

BRIEF TO
THE COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS
EDUCATION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

~~SECRET~~

From The
SHAAREI SHOMAYIM CONGREGATION

Port Arthur - Fort William, Ont

Mlay

May 12, 1967

We are here on behalf of the Shaarei Shomayim Synagogue of Port Arthur and Fort William, comprising the Jewish community of the Lakehead.

Our community has from the beginning opposed the introduction of religious teaching in the public schools, a step that was in variance with and contradiction to the entire previous tradition and practice in our educational system. We have opposed this for reasons which we are sure must be quite familiar to the members of your committee. We welcomed the announcement made by Mr. Davis that he would establish a commission to review and reevaluate the course in religion and we are pleased to know that the persons named for the task are so well-qualified and have taken their assignment in the spirit of earnestness that it so fully warrants.

Our position, Honourable Sir, is one not based on parochial or sectarian grounds. It is not necessarily as adherents of the Jewish faith that we are opposed to the course of action that has been prevalent since 1944 though its evils have, perhaps, become plain to us sooner because we are a religious minority and these things have been brought home earlier. We base our opposition to the course on the wider grounds, that it is harmful to Canada and to Canadian unity and inter-group harmony.

It is not only as a Jewish community proudly Canadian that we address you on this subject. It is as a Jewish community remote from the larger centres of Jewish population in the South and East, centred in

the less populated part of Ontario. It has been suggested that a dual arrangement be sought: that there be one standard for the rural or smaller communities and one for the larger centres of more mixed population. We would reject this "saw-off" most unequivocally. We feel that on a matter of religious conscience there can be no double standard. There should be no special privileges or arrangements available to the larger centres from which the smaller centres would be excluded. In fact, we should point out that in this matter it is the Jewish community in the smaller centre that is far more sensitive to the problem in some ways than the Jewish community in the large city in Old Ontario. The schoolchild of a minority religion who is in relative isolation from large numbers of his co-religionists, is in a much more vulnerable position in a classroom setting where sensitive matters of religious belief are dealt with.

We have in the past placed ourselves on record on the question of religious education in the public school. In the 1950's we submitted a formal objection to the innovation of bringing clergymen into the schoolroom to give religious instruction, an objection which was regrettably overlooked.

As we indicated before, Honourable Sir, and Members of the Committee, you have by now, no doubt, heard the many grievances and grounds in opposition to religious education in the public schools. It would perhaps be superfluous for us to give a further recital of these.

What you are interested in, we would guess, is some proposals on what should be placed in the curriculum should religious instruction be removed. Our view on this is that there need not necessarily be "a new course" to replace the existing one. The 1944 course did not dislodge any previous course and we do not feel that the removal of the present course should be contingent on substituting "something new" for it.

Doctrinal religion, it is agreed, has no place in the classroom. The inculcation of human and social values, on the other hand, does have a proper and legitimate place. How can this goal be reached? By nothing more radical than "good teaching", teaching that is sensitive to the needs of the child as an individual and a human person, that can reach and communicate with the child, that knows how to relate the child to his social and human environment and that possesses the skill of using every and any element in the background of society and the school to draw those lessons that best implant our values.

To attain this there is no magic formula, no special system but basic tested pedagogic skills plus the tangible element of personal and human warmth, the warmth that inspires and catches the imagination of the young.

Does this mean we want to ban the Bible or forbid any reference to religion in the classroom? Far from it. We agree that it would be absurd to tell stories about the myths of Greece and Rome and forbid stories from the early histories of the Jewish people and the stories

associated with the beginnings of Judaism and Christianity.

There is a place in the classroom for stories from the Bible ^{there} as/is for stories from the Koran, and the traditional sacred books of many other peoples and faiths. But these ought to be presented in their context, not as stories which the children must believe as an article of faith. The doctrinal aspect of these stories must receive their sanction from the religious institution and the home: the public school cannot and should not undertake to tell the child what he should believe and what he should not believe in matters of religion.

We believe it is too late to turn the clock back to 1944 and re-introduce the program of having clergymen give instruction to children of their denomination after hours. This system, while not as obnoxious as the present, does give rise to certain objections and would not constitute that much of an improvement.

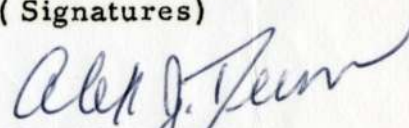
As for the objective teaching of religion or religions, this is certainly something your Committee ought to consider. We have no set view for or against, though we feel study of this question should give careful consideration to the following factors:

- a) the age of the pupils
- b) do we have teachers qualified, i. e. with the knowledge and equipment to deal with it?
- c) can subjective bias be totally eliminated in such a course?
- d) is there any experience of such instruction in the context of a common school system?

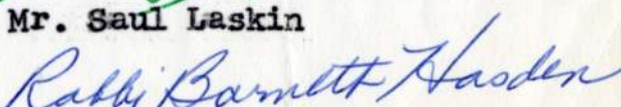
Should there be a course in Moral Values? Our feeling is that these are best inculcated in integration with the existing curriculum rather than by a set course of precepts. Lessons in values can be drawn from events in history, from biographies of famous persons be it St. Francis of Assisi, Albert Einstein, Albert Schweitzer, Florence Nightingale, Mahatma Gandhi, Ludwig Zamenhof, John Wesley, Rabbi Isaac-Levi of Berditchev and William Wilberforce, from tales of literature be it Dickens, Kipling, Mark Twain, Daudet, Cervantes, or Peretz. There is a great wealth of material the teacher can draw on and to straitjacket the concept of ethical and moral values into the narrow confines of a fixed course would be to minimize and restrict its scope. Ethics and morals are too important to suffer this limitation - they should pervade the entire curriculum.

We hope, Honourable Sir, Dr. Innis and gentlemen, that we have succeeded in some modest measure in projecting some ideas that can be of some assistance to you in framing your conclusions.

(Signatures)


Alex J. Devon


Mr. Saul Laskin


Rabbi Barnett Hasden

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