

Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life: A Survey of Jewish Preschool Parents in Three Cities

Pearl Beck, Ph.D.
Ukeles Associates, Inc.

November 2002

This study was funded by the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership

I. Introduction

During the past decade, Jewish organizations have expended substantial resources and creative energy on outreach to the unaffiliated. However, scant attention has been paid to a substantial population already “in the system,” namely families whose children are enrolled in hundreds of Jewish preschools throughout the country. The findings of our study, funded by the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership (JECEP), strongly suggest that Jewish preschools present significant, yet underutilized, opportunities for strengthening families’ Jewish affiliations and enhancing their Jewish identities.

The study was originally undertaken to find out why these Jewish families chose to send their children to Jewish preschools, their attitudes regarding their actual Jewish preschool experience, the extent of the linkages between the Jewish preschool and the synagogue and between the Jewish preschool and the local Jewish Day School, whether they believe they are doing anything different “Jewishly” as a consequence of sending their children to a Jewish preschool, and what they decided to do about their children’s general and Jewish education subsequent to graduating from preschool.

II. Methodology

To investigate these questions, we surveyed parents who had sent their children to a Jewish preschool in three cities: Baltimore, Denver and Chicago. The schools we studied were situated either in Reform or Conservative synagogues or were affiliated with Jewish Community Centers (JCCs). All in all, we conducted in-depth, telephone interviews with 90 families, each of whom had a child who attended one of the nine preschools and had completed the preschools in June 2001. The interviews were conducted between November 2001 and March 2002.

The names of the families who were interviewed were selected at random from a the roster of all preschools families provided by each school. These 90 interviews represented a 28% sample of the families whose children graduated at that time from the nine targeted Jewish preschools.

A substantial number of Jewish children attend Jewish preschools in these three cities. The following enrollment figures were obtained for the 2001-2002 school year: in Denver, 1,123 students were enrolled in 9 Jewish preschools; in Baltimore, 2,500 children were enrolled in 21 preschools; and in Chicago there were 5,750 children in 40 preschools.

However, not all children who attended the Jewish preschools were Jewish. (e.g. Some children did not have a Jewish parent.) This is especially the case in the schools based in JCCs and in synagogues affiliated with the Reform movement. For example, in Denver, Jewish students accounted for only 65% of the students attending the JCC and 50% of the students attending the (Reform) Temple Emanuel preschool.

We chose cities that were geographically dispersed and specific areas within these cities that were home to highly regarded public schools as well as to Jewish and private schools. In choosing these areas, one of our goals was to examine school choice in places where such choices are actually available. Similarly, Orthodox preschools were not included in the study because for Orthodox parents, sending children to Jewish Day School is more likely to be perceived as a given, rather than as a choice.

Only the parents of Jewish children were interviewed for the study. Parents were interviewed about their experiences with the child who graduated from one of the nine Jewish preschools in June 2001.

As part of the research, we also visited the preschools and interviewed the directors. In addition, we interviewed directors of other Jewish preschools as well as experts in the field of Jewish education.

Presentation and Interpretation of Numerical Results

This research was originally intended as a qualitative study. However, given the large number of interviews that were conducted, we have used the results to identify some trends and patterns. At the same time, given the limited number of cases, the quantitative data should be regarded as suggestive and as a basis for hypothesis-testing, rather than as conclusive “results.” In addition, all data analyses were limited to two variables (e.g. preschool type and current educational situation). All relationships between variables are correlational; therefore no inferences can be drawn regarding causality.¹

¹ e.g. correlations between visiting Israel and Jewish education do not mean that visiting Israel leads to a specific educational choice or outcome.

III. Findings

A. Demographics

Two-thirds of the children in our sample were male. At the time of the interview, 78% of the children were in kindergarten and another 17% were in first grade. Another 5% were in Pre-K, second or third grade.

The average age of both the fathers and mothers was 40 years old. Consistent with other studies of the Jewish childbearing age population, the parents appeared to be highly educated and to have postponed childbearing until they were in their 30s. The overwhelming majority of the fathers (93%) were engaged in full-time work. In contrast, only 27% of the mothers reported having full-time employment and 31% reported working part-time. Forty-two percent of the mothers were not working for pay.

Parents' Jewish Background

Although almost none of the parents had attended a Jewish Day School, most had received some religious school education prior to becoming bar or bat-mitzvah. Very few reported that they had enrolled in a Jewish Studies course in college or had been involved in an adult Jewish learning experience. However, on one important measure of Jewish identity, visiting Israel, the preschool parents had a higher rate (50%) than the general American Jewish population (31%).

One of the most interesting findings was that approximately 25% of the sample consisted of families who were intermarried (17%) as well as families in which one parent had converted to Judaism (8%). In fact, one preschool director maintained that for the majority of families at her school, sending their child to a Jewish school was probably "the first time that they had done something Jewish as a family."

B. Choosing a Jewish Preschool

Recruitment of Parents to Preschools

Most JCC-affiliated and synagogue-based preschools did not need to resort to marketing or recruitment campaigns to attract preschool families. Instead, for the most part, they relied on their reputation within the community. The exception to this was schools that were just getting underway. Those schools, especially when situated in a synagogue, were more dependent upon the host institution to refer children to the school. A director of a recently implemented pre-school described how the synagogue board provided her with a list of all members with preschool age children and requested that she contact them.

A “lower-key” recruitment strategy consisted of sponsoring “Parent-Infant” or “Parent-Tot” programs (e.g. “Shalom Baby”) that provided a social context for new parents and simultaneously gave parents the opportunity to become acquainted with the school.

Parents Were Not Originally Motivated by the Jewish Content

When asked “How did you decide upon sending your child to this specific school?” parents cited a variety of reasons, most of which were unrelated to the school’s Jewish content. The following response is an example of this phenomenon: “I liked the small scale, spacious classrooms, location, small teacher/student ratio, peaceful environment, and the teachers.”

While positively disposed to a school’s Jewish content, most families were not primarily concerned with providing a Jewish education for their children. As one family stated: “The Jewish education was a plus but it was not something we were looking for.” Others gave visceral reasons to the question of why they chose a particular Jewish school: “When I originally visited the school, it smelled clean, it looked clean and the children appeared to be happy.” Convenience to home, availability of swimming pools, beautifully appointed play areas were reasons offered more frequently than a school’s Jewish curriculum. Another highly valued feature was a school’s reputation for having warm and nurturing teachers.

Jewish Preschools as Compensatory Educational Strategy

For another subgroup of families, selecting a Jewish preschool represented an educational strategy to compensate for their child’s attending a secular school – rather than a Jewish Day School – in the future. This perspective was articulated by the following statements: “I wanted my child to get a little bit of Jewish education before he starts public school,” and “We wanted a religious based preschool because we knew that we were going to send our kids to a secular primary school and wanted to first give them a base in religious education.”

Child-Care Coverage

Our sample of schools did not include many that provided full-time child-care. Perhaps for this reason, we found that though the interviewed families appreciated schools that offered flexible schedules, few appeared to seek full-time child-care. (The absence of the need for full-time childcare was undoubtedly related to the small number of families with two full-time working parents in our sample.)

C. Programming in the Jewish Preschools

Goals of Jewish Programming

While most of these schools did not appear to have highly articulated Jewish educational goals, their more general goals appear to focus on integrating Jewish values and Jewish culture into the preschool environment and making children proud of being Jewish. However, even though the schools generally share these overarching goals, they differ in how they translate these goals into practice.

To some extent, the variations across the programs correspond to the debate between proponents of formal (explicit) education versus informal (implicit) early Jewish childhood education. For example, some schools attempt to teach the children some basic Hebrew words (numbers, colors etc.), while others believe in a more low-key approach. Proponents of the more relaxed approach would probably agree with the director who stated: "It's more important that the children learn and grow within a Jewish value system than if they come home with the latest dreidel song," while advocates for more explicit Jewish education tended to be more critical, such as the Jewish education professional who asserted that: "Cognitive expectations are too low in these Jewish preschools."

Jewish Programming

A consensus emerged among the Jewish educators and preschool directors interviewed for this study that the Jewish programming in these schools could be vastly improved. It was rare to find a school that had designed a Jewish curriculum, especially one that addressed the children's cognitive, affective and behavioral needs. In fact, much of the Jewish programming appeared "ad hoc" and was dependent upon the director's initiative. This often took the form of photocopying material or inviting speakers to talk to the teachers about the holidays. One director articulated her concern about adopting a structured Jewish curriculum that she claimed would cut down on her teachers' creativity.

Most of the Jewish programming in the preschools focused on Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. Every school conducted a special Shabbat celebration, typically with a girl and boy serving as the Shabbat "*Ima*" (mother) and "*Aba*" (father).² The parents were often invited to join the celebration on the occasion of their child serving in this role. Some preschools gathered the entire school together for a weekly Shabbat "sing," which was clearly the high point of the week.

² It is interesting to note that no parent commented about the sex-typed nature of this particular activity.

The "Shabbat Backpack " was singled out as a particularly successful program. It consisted of sending home a backpack containing the traditional Shabbat ritual objects -- candles, challah and grape juice -- along with the appropriate blessings for lighting Shabbat candles, making Kiddush, and blessing the challah. A stuffed bear was often included to "participate" in the experience along with the child. This attempt to link school life with Jewish life at home was furthered by the inclusion of a journal to record how the contents of the backpack were used. One family wrote:

Danielle's first time using the Shabbat bag was really fun! Danielle recited all the blessings by herself in Hebrew, as they do in school, which made her feel very special. Although it was not a traditional Sabbath meal, we enjoyed the evening nonetheless and it was a truly a great experience for our family.

Anya had an interesting Shabbat experience. She tried to say the blessings in Hebrew as you do at school. Thank you. This was truly a great experience for our family.

A few schools developed a Jewish curriculum for their students. These schools tended to be those associated with a local Jewish Community Center that provided both the resources and the framework for designing the curriculum. (The most ambitious curricula included a family education component.)

The Parents' Associations of most schools offer parents an opportunity to purchase a challah for Shabbat. This serves a dual purpose; it brings Jewish ritual into the homes of the preschools families while it raises funds for the schools.

Jewish Holiday-Related Programming

Most schools have developed programs around Chanukah, Purim, and Passover. The model Passover seder, to which parents are invited, represents the schools' Jewish programming "centerpiece." Purim is often celebrated with a Sunday "fair" to which the entire family is invited. Some schools have even begun to institute a Tu B'Shevat Seder.

Israel Related and Hebrew Related Programming

Israel-related and Hebrew language programming appear to be the weakest components of the Jewish programming. Much of this is attributable to the lack of qualified staff; few staff members have visited Israel, let alone know Hebrew. In lieu of knowledgeable staff, some schools hire local Israelis to conduct programs once or twice a week, mostly involving song and dance.

It is also likely that the weak Hebrew language program is also attributable to parental lack of interest. One director, who is a native Spanish speaker and who is also fluent in Hebrew, remarked humorously that more parents have requested

that she teach the children Spanish than have requested that she teach them how to speak Hebrew.

The celebration of “*Yom Ha’atzmaut*,” Israel’s Independence Day, is the major - and often only - Israel-related program sponsored by the schools. However, as one director stated: “How do you conduct programs about Israel if the teachers themselves have not been there?”

Other Jewish Programming

Many of the schools appear to be at a loss for non-holiday related programming. However, there are exceptions. Some schools integrate bible stories into their daily schedules, while others are attempting to implement innovative programming to familiarize families with Jewish rituals. For example, in the “Shema-Pajama Party”, the children attend schools in their pajamas and are taught the bed-time “shema” prayer.

Programming Related to Jewish Values

Two major Jewish values appeared to be emphasized in the curriculum. The first was *tzedakah* -- doing charitable deeds. To demonstrate this value, many schools requested that the children bring in small coins to be contributed to a charity.

“Mitzvah doing” was the other Jewish value promoted by the schools. This value was often communicated via a “mitzvah tree” which consisted of a poster in the classroom. Every time a child reported engaging in some positive behavior (“I was nice to my sister when she was upset”) the behavior was recorded on a piece of leaf-shaped paper and tacked up on the tree for everyone to see and appreciate.

Parenting Programs

One preschool offered a series of four-night, two-hour, Jewish parenting classes based on the book “Blessing over a Skinned Knee”. Fifteen parents signed up for the program and childcare was provided so that both parents could attend. Another innovative program was a “Dad’s Group”, which was established to involve fathers both with the school and with each other through “hands-on” activities.³

Some schools provided opportunities for parents to get involved in general and in Jewish charitable activities within the community, such as sending *Mishloach Manot* (food parcels for the needy) on Purim, participating in a card and toy drive for inner city children, and volunteering for a local battered women’s shelter.

³ The impetus for this group was the observation that fathers were less familiar with the classroom environment and with the other parents, possibly because they were less likely to bring their children to school. Furthermore, when they did bring their children to school they tended to gravitate toward “hands-on” activities.

Mental Health and Special Education Services and Supports

One or two schools employed part-time social workers to provide assistance to parents, teachers and children. Although a number of school administrators expressed the need for a mental health professional to be included among their staff, school budgets rarely included funding for this position.

Only one school, the Denver JCC, has a publicly funded special-education classroom. The staffing for this program includes a special-education teacher, an occupational therapist, and a speech and language teacher. (The school supplies an assistant teacher.)

D. Parents' Reactions to, and Involvement in, the Jewish Preschools

Parents' Reactions to Jewish Preschools

Although the Jewish programming was not necessarily the original impetus for enrolling a child in a specific school, parents expressed overwhelmingly positive sentiments when asked to reflect about their child's Jewish preschool experience. Parents for whom the "Jewish factor" was not the major reason for enrolling their child sometimes expressed surprise at how much they liked a school's Jewish component. One such parent stated: "Jewish education was a double extra super bonus."

On a traditional satisfaction scale, 87% of the parents reported being "very satisfied," the highest rating, with the school as a whole, while 91% reported being "very satisfied" with the Jewish programming. (There were some differences among the 3 cities: while 97% of the Denver parents reported being "very satisfied" with the Jewish programming, this was true for 87% of the Baltimore parents and 90% of the Chicago parents.)

It appears that even parents who had experienced uncertainty or ambivalence about enrolling their child, were "won over" by the Jewish preschool experience. One mother stated:

I had even looked around at other schools, even after my child enrolled but then I decided that this was the perfect combination and that the kids were really involved in hands on learning – especially when it came to Shabbat and holidays.

Parents expressed appreciation that the programs did not consist of “heavy-handed indoctrination.”

I like that the school did a lot with the holidays; it taught my child some Hebrew words and some bible stories. They were big on being proud of being Jewish and the learning was presented in an enticing, fun and appropriate way and wasn't being forced down their throats.

Reactions of Non-Jewish Parents to Jewish Preschools

Although we did not interview any non-Jewish parents, the directors were asked how they responded to the school's Jewish themes and programming. According to the directors, the non-Jewish parents who choose to send their children to Jewish preschools are a self-selected group and are therefore positively disposed to the content. In fact, several directors recounted how non-Jewish parents have approached or written them to express their appreciation for teaching their children about “caring Jewish values.”

Parental Involvement with Preschool's Jewish Program

Parents enjoyed attending special events such as the “Shabbat Sing” as well as the model seder. Parents have minimal to no involvement in designing the program or the Jewish curriculum. An exception was a JCC that included a parents committee in the design of a new Judaica curriculum. However, since few schools even have a curriculum, there is not much opportunity for such structured input.

Family Education

Despite curricular gaps, children enrolled in Jewish preschools appear to be learning a great deal about Jewish traditions, rituals, and holidays. But parallel learning opportunities are rarely available for the parents. Only one preschool sponsored a Jewish educational program for them. Consensus prevailed among the directors about the need for additional family education. As one director related:

Parents have told me that when their children come home with all the new things they have learned in school about Shabbat and Jewish holidays, they feel “stupid” because of their own lack of knowledge in these areas.

Some schools provide families with written material containing Jewish educational information, typically about Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. For example, the Prizker Center for Jewish Education of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago produced a series of six booklets, containing information for both children and

adults, which included holiday songs, holiday recipes, information about the meaning of the holidays, as well as references.

Anecdotal accounts indicate that when such programs are offered, parents are enthusiastic participants. One Jewish preschool director, interviewed for this study,⁴ is so committed to family education that she met with families each Sunday during the year and provided them with a Jewish learning opportunity. In order to foster community among the parents, she divided the preschool class into small, informal study groups and met with each group separately.

E. Linkages with the Synagogue and with the Rabbi

Contact with Synagogue

Contact between the synagogue and the preschool parents was often minimally maintained. Most, but not all, synagogues mailed their bulletin to preschool parents who were not synagogue members but typically that was the extent of the connection. One director of a relatively recently implemented preschool mentioned that the synagogue had forgotten to include the preschool on its letterhead. Some preschools actively encouraged parents to attend a monthly “Tot Shabbat,” sponsored by the synagogue.

As can be expected, synagogues with large membership rosters (and few available high holiday seats) were less likely to engage in active membership outreach to preschool parents, than were synagogues interested in expansion.

In general, there appeared to be little active recruitment of preschool families to become synagogue members. However, when the synagogue undertook such outreach as an important component of its campaign to attract new members, substantial success was reported:

Even in synagogues where there was little outreach to the school’s parents, preschool parents had positive things to say about their children’s experience in the synagogue.

I was particularly impressed by the family orientation. The shul tries to get families involved in the synagogue’s weekly Tot Shabbat program with songs, stories and activities. When I went to Simchat Torah it was fun; I was singing and marching and the kids were having fun too.

Of particular interest is the finding that despite the lack of formal outreach on the part of most synagogues, synagogue membership rates among the interviewed

⁴ This director was not associated with one of the nine schools included in the study.

families doubled over time. Before enrolling their child in Jewish preschools, only 40% of the families reported being synagogue members. In contrast, at the time of the interview, 80% of the families were members. This increase in membership is perhaps at least partially related to the large proportion of preschool families who enrolled their children in the synagogue's religious school for the subsequent school year.

Contact with Rabbi

Although families expressed willingness to have more contact with the synagogue Rabbi, nearly 35% of the families had not met the Rabbi during the time their child was enrolled in a synagogue-based preschool. For parents who did not attend the "Tot Shabbat" service, their only reported contact with the Rabbi was when he or she gave a welcoming speech at the school's annual "New Families Evening."

One synagogue-based preschool director lamented:

The Rabbi is absolutely not involved and that's not okay because Judaism is all about families and communities. The Rabbi needs to connect, do a dvar torah, drop in and be a "bear" to the children.

Although quite unusual, in a few synagogues, the Rabbi or Cantor makes a special effort to meet with the children in the sanctuary every Friday for a mini Shabbat celebration that can include saying the Shabbat prayers, singing Shabbat songs or reading a story, often related to the weekly Torah portion. However, when such contact occurs, it is really appreciated:

They took the kids into parts of the synagogue - the chapel, sanctuary, on the bima. They owned it!

One director maintained that the current Rabbi has had "absolutely" no contact with the preschool. In contrast, she recounted how one year a substitute Rabbi was hired who made the effort to develop a relationship with the preschool. According to the director, several children were so impressed by the substitute Rabbi, they announced that they wanted to become Rabbis when they grew up.

F. The Selection of Primary Schools and Jewish Educational Experiences Subsequent to Jewish Preschool

Current Schools: All 2002 Graduates

To obtain information on a larger “universe” of children than on just those included in the study and to determine how comparable our sample of 90 families was to the entire population of children who graduated from these nine preschools⁵, all the schools were contacted in June 2002 and asked to indicate where their 2002 “graduates” intended to attend primary school. The schools reported that 422 children were moving on from the preschools.. The vast majority (73%) of the preschool families chose to send their children to public school. The remaining families were almost evenly split between Jewish Day Schools (16%) and private schools (12%). To a great extent, the educational choices made by all the graduating 2002 families paralleled the choices made by the 90 families whose children graduated in 2001.⁵

Jewish Educational Experiences Subsequent to Preschool

Upon graduating from the Jewish preschools, the overwhelming majority (76%) of the interviewed families continued their children’s Jewish education. Twenty percent of the families in our sample sent their child to a Jewish Day School, while 53% sent their child to a synagogue-based Sunday school program. Two children were involved in Jewish educational programs at JCCs, while two families hired private tutors to teach their children (and often other children as well), about Judaism and about Israel as well as to provide them with more intensive Hebrew language education.

Furthermore, among families who had not enrolled their child in a formal Jewish educational program subsequent to completing preschool, 80% had specific plans to enroll their child in such a program within the next year or two.

The Implications of Continuing Religious Education Immediately Upon Completing Jewish Preschools

From a Jewish educational perspective, it is good news that such a substantial proportion of children graduating from Jewish preschools continue their Jewish

⁵ Among the sample of interviewed families, the overwhelming majority (71%) enrolled their child in public school while 20% send their child to Jewish Day School and 9% send their children to private schools. The proportion of Jewish Day School attendance was similar in Baltimore and Denver (23% and 24% respectively), as were the levels of private school attendance (13% in Baltimore and 14% in Denver). In Chicago, 13% of the families enroll their child in Jewish Day School and the remaining 87% are in public school.

education the subsequent year, instead of waiting until they are in second or third grade (which has been the “norm” for supplementary Jewish education.)

Ironically, such continuity in these children’s Jewish education poses both a challenge and an opportunity for the religious schools. These schools would benefit from a more in-depth understanding of the preschools’ Jewish program/curriculum so that they can build upon what the children have already learned and not have to begin at “square one.” In addition, perhaps an expanded religious school program can be offered to children who have attended Jewish preschool so that they do not experience a precipitous decrease in their Jewish education. This is yet another area in which a stronger relationship between the preschools and the synagogue’s religious school could result in mutually beneficial consequences.

Selecting Jewish Day Schools

The Jewish preschools typically provide parents with general information about primary school options. This is accomplished by sponsoring a “primary school open house” night, during which a wide range of local schools make presentations to the parents or alternatively, parents are given a listing of these schools. It is in this general context that information about Jewish Day Schools is provided, if it is provided at all.

While 37% of the parents interviewed reported that the Jewish preschools had provided them with specific information about post-preschool Jewish educational options, only 27% reported receiving specific information about Jewish Day Schools. One director, when asked whether she provided families with information about Jewish Day School, responded dismissively by saying “No, because our families are just not interested.” In contrast, when families were interviewed, they expressed openness to receiving such information, as long it was not communicated in a didactic fashion.

While most directors shied away from advocating any specific primary school or type of schooling, some directors were unabashed in their support for Jewish Day School education. It is notable that in the two preschools whose directors

expressed strong support for Jewish Day School education, a larger proportion of the graduates attended Jewish Day Schools – although this was possibly attributable to self-selection on the part of the families (parents with this inclination were more likely to have selected preschools whose values were consonant with their own).

Schools located within synagogues typically provided families with some information about their synagogue’s religious school. But according to the parents, this information was often transmitted in an impersonal fashion, such as by distributing a brochure.

Examples of missed opportunities abound. For example, one preschool director reported that the principal of the synagogue's Hebrew school only visited the preschool once a year. Nevertheless, our data indicate that despite the lack of energetic outreach on the part of the synagogue, about half of preschool families (53%) appear to have sought out these religious schools as venues for post-preschool Jewish education.

Reasons for, and Factors Related to, Choosing a Jewish Day School

High Levels of Observance and Affiliation

Many families who chose a Jewish Day School appeared to have made up their minds even prior to sending their child to a Jewish preschool. For this sub-group, who tended to comprise the more observant and affiliated families, no other educational options were even considered.

Perception of Jewish Day School as Beneficial for the Child

There also appeared to be another subgroup of families who actually went through a decision-making process whose end result led them to a Jewish Day School environment. Although for some, the Jewish content was the deciding factor, for others the selection criteria appeared idiosyncratic and in some respects, resembled the decision-making process involved in preschool selection. For example, one father stated:

I know this sounds sexist, but we are sending our son to a Jewish Day School because we believe that boys require a more sheltering environment so that they don't become wild. We think that boys acquire good manners and attributes in Jewish Day Schools.

Peer Group Who Send Their Children To Jewish Day Schools

Knowing other families (or even just one other family) who sent their children to a Jewish Day School appeared to be an important factor when it came to making this decision. For example, one mother said:

The Jewish school was close and I knew some people who had sent their kids there.

Motivation to Maintain Jewish Ties

Even among families who specifically sought a Jewish preschool, some were primarily interested in providing a general Jewish milieu rather than with inculcating them with religious education or even with any specific body of knowledge (e.g. Hebrew language). For example, the Israeli families who decided to send their children to Jewish Day Schools appeared motivated by other concerns. One such

family reported that they had decided to send their children to Jewish Day School, even though they were secular, because:

We were concerned that our family would lose the Jewish chain if we didn't send our kids to Jewish school. We feel that we need to keep the Jewish soul. In America, Judaism is religious and not national.

Newly Found Belief in Importance of Jewish Education

Although not a common occurrence, as a result of sending their child to a Jewish preschool, the following family grew to realize the importance of Jewish education and decided to transfer their daughter from a public school (where they had sent her subsequent to preschool) to a Jewish Day School.

Before my daughter attended Jewish preschool we didn't celebrate Shabbat and now we do. I didn't want it to be something that my daughter was only exposed to in school. I believe that Jewish education and exposure to Torah is important.

Avoidance of Perceived Negative Aspects of Public School

For a small minority of families, the decision to send their child to a Jewish Day School appeared to be motivated more by their desire to avoid what they perceived as the negative aspects of public school education, rather than by the positive valence of Jewish education. For example, one father stated:

We stayed away from public schools in our area because we heard that they taught Ebonics and that the kids were using drugs. Our children who are in Jewish Day School are having a safe and nurturing educational environment and it doesn't hurt that they are continuing their Jewish education.

Several families reported that although their child is in public school, they have not completely ruled out Jewish Day School.

Belonging to Synagogue Prior to Preschool Enrollment

Not surprisingly, families who belonged to synagogues prior to sending their child to a Jewish preschool were more likely to enroll their child in a Jewish Day School (38%) than families who did not belong to synagogues (14%).

Receiving Information about Jewish Education from Preschools

Twice as many families who send their children to Jewish Day Schools reported receiving information about Jewish education from their preschool than families who do not send their children (29% versus 15%). However, these findings do not

indicate a causal relationship. (For example, while it is possible that the information families received from the school increased the likelihood of their sending their children in a Jewish Day School, it is also possible that interested families sought out this information.)

Travel to Israel by Mother and/or Father

Both parents were more likely to have traveled to Israel among Jewish Day School families (55%) than among private (25%) or public school (9%) families. When we examined whether **either** one or both parents had been to Israel, the difference between the Jewish Day School families and the private school families was significantly reduced: in 83% of Day School families and 75% of private school families one or both parents had been to Israel whereas this was the case in only 50% of the families whose children attend public school. It is possible that families who can afford to pay for their children's schooling are also the families who can afford to travel to Israel. Alternatively, these differences in travel to Israel reflect parents' differing levels of concern about Israel.

Reasons for Not Choosing a Jewish Day School

Lack of Interest

Although most families who chose public or private schools instead of Jewish Day Schools were motivated by positive sentiments regarding their educational choices, others were also motivated by negative feelings toward Jewish Day School education, which they regarded as "too intense," or "too sheltered."

Cost

Some parents reported that they were attracted to Jewish Day School education, but were deterred by the cost. "I would have considered Jewish Day School, if not for the money," stated one such parent.

However, for the most part, it appeared that parents who chose not to send their child to Jewish Day School were driven more by their lack of strong interest in Jewish education rather than by its cost and that this was true even for those who stated that "cost was a consideration."

Also among those interviewed were parents who felt that the value and benefits of Jewish Day School education outweighed the financial hardship that they would have to endure. In the words of a parent from Baltimore who is sending her son to the local Jewish Day School: "We still can't afford Jewish Day School but my family are Holocaust survivors and we felt that it was very important to carry on the tradition."

Distance from Home

Even families who expressed interest in Jewish education often decided against sending their child to a Jewish Day School because of its distance from their home. For example, a mother who had significantly increased her own level of involvement in Judaism as a result of the preschool experience, and who stated that she would like her six-year-old son to become a cantor when he grows up responded “proximity to our home” when asked to state her most important consideration when applying to primary school.

We considered sending our son to local Day School but it would have meant a long commute and not being in the same neighborhood as his friends. Ironically, the public school which he attends has 30 - 40% Jewish kids.

Belief that Public School Education is Consonant with American Values

Many families who chose public schools appeared motivated by what they describe as a “belief in public education.” This appears to refer to their belief that the diversity and inclusiveness characteristic of public schools are important American values and that by sending their child to such schools they are “living” these values. As one family stated:

We wanted our kids to be with a cross-section of people in a heterogeneous environment.

Special Needs Children

Some families claimed that Jewish Day Schools did not have the appropriate supportive services for children who were diagnosed with learning disabilities. Similarly, several families whose children were not classified as “learning disabled” but who had some focusing issues, were concerned about the adverse effects of a double curriculum on their children. [On the other hand, one family chose a Jewish Day School because they felt strongly about Jewish education but believed that their son, diagnosed with ADHD, would not be able to tolerate attending an afternoon Jewish school (e.g. supplementary school) in addition to a regular school.]

Belief that Family Observance is a Necessary Jewish Day-School Prerequisite

Some parents believed that they themselves needed to be observant (or even Orthodox) in order to send their children to a Jewish Day School. “We’re not religious and therefore we didn’t consider sending our kids to a Jewish Day School” typified this reaction. For these families, sending a child to a Jewish Day School while maintaining their secular lifestyle is tantamount to “living a hypocritical life.”

Concern about Creating a Potential Knowledge Gap Between Parent and Child

A related concern is that sending a child to a Jewish Day School will potentially create a knowledge and observance gap between the child and the parents. This might be particularly affect families in which one parent is not Jewish. For example, our data indicate that post-preschool enrollment in a Jewish educational program is lowest among families in which one parent is not Jewish.

Lack of Peer Support

In addition to not being well informed about Jewish Day School education, many families appeared not to know any parents who had chosen to send their child to a Jewish Day School.

Need for a Diverse Educational Setting

In addition to voicing support for the value of diversity, several parents mentioned the importance of diversity for their child's emotional well-being. For example, parents of adopted children did not want their children to feel "different" in an environment where the children were overwhelmingly white. One parent of an Asian girl stated: "When I visited Jewish Day Schools, I looked around and saw a sea of white faces." In addition, families of adopted children appear to encounter other issues regarding Jewish Day School attendance. For example, families mentioned that certain types of Jewish schools would not accept a child who had not undergone an Orthodox conversion.

Parents' Negative Jewish Day School Experiences

A handful of people who were interviewed had attended Jewish Day Schools and had experienced these environments as "too sheltering", and wanted to provide their children with a more expansive educational experience. "As much as I wanted my daughter to get a Jewish education, I wanted her to get a diverse background," stated a mother who claimed that cost was not such a great consideration in her decision to send her child to public school.

Targeting Families for Jewish Day-School Education

Our findings appear to indicate that most families who decide to send their children to Jewish Day Schools have made that decision prior to enrolling their child in Jewish preschools. However, for a smaller proportion of families, their child's final year in preschool represents a real decision-point. This is particularly the case for those families who can afford to pay tuition and are considering private and/or Jewish schools. It is interesting to note that families of private school students were found to be more likely to have been synagogue members prior to preschool enrollment than families who send their children to public school.

Ironically, our results suggest that families who decided upon private school were less likely to have received information about Jewish education than families whose children currently attend Jewish Day School or public school).

Factors Associated with Continued Jewish Education

The proportion of families who enrolled their child in a Jewish educational program (including Jewish Day School) subsequent to Jewish preschool, differed by city: Baltimore (83%), Chicago (80%) and Denver (63%). Children who attended preschool in Reform synagogues had the lower level of subsequent Jewish school attendance (70%) than children who attended either JCC preschools (80%) or Conservative synagogue based preschools (77%).

Mothers' Jewish Status

Consistent with other findings regarding educational decision-making among parents, the mother appeared to play a more significant role in determining whether or not the child's Jewish education would continue the year after completing preschool. In families where only the mother was Jewish, 91% of the children were enrolled in a Jewish educational program as compared to 40% enrollment in families where only the father was Jewish.

Travel to Israel by Mother and/or Father

Post preschool involvement with a Jewish educational program also appeared to be slightly higher among families where at least one parent had visited Israel than among families where neither parent had visited Israel (80% versus 73%).

G. The Impact of Attending Jewish Preschools on Families

Measuring Impact

The major method used to determine the impact of the preschool experience was to ask parents retrospectively whether they were "doing anything different regarding their Jewish practice or Jewish lifestyle as a result of your preschool experience?" Although this is a standard technique used in qualitative research, it does not have the methodological rigor of a pre-post or comparison group design.⁶

Overall Impact

Nearly 70% of those interviewed claimed that they were doing something different in terms of their Jewish observance or Jewish lifestyle as a result of their child attending a Jewish preschool. Denver families reported the highest rate of impact; 80% of these families reported that they were doing something different as

⁶ Using a pre-post design, the research can determine whether or not a self-reported increase represents an actual increase, while including a comparison group that does not receive the "intervention" (e.g. Jewish families who sent their children to general, secular preschools) would indicate to what extent change might have occurred over time, without the intervention.

opposed to 67% of the Chicago families and 57% of the Baltimore families. Some of the families reported that the reason they responded that “they were not doing anything different” was because their level of involvement with Judaism was already very high prior to sending their child to Jewish preschools.⁷

Increased Level of Jewish Observance

Despite these measurement issues, the interviews revealed that many families began making small, yet meaningful, changes in their levels of Jewish observance. The following quotes exemplify this phenomenon.

Our kids declared that they intend to celebrate Hanukkah exclusively this year and not both Christmas and Hanukkah as we have done in the past.

I think each one of the holidays took on a larger meaning because it was so important to what the kids were doing.

My kids make our family say “hamotzei” at every meal. They don’t mix milk and meat, but we eat crabs.

My son is the impetus for everything religious in this house. I believe that the only way to teach Judaism is to practice it

Getting started at an early age makes it more comfortable to continue in religious school. More Jewish values have come into our home, more Jewish songs, we go to friends’ houses for Shabbat dinners. The children bring home what they learn at school. They have an option to buy challah and it comes home with a little kit that includes prayers and candles.

When kids are exposed very young to holidays and Jewish concepts they grow up loving it – especially if it’s done in the home. The home & school then reinforce one another.

⁷ In fact, if a family responds that the preschool did not have an impact upon their Jewish lifestyle, it is not possible to determine whether this was the case because the family was already very (Jewishly) involved or because the family’s Jewish lifestyle was actually not affected by the Jewish preschool experience.

The JCC got our family involved in many holidays that we weren't even aware of – such as Tu B'shevat.

Shabbat – and specifically the lighting of candles on Friday night – was mentioned by the greatest number of families as the aspect of their lives that was most affected by the preschool experience.

We always now light candles. We have Shabbat every Friday night because of the “JCC.” The kids come home with challah every week.

Our kids began to want to do Friday night dinners at home because they did it in school.

My daughter has declined party invitations on Friday nights because she doesn't want to miss Shabbat.

We are celebrating Shabbat now and we joined a synagogue.

We began to celebrate Shabbat – to light candles, say prayers and have dinner on Friday night. Furthermore, when we did things at home, there was a real sense of familiarity for us. Originally, it was my husband's idea to send our child to a Jewish preschools, but now I have become the driving force in my household. I have organized the school.

Before we sent our child to Jewish preschools, we did Shabbat once a month. We now try to do it every week. I learned how to bake challah. We now know about Shabbat and also about the different holidays. My son wants more and I love that he wants more. The parents from the Jewish preschools remained close to each other and provided a social context.

We definitely started to do things differently as a result of Jewish preschools. The purpose of sending kids to Jewish preschools is to help me keep a Jewish house.

Enhanced Sense of Jewish Identity

For some families, the impact of Jewish preschools had more to do with a stronger sense of being Jewish than with changes in their observance of Jewish rituals.

Jewish preschools helped us recognize that we wanted to have a Jewish family with a Jewish identity and be proud of it and to make our kids understand why we don't have a Christmas tree.

I felt that training in a Jewish preschool would provide what we weren't providing at home. Preschool enhanced our family life and got us in touch with our Jewish identity in a way we would not have been otherwise.

We did not choose Jewish preschools because it was a Jewish preschool. Jewish preschools enhanced our life. We learned to appreciate the Jewish aspect when we were there.

If you want to raise your family Jewish, it's important to start at the beginning. Kids will think that it has always been there and they won't remember actually learning it.

I think it was a good experience because it brought us together as a family and made us aware of the values that Judaism considers important.

Increased Interest in Jewish Education

Through the Jewish preschool experience, many families began to understand the importance of Jewish education for their children as well as for themselves. A greater proportion of families who reported that they were “doing something differently” have pursued Jewish education (either in synagogue-based religious schools, Jewish Day Schools or through private tutors) than families who did not report this (71% versus 59%).

It was a learning experience. It was the start of my Jewish education.

My daughter is really into this Jewish education thing but we are a totally secular family. It's nice to see it becoming an important part of our lives.

Jewish preschool is a great orientation to Judaism. It was a wonderful way to integrate Judaism into everyday life. I especially liked that they were learning about Judaism outside of the home.

Enhanced Sense of Jewish Community and Increased Synagogue Membership

Very few preschools offered structured opportunities for families to get together outside of school for Shabbat meals or for Jewish learning. Nevertheless, several families mentioned that they felt connected to a larger “community” through their involvement in the preschool. Many parents remarked that they had met most of the people who are currently their friends through their child’s preschool.

In addition to this subjective sense of community, families who reported that they were “doing something differently” regarding their Jewish lifestyles had higher synagogue membership rates subsequent to attending Jewish preschool than families who did not report that they were doing something different (73% versus 47%).

Factors Related to Being Affected by the Jewish Preschool Experience

Being Involved in a Reform Synagogue-Based Preschool

There appears to be a small association between type of school and the reported impact. Families who sent their child to a school based in a Reform synagogue were more likely to say that they “were doing something different” than families who sent their children to the two other types of schools (73% in Reform preschools, 67% in JCC-preschools and 63% in Conservative synagogue based preschools). However, some of these differences might be attributable to a “ceiling affect”, that is, the higher baseline of Jewish involvement and observance among families who send their children to Conservative synagogue-based preschools than among those who attended school in a Reform synagogue.

Meeting the Rabbi

There appears to have somewhat more contact with the Rabbi among families who report “doing something differently” in their Jewish lives as a result of their Jewish preschools experience, than among families who did not have contact with the Rabbi (74 % versus 63%).⁸

⁸ The association between these two variables does not necessarily imply a causal relationship. It is also possible that families who are interested in changing their Jewish lifestyle made a greater effort to connect with the Rabbi of the synagogue.

IV. Recommendations

To further enhance their positive impact, Jewish preschools should:

1. **Develop and Strengthen the Judaica Curriculum Through Collaborative Relationships**

To provide a substantial Jewish educational experience for the children, the schools should strengthen their Judaica curriculum especially in areas related to Israel, Hebrew, bible stories, and Jewish values. Schools would benefit from a more collaborative approach to curriculum development and material design. Educational materials and curricula could be shared among schools (e.g. by posting them on-line). This would particularly make sense for schools that belong to the same denomination. Preschool families can also be enlisted to assist in this effort that might stimulate their own interest in Jewish education.

2. **Provide Additional Staff Development and Training Regarding Jewish Subject Areas**

Opportunities for providing preschool teachers with enhancement in the area of Jewish studies should be energetically pursued. This could include enrolling the teachers in adult education (e.g. Melton and Me'ah), supporting school based professional development programs (e.g. Machon L'Morim: Bereshit), and/or attempting to access external funding sources (e.g. local foundations and federations) to create school or community based professional development programs.

3. **Strengthen Linkages Between Preschools and Jewish Day Schools**

Directors of early childhood programs should meet with the director of the local Jewish Day Schools to discuss ways to inform the parents about day school options. Preschools and Jewish Day Schools should engage in exchange and visitation programs. Preschool directors and teachers should be educated about the value of a Jewish Day School education as an extension of the early childhood program. In addition, preschool teachers and Jewish Day School early childhood professionals should engage in joint professional development programs. Materials about the Jewish Day Schools can be posted on the preschool bulletin board. Furthermore, it would be helpful were the preschools to maintain a list of preschool families who sent their children to Jewish Day Schools so that parents can learn about these schools from the perspective of former preschool families.

4. **Strengthen Linkage Between Preschool and Synagogue's Religious School**

Given the larger-than-expected number of children attending the synagogue's religious school the year subsequent to completing preschool, a stronger curricular link between these two Jewish educational experiences is advisable. By establishing such a link, the religious school could build upon the essential

cognitive, affective, and behavioral components to which the children were previously exposed. Religious schools might also consider expanding the number of hours offered to these children the subsequent year. By doing so, the children will not experience such a sharp drop-off in their Jewish education especially since at that point, they are developmentally ready for more in-depth study.

5. Foster a Closer Relationship between Preschools and Synagogue and between Preschools and Rabbi

Parents expressed the desire to become better acquainted with the synagogue's Rabbi and also to have the Rabbi more involved in the preschool. It is reasonable to assume that a closer relationship between the synagogue's Rabbi and the parents might have a positive impact on their decisions about their children's Jewish education as well as on their decisions regarding their own Jewish affiliation. In addition, it might be beneficial for the denominations to initiate conversations with their synagogue Rabbis about their roles vis-à-vis the preschools.

6. Provide Additional Opportunities for Jewish Family Education

In order to include parents in their children's "learning curve," parents should be provided with opportunities to expand their own Jewish knowledge. Diverse strategies ranging from low impact (e.g. sending home Jewish educational materials) to high impact (e.g. organizing the families into chavurot and learning groups) can be implemented to involve families in Jewish learning.

7. Create Opportunities for Parents to Connect to Each Other and to the Broader Jewish Community

Parents, especially first-time parents often seek to connect socially with other parents. Since Jewish preschools already offer families opportunities to get together informally, they can go one step further and infuse these social events with Jewish content. This experience will provide parents with an experience of Jewish community and might serve as an impetus to becoming more affiliated and more involved in Jewish life.

8. Create Additional Introductory Programs for First-Time Parents

Families who have just had their first child tend to feel very isolated and would benefit from a supportive program. Several schools already sponsor programs (e.g. "Shalom Baby") that help to bring families into Jewish preschools and into Jewish education. Those schools that do not currently sponsor such programs recognized their value and were interested in instituting them. (Optimally, these programs should include both parents and not just the mother and baby.)

V. Conclusions

Parents who sent their children to Jewish preschools, ended up being strongly affected by the experience in ways both large and small. Judging from conversations with the parents, these changes were all unanticipated when they initially enrolled in the Jewish preschool.

When asked what they are doing differently as a result of their child attending a Jewish preschool, the overwhelming response, among those who responded affirmatively, was that they were celebrating Shabbat, whereas previously they had not done so. Further probing revealed that what they meant by “observing Shabbat” was that they had dinner as a family on Friday night, a dinner which began by lighting Shabbat candles, and saying the blessings over the wine and challah. This level of Shabbat observance appeared to represent a positive transformative experience in the lives of these families – one that they attempted to recreate on a weekly basis. This transformation in their Jewish practice was often brought about by small interventions such as sending home a package containing candles and a blessing or the “Shabbat Teddy Bear.”

As opposed to many other Jewish experiences, which have prerequisites to participation such as knowledge of Hebrew and rituals – not to mention being Jewish – there are no such barriers to being involved in the Jewish life of these preschools. In fact, activities sponsored by these schools are likely to be non-threatening and fun. These characteristics make Jewish preschools particularly welcoming environments for intermarried and/or converted parents. In the words of one parent interviewed for the study:

Although my husband is not Jewish and grew up Catholic, he has a real positive attitude and especially likes the synagogue services. He sometimes says “Why don’t we stay home and light candles.” I grew up Jewish, but secular so I too am learning about Judaism. It puts the two of us on equal footing.

In conclusion, Jewish preschools have many features that other outreach programs strive to emulate but rarely succeed in achieving. Involvements in these schools make Judaism accessible - especially for people lacking Jewish backgrounds and for those who are peripherally affiliated with organized Jewish life. If, as one of the preschool directors noted, many families began as “tourists” at these schools, it is the Jewish community’s challenge and responsibility to encourage them to become permanent residents in the Jewish world at large.