“Now Where Do We Go from Here?”
Separateness, Integration, and Pluralism in Philadelphia

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Introduction

Schooling for racial, ethnic, or religious minorities presents a challenge in the American democracy. Such groups, insofar as they are equal citizens, have the right to maintain their identities. As such, they have often used separate educational institutions to transmit distinct traditions, values, and mores. To the extent that the American experiment is a pluralistic one, the decision to remain different from dominant groups is a valid one.

Yet, participation in American society seems also to demand a measure of social and cultural integration. Inasmuch as the notion of “e pluribus unum” reflects a political framework and a popular (if perhaps privileged) sentiment, it demands association at the very least. Thus, from this position, schooling should dissolve rather than reify difference.

Confounding such questions, of course, is the reality that racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are often not equal citizens. How should those perceived as inferior or un-American be schooled? In mixed schools? In separate, but ostensibly equal schools? Or in some altogether different manner? As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1935, “other things being equal, the mixed school” presents a “broader, more natural basis for the education of all youth.” But, as he famously concluded, “other things seldom are equal,” and in that case, the advantages of separate schooling—sympathy, knowledge, and the truth, as he named them—should not be overlooked.¹

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This article examines the case of a Jewish day school in Philadelphia as a means of better understanding questions of separateness, integration, and pluralism in modern American educational history. The school in question, Akiba Hebrew Academy—now Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy—is the oldest continually running community Jewish day school in the United States. As such, it was a site of intense early debate about whether education should foster integration into the American mainstream and/or cultivate a separate and unique cultural and religious identity. Its significant history also provides the kind of long view required to observe significant change over time. But unlike many other parochial schools, the school’s history is confined to the post-World War II era. Thus, a school founded in 1946 makes for a perfect fit with an analysis focused on the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first.

When Akiba was founded, Philadelphia—a city that boasted the third-largest Jewish population in the nation—had no day schools catering to nonorthodox Jewish students. As a nondenominational institution founded to educate Philadelphia’s Jewish youth, the school filled a clear need. Yet, the school struggled to articulate a clear and compelling reason for its existence as it strove to situate itself in various communities: among Jews and non-Jews—though interests of non-Jews were often filtered through the concerns of the Jewish community—in Philadelphia and beyond. Additionally, the school’s attempt to define its raison d’etre did not dissipate after the school’s initial years. Rather, as this history demonstrates, school leaders continually worked to square perceptions of their institution—and their understanding of what it meant to be a part of an American minority group—with the interests and concerns of those both inside and outside of the institution.

Put another way, the story of Akiba Hebrew Academy reveals the concerns of those both inside and outside of the school regarding questions of separateness, integration, and pluralism.

The Founding of Akiba

On September 11, 1946, twenty students, their parents, and teachers gathered in front of a new school on Philadelphia’s South Broad Street. After the singing of “America,” the school opened its doors for the first time. Named after Rabbi Akiba, the second century sage and scholar involved in the Jewish rebellion against Rome, Akiba Hebrew Academy was a new brand of American-Jewish schooling.

2The stakeholders of Philadelphia’s Orthodox Jewish schools at the time, unlike those of Akiba, showed little interest in questions of assimilation or Americanization that are central to this analysis.
The mission of the school, to teach Jewish and secular studies in a single educational institution, was born from a distinct effort to balance the particular concerns of various stakeholders. And even the school’s name reflected this. “We have chosen the name of the Akiba Hebrew Academy advisedly,” explained the Chairman of the Committee on Education, Dr. Joseph Levitsky, to the crowd that had gathered to celebrate the opening of Philadelphia’s new Jewish day school. “Akiba combined within himself, perhaps more than any of our Jewish heroes, the qualities of scholarship and active participation in the life around him at a time of great crisis in Jewish history.” Balancing civic participation and allegiance to Judaism was of utmost importance to Akiba’s founders, but many of their contemporaries in the American-Jewish leadership were skeptical that a Jewish day school could cultivate these attributes.

Opponents of Jewish day schools offered myriad reasons in defense of their position, but primary among them was fear of being perceived as anti-American. As Murray Friedman writes, by World War II “the pattern of antisemitism [sic] and social discrimination that had begun to develop [in Philadelphia] and in other parts of the country at the turn of the century had become intensified among the city’s older-stock elite.” Upward social mobility, “particularly of the ‘foreign’ Russian Jews, fulfilled the worst patrician fears.” Further, though there were many strong relationships between less upwardly mobile Jews and members of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, many in the Philadelphia Irish community tuned in to the anti-Semitic exhortations of Father Charles Coughlin, while many in the German community backed the city’s chapter of the similarly anti-Semitic German American Bund.

Not surprisingly, then, many prominent American-Jewish educators argued in favor of social integration through the public schools rather than for separate Jewish education. Renowned Jewish educator Dr. Samson Benderly, for example, worried about the ghettoizing effect of separate schools for Jewish students and insisted that “as the great public school system is the rock bottom upon which this country is rearing its institutions, so we Jews must evolve here a system of Jewish education that shall be complementary to and harmonious with the public school system.”

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6 Samson Benderly, “Letter to Judah L. Magnes, Chairman of the Jewish Kehillah of New York City,” reprinted in Jewish Education 20, no. 3 (1949): 110. See also Jonathan
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and a Benderly disciple, warned that Jewish day schools were “fraught with danger for America and for American Jews” because they caused Jews to stand out from the masses. Arguing for supplementary Jewish education, Benderley, Dushkin, and other Jewish communal leaders argued that after-school programs permitted students to attend public schools and thus offered access to the best of American and Jewish life. Day schools, on the other hand, would separate Jewish students from other American youth. Segregation, they claimed, was un-American.

Several months before Philadelphia’s new Jewish school opened, this anti-day school rhetoric found its way to Pennsylvania, where Philadelphia Jewish Times editorialist Arnold R. Ginsburg painted day schools as un-American. Ginsburg expressed three main objections to such schools. First, he repeated the charge that day schools “segregate” Jewish children from their non-Jewish peers, “which thwarts the desirable process of harmonious integration (not escapist assimilation) into the American pattern of life.” Jews could be part of a well-balanced American society, he argued, only when they lived and learned together with other citizens. Second, Ginsburg made the case that public schools were the cornerstone of democracy and the American way of life. “All Americans, including Jews,” he explained, should “use the public school, not because we would be ungrateful to do otherwise but because it is to our personal and group advantage to do so.” Only public education, he claimed, could offer opportunities for social and economic advancement. Third, he believed that public schools could accomplish what separate Jewish schools could not; they could prepare students “to cope with the problems of being a Jew in a non-Jewish world.” Students in an all-Jewish school would develop a false sense of security and would be ill-equipped to deal with a culturally diverse, sometimes hostile world in which anti-Semitism was a palpable reality. Ginsburg conceded that Akiba would provide students with a better Jewish education, but he strongly cautioned his readers against sending their children to the new school. The risks outweighed the benefits.

Day school proponents, on the other hand, argued nearly the opposite, making the case that day schools embodied the American ideal and represented the highest form of democratic education. Ludwig Lewisohn, for instance, asserted that “withdrawal from the undifferen-


8Arnold Ginsburg, “Should Your Child Attend a Jewish All-Day or Parochial School?,” Philadelphia Jewish Times, 26 July 1946, 1A.

9Ibid.

10Ibid.
iated mass life for special religious or education purposes is the very mark and sign, the symbol and banner of a free society.”\textsuperscript{11} Ohio State University philosophy professor Marvin Fox argued that Jewish day schools were invaluable for the healthy functioning of American society. “By reminding America constantly that there are legitimate ways for a man to understand himself and his world other than through the insights of scientific naturalism,” he explained, “the Day Schools can help to avert the dangers of the kind of intellectual totalitarianism which no democratic society can afford.”\textsuperscript{12} In short, such proponents proposed that just as Jews were supposed to be a “light to the nations,” so Jewish schools could be beacons of light for American democracy.\textsuperscript{13} They were less concerned with the unique “cultural gifts” that Jews could bring to America than with the fact that, through their very separation, Jews could exemplify American pluralism.\textsuperscript{14}

Day school proponents could also point to increasing acceptance of Jews in American culture as evidence that concerns about un-Americanism were overblown. Although in 1931 the Supreme Court labeled Americans as “a Christian people,” by the time Philadelphia’s Jews began to talk of forming a Jewish day school there was increased public acceptance of Jews as part of American life. As Wendy Wall explains, “during and after World War II, the long-standing equation in public discourse of ‘Americanism’ with Protestantism gave way rapidly, if incompletely, to the notion that the U.S. was a Judeo-Christian ‘tri-faith’ or broadly ‘God-fearing’ nation.”\textsuperscript{15}

Jews were also increasingly visible in mainstream American culture. In 1945, a year before Akiba’s opening, Jewish baseball star Hank Greenberg led the Detroit Tigers to win the World Series. That same year—for the first and only time in U.S. history—a young Jewish woman, Bess Myerson, was crowned Miss America. Throughout the United States, Jews viewed Greenberg and Myerson as symbols of legitimacy, proving that Jews could become successful Americans.\textsuperscript{16} They could excel in quintessentially American venues without denying their Jewish heritage. Still, there existed widespread concern about the

\textsuperscript{14} Diana Selig, \textit{Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
place of Jews in American society—a concern that would continue to manifest, perhaps most notably in the persecution of Hollywood Jews by the House Un-American Activities Committee.17

Mostly, of course, the debate was theoretical in nature. When Akiba began enrolling students in the 1940s, less than 5% of American-Jewish children attended day schools, which totaled only roughly 65 institutions.18 And an earlier Jewish day school movement in the mid-to late-nineteenth century had been a qualified failure—many schools survived into the twentieth century, but most only as supplemental schools. In Philadelphia, the Hebrew Education Society closed its Jewish day school in 1878, deciding to “focus exclusively on supplementary Hebrew education of a more elementary kind.”19 Several intensive Orthodox schools persisted, but as Diane A. King writes, “the number of pupils who availed themselves of this form of education was so small [that] its impact on the Jewish community was minimal.”20 Day schools were mostly a nonissue.

Yet, the Jewish community in Philadelphia hardly treated the creation of Akiba as an issue of minor importance. The city was home to the nation’s third-largest Jewish population, and it was internally divided about what exactly it meant to be a Jewish American. If Philadelphia was to offer a Jewish alternative to the public schools, what would it look like? What would Akiba’s mission be?

Four days after Ginsburg’s anti-day school editorial, Akiba’s chairman of the board Martin J. Feld responded generally to the criticism of day schools by arguing that children’s friendships arise “on the street and in the playground,” not in school, and he made the case that sending students to supplementary Hebrew schools limited their opportunities to make non-Jewish friends in the neighborhood.21 But he also specifically outlined Akiba’s mission, taking care not only to respond to the concerns of day school opponents, but also to send a message to advocates. “The democracy and Americanism of our students,” he wrote, “will certainly be enhanced, not diminished.”22 But he also insisted that Akiba’s greatest asset would be its ability to foster “an environment

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18 Ginsburg, “Should Your Child Attend a Jewish All-Day or Parochial School?”
22 Ibid., 1B.
which will not create an unhealthy split in [students’] minds between the ‘secular’ and the ‘Jewish.’”

The position staked out by Feld acknowledged the complexity of Jewish social reality in postwar America. Whatever the successes of the Greenbergs and the Meyersons, Jews still needed to work to be seen as ordinary Americans. Yet, Jews had also made great strides in assimilating, especially in cities like Philadelphia; so great, in fact, that many began to worry about the loss of Jewish distinctiveness. Thus, as Akiba prepared to enroll students and hire teachers, its leaders worked to carefully frame the school to appeal to parents as well as to various Jewish and non-Jewish public constituencies.

The New School’s American Character

Newspaper debates about Akiba’s American character continued after the school opened its doors. In November 1946, *The Jewish Exponent* published a series of debates between Dr. Julius Grodinsky, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School who served as Chairman of the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Council for Judaism, and Rabbi Simon Greenberg, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and one of Akiba’s founders. Like the debate between Ginsburg and Feld, these letters to the editor focused primarily on whether Akiba threatened or strengthened the American democratic system.

While Ginsburg had argued that perception was what mattered, Grodinsky made the case that Jewish students simply could not learn civic responsibility outside of the public schools. Jewish day schools, he contended, “can not function effectively in teaching democratic ideals when the children are removed from the public school system and removed from contact with other American children who are members of other religious faiths.” The Jewish community, he insisted, needed to rally behind the public schools and prevent any other educational movement that might impair the development of good American citizens.

JTS’s Greenberg employed three distinct rhetorical strategies to counter the attack against Akiba. First, he questioned the link between public school education and democratic ideals. While he recognized that “the public school system is undoubtedly one of the chief bulwarks, though by no means the only bulwark, of American democracy,” he also argued that public education was not a guarantor of democratic

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23Ibid., 1B.
principles.\textsuperscript{25} He pointed to racially segregated public schools as an example of state supported schools that did not teach education for democracy, and he suggested that a school’s curriculum and pedagogy—not its status as public or private—determined its democratic values. “The mere juxtaposition of races and creeds does not \textit{ipso facto} make for tolerance and civic virtue,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{26} Akiba, which would actively teach pluralistic and democratic ideals, would indeed develop civically minded Americans.

Second, he linked Akiba to other Philadelphia religious schools. If American democracy was endangered by nongovernment supported schools, Greenberg argued, then concerned citizens should advocate for legislation to make such schools illegal. They should call for a ban against Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Society of Friends schools. Greenberg accused his opponents of self-hatred, writing: “Is it not rather strange that these gentlemen had to wait until Akiba appeared on the scene to discover mortal dangers to America of the schools not affiliated with the public school system?”\textsuperscript{27} Jewish schools, he insisted, should not be singled out for disapproval.

Third, Greenberg accused his critics of harboring totalitarian tendencies and, in doing so, suggested that day school opponents—not Akiba’s supporters—were un-American. Greenberg argued that “the worst blow that can be delivered at American Democracy is to advocate [an educational] monopoly or to imply that independent educational activity on the part of any group represents disloyalty to, or the sabotaging of, the democratic ideal as understood in America.”\textsuperscript{28} This sort of educational totalitarianism, he insisted, could only precede political totalitarianism. Day school opponents lacked confidence in the strength and vitality of the American system, but day school advocates “have faith that Democracy in America is so real and deep-rooted that the possible withdrawal of less than one percent of the American Jewish children from public school will in no way impair its integrity. On the contrary only as American Democracy trains itself through practice to encourage variety even in the field of education does it grow in strength and vitality.”\textsuperscript{29} Jewish day schools, for Greenberg, could actively strengthen the democratic system by limiting a government monopoly on education and assuring that America maintained cultural and religious pluralism.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{27}Simon Greenberg, “Letter to the Editor,” \textit{The Jewish Exponent}, 8 November 1946, 4.
\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{29}Ibid., 9.
A week after their initial argument appeared in print, Grodinsky and Greenberg resumed their fierce debate in the pages of The Jewish Exponent. Grodinsky’s second letter to the editor accused Greenberg of failing to respond to a chief claim of the anti-day school movement: the concern that “the Jewish parochial school is an important advance step toward the segregation of Jews in American educational life.”

Jewish boys and girls, Grodinsky argued, must be given the opportunity to meet, play, and talk with children of all other faiths. Their inability to do so in schools like Akiba was the chief problem with day school education.

Grodinsky expressed concern about segregation at a time when Jewish urban neighborhoods were on the decline in metropolitan areas across the United States. By 1946, a growing postwar economy and a rise in speculative housing construction pulled Jews toward increasingly affordable suburbs, which though not universally welcoming, were certainly more so for white ethnics than for people of color. Consequently, Jews, like other white ethnic groups, began to move into multiethnic white suburban neighborhoods. With the dissolution of Jewish neighborhoods, came the decline of neighborhood public schools with predominately Jewish populations. Some Jews, like Grodinsky, savored the opportunities for integration afforded by new multiethnic neighborhoods and feared that separate Jewish day schools would reverse that trend. Others, like Greenberg, saw the rise of day schools as a sign that Jews, like other religious minorities, could maintain a distinct ethnic identity—a right that was guaranteed only in pluralistic America.

Greenberg defended Akiba against the charge that it segregated Jewish students by insisting on the importance of Jewish separatism. Segregation, he admitted, “is a very serious problem and worthy of the most thorough self-searching on the part of those who support the Akiba [sic] or similar schools.” However, he claimed, everything Jews did to maintain their Jewish identity was segregating them into a separate world. This was acceptable “if within that world you are taught to respect all others and to be ready always to cooperate with others for the common good.”

Jews, he argued, had a right to maintain their spiritual and physical identity as a group. An individual Jew had the choice not to participate in such an endeavor, “but he has no right to

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34Ibid., 14.
imply that a Jew is engaged in un-American or un-democratic activities if within the framework of the spirit and the law of American democracy he seeks to maintain that identity.”

Day school critics could choose to send their own children to public schools, Greenberg implied, but they had no right to object when other members of the Jewish community supported a school that would maintain a robust and distinct Jewish community in Philadelphia.

This letter to the editor signaled a turn in the rhetoric of the debate because Greenberg acknowledged that day school education drew upon both American and Jewish values. He believed that the day school movement was “not exclusively a Jewish problem but an American problem, and it should be treated that way.” Yet, he also maintained that Akiba’s founders were concerned “exclusively” with Jewish education. Here Greenberg departed from the discussion about American democracy to focus on the pedagogy of Jewish education. He insisted that only day schools—not public education supplemented by afternoon Hebrew schools—could help a student effectively synthesize “his Jewish religious, his specifically American and his general human heritage.”

These debates in The Jewish Exponent and the Philadelphia Jewish Times were the only occasions in which the budding Akiba Hebrew Academy faced stiff in-print opposition accusing the school of un-American activities. Once Akiba became an established institution in the Philadelphia Jewish community, newspaper editorials attacking the school ceased. Nonetheless, the anti-American, undemocratic charge against Akiba seemed to linger in the minds of the school’s promoters, and they worked to portray their institution as a model American school.

A Model American School

In its inaugural year, 1946, Akiba Hebrew Academy housed twenty students in grades seven and eight. Like students who attended Philadelphia public schools, these youngsters enrolled in a variety of secular subjects: mathematics, science, English, social studies, music, art, physical training, and hygiene. In addition, the school offered courses in Bible, Talmud, and Hebrew literature. By the 1949–1950 academic year, the school had expanded to include grades six through eleven,

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36 Ibid., 11.
37 Ibid., 13.
38 “All-Day Jewish High School Opens Here,” The Jewish Exponent, 20 September 1946.
and it served ninety-nine pupils. The following year, it graduated its first class of thirteen high school seniors. Over time, Akiba Hebrew Academy continued to grow, serving 150 students by 1956 and expanding to roughly 350 students by 1974.\(^{39}\) As its enrollment grew, so did its course offerings, including classes in Latin, Spanish, computers, Jewish philosophy, Jewish history, and prayer.

Despite this expansion, the school struggled to attract enough donors and new students to make the institution financially viable in its early years. Chairman of the Board Martin J. Feld attributed the school’s troubles to opposition within the Jewish community to day school education. In a 1951 letter, he wrote to opponent Reform Rabbi David H. Wice of Philadelphia’s Congregation Rodeph Shalom, lamenting that “Akiba in its few years of existence has from almost its very inception enjoyed the strongest kind of opposition from some people in our community who have done almost their ‘all’ to discourage me and all of my efforts and those of my associates.”\(^{40}\)

Whether or not the Jewish community and its leaders in Philadelphia were hostile to Akiba’s existence, perception drove action. Feld and Akiba’s leadership, consequently, worked to create outward signs of American normalcy. Admissions brochures from 1950 and 1951, for instance, claimed that Akiba offered a “social and educational setting where the best practices of the American way of life predominate.”\(^{41}\)

Perceptions of the school in the Philadelphia Jewish community were not the only concern of Akiba’s leaders, however. Whatever the political threats to Akiba’s existence, the school also depended on funds from tuition and private donations, as well as support from groups like the Allied Jewish Appeal. This dependence was only heightened by the fact that the school ran consistently over budget and school leaders often contributed their own money.\(^{42}\) Consequently, they worked to craft a mission that appealed not only to parents, but also to funders, and to do so without alienating powerful critics.

Marketing the school to quality-conscious parents, the school’s leaders also made the case that Akiba was academically equivalent to—if not better than—traditional public schools. In-house publications, thus, claimed that the school could impart “a general education


\(^{40}\)Martin J. Feld to Rabbi David H. Wice, 22 May 1951, AHAC, PJAC.

\(^{41}\)“Akiba Hebrew Academy,” brochure, 1950, AHAC, PJAC, emphasis in original. Also in “Akiba Hebrew Academy,” brochure, 1951, AHAC, PJAC, emphasis in original.

\(^{42}\)Martin J. Feld to Dr. Joseph Levitsky, 7 July 1953, Box 1, Fol. 1, AHAC; Valerie Sandler Thaler, “The Reshaping of American Jewish Identity, 1945–1960,” (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2008), 121.
comparable to that of the best in the public schools.”43 But as the number of Jews on Hollywood blacklists swelled, and as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were tried and executed for passing U.S. state secrets to the Soviet Union, Akiba’s leaders deliberately continued to play up the school’s Americanism. This was not because they feared being listed on the HUAC hit list, but because they were working to square their mission with broader values in the Philadelphia Jewish community—a community that, itself, was working to craft its own image among American Jews and in the nation as a whole. Thus, a rhetorical flourish from a 1953 brochure made the case that “a non-Jewish child, interested in Akiba’s program, would be welcome.”44 The rhetorical move was an outward signal to any potential detractors that Akiba was all-American.

All of this impacted the school’s mission. But it also seems to have penetrated the life of the school. In a 1950 article in the Jewish Exponent, Akiba parent Benjamin Simons praised the top-notch secular and Jewish education his daughter was receiving, combining the culture and literature of the Jewish people and of America. He concluded his article by proudly stating that “She is combining these two cultures, and I am certain to be proud of her as an outstanding American.”45

Through 1960, then, Akiba’s mission continued to emphasize the school’s Americanism, while also promoting its contributions to non-denominational Jewish values—a balance that had been carefully struck in response to perceived concerns among the school community, the Jewish community in Philadelphia, and the broader non-Jewish community. As Joseph Kohn, Akiba’s president, wrote in a 1961 marketing brochure, “At Akiba, through our integrated program of American and Jewish cultural studies, we have succeeded in developing the total personality of our students both as Americans and Jews and sincerely believe that our graduates are prepared to make a definite contribution to the American scene.”46

The same year, Akiba’s principal, Louis Newman, published an article in Conservative Judaism that harkened back to the arguments Feld and Greenberg made when defending Akiba in 1946. In 1961 Newman wrote,

Jewish people love our American democracy and see the withdrawal of children from the public schools as damaging to the cultural cement which binds

44“Why Akiba?” brochure, n.d., c.a. Summer 1953, Box 4, Fol. 8, AHAC, PJAC.
46Joseph Kohn, “From The Chairman of the Board,” in Deepening the Stream: 15 Years of Educating Jewish Youth, brochure, 1961, AHAC, PJAC.
Americans. We reply that we see no local institution that is transmitting our Jewish culture to the young in such a way that it will ennoble personal and communal behavior. We seek conscious convictions, commitments and a Jewishness which an individual finds relevant to all of life. When we achieve and transmit these to coming generations our contribution to American society will be of greater democratic and humanitarian significance than had we let our Judaism disappear through self-deceptive inadequate education.  

Thus, despite their efforts to speak to multiple audiences, the primary focus of Akiba’s leadership remained proving the school’s American character. Over the next decade, however, the school’s leaders would begin to respond to new concerns—framing the school’s mission in new ways as a means of fending off threats to the institution’s viability. The balancing act, in other words, would continue.

**From Americanism to Jewish Survival**

By the mid-1960s, Akiba’s stated mission had undergone a notable shift. Day school opponents across the United States continued to insist that separate Jewish schools harmed the American way of life. Day school proponents, however, began to speak of these schools as essential for the survival of the Jewish people—not as necessary for the healthy functioning of American democracy. Unlike in the 1940s, when proponents viewed day schools as “the symbol and banner of a free society,” by the mid-1960s day school supporters insisted that only day schools could “assure the survival of Judaism.”

This marked a radical shift in rhetoric. Jewish survival—not Americanism—became the new rallying cry for day school advocates, and Akiba’s leadership adapted accordingly.

In a study of Jewish integration into American society, Steven Cohen and Leonard Fein argue that integration, which had been “the highest priority on the collective agenda of the Jews” until the mid-1960s, was no longer the chief concern of the American Jewish community. “The survival of the Jews as a distinct ethnic/religious group,” they contend, became “a priority of at least equal, and perhaps greater concern to many individual Jews, and more particularly, to the agencies and institutions that determine the collective agenda of the Jewish

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Insofar as they perceived this to be true, leaders at Jewish schools began to deploy the rhetoric of Jewish survival as a means of appealing to parents and justifying their existence to potential opponents.

That schooling could act as a bulwark against eroding group identity was, of course, not an idea unique to Jewish Americans. In the years after the 1954 Brown v. Board Supreme Court ruling, as black students began entering previously all white educational institutions, similar concerns were raised by African-American educators and community activists. In 1955, for instance, one black educator warned that in the push for better education, African Americans must be careful to “lose not our identity as a capable and ingenious race nor lose a single phase of our cultural heritage.” And as black power became an increasingly visible part of the political discourse, so too did the push for schools where black students could “learn of their proud African heritage and the links that exist between people of African descent wherever they may be.” Thus, whether African American or Jewish, victories in the wars for acceptance had led to a growing preoccupation with preserving cultural heritage.

For the first time then, Akiba abandoned its rhetoric about American identity and began to speak of the school’s unique contributions to Jewish life. As faculty advisor Dr. Joseph S. Butterweck wrote, the publicly stated goal of Akiba became “educating young people to appreciate the [Jewish] culture into which they were born, so that they will help perpetuate the enduring values inherent in it when they become adults.”

In part, Akiba was able to turn inward because of how successfully its leaders had framed the school’s mission in the previous decade. By the 1960s, Akiba’s legitimacy was well-established. Enrollment had risen steadily and it was financially stable. In 1953, it had been admitted as a constituent of the Allied Jewish Appeal—a Jewish fundraising organization that in 1957 merged with the Federation of Jewish Charities. And, in 1956, the school had acquired a building in Merion Station that would allow it to continue to grow.

52 Joseph S. Butterweck, “From the Faculty Advisor,” in Deepening the Stream: 15 Years of Educating Jewish Youth [brochure] 1961, AHAC, PJAC.
Akiba’s shift in mission was also a response to shifting national conditions. American anti-Semitism was abating, Jews were intermarrying and further integrating into American life, and Jewish GIs had returned from Europe, Japan, and Korea. On the whole, a general trend in assimilation occurred. Proving their American character was no longer of the utmost urgency and import to American Jews who, for the most part, believed they had done that.

Ironically, however, growing acceptance of Jews had inspired fear of total integration into non-Jewish America. As early as 1946, the authors of an American Jewish Committee study wrote that “the home is, of course, the place where [a Jewish] atmosphere should prevail.” Yet, they noted that “a preponderant majority of the Jewish homes neither possesses nor cultivates an atmosphere of joyous experience in a Jewish milieu,” concluding that it was therefore “the task of the school to supply it.” The fear of assimilation shifted the burden on Jewish educational institutions, which became increasingly responsible for maintaining Jewish tradition in America.

Another nation—in the form of the young state of Israel—also affected American Jews dramatically. Although the Jewish state had existed almost as long as Akiba, in the 1960s it began to take on a heightened role in American Jewish consciousness. By 1960, Steven Rosenthal writes, “American Jewish support of Israel was . . . seen

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as normal and patriotic.” Successful American films about the birth of the state, including *Exodus* (1960) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966), created a positive cultural image of a place that few American Jews had actually visited. Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War ushered in a renewed sense of pride and self-congratulation among American Jews. For many American Jews, the growing military and economic success of the Jewish state legitimized pride in Jewish cultural and religious identity—something reflected in Akiba’s evolving mission.

The rhetorical shift toward “Jewish survival” also occurred as the American-Jewish community began to deal more openly with the impact of the Holocaust. While Jews in the United States were certainly aware of the annihilation of their European brethren in the 1940s, Jewish writers, intellectuals, and community leaders were “relatively silent on the topic of the Holocaust in the 1940s and 1950s.” Scholar, Rona Sheramy writes, “attribute this silence to a variety of factors, primary among them that American Jews were eager to partake in the postwar victory spirit, did not want to call attention to their recent victimization, and were reluctant to criticize Germany, the United States’s new Cold-War ally.” But in 1961, Israel publicly tried and executed Nazi mastermind Adolph Eichmann, signaling a turning point; Jews in both Israel and the United States rushed to acknowledge the devastation that they had always known about and discussed in muted tones, but never before turned into a central focus of their public and communal discourse.

Although Akiba Hebrew Academy had once described itself as, first and foremost, “an American school,” by the 1960s it had begun to promote the “Jewish heritage . . . which ennobles living.” The focus was not on American heritage and Jewish heritage, which is what earlier school publications talked about; something had changed.

By 1962, the stated objective of the school was to prepare students to “become leaders in the Jewish community” and “have a desire to practice the cultural values associated with the characteristics of a ‘good Jew.’” An internal committee document reflected this outward positioning, noting that “no longer were we concerned with developing an

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61 Ibid.
62 Jos. S. Butterweck to Rabbi Charry and Louis Newman, 1 September 1962, AHAC, PJAC.
integrating personality. Our concern shifted to the development of a better Jew.”

Some school leaders did continue to make the argument that it was “not incongruous” to expect an Akiba graduate “to live as a good and loyal American and, at the same time, to enjoy a rich and full Jewish life.” On the whole, however, leaders at Akiba, like day school supporters throughout the United States, had undergone a shift from an American to a distinctly Jewish rationale for the school’s existence.

By the 1970s, this transformation was complete. No longer did the school advertise its authentic American character. Instead, it insisted it could help solve the increasingly visible problem of eroding Jewish identity in the United States. An undated brochure from the late 1970s claimed that, “the Jewish Studies program and those activities which flow from it are essentially the raison d’être of the school.” Thus, as the school repositioned itself for the outside world, its Jewish studies program became the new core.

Rather than becoming the artifact of history, however, the school’s previous mission of “combining two cultures” dissolved from memory altogether. The official school history provided in the 1978–1979 student handbook, for instance, explained that Akiba “was founded in 1946 by a group of public-minded citizens, lay and professional, who were deeply concerned for the future of meaningful Jewish education in the Philadelphia area. Uppermost in the minds of these founders was the need to create, in the United States, a dynamic community of educated Jews who could carry on for the 6,000,000 Jews who perished in the Holocaust.” Attributing their own iteration of the school’s mission to their predecessors—and effectively rewriting history—Akiba’s leaders revealed once more their fundamental concern with messaging.

At the same time as the school redefined its mission around the aim of Jewish survival, it also adjusted its marketing pitch to emphasize the school’s exclusivity. A shift had occurred in the social context in which Jews were understood as Americans, as well as in the way in which they understood themselves. But another shift had taken place, too—increasing competition for spots at top colleges was stirring anxiety among middle-class parents, Jewish and non-Jewish.

64Ibid.


66“Akiba Hebrew Academy,” [brochure], 1979–1983, AHAC, PJAC.

The desire to use schools as a means of upward social mobility was nothing new for American Jews. But as smaller and smaller percentages of applicants were admitted to prestigious colleges, parents concerned with educational attainment became even more status conscious. Thus, despite its outward focus on its Jewish Studies program, Akiba also needed to present itself as an elite college preparatory school. In 1970, for instance, the school's new President Abe Birenbaum wrote that “the purpose of the Academy is to produce young Jews who embrace the achievements of the best secular learning with the finest training in Jewish studies, at a level equal to the best that any other private school can provide.”

Previous comparisons, of course, had been made between Akiba and the best public schools. That, however, had been a part of the school’s effort to burnish its patriotic credentials. In boasting that Akiba’s secular program matched the best found in other private schools, Birenbaum was sending a clear message to parents aware that private school graduates maintained a distinct advantage over public school students in the college admissions process, especially at Ivy League schools, where Jewish enrollment had been steadily growing for over a decade.

Thus, by the 1970s, Akiba had emerged as a new school—a college preparatory academy with Jewish Studies at its core. Today, the school now known as Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy conceives of itself as “a caring community dedicated to integrating intensive Jewish studies with a rigorous college preparatory program.” And, in a distinctly modern twist, the school’s website notes that “perhaps most importantly, our students love being here.” A new concern—student well-being—had arisen as one that needed to be integrated into the school’s balancing act.

**Remembering Akiba’s History**

Over sixty years, Akiba Hebrew Academy grew from a small junior high school serving twenty students to an established institution educating 300 teenagers in grades six through twelve. In this time, the school

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70 Abe Birenbaum, “Excerpts from Abe Birenbaum’s Speech Upon Accepting the Presidency of Akiba Hebrew Academy,” *Parent-Teacher News of Akiba Hebrew Academy* 10, no. 3 (June 1970).
71 Karabel, *The Chosen*.
constantly worked to secure its future, and in so doing, consistently reconstructed its mission.

When leaders of the local Jewish community insisted that being a good American meant living in integrated neighborhoods, supporting local public schools, and—above all—doing nothing to highlight Jewish distinctiveness, Akiba worked within that narrative.

Akiba’s founders made the case that their school would produce loyal Americans. Further, they argued that Akiba would showcase the nation’s finest achievements: educational and religious pluralism. In short, the school would enrich America by teaching the same democratic values as the country’s top public schools while simultaneously protecting the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution. In keeping with this, a 1954 admissions brochure proclaimed that Akiba was founded “as a progressive Jewish community school designed to fully integrate the best in the Jewish and American traditions.”  

As debates about Akiba’s American character persisted, the school’s leaders worked steadily to meet the potential concerns of parents, funders, and community members. Over the course of its first two decades, though, new priorities began to emerge among the school’s various constituents. High levels of integration, social prominence, and military service had reduced concerns about the American character of Jews living in the United States. But it had also raised concern about the perpetuation of Jewish identity. Paired with the existential reckoning brought about by growing attentiveness to the horrors of the Holocaust, American Jews became more concerned with Jewish survival. As Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard put it, “for those with a fundamental commitment to Jewish collective existence as a separate people, religion, and culture,” assimilation “evokes profound anxiety, expressed in ever more highly charged phrases like ‘internal erosion and corruption,’ ‘spiritual Jewish genocide,’ and the ‘end of American Jewish history.’”  

Akiba adapted its mission, and even its narrative about the school’s history, to meet those changing concerns. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Akiba abandoned its well-established policy of trying to prove that it could bolster American democracy. Instead, the school began to emphasize its Jewish Studies program and leaders asserted that Akiba could address the problems of eroding Jewish identity in a post-Holocaust world. Conversations about Jewish survival entirely replaced discussions of Akiba’s American character. Having secured its legitimacy, leaders also worked to gain greater prestige for the school, making the

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73 “Why Akiba?,” [brochure], 1954, AHAC, PJAC.
case that Akiba was a top-notch college preparatory academy with a unique focus on Jewish studies.

The school’s stated mission was not merely a rhetorical tool. Through the stories told about the school’s purpose, its students, faculty, and staff were oriented toward a particular understanding of the enterprise in which they were collectively engaged. On his senior page in the 1967 school yearbook, for instance, Akiba student Samuel Jay Lipsky wrote that “the establishment of Akiba Hebrew Academy twenty years ago . . . was a ‘renewal’ of the deepest values inherent in us and a ‘rededication’ to the faith in our own future. It was a direct adherence to the command v’shinantam l’vanecha [and you shall teach them to your children].”

Lipsky viewed his own attendance at Akiba primarily in terms of his Jewish heritage, unaware that the school’s early leaders were as concerned with producing loyal American citizens as with renewing Jewish life.

In 1960, a contributor to the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent wrote that the “Jewish all-day school has faced the greatest uphill climb in the history of Jewish education in this country.” Bemoaning the myriad objections raised to the movement, he concluded that the success of schools like Akiba was “a tribute to the spirit of dedication of the few who did not rest until such schools were established in their respective communities.”

Even once the school’s survival had been seemingly guaranteed, such a spirit of dedication continued to characterize Akiba’s leadership. But it was not an unthinking dedication tone-deaf to the concerns of the wider community. Had that been the case, Akiba’s growth would have been stunted—brought to a halt by a mismatch between school and society. Rather, it was a dedication grounded in sensitivity to context. Capturing this spirit of restless adaptation, incoming President Abe Birenbaum asked the assembled community in 1970: “Now, where do we go from here?”

A Negotiated Position

Concerns about the perpetuation of group identity have long occupied the collective imagination of American minority groups, and rightly so. After all, even a pluralistic society that explicitly embraces diversity can dilute the distinct contributions and cultural heritages of its constituent

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75 Samuel J. Lipsky, “Samuel Jay Lipsky’s Senior Page,” in Hamigdal/The Citadel [Student Yearbook], 1967, AHAC, PJAC.
77 Birenbaum, “Excerpts from Abe Birenbaum’s Speech.”
groups. Schools, as institutions positioned to teach young people about the society in which they live, help initiate children into a cultural or religious community and its norms, values, and beliefs. Responding to concerns about cultural preservation then, schools can teach young people to perpetuate their cultural and religious traditions.

But the maintenance of cultural and religious identity is not a fixed North Star by which minority groups navigate. Insofar as such groups see benefits in processes such as integration and assimilation, they may choose to pursue acculturation, even at its steep cost. And schools can meet this concern, too, working to incorporate students into the American mainstream.

Such aims, opposite as they are, seem to present a stark choice. Yet, as the case of Akiba Hebrew Academy illustrates, the aims of preservation and acculturation are not exclusive of each other. Nor are decisions about separation and integration. Schools help students and their communities negotiate the distinct, and sometimes competing, aims of life in a pluralistic society. And as this history demonstrates, they navigate these positions constantly, responding to ever shifting contexts inside and outside of the community in question. Such negotiation, rather than being linear, is cyclical or iterative in nature.

School and community leaders, in this particular case, were occupied by different balancing acts over the decades, which metamorphosed as the school, the Jewish community, and American society evolved. And yet, despite the changing nature of public discourse and school policy, there remained an underlying constant: the necessity to define and negotiate the place of the minority group within the larger context of American society. For the parents, students, and faculty at Akiba Hebrew Academy, the notion of “e pluribus unum” was not just a motto of a pluralistic America; it was the fundamental challenge of education.

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