have overcome the school crisis of the 1960s and 1970s.

But it would be reassuring to see develop in San Francisco a supporting group of citizens, just Friends of the Public Schools, who had no special causes, no quick panaceas — but who had, in modern terms, the instinct for the link between education and civilization expressed by a Jew named Simeon some 1,700 years ago: "A town without good schools is doomed to destruction."