

REACHING AND TEACHING JEWISH YOUTH: A STUDY OF POST-B'NAI MITZVAH RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT

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Despite differences in ideology and school structure across synagogue schools in the United States, there is widespread consensus that post B'nai Mitzvah dropout is an epidemic that threatens the future of American Jewry (Saxe et al., 2001; Woocher, 1992). As current studies document, American Jews are at an historical moment in addressing serious and ongoing assimilation into mainstream American society (Saxe et al., 2001; Woocher, 1992). However, despite serious concern and widespread attention in this area, there seem to be many more questions than answers about how to remedy the current situation.

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education (ACAJE) of Greater Philadelphia set out to find answers to some of these questions in an action research study devoted to post-B'nai Mitzvah dropout and retention. From September 2000 to August 2001, ACAJE conducted research in the area of adolescent retention in the Jewish community. The goal of this study was to learn more about how to retain young people's involvement in the Jewish community beyond their Bar and Bat Mitzvah, a time when the majority of young Jews become disconnected from Jewish life and lose opportunities for Jewish learning just as they are developing their identities. This research was funded by the Lasko Charitable Fund, a philanthropic

fund committed to the implementation of youth initiatives that are grounded in solid research.

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in research and writing on post-B'nai Mitzvah dropout (e.g., Elias & Kress, 1997; JESNA, 2000; Munitz-Gruberger, 2001; Sales, 1996; Saxe et al., 2001; Woocher, 1992). Yet, relatively little has been done to bridge theory with practice or to bring students' opinions and voices into the process of exploration into and decision-making about ways to improve their formal and informal Jewish experiences. ACAJE's goal was to learn about young Jews' interests, needs, and opinions through a year-long research study that focused on youth before, during, and after becoming B'nai Mitzvah, as well as on their families, community leaders, and college students. The findings of this research will be used to stimulate planning for and implementation of youth initiatives in the Greater Philadelphia Area.

This research was conducted with approximately 800 Jewish youth in the Greater Philadelphia area between the ages of 11 and 22; parents of Jewish youth who are Pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah, in their Bar/Bat Mitzvah year, and post Bar/Bat Mitzvah; and youth professionals representing formal and informal realms of Jewish education both locally and nationally. Diversity was sought with respect to age, gender, geographical region, movement affiliation, and the nature of participants' Jewish involvement (or noninvolvement), with a focused attempt to include non-affiliated students from a range of backgrounds and regions.

An expanded version of this study, including research design, will be published in the summer of 2002. For more information on how to order a copy of this study, please contact Dr. Sharon M. Ravitch, 215.635.8940, ext. 1228, or sravitch@acaje.org.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: The Jewish Education System Needs to Undergo a Paradigm Shift

Enlivening Jewish Learning—"This is Not Your Father's Hebrew School"

Because today's youth are considerably more sophisticated in terms of their educational needs, they want, need, and expect more from synagogue school than their parents did. These higher expectations are due in large part to increased experience with student-centered pedagogy in their secular classrooms. Specifically, students expect that they will be actively engaged in learning and that the classroom experience will reach beyond the confines of their synagogue classroom. Our data point to a desire on the part of contemporary synagogue school students to be engaged by their teachers in various forms of experiential learning and in learning that is connected to critical thought and meaningful, ongoing forms of community action.

What became clear throughout the research process is that American synagogue schools must undergo a paradigm shift. Today's students are aware of, and are therefore resistant to, sub-standard teaching and recycled curricular materials. And while students may be too tired at the end of a long day to communicate this to their teachers, they are communicating this with their feet as they walk out of synagogue schools just after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, never to return. The overwhelming majority of students in the study made it clear that their choice not to stay in synagogue school was precipitated by the feeling that there is/was nothing compelling to keep them there. This was in sharp contrast to students who chose to stay in synagogue school after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah because their programs, teachers, and/or educational directors created environments in which they felt energized and engaged socially, intellectually, and/or in terms of social action, and in which they felt person-

ally connected and supported. This contrast speaks directly to the need for the professional development of educators, as well as for revised curricula and enhanced programming. It makes clear that there is a dire need for more accountability within the supplementary school system, as well as for focused and supportive ongoing professional and leadership development for teachers and their educational directors.

Finding 2: Teacher Training and Curriculum Development

Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn: The Need for Quality Control

The overwhelming majority of students from all age groups reported that their teachers did not involve them in the classroom or give them the opportunity to explore or express their opinions and questions about Jewish issues. Rather, students reported that their teachers tended to follow teachers' manuals from outdated textbooks rather than working with planned, meaningful, sequential materials that build on students' prior knowledge and experiences in synagogue school. Furthermore, students pointed to the fact that many of their teachers lack pedagogical and management skills, as well as a sufficient Judaic knowledge base. These students repeatedly voiced frustration at feeling "forced" to sit in classrooms with teachers who themselves seemed disengaged and who lacked inspiration and/or pedagogical and classroom management skills.

The participants reported that they would have been more likely to remain in the Jewish educational system beyond their Bar/Bat Mitzvah if the curricula were personally meaningful, relevant to their secular lives, sequential, developmentally appropriate, student-centered, based on active learning models, and taught by teachers who are able to engage students. Many of the high-school-aged participants reported that their synagogue school experience did not contribute to positive feelings about their Jewishness

nor did it give them the background necessary to lead a meaningful Jewish life. One young woman, for example, noted that she "didn't even learn how to run a Jewish home." The majority of high school-aged participants reported that their main reason for leaving formal Jewish education was that their synagogue school experience leading up to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah was not "meaningful," "valuable," or "enjoyable."

Conversely, students reported that when they had engaging and knowledgeable teachers who gave them the opportunity to think critically about various issues, they enjoyed synagogue school and valued their learning. The teachers who engaged their students with exciting material and inspired pedagogy were respected and adored by students and considered by them to be mentors. Not surprisingly, it was the students who had teachers that showed this sort of commitment and skill who typically returned to synagogue school after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and who voiced more of an understanding about the importance of receiving a Jewish education.

Finding 3: Diversifying Curriculum, Instruction and Programming for Jewish Youth

"One Size Does Not Fit All"

What became strikingly clear after engaging with diverse students across the region is that students from different areas have different needs in terms of pedagogy and programming. While approximately 90 percent of the participants voiced that they wanted more out of their synagogue school experiences, there were some important differences among students. For example, students from higher socioeconomic areas tended to communicate more interest in participating in programs such as ski trips and coffee houses, and had no financial concerns about doing so, whereas their counterparts from less financially secure families asked questions and showed concern about funding and transportation for such events.

These differences in the needs that students communicated speak to the fact that synagogue schools need to think not only about improving the content and style of instruction, but also about developmental, social class, gender, and regional differences as they plan positive changes in synagogue school education and programming. They point directly to the need to think critically, progressively, and inclusively about curriculum, instruction, and programming for Jewish youth.

Finding 4: Parental Roles in Post-B'nai Mitzvah Retention

"It Takes a Village to Raise a Family"

Both students' and their parents' responses supported the widely accepted notion that their parents' beliefs about their children's Jewish education had much to do with their own sense of priority about Jewish education. Many students reported that their parents viewed their Bar or Bat Mitzvah as little more than an historic rite of passage. For example, one student stated, "I'm doing it 'cause my Mom Mom and Pop Pop would be mad at my mom if I didn't"; many said they had no intention of pursuing anything Jewish-related after the day passed, as one student admitted, "The day I read my Haftorah, I'm outta here!"

In contrast, the students who reported that they wanted to continue with their Jewish education generally noted that either their parents insisted and placed great importance on their continuing Jewish education and/or their parents were themselves involved in the synagogue and in some form of Jewish learning and practice. Likewise, of the parents interviewed, those whose children continued with their Jewish education post-B'nai Mitzvah were clearly themselves committed to Jewish learning, whereas parents whose children were not involved tended to communicate their own reluctance or lack of a sense of connection to their synagogues and their own Jewish learning.

The correlation between parent and student attitudes toward Jewish education was powerful in its consistency and points toward the need for consistent and meaningful outreach from our Jewish institutions and the Jewish community at large to parents and families. Further, it speaks to the need for training in family outreach and education for teachers and educational directors so that they are aware of the need for family involvement and able to address it proactively.

**Finding 5: The Collective
Abandonment of Jewish Youth**

"Out of Sight, Out of Mind"

The overwhelming majority of Jewish youth who left synagogue school after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah reported a lack of outreach from Jewish leaders or peers after they left. Many of these students said that they would be interested in attending informal Jewish events, and even possibly school-based events or innovative school programs, but that they were not contacted by anyone after their first year of leaving the school. A significant number of students noted that outreach might have made a difference in their decision to return to synagogue school. For example, one student responded to our phone inquiry with excitement and immediately asked how he could get involved. He stated, "Wow, I would really like to be involved; no one calls me anymore." This finding speaks to the need for outreach in innovative ways given kids' high-tech, fast-paced lives as well as the decentralized nature of Jewish communal life in America.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research suggest a number of possible directions to pursue in addressing the critical issue of retaining young people in the Jewish community beyond their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. While the recommendations that follow reflect our findings, we would urge regional research on this topic since we have found that the data,

and, therefore the implications of this data, are largely context dependent. These recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to engender active dialogue about how to remedy the current crisis in Jewish involvement among Jewish youth.

**Implication 1: Systemic Revision of
the Jewish Educational System:
Beyond Turf Wars**

Students' responses speak to the need for institutional integration of youth curricula, teaching staff, and programming as well as a systems approach for adolescent programming across institutions. Such a shift would require the formation and implementation of a system of communication across formal and informal educators so that the Jewish education and outreach system is unified, continuous, and interdependent. Integration would contribute to less "reinventing the wheel" programming, as well as to a seamless experience across youth's educational experiences, both formal and informal. Facilitating this paradigm shift will require a reenvisioning of the Jewish educational system across movements and venues, as well as serious reconsideration of how Jewish programming for youth is conceptualized (i.e., intra- and inter-institutional restructuring toward a collaborative model).

**Implication 2: The Need for Serious
Teacher Training and Curricular
Development**

Students' reports about the quality of their synagogue school experiences speak to the need for a systemic focus on teacher training and professional development for teachers and educational directors toward the goal of making the curriculum and instruction sequential, student-centered, and responsive to students' needs. As students stated with consistency, Jewish education is often passive and frontal and should be more active and interactive so that the learning is meaningful and so that teachers involve and engage students. Students must feel that they are being engaged in meaningful dialogue and activi-

ties, both inside and outside the classroom. To this end, community service emerged as a one way to improve Jewish learning contexts. Students also want to spend semi-structured time with peers. Put simply, kids do not just want to "sit around anymore." Teachers must learn how to incorporate active learning strategies and activities into their teaching. This can only happen when teachers' knowledge base is enhanced so that they have serious, in-depth, meaningful lessons to offer.

Implication 3: Jewish Education Needs to Shift

Jewish education needs clear goals that relate directly to the needs, wants, and demands of youths' lives. There is a need to clarify that for and with educators so that the educational experience is dynamic and meaningful (and "cool"). It needs to integrate formal and informal education since Jewish educators cannot teach the cognitive without the affective and social aspects of Judaism.

We need to promote the positive aspects of Jewish learning and Jewish living through engaging students and their families in a creative, new approach to Jewish education. This necessitates a shift in the organizational infrastructure so that education becomes central to synagogue functioning and rabbis and synagogue leaders are integrated into the process of teaching and learning.

Implication 4: The Need for Parental Education/Involvement

Parents' investment in their children's Jewish education typically lasts until their child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In order to make a significant change in this pervasive attitude, we must create programs within an entire system that (1) attract and engage parents in learning and living Jewishly, (2) seek ongoing parental buy-in, and (3) model valuing Jewish education as an end in and of itself, not simply a means to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. This will require long-range plan-

ning, comprehensive programming, and systemic change.

Since parents often focus on their own less-than-ideal Hebrew School experiences and then pass on this negativity to their children, we must replace these perceptions with contemporary, resonant images. To this end, there needs to be an experiential component to synagogue school. We also need to integrate Jewish education into people's lives, to help parents realize that Jewish education can be integral to their lives, and to foster a sense that Jewish education is integral to Jewish life and identity. In this area, the Jewish community as a whole must work to undo the devaluation of leading a Jewish life and of Jewish education.

Young parents need to be involved in the educational process from the beginning of their children's educational experiences. Schools need to consider focusing parent and family education from the pre-school years and throughout the teen years in new and innovative ways. Jewish educators and rabbis must act as advisers to parents and families, helping them create a "Jewish family strategic plan."

We need to provide a variety of entrees into the Jewish world for families, creating a continuum in which they can move back and forth in their level of involvement over time.

Implication 5: A Call to Stop Abandoning Our Jewish Youth

There needs to be a system of accountability in the Jewish community as a whole so that students and families who opt out of the system do not ultimately feel too alienated to return. This must be thought through creatively. Institutions should seriously consider hiring outreach workers to contact youth and families who leave the formal Jewish educational system.

CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR ACTION RESEARCH IN THE STUDY OF JEWISH YOUTH

Our findings speak to the need for systemic accountability and professional devel-

opment across Jewish educational contexts. Specifically, our data point to the need for synagogues to better meet the needs of their constituencies: youth and their families. While programming for post B'nai Mitzvah can certainly be improved upon, the seeds for valuing Jewish learning must be sown well before that time. This has both local and national implications, and we urge other centralized institutions to engage in action research in this domain; research that crosses over movements, specific venues, and demographic areas so that all Jewish institutions can come together to better serve our youth and ensure our future as a people.

One of the most significant findings came as a result of engaging in action research. We began this research as a response to a generous offer of funding for post B'nai Mitzvah programming from the Lasko Charitable Fund. Together, we decided that, rather than simply creating new programming, we should inquire as to what the youth themselves wanted and valued as a preliminary step to implementing any given program. Together we developed a research plan for engaging in data collection across the entire Philadelphia region and explored in depth the needs, concerns, and desires of a diverse range of local youth.

This model of research, in which the funders are involved in the research process and in which an interdisciplinary advisory committee helped chart the research process, yielded a quality of research that far exceeded our expectations. This was a self-conscious pursuit of multiple perspectives. The collaborative and action-oriented nature of this research resulted in a collaborative commitment to a community-wide agenda dealing with the significant issues that will affect the future of Jewish youth and the Jewish community as a whole.

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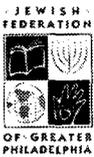
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INDEX

Volume 78 (2001–2002)

F: Fall Issue

W/S: Winter/Spring Issue

S: Summer Issue

A. AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Adams, Susan, S:000
Avgar, Amos, F:49
Bayme, Steven, F:38
Barasch, Miriam, F:49
Bernstein-Baker, Judith, S:000
Block, Cindy E., W/S:75
Bronstein, Marcia, S:000
Bubis, Gerald B., W/S:99
Comet, Ted, F:60
Feldman, Marla, F:15
Finkel, Norman S., S:000
Geldman, Ardie, F:32
Glicksman, Allen, S:000
Goldberg, Caroline, W/S:80
Greene, Wallace, W/S:73
Hocky, Abby Stamelman, S:000
Iecovich, Esther, F:49
Kaufman, Nancy K., F:20
Kaufman, Roni, F:49
Kol-Fogelson, Aliza, F:49
Kolton, Leonid, F:49
Linzer, Norman, F:43
Mirsky, Julia, F:49
Moses, Larry S., F:4
Ravitch, Sharon, S:000
Romirowsky, Reuben, W/S:89
Rosenthal, Hannah, F:12
Rubinstein, Joshua, W/S:104
Ruskay, John S., S:000
Schactman, Tom, W/S:104
Schneider, Leonard C., W/S:68
Sheanin, Dana R., F:4
Spector, Jay, S:000
Tye, Larry, F:60
Zucker, David J., F:56

B. SUBJECT MATTER

Administration and Management

Jewish Organizational Change in a Digital World: Some New Considerations, by Reuben Romirowsky W/S: 89

Book Reviews

Home Lands, by Larry Tye F:60
Director Had a Heart Attack, The, by Gerald B. Bubis, W/S:99
I Seek My Brethren, by Tom Schactman, W/S:104
Stalin's Secret Pogrom, by Joshua Rubinstein, W/S:104

Aging Services

A Place to Call Their Own: The Importance of the Jewish Home for the Aged for Residents with Dementia, by Caroline Goldberg, W/S:80
The Past as Prologue—Aging Jewishly in Philadelphia: A Model for the Nation, by Allen Glicksman, S:000

Children's Services

Development of Child Care Under Jewish Auspices in the Greater Philadelphia Community, The, by Norman S. Finkel, S:00

Community—Its Character, Trends, and Values

Building a United and Caring Jewish Community, by Dr. Norman Linzer, F:43
Strengthening Community Post-9/11, by Dr. John S. Ruskay, S:000

Community Organization and Social Planning—Federations

Jewish Organizational Change in a Digital World: Some New Considerations, by Reuben Romirowsky W/S: 89

Family Services

Hesed Model: Jewish Community Welfare Centers in the Former Soviet Union, The, by Amos Avgar, Miriam Barasch, Aliza Kol-Fogelson, Julia Mirsky,

Roni Kaufman, Esther Iecovich, & Leonid Kolton, F:49

Community Links: A Collaborative Model Point of Entry Program, by Cindy E. Block, W/S:75

Redefining Citizenship Services: The Case for Jewish Communal Involvement, by Susan Adams & Judith Bernstein-Baker, S:00

Israel

Growing Gap Between American Jews and Israel: Two Views, The, The Israeli Perspective, by Ardie Geldman, F:32

Growing Gap Between American Jews and Israel: Two Views, The, The North American Perspective, by Steven Bayme, F:38

Jewish Community Relations

Community Relations in the Aftermath of September 11, A Call to Action: Social Justice and Community Relations, by Hannah Rosenthal, F:12

Community Relations in the Aftermath of September 11, What's in the Name? A Case for Community Relations, by Rabbi Marla Feldman, F:15

Community Relations in the Aftermath of September 11, Recapturing Our Soul: A Vision of Community Relations, by Nancy K. Kaufman, F:20

Public Policy and Jewish Needs, Jay Spector, S:00

Redefining Citizenship Services: The Case for Jewish Communal Involvement, by Susan Adams & Judith Bernstein-Baker, S:00

Jewish Education

Reaching and Teaching Jewish Youth: A Study of Post B'nai Mitzvah Retention and Engagement, by Dr. Sharon Ravitch, S:00

Role of the Jewish Communal Worker

Recruitment and Retention: Imperatives for the Field of Jewish Communal Service, by Larry S. Moses & Dana R. Sheanin, F:4

When Do the Best Rest—And Why? A Work in Progress, by Rabbi David J. Zucker, F:56

Elevating the Status of the Jewish Communal Professional, by Wallace Greene, W/S:73

Strengthening Professional Leadership of Jewish Agencies: The Tri-State Jewish Professional Leadership Institute, by Marcia Bronstein, & Abby Stamelman Hocky, S:00

Training, Supervision, Recruitment, Professional Education

Recruitment and Retention: Imperatives for the Field of Jewish Communal Service, by Larry S. Moses & Dana R. Sheanin, F:4

Strengthening Professional Leadership of Jewish Agencies: The Tri-State Jewish Professional Leadership Institute, by Marcia Bronstein, & Abby Stamelman Hocky, S:00

Values, Jewish Content, Jewish Identify

Building a United and Caring Jewish Community, by Dr. Norman Linzer, F:43

Strengthening Community Post-9/11, by Dr. John S. Ruskay, S:000

World Jewry

Hesed Model: Jewish Community Welfare Centers in the Former Soviet Union, The, by Amos Avgar, Miriam Barasch, Aliza Kol-Fogelson, Julia Mirsky, Roni Kaufman, Esther Iecovich, & Leonid Kolton, F:49

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Faculty Opening in Jewish Communal Service

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion announces the opening of a junior level tenure-track position in Jewish Communal Studies, which will begin July, 2003. Responsibilities include teaching and mentoring graduate students on the Los Angeles campus at the School of Jewish Communal Service.

The ideal candidate will possess a strong academic background in non-profit management, planning, organizational development and/or business administration. Knowledge of modern Jewish history and Jewish religious traditions is considered to be essential. Preference will be given to candidates with a Ph.D. and/or a record of scholarly publication, and to those who have had occasion to study and/or work with Jewish organizations.

Candidates should indicate their interest in this position by sending an email to Dr. Isa Aron, Chair of the Search Committee (aron@usc.edu) as soon as possible.

The full application, due no later than January 15, 2003, should include: a cover letter explaining the candidate's qualifications; curriculum vitae; one or more published articles and/or chapters of a dissertation; and three letters of recommendation (which can arrive separately).

Please send these materials to:

Isa Aron, Ph.D., Chair of the Search Committee
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
3077 University Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90007-3796

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