

Population Tilt: When Is a Jewish Pre-School Not a Jewish Pre-School?*

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The expansion from nursery care to day-care, to extended care, to summer camp programs to additional programs for nursery school-aged children has been needed for a long time.

If there is any reader expectation that this paper can provide a magic number or percentage ratio as the ethnic tipping point in a nursery school, it will be disappointed. The issue of a Jewish-non Jewish ratio in a Jewish nursery school of a Jewish community center is complex for it is not confined to the nursery school but involves the totality of the Jewish community center. My effort will be to stay with the nursery school as such, but at times I will have to consider factors related to the Center as well.

Demography, Economics, and Philosophy

The most general question must be asked as to why this becomes an issue at the present time. There are at least three parts to the answer:

1. The most obvious answer to the question is a demographic one. The war baby boom is over, fewer people are getting married or they are getting married later, and families are smaller. Therefore, as good planners we must take that into consideration. In some communities, the decrease in numbers of Jewish children of nursery school age has already become apparent.

2. The *economic* factor applies in a number of ways. If the Center has developed a good nursery school, non-Jews as well as Jews want to sign their children up for it. In order to keep a quality program the school needs a proper teacher-student ratio and therefore numbers do become important. With a need for balance, and with fewer Jewish children

applying, non-Jewish children are accepted into the program more readily.

However, economics also can become a source of conflict. Certain parts of the Rabbinate, usually those who would attack Centers anyway, as well as some lay people with a strong Jewish identification, question whether Jewish Federation money should support programs which serve non-Jews. It is difficult to discuss the issue with such people since many of their arguments are emotional and nothing will dissuade them from believing that having non-Jews in a program will dilute the Jewishness of the program.

Unfortunately, this attitude is sometimes assumed by some Center board members thereby becoming an even more crucial issue for the Center's nursery school program. Some Centers have come to expect the nursery school to become a money-making proposition or at least to meet all expenses. If it loses money, then those board members begin to look at how many non-Jews are being served.

That is when economics rather than the value of the service being rendered begins to dictate attitudes. That is why what we have called the tipping point becomes crucial. Moreover, relative factors weigh heavily in the balance. For example, 35 percent of non-Jewish enrollment in one community is not taken as negatively as a change in non-Jewish enrollment from 10% to 15% in another community. If nursery school staff and other Center staff members are to help lay people examine the issue objectively, then the various facets need to be clarified rather than assuming it is simply necessary to come up with some kind of magic number.

The role and attitude of the Center's

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Executive Director are crucial. Board members may raise questions, but in the normal process those questions are fielded by the Executive. The Executive should have a philosophy related to the agency's role in the community and the place of early childhood education within the Center. However, the burden of interpreting the early childhood education department's philosophy and operation has to be shared by the early childhood education staff with the Center's executive. Conversely, the pressure by certain board members has to be interpreted and handled by the executive and should not be dumped on the shoulders of the early childhood education staff.

3. There is a *philosophical* point-of-view of some people, at the other role from that of the Rabbinate, posing the question, "is it right to subject non-Jewish children to a Jewish milieu?" That is probably the easiest question to answer. The non-Jews are *not* the problem. The non-Jews who register their children for nursery school are aware of the Jewish orientation of the program and expect a Jewish agency to be Jewish. Just as I feel I should not get upset if I enrolled my child in a YMCA or YWCA program and that child came home singing Christmas Carols.

The Numbers Issue

Now to tackle the numbers problem from another direction: if a major problem is that there are fewer Jewish children being enrolled in nursery school programs at Centers, what have we in local communities done about it? The first step is to learn the demographics of the local community, i.e. approximately how many families are there with nursery school-aged children? There should be available enough information about Jewish families to make a relatively good guess. For additional help, the local Anglo-Jewish weekly can be consulted. Many of them feature announcements of births. Going back three years into the newspaper's files will provide names of families who now have three-year-old children.

If the nursery school is attracting a low

percentage of those families, some analysis may be made of the factors that account for it. In some communities, synagogues and temples also run nursery school programs. This may not pose a problem in large metropolitan communities, but it certainly can be problematic in those communities with under 50,000 Jews.

The case for a nursery school and its advantages in a Jewish community center as compared to a synagogue has been made elsewhere.¹ If the local Jewish "competition" is a factor in low enrollment in the Center nursery, question might well be raised whether having a number of Jewish nursery schools operating in one community is the wisest use of the community dollars, and it may be possible for the local Jewish Federation to suggest a joint community nursery school program with the Jewish Center playing a leadership role in the process.

The Jewish Parent

If there is no other Jewish institutional "competition" other factors may account for low registration in the Center's program. Unfortunately, some parents are not interested in Jewish content and are willing to register their children in church programs near their homes. Those programs may be cheaper since they do not exact both nursery school tuition and Center membership fees. In addition, physical distance may be a factor for some parents for whom the Jewish emphasis is not important compared to convenience and lower cost.²

¹ Nancy Livingston, "What is a Pre-School Doing in a Jewish Community Center?" this journal, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (1977), p. 39.

² Although not necessarily typical of all Jewish communities, the study of the nursery school program in San Francisco did indicate that the strength of the Jewish program was not very important to many Jewish parents as compared to the social, psychological, and intellectual development of their children. Margaret Purvine, "Jewish Community Center Nursery Schools: Expectations and Reality as Seen by Parents and Staff," *Research Digest* (New York: Florence G. Heller-JWB Research Center, 1977) p. 11.

The fact that the Jewish emphasis is not important to many parents should become an important part of the organized Jewish community's agenda. This reality our Rabbinic colleagues tend conveniently to overlook when they attack Jewish Centers for not being Jewish enough. Unfortunately, the average Jewish person is not as interested in Jewish identity as we or the Rabbinic are.

An example from the author's personal experience follows. The experience is not related to nursery schools but to Jewish identity. My definition of Jewish identity includes almost any activity related to being Jewish—religious, cultural, Israel-oriented, etc. I was a chairman of my synagogue's Youth Committee several years ago. During that time, our synagogue's educational director sponsored a long weekend program wherein the high school youth traveled with him to New York and spent the weekend with the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

We held a Youth Committee meeting several weeks later and just before we were ready to adjourn a mother of a youth who had attended that weekend questioned a Conservative synagogue permitting its members' children to attend a weekend with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, since her child and others came home with a number of ideas which were contrary to what her family and presumably Conservative Judaism believed in (the synagogue is "right-wing" Conservative).

In reply, I stated that I could understand her feeling, but if I had to choose between my son being "turned on" by the Lubavitchers as compared to the various non-Jewish groups such as Krishna, the Moonies, or Jews for Jesus, I would choose the Lubavitchers anytime.

If this is the attitude of a presumably very Jewishly identified woman, then we should be surprised at the neutral nature of other Jews who are not identified or committed to any form of Jewishness except perhaps what has been called "gastronomic Judaism." This issue is also related to the one discussed above. The non-Jews are not upset by our emphasis

on Jewishness, it is usually some Jewish members who are. For example, more Jews are upset by the Center closing on certain days during Passover than are non-Jews.

If the desire for convenience in travel and for saving money is stronger than a parent's Jewish identification, the Center loses a prospective nursery school child. Apart from Jewish identification, we have operated our Center programs with the concept that their quality will sell them to the Jewish public. It works sometimes, but unfortunately, not always.

The Consumer Society

We must recognize that we live in a consumer-oriented society and that means we must sell our programs. We can see what are successful TV commercials and, moreover, we have psychological knowledge. It would appear that two variables are operative in "selling." One variable is not the inherent quality of the product, but what the product can supposedly do for the person, e.g. make life more comfortable, make the person sexier, make the person "happier," and so forth.

The other variable is familiarity. People usually buy what they are familiar with. We all know people who stick to their Buicks and would never think of driving a Mercury. Familiarity also has to do with what your friends do. In a mass society that gets translated into having familiar figures like movie stars selling a product.

However, the fact that many Jewish parents might not be attuned to Jewish issues or Jewish content is what makes our job even more important, and in fact, easier. That is why the role of "salesperson" should not be seen as a burden by any Center worker, if we are clear as to what we're doing. Synagogue nursery schools may offer fine programs, but they are defined by

... a specific type of Judaism. Jewish community centers are more open to all ways of being Jewish. Offering an opportunity even to those who are struggling with their commitment to Judaism, the Center may in

fact serve as a halfway house for young parents to come and explore the possibilities and ways of being Jewish.³

The opportunity to experience being Jewish in an open setting and in a "halfway house" is needed by many young Jewish couples. That is why this should become a concern for the Jewish community.

If parents are indeed more interested in convenience or will identify with something they are familiar with, then Centers need to reach-out to young married couples even before their children are old enough to enter nursery school. This may mean special membership considerations, and it certainly means more contact with young families. As an expression of the Jewish community's interest in preserving the Jewish family such a step is necessary not only to strengthen the nursery school programs but for the good of the total Jewish community. It is something our Jewish Federations will have to participate in monetarily. *Jewish Federation funding must match Jewish Federation rhetoric.*

Another issue relates to day-care for children. With there being more and more single-parent families and working mothers, married or not, day-care programs appear to be the wave of the future. Jewish Centers have prided themselves on being flexible enough to meet new needs. Day-care is certainly a major need.

The Jewish community center is certainly better equipped than other Jewish agencies to

sponsor such programs. The traditional nursery school has occupied a rather limited and circumscribed place in the Center. The expansion from nursery care to day-care, to extended care, to summer camp programs, to additional programs for nursery school-aged children has been needed for a long time.

The advent of the early childhood educator in the Jewish Center is an addition whose time has come. The early childhood educator has a clear concept of what his or her profession can do. Just as pediatricians have gone from working with very young children all the way through adolescence, the early childhood educator has the potential to work with children beyond the kindergarten or first grade level.

In conclusion, we should not be panicked into trying to solve false issues or problems which are symptoms of greater problems. The issue of the tipping point is only a symptom. True, in very small Jewish communities it is more than a symptom, since the number of enrollees become important for economic reasons. But sheer economics should not inhibit the Jewish community's saving its own future.

It is quite possible that some nursery school programs may have to close down, but not before an examination of all the factors discussed in this article. In addition, early childhood education should not be equated merely with the nursery school. Strengthening the Jewish family is a community-wide, in fact, a national and international, Jewish problem.

³ Nancy Livingston, *op. cit.*