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Aligning the Educational Walk with the Congregational Talk

As a college student, I taught a 5th grade religious school class in a nearby Reform synagogue. Similar to other supplementary schools, the 5th grade Judaic studies curriculum focused on *N'vi'im*, Prophets, and we often discussed how the prophetic voice would speak on contemporary issues of social justice. I added more classes to my teaching load, and by my senior year in college, I was spending 8-10 hours a week at the synagogue, when I began to discuss post-graduation employment with the synagogue. Through these conversations, I learned, *for the first time*, of the exciting and innovative social justice work the synagogue with which the synagogue was engaged. The congregation had begun to structure its social justice work through the lens of community organizing. For the first time, synagogue members were sharing stories about the issues that mattered most to them and to their families, and were preparing to act on the issues that were felt most deeply in the synagogue. I had no idea that this initiative was taking place, and I spent a significant portion of my week in the building! I realized that if I was not aware of this exciting new initiative, with all my hours in the building, it was unlikely my students' parents, who spent much less time at the synagogue, had any idea about this exciting initiative. This synagogue, which significantly enabled and supported my own learning as a Jewish professional, is not atypical from other great congregations in lacking alignment between *shul* and school.

This story is one example of the disconnect in Reform synagogues, between the synagogue life experienced by young people and their families in religious school, and

that experienced by those adult members of the congregation who are not connected to the school. Many Reform synagogues place social justice, advocacy, and activism at the top of their communal agenda, yet this prioritization is not often reflected in the classroom. Religious school, when disconnected from the rest of communal life (Shabbat, holiday observances, and social justice work), fails to show students and families the alignment between the lessons taught in its classrooms and the expectations of adult members of the community. This lack of alignment can impact many areas of congregational life, but communal social justice work is an area at particular risk, because of its central role in many Reform synagogues.

Synagogues and religious schools have the potential to work together to paint a holistic picture of Jewish life and learning. For example, many religious schools study *N'vi'im* as part of their curriculum. However, when students list examples of how one might act like a prophet in the 21st century, or respond to the texts that they are studying, rarely do they include examples of the work that their synagogue is actively engaged in. Although many religious schools have social justice curricula, and require b'nai mitzvah students to complete community service projects, these do not play the same primary role that social justice does in their communities.

This lack of alignment is further reinforced when the teachers in the religious school are not integrated in the synagogue community. Although going outside of the synagogue community to hire teachers has its merits, both ethically and in efforts to find qualified staff, teachers from outside the community cannot model what it means to be an adult Jew *in that community*. This role modeling must be done by the adults of the community, including but not limited to the students' parents. The need for this role

modeling and interaction between the world of young people and the world of adults at the synagogue stems from my understanding of the core purpose of Jewish education: to prepare young people to be active Jewish adults in their community. When a synagogue community deeply values social justice, but this commitment is not transmitted to the next generation, there is a serious gap in the community's religious education. The synagogue is not successfully enculturating its students into life in that particular community.

Authentic assessment is one tool in the educator's toolbox with which to align the classroom with synagogue life. Ron Berger discusses the importance of "authentic assessment" in *An Ethic of Excellence*. The work that students do in the classroom needs real-life relevance in the outside world. In Berger's classroom, students are not only studying biology, they are biologists. One of the projects in his project-based learning classroom is a powerful example of what it can sound like when education links classroom learning and real-world doing. Berger reports, "Many of these students hope to become scientists. In fact, as Maria said to her fellow students, We already are!"¹ This attitude towards the connection between the classroom and real life needs to make its way into our religious school classrooms. If students see the relevance of the texts that they are studying to real and vibrant Jewish life, particularly as it is lived in their community, they will see the alignment between class and life. In a synagogue school setting, this authenticity does not need to be simulated, because the community itself is already doing the "real work" of Jewish life. Scholar of Jewish education, Isa Aron, calls for enculturation as a crucial part of a young Jew's religious education. Enculturation

¹ Ron Berger, *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*, p. 116. Copyright 2003 by Heinemann.

immerses a learner in a culture. In the synagogues that place social justice at the center of their mission, social justice is part of that institution's culture, and should be part of a student's education. Educators can learn from Aron's understanding of enculturation's role in the Jewish school:

A...characteristic of schools whose goal is enculturation is their concern with the authenticity of the subject matter...Enculturation, on the other hand, depends upon authentic encounters with a culture in all its richness and complexity. Studying *about* the Torah is not the same as studying Torah; learning prayers is not the same as praying.²

The same goes for social justice. Learning about the prophets or about Maimonides' ladder of tzedakah is not the same as doing social justice work in the world. Further, when students only hear their teachers and other adults talk about doing social justice, without seeing the actions, it may even be miseducative.

Reform synagogues that have placed justice at the center of their lay engagement and communal agenda must share this prioritization with their youngest members. Powerful and exciting social justice work brings many lay leaders to renewed commitment to synagogue life and Judaism, and this same work has the potential to show our young people how exciting, powerful, and relevant Jewish life can be. One example can be found in the work of Reform CA, a campaign of the California Reform movement to act powerfully for justice in California, in partnership with the social justice initiatives of the Reform movement, won its first significant campaign. Reform CA played a critical role in the passage of the TRUST Act, state-level immigration reform that sought to minimize deportations and restore trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities. The week following the victory, one rabbi who had been involved in the

² Isa Aron, "The Malaise of Jewish Education," in *Tikkun* 4 (1989), 34.

campaign from the beginning, took time out of the next teen religious school class to share with her teens what their rabbi and congregation had accomplished.

Taking time with teens to show them how their community lives their Judaism is important, but it is only one step. The teens, and their fellow students in younger grades, need to have an opportunity to be *part* of the work that their congregation is doing, not merely spectators to it. Teachers must bring congregational social justice work into the classroom, and educators, rabbis, and lay leaders must create openings to bring young people and families into the community's justice work. Alignment between the classroom and the rest of the synagogue is not a one-way street. It is not enough for young people to be aware of and engaged with the social justice work of their community. The learning that occurs in the classroom, about the prophets and the Torah foundation for social justice work, must also make its way into the work that the adult lay leadership is doing.

The arena of congregational social justice work is just one area of potential alignment between the world of young people and the world of adults in a congregation. In fact, if educators and synagogue leadership were to look holistically at education within the congregational environment, alignment could be possible in every area of Jewish life: prayer, ritual, Shabbat, holiday celebrations. What young people learn would not be hypothetical, or worse, hypocritical. Instead, their learning would be rooted in the commitments and values of the congregation. Each young person would have a vision of what it means to be a Jewish adult in his or her community, and be able to point to specific examples of Jewish role models. School culture and congregational culture would be one and the same, having powerful implications for the entire community, as young people would be prepared and excited to enter a vibrant adult Jewish life.

Ambitious visions call for deep cultural change, in this case, in both schools and synagogues. But it is certainly not beyond reach. After all, linking what Jewish kids are taught with what Jewish adults actually do cannot be deemed too ambitious; it is simply good education. After all, linking what Jewish young people are taught with what Jewish adults actually do cannot be deemed too ambitious; it is simply good education.