Down with Disposable Jewish Education
Nicole Berne (nfberne@gmail.com)

Every year, thousands of egg carton hanukiyot, paper plate goggers, and popsicle stick Stars of David are thrown away by parents and even by the students who made them. These congregational elementary school students are capable of much more, and they know it, which is why they throw away these projects. Families get the message that Jewish education is disposable when the visible products of religious school can be tossed without the slightest regret.

Too often, rabbis and educators forget that, while parents want what is best for their children, they don’t always see Jewish education as best for their children. That is why, early on, parents decide which activities will become commitments. When parents choose piano lessons, they decide that their children will receive something valuable from the lessons, even if the young musicians do not yet understand what that is. Parents understand the benefit of piano: brain development, motor skills, cultural awareness, and the discipline that learning to play piano fosters. Because of this, they ensure that their children spend the fifteen minutes every day practicing scales over and over again. Parents internalize that there are worthwhile and enriching benefits to piano playing, so they commit their child – and themselves – to the endeavor. This holds true, whatever the cost of the program or hobby, and whatever time commitment is required. Parents ensure their children are where they need to be, with what they need to have, for each activity in which their children engage.

As a result, students and their parents are spread thin, moving from soccer practice to piano lessons, theater rehearsals, and math tutoring, in addition to school and homework. The commitments that get shortchanged are the ones parents decide are less meaningful and less important. When families rank Jewish education below piano lessons, soccer, and robotics,
something must be wrong with synagogue schooling and its value status. When Jewish educators and rabbis at congregations offer gingerbread Hanukkah houses as evidence of student learning, parents may seem uncertain, and legitimately so, of the value of Jewish education. However, in those instances when parents do acknowledge that education is of prime importance, it is because, as anthropologist of American Jewish life, Riv-Ellen Prell reports, they assume education is “…the critical avenue to becoming a person, to success and to achievement.”

Supplemental religious education is often seen as lightweight, in contrast to the array of various secular American educational opportunities. Projects like making paper chains for Sukkot are fluffy, repetitive, and superficial. Because of the optional nature of Jewish supplemental school, as opposed to public or private full-day primary and secondary schooling, Jewish supplemental programs must strive to operate so that the educational benefits to students are as clear to parents as are the benefits of piano lessons. Congregational Jewish education provides opportunities to socialize learners into Jewish culture and traditions and to study Jewish literature, liturgy and history in a way that helps learners explore how these can have personal relevance. Otherwise, religious school can be viewed, as scholar of Jewish education Jeffrey Kress puts it, “as just one more burden for an overextended child to shoulder, or another carpool for the parents to manage.” Nobody wants to sign up for more burdens; we all have plenty of those. Jewish education needs to be understood and recognized as the deeply beneficial choice it is.

The education that rabbis and Jewish educators provide must fulfill Prell’s markers of compelling education: helping the learner in *becoming a person*, reflecting the internal

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development of the individual as well-rounded with a developing Jewish identity; success, the sense of internal accomplishment felt by the learner; and achievement, the external marker by which others measure learners’ accomplishments. Only when this happens do parents find it meaningful to, in turn, seriously commit their child to Jewish education.

*Becoming a person* in this sense is challenging to concretize, but I believe Jewish identity formation occurs when students have the ability to connect the content of their Jewish education with their own identity. For example, a *siddur* annotated with a student’s own interpretations of the prayers she has studied could, in turn, inform the shape and arc of the Bat Mitzvah service she leads, thus deepening her ritual experience, spiritual development, and enforcing the practical application of her studies, thus making her Bat Mitzvah a personalized product of her Jewish learning, rather than a cookie-cutter service. These annotations become the student’s personal exploration of what prayers mean to her. In utilizing them in her Bat Mitzvah service, she then is able to put herself into her Jewish education, as well as incorporate her Jewish knowledge into her understanding of who she is as a maturing young woman. Learning experiences such as these are instrumental to students’ Jewish identity formation, which is Prell’s *becoming a person* in a Jewish educational context.

Ron Berger, a prominent educational theorist, writes of the intense investment students have in the portfolios of their work, which capture their learning at various stages, and tell the story of their growth and development. The portfolios define student excellence and cultivate genuine pride in accomplishment.\(^3\) *Success* involves cultivating the sense of internal accomplishment felt by the learner that Berger identifies his students feeling from their portfolios. In Jewish education, this might play out in this way: students would study the history

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and symbolism of the Israeli flag. After discussing how the flag’s design expresses the values of the early Zionists, students could then engage in a design process culminating in creating a flag for their congregation that would be displayed in the sanctuary alongside the Israeli and American flags. This annual project would be displayed for the entire year following, until the next year’s class created their own flag. Because of the heightened stakes of the project due to its public presentation, and the deliberate and thoughtful creation process of the flag, student investment and pride in the project would be deepened.

Jewish educational leaders must make explicit the benefits. By building opportunities for socialization, rich and deep studies of Judaism, and spiritual development into religious school curricula, the education Jewish supplemental programs could provide would be capable of fulfilling Prell’s insight about the role of achievement, the external marker by which others measure learners’ accomplishments. In the case of both the siddur and the flag projects, parents could see the worth of these projects because they would be able to see the results of their student’s labors. By bringing in the student’s annotations as a resource in shaping the student’s bat mitzvah, the entire community is witness to the analysis and interpretation in which the student has engaged. But they are not just witnesses: they’re beneficiaries of the student’s learning. The same holds true in the flag example. When the final product is publicly displayed, the community becomes the recipient of an artistic interpretation of their community’s values, a visual reminder of the mission of the congregation, which can serve as a symbolic focus for the year. The value of rich learning opportunities such as this one would be clear to the entire community, because of the visible consideration given by the students in their educational pursuits. With this evidence, parents and the congregation in general, might prioritize Jewish

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education more highly because the benefits of their students’ learning would be made more apparent.

Projects such as these do not just require high-level thinking, they require a student to reflect personally and include aspects of the student’s self in the work. From them, students can claim a sense of pride and ownership, and parents can recognize in Jewish supplemental schools a thoughtfulness that they might not have been able to name was missing before. Ultimately, families would commit to their Jewish education for the intrinsic payoffs, not just for the bar/bat mitzvah experience. Jewish education that proves transformative to the Jewish identity of a student would ensure that b’nai mitzvah was, rather than the finish line in one’s Jewish education, a checkpoint on the road to life-long Jewish learning.

This is the deep meaning behind Riv-Ellen Prell’s finding that education is the critical avenue to becoming a person: it is the personal connection, the use of the individual learner’s self, that makes the work meaningful. And the work of Jewish learning must be meaningful. Congregational supplemental schooling becomes more so when students are given the opportunity to see their own progress and growth over time. If religious school students engaged in learning opportunities that gave them this sense of intense pride and satisfaction, and if parents saw their children coming home with the products of deep and thoughtful learning, rabbis and Jewish educators would send the message that Jewish education is treated with love and care, and the results of it deserve framing behind UV protected glass. In fact, students would be devastated if anyone threw their work in the garbage. With investment on this scale from parents and students, congregational schools could become a focal point for a congregation, rather than the necessary evil it has been viewed as in the past.