

## Building a Middle School Bridge to the Community Hebrew High School by Diana Yacobi

### The Community Hebrew High School: A First Conference

In July 2004, a breakthrough conference for supplementary Jewish education was held at Brandeis University, focused on community Hebrew high schools. This conference was part of a new project being undertaken by the institute for Informal Jewish Education (IJE) at Brandeis University under the direction of Dr. Joseph Reimer. It was a first opportunity for community Hebrew high school directors from around the country to meet and discuss the challenges of supplementary high school education.

The first part of this article describes highlights of the conference. The second part explores the idea of a middle school version of the community Hebrew high school to bridge the gap between the Hebrew school and Hebrew high school experience.

### Goals

A primary goal of the conference was to establish a body of knowledge for this area of Jewish education. Formal presentations focused on models for curriculum development,<sup>1</sup> curricula in development at several schools,<sup>2</sup> marketing strategies, and grant writing. Surveys designed by marketing specialists Barbara Bix and Angela Rutzick<sup>3</sup> distributed before the conference yielded useful information about parent and teen reasons for joining or not joining a supplementary Hebrew high school program.

### Issues in Supplementary Education

A distinguishing feature of supplementary community Hebrew high schools proved to be their cross-denominational student population, encompassing Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist denominations. It was noted, however, that Reform synagogues often preferred to maintain their own synagogue-based high school programs in order to complete their confirmation programs that continue until the tenth grade.

As educational director of a synagogue school, I was privileged to attend this conference<sup>4</sup> that represented a first serious look at issues confronting supplementary Jewish education. Of particular interest to me were the common concerns at both the congregational and high school levels. These include:

#### 1. Teacher Issues:

- Dealing with different teacher ideologies and diversity in terms of teacher background (college students, professionals in the community, rabbis).
- Finding the time for quality teacher training and sharing, given the very part-time nature of the teaching commitment.
- Handling of sensitive issues that arise in the classroom with regard to Jewish practice, lifestyle differences, personal issues, i.e., balancing students' questions or point of view with the teacher's responsibility to express an authentic and authoritative point of view; recognizing that "how" a

comment is delivered can be more significant for learning and identity development than “what” is said; acquiring the language and strategies to achieve this balance.

- Related to the previous point is the importance of creating a safe space for discussion of spirituality, feelings, concerns, questions, values, choices.
- Teaching about God and spirituality, life cycle and Jewish holidays in innovative, age-appropriate ways.
- Building teacher capacity to create curriculum.

## 2. School Issues:

- The importance of educator/rabbi collaboration for promoting continued Jewish education.
- Instilling the expectation of continued Jewish education at the institutional and communal level.
- Aligning classroom learning with parent perceptions and understanding of what is being taught.
- Dealing with the impact of a poor Hebrew school experience on the likelihood of continuing Jewish education.

### The Hebrew School Challenge

With regard to the last point, the presentation by Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman<sup>5</sup> highlighted a number of Hebrew school characteristics that may adversely impact children’s future interest in attending a community Hebrew high school program. These include tests, cliques,<sup>6</sup> and a generally accepted culture of complaining by both parents and children.

On the positive side, however, meeting Jewish friends was a benefit of the Hebrew school experience. There was also agreement among several educators who administer religious schools as well as high schools that the attitude of students during the primary (grades K – 1) and early elementary (grades 2-4) years was generally positive while children were mastering the skills and content needed for Hebrew reading, prayers, and the holidays, respectively.

In other words, learning the skills and content for basic Jewish literacy during the primary and early elementary years was, on the whole, found to be challenging and worthwhile.

Not addressed but underlying this “culture of complaining” is the diminished sense of accomplishment that tends to set in after the fourth grade, echoed in the “I’m not learning anything” refrain already documented in David Schoem’s famous ethnographic study of a synagogue school in 1979.<sup>7</sup> A weak link in synagogue school education tends to be the post-basics phase, especially in content areas such as Bible and holidays and in Hebrew reading, in particular. Reading acquisition is accomplished in second through fourth grades, with the next phase largely uncharted in terms of goals and benchmarks. Upon beginning Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, many children (and Bar/Bat Mitzvah trainers) are faced with the reality of weak reading skills as they confront complex Biblical text. The system-wide lack of training for educational directors as well as teachers<sup>8</sup> in the three critical areas of reading acquisition, reading strategies for text study, and early adolescence and middle school practice combine to create frustration with supplementary Jewish education during fifth through seventh grades, perpetuating the “culture of complaining.” Both complaining about Hebrew school and Bar/Bat Mitzvah have become Jewish rights of passage.

### Marketing the Community Hebrew High School

Given the need for readiness and willingness on the part of both children and their parents to continue from Hebrew school into a community Hebrew high school program, the negative culture and disenchantment create a formidable challenges to marketing and recruitment, and to the Jewish community as a whole.

To begin to attract students to post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah education, the marketing sessions at the conference outlined the process for targeting the desired population. Identifying goals and objectives that could then be evaluated were also stressed as part of marketing and ultimately school development.

In terms of growth, Prozdor at Hebrew College in Boston demonstrated impressive growth by sophisticated marketing to the community and direct outreach to surrounding synagogue-based Hebrew high schools. Over a six year period, Prozdor became “the address” for many surrounding synagogue and day school students. Synagogues joining Prozdor serve as weekday sites one night a week, with all students from surrounding branches coming together on Sunday mornings at the Hebrew College campus in Newton (a suburb of Boston). The Prozdor presentation pointed out that marketing and partnering with existing programs are among the proven routes to student recruitment.

#### A Proposal:

[Building a Middle School Bridge and Youth Community](#)

[Closing the Hebrew School/High School Gap](#)

As the years of Jewish education seem to wind down in the seventh grade year, what can be done to keep the children connected to Jewish education and the friendships made over the years? This question looms large for educators each year. The conference helped to trigger for me the idea of a middle school bridge, creation of a communal framework that would engage young adolescents well before Bar/Bat Mitzvah and serve as a precursor to the community Hebrew high School.

The time may be ripe to consider creation of a middle school experience that would help students bridge the gap that seems to exist between seventh grade, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the high school experience.

A middle school bridge would involve three key elements. First of all:

- Students continue to attend either their synagogue or day school program for formal Jewish education.

Then, based on the Hebrew high school model, the middle school bridge would:

- Serve as the communal framework for all day and synagogue schools offering students informal Jewish education.
- Consist of students in fifth through seventh (and possibly, eighth) grade.

The purpose of this middle school bridge experience would be to:

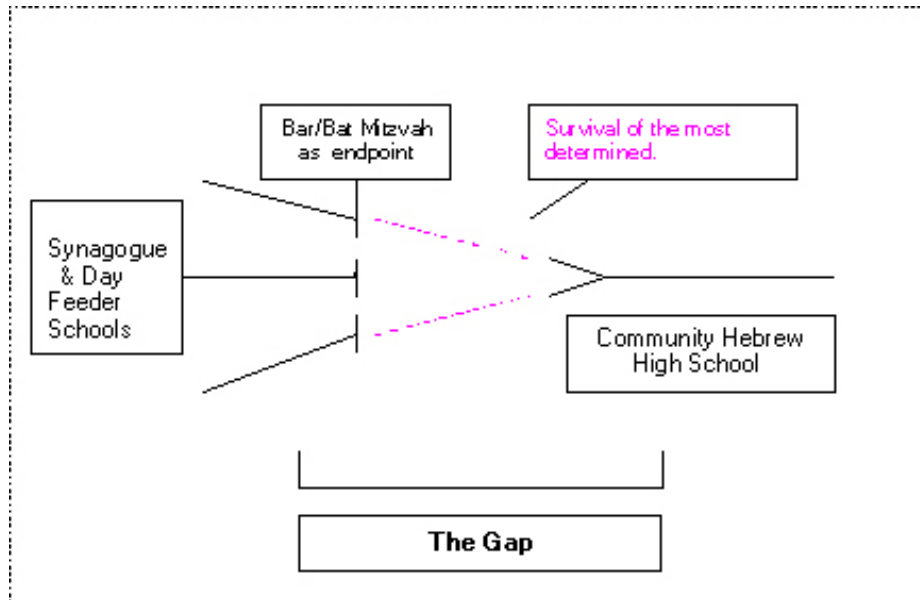
- Create a cross-denominational middle school youth community as a precursor to the Hebrew high school experience.
- Provide a communal framework for youth and individual feeder schools several years before Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

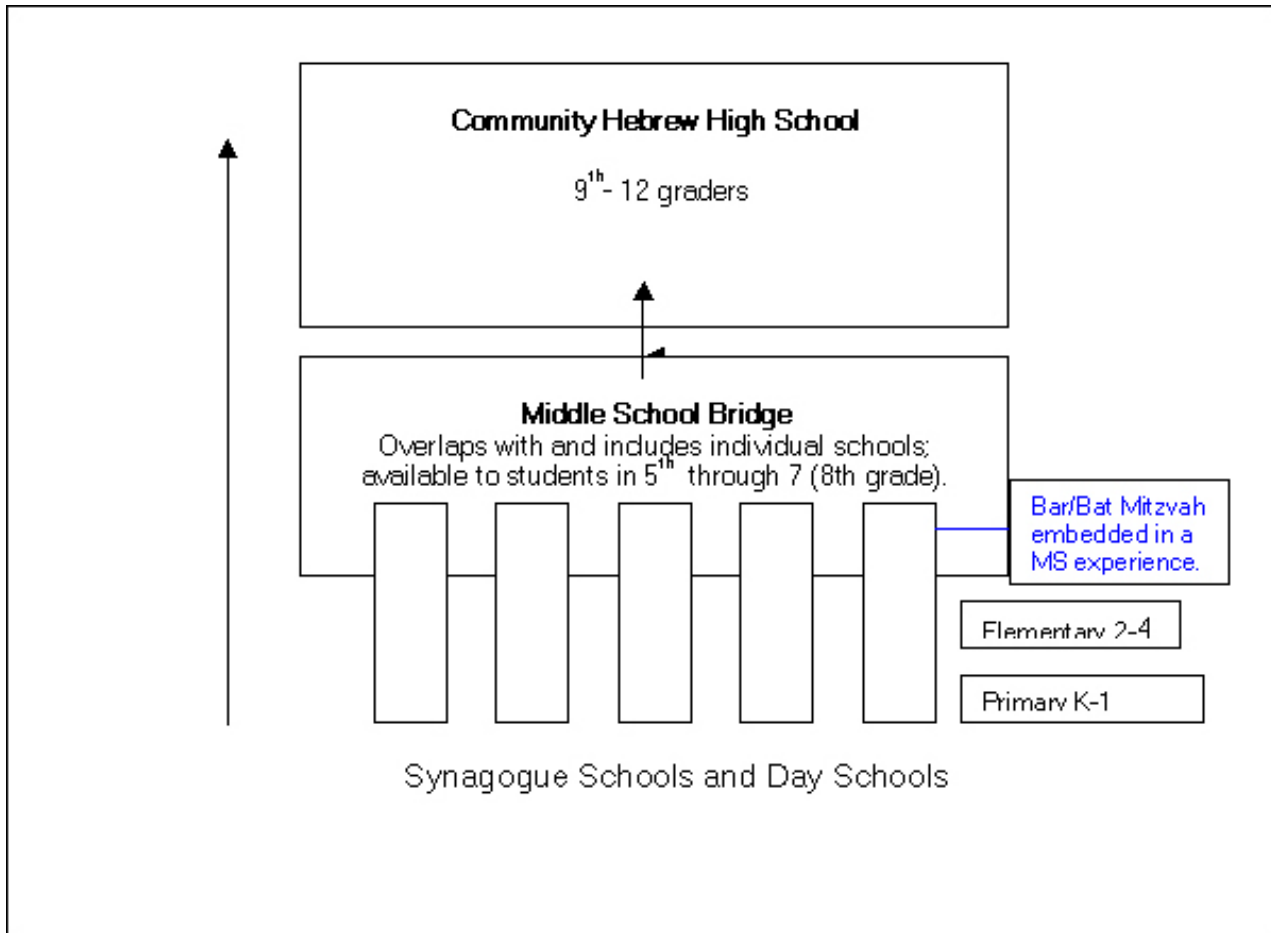
- Enable students to expand their network of Jewish friends and see themselves as members of both a school and a broader Jewish youth community.

Perhaps most importantly,

- A middle school bridge would begin to embed Bar/Bat Mitzvah in a larger context and posit for Jewish families a Jewish identity goal and direction beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

In the two diagrams that follow, the first one points out the structural gap that appears to exist between elementary schools and the community Hebrew high school with Bar/Bat Mitzvah as the end point. The second diagram seeks to present a middle school bridge that overlaps with the individual schools during the middle school years and leads directly to Hebrew high.





### Creating a Central Agency Department for Middle School Youth

To create a middle school bridge, a department for middle school youth would be needed at the central agency level to include at least one full time educator/facilitator specializing in early adolescence and middle school practice. A middle school department would:

- Focus exclusively on getting to know this age group in the community.
- Serve as liaison between the central agency, the community Hebrew high school, educational directors of synagogues, and day schools.
- Create programs using facilities in the Jewish community like a JCC gym for events like a mini-Maccabiah or a dance, plan local trips, organize “color wars,” organize volunteers, organize Shabbatonim, suggest mitzvah projects in the community; organize an Israel day.
- Promote and plan an Israel trip for eighth graders.

Within this broader context, young adolescents would be encouraged to begin making Jewish choices, to discover and exercise their “Jewish identity muscle” by having a variety of options and activities from which to choose.

### Beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Bar/Bat Mitzvah, which has for decades been accepted as the end of the Jewish educational journey for so many of our young people, must become instead a whistle-stop along the way, only one of the many exciting

[caje.org/learn/a\\_yacobi-win05.htm](http://caje.org/learn/a_yacobi-win05.htm)

sites and sounds of Jewish life to be experienced.

Middle school education directs us to challenge the young adolescent with goals, experiences, and concrete tasks to build self-understanding and identity. A communal context modeled on the community Hebrew high school would begin to accommodate the young teen's intense need for socialization, inquiry, exploration, role models, and acceptance by interested adults.<sup>9</sup> A middle school bridge in partnership with synagogues and day schools, that offered the young Jewish adolescent a larger communal experience, would give the child's Jewish identity room to grow and develop.

A middle school bridge and youth community would begin to close the gap between the synagogue and the community Hebrew high school, between juvenile Judaism and a more mature Jewish worldview. The community Hebrew high school has proven itself as an important life-shaping experience for Jewish teens. The goal is to make it a natural next step for more of our Jewish youth. Build it and they will come.

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#### Endnotes:

1. The 4-mat System and Understanding by Design (UBD), presented by Dr. Shira Epstein.
2. "The Rhythm of Jewish Time: Spirituality, Life Cycle and the Jewish Year", Ari Goldberg, [agoldberg@gratz.edu](mailto:agoldberg@gratz.edu), JCHS of Gratz College; "Vayikra and Beyond And a Overview of the New Los Angeles Hebrew High School and Standards Based Text Curriculum," Bill Cohen, [bill@lahhs.org](mailto:bill@lahhs.org), Los Angeles HHS; "Sim Judaism," A curriculum in which students learn about the makeup of the Jewish community by creating a Jewish community from scratch, modeled on the computer game Sim City, Richard Walter, [rwalter@bjeri.org](mailto:rwalter@bjeri.org), Harry Elkin Midrasha CHS of the BJE in Rhode Island; Core curricula for 9th – 12 th grades on Jewish identity, Israel, Jewish Spirituality and Thought, respectively, developed by the Center for Jewish Living and Learning, the BJE for four East Bay, CA midrashot. The four midrashot study the core curricula and participate together in the retreat program, Diane Bernbaum, [diane@midrasha.org](mailto:diane@midrasha.org).
3. Barbara Bix of BB Market Plus and Angela Rutzick of A-Type Design & Marketing in Boston.
4. Yacobi, Diana. *The High School Resource Guide for Jewish Educators* (1997) that documents models, programs, curricula, research, task force reports, and teen voices, as an overview of the field of supplementary high school education, JEA. Available from the author.
5. Dr. Barack Fishman presented some initial findings from a study she is doing currently on teenagers and Jewish identity.
6. Also cited as a factor in responses to the marketing surveys by Bix and Rutzick.
7. Schoem, David. (1979). *Ethnic Survival in America: An Ethnography of Jewish Afternoon Schools*. Berkeley: Ph.D dissertation, University of California. (1989) *Ethnic Survival in America: An Ethnography of A Jewish Afternoon School*, Brown Studies on Jews and Their Societies). Atlanta:

Scholars Press.

8. Yacobi, Diana. "Empowering Teachers through Expertise: Creating a Mastery Model for After-School Jewish Education," in *Jewish Education News*: vol ??? 49-52.
9. Yacobi, Diana. (1995) *Bringing Middle School to Hebrew School*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Masters thesis. A study of early adolescence, middle school principles and practice and its application to the synagogue school setting.