

Different Faces in Our Classrooms: The Challenges of Family Diversity by Richard F. Address

It was time for Kiddush at a Friday night service. As is the custom of this Midwest congregation, the rabbi asked those children in attendance under the age of thirteen to come forward and help bless the wine and chant the melody. Gradually, a small group walked forward and took their places holding the small plastic cups of juice. They joined the cantor and congregation in the blessing. A typical Erev Shabbat event. Yet, the faces of these young congregants mirrored the dynamic changes that now are impacting what we know as the family. Oriental, African-American, and Native- American faces. Latino and Eastern European faces. Jewish faces! The faces of our present and our future.

The department of Jewish Family Concerns of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations recently concluded a study of the past decade of population studies of North American Jewish communities. This was done as part of the department's development of a new pre-marital education program for Reform congregations. The intent was to look at marriage and family patterns. One of the consequences of the analyses has been to observe three major trends that are now impacting our community. These trends, common to the majority of the community, present congregations, communal agencies, and educational institutions with interesting new challenges for our near-term future. For many of us, the nature of our constituency is changing. The children in our schools and camps are coming to us from different sets of realities and often different family systems. Our challenge, as a vibrant Jewish community, is to seek within this diversity, a unity of purpose and message.

One of the issues that now impacts our seeking this unity of message and purpose is the reality that for much of our community, the perceived division between Jewish and secular culture no longer exists. The American Jewish community, and the family systems within the community, reflect the higher-educated, affluent American culture within which much of it resides. The social and economic changes of American culture that have underscored changing family dynamics in the general culture are reflected in much of contemporary Jewish communal and family life. While many within the community still have an idealized vision of American Jewish life as reflective of two distinct value systems, Jewish educators who stand before classrooms of youngsters on a regular basis understand that they stand before young Americans who have come to them for an infusion of Jewish identity. The stakes for the Jewish community have never been higher. The opportunities for creativity have also never been more profound.

The Affiliation Gap

The first trend that emerged we referred to as the "affiliation gap." This is defined by the fact that for much of our Jewish community, we lose contact with our children between the ages of thirteen and sixteen (Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation). We also observed that for much of our community, we now marry later. Indeed, we learned that our young people marry, on average, from five to seven years later than the non-Jewish community. We have been successful in teaching our children the value of education and career and so it is not unusual for first marriages to take place from the late twenties through the thirties. It is also not unusual for our children to then delay having children (often for career choices) for several years. Those young moms and dads who will be registering their children in our schools for this coming year will more often than not be in their

who will be registering their children in our schools for this coming year will, more often than not, be in their thirties and even forties. For many of these same moms and dads, it will be a return to congregational or communal life after a period of up to twenty years away. There is a vast gulf of life experience between a child of thirteen and a man or woman of thirty-five.

There are some interesting educational opportunities for our community as we attempt to deal with this “affiliation” gap. How may we begin to re-structure the courses and educational environment for our middle and high school students so they may be better prepared to make Jewish choices in their lives? Are our schools relating Jewish values to the changed circumstances and life situations that many of our young people now face? There is also the question of how we educate and welcome those of our young people who are contemplating marriage. Formal programs of text-based pre-marital education are now being developed. Yet the place of marriage and its importance in the broad scope of Jewish family concerns has not received appropriate emphasis. We would suggest that most congregations place more emphasis on preparing a youngster for Bar/Bat Mitzvah than in preparing young adults for marriage and family. Why?

Do we develop discussions, classes, and forums for our teens to exchange opinions and share views on the role of marriage and family? How do we navigate the tension of teaching our children that they can “have it all,” when we now may be seeing that the trade-offs may mean increased personal and familial stress? How many congregations and communal organizations are ready to have their leaders mount their pulpits and teach that it may better to delay that graduate degree or career track in order to start families at an earlier time? Then, of course, we face a debate that is so often heard within our community: the “why bother” attitude expressed by some who feel that, for our children in their twenties and early thirties, this is their time for experimentation and for “finding” themselves. The argument goes on to suggest that trying to reach this generation would not be a wise investment of time and resources. So, many return to us in their mid-thirties, bringing their children to the religious schools, having been away from meaningful Jewish experiences for perhaps two decades. How prepared are they to pass on a living heritage and culture to their children?

The second development we refer to as the “diversity” trend. This is affected by and impacts on the first trend that we saw. It is a trend that is also reflective of the changes in American secular culture and the “Americanization” of contemporary Jewish culture. This trend consists of not only the rise in our schools and camps of children of inter-faith marriages, but also the rise in the number of adopted children whose cultures and early life experiences are now a source of creative educational possibilities. Likewise, we see rises in the number of children from single-parent households or gay and lesbian unions, as well as blended families. It is no longer unusual to have several, if not each, of these categories represented in a classroom, a school or at a Jewish summer camp. This presents us with a dynamic challenge to create a unity of diversity. Against this canvas of diversity, any attempt to paint a uniform picture of a “typical” Jewish family is folly. Likewise, this reality places increased responsibility on Jewish institutions (synagogues, communal organizations, etc.) to assume an even larger role in creating meaningful educational opportunities to ensure the ideal of Jewish continuity.

Educators understand these realities better than anyone, for they face them every day. How do we prepare courses and classes that are sensitive to different levels of Jewish background and diverse cultures? Are we preparing text books and materials that accurately reflect the changing faces and family systems in our community? If the pictures of family that stare out from our textbook pages show two parents and two

children, we need to know that this picture represents less than thirty percent of what constitutes a Jewish family at the beginning of the twenty-first century in America. How can we prepare our teachers, many of whom will be reflecting this same diversity, to teach in these new realities? Should we expand the development of after-school and weekend informal educational programs that allow for more opportunities for students to enter a Jewish educational setting? Do we need to re-think what a supplemental religious school experience means in this society? Do we continue to expand “family track” educational opportunities that meet on flexible time schedules and thus make it easier for families to learn together? How do we expand the use of electronic and computer-based learning materials that can enhance the educational process in terms that our young people understand? The diversity of our family systems will yield a greater diversity in educational approaches. We need to think in these terms or risk becoming obsolete or worse, being perceived as irrelevant.

The Longevity Revolution

The third trend we observed as the “longevity revolution”. This, in truth, may be the most exciting of all the trends that are now unfolding within our community. Currently, just about twenty percent of the American Jewish community is over sixty-five. The median age of the community is forty-one years of age (up five years in a decade). The current generation of older adults is the best educated, most mobile, healthiest, and most affluent cohort that has ever existed. The gifts of health and longevity have allowed this generation to help drive the engine of renewed interest in serious Jewish education. They want, even demand, that their Judaism provide meaningful answers to their unique life experiences. To this reality will come, within a decade, the first wave of the “Baby Boom” generation. Shall they bring their own particular life and educational experiences to their aging? We are already seeing the first aspects of change in materials and programming that reflect the meeting of these two generations that, thirty years ago, were often in conflict over issues such as Vietnam, civil rights, and life style. Now, these generations are about to be joined over such issues as care-giving, entitlement programs, and health care. This new cohort may not be content with the traditional mid-day seniors’ luncheon and discussion groups.

Here we are presented with a population that, within a decade, may be one quarter of the entire Jewish community. Their desire and need for quality, creative and caring Jewish education will increase.

Have our congregations and communal organizations begun to seriously examine the changes in educational opportunities that will be possible as the “longevity revolution” takes root? How are we looking at new educational demands and possibilities? Are we re-examining, given the changes in life styles and family dynamics, such issues as grand-parenting, mentoring, and the view of this new older adult cohort as a vast reservoir of untapped human resource? How are we developing meaningful inter-generational programs that model respect for aging and teach life-long lessons and values to new generations? Are we seeking to create educational opportunities for older adults that embrace their longevity with Jewish values and tradition in such areas as the development of new religious rituals that speak to their lifestyle? Can we look to make use of our often under-utilized synagogue and communal facilities to develop adult day care programs that can relieve care-givers and provide another venue for new types of Jewish education? Are we creating opportunities for our community to teach the Jewish values of health and wellness that can inform and enhance this new longevity?

Adapt and Innovate

This is a dynamic and exciting time to be in education within the Jewish community. The changes and challenges associated with new family and cultural systems provide us with opportunities to be creative, risk-taking role models and educational innovators. Do not be deceived by those who would preach “doom and gloom” when confronted by these trends. Judaism has always met new realities by being able to adapt and risking the innovative. The faces that look out to us, changed as they may be, still look to us to enhance their lives and teach them from a foundation of Jewish faith and values. There is no greater calling.

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