

SHAARE TEFILAH ADULT EDUCATION
BIG READ
Shabbat, March 7, 2009

Is afternoon Jewish education effective?

Most Conservative Jews rely on after school and Sunday classes to teach their children about being Jewish. However, many people have complained that such education is not effective and is not producing children who are knowledgeable about their religion and committed to Judaism.

It has been said that afternoon Jewish education caters to the "least common denominator" of observance and knowledge among the members of synagogues. There are those who complain that the high cost of day schools prices many Jews out of the market for a well rounded Jewish education.

Do you agree?

If so, what can/should be done to improve Jewish education for the masses?

Back to School On Education

By Leonard Fein

Fri. Feb 11, 2005, The Forward

The big news in Jewish education these days is, of course, the dramatic expansion in day school enrollment. We are indebted to Marvin Schick and the Avi Chai Foundation for providing us the count as of the 2003-2004 school year: There were 759 schools and 205,035 students. For those of us in the non-Orthodox community, the growth in the Solomon Schechter schools of the Conservative movement and the burgeoning of Reform schools have been nearly breathtaking.

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But before we allow ourselves to be carried away, let us bear in mind that the total numbers involved on the non-Orthodox side of the ledger are in fact pitifully small. Of 205,000 students

altogether, 18,000 attend Schechter schools and 4,400 attend Reform schools. Add in another 17,000 who go to community schools, and you still have less than 20% of the total. Day school education in the United States remains overwhelmingly an Orthodox phenomenon.

So what happens to children in Sunday schools and in afternoon Hebrew schools remains a critically important, if often neglected, concern of the community.

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At first blush, the answer seems easy: Hebrew, customs and ceremonies, a bit of Jewish history and so forth. But when you begin to think about it, you immediately come to recall that Hebrew school is remembered by most American Jews as the place where they failed to learn Hebrew.

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On the one hand, mastery of Hebrew is a huge resource...there's an integrity and a richness in the language that is utterly lost in translation. At the same time, we seem - with here-and-there exceptions, to be sure - not to know, not even after all these years and all the effort, how to teach the language successfully. Do we really intend that our children emerge from the Hebrew school experience with an enduring sense of failure?

As to the rest, which typically takes place with children who are very young, it often seems to border on the trivial. We desperately want our kids to understand something of the thundering history of the Jewish people, but mostly the best we can do, given their age and the quality of too many of our teachers, is to tell them that it was thundering. At 8 years old, they might believe what we say, but it doesn't much matter to them.

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At its best and strongest, Jewish history, like Jewish life today, is all about knowing how to answer the one key question that structures the entire saga of our people: Where are you? That was God's first question, and it remains the operative challenge we are given. The answer to that question is no mystery; it, too, is presented, again and again, in our texts. The answer is, "Here I am."

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A responsible and inspiring Jewish education, it seems to me, should be organized around teaching what being "here" means, where "here" is.

Being "here" is not about geographic location; it is about a way of living. It is about being present, about paying attention, about internalizing the central concepts and values that inform our tradition... It is never too early to learn what it means always to be ready to be the 10th person in a minyan; it is never too early to be encouraged to be the first person in a minyan; one is never too young to learn about tzedakah, hence about paying attention to the Other.

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[Public school has made many educational advances.] Meanwhile, Hebrew schools have developed an institutional inferiority complex, born of the recognition that they are very much an add-on, very nearly an afterthought.

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## **To Bore No More: Educators Share Their Best Ideas**

By Erin McKigney

Tue. Aug 07, 2007 The Forward

Across the country, individual communities have developed initiatives aimed at improving Jewish congregational schools.

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[An educational consultant] said, “We are in business because there are hundreds of thousands of people who are receiving [Jewish] education in [congregational schools], and most of it is not effective and not innovative.”

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Throughout the program [designed by the consultant], parents have learned how to be co-educators, education professionals have undergone a leadership seminar focusing on effective teaching strategies and a team has been formed to create a shared vision for each school.

A report was drafted in July 2006 evaluating the goals of the program, noting successes, major findings and future recommendations. Points included were the initiative’s positive impact on the synagogue school, making it an important central component to the congregation, as well as a heightening children’s interest in Jewish education and offering effective professional development for teachers.

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Kesher — founded in Cambridge in 1992 and followed by the Newton Centre branch in 2003 — generates an atmosphere where modern Hebrew is spoken and is an important part of the learning community, Applebaum said. An environment is created where family and teachers come together; Kesher also combines elements of after-school care, in the sense that kids can have snacks, do homework and play games in their Jewish community.

“We think that part of our mission is creating terrific Jewish educators,” Applebaum said. “We invest a lot in our teachers, and so the teachers become a learning community just like the kids do, and that’s very real, and that is one of the things I’m proud of about Kesher.”

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“I think there is a great opportunity here. It is like a pivot point to reach the next generation of young American Jews and to get them excited about what is beautiful, meaningful and joyful in Judaism,” he said. “Until now, Jewish education has not done justice to the Jewish people, to their very rich and meaningful tradition that Judaism is.”

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Preschoolers Get a Head Start in Hebrew

Language Immersion Shows Promising Results in Los Angeles Day Schools

By Rebecca Spence

Fri. Jan 19, 2007 The Forward

Jewish day-school educators have long been flummoxed by the fact that, despite their best efforts to teach Hebrew, the vast majority of students graduate with little grasp of the language. In [Los Angeles], that story is finally changing.

Some four years since the launch of a pilot program to teach Hebrew at the preschool level using language immersion, children in Los Angeles are showing signs that the retooled approach is producing results.

The introduction of Hebrew to 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds began with Ma'alah, a program based at the Davidson Graduate School of Education at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, Conservative Judaism's flagship institution. Funded by a grant from the Covenant Foundation, a New York-based Jewish educational foundation, the program aimed to teach part of a child's school day entirely in Hebrew.

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Aviva Kadosh, a 28-year veteran of L.A.'s Jewish-education bureau, had already spent several years trying to pinpoint exactly what was malfunctioning in Hebrew-language instruction at day schools and how it could be improved. Kadosh, who has a background as a language-acquisition specialist, examined how other languages were taught. So when Robbins proposed the Hebrew-immersion program, she said, "it was a natural."

Two L.A. schools were selected to pilot early Hebrew immersion. At the Jacob Pressman Academy, a Conservative day school affiliated with Temple Beth Am, a large West L.A. synagogue, the program started out in the school's early-childhood center. Pressman Academy's education director, Mitchel Malkus, said that in previous years Hebrew was taught largely through songs, and that only a few basic words were introduced at the preschool level. "Now," he said, "you can walk into our classrooms and children are speaking fluent Hebrew at age 4 and have complete comprehension."

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"It's become a distinctive element of our curriculum and it's created a lot of excitement in general at the school," said Malkus. Not only are 3- and 4-year-olds making giant leaps in their Hebrew, he said, but the older students are also benefiting as language teachers at the day school and the religious school have upped the quality of their instruction. "It shifted the culture of the schools, so the other teachers started doing more."

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While the amount of time that preschool kids spend learning in Hebrew varies from school to school, the unifying idea is always the same. The underpinning of the Ma'alah approach is to teach children their own curriculum in Hebrew, in place of teaching the language as a distinct facet of their education.

Study Provides Snapshot of Struggling Supplementary Schools

By Nate Sugarman

Wed. Aug 13, 2008 The Forward

America's Jewish supplementary schools are struggling to remain relevant as a torpid American economy and higher rates of intermarriage and religious apathy take their toll. Many Conservative and Reform Jewish parents are opting out of giving their children a religious education.

Supplementary schools, also known as Hebrew schools or complementary schools, operate for a few hours, one to three days per week. They supplement the education of Jewish students attending public schools and educate youngsters in the basics of the Bible and Hebrew language. These schools are most popular with Conservative and Reform Jews; Orthodox families overwhelmingly send their children to day schools instead of public schools.

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The census shows that there are about 230,000 students enrolled in Jewish supplementary schools. This compares with some 172,000 enrolled in the same grades of Jewish day schools, according to the 2003-04 study. Despite the larger number of students enrolled in supplementary schools, Wertheimer adds a caveat: "Students tend to be enrolled for more years in day schools than in supplemental schools, which means the turnover is higher in the latter and they have more kids going through the turnstile."

According to Wertheimer's census, 85% of children who are enrolled in grade six have left by grade 12. He speculates that many parents are content to withdraw their child after that child receives a bar or bat mitzvah education.

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Economics is one of the major concerns affecting the educational decisions that families make. With day schools, economic woes have not affected enrollment as severely. Students attending day schools are mostly from Orthodox families, and many academicians, including Wertheimer, speculate that families with Reform and Conservative backgrounds are less likely to require their children to be taught by those of the same denomination as their parents.

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Jonathan Woocher — chief ideas officer at the Lippman Kanfer Institute, a Jewish education think tank that is part of the Jewish Education Service of North America — recognizes that because of a variety of external forces, including growth of day schools, declining population of young Jews and the rise of intermarriage, this segment of Jewish education is in a temporary state of doldrums. Though he doesn't dispute the lower enrollment numbers, he is optimistic about the future of Jewish supplementary education. "There is good reason to believe things will improve qualitatively," Woocher said. He cites that many initiatives are taking place to improve the quality of Jewish supplemental education. "Many foundations and organizations are stepping up and designing new curricula, becoming more interactive with students and parents, and developing more facilities," Woocher said.

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Margie Berkowitz, director of Prozdor at the Hebrew College, agrees, and said that "the current system was designed for the children of the 1950s, and it needs to be changed to fit the needs of students today." Prozdor is a major Conservative supplementary school based in Boston. Berkowitz indicates that there are new strategies being undertaken with Prozdor's Makor

initiative, such as “allowing students to choose their own classes; cooperation between the Hebrew schools and synagogues that the children attend, and paying close attention to feedback, both from students and parents.”

Congregational Schools Seek New Vision

By Shoshana Olidort

Fri. Aug 26, 2005 The Forward

Congregational Hebrew schools aren't easy to love. Students are expected to give up their Sunday mornings and weekday afternoons - and, often, soccer practice, ballet rehearsal or any number of after-school activities - to memorize ancient history, learn basic Hebrew and study their prayers. Is it any wonder that, according to some, less than 50% of students in congregational schools continue their studies after their bar or bat mitzvahs?

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"The largest percentage of children receiving formal religious education go to a congregational school, so it behooves the community to be concerned about this," said Steven Kraus, Jesna's director of day school, congregational and communal education initiatives, and director of the Coaches Training Institute.

There are about 1,500 to 1,600 congregational schools in America, and according to Kraus, the issues facing them generally stem from lack of a clear, consistent and unified vision on the part of synagogue and community leadership, school faculty and parents. The various key players will have to work together, he said, to prioritize and outline a set of feasible goals.

One of the institute's organizers, the Chicago-based Experiment in Congregational Education, works with synagogues across the country to change their educational programs, beginning with an assessment of the school and extending to a comprehensive process that includes core discussions about curriculum and alternative models of teaching. Change "cannot be achieved in a piecemeal fashion," said Robert Weinberg, director of ECE, but it "must be based in overarching change in educational culture." This will require that educators, religious leaders and parents go through a process of serious self-examination. It will be a major objective of the institute's retreat.

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Although there are definitely pockets of high-quality congregational education, Kraus said, much of it happens in isolation, and the lack of connection between Hebrew schools has made it difficult for others to access information that could be helpful.