

GARY ROSENBLATT

Looking For A Few Good Teachers

Jewish education, like the weather, is a topic that many people discuss but few do anything about.

Some of us bemoan the state of Jewish ignorance in America, where Jewish education usually consists of after-school classes one or two days a week — an experience almost universally disliked — culminating with a bar or bat mitzvah. So while we prod our children toward academic achievement in so many areas, from math to science to the arts, we seem content to allow those same youngsters to conclude their exploration of Jewish history, culture and religion at a point in their lives when their voices haven't even changed, not to mention the maturation of their minds.

To be sure, Jewish education has risen on the communal agenda these last 20 years, viewed increasingly as an antidote to assimilation and intermarriage. But the debate goes on as to whether we should focus our energies on intensive day schools, camp experiences, adult education or family education.

David Silber and his wife, Devora Steinmetz, have staked their professional careers on the belief that the best, and perhaps the only way to transform Jewish education is one student and one teacher at a time.

That's what led Rabbi Silber to found the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education on Manhattan's Upper West Side in 1979, pioneering the way for women to pursue intensive Torah

study. And it motivated Steinmetz to found Beit Rabban a few blocks away, a non-denominational, coed elementary school that teaches children to integrate and analyze Jewish and secular studies.

Now this iconoclastic couple, observant in practice but pluralist in principle, is preparing to launch an ambitious new program to recruit, develop and train quality Jewish educators. In so doing, they hope to set new standards of educational practice and attract talented recent college graduates who would not otherwise consider a career in Jewish education.

"We're trying to upgrade the profession by engaging a few good people educationally and spiritually," explains Rabbi Silber. "And," his wife adds, "by offering them the opportunity to meet and study with a group of kindred spirits."

The 12-month program is called She'anim, and is slated to begin in the summer of 1998. Funded by a local philanthropic family that wishes to remain anonymous, it will provide each of about a dozen fellows an \$18,000 stipend and free tuition. The participants, male and female and from any or all of the denominations, will commit to a year in an intensive environment integrating Jewish textual study and pedagogical course work developed by Silber and Steinmetz — and to spend at least the next two years teaching full-time in a Jewish day school in North America.

After that time, the hope is that some can-

didates will be hooked on Jewish education as a career, and that the others will have made a real contribution to the field before embarking on different professional pursuits.

"You can't change the culture overnight," Silber notes, but the program plants the idea in young people's minds that they can spend three years of their lives studying how to learn and learning how to teach in dynamic new ways that will make a contribution to American Jewish life.

Silber and Steinmetz are critical of the kinds of teaching they see in day schools today. "Most are not open to new ideas, in part because ours is an anti-intellectual culture," says Steinmetz.

"There is a rigidity in the classroom," her husband adds, particularly in Judaic subjects, "where teachers say 'this is the way it is,' and the kids are told to accept it."

That leads to closed minds among teachers and students, he says. "Our model is one of autonomy and personal responsibility," he adds. "But in order to have students able to analyze and think for themselves, you need teachers who believe there is more than one correct solution."

What makes a good teacher?

In recruiting on college campuses for the new program, Steinmetz says she will follow the same guidelines she has used in finding teachers for Beit Rabban. She will look for people with a certain level of Jewish knowledge, but also for those with certain personal



Devora Steinmetz and Rabbi David Silber. Looking to make Jewish education a career alternative for our best and brightest.

qualities that are easier to spot than define. "I want to see how they talk and how they listen. In a classroom, listening to the children is so important." She also seeks people who are reflective, and open to and excited about new ideas.

What is exciting about this program is the potential to reinvigorate Jewish education and set higher standards — and respect — for a profession that is as vital as it is under-appreciated.

"Everyone picks on teachers," Silber notes. "Parents, kids, and the community at large."

Yet what profession is more important to a community obsessed with survival and continuity? Silber and Steinmetz, in their own quiet way, have already revolutionized Jewish education. Now they are hoping their new program can restore nobility to a once proud profession, making Jewish education a viable career alternative for our best and brightest. □