

High taxes, high tuition

Thursday, 21 June 2007

High taxes, high

tuition

By SHMULEY BOTEACH, THE JERUSALEM POST Jul. 20,
2005

It is only four weeks since my children's school year ended, but already my summer is ruined. This week I received by mail the tuition fee schedule for my children's private Jewish day schools that I already owe for next year. I'll withhold the exact amount because I don't want to give you a coronary, but with seven children in private religious education, and with tuition for Jewish day schools in America running at about \$9,000 per child (and that's with a discount), you can easily imagine the astronomical bill.

Still, I'm prepared to cover this huge sum because a religious and moral education for my children is non-negotiable.

But here's the rub. In

addition to the high tuition, which I struggle to meet, I am also required to pay enormous property taxes – and in the mismanaged and profligate state of New Jersey where I reside the property taxes are equally shock-inducing – to cover the public school system my kids would be using if they were not in parochial schools.

That's right. The United States, alone among the great democracies of the world, shows utter contempt for religious parents by making them pay twice for their children's education, refusing to put even a single dollar of their tax money toward their children's religious schools.

Now why should parents be penalized for wanting to give their children a religious education? Is it a sin to teach children the need for spirituality in life, to condition them to the sanctity of human life, and to expose them to the great ethical code contained in the Ten Commandments? Is it right to be financially penalized tens of thousands of dollars per annum for wanting to give one's children a solid moral and ethical education that will make them more readily appreciate the democratic and humanitarian ideals upon which a great country like the United States is built, and be more patriotic as

a result?

Is it not precisely the moral values they absorb in a religious school that will ensure they grow up to be law-abiding citizens and, therefore, even in the most practical economic sense, of great economic value to their country?

After all, what percentage of kids who receive a solid religious and moral grounding end up robbing a liquor store and going to prison, or becoming drug addicts, thereby costing the state tens of thousands of dollars per year in prison or rehabilitation costs?

And yet it is precisely those parents for whom a religious education is not pivotal, who are prepared to risk their kids in the dangerous jungles of the American public school system with its much higher rate of juvenile delinquency, who are given massive financial incentives to do so.

WHEN I resided in England, as the rabbi at Oxford University for 11 years, my children attended some of the best Jewish day schools in the world. The cost to me was minimal because the Jewish day schools have all their secular studies subsidized by the government while the religious studies are, of course, paid for by the parents.

Parents in Israel, of course, have it much better. As Jewish parents in a Jewish state they can send their kids to most religious day schools at practically no cost, their tax dollars being used, rightly, to fund their children's complete education.

But even solidly secular countries like Canada and France, whom Americans perceive as being hostile to religion, all have government subsidies for religious schools.

Only America, the most religious country of them all, brutally punishes religious parents by not allowing their hard-earned tax dollars to fund their children's parochial schools.

The net result is that the exorbitant price of religious tuition has simply become unaffordable for most American families. Virtually every religious family I know struggles

very hard just to meet the tuition bills. Then, when they need a scholarship, as virtually every family does, they are subjected to the humiliation of having to go before scholarship boards and reveal every last family expenditure. Many throw in the towel and send their kids to public schools rather than face bankruptcy.

The religious majority in the US, who demonstrated their phenomenal political power in the last election by keeping George W. Bush in power amid a liberal onslaught to oust him, don't seem to care much about the issue of parochial school education. Even very religious Christians are content to leave their children in public schools, with their loose morals and lax standards, or home-school them — an admirable choice increasingly common among evangelical Christians but untenable for Orthodox Jewish families, who typically have much larger families than their evangelical counterparts.

Indeed, the voucher movement in the US, which would give parents far greater choice for their children's schooling, has little political support.

Which explains why, with a battle raging over the replacement for the moderate Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, all the talk among the faithful is of having a conservative justice who will help to ban abortion rather than one who will help curb the increasing hostility to God in America's public spaces.

Yet the assault against God and religion in the American educational scene is a far more pressing issue. Every adult is a product mostly of the influences of his or her formative years. If America is to continue to be a mighty and moral nation it will have to produce a generation of adults who were taught, as children, that life is more than the pursuit of money and recognition. America's kids require exposure to the religious message that man is born for service rather than adventure, and to reconcile with his fellow man as a colleague rather than to endlessly compete against him as an adversary. In a world of endless strife there is no more important idea than the religious teaching that all human beings are created in God's image, and all are therefore brethren.

With Bush combating terrorism around the world it is important to remember that the principal means by which Islamic fundamentalists foster hatred against the US is by falsely painting us Americans as godless materialists and decadent infidels.

They are wrong, of course.

But it would be good if the Supreme Court finally confirmed the place of God in American life rather than treating the Creator as an unwelcome intruder. The writer is a syndicated radio host in the US and author, most recently, of *Hating Women: America's Hostile Campaign Against the Fairer Sex*.