Jewish Early Childhood Education and Jesus’ Education

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ABSTRACT—Early childhood education represents a unique opportunity to engage both young children and their parents in a rich and meaningful communal life. At this stage of their lives, parents of young children are open to considering questions of identity and connection for themselves and their children. More specifically, the raising of young Jewish children offers Jewish communities an unrivaled opportunity to engage young families and deepen their Jewish journeys. This study compares the Jewish early childhood education and with that of Jesus. The synagogue was the center of the Jewish early childhood education. However Jesus was not educated in the synagogue. The Jews taught from the Mishnah as their central text for the synagogue education. Jesus had a different experience. He valued useful work, the study of the Scriptures and of nature, and the experiences of life as the prime sources of His education. This study seeks to understand the reason why He did so. Those four elements that Jesus chose can be characterized as the NEWS of Jesus when their first letters become an acrostic. The NEWS of Jesus finally will be compared with the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) and Luke 2:52.

Keywords: Jews, education, childhood, synagogue, rabbinical education, Mishnah

I. Introduction
The early years of a child’s life have a substantial impact on brain development, socio-emotional intelligence and personal identity. Brain research has shown that the first three to five years of life are a time of extraordinary brain development. Jewish early childhood scholars assert that during this period of amazing growth, Jewish experiences lay the groundwork for a lifelong Jewish identity and create the basis upon which all future learning is built. Jewish early childhood education is about building the foundation of a strong, vibrant, joyful Jewish identity for each child. The foundations for future learning, personal relationships and communal belonging are laid down in those early childhood experiences. Thus, parents seek the best educational environment available for their children. The Jewish community must offer them excellence. An excellent synagogue early childhood program begins laying the foundations of Jewish identity in a very sacred and central place within the community.

In the days of Jesus, both boys and girls attended school in Galilee. But only gifted boys continued their education beyond the age of 15, as girls were married by that age. Students probably attended school in the synagogue and were taught by the hazzan, the local Torah teacher. According to the Mishnah (the written record of oral tradition at Jesus’ time and afterward), students followed a specific educational plan:

- Study began at age five or six in elementary school, called bet sefer, with memorization and study of the Torah.
- At age twelve, boys began studying the more complicated oral interpretation of the Torah. Question and answer sessions between teachers and students were added to the memorization drills.
- These boys became religious adults at the age of thirteen.
- After age twelve or thirteen, gifted students might continue their studies with a local rabbi in beth midrash (meaning “house of study,” or secondary school). Here a more intense process of understanding and applying the Torah and oral tradition to specific situations was conducted.
- Truly gifted individuals would travel and study with a famous rabbi as a talmid or disciple. The disciple’s goal was to become like their rabbi by learning and applying the wisdom of Torah and oral tradition to daily situations.
- Students learned a trade at twenty.
- Students were considered fully able scholars at thirty. (www.pottershouseschool.org)