

Building Supplementary Schools We Can Be Proud Of

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“I’ll be picking Josh up early today – he has a soccer game.”

It’s a sentence every Jewish educator has heard before. In fact, some would prefer hearing this to a very real alternative: the silence of all-out absence on game days.

Jewish education is not providing our learners with compelling reasons to prioritize Jewish education, and they and their parents are voting with their feet.

Leaders of supplementary synagogue schools, which provide the setting for the majority of Jewish children receiving their Jewish education,¹ speak frequently about the importance of being accepting communities. No one wants to push families away; no one likes the word “no.” If a student only shows up for 50% of her Sunday morning class sessions, there will almost always be phone calls and check-ins, and there may even be threats thrown regarding *b’nai mitzvah* dates,² but in the end, very few families change their ways or their priorities. Soccer (or ballet, or karate) usually wins, and *b’nai mitzvah* dates almost never get cancelled. Supplementary school attendance policies seem to be far more flexible than sports teams, and not in a good way.

Poor attendance rates are not actually the problem, though. They are merely the symptom. The real problem is that Jewish education lacks excellence.

Sometimes the overwhelmed educator with too many projects to oversee simply cannot keep up with supervising his faculty’s professional growth and their lesson plans. Elsewhere, undertrained faculty cannot think creatively about learning. Perhaps what most compromises potential for excellence is a pervasive fear that the entirety of Judaism must be transmitted to Jewish youth in 2-6 weekly hours.

Kids see right through it. Jack Wertheimer notes that the very nature of supplementary education as supplementary sends a message to learners – there is much to do, little time to fit it all in, and “the fact that supplementary education takes place after school, and that grades do not ‘count’ shapes the perception of children as to what is truly important.”³

¹ Jack Wertheimer, “Recent Trends in Supplementary Jewish Education.” p. 3

² “Many congregations continue to tie synagogue education to the bar/bat mitzvah celebration, thinking this gives them leverage with families.” – Wertheimer, p. 6

³ “The supplementary nature of the education imparts a message to young children

They come to class when it is convenient, and seem to anticipate those days when other obligations outweigh their religious school attendance.

Current Coping Strategies

One response among Jewish educators has been to bring the competing activities into shul. All teens want to do is play basketball? Great, we'll set up a basketball program at the temple to keep students coming back. Or perhaps their one true love is the theater, and so a drama teacher is hired to entice them to stay.

In a separate vein, many students voice concerns about "real school" and their obligations in that arena, and so a second strategy synagogues use is to open their doors for a few hours prior to weekday religious school and order pizza, hoping their learners will come, do homework, and then stay for "Jew school."⁴

However, a far more concerning response among some has been to actually shift the goals of Jewish education altogether. Religious school principals want their learners to have fun, enjoy being in synagogue, and to come back. Administrators hand their teachers heavy binders full of curriculum content and say "Cover this and that – but remember, the most important goal is that the kids have fun!" Teachers hear either the curriculum message (and race to cover too much content) or the affective objective (and spend their class time playing games that all too often miss the curricular point).

These solutions mean well, and perhaps they are even effective, at times. But they miss the deeper point about the actual problem and therefore fail to achieve genuine cultural change.

Time for Renewed Rigor

To be clear, I believe in basketball, theater, and pizza – and I am not advocating a removal of fun from the classroom. In fact, I believe that my vision enhances the fun that is already had in classrooms.

about the limited importance of the enterprise. As parents are swept up by social pressures to involve their children in sports, the arts, entertainment, tutoring and other after-school activities, pressures mount to limit Jewish education... The fact that supplementary education takes place after school, and that grades do not "count," shapes the perception of children as to what is truly important." – Wertheimer, p. 6

⁴ A term many students use to refer to religious school, as differentiated from "real", that is, legitimate, school.

I am calling for renewed rigor.

Students should have the opportunity to make deep inquiries into weighty topics. Classrooms should support learners' ability to produce work they are proud of; work that they grab at the end of class to run and show off to their parents, siblings and friends. Curriculum should discuss Judaism not as a checklist of holidays and lifecycle events, not merely as a set of ethics and values, but as a religion that helps learners define who they are and how they interact with the world.

In short, I seek excellence.

Why? One simple but profound reason: learners crave it. Nobody – not teachers or students – feels good about spending time pursuing mediocrity, and taking home second-rate work and ideas. In “Beit Knesset Hazon: A Visionary Synagogue,” Jewish education scholars Isa Aron and Nechama Moskowitz tell the story of a synagogue transformed by learning, a congregation whose community discovered a drive to learn about Judaism and took matters into its own hands. One congregant described a pivotal speaker who helped light a fire, saying,

“he embarrassed me into thinking seriously about what my Jewish identity meant to me...What’s really sad is that we’re generally not embarrassed by our Jewish ignorance...I really took seriously almost every other aspect of my life...If I wanted to send my kid to nursery school, I researched it - but when it came to [my kids] Jewish education, it was by default.”⁵

This congregant was called to task for paying inadequate attention to her own Jewish learning and the Jewish learning of her children. As a result, she helped instigate lasting change in the education system of her congregation. If she would not stand for mediocrity in her child’s nursery school, she figured, why do so when it came to her family’s Jewish education options?

This idea, that Jews crave personally transformative Jewish learning that invites learners to think Jewishly in new and creative ways, is part of what propels hugely successful organizations like IKAR⁶ in Los Angeles and The Kitchen in San Francisco. Sharon

⁵ Quote from named article, found in Learning and Community: Jewish Supplementary Schools in the Twenty-first Century, ed. Jack Wertheimer, 2009. Page 238.

⁶ “Since its founding, we have witnessed exponential growth from a handful of people to a community of more than 500 member households – making it one of the

Brous, founding rabbi of IKAR, explains that the IKAR community was built to “lower the bar for entry - everyone should walk into this space and feel welcome...but raise the bar for engagement - every sermon, text study, etcetera is designed to stimulate the great intellectual minds in the room.”⁷ In other words, mediocre Jewish experiences no longer hold water, or congregants. Silver, Strong and Perini, authors of The Strategic Teacher, agree: "The decision to withhold rigor from some students is one of the most important reasons why schools fail." When classrooms are not excellent, learners simply do not show.

A Charge for Excellence

The task may seem overwhelming, and no one should expect shifts to take place overnight. But three components can lead communities away from mediocrity and towards excellence.

First, *we need new criteria for religious school personnel*. Yes, quality teachers can be hard to find due to the part-time nature of supplementary school, but educators must seek out the highest quality teachers possible because of the part-time nature of the limited time they are able to spend interacting with students. They must seek people who are interested in and willing to participate in professional development. Furthermore, once in the door, teachers must be meaningfully mentored and supervised. Educational leaders must actually read through and respond to their teachers’ lesson plans, treating their growth as educators seriously.

Second, *assessment must drive curriculum*. School heads must provide clear goals for teachers, and teachers must, in turn, provide clear end goals at the beginning of the year, articulate those goals to their learners, and take steps to attain those goals over the course of the year. Results must be measurable and significant. Expectations must be set clearly between teachers, learners, parents and administrators so that all parties understand what matters and why. Everyone needs to know what being absent will “cost” them educationally. Everyone needs to know who will lose out if people do not hold themselves and each other to the highest standards.

Finally, *there must be a check on “coverage”, the attempt to teach as much content as possible in the short time given*. The vast majority of Jewish supplementary school educators are trying to teach too much material in too little time, without providing

fastest growing Jewish communities in the country. “ – <http://www.ikar-la.org/about/>

⁷ Personal Notes, April 8th 2013. American Jewish History (for which Brous was a guest speaker)

“*uncoverage*” opportunities; that is, planned and structured time for the learners to actually make sense of, use, internalize, and decide what counts as excellence when it comes to all that content. Synagogue education systems must make hard decisions about the number of topics a child can and should master during his/her time in religious school. These decisions can and should vary from shul to shul based on the values each community chooses to label formative and imperative, but the crucial decisions about priorities must be made.

To be sure, none of these components is new. Furthermore, each requires great amounts of time, energy, and drive. Specifically, they require that stakeholders show up 100% of the time, 100% ready and eager to get their hands dirty and give it their all. Change takes time, and these changes are particularly difficult because they are about deep cultural shifts, not simply structural or programmatic additions. As such, they demand serious time and commitment. Plus, it requires leaders to find the appropriate amount and type of challenge; none of us wants to make our learning environment more challenging than our learners can handle. Lastly, cultural change is hard because of how much is ultimately at stake. After all, we certainly do not want to turn uneducated Jews out into the world. But even these challenges have solutions.

Scare time: Worried that there is “not enough time in the day”? Let’s revisit the tasks in which we are spending our time. Do our activities mirror our values? If youth engagement, lifelong Jewish learning, and identity formation are high on our list of Jewish values, let’s be sure our work-hours reflect that.

Setting high expectations: Worried that our learners will be “turned off” if we set real learning goals and ask all parties to adhere to those goals? Perhaps it is time for a conversation with congregational stakeholders about the purpose of supplementary Jewish education in our institutions.

Coverage vs. Uncoverage: Afraid that cutting back on “number of things taught” will result in uneducated Jews? Frankly, I doubt our learners are remembering half of what we are teaching them. Why not delve into the important stuff, the stuff that is crucial. Why not help our learners truly internalize five things rather than perhaps remember some percentage of the fifty things we’ve attempted to cover on a surface level? For example, focusing curriculum on one phrase, “*b’tzelem elohim*”, allows learners to delve into all of the ways the idea of *b’tzelem elohim* manifests itself in our world. This reframing focuses the lens of a more overarching curriculum theme like “Jewish history” around God’s relationship with various people and people’s relationships with other people throughout history. Rather than requiring teachers to cover the entirety of Jewish history in the

course of a year, teachers have the freedom to focus on those aspects of Jewish history (and ritual and culture) that speak to the concept of *b'tzelem elohim*.

Although too few believe it based on current models, supplementary Jewish education has the ability to provide young Jews with formative Jewish learning experiences. The endeavor deserves the time, energy and effort of all those who have a part in Jewish learning. For if we continue to give it short shrift, “Jew school” will eventually become no more than “the place we go when soccer practice is cancelled.”