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**SUPPLEMENTARY
JEWISH EDUCATION:
WHAT CAN BE
DONE?**

Eli Valley
Editor

Janet Mann
Administration

Yakov Wisniewski
Design Director

THE STEINHARDT FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH LIFE

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Rabbi David Gedzelman
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Rabbi Irving Greenberg
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Jonathan J. Greenberg z"l
Founding Director

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Phone: (212) 279-2288

Fax: (212) 279-1155

Email: contact@jewishlife.org

Website: www.jewishlife.org

For media inquiries about The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, please contact Richard Dukas at richard@dukaspr.com.

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

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SUPPLEMENTARY JEWISH EDUCATION: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

There is arguably no venue of Jewish education that has received greater condemnation and scorn than afternoon schools. To hear many community leaders tell it, Hebrew schools are both cause and symptom of seemingly ubiquitous declines in levels of Jewish affiliation.

Much of the criticism is well-founded. It is hard to find adult Jews who speak glowingly of past experiences in afternoon schools. Numerous factors have contributed to this reputation. The venues — often synagogues — are stultifying. The curricula are ossified. The educators are working part-time. The time of day — in the afternoon or on Sundays — is not especially conducive to learning indoors. Parents, for their part, do not show the same investment in their children's educational progress as they show in non-Jewish educational settings.

But the fact remains that for the majority of American Jews, afternoon schools are and will continue to be the preferred venue of Jewish education. Instead of declaring the demise of Hebrew schools, the community should recommit itself to making afternoon schools work. The articles in this issue of CONTACT examine ways in which afternoon schools can take the initiative in creating innovative, dynamic and rewarding Jewish educational experiences. Taken together, they offer a picture of supplementary education that can help form the cornerstone of a revived Jewish life.



Eli Valley

TO OUR READERS:

Please note that Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is now **The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life**.

In addition, it is our pleasure to welcome **Robert P. Aronson** as the new Acting President of the Foundation. Bob has been actively involved advising the Foundation for a number of years. The Foundation's Board and Staff are happy to welcome an old friend in his new leadership role.



Rethinking Supplementary Education

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

When we consider the state of Jewish supplementary education, it is difficult to suppress a profound sense of disappointment. Images abound of listless classrooms, unprepared teachers and students who would prefer to be anywhere but in a school setting. In certain ways, a dismal afternoon school experience probably does more harm for future Jewish identity than no education at all.

Afternoon schools face an uphill battle from the start. Parents are well aware that their children resent being in classrooms while their peers are out having fun. But instead of taking an active role in their children's performance, they ignore it. In contrast to their much-lauded devotion to their children's progress in secular school, parents show little interest in afternoon school performance. They rarely discuss what their children are learning, fail to monitor their children's progress, and turn a blind eye to the quality of the afternoon school. It should be no surprise that their children follow suit.

Then, of course, there is the often shoddy quality of teaching. It has always been difficult to get superior pedagogy in an institution that invariably offers only part-time employment, and it's hard to see how that can change without drastic measures.

Perhaps this is why for so many American Jews, afternoon school is not a launching pad for future Jewish enrichment, but merely a way station towards assimilation. For this reason, many parents have given up on afternoon schools completely. This would not be a problem if the day school movement were more popular and pervasive. But the fact that only about three percent of non-Orthodox Jewish children attend day schools leaves us

with little option: It is supplementary schools or nothing.

If there is any chance to revitalize the institution, we must rethink the way we approach supplementary school education. First, although Bar and Bat Mitzvahs have become significant rites of passage for most American Jews, the tendency of synagogue schools to concentrate on these ceremonies has made the age of 13 the endpoint of Jewish engagement. Part of the problem is that Bar/Bat Mitzvah education focuses on rote memorization as opposed to Jewish teaching and values. For so many, the ceremony has become a final exam that requires tedious work but that ultimately signifies a graduation from Jewish life. Meanwhile, increasingly ostentatious Bar and Bat Mitzvah parties have turned the milestone into gaudy bacchanalia devoid of Jewish reflection.

As Bar/Bat Mitzvahs occur in the synagogue, it is understandable that synagogue-based supplementary schools focus on these rites of passage. But that does not make it right. Our curricula need to be reoriented away from these ceremonies and towards the larger narrative of our shared history and values — something I have termed “Common Judaism.”

Second, we should employ the successes of informal education to supplementary education. If we identify what makes camping so appealing where afternoon schools have failed, we might have a chance of invigorating our schools. Camps succeed because they foster camaraderie, they infuse joy in Jewish experience and they offer a broad range of activities informed but not defined by Jewish teachings. Unlike afternoon schools, camps are guided by the energy and dynamism of their young learners. Overall, the holistic Jewish environment of camps has a profound effect on campers' future identification as

Jews. It is time afternoon schools began to emulate the success of camps.

Schools might experiment with offering classes at more appealing times. But even more important, it's time to look into non-classroom settings. After all, isn't one of the virtues of camp that it takes place outside the typical venues of learning? This should be all the more pertinent to afternoon schools, which convene after students have spent entire days in cramped desks underneath fluorescent lights. Indeed, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah issue is symptomatic of a larger problem: supplementary education has been inextricably connected to the synagogue, which for so many in the community has become a dying vessel. We need to get Jewish education out of the synagogue if it is to have a hope of revival.

Why don't we educate our children in family homes? This would compel parents to take a greater interest and investment in their children's Jewish future. Instead of dropping their kids off at the prisons of today's synagogue schools, they would open their homes to teachers and young learners in their neighborhoods. This approach to Jewish education would bring families together in the kind of grass roots community building that is the key to a vibrant Jewish future.

Convening in family homes is just one proposal; there are doubtless many more ideas we should explore in an effort to revitalize the ways we teach our young. The main issue is clear: Decades of afternoon schooling are partly responsible for widespread Jewish apathy. We no longer have the luxury of inaction. Only by breaking with current failed methods of supplementary education will these schools have a hope of survival. At stake is not simply a system of education but the minds, identities and spirits of the next generation of Jews.

Michael H. Steinhardt is Chairman of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

SOMETHING WONDROUS!

PELIE:

The Partnership for Effective Learning & Innovative Education

by **RABBI NATHAN LAUFER**



Day school education has received the majority of communal attention and funding over the past fifteen years. Yet, upwards of 70 percent of Jewish children in the United States who receive a Jewish education do so in Jewish complementary schools, not in day schools. The scant attention and resources devoted by funders to complementary schooling is partially due to the fact that complementary schools have been viewed by funders as employing old and failed educational models that are largely ineffective in nurturing knowledgeable and inspired young Jews. PELIE, the Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education (Hebrew Meaning: “Wondrous!”), chose its name to reverse these two critiques of complementary school Jewish education. Created by a group of visionary funders, PELIE’s mission is to substantially improve complementary Jewish education in North America and to thereby transform the reality, perception and funding of the field.

The seeds of substantial improvement have been planted in several national and local change initiatives around the continent. PELIE’s pilot strategy is to replicate two successful local change initiatives, Philadelphia’s NESS model and Boston’s Keshet model, and implant them among communities

and congregations that are ready, willing and able to co-fund and receive them.

The Congregational School Model

Our first approach is aimed at reinventing and dramatically improving existing Congregational schools. Based on the innovative NESS program developed by Philadelphia’s Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education, this approach trains central agencies to transform groups of congregational schools in a systemic, rather than a piece-meal fashion. NESS’s uniqueness and effectiveness lies in its holistic, integrative approach to change that transforms the total educational environment in which complementary education takes place in the school. Systemic improvement includes, but is not limited to, transforming the organizational leadership process in which the learning takes place; upgrading the leadership capacity of the educational directors; enriching the professional development of the teachers; engaging the parents and families in the educational process; focusing and custom-designing the curriculum to align with the specific sought-after educational outcomes set by the congregation’s leadership; and using assessment tools to measure educational progress throughout the schooling process.

As the professional staff at NESS has learned, it is only by incorporating all of these changes in a planned, comprehensive, synergy-producing sequence that transformative change can take place.

On a subjective level, because of the improvement of the entire educational system and especially the capacity of the teachers to offer engaging and focused learning to the students, the education imparted through the NESS model is far more interactive, exciting and joyful than that previously experienced in complementary schooling.

The Peoplehood School Model

A second approach, loosely based on the model of Boston’s Keshet schools, is to create totally new, independent schools of complementary Jewish learning from scratch. Since there is a significant segment of the American Jewish population today that is either not providing its children with a Jewish education or is dissatisfied with the existing options, the development of new institutions that might better suit the needs and sensibilities of this segment of American Jewry is a priority. These new institutions should include all or most of the following characteristics:

- **Shared Judaism Curriculum** — These schools will offer students an innovative, peoplehood-based rather than religious-based curriculum. By focusing on conveying the foundational story of the Jewish people, Judaism’s character building and interpersonal values, and familiarity with community building rituals and symbols — the elements that Jews across the denominations share in

Rabbi Nathan Laufer is Founding Director of PELIE and President Emeritus of the Wexner Heritage Foundation.

KESHER

by LAUREN APPLEBAUM
and RAFI ESTERSON

Kesher, Hebrew for connection, is a Jewish learning community providing after-school Jewish and Hebrew education for children from kindergarten through high school. The Kesher model began in 1992 in Cambridge, MA, and in 2003, Kesher Newton opened in Newton, MA. Independent of institutional affiliation, Kesher is committed to the idea that Jewish learning, like Jewish life, reaches its highest fulfillment in the context of community. The creation of meaningful learning communities among children, *tzevet* (staff), and families is a key part of the Kesher experience.

Families choose Kesher for many reasons. Some are seeking an alternative to synagogue affiliation. Others are active members of synagogue communities and choose Kesher as an alternative to their Hebrew schools or local day schools. Some are attracted by the strength of our Hebrew or Judaica curricula. Others are drawn in by the joy and warmth, which remind them of their most positive Jewish experiences, often at camp. These families span a wide spectrum of approaches to observance and Jewish life. All of them value Kesher's ability to create connections between Jews of diverse backgrounds, both secular and religious.

Children arrive at Kesher straight from school. From the moment the children are greeted (in Hebrew), their teachers spend time with them as they choose to play games, work on art projects, do homework or share stories. The environment is rich with spoken Hebrew, the rhythms of the Jewish year and reflections of their curriculum. The outcome? As the more structured part of the day begins, a nurturing community in which children feel confident and comfortable with one another and with their teachers has been established. They are ready to work together with a sense of common identity and purpose.

This commitment to building a learning community begins with the staff. Kesher teachers spend several hours each day working and learning together as adults before the first child arrives. Each teacher also receives individualized support and training several times a week. Energized by their own growth, both professional and Jewish, Kesher teachers bring sophistication and creativity to their work. That passion permeates the entire Kesher community.

A joyful *ruach* (spirit) pervades Kesher. Song, dance, drama, and art are central modes of learning alongside text study, discussion, and debate. The key to the creation of this special atmosphere is our conviction that the Jewish tradition is inherently interesting, meaningful and joyful. When given a chance to encounter that tradition in an intelligent and thoughtful way, and in the context of a meaningful community, children find that encounter rewarding and exciting. Kesher is fun because it embodies and actualizes the wonder of Jewish learning.

Lauren Applebaum is Executive Director of Kesher Newton. **Rafi Esterson** is Executive Director of Kesher Cambridge.

common — the programs will appeal to many of those families that are currently not comfortable with a traditional synagogue education. In addition, the curriculum will emphasize the learning of contemporary rather than liturgical Hebrew. Contemporary Hebrew can be taught using a “whole language” approach that springs from the actual world of the child. This will empower the students with a functional vocabulary that will make visiting, studying in and even living in Israel a future possibility. Ultimately, proficiency in contemporary Hebrew will also empower the child to read liturgical and biblical Hebrew, thus enabling the child to celebrate a traditional Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

- **After-School Program Model —**

The programs will be designed as after-school programs, ideally meeting four to five days of the week and providing a warm, diversified and supportive environment for single-parent or two-working-parent families. While most parents would choose to send their children to these programs only two days a week, the availability of the program throughout the work week would offer several advantages not currently enjoyed by most complementary school programs. These after-school programs would have camp-like characteristics — i.e., a happy, joyous atmosphere that provides an assortment of extracurricular activities in addition to the Hebrew/Jewish learning. They would therefore provide greater parent buy-in by providing the quality care and nurturing that the parents are seeking for their children in their absence, as well as the flexibility to choose the most convenient days in their work schedules. By providing those added values, the after school program can command higher tuitions and be in a position to engage higher caliber, almost full-time teachers who are themselves more invested in their craft. In addition, the school's teachers would meet daily as a group to prepare the lessons several hours in advance of the children's arrival. In

so doing, the teachers themselves would become an impassioned community of learners, serving as inspiring role models for the children and their families. These same teachers would also interact with the children during their extracurricular activities, helping to build relationships of trust between teachers and students. The net result would be happier, better educated young people.

- **Family/Parent Education —**

The model will include bimonthly Shabbatons, adult holiday programs, an optional week-long retreat in the summer prior to the beginning of the school year, and a concluding trip to Israel (see below).

- **Israel —** The program will culminate with an optional ten-to-fourteen day, birthright israel-style educational family trip to Israel of all *b'nai/b'not mitzvah* of the class with their families.

- **Attitudes and Achievements —**

Student attitudes and achievements will be measured before, during and after completion of the program to validate for the students, their families and the community at large that significant, meaningful learning is taking place.

By inviting new or fledgling complementary schools to adopt the Peoplehood Model in its entirety, and thus begin their institutional growth with the pivotal pieces for success in place at the start, we will begin to create a new and substantially improved form of complementary Jewish education.

As they are being implemented, both the Congregational and Peoplehood School Models will continue to be improved and refined. These two approaches reflect PELIE's best judgment as to how to build on what is already working in complementary education. PELIE will continue to scan the field for other promising local or national change initiatives and will be prepared in the future to promote those that prove themselves to be both effective and innovative, capable of replication or adaptation.



Teaching in a Religious School as a Full-Time Job

by SAUL KAISERMAN

It seems hard to imagine now, but only a few decades ago, in many (if not most) synagogues, the position of religious school principal was part-time. Today, it is not uncommon for a synagogue to have several full-time educational positions, including an educational director, one or more administrators, a family educator, a youth or teen director, an adult educator and so on. An increasing number of universities now offer graduate-level programs in each of these specializations, and the shift towards the professionalization of the field of Jewish education has had a significant and positive impact on the quality of synagogue education. Nevertheless, religious schools continue to depend upon part-time employees to serve in what may be the most critical role, that of classroom teachers. But this, too, may be starting to change, and the move to full-time religious school faculties may offer the greatest potential for the transformation of synagogue education.

Creating full-time teaching positions can be an appropriate solution to the problems of recruitment and training of qualified teachers. While exceptions abound, there is some truth to the stereotype of the inexperienced, inexperienced, part-time religious school teacher who prepares for lessons on the bus ride to work. Part-time faculty are understandably resistant to participating in professional development or school activities occurring outside of school hours. Certainly, even the most capable teachers must balance their responsibilities to the synagogue with those of the rest of their professional and personal lives, and they can hardly be expected to prioritize what is, after all, likely to be only a source of supplementary income.

With these problems in mind, the leadership of Central Synagogue in New York City decided in 2004 to pilot a program in which students in grades 3 – 6 would be taught by full-time faculty. The expectation was that by creating a position with a salary package equivalent to that of a day school teacher, the institution would attract candidates with commensurate qualifications. Teachers would have office space, receive on-site mentoring and training sessions, and work as a team to develop and execute curricula. It was imagined that after two or three years, the teachers would be prepared to direct programs of their own or otherwise pursue careers in Jewish service.

Now entering its fourth year, the program has become an intrinsic part of the life of the synagogue, with all students in grades 3 – 9 taught by full-time fac-

Saul Kaiserman, MA, is the Director of Lifelong Learning for Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York and the editor of the weblog www.newjewisheducation.org.

ulty. It is still too early to differentiate with certainty between the outcomes that might be associated with full-time teaching and those that are specific to this particular institution. Still, it is worth noting that the size of the school has nearly tripled, and an independent evaluation has shown that parent, student and teacher satisfaction with the religious school experience has reached an all-time high. Anecdotes abound about students who have stayed home from secular school with a cold, but then insisted on not missing an afternoon session of religious school. Also, in nearly every instance, former faculty have moved on to leadership positions in Jewish educational institutions or to pursue a graduate degree in Jewish education or the rabbinate.

This year, at least three other synagogues in the New York area are either hiring full-time teachers or are exploring the possibility of doing so. The key limiting factor is the associated costs — not only for the increased salaries and the provision of benefits, but also for additional office resources and space. It is reasonable to assume that the school budget will at least double if a synagogue incorporates even a partial faculty of full-time teachers. Another technical challenge involves scheduling: While some schools currently hold classes five or six days a week, already making it possible for faculty to work throughout the week, others would require a dramatic restructuring of their weekly schedule. This might be a hardship for parents, not to mention a drain on institutional resources as additional maintenance and security staff would be required to keep the school open in new time-slots.

The greatest issue, however, comes from the simple question: What will these teachers do when they are not in the classroom? Unquestionably, working additional hours will not in and of itself lead to success. Thus, the key issue is how faculty members will use that time. Ultimately, if employing full-time faculty is to result in a cultural shift, this question of educational vision must be addressed by institutional leadership and endorsed by the broader community. Certainly, use of those extra hours will vary from one synagogue to the next, but there are at least three key ways that a full-time faculty could be instrumental in transforming a synagogue's educational program:


Collaborative curriculum design and

assessment: In most school settings with part-time faculty, it is difficult for faculty to find a free moment in which to work together to develop lessons and plan activities. Full-time faculty have the opportunity to meet on a regular basis to build curricula and to critique one another's work. Furthermore, full-time staff have time to develop a common educational vision, to set meaningful benchmarks for achievement and to assess the success of individual students as well as the entire program in meeting those goals.

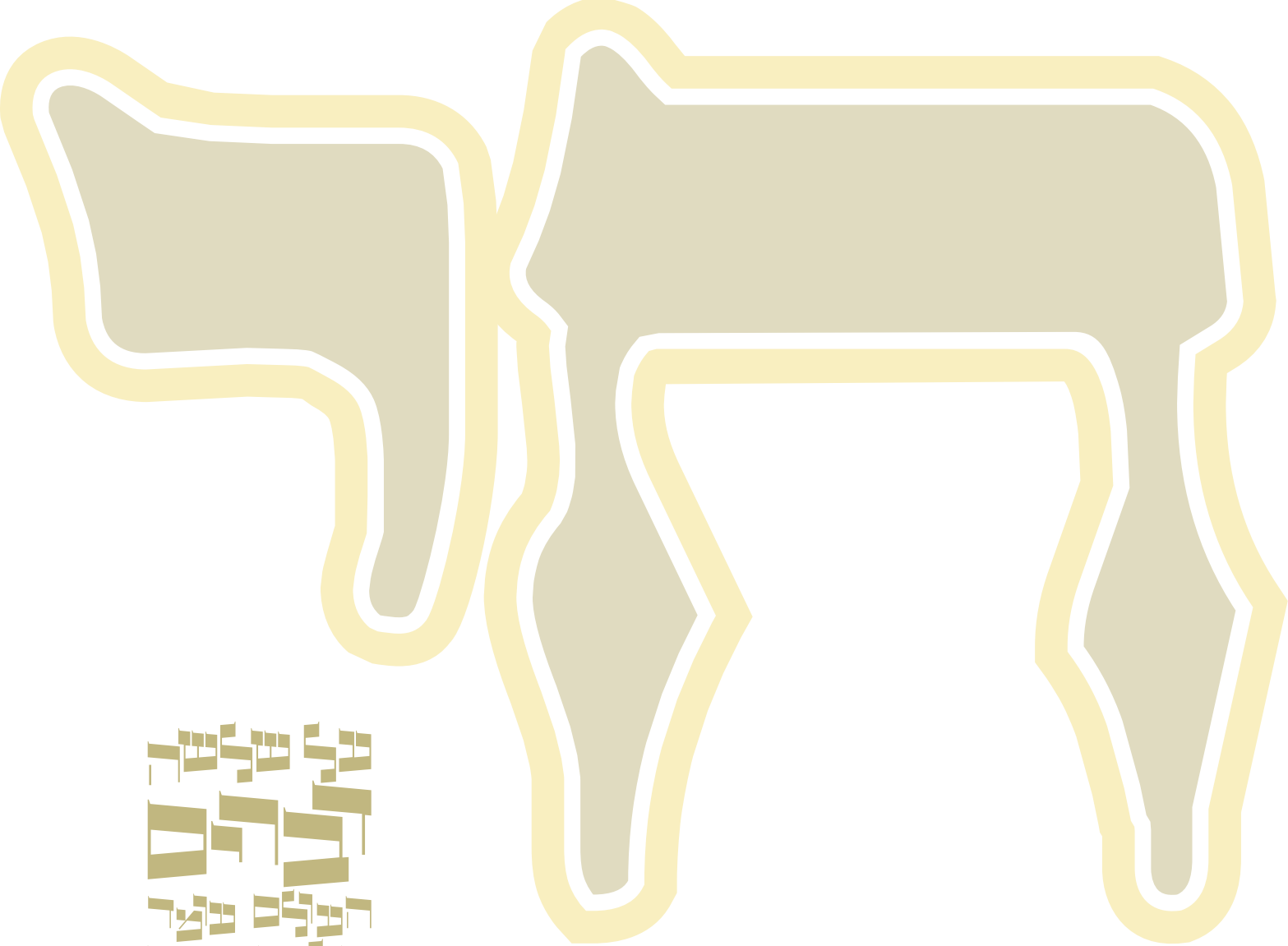
Ongoing communication: A full-time faculty can hold regular office hours in which to be in contact with parents and other stakeholders. This enables teachers to follow up on student absences, to write weekly letters or emails detailing the classroom activities of the week, and to serve as a conduit for the transmission of information about upcoming events.

Outside school activities: Many schools run creative programming and worship targeted to students and families on Shabbat and holidays; they also lead students on trips and provide opportunities for participation in social action projects. With a full-time faculty, these programs can be created and led by the classroom teachers, providing opportunities to link these activities with the religious school curriculum and to integrate the classroom experience with family participation in the broader synagogue community.

It seems self-evident that having more qualified and better compensated teachers working longer hours with more responsibilities outside the classroom will improve a religious school program. The real value of such a shift, however, is the opportunity it provides to align the school's curriculum, prayer experiences, and social justice activities with the vision and values of the synagogue as a whole. The integration of the religious school faculty into the daily life of the synagogue and the lives of its families provides new potential for building communities of learning and engaged Jewish living. True institutional transformation will come not only from improved pedagogy, but also from the creation of meaningful communal experiences outside the classroom.



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CHAI

A Living, Learning Community

by RABBI DANIEL FREELANDER
and RABBI JAN KATZEW

In recent years, fundamental changes in the Jewish community have had profound, perhaps unprecedented implications. In an effort to serve and lead a learning community of synagogue schools that responds to the auto-

nomous, mobile nature of contemporary Jewish life, the Union for Reform Judaism is offering CHAI — a versatile, adaptable Jewish studies curriculum, complemented by *Mitkadem*, its Hebrew learning counterpart. From its inception in 2001, CHAI was designed to be a dynamic, evolving curricular resource with a curriculum core for students in grades one through seven. Ongoing input from academicians, parents, educational leaders and teachers

has resulted in refinements that have met the needs of a diverse learning community. Complementing the curriculum core are family education, parent education and volunteer leadership components.

Our goal was to create a resource to help ensure that the community of Jewish learners should embrace congregations of every size and configuration, those with exceptional human and material resources and those with modest,

Rabbi Daniel Frelander is Vice-President of the Union for Reform Judaism. **Rabbi Jan Katzew, Ph.D.**, is Director of Lifelong Jewish Learning at the Union for Reform Judaism. To learn more about CHAI/Mitkadem, please go to www.urj.org/chai.

even meager resources. Our goal embraced educational affirmative action seeking to close the gap between well resourced and under-resourced communities. CHAI/*Mitkadem* offers a shared Jewish educational experience that can be implemented by schools of any size, in any community, at affordable expense. CHAI students who transfer to other CHAI schools adjust quickly, and find that they share a common Jewish experience with their new neighbors.

The CHAI Curriculum uses seven Levels to specify a set of twenty-seven lessons to be used during the course of any one year. Each level of CHAI has a thematic thread that connects Torah, *Avodah* and *G'millut Chasadim*. For example, in Level One, students relate personally to each strand through the theme of discovering themselves in the Jewish narrative. In Level Three, students refine their understanding of *kedushah* and apply that understanding to how ritual objects, symbols, prayer, and human behavior can bring moments and places closer to God. In Level Four, students study the relationship between the People and the Land in the Torah, the significance and structure of communal prayer, and acts of *G'milut Chasadim* affecting relationships — all with an eye towards understanding the relationship between being a member of a community and individual behaviors. In a later Level, students examine Revelation and explore ways in which they experience it personally. They consider whether there is a human role in divine revelation, study components of the Torah service, and explore *G'milut Chasadim* on a more universal level.

Since their introduction six years ago, the Jewish Education Service of North America has conducted an ongoing assessment of CHAI and *Mitkadem* in a concerted effort to improve the curriculum. Despite the fact that CHAI/*Mitkadem* is now implemented by more than 350 schools and used by thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of students, we are not satisfied with its quantitative success. We harbor no illusions that a curriculum, any curriculum, can cure ignorance and indifference. Yet we fervently believe that as much as education is local and dependent on the relationship of every teacher to every learner, it is also communal and global. Jewish experience has borne witness to

this proposition, with Torah and Talmud serving as the ultimate examples of texts that invite Jews to form a community of learners across time and space. In *The Talmud and The Internet*, Jonathan Rosen compellingly makes the case by suggesting that the idea of a virtual community is not a Twentieth Century invention but rather a Sixth Century (or earlier) rabbinic convention.

We knew we wanted to develop a curriculum as a centripetal force, to bring learning Jews together around concepts that are as authentic as they are relevant: Torah, *Avodah* and *G'millut Chasadim*. Knowing what we wanted to accomplish was necessary but not sufficient. We also needed to figure out how to improve synagogue schools.

How does one teach *clal Yisrael* when virtually every American Jew experiences Judaism differently? What are the shared experiences, understandings and melodies? As each Jewish community and school tends to make Shabbat for itself, in idiosyncratic and often creative ways, we face the potential of a generation of Jews without a common Jewish language. CHAI/*Mitkadem* has been designed to create a shared language of Jewish learning and develop shared values of Jewish meaning.

Our goal embraced educational affirmative action seeking to close the gap between well resourced and under-resourced communities.

CHAI/*Mitkadem* educational principles include:

1. The teacher is the most important learner in the class. If the lesson does not engage and excite the teacher, then how can it engage and excite the students?
2. A teacher needs to think like an assessor rather than an activity planner by asking repeatedly, "How do I know that the students understand what I am trying to teach?"
3. Special education is very good edu-

cation. Every student learns differently, and therefore, every student should be assessed individually, so we encourage the creation of a portfolio for each student.

4. A curriculum is not a document. It reflects what actually occurs in class. If we wish to develop a curriculum, we need to provide ongoing, longitudinal support to the teachers who make CHAI lessons come alive.
5. Educational change is incremental, not transformational. We are dedicated to continual improvement of the status quo.

CHAI/*Mitkadem* Jewish principles include:

1. Jewish learning must balance tradition and innovation.
2. The best evidence of Jewish learning is Jewish living.
3. Literacy, competency and caring are three essential dimensions of Jewish education.
4. Hebrew should not be a foreign language to a Jew in North America, but rather a second (or third) language.
5. A Jew lives in sacred community.
6. Liberal Judaism is a branch of Judaism, not liberalism.

CHAI/*Mitkadem* demands ongoing collaboration between educational leaders, teachers, parents, rabbis and volunteer leaders. The curriculum is supported by a network of educational consultants who provide ongoing teacher training, professional development, phone and email support, and an extensive website of best practices in the classroom tested by CHAI and *Mitkadem* teachers. For example, at the recent CAJE conference (August 2007), 50 educational leaders and teachers who represent a diverse assortment of synagogue and community schools engaged in intensive learning about CHAI and *Mitkadem*.

After the first six years of this ambitious project, the "Jewry" is still out on CHAI and *Mitkadem*, but there is growing evidence that the massive investment of time, money and talent is yielding significant dividends in teacher and student learning, in retention and in engagement.



A culture becomes creative where the dreams of its youth are revealed and the visions of its elders are revered... A culture that rejects the spirit of its youth will come to lack spirit and imagination when faced with life's almost impossible challenges. A culture that forgets the necessity of converting "olders" into genuine elders will have leaders who can't learn from the past and, therefore, can't imagine a meaningful future.

— Michael Meade, *The Water of Life*

Righting The Rite of **Bar Mitzvah**

by JACOB SCHREIBER

It has been twelve years since Edna and I brought our first born son, Gavri, into the world. We were so proud. But like many new parents, the specter of subjecting him to the *Mohel's* knife only eight days into his new life was upsetting. We could already hear his cries reverberate in the sanctuary, and we stressed over whether circumcision was civilized.

In the end, it wasn't an issue. This was our first opportunity to initiate our son into the community we loved, and we were going to celebrate this rite in

the tradition of Abraham. There would be meaning and joy, lox and bagels.

Now twelve years later, we are more appreciative of how much guidance children need to avoid excessive therapy. With this in mind, we are seizing the opportunity of Gavri's Bar Mitzvah, his second Jewish rite of passage, to provide him with impressions, rituals and relationships that will last a lifetime.

As human beings, we go through myriad physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual changes that reflect distinct stages of our lives, including early childhood, adolescence, adulthood and golden years.

Traditional cultures have long utilized rituals and communal rites of passage to help their members successfully move from one phase of life to the next. Among Jews, the Bar Mitzvah is one

such rite that traditionally marks the transformation of a boy into a man. At thirteen, he is counted as part of the *minyan* and assumes all responsibility for his actions — both good and bad.

That is no small change.

How does the modern Bar and Bat Mitzvah help usher our children into this new phase of life? What kind of added support and guidance does it provide them? Is it sufficient to learn how to chant Torah, lead a service and do a *mitzvah* project? Have we substantially aided the (Jewish) personal growth of our sons and daughters? Have we given them the tools they'll need to cross the threshold into adulthood? Have we built a meaningful *minyan* — a nurturing community of friends and elders to guide them?

Usually not. And that is a shame. Because considering the amount of time,

Jacob Schreiber is a veteran Jewish professional working for Hillel's Schusterman International Center. He also consults with organizations and families, helping them design and support alternative Jewish practices and programs that inspire joy, participation and personal meaning. He can be reached at jschreiber@hillel.org.

effort, pomp and money that goes into making a Bar Mitzvah, it should have a lasting effect on our sons and on the communities that surround them.

This is what Edna and I wanted for our son, from our community and from our tradition. So we went to a minyan of special friends and family and asked them to help us by agreeing to serve on a Counsel of Elders for Gavri's Bar Mitzvah.

In our invitation, we explained that the Bar Mitzvah is a sacred time when we are "encouraged to sharply focus on the treasured soul of a young man and utilize lifecycle rituals to provide him with the guidance, challenges and support he will need to transition from childhood into adolescence and manhood." We let them know that we could not see Gavri stepping over this threshold without their unique and intimate guidance. Edna and I explained that while we would always give Gavri parenting and family, we could not provide him with community. And in the end, we truly believe it takes a village — or, in the Jewish sense, a minyan — to help people achieve their potential and live happy, loving and spiritual lives.

Leaving all the Bar Mitzvah education solely in the hands of the clergy, then, would prove insufficient. While rabbis and educators might be expert in enhancing the skill sets and knowledge associated with the greater Jewish People, to be truly initiated into our Jewish community, Gavri will need to learn the values and customs of his immediate Jewish community — the people likely to be a part of our family's life after the Ark is closed and the party is over.

To achieve this, each Elder was asked to:

- Spend quality time with Gavri at least twice before his Bar Mitzvah and build a personal relationship;
- Listen to Gavri and encourage him to identify and express his dreams, desires, opinions and fears;
- Share with Gavri that which is of personal importance, including key values;
- Give specific guidance on any subject or skill — serious or fun —

ranging from theater to cooking, music, science, sports, religion, literature or activism;

- Be available for a few Counsel of Elders gatherings at which we would brainstorm on ideas and review what we collectively believe would be an appropriate challenge or task for Gavri to face as a rite of passage;
- Attend an Elders Assembly with Gavri to hear what he has learned, and then to ceremonially "pass him" over the threshold from childhood to adolescence and give him our blessings for his journey.

So far, so good.

While I can't reveal all that has and will transpire (what kind of self-respecting Tribal Council would do that?), and although we may be weirding out Gavri a bit, everyone involved has embraced the initiative. Gavri is learning things he just can't get in a formal Jewish school context. He is getting first-hand accounts of Jewish histories, customs, values and practices that are immediately relevant because they originate from people who matter to him. He is laying the foundations for personal and professional mentorships with quality Jewish adults from a variety of fields. And instead of learning about Jewish life from a denominational classroom that often presents a particular view of Judaism, he is being exposed to real-life Jewish pluralism through the eyes of an Orthodox rabbi, a Jewish atheist, an Iraqi-born traditionalist, an internet banker, a human rights activist, a Jewish professional and several others with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Equally satisfying is the positive effect this process is having on the Elders. Each has expressed being touched by having been asked to play a continuing role in our son's life; each feels empowered by serving as valued purveyors of Jewish values; and each has enjoyed meeting and bonding with other special people via the creation of something meaningful, novel and necessary.

Now if only Edna and I could get some help choosing between the pasta and fish.

TRIBECA HEBREW

by **HEATHER BROWN**

The bright, primary colors painted on all the walls may be intriguing, but the true color of Tribeca Hebrew lies in its powerful mission: to expose children and their families to Jewish culture and rituals and to provide a safe and inviting environment where Jews of all backgrounds can feel free to explore their Jewish identities and embark on a path of life-long learning.

In the Fall of 2007, Tribeca Hebrew will open its doors for its fourth year of operation. The school's original vision centered on the creation of a "Hebrew play group," which drew so much interest from Tribeca families that the idea emerged to create an afternoon Hebrew school instead. In 2006-07, 130 students enrolled, and, in the last several years, Tribeca Hebrew has more than doubled its size.

Tribeca Hebrew's curriculum aims to inspire and engage students from Pre-K through 8th grade. Students attend classes once a week in an intimate classroom setting where a young and energetic staff brings Jewish ideas to life. In addition to Hebrew instruction, the children explore Jewish rituals, values and culture. The buzz of classroom learning stems from out-of-the-box lessons, art projects and soulful song sessions.

The founding members of the school quickly learned that it was not enough to educate only the children. Since most Tribeca Hebrew families were not affiliated with a synagogue, the school would need to fulfill the spiritual needs of parents and children alike. As a result, the institution began to offer sophisticated adult education classes, family education programs, community-wide holiday celebrations, B'nei Mitzvah preparation and ceremonies, and monthly Shabbat dinners. Thus, the entire family is exposed to multiple paths of spiritual fulfillment.

At Tribeca Hebrew, our classes and programs are constantly evolving to best fit the needs of our families. Since the school is not affiliated with any particular Jewish movement or synagogue, our families reflect a wide spectrum of Jewish values and beliefs. The institution embraces this diversity and teaches pluralistic values, acceptance, and openness to all Jewish backgrounds.

Heather Brown, M.Ed., is Education Director of Tribeca Hebrew.



Jewish Family Education in Today's Synagogues

by RABBI JEFFREY SCHEIN

In the late 1980s, the concept of Jewish family education rolled onto the communal agenda with considerable fanfare. Clarion calls such as the one from the Cleveland Commission on Jewish Continuity focused attention on “whom” we were trying to reach as we planned for Jewish education:

Our approach to Jewish education must change. Of course, we must bolster formal Jewish learning. However, in order to survive as a people, the focus of Jewish education needs to shift from the child to the family, because our families must learn to make a Jewish home and raise a Jewish child. (1988)

Communal priorities tend to be cyclical and sometimes even fickle. Thus, by the mid-1990s, family education had given way to adult learning, and in the past five years, family education has given way to synagogue transformation. Hence, it is not surprising that a good deal of the programmatic apparatus for introducing family education into congregations and communities has been dismantled. The most notable exceptions to this rule are perhaps Cleveland and Boston.

Still, the sea changes in how we think about Jewish education are with us in a number of distinct ways. Jewish educators and communal planners now tend to think about and plan more holistic approaches for target populations. The Jewish family itself is understood in richer and more complex ways in terms of the constellations that Jewish educators desire to engage (inter-generational, interfaith, single-parent, gay/lesbian, etc.).

Thus, Jewish family education is not a static entity. It is of greatest value today if it is conceptually as well as programmatically linked to larger constructs such as life-long learning and caring communities. Vignettes reflecting this linkage come from two congregations (one Reconstructionist and one Reform) that have received Legacy Heritage Family Education Innovation grants. These Legacy Heritage grants are designed to link new innovations in Jewish family education with more systemic approaches to promote synagogue transformation.

Jewish Family Education as a Form of Community Building

Suburban Temple Kol Ami in Cleveland is a mid-size Reform congregation of about 500 families. While intimate by the scale of larger congregations, Suburban Temple Kol Ami is large enough for families to get lost. For many of these families, the more intimate sense of an extended family has been largely missing. Some 60 synagogue families have joined into ten larger neighborhoods in order to restore this sense of intimacy to their Jewish living

Rabbi Jeffrey Schein, Ed.D., is Professor and Director of the Department of Jewish Education at the Siegal College of Judaic Studies in Cleveland.

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and enrich their Jewish lives.

How might such neighborhoods (a word consciously chosen to avoid frightening away non-Hebraic speakers with “*havurot*”), be formed? Here Suburban Temple Kol Ami reflects a change in the landscape of Jewish Family Education nationally. In the earlier years of the field of Jewish Family Education, innovative programming would have been the first step in the process. Yet, it has become clear that innovation that is not guided by an educational vision is unproductive in the long run.

A well-articulated and vigorous vision can provide the basis for such family neighborhoods. Indeed, the professional and lay leadership has been working in conjunction with Siegal College and the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland to develop and implement just such a vision of the educated Reform Jew at Suburban Temple Kol Ami. The preamble of the vision begins, “We affirm that our goal is to develop forms of education that will support and challenge all learners to become educated Reform Jews who...” The remainder of the vision statement spells out the specific goals of an educated Reform Jew in such arenas as Torah study, Shabbat and festival celebration, prayer, relationship to Israel, and relationship to God.

The formation of these neighborhoods has just begun. Naturally, the highest priority is to establish a sense of belonging among the families that constitute the neighborhood. Neighborhood connector families are meeting and planning for the future. They are beginning to imagine what kind of activities might be generated if the specific goals within the vision statement serve as a kind of educational and spiritual compass for the activities of the neighborhood.

Jewish Family Education as a Form of Intergenerational Learning

Kol HaLev is a Reconstructionist congregation in Cleveland of about 130 households. It aspires to be an intergenerational learning community where empty nesters, seniors, young families with and without local grandparents, singles and marrieds share the joys of Jewish learning and living. Kol HaLev is utilizing its grant from the Legacy Heritage foundation to further these goals.

Kol HaLev leaders and members believe that the richest form of family

learning is intergenerational in character. During the first year of experimentation as a Legacy family education innovator, the congregation explored the notion that the most powerful form of such learning is rooted in the soil of a community exploring a single, powerful Jewish debate topic. For example, this past year, the anchoring topic was “Wrestling with Ourselves, Wrestling with Angels.” At an initial intergenerational program at a rock-climbing gym, participants had a chance to emulate Jacob’s wrestling match with a person representing a divine messenger (dressed as a Samurai), as well as to take on the challenge of climbing to new heights on the rock walls. The final Shabbaton/weekend was attended by 55 households and had the power and poignancy of family retreats as a venue for effective Jewish family education.

The heart of the thrust towards intergenerational learning was captured during a Purim event, when a 65-year-old empty nester joined a group of seven year olds talking about courage and bullying. One seven-year-old confessed that it’s very hard to take on a bully. The older Kol HaLev member did not lecture or moralize, but shared with the child the plot line of a play about bullying and scapegoating written by his daughter, a New York playwright. A spark of *chochma* (wisdom) had jumped a generational gap.

Towards Life-Long Learning

It has become clear to the senior professionals who guide Jewish education in Cleveland that powerful forms of family education such as those described above can only occur if there is a guiding vision of the role of the family within the larger ecology of Jewish learning and living. Hence, we tend to think of Jewish family education less as a single program and more as a lens for viewing the work towards the ultimate prize of life-long learning. To empower such vital approaches, the family educators in the community in collaboration with rabbinic and lay leadership developed a vision template for Jewish family education that can be adapted to the unique needs of each congregation. The core of the vision is captured in the very first sentence: “We seek to inspire and support the Jewish journey of our families.” The shared vignettes are but two versions of many powerful journeys.

PROZDOR

by MARGIE TARMY BERKOWITZ

Prozdor Boston has undergone a dramatic rebirth over the past eight years. Our enrollment has grown from 175 to 900 students, the result of our willingness to dismantle the program that was in place in order to create something new for today’s teens. What initiated Prozdor’s remarkable transformation?

1. Choices! Choices! Choices!

We put the ownership of each student’s education in his or her own hands. The teens can choose the number of hours they study, where they study and what they study. Other than one core course each year, all classes — including Hebrew language — are elective. We offer a two-hour (non-graduating) track, a four-hour standard track and a six-hour honors track. While most students participate in our Sunday morning program, we offer weeknight branches in seven different locations.

2. Magical teaching

We hire the very best teachers who create magical learning experiences for our students. Our teachers are passionate about their subject areas, and they are passionate about teaching teens. Serious academic focus is the absolute core of the Prozdor experience. Our teachers span the entire spectrum of Jewish belief and practice. They are encouraged to share their own Jewish story with their students, and so a wide array of role models is visible in our community. New faculty are hired with input from students as well.

3. See the world while building a community

We believe in education beyond the classroom. Each school year, we provide a trip or Shabbaton for each grade, plus an outstanding international experience. All overseas trips are paired with a curriculum that is taught before the trip and follow-up sessions upon the travelers’ return. Each year we offer a 12th Grade Israel trip, and we feature a biennial trip to Poland and Lithuania. We have brought students to London, Spain, Montreal and locations around the United States. Students enjoy an engaging learning experience while building a connection to Prozdor and forging new relationships.

4. Location, Location, Location

We are blessed to be part of Hebrew College, which is housed on a magnificent college campus. As students move around the campus, changing classes and meeting friends, they feel empowered and independent.

5. Building the Jewish future, one teen at a time.

Despite our heavy enrollment, we manage to know each student and his or her needs along with parental expectations and commitment. We are flexible and at the same time maintain high standards. We are there for our kids, whether to write a college recommendation, find the right class or teacher for an autistic child, or just sit and listen to a teen or parent who feels overwhelmed. Prozdor is part of each family’s “real life.”

Margie Tarmy Berkowitz, M.J.Ed., has been Director of Prozdor since 1998, following a long career in Jewish education that included leading congregational schools in both Reform and Conservative synagogues and directing Camp Yavneh.



Authentic Jewish Education

by **BILL ROBINSON**

In 1990, the Commission on Jewish Education in North America published *A Time to Act*. In it, a renowned group of philanthropists, Jewish educators and scholars wrote:

It is clear that there continues to be a core of deeply committed Jews whose very way of life ensures meaningful Jewish continuity from generation to generation. However, the thrust of the Commission's thinking was directed at the much larger segment of the Jewish population which is finding it increasingly difficult to define its future in terms of Jewish values and behavior. The commissioners realized that there was no way to guarantee that education is going to resolve this issue for the majority of Jews today. But it is also clear that education is the only means by which this goal can be achieved.

With the release of data on intermarriage and assimilation in the 1990 *National Jewish Population Study* and the subsequent furor that shook the Jewish world, education came to be viewed as the panacea for all of our problems. Far be it from me to argue against the importance of Jewish education. The problem I find is with the Jewish community's continued insistence on turning the education of our youth into a means — and the primary means — of creating adult Jews actively engaged in living Jewishly. We need to shed this means-end rationality and begin to embrace Jewish education as an end in itself.

There are signs that this has been happening already. The increasing popularity of lifelong Jewish learning speaks to the growing acknowledgement that Jewish education is not solely or even primarily for youth; rather, Jewish learning is central to a full adult Jewish life. Yet, our educational institutions, especially our congregational schools, still focus on teaching our young children

Bill Robinson, Ph.D., is Director of Education and Research at The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

If Judaism is our path toward being fully human, which I believe it is, Jewish education must teach all of us to play with our Judaism. To achieve this, we cannot build schools; we need to construct authentic educational spaces for living Jewishly...

knowledge and skills that they are supposed to use later on in life (not in the immediacy of the classroom). They teach prayer skills, but don't give them opportunities to practice the art of praying. They teach the words and lessons of Torah, but don't give them opportunities to glean meaning from the text through creative *drash*-ing. They teach Jewish values, but don't create opportunities to act out these values side-by-side with their classmates in their everyday lives.

I am heartened that there are places where these practices are changing. For instance, some schools seriously use curricula designed to encourage and teach students to creatively interpret the Torah. Congregations that have partnered with Spark: The Center for Jewish Service Learning at the Jewish Funds for Justice provide their youth with opportunities for service learning. But such programs are still few and far between. Instead, we end up with students who know bits and pieces about Judaism, but have never actively experienced what a full Jewish life in a community feels like. They see it as something one does as an adult, though, of course, most of the adults they know don't do it.

Instead of seeing education as preparation for later participation in Jewish life, we need to see our educational institutions as spaces in which Jewish living actually happens in all its fullness. Classrooms (in the broadest sense of the term) need to be places where praying, *drash*-ing, and doing *mitzvot* happen at all ages. The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) is revolutionary because it puts forth the vision that the preschool should really be a center of Jewish living (grounded in learning) for the entire family — for parents and for young children.

Young people — and adults for that matter — need to learn about their cultural heritage before they can become

active participants in living and shaping it. One needs to know something about driving before getting behind the steering wheel. But, one really learns to drive by driving. One also needs to know something about playing the piano (though much less) before one begins to play, but again one learns to play the piano by playing the piano. We need our youth (and our adults) to learn about Judaism by doing Jewish. And, as is the case with driving and playing the piano, there will be certain things they need to know first. But I bet those things are a lot fewer than what we teach before we let them play.

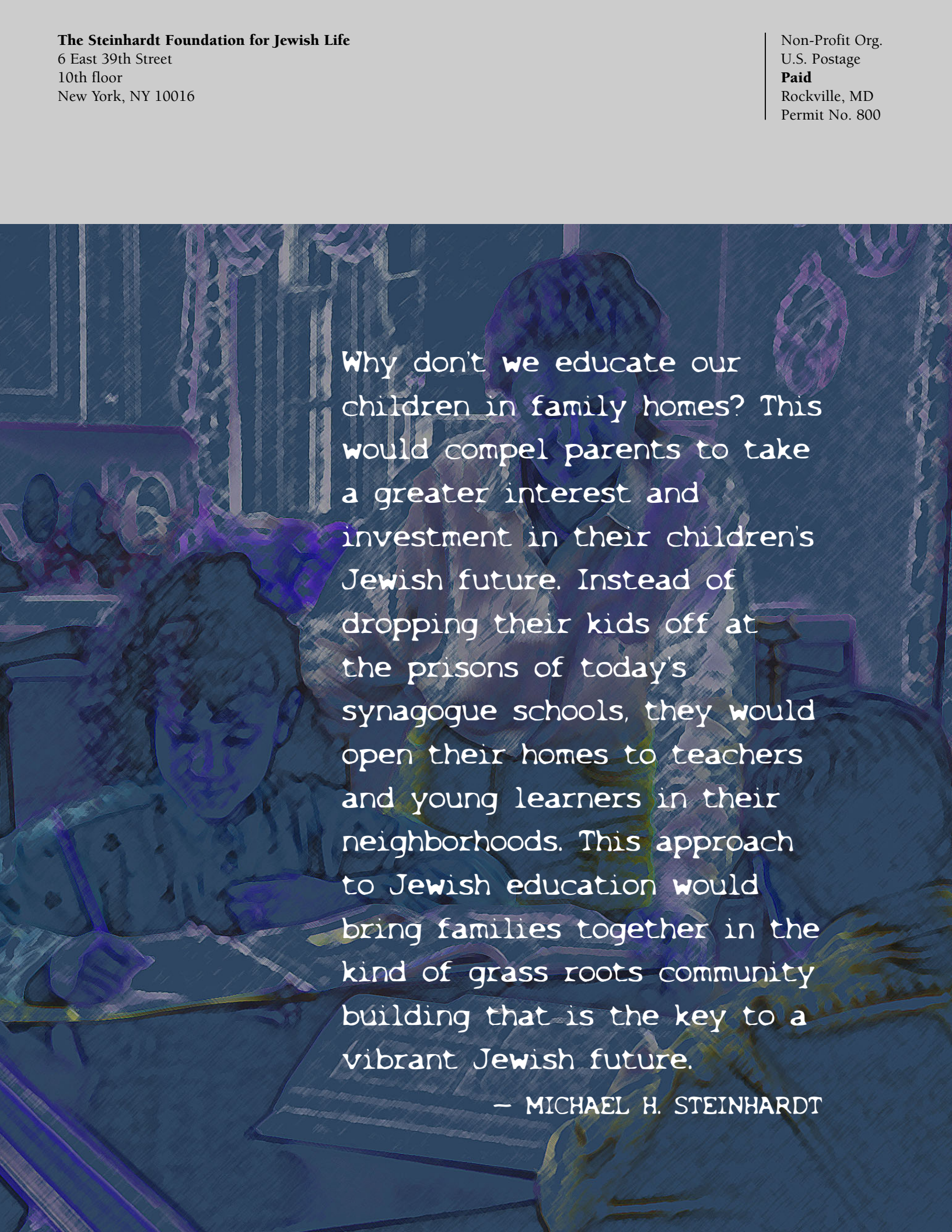
The younger generations are growing up in a world in which being a novice dabbler is common nature. Everyone today is a DJ, creating his/her own song lists and mixes, sampling from different songs to create personal and unique sounds. Where once there were professional photographers, now everyone with a camera phone and Photoshop is a photographer. And now that we've entered the era of Web 2.0, millions of people online are creating their own content, whether through personal blogs or MySpace pages. Younger generations expect to be able to play with their cultural heritages — not just to choose and pick between options, but to re-shape those options into forms we never even thought of. They will become actively engaged Jewish adults only if we show them when they are young how they can play with Judaism to create meaningful lives for themselves, as well as for their families and friends.

Full-time teachers, informal educational experiences, family education and new curricular resources, to name just a few, are vital to Jewish education. But none of them are sufficient. We need a whole new approach to Jewish education, of which we now see only a glimpse. Let's call it Authentic Jewish Education.

There are several meanings of the term authenticity that make it a complex and aptly descriptive term for this new approach to Judaism. First, when we commonly talk about authenticity in regard to a culture (such as Judaism), we mean those elements that have long been part of the Jewish tradition. In this sense, Orthodoxy has often accused Reform Judaism of being inauthentic, an unacceptable break with tradition.

Yet, there is a second meaning of the term, which is shared with its cognate "author." To live authentically is to be the author of your own life. Lionel Trilling, in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, describes how authenticity comes from the Greek word *authentēo*, which means "to have full power over" but also "to commit a murder." When we become the authors of our own lives, we have in essence murdered our former selves. In Authentic Jewish Education we will recognize and honor those who have wrestled with Judaism before us. We will also metaphorically kill Judaism every day by taking it apart, turning it upside down and pulling it inside out — constantly creating the new while remembering the past.

Trilling goes on to quote Schiller, "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays." If Judaism is our path toward being fully human, which I believe it is, Jewish education must teach all of us to play with our Judaism. To achieve this, we cannot build schools; we need to construct authentic educational spaces for living Jewishly. This brings us to the third meaning of the word authentic — when professed values are truly embodied in behaviors. Authentic Jewish Education creates experiential communities for all ages that live and play Jewishly together, and that reflect on that play in order to grow from it.

A painting in a dark, textured style, possibly charcoal or oil, depicting a woman and a young child sitting at a table. The woman is leaning over the child, who is holding an open book. They appear to be reading together. The background features architectural elements like columns and decorative patterns. The overall mood is intimate and focused on learning.

Why don't we educate our children in family homes? This would compel parents to take a greater interest and investment in their children's Jewish future. Instead of dropping their kids off at the prisons of today's synagogue schools, they would open their homes to teachers and young learners in their neighborhoods. This approach to Jewish education would bring families together in the kind of grass roots community building that is the key to a vibrant Jewish future.

— MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT