

## INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

In this article, Rob Weinberg and Isa Aron report on lessons learned from their work with ECE (Experiment in Congregational Education) over the past decade. They present an encouraging image of the potential for transformative change in synagogues and congregational schools, while providing guidelines for clear thinking about dissemination of best practices. This will make important reading for lay and professional synagogue leaders as they think about replicating successful models and programs, including the case studies presented in this issue (see pages 39–49).

## Revitalizing Congregational Education: Lessons Learned in the Trenches

ROBERT M. WEINBERG AND ISA ARON

Over the last decade we have witnessed a rekindling of interest in Jewish learning as increasing numbers of American Jews search for meaning in their lives and find it in their Judaism. Today, individual seekers are discovering that spirituality needs substance, and congregations have awoken to the fact that members as well as leaders need to be knowledgeable in order to be competent and confident in their daily practice of Judaism.

Into this climate have come a number of organizations and programs such as the Wexner Heritage program, the Florence Melton Mini-School, Boston’s *Me’ah* program, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations’ adult study *kallot*. Yet not all of these programs operate within the context of the congregation. And, in many communities, congregations have had limited success in transferring knowledge and enthusiasm built through such programs into the synagogue context.

The Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) was founded by HUC–JIR’s Rhea Hirsch School of Education in 1992 on the dual beliefs that congregational education could be dramatically revitalized and that, by becoming “congregations of learners,” synagogues could be transformed from member-service institutions into communities of meaning. We began this work and continue it with the assumption that Jewish learning is the primary pathway and best starting point to revitalizing a synagogue community. The sages acknowledged this in their listing of

obligations that cannot be measured. After a long list – which included performing acts of kindness and praying with sincerity – they concluded by saying “and the study of *Torah* is equal to them all.”

In today’s parlance we express it this way. Jewish learning is the primary portal to creating vibrant communities of actively engaged Jews because Jewish learning:

- offers a non-threatening point of entry;
- leads to a deepening of Jewish commitment and expanding Jewish practice;
- contributes to the creation of a strong sense of community; and
- develops a synagogue’s capacity to be self-renewing.

So, what lessons have we learned as we complete nearly a decade of this experiment and launch into the next major phase of our work? First, we discovered that congregations are, indeed, both willing and able to transform themselves. Second, we found that this process bears fruit in the form of innovative and valuable educational programs that can be disseminated and adapted to aid the revitalization of still other congregations. These learnings are driving our current efforts to employ internet-based communication tools and distance education technologies to disseminate Jewish educational innovations and create a virtual network of congregations engaged in learning-based transformation efforts. We will expand on each of these lessons in turn.

## LESSON 1: SYNAGOGUE TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE!

It is now accepted wisdom that synagogues cannot successfully transform themselves simply by introducing a rash of new programs. Change takes a lot of time, energy, and resources (both human and financial). The good news is that we have seen congregations go through a systematic, deliberative process and emerge as changed institutions. The experiences of ECE congregations – and of congregations that have adopted our approach – show that many congregations have the capacity to form a task force and a committed leadership team and to engage in a sustained process toward revitalization or even transformation.

Supported by text study materials, process guides, regular consultation, and a community of other synagogue teams, congregations are able to:

- examine their history and congregational culture;
- inventory and assess their current educational offerings;
- use imagination to envision their congregation as a “congregation of learners;”
- experiment with a number of short-term programmatic enhancements (“low-hanging fruit”);
- engage the broader congregation in meaningful conversation (through “focus group”-type discussions);
- explore a variety of ambitious, new educational programs; and
- adapt these programs for implementation over the long term.

These congregations became able to mount and support a coordinated set of specific, exciting and innovative educational outcomes. More importantly, they also developed congregational cultures that are expected to expand and improve their educational offerings and outcomes by continuing to experiment on an ongoing basis.

### Implications

Among professionals and lay leaders, policy discussions should take into account the dual facts that congregations can, indeed, transform themselves and that success depends on a clear process with information, resources, and support to sustain it.

## LESSON 2: VALUABLE INNOVATIONS OCCUR AND CAN BE DISSEMINATED BUT MUST BE ADAPTED STRATEGICALLY.

Many of the congregations we’ve worked with have produced exciting new educational innovations that can be adapted to other congregations seeking similar ends; an efficient transformation process does not require each congregation to totally reinvent the wheel each time it sets out to innovate. We believe the goal of successful dissemination of innovation in Jewish education is not, in fact, to disseminate innovations, but rather to create innovators. Nevertheless, innovators need sources for ideas and tools with which to work.

An important element of past ECE *kallot* has been the time for congregations to share their educational innovations. One such exchange occurred between members of Congregation Beth Am of Los Altos Hills, CA and of Westchester Reform Temple (WRT) of Scarsdale, NY. The Beth Am team talked about their *Shabbaton* program, an alternative to religious school in which parents and children study, worship, and celebrate *Shabbat* together. The idea was so compelling that WRT started its own *Shabbat*-based program, called Sharing *Shabbat*.

What is important about this simple example is that WRT did not simply copy the *Shabbaton* model. They created a program with similar goals and some similar components, but also with important differences designed to suit the particularities of their congregation. This example points to important implications for successful dissemination of educational innovations.

Too often those interested in disseminating “best practices” in Jewish education have treated “practice” as synonymous with “program.” Most efforts at disseminating successful practices have amounted to little more than publishing successful programs with little attention to what made them appropriate and successful in their original settings or what issues require consideration in adapting them to other settings.

Our experience with synagogues – as well as the educational and organizational developmental literature on dissemination of innovation – suggests that a more fruitful approach operates from two premises:

1. Best practices should be thought of at the level of generalizable principles and broad practice areas. An example would be that the *practice* of involving parents more in their children’s Jewish education yields better results.
2. The specific design characteristics of educational programs (such as a *Shabbaton* or *Sharing Shabbat*) intended to carry out such principles or implement such practices must be tailored strategically to the cultural, historical, ideological, resource, and geographical realities of each congregation.

### Implications

This means that efforts to disseminate a “successful” program must be contextualized in a way that makes clear what circumstances led to development of the innovation, what goals it sought to achieve, how the program met the needs and constraints of the congregation that developed it, and what conditions are required to replicate (or, more likely, adapt) it. Sharing program descriptions and lesson plans is not enough. To adapt a program successfully, others need to know how the innovators *thought* about what they did.

With this perspective in mind we have begun a new phase of our work with the support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Koret Foundation. We are investigating and disseminating innovative Jewish educational models. We have chosen the medium of distance education technology specifically because it will facilitate the richness of knowledge sharing that this approach requires.

Our first distance learning module focuses on alternative models of the religious school. Users of this and subsequent modules will be able to contextualize the profiles of each model with deeper information about the congrega-

tion, the process of innovation, the significant Jewish learning issues associated with the program, and the unique needs, problems, and opportunities to which the program responded. Through video and audio clips users will be able to make a rich virtual visit to see and hear the programs in action. But they also will see and hear both innovators and participants explaining their thought processes and experiences. A process guide that takes the user’s congregation through the deliberative process of considering its own context, needs, and goals and adapting what fits to its circumstances will accompany each module on programmatic innovation.

### DEEP LASTING CHANGE

Through this kind of process, we have seen members of congregational task forces – and of the congregation at large – become aware of their potential to create a “congregation of learners” and of the cultural realities that affect their congregation’s ability to realize this vision. As a result, they have reconsidered long-held and deep-seated attitudes and beliefs and adopted new vocabulary. The result is educational innovation that is neither faddish nor change for its own sake. Rather, it is innovation that plants the seeds of meaningful and ongoing revitalization through learning deeply in a congregation’s cultural soil.

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#### Editor’s Suggested Discussion Guide:

- In talking about disseminating best practices, Weinberg & Aron make a point of distinguishing between best practices and excellent programs. What is this distinction and why is it important?
- Weinberg & Aron state that their goal “is not, in fact, to disseminate innovations, but rather to create innovators.” What do you think they mean by this, and

how does this work in the context of sharing successful programs?

- Identify a successful program or change that has been implemented in a congregational school that you would like to replicate in your setting. How would your school need to adapt that program in order to make it successful given “the cultural, historical, ideological, resource, and geographical realities” of your congregation?