

The Synagogue Preschool as a Gateway into Jewish Life

by Fred Greene

We are living in a Jewish age where renaissance, inclusion, and creating welcoming institutions are our buzzwords. Recent studies of the American-Jewish community reinforce just how diverse we are. It has become clearer than ever that we need a wide range of approaches to reach out to and welcome individuals and families interested in seeking Jewish connections. One of these vital entry points is our synagogue-based early childhood program. While they are perfectly positioned to reach out to the under-engaged and unaffiliated, too many congregations do not recognize their potential as Jewish gateways.

The challenges are wide-ranging and pervasive. Consider these points:

- ♦ In Reform congregations, we have 10,000 four-year-olds in our early childhood programs, but fewer than 4,000 in the kindergartens of our religious schools. This means that our school dropout rate from early childhood programs is higher than our post-*Bar Mitzvah* dropout rate.¹
- ♦ Many congregations create early childhood programs as enrichment programs and as sources of revenue for the congregation, without concentrating on Jewish content or recruitment of Jewish students or faculty.
- ♦ As Jews marry and start families later in life, their connections to Jewish communities often become weaker; many of these individuals are not actively engaged in a Jewish community between the time that they are in high school through the time they are enrolling a child in religious school. This can be a fifteen- to twenty-year period (or more) without a meaningful connection to the Jewish community.

What do these points highlight? They reinforce the idea that synagogue-based early childhood centers (ECCs) are crucial gateways for the youngest members of our communities and their parents to engage in Jewish communal life. Our early childhood programs should not only be welcoming, but also must be high-quality educational programs and meaningful communities.

I would like to propose that early childhood program educators, their lay advocates, and clergy seek out superior models of communities with strong relationships between congregations and their ECCs, fostering a culture that not only recognizes these programs as revenue generators, but also sees their potential as serious Jewish learning centers for children and their parents. This requires new thinking about early childhood programs in general for many synagogues and transforming synagogue culture to reflect the significance of early childhood education.

Tips for Transforming Your Early Childhood Program into a Gateway for Jewish Living

Give your ECC Director appropriate standing in your congregation. These individuals are not high-priced babysitters (even if that is how they often are compensated). These are accredited, dedicated educators who deserve recognition as Jewish educators. Not only are they often master's level educators, they also have personal relationships with these young families already in your synagogue building. Give them the opportunity to be community builders, since they have particular insights into the needs and interests of this cohort. It is appropriate that the ECC director be considered "senior staff," positioning her/him to build bridges between these young families and the congregation, as well as to teach the congregational leadership about the importance of early childhood education. As such, the director should also be invited to Board meetings, along with other senior staff.

Make sure there are appropriate advocates for your ECC in the congregation. Your ECC has a sizable budget, staff, and programs. You must have the right team behind it not only to ensure continued growth and success, but also to have lay advocates to make sure the ECC continues to have the necessary tools to implement its mission and reach its goals. Congregations have different models of governance. Whether it is the chairperson of the ECC committee or another committed person who understands Jewish early childhood education, representation (in addition to the Director) on the Board of Trustees, advocating for appropriate funding, resources, and integration into the synagogue community, is essential.

Clarify your mission as a Jewish school. Mission statements are important. They com-

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municate your purpose and character to your ECC families and the community at large.² This can help your Director, advocates, families, and Board of Trustees take the school seriously and collaborate to implement its vision.

Encourage your rabbis and cantors to be present. One of the easiest things to do to create a bridge between the synagogue and the ECC is to have your clergy be present. It doesn't take much effort to schedule fifteen minutes to welcome and forge connections during the children's drop off and pick up. For these families, knowing that the rabbi and cantor are interested in them and their families is a significant statement. Even more so, to have the clergy enter the classroom and tell a story or sing a song is a wonderful gift to give these children. When the rabbi comes in, sits on the floor, and tells stories, he creates memories and relationships for the children with "their rabbi." And when the children tell their parents about it, it is a powerful message to the parents, whether they are "members" of your congregation or not (yet). It is true that not every rabbi or cantor has the ability to reach three-year-olds where they are at with stories or songs, but every rabbi and cantor can help these young children start their Jewish journeys. If the rabbi or cantor is uncomfortable or inhibited in engaging with this age group, encourage them to seek out guidance and support from the expert — the ECC Director. The clergy team has a role to play. Make sure it is a constructive one.

The rabbis have an important vision to articulate to the early childhood program community and to the congregation at large. Our synagogue early childhood programs have a constituency that meets either once each week or daily for several hours. What we have created is not only an early childhood center, but also a Jewish Head Start program. Framing conversations in those terms helps define our roles as Jewish educators, clergy, and lay leaders. It means that we are going to make sure our faculty has the tools to infuse lessons with appropriate Jewish content, beyond *kiddush* over grape juice. Yes, our ECC staff has many gifts. But their backgrounds and credentials are not always in Jewish education. We have to provide them with the support and training not only to be good teachers, but also to help see, create, and implement their lessons with a Jewish lens. Every faculty team would benefit from their rabbi spending some time in the classroom modeling how to talk about God, gratitude, *zedakah*, and faith — for the students and the teachers. Also consider having your rabbi meet regularly with the faculty, lay committee, and ECC Director to make sure that Jewish content flows freely in the class, and not only around Jewish holy days.

Create a bridge between the congregation and the ECC. Most congregations do not require that early childhood program families be members of the congregation. However, among all the options for good early childhood program experiences, these families have chosen your congregation-based program. Take advantage of this opportunity and make the program the front door to synagogue membership. When there is a crisis for an ECC family, don't limit your caring/*hesed* committee to "members only." Reach out. Communicate that you care about them as a family. Make sure you treat them as "prospective members" — inviting them to congregational events, celebrations, family education events, holidays, adult learning opportunities, etc. Create

a calendar of classes and workshops for your ECC community to discuss Jewish parenting, talking to children about God, Jewish bedtime rituals, young family-friendly *seder* ideas, or discussing issues of loss and death. My congregation has linked the early childhood program families to our outreach program, offering "A Taste of Judaism: Are You Curious?"³ to this specific group while their children are in school. The Council of Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) in Boston has created an impressive initiative to reach out to these families and reintroduce them to Jewish learning. CJP's *Ikkarim*⁴ program is being met with stunning success. And if you

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have family education experiences, whether it is a Tot *Shabbat*, children's concert, *Purim* Carnival (with an early childhood program-appropriate section), or similar experiences, make sure you communicate these points of connection to the families in the school.

Ask your Religious School Director of Education to talk about transitions. If an early childhood program is more than babysitting and enrichment programs, if it is a Jewish education initiative to be taken seriously, then communicate what the next steps are in the Jewish journey. All parents are concerned about transitions for their children and themselves. Introduce them to your religious school director or day school director who can address their concerns. By doing so, you will communicate that there is a holistic education program that begins in the ECC.

Encourage them to seek out stronger connections to the Jewish community. Young people in their 20s through their 40s who are likely to have children in your school tend not to join synagogues until they are mandated to do so (in order for their children to attend the religious school). Congregations and our movements have not been overwhelmingly successful in communicating that there is a place for young people in our synagogues. Further, these young adults are turned off by the culture of "membership" and "dues." They are savvy, sophisticated people. They can appreciate the need for revenue, and certainly can understand the value of *zedakah* and the culture of giving. Their perception is that Jewish institutions concentrate too much on fundraising.

This is coupled with another perception of being in transitional stages of their lives (families with young children, developing their careers, etc.). They see the term "dues" as a message that congregations are fee-for-service institutions. The result is that synagogues, perceived as dues-hungry, are a huge turn-off. Create an approach that communicates that your community wants them to connect and to consider the synagogue as a place worthy of their *zedakah*. Create a welcoming environment where their presence is valued and help them learn the value of supporting and sustaining vibrant, serious Jewish institutions. For example, many congregations have found success by adjusting their annual commitments (a term I prefer to "dues"). Such initiatives include "Meet

Us Halfway” — cutting the annual commitment in half for new families. Other congregations have launched voluntary dues incentives or nursery school family categories with substantially

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reduced rates. Ultimately, we must communicate that our congregations are authentic places of meaning, not simply large institutions focused on dues. The last part of this equation is to develop a liaison on your membership committee or team who will be able to communicate why this is worthwhile for them as a family. Ideally, that is a person who is already connected with older children in the religious school, but still has a younger one in the ECC program.

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Advocate for early childhood education as a Jewish communal priority. Perhaps it is time for rabbis, ECC Directors, and their lay leaders to reach out to their neighboring colleagues and propose a plan to their local federation leadership or Jewish education agency that advocates for funding to fill our Jewish early childhood programs with Jewish students. Imagine what we could accomplish if our local federations and philanthropists would consider subsidizing the costs to families as we invest our resources in teacher-training, effective marketing, curriculum development, and assessment. I am not one who believes that “if we build it,

they will come.” We need to build it with meaning and purpose, communicate it effectively to a cohort that has numerous positive options, and help them to go through one of our gateways to meaningful Jewish communities.

Having a quality early childhood program — infused with warmth, joy, and Jewish content — integrated into a meaningful Jewish community that cares about young families starting their Jewish journeys conveys a powerful message to Jewish families. If we communicate that they matter to us, that we care about them, and that we want them to find meaningful connections to support and sustain them, then we are not only fulfilling our mission and having good programs, but we are also making Jewish life and learning contagious and exciting. This is the covenant every synagogue-based ECC should and can create. ❁

ENDNOTES:

1. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, *URJ Biennial Sermon*, November 19, 2005.
2. For help in drafting a mission statement, see “Hear, O Israel: Creating Meaningful Congregational Mission Statements” from the URJ Commission on Synagogue Management; also CHAI Curriculum Materials for Education Committees, Session 2, “Developing a Mission Statement.” The full curriculum for boards and committees can be downloaded at <http://urj.org/chai/temple/>. The materials were written by Keren Alpert; also see Joshua Elkin. “Developing a School Mission Statement” in *Jewish Education News*. New York: CAJE, Spring 1993, pp. 15-17.
3. For more info, go to <http://urj.org/outreach>.
4. http://www.cjp.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=145941.

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