“Ani Po” Does Not Equal “Hineini”

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As the teacher calls out names for attendance, small voices pipe up with the response, “Ani Po!” Students are in class. But are they really present?

According to the 2013 Pew Survey of U.S. Jews, 48% of parents who identify as Reform Jews had their children enrolled in a day school, another formal Jewish educational program, or an organized Jewish youth program.¹ Based upon recent trends, it would seem that the majority of those children are pre-teens, and have not yet become B’nai Mitzvah. Indeed, back in 1996, scholar of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion Isa Aron reported a post-B’nai Mitzvah dropout rate of 60%. More recently, in a 2010 speech to the Union for Reform Judaism Board of Trustees, Rabbi Eric Yoffie suggested that figure might be closer to 80% in Reform congregations.²

Much work has been done during the past five years to improve and expand upon the opportunities for post-B’nai Mitzvah youth, and yet, according to data gathered by JData in 2014, the number of Reform teens enrolled in part-time educational programs drops by more than half between 7th and 8th grades, and by approximately 85% between 7th and 12th grades.³ This indicates that the majority of students who are physically present in congregational schools are pre-B’nai Mitzvah age, and most of those students are not spiritually present if they are disappearing from education in droves once they have become B’nai Mitzvah. So why do these statistics persist despite the efforts of youth-focused professionals and congregational lay leaders to increase the number and types of offerings for post-B’nai Mitzvah youth?

I believe that the challenge of retaining youth in Jewish educational life beyond B’nai Mitzvah lies largely in the ways that congregations continue to approach pre-B’nai Mitzvah education. Our children and families say “Ani Po,” but they are not saying “Hineini.” They are declaring “here” (po) for attendance without being fully present in mind, body, and soul. It was Abraham who first declared, “Hineini,” in response to God’s call (Genesis 22:1). It is clear that Abraham did not simply mean, “Here I am;” he meant that he was fully present and ready to engage and participate.

Students are showing up for what they view as perfunctory participation to achieve the goal of B’nai Mitzvah, but they are not invested in a way that says, “I am fully present and committed to Jewish life, education, and community.” The requirement to join a congregation and enroll in religious school in order to become B’nai Mitzvah has been one of the unintended consequences of modern congregational affiliation in North America. As a result, many Jewish Americans treat becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah as the end goal of religious education (Aron, 2010). Although there are multiple opportunities

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¹ http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/
² http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/rabbi-eric-yoffie-announces-retirement/
³ https://www.jdata.com/
for teens to stay connected, students do not feel compelled to continue since they have essentially been going through the motions to reach a perceived goal. They have not found any meaning or inspiration along the way to convince them that Judaism could be relevant in their lives outside the walls of the congregation.

Many families arrive at congregational doorsteps with the intention to do only what is required of them in order for their children to become B’hai Mitzvah. However, once they enter the doors, congregational professionals, teachers, and lay leaders have an incredible opportunity to engage them in ways they may not have previously imagined.

Unfortunately, for nearly a century, congregational education has defaulted to what Michelle Lynn-Sachs calls the “grammar of schooling” in how children are educated (Aron, 2014). The grammar of schooling includes particular “rules” such as the layout of classrooms, the organization of instruction into subject areas, and assigning learning to specific times and spaces. Congregational schools are typically modeled after secular schools, with graded classrooms of children sitting at desks while an adult stands in front of them dispensing information. When students feel that they are attending yet another day of just another school, and see no relevance in how they can apply Jewish concepts outside of the classroom, they certainly will not be enticed to participate in what they typically view as optional education in their post-B’hai Mitzvah lives. Of course, this is the precise moment when Jewish values could provide important guiding principles as adolescents dive head-first into the work of identity formation. But up to this point, their attendance has only been “Ani Po,” and “Hineini” has not been a part of their literal or figurative vocabulary with regard to Jewish education.

In order to stem the tide of post-B’hai Mitzvah dropout, congregational professionals and lay leaders need to work in partnership to **reinvent** pre-B’hai Mitzvah education. This is difficult to imagine, as education has become synonymous with schooling. Like Mark Twain once warned, however, we must never let our schooling interfere with our education. Over the past 25 years, there have been a few congregational schools that have developed new models, most notably the family school, chavurah/community based structures, and camp-style/experiential learning. There have also been some innovative curricular approaches adopted in several schools, including Project Based Learning and Hebrew Through Movement (Aron, 2014). However, in most of these examples, the traditional school model has not disappeared entirely, either because these approaches have been adapted into classrooms that are essentially structured in the same public-school manner, or because the alternative model is an optional track alongside the standard religious school program.

Moreover, the educational outcomes of these alternative programs are merely anecdotal. To date, no comprehensive study has yet been undertaken to determine if they have been successful in engaging more students and retaining them in Jewish life post-B’hai Mitzvah. While these efforts at re-imagining are a start, they are still sorely insufficient. With the development of new and exciting post-B’hai Mitzvah programs meant to stimulate teens’ interest in Jewish life and living, congregational professionals and lay leaders need to create pre-B’hai Mitzvah programs that are aligned in mission and vision.
with these post-B’nai Mitzvah opportunities. This entails a significant shift in thinking that goes beyond the traditional classroom as the only setting for learning in the Jewish world.

Judaism is meant to be studied, but more importantly, it is meant to be *lived*. Students should be provided with opportunities to learn about Judaism while actually experiencing it at the same time. In addition to looking more broadly at the setting in which learning occurs, the definition of “student” needs to extend beyond children. “School” is for young people between certain ages, but “education” is for everyone. Emphasizing opportunities for learning within mixed age groups can help diminish the traditional grade-placement of children and help foster multigenerational, community engagement in Jewish life. Creating learning opportunities that upend Michelle Lynn-Sachs’ “grammar of schooling” and bring meaning and excitement to the world of Judaism for our learners will turn many responses of “Ani Po” into a chorus of “Hineini.” Our students will be truly *present* and committed to Jewish life past B’nai Mitzvah and throughout their lives.

Works Cited

