# Supplementary School Education

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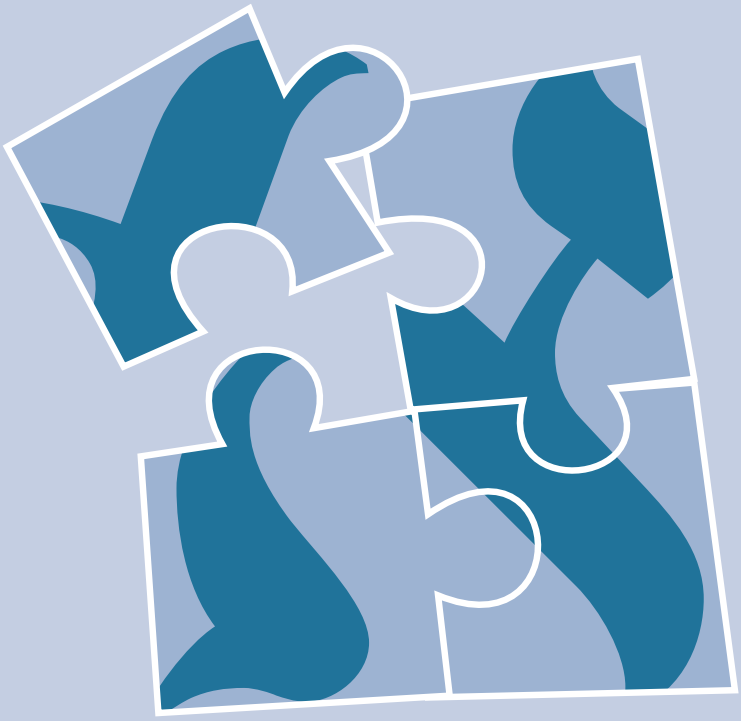

MANDEL FOUNDATION

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## The Best Practices Project

## What Is The Best Practices Project?

In describing its "blueprint for the future," *A Time to Act*, the report of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America, called for the creation of "an inventory of best educational practices in North America."[1]

The primary purpose of this inventory was to aid the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE) in its work as a "catalyst for change" for North American Jewish education. This recommendation of the Commission led to the creation of the CIJE Best Practices Project.

Along with its contribution to the work of CIJE, the Best Practices Project can be seen as a research effort that can make an important contribution to the knowledge base about North American Jewish education by documenting outstanding educational work that is currently taking place.

What do we mean by "best practice"? One recent book about this concept in the world of general education states that it is a phrase borrowed from

> the professions of medicine and law, where "good practice" or "best practice" are everyday phrases used to describe solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field. If a doctor, for example, does not follow contemporary standards and a case turns out badly, peers may criticize his decisions and treatments by saying something like, "that was simply not best practice."...[I]f educators are people who take ideas seriously, who believe in inquiry, and who subscribe to the possibility of human progress, then our professional language must label and respect practice which is at the leading edge of the field.[2]

It is important, however, to be cautious about what we mean by the word "best." The contemporary literature in general education points out that seeking perfection when we examine educational endeavors will offer us little assistance as we try to improve actual work in the field. In an enterprise as complex and multifaceted as education, these writers argue, we should be looking for "good" not ideal practice.

Outstanding examples of educational practice certainly have their weaknesses and do not succeed in all their goals, but they do have the strength to recognize those weaknesses and the will to keep working at getting better. In seeking "good" educational practice, then, we hope to identify models of excellence for Jewish education. In other words we are looking to document the "success stories" of contemporary Jewish education.

In having such a best practices resource, CIJE would be able to offer both encouragement and programmatic assistance to those asking for advice. The encouragement would come through the knowledge that good practice does exist in many aspects of Jewish education. In

addition, by viewing the Best Practice of "X" in one location, another community could receive programmatic assistance by seeing a living example of how "X" might be implemented in its own setting.

The effective practical use of the Best Practices Project is a complex matter, however. Knowing that a best practice exists in one place, and even seeing that program in action, does not guarantee that the other communities will be able to implement it in *their* localities, no matter how good their intentions.[3]

What makes a curriculum, supplementary school, or early childhood program work in Denver or Cleveland is related to a multitude of factors that may not be in place when those ideas are introduced in places such as Atlanta, Baltimore or Milwaukee (CIJE's original Lead Communities, laboratory sites for Jewish educational reform). The *translation* from the Best Practice site to another site will require considerable imagination. At the end of this introduction I will indicate some ways that such translations may occur.

Of course there is no such thing as "best practice" in the abstract, there is only best practice of "X" particularity: the supplementary school, JCC, curriculum for teaching Israel, etc. The first problem that the Best Practices Project had to face was defining the *areas* that the inventory should have as its categories. Thus we could have cut into the problem in a number of different ways. We might, for example, have looked at some of the sites in which Jewish education takes place such as:

- Synagogues
- Day schools
- Trips to Israel
- JCCs

Or we could have focused on some of the subject areas that are taught in such sites:

- Bible
- Hebrew
- Israel

Or we could have looked at the specific populations served:

- Adults
- Children
- Retired people

There were numerous other possibilities as well.

Our decision was to focus on the *venues in which Jewish education is conducted*. Eight different areas were identified:

- Supplementary schools
- Early childhood programs
- JCCs and Ys
- Day schools
- The Israel experience
- College campus programming
- Camping/youth programs
- Adult education.

Obviously there are other areas that could have been included and there were other ways of organizing the project. For example, we could have identified Family Education as a separate area, but we chose to include it *within* the relevant areas above—i.e. family education programs connected to synagogue schools, day schools, JCCs, etc. We later chose to add a ninth area, professional development programs, and as the project evolves, it is likely that other areas for research will be added to the original list.

## Best Practice in the Supplementary School: *The Process*

The first area that the Best Practices Project chose to work on was the supplementary school primarily because we knew that (1) there was a general feeling in the community, particularly in the lay community, that the supplementary school had not succeeded; and (2) the majority of Jewish children get their education in the supplementary school and because of the perception of failure, the three original CIJE Lead Communities would almost certainly want to address the "problem" of the supplementary school.

A group of experts was gathered to discuss the issue of best practice in the supplementary school. (The list of names appears in Appendix Two of this introduction.) On the basis of that meeting and other consultations, we developed a Guide to Best Practice in the supplementary school (see Appendix One) which represented the wisdom of experts concerning what constituted success in this area. We did not expect to find schools that "score high" on *every* measure in the Guide, but the Guide was to be used as a kind of outline or checklist for writing reports.

A team of report writers was assembled and given the following assignment: using the Guide to Best Practice in the Supplementary School, locate good settings or successful individual programs either within those settings or outside of them ("stand alone" programs such as a parent education program). The researchers were asked to write short, descriptive reports for inclusion in this volume.

We believed that working in this fashion, we would be likely to get reliable results in a reasonable amount of time. We also knew from the outset that the Best Practices Project was created to fulfill a pressing need for assistance that both the field of Jewish education and the leadership of North American Jewry agree must be met. We did not have the luxury to create a research project whose results would not be available for many years.

The model that we employed relies on the informed opinion of expert observers. The reports that our researcher wrote were based on a relatively short amount of time spent in observing the particular schools or the individual programs—although all of the researchers had had some previous knowledge (sometimes quite extensive) about the school or program being studied. To facilitate the process, we tried to use researchers who began the process with a "running start": They had some familiarity with the places they were looking at and could use that prior knowledge to move the process along quickly.

## Next Steps For Best Practice Research

It is important to remember that CIJE has always viewed the Best Practices Project as an enterprise with important long range implications. We believe that these reports can offer serious assistance to communities seeking to improve the quality of Jewish education in North America, but we also know that more work can and should be done. We view the reports included in the present volume as the first "iteration," in the language of social science researchers—the first step in a process that needs to evolve over time.

How might that research develop? We can see two ways: first, the research can *broaden*. We have included only a handful of examples in this report. The simple fact is we have no idea how many successful supplementary schools are currently operating in North America. We have certainly heard enough bad news about Jewish education over the past 25 years, but we have heard very little about the success stories. It is possible that the number is small; even if that is true, however, this volume has touched only a few examples.

In an effort to plan for widening the net of possible sites, at the time of our first exploration of supplementary schools, we sent a letter to all the members of the original CIJE

Senior Advisers committee asking for their suggestions. We also sent a similar letter to contacts within CAJE. Because of these initiatives we now have a list of 20 to 30 supplementary schools that can be investigated in the next stage of Best Practice in the Supplementary School. We should note, however, that such an investigation would likely be more time-consuming than the first round. Here we may not have the advantage—at least in most cases—of the prior knowledge of the sites that our current researchers brought with them to the task.

A second way of expanding the research in the supplementary school area would be in the "*depth*" of the current reports. Many of the report writers have said that they would like the chance to look at their best practice examples in more detail than the short reports have allowed. I have called this the difference between writing a "report" and writing a "portrait" or study of an institution.[4] As further iterations of the Supplementary School volume develop, we would like to see more in-depth portraits of schools and programs.

## The Reports: *An Overview*

The best practice reports represent a range of synagogues, schools and geographical locations. In general the focus is on the school as a whole, rather than stand-alone programs. Our sense was that the key to success in the supplementary school tends to be a wholistic approach, especially because of the part-time nature of the enterprise.

The congregations vary in size and wealth. Some of the schools are located within large congregations which simultaneously run a whole host of programs, including early childhood programs and day schools. The ability of the supplementary schools in these congregations to "compete" with other institutions, especially the day school, is particularly noteworthy.

Please note: In order to preserve the privacy of the schools for a public document such as this one, all of the synagogue names (and personnel directly associated with those synagogues) have been changed.

## Improving Supplementary Schools: *Some Practical Suggestions*

It is obvious from these first explorations that there are numerous ways in which supplementary schools could be improved using the Best Practices Project. The following suggestions are by no means exhaustive, but they represent ways individual schools or groups of schools within a community could begin to work for change.

**1.** *Use the Guide*

A good place to start is with the "Guide for Looking at Best Practice in the Supplementary School" (see Appendix One). Even though it was designed for use by a group of experts with considerable experience as school observers and it was not intended to be an exhaustive "evaluation tool," nonetheless the Guide offers the opportunity for both professionals and laypeople within an institution to begin a conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of their school. Obviously, insiders will have the disadvantage of less objectivity than outside observers, but on the positive side they also have much more information and a deeper sense of the real workings of the school. Using the Guide is a good way to start thinking about the directions that supplementary school education could and should be taking.

**2.** *Improve the School at the Systemic Level*

One characteristic common to all the best practice schools was the system-wide orientation of the supplementary school. By "system-wide" we mean a number of different but interrelated matters. First is the relationship between the school and the synagogue. At this time in the history of North American Jewish education, virtually all supplementary schools are synagogue-based. One factor that characterizes a best practice school is the way that the school fits into the overall congregation. The school reflects the values of the synagogue, and the synagogue gives a significant role to the school–in its publicity, in the status of the school committee or board within the synagogue structure, in all the subtle messages that the synagogue sends. A school that is valued and viewed as central to the concerns and mission of the synagogue has a much greater chance for success. One need only look at the reports on "Temple Isaiah" and "Congregation Beth Tzedek" for two very different examples of the same effect. Adding to the impact of this idea is the fact that both of these congregations also house day schools. Yet despite the generally held perception that the supplementary school will have a much lower status than the day school when both are housed within the same synagogue, in these two instances the supplementary schools are successful and profoundly appreciated by their congregations.

How does the supplementary school become a valued institution? It is obvious from the best practice reports that the key player in bringing this about is the rabbi of the congregation. Virtually every best practice report talks about the investment of time, prestige and interest of the synagogue's rabbi. If we are begin to improve the quality of the supplementary school, we must engage the rabbis in an effort to raise the stature and importance of the congregation's school.

Lay leadership also has an important role to play, as the best practice reports clearly point out, and that factor leads us to the second element of working on the system: the stakeholders in the synagogue must be involved in an ongoing conversation about the goals and mission of

the school. The report writers talk about schools that are "driven" by their goals (see, for just one of many examples the report on "Temple Bnai Zion"), and schools that have a clear sense of their "vision" (see, for example, "Congregation Reyim," a school with a very different vision from that of Bnai Zion, and which succeeds with a similar impact). The best practice reports indicate that schools that work are places that continually try to find ways to involve the key participants in ongoing reflection upon and discussion about the goals of the school.

Finally, best practice schools view themselves as one part of a much larger context. They see the synagogue *as a whole* as an educating community. In such places we are more likely to see the integration of the formal program (the "school") with a variety of informal programs—such as camps, shabbatonim, family retreats, trips to Israel, holiday programs, tzedakah programs, arts programs, etc.

***Implications and Possible Recommendations***

If we want to have an impact on the supplementary school, we need to begin with the rabbis. A program of consciousness-raising and practical skills development for rabbis in the local communities would make a great deal of sense. Such a program could be developed either through the national rabbinic organizations (RCA, RA, CCAR, RRA) or independent of them. It might include visits to the best practice sites and meetings with the rabbis in those synagogues.

A similar program for lay leaders could also be launched. Here the ideas from the best practice reports could be studies and explored, so that lay leaders could come to understand the educational principles that make for success in the supplementary school.

**3.** *The Educational Leader Is Crucial*

If there is one thing shared by all the best practice schools, it is the key role of leadership in creating quality. In most cases the leader is the educational director; in one small synagogue ("Ohavei Shalom Congregation"), it was the rabbi. These leaders provide continuity, build morale, work with the rabbi and lay leadership on issues of status and vision and many other things as well. In addition, such a leader can help turn around a school that needs to change ("Emeth Temple"). It is the principal who helps orient the institution toward problem-solving and away from defeatism, and the principal also seems to be an important factor in maintaining a school without significant "discipline" problems.

The people described here can all be characterized as *educational* leaders. They see their role not primarily as administrative or organizational, but as educational in a variety of ways. For some it takes the path of supervision and in-service education; for others it is by being inspirational or spiritual models; for others it is in pedagogic creativity, programming or curricular improvements. There is no one single way to be an educational leader, but it is

hard to imagine a successful school, based on these reports, that would not have that kind of professional leadership.

***Implications and Possible Recommendations***

Of course, saying that a supplementary school needs an educational leader is a good deal easier than finding such a person. But knowing the importance of leadership can lead to a number of important practical suggestions: (1) When hiring an educational director, seek out a person who can provide leadership appropriate to an educational institution, not just someone who is a good administrator. Such a consideration should influence the kinds of questions that are asked in an interview or solicited from recommendations. (2) Investing in leadership means finding ways for educational directors to attend serious, ongoing training programs that can help them grow as leaders. (3) Consultants who know about educational leadership development can help schools improve by working with boards during the search process. (4) Places might want to develop peer groups designed to focus on important educational issues or through pairings of principals who could meet on a regular basis. Such groups could be organized denominationally or on the basis of the size and type of institution. Professional consultation and training could come from a mixture of national service institutions (UAHC, United Synagogue, etc.), institutions for higher Jewish learning (YU, JTS, HUC, etc.) and institutions from the world of general education such as universities, training organizations, or professional societies.

**4.** *Invest in Teachers*

Despite the importance of systems and the centrality of leadership, in the end schools succeed or fail because of what happens in the individual classroom. The best practice schools are all characterized by an emphasis on the teacher's key role. In different ways each of these schools try to deal with the three fundamental dimensions of staffing a school: recruitment, retention, and professional growth.

For some of the best practice schools recruitment is not a major problem. A place like "Temple Bnai Zion" has a staff of veterans and experiences a very small amount of turnover. In general, good schools tend to perpetuate themselves because their reputations are well known in the community of educators and when openings appear, teachers will want to come to work in such an institution. Here in a slightly different way, the educational leader makes a difference. Who would not want to work for the revered principal of "Congregation Beth Tzedek"?

Still, recruiting good teachers is not always easy, even for outstanding synagogues, and some of the best practice schools have tried inventive solutions. Certainly the most radical has been the teacher-parents used by "Congregation Reyim." This synagogue has developed a unique approach that deserves serious consideration. The pluses and minuses are spelled out in the report. The most important point of the Reyim model, however, is that the school works at

*training* the parents for their jobs as teachers. Without that training and in-service the program could not succeed.

Other schools (such as "Congregation Beth Tzedek" and "Emeth Temple") have used teenagers as teacher aides or tutors in the Hebrew school. This has the dual effect of helping out the professional teachers and finding useful involvement for the teenagers in the educational life of the congregation.

Finding ways to retain outstanding teachers is a crucial component of success. It is not easy to determine what is cause and what is effect here, but it is clear that *stability of staff* is one of the marks of the best practice schools. Success in retaining teachers involves a number of interrelated factors: fair pay is one thing, but this issue came up quite infrequently in the best practice investigations. More to the point was a sense of being appreciated by the educational director, the rabbi, and the community as a whole. The reports present a number of suggestions about teacher esteem. The key point is that this matter is directly related to the systemic issue of the congregational attitude about the role of education. Where education is valued, teacher esteem will tend to be high.

An ethos of professional growth and teacher education characterizes all the best practice schools, even—one might say *especially*—in places that use nonprofessional teachers. Professional growth opportunities have the advantage of advancing both the quality of teachers and their sense of being valued.

We have seen many forms of such professional growth, but they tend to center around three areas of focus: (1) efforts to increase the subject knowledge of teachers with sessions on, for example, Bible, Hebrew, or Jewish holidays; these sessions are particularly important for the teachers in supplementary schools who may be professional *general* educators (such as public school teachers). Such teachers have pedagogic skills but lack Jewish knowledge; (2) efforts to increase the skills of classroom teaching such as discussions leading, curricular implementation or classroom management; and (3) efforts to build a sense of personal Jewish commitment in teachers.

The best practice schools use local central agencies, denominational organizations, and sometimes Jewish textbook publishers for teacher education sessions. Teachers are also sent to conferences, most notably the national CAJE conference, local mini-CAJE conferences where they exist, conferences connected to the various denominational educational organizations, and experiences in Israel.

Most of the best practice schools engage in professional supervision of teachers, almost always by the principal. It is also noteworthy that a number of the reports mention that the educational directors find that they do as much supervision of teachers as they would like.

*Implications and Possible Recommendations*

The area of professional growth should be able to make significant impact on Jewish education quality in the supplementary school. We know from the research in general education that in-service education needs to be sustained and systematic and there are a number of ways that such programs could be implemented, aside from the worthy policy of sending teachers to the national and local CAJE conferences. The CAJE conferences play an important role in contemporary Jewish education—especially lifting the morale of teachers—but they can not be considered a sufficient answer to the question of teacher education and professional growth.

What form should professional growth take? It is clear that many options are used. These include the three possible focal points mentioned above: Jewish subject matter knowledge, pedagogic skills, and issues of Jewish commitment. The means used include: in-service programs run by national organizations, extension courses at local universities, adult education programs geared for teachers, local BJE personnel coming into the school, sessions run by the local BJE, retreats for teachers, programs in Israel geared for teachers. Generally schools must find the financing too help teachers attend these conferences, and sometimes money must be found to pay for substitutes while teachers attend workshops. Some schools pay the teachers to attend such sessions or relate their salaries to specific hours of in-service training.

The best practice schools do various things to work on retaining teachers. In general the focus is on raising the status of the school, and hence teaching in the school, within the congregation as a whole. Singling out the accomplishments of teachers through the synagogue bulletin and rabbinic support is coupled with treating teachers in a professional manner, giving them the appropriate workplace, and supporting their trips to conferences and other in-service sessions.

Different localities deal with recruitment in different ways. The efforts described in the reports of some congregations to use teenagers and parents in the school as teachers or adjunct teachers may be appropriate for schools that have difficulty finding teachers.

**5.** *Involve the Family*

"Family education" has become a catchword in contemporary Jewish education, but it is obvious from the best practice reports that the term is used in many different ways in different settings. The overall goal of family involvement is clearly an important one for many reasons. Family involvement helps support the goals of the school (and probably the quality of discipline in the school), reinforces in the home what children learn in school, helps give children a sense that Judaism is not "just for Hebrew school," and empowers parents by assisting them in doing the home-based informal educating that has been typical of Jewish life for generations. The best practice reports show that family involvement may take many forms—adult learning,

family retreats, actual teaching by parents in the school, an entire curriculum focused on family education, and others as well. There is little doubt that an increased and serious investigation of more family involvement in the synagogue school can have a powerful impact on its success.

## Communities and Best Practice: *Implementation*

In what way can the Best Practices Project directly assist local communities? We see three immediate uses of the project: knowledge, study, and adaptation. First, the Best Practices Project offers "existence proofs" for the successful supplementary school, knowledge that such places actually exist. It is possible to answer "Yes" to the question, "is there a Hebrew school that works?"

Beyond merely knowing that such programs exist, we can use the best practice reports as models that can be studied. These programs "work" and they work in a variety of ways. Professor Seymour Fox has often spoken about the Best Practices Project as creating the "curriculum" for change in communities. This should include: exploration of the particular schools and programs through study of the reports, meetings with the researchers who wrote them up and the educators who run those schools, as well as visits to the best practice sites.

Finally, it is crucial to think hard about adapting the best practice sites to the specific characteristics of local communities. It is unlikely that a program that exists in one place can simply be "injected" into a community. what must happen is a process of analysis, adaptation, revision, and evaluation. The Best Practices Project gives us the framework to begin the discussion, explore new possibilities, and strive for excellence.

## From Best Practice to New Practice

Best practice is only one element in the improvement of Jewish education. Even those programs that "work" can be improved. And other ideas as yet untried need to be implemented and experimented with as well. CIJE's work with communities allows us a chance to go beyond best practices in order to develop new ideas in Jewish education. At times we have referred to this as the "department of dreams." Within this department reside all the new ideas in Jewish education that might be imagined, along with the ideas that people have talked about, perhaps even written about for years, but never have had the chance to try out. Contemporary Jewish education has been given the challenge to dream those dreams and imagine those new ideas. As we learn from the best of what works today, we must also envision new directions for Jewish education in the coming century.

# A "best practice" supplementary school should be a place...:

## I. Systemic Issues

**a. ...with well articulated educational and "Jewish" goals.**

What are those goals and by what means are they articulated? Meetings? Publications? Sermons?

What are the outcomes that the school seeks to achieve and how does the school measure success?

**b. ...where stakeholders (such as parents, teachers, laypeople) are involved in the articulation or at least the validation, of these goals in an ongoing way.**

What is the process by which this articulation and involvement happen?

**c. ...with shared communication and an ongoing vision.**

How do we see this in the day-to-day life of the school?

**d. ...where one feels good to be there and students enjoy learning.**

In what way do you see this? What is the atmosphere in classes? The nature of student behavior and "discipline"?

**e. ...where students continue their Jewish education after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.**

Does the school have actual data about this?

## II. Curriculum and Instruction Issues

**a. ...which takes curriculum seriously and has a serious, well-defined curriculum.**

Is it written curriculum? Does the school use materials published by the denominational movements? By commercial publishers?

**b. ...and in which, therefore, students are learning real content.**

Do you have a sense of what the students learn? About Jewish religious life and practice? Moral principles? History? Hebrew language? Israel, etc. In what way, if any, does the school monitor student progress?

**c. ...in which one sees interesting and strong teaching.**

Is there a particular style of teaching that you see in the school? (Discussions? Lectures? Group work? etc.)

Who are the teachers? What is their Jewish educational background and preparation?

What is their relationship to the students?

What is the stability of the staff over time?

What does the school do to help new teachers enter the school?

**d. ...in which one sees attention given to affective experiences for children.**

Is there occasion for "practice" in Jewish living or values? For example, is there a tzedakah project, and Israel project, a mitzvah project in the school? Is there a Junior congregation or other opportunity for experiencing prayer? Are there programs in the arts—music, dance, etc? Is there a retreat or shabbaton program for children?

**e. ...with family or parent education programs.**

What does the school do in this area? Do they use any specific materials or programs? (which ones?) How often does this happen? Is there a retreat or shabbaton program for families? Are parents required to engage in some kind of adult learning? In what way?

## III. Supervision and Professional Growth Issues

**a. ...which engages in regular serious professional growth and/or supervision of teachers.**

Who does the supervision? What is it like? How regular is it? Does the school use outside consultants for in-service? Are teachers sent to in-service sessions? Where and in what way do these take place? Is there a retreat or shabbaton program for teachers?

**b. ...with an effective principal who serves as a true educational leader.**

In what way does the principal demonstrate this leadership? How do the teachers, the parents, and the rabbi perceive him or her?

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## Notes

**1.** Commission on Jewish Education in North America, *A Time to Act* (University Press of America, 1991), p. 69.

**2.** Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, *Best Practice* (Heinemann, 1993), pp. vii-viii.

**3.** See Barry W. Holtz, "Best Practice and the Challenge of Replication," *The Melton Journal* no. 28 (Fall\Summer, 1994).

**4.** The most well-known example of the "portrait" approach is Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's book *The Good High School* (Basic Books, 1983).

# REPORTS ON SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS

# Temple Isaiah

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Kathy Green

**Date:**
June, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Temple Isaiah

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Conservative

**Approximate Number of Students:**
388 (*in middle school*)

**From Ages:**
7 to 13

**Number of Teachers:**
17

**Students Attend:**
6 hours per week
(*3 days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
NA

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
School/congregation relationships

Professional leadership

Supplementary school/day school relations

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Kathy Green describes "Temple Isaiah," a Conservative congregation of between 1,200 and 1,300 member families, located in the suburbs of a large Eastern city. Isaiah houses four separate, semi-autonomous schools, each with its own programs and staff.*

*Isaiah has both a supplementary school and a day school. The congregation is careful to find ways to integrate both the congregational school students and the day school students and can serve as a model for that kind of programming.*

*Isaiah is characterized by its well-trained, stable staff of teachers and the enthusiastic (and full-time) leadership of the school's principal. The principal is involved very closely with the educational (not just the administrative) side of the program and observers believe that his leadership is partially responsible for the success of the school. The synagogue itself places a good deal of emphasis on the school (despite supporting a day school as well), and the rabbi as well as the lay leadership is highly supportive of its activities. The fact that the principal has a full-time position is viewed within the community as one indication of that congregational support.*

*The principal pays close attention to the educational content of the school and has been developing a graded curriculum using the resources currently available on the market. School-wide affective educational experiences are also emphasized. Isaiah is an example of the way that a large and well-funded institution can make outstanding use of its resources in developing and nurturing its synagogue school along with a host of other educational activities.*

## Introduction

"Temple Isaiah" does many things very well. It is both numerically and physically a large institution, a Conservative synagogue of between 1,200 and 1,300 member families, housed in a sprawling building at an expressway exit in the suburbs of a large Eastern city. My primary contact person and informant at Isaiah was Rabbi S., a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and for the last four years the director of the synagogue's religious school.

Rabbi S. characterized Isaiah as an umbrella which reaches over four separate, albeit not autonomous schools, each with its own programs and staff.

## Schools Within A School

First, let us briefly look at the four schools, their programs, and staffs. Dr. P. serves as educational director and is therefore in a supervisory position above Rabbi S.; Dr. P. is also principal of Isaiah's Solomon Schechter Day School (SSDS). This day school for children from K through 8 began ten years ago with 17 children and currently has an enrollment of 342, of

whom 40-45% are children of Isaiah members. Rabbi J., the senior rabbi of the synagogue, explained that he worked for the establishment of the school as a strategy to infuse what he perceived as an aging and faltering congregation with young people and new activity.

While Dr. P. believes that 20-25% of the SSDS students come from other congregations and perhaps 30-35% are not affiliated, the school is subsidized by Isaiah. Tuition is under $5,000 per year, and a spring trip for graduating eighth graders to Israel was financed in such a manner as to ensure that no child was deprived of the opportunity to go for financial reasons. The Solomon Schechter Day School's PTA Council along with representatives of other Isaiah schools. Dr. P. runs a Middle School Minyan which meets twice a month in the synagogue and is only for children. Rabbi S. and Rabbi J. each teach courses in the SSDS. Thus the human and administrative integration of the school within the larger Isaiah structure is apparent. Professionals (such as Rabbi S. and J.) are visible within the school and can be affected by their own experiences of contact with students, faculty, staff, and parents.

## The Religious School

Teachers employed by SSDS also teach in the religious school, which maintains classes for grades K through 7. While the total religious school enrollment is 388, class meeting times vary in duration and schedule slots. Kindergarteners and first graders attend classes only on Sundays. Second through seventh graders attend school three days a week for a total of six hours per week.

Twenty-six religious school students in grades 5, 6, and 7 have elected to attend school for two additional hours each Sunday. This group is now meeting for its third year, with double enrollment over its first year. Students follow the regular curriculum of the six-hour program but are the beneficiaries of special programming in the additional two hours. Classes in Torah cantillation and Zionism have been offered, and the question of possibly using the additional time to develop an enhanced Hebrew language tract has been raised.

Ms. R., who directs this voluntary "enrichment program," is very proud at having received a grant for next year to fund a life history unit. In this unit a geriatric social worker will train students in interviewing techniques; children will collect information from residents of an institution for the elderly; a professional writer will help children translate their interview data into play; and finally the children will perform their play for their elderly informants. The children will also study traditional Jewish texts related to issues of growing older.

For the last four years Rabbi R., Isaiah's assistant rabbi, has directed a Hebrew high school program, where alumni of the religious school and SSDS can meet. A typical activity, which draws about 100 teenagers, is a monthly social dinner meeting. Until the end of this school year (1992) more serious religious school graduates were encouraged to attend a three-session-a-week BJE program and come to a Havurah study session at Isaiah on Tuesday nights. SSDS alumni were encouraged to participate in a similar BJE structure. By enrolling in any Tuesday evening youth

program at Isaiah, a student automatically becomes a member of USY. A special student/faculty committee called "Lift" is responsible for social programming. A structural problem or challenge for Isaiah is that eighth graders who are already graduates of the religious school may seek out youth groups separate from the eighth graders who are still students in the Solomon Schechter School.

The following structure and system for accommodating differing interests on the part of students has been designed for next year. Students who so choose may attend a weekly, one-evening (Tuesday) high school program. Within this program there are two tracks. They may opt for the "Bet Midrash," which is text oriented; is led by Isaiah rabbis; and has homework, grades, and required attendance. Or they decide to attend the "Havurah," which is centered around discussion. Alumni of Solomon Schechter Day School and serious graduates of the religious school may elect to attend the community's Judaic Academy for two evenings a week and the "Bet Midrash" at Isaiah on Tuesdays. The religious school and SSDS graduates will be placed in different classes at the Judaic Academy, because of the variation in their levels of Hebrew language skill. All participants in Tuesday evening programs will also be invited to the monthly social dinner. So far, because of the age of the Solomon Schechter Day School, there have been only two graduating classes. To date very few graduates have gone on to day schools, thus member children have gone back into the pool of Isaiah young people.

## Preschool

Another "school within a school" is the preschool, which is directed by Ms. L. Approximately 250 children attend the preschool. It accepts children as young as two years of age and goes through pre-K. The preschool functions as a feeder school for SSDS; in fact, the pre-K class evolved out of need for a class for children not quite ready to enter Schechter's kindergarten. Interestingly, parents of preschool graduates who do not intend to send their children to SSDS tend to resist sending their children to Isaiah's kindergarten, choosing to enroll them in the religious school for first grade. Their reasoning seems to be to allow their children more time for transition to "regular" school kindergarten, and they feel also that the children have received a lot during their preschool years.

## Family Education

Ms. M., a graduate of Brandeis University's Hornstein program and a teacher within the religious school, directs three family education coordinators, who began working with kindergarten and first graders and their families but hope to expand their work upward through the grades. The curriculum for sessions with parents is designed to support what is happening in children's classes. The rich resources of Isaiah are reflected in some of the materials designed for a recent family education event. Children were learning about their Hebrew names. One of Isaiah's three on-staff art teachers designed and calligraphed special birth certificates. Parents were supplied with photo-copies of perpetual

calendars to look up their children's Hebrew birth dates and fill in the birth certificates. Later parents received mailings of suggested strategies for celebrating Jewish birthdays in educationally enriching ways.

Mr. J. explained the benefits of such programs: a way of informing parents what is happening in class; educating parents themselves; public relations for the school within the entire synagogue.

There are a number of frameworks within which children from the religious school and from Solomon Schechter can interact. Graduates of either school can earn $5 an hour working as tutors, helping the cantor in the Hazan's Program. To qualify for this program, students must demonstrate cantorial proficiency. Religious school aides are also paid $5 and required to keep journals describing their work with younger children. According to Jane Rachel, a ninth grader who works as a religious school aide and attended SSDS, the $5-an-hour pay represents an important incentive, giving the program a firmer foundation than if she and her friends served as volunteers. Ten young people have committed themselves to attending a two-hour-a-month education course next year as well as combined study in the Judaic Academy and Isaiah, and journal keeping to work as religious school aides or aides to the Havurah and younger children's youth groups.

## Youth Groups

There are three youth groups for elementary school students (third and fourth graders; fifth and sixth graders; and seventh and eighth graders). Shabbat morning could find the following groups functioning outside of the main sanctuary service: Torah for Tots; Junior Congregation (led by Rabbi S. and comprised of young families; two-thirds of the children who lead the services are from SSDS, one-third from the religious school); Middle School Minyan, which meets two times a month and is only for kids, led by Dr. P. and attended by SSDS students). Once a month there is a free Shabbat lunch attended by any and all kids and their parents. At this lunch birthdays are announced.

## Staffing

While the staff of the religious school is well trained (out of 17 teachers, there are 1 M.S.W., 7 M.S.Ed's, 1 close to finishing M.S.Ed., 1 Ph.D.), what is probably special or unusual about the faculty, according to faculty members interviewed, is the enthusiastic and full-time leadership of Rabbi S. Rabbi S. explained that teachers are recruited through the BJE placement service, and their salaries follow the BJC scale. Only two teachers who were members of the faculty four years ago when Rabbi S. began his tenure remain today on the faculty.

What does Rabbi S. look for when hiring a new teacher? Knowledge of subject matter to be taught; ability to present the subject to students; sense of vocation or mission; love of kids, comfortableness in teaching in a Conservative synagogue. (According to Ms. J., four out of ten teachers with whom she works directly in the school would not drive on Shabbat.) Rabbi S. expressed willingness to change curriculum to

capitalize on the individual talents of teachers. While he neither requires teachers to submit lesson plans nor schedules formal observations of teaching, he expects teachers to submit lesson plans nor schedules formal observations of teaching, he expects teachers to attend monthly administrative staff dinner meetings and team meetings of teachers working in the same grade level. He frequently enters classrooms and joins in the children's activities. He will draw and color with children and tells teachers to call on him to answer a question if he raises his hand. He believes that he has earned the respect of teachers by putting himself "on the line" by teaching at SSDS. Significantly, he is a full-time principal of the religious school.

## Curriculum

What is the religious school's curriculum, and how did it evolve? Clearly the BJE's Synagogue Council, which grants an annual subsidy of $12,000 to Isaiah as an arena for developing curricular teaching materials, has influence. Rabbi S. maintains that the school's current curriculum grew out of dialogue between the principal and his staff and that he worked with two guiding principles: (1) You can't teach everything; and (2) each year should be different. Further, he built on what existed when he came to the school and made changes slowly. Changes he made include phasing out conversational Hebrew; requiring teachers to design and share with students a "seder shel yom," and encouraging teachers to develop classroom goals which enable him to outline a curricular overview of the school.

It is Rabbi S.'s dream that each classroom teacher begin the year with an itemized document of goals for each student. Next to each goal is a space for the teacher's signature when the goal has been achieved. Currently these documents are in use through the Heh level and are in the works for higher grades. Curricular content is listed below by grade level.

***Aleph:*** Letter identification, leading by the end of the year to oral reading. Throughout the grade levels, understanding of Hebrew words is taught. On tests in higher grades students are expected to write Hebrew words, names, etc., in response to questions (e.g., *Avraham* [in Hebrew] left *Haran* [in Hebrew]). We learn this in *Sefer Bereshit* [in Hebrew]. Melton holiday materials. Family education programs orchestrated by Marietta (for example, the moon and the calendar; Jewish birthdays and names).

***Bet:*** The year of *Havdalah*: family education program; learning first part of *shaharit*; Israel; holiday vocabulary; *Our Living Past* (Behrman House).

***Gimmel:*** *Kabbalat shabbat*; home rituals; Ron Wolfson's *seder shel shabbat* materials; Melton workbooks for *Bereshit* and *kashrut*. Through their work on kashrut students have become enthusiastic callers with questions to the local Halacha Hotline. Near the end of the year the Rabbi, who runs the hotline, visited the class and enabled children to meet the person behind the voice on the telephone.

***Daled:*** Torah reading, Passover *Haggadah*; the Book of Exodus.

***Heh:*** Hallel; the Book of Numbers; Rashi (through Melton curriculum).

***Vav:*** *Tikun Olam* with reading of Jonah (self); *Esther* (responsibility); *Ruth* (extra acts of loving kindness); *Amidah*.

At the completion of the Vav year an examination of Jewish knowledge is given. In order to graduate from religious school, students must pass this examination. Occasionally students fail and are given an opportunity to retake the exam. Children failing the examination have been assigned an alternative: reading five books and writing reports. It has happened that a child did not pass the examination, chose not to fulfill an alternative assignment, and was not allowed to graduate.

At the end of the school year summer homework and/or reading lists are handed out.

## Affective Experiences

Rabbi S. identifies as one of his strengths the ability to create affective and effective school-wide events, and he credits his years of experience working in Ramah camps as the source of this knowledge. What follows below are two of this observer's favorite examples.

**1.** For Yom Ha Shoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) an enormous collage-type poster was created by teachers and artists in the school. The poster consisted of a map of Europe with photographs illustrating Jewish creativity and life which was native to particular cities and regions. Children were asked to look at the poster very carefully and speculate about the people who lived before the Second World War in locations depicted on the poster. Next, as the story of the Shoah was told the poster was cut up into many fragments. Children were given only a very small percentage of the remnant of the poster and told that they could try to create another collage working with poster paper on which were identified cities that had received refugees after the war: Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem, Montreal, New York, etc. The children became so engrossed in their attempt at reconstruction that when the school day ended they did not want to leave their project. Thus they participated in a graphic illustration of destruction and resurrection.

**2.** "Rabbis and Romans" is a game played in celebration of Lag b'Omer on the wide lawns and playing field of Isaiah. Areas are marked as caves and tunnels, which are safe spaces. Children are divided into two teams: Rabbis and romans. Midway through the game a whistle is blown and children switch (Rabbis become Romans, and Romans become Rabbis), Each teaching of *Pirke Avot* is cut out on a separate slip of paper. Rabbis can learn *Pirke Avot* only in a safe place, but a whistle is blown to limit time available in any given cave or tunnel. The winner of the game is the team of Rabbis who has learned the most *Pirke Avot*. A rabbi captured by a Roman can no longer learn *Pirke Avot*. Perhaps the nicest aspect of the game is that the rules were worked out by Jacob, a young teaching aide in the school.

## Measuring Success

By what yardstick can success of Isaiah's schools be measured? If enrollment is a standard, then clearly the programs are successful; witness the religious school's teacher roster, which shows an increment in the number of

classes in each grade level, with the largest number of increases paralleling Rabbi S.'s presence within the school. According to teachers, SSDS and religious school students are meeting positively within the walls of Isaiah, acknowledging differences in their educations (especially in Hebrew language) but also finding commonality in Jewish commitment. While this positive vision could be validated only through extensive interviewing of students and parents, Rabbi S. in part accounts for the successful integration in the following way: By hiring him as a full-time professional devoted to the religious school, the synagogue's leadership made an important statement about their valuing of and commitment to the legitimacy of the supplementary school and its programs. (Other strategies for positive integration have been noted above.)

The apparent success of Isaiah in terms of increasing enrollment and expressed enthusiasm on the part of faculty, administration, and students is contradictory to both current demographic studies and patterns observed within the United Synagogue. When asked about the apparent contradiction, Rabbi S. joked, "Welcome to Toronto." By this he meant that the city itself represents a more traditional Jewish community than many other U.S. cities.

In terms of implicit goals of nurturing positive Jewish identity and commitment, Rabbi S. and the teachers eagerly cite examples of children and teenagers who devote extra time and effort to programs within the synagogue and to such positive affect and enthusiasm in classrooms as manifested by Ms. C.'s fourth-grade skit writers or Dr. M.'s video interviewers.

It should be pointed out that from those interviewed, two themes explaining success were most frequently articulated. Rabbi S. himself was praised enthusiastically, and Rabbi J. was credited with significant administrative acumen in creating the organizational structure within the synagogue's educational programs. It should be noted that one of Rabbi S.'s first tasks, assigned by Rabbi J., as he entered Isaiah's employ was to write an administrative manual for the religious school. Finally it should be appreciated that the synagogue had both the money and leadership which enabled it to seek a skillful and talented professional staff.

# Ohavei Shalom Congregation

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Kathy Green

**Date:**
May, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Ohavei Shalom Congregation

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Reconstructionist

**Approximate Number of Students:**
85

**From Ages:**
3 to 12

**Number of Teachers:**
10

**Students Attend:**
5 hours per week
(*2-3 days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
NA
(*see report re grant*)

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
Family education

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Kathy Green describes "Ohavei Shalom Congregation," a thirteen-year-old Reconstructionist congregation of 125 family unit members, located in a small city in New Jersey. Her report focuses primarily on the success of the family education program at Ohavei Shalom. This is an example of how a small congregation with limitations on its funding can effectively use family education as a means of both teaching children and having a powerful impact on the synagogue as a whole.*

*Along with the regular curriculum of the school, year-long themes have been chosen for the five years of schooling. The goal of the program is to help people find themselves Jewishly by refracting their lives through the thematic concepts of the program. The synagogue hopes to influence the culture of the family by bringing new vocabulary and symbols into the home.*

*There are four components for presenting material related to a theme in any given year: First, one hour of student class time on Sunday morning is devoted to the topic; second, children and their parents are required to do projects at home together based on materials that are sent home. The third component consists of adult education sessions on Sunday mornings for parents.*

*According to the synagogue leadership, parental reactions have been positive and enthusiastic. Because of this program, the synagogue has a positive image of educational outreach to families. The synagogue is young, with many young families and a youthful rabbi. The number of young families means that it is not unreasonable to anticipate that as the initial five-year program is completed, roughly half the members of the congregation will have participated in the family education program.*

## Introduction

"Ohavei Shalom" is a thirteen-year-old Reconstructionist congregation of 125 family unit members. It is a tenant of a Baptist church and meets in a section of the church building in a small city in New Jersey. When D.E., Ohavei Shalom's rabbi for the last four years and a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, came to the congregation, he perceived a need for family education, a vehicle for reaching out to adults and children. He began, in consultation with members of the education committee and the Hebrew school principal, to design a proposal for a family education program.

Further consultation with representatives of the JEA led him to craft a grant proposal which met with positive response on the part of the Jewish Community Foundation of MetroWest, a New Jersey Jewish Federation group. Rabbi E. proposed and received a grant of $14,100 to fund half of a five-year family education program. At this point in time (June 1992) curricula for three years of the program have been written, and two years of the program have been implemented. The synagogue has matched MetroWest's funding, absorbing the program's cost within the larger synagogue budget. Frugality has allowed Rabbi E. and his

staff to spend grant money at a slower rate than initially anticipated, thus extending the amount of time that the money is lasting.

Early on Rabbi E. enlisted the aide of Rabbi Jeffrey Schein, who directs educational services for the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot. Rabbi Schein, collaborating with Rabbi E., became the curriculum writer for the program. Rabbi E. saw himself as implementor who would test curricular ideas and supply feedback to adapt and modify the curriculum as it evolved. Shortly before the program actually began, Rabbi Schein paid a visit to Ohavei Shalom and offered a teacher training in-service session to help acquaint faculty with the curriculum.

What no one, including Rabbi E., could have anticipated as the program was being initiated was the profound ripple effect it would have on the nature of Ohavei Shalom as a whole. This report will first focus on the family education program, its structure, goals, and evaluation, and will later turn to considering some of the larger effects of the program on the congregation.

## Hebrew School

The family education program exists within the context of the synagogue's school, which now has an enrollment of 85 children. The pattern of attendance in the school is as follows: three and four year olds come to the school one Sunday a month; five to seven year olds attend every Sunday for two hours; and eight through twelve year olds attend Sunday mornings for three hours and late afternoons on Wednesday, totaling five hours per week. There is also a pattern of required attendance of Shabbat services per year, as follows: three year olds—two services per year; four year olds—three services; five year olds—five; six year olds—eight; and seven year olds and above—twenty-eight. Older children approaching *bar/bat mitzvah* join Rabbi E. on the *bimah* and help lead services. The general curriculum of the Hebrew school includes the Behrman House series as a tool for teaching reading of *siddur*. Growth in numbers of students in the Hebrew school parallels Rabbi E.'s tenure in the synagogue, with numbers increasing incrementally from the lower grades up. Currently ten teachers work in the school; it is hard to make statements about stability of teacher tenure; Rabbi E. reports that some of the teachers have been at Ohavei Shalom for several years while others represent rapid turnover.

## Staff

Two teachers are working in the family education program, one with each thematic year. In contrast to the common expectation of finding women teaching in Hebrew schools, at the end of this school year all those working with the family education program were men. The staff consists of the synagogue's rabbi, the Hebrew school principal, and two teachers. What the two teachers most significantly share in common is extensive time living in Israel. T.G., now a student at HUC/JIR, previously worked for five years as a teacher on a kibbutz and also comes to Ohavei Shalom with a number of years' experience as a HaBonim camp counselor. Joe F. lived in Israel on a HaShomer HaZair kibbutz from 1968 until 1980. He comes to Ohavei Shalom with previous experience teaching in Hebrew schools but is employed as the vice president for production of a northern New Jersey manufacturing company and sees his teaching as a "labor of love." Harvey R., the school principal, is regularly employed as a

public school psychologist; he also is a veteran of elementary age yeshiva education. Mr. R. came to Ohavei Shalom a year before Rabbi E. Rabbi E. explained what he looks for in hiring a teacher: We are seeking teaching skill and Jewish knowledge. When we are lucky, we get both!

## Family Education Structure

Within a context of expected attendance, family education is structured in the following ways. Year-long themes have been chosen for five years of schooling. In the first year of the program, when students are eight years old and in the *Aleph* year of Hebrew school, the theme is *Hiddur Mitzvah*. The next year's theme for Bet class students and their families is *Menschlichkeit*; the following year is devoted to Zionism. Themes for the fourth and fifth years are *Kedusha* and *Tikkun Olam/Hokhma*, respectively. (Translations of these theme names are provided at the beginning of the school year but are rapidly dropped with the intent that the terminology enter the participants' vernacular.)

On what basis were these topics chosen? They seem to have emerged from dialogue between Rabbi Schein and Rabbi E. and reflect articulated values found within the Reconstructionist movement in general and in particular in *Creative Jewish Education*, edited by Jacob Staub and Jeffrey Schein (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Rossel Books, 1985).

There are four components for presenting material related to a theme in any given year. One hour of student class time on Sunday morning is devoted to the topic. Mr. F., who taught *Bet* students in the *Menschlichkeit* program this year, spoke enthusiastically about student responses. He would read scenarios from Earl Schwartz's *Moral Development: A Practical Guide for Jewish Teachers* (Alternatives in Religious Education, Inc., 1983) and encourage nine year olds to debate their responses. He found that students quickly became involved in arguing and defending their positions. He also used Molly Cone's *Who Knows Ten* as a trigger for discussion and contrasted positive levels of attentiveness with students' involvement when he taught materials not in the family education program.

Another component of the program is requiring that children and their parents do projects at home together. This is accomplished by sending materials home for parents and children to work on together. For example, families in the *Hiddur Mitzvah* year were asked to search their houses or apartments for objects that made their homes identifiably Jewish. On another occasion they were asked to chose a quotation from *Pirke Avot* which they found most meaningful and create an art project illustrating the quote for display in their homes.

Still another aspect of the program is adult education sessions on Sunday mornings for parents. Topics for such sessions might include the origin of the menorah as a symbol at Hanukkah time; or a psychologist leading a session on *menschlich* ways of interacting with children and strategies for encouraging *menschlich* behavior in children. During the *Menschlichkeit* year adults attended a session devoted to ethical wills. At the end of the class they were not asked to write ethical wills but rather were asked to list values and ideals that they hope to hand down to their children. They were then told that their children's class would compile a list of values and ideals that they believed their parents wanted to inculcate, and the lists would be compared. These adult sessions, which occur three times a year for

each year's theme, are generally led by Rabbi E. and occasionally by a paid expert guest speaker. The sessions are separate from adult education courses taught in the synagogue.

Adults and children join together for three sessions on Sunday mornings. A classic parent/child session was a trip to a Jewish museum when *Hiddur Mitzvah* was being studied. In the *Menschlichkeit* program parents and children chose to hand out leaflets about recycling and environmental concerns at a local shopping mall.

## Upon Reflection

What Rabbi E. perceives as unique about Ohavei Shalom's family education program is the combination of thematic approach with varying matrixes of interaction (teacher/children; parents/children at home; teacher/adults; parents/children in trips or special events). This year there were twelve children in the *Hiddur Mitzvah* theme year; they came, as Rabbi E. quips, from ten and half families (two twins and two step-siblings were part of the program). Sixteen children in the *Menschlichkeit* program this year represented fifteen families, accounted for by the presence of one set of twins.

Attendance is expected, and either Rabbi E. or Mr. R., the Hebrew school's principal, try to follow up absence with a telephone call. Unanticipated when the program was being planned was the situation of a family with more than one child in close age proximity. In such a circumstance Rabbi E. suggested to a mother that she give priority to any program that included her children and "cut" adult education classes in which material being presented seemed similar to what was addressed the previous year. This is an example of idiosyncratic details that could not be planned for in advance.

According to Mr. R. and Rabbi E., parental reactions have been positive and enthusiastic. Rabbi E. could think of a family with young children that joined the synagogue in part because of the positive image of educational outreach to families. He also notes that the synagogue, although numerically small, fills its calendar with as many events as much larger and better-staffed institutions. That means that demands are made upon congregants which, combined with expectation of participation in ongoing family education programs, have led a few families to leave the congregation.

## Goals

What goals did Rabbi E. formulate as he talked about the family education program? He began by discussing the importance of Jews' learning about such concepts as *hiddur mitzvah* or *menschlichkeit*. "In a non-Halachic age, how are people going to find themselves Jewishly? Perhaps they can be helped by refracting their lives through such concepts as *menschlichkeit* or *hiddur mitzvah*. We can influence the culture of the family. We can bring new vocabulary and symbols into the home." As Rabbi E. sees the program, it is good for children to see their parents in Hebrew school and good for parents to see what efforts their children are exerting in school. He believes that the program is enhancing parents' Jewish educations and allowing parents who perceive themselves as Jewishly ignorant to function in modest teaching roles with their children. A fringe benefit of the program is that by gathering parents of young children together and molding them into a group, they become a support group for one another as their children approach *bar* and *bat mitzvah*. Furthermore, the rabbi and school staff have had an opportunity to influence

positively families' values and expectations as they prepare for *b'nai/b'not mitzvah*. Another benefit of the program is that, of families with Hebrew school age children, about 20 percent are intermarried. Thus the adult education aspect of the programs facilitates reaching out to non-Jewish spouses. Parents are required by the family education program to come into the school for six Sunday mornings during the year; over a five-year period minimally they have attended thirty educational sessions.

## Ripples

Perhaps most interesting is the ripple effect of the program on the demography of the synagogue. The synagogue is young, with many young families and a youthful rabbi. the number of young families means that it is not unreasonable to anticipate that as the initial five-year program is completed, roughly half the members of the congregation will have participated in the family education program. Because the program is continuous, it will take a family with one child six years to become an alumnus of the program; the more children, the longer the involvement. Rabbi E. hopes, in fact, in the future not only to publish the program as a model for use elsewhere but also to design a similar scheme for nursery school children. Thus as time passes, it does not seem unlikely that more and more of the synagogue's identity, public image, and activities will be associated with family education.

## Evaluation

When asked by what criteria the program could be evaluated, Rabbi E. and his staff all pointed to positive feedback/enthusiastic comments, attendance, attentiveness, and involvement on the part of students. The program has received positive reviews from the JEA, laudatory local newspaper publicity, and an award from the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot. When asked what might be done to improve the program, the following ideas emerged: planning long in advance with guest speakers in place and on the synagogue calendar as much as a year in advance; clearer, more explicit statements of curricula for teachers; more staff meetings; either a loose-leaf binder or its equivalent on computer which would serve as a schedule diary and tell the user, "Now is the time to send out reminder notices, etc."; greater consistency in follow-up telephone calls to parents.

Rabbi E. explained that he was more intimately involved in the administration of the program during its first year (1990-91) and because of other responsibilities within the congregation pulled back a little this year and gave the school principal more responsibility. He believes that as the program continues to grow, more administrative time will necessarily be devoted to the enterprise. That will mean either upgrading the principal's job from half to three-quarters of full time or hiring someone to act purely as family education administrator.

A problem within the synagogue which is not addressed by the family education program is what to do with post Hebrew school children who will be veterans of the family education project. At this point a few children go on to a regional Hebrew high school; a fledgling, faltering youth group is beginning. Rabbi E. is very proud that this year eight or nine teenagers from the congregation (in contrast to only one student last year) are going to HaBonim's Camp Galil.

# Temple Bnai Zion

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Carol K. Ingall

**Date:**
March, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Temple Bnai Zion

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Conservative

**Approximate Number of Students:**
110

**From Ages:**
5 to 13

**Number of Teachers:**
17

**Students Attend:**
6 hours per week
(*3 days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
$77,000

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
Parent education programs
Teaching of tefillah (prayer)
Active attention to problem solving

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Carol K. Ingall describes "Temple Bnai Zion," a large Conservative congregation located in a midsized Northeastern city. Bnai Zion is a school with well-articulated goals which drive the day-to-day life of the school. The school is characterized by its special emphasis on prayer and includes in its regular program a mandatory Shabbat experience for students and their parents once a month.*

*The school has a good record of sending its graduates on to the community Midrasha of Jewish Studies, which meets in the school building. Temple Bnai Zion school is a place where students and parents seem happy and there are few discipline problems. Teachers who teach in both the local Schechter day school and Temple Bnai Zion sense little difference in the students' behavior in the two institutions.*

*Bnai Zion is also noteworthy because of its ability to deal with problems in the school without despair or pessimism and in a creative, responsive, and effective manner.*

## Goals

The "Temple Bnai Zion" Religious School articulates its goals as follows:

"We want our children to:

- demonstrate a knowledge of Hebrew language, synagogue skills, rituals, and ceremonies;
- observe *mitzvot* and demonstrate a commitment to ethical behavior and social justice;
- understand that personal Jewish growth and learning begin, not end, with *bar/bat mitzvah*;
- develop a sense of *k'lal Yisrael* (a sense of commitment with and responsibility for all Jewish people);
- develop a sense of *dor le'dor* (continuity and history of the Jewish people);
- develop a lifelong identification with and commitment to Judaism, the Jewish people and the land of Israel.

These goals are communicated through a parent handbook, the synagogue bulletin (*Kol Bnai Zion*), weekly newsletters to families, reports to the synagogue Board and other constituent groups that support school programs (e.g., the Men's Club, which supports a school-wide Jewish Book Month program), and regular programs which implement these goals.

The goals were developed first by the faculty, then brought to the school committee, which consists largely of parents, and then shared with the parent body through their inclusion in the parents' handbook.

The goals drive the day-to-day life of the school. There is a core of Hebrew-speaking teachers on the faculty who address each other and the students in Hebrew. Hebrew is promoted as a vehicle for prayer. The school stresses *tefillah*, including a weekly *Minhah* service, *Havdalah* on Sunday mornings, and

a mandatory Shabbat experience for students and their parents once a month. The Shabbat experience consists of the school's meeting once a month on Shabbat instead of Sunday. Students attend one of their classes, adapted to meet the needs of *halakhic* Shabbat observance. While the youngsters study, their parents do so as well. Parents attend a learners' *minyan*. Both groups join for a service and family lunch, which bring the experience to a close.

*Mitzvot* play an important role in the curriculum of the school. Students routinely visit the Jewish Home for the Aged; they are currently selling snack to each other to save up for a gift of wheelchairs for the Home. The school has a good record of sending its graduates on to the community Midrasha of Jewish Studies, which meets in the school building. Generally 60% go on to Midrasha; this year's class is likely to send 80% to Midrasha in the fall. Students continue their informal Jewish studies as well. Ten or twelve attend Camp Ramah; many Bnai Zion alumni supplement their Midrasha educations with summer trips to Israel.

Israel features prominently in the school. Students perform in a *Shiriyah*, a song festival to which the synagogue community is invited. They perform Israeli songs, led by their Hebrew-speaking music teacher. The sixth and seventh graders discuss current events in Israel, using nationally published news magazines for children.

Students and parents seem happy. There are few discipline problems. Teachers who teach in both the local Schechter day school and Temple Bnai Zion sense little difference in the students' behavior in the two institutions. (Some teachers indicate that students at the Schechter school are more serious about their studies but agree that there is none of the fabled heder acting-out here.) There are a number of explanations for student decorum. The principal is considered "very strict." As the librarian commented, "They wouldn't dare." The staff is an experienced, veteran group of professionals. All are trained teachers with the exception of a college student. All but one have been teaching for five years of more. When asked about the absence of behavior problems, teachers pointed to the presence of three clergymen on the faculty. Several teachers commented that since the two rabbis and the cantor joined the faculty, student behavior has improved. Contrary to conventional wisdom, all the teachers agree that having a parent involved in synagogue life is no guarantee of better behavior in a student. When I asked about the correlation, numerous teachers gave me examples of dedicated parents and troublemaking children.

Students attend junior congregation, reading Torah and leading services. There are twelve or so regulars who are coming weekly and beginning to bring their parents and friends. Parents seem to be pleased with their children's accomplishments. This is particularly significant in a community that has a thriving day school. Until recently, parents assumed that only day school children could be comfortable in a synagogue service. The success of the Shabbat morning monthly experience seems to be paying off.

## Curriculum and Instruction

The local Bureau of Jewish Education accredits each of the state's religious schools. As part of the accreditation process, the school must produce a curriculum. Bnai Zion, having

recently completed its accreditation review, has produced a curriculum including behavioral objectives, learning activities, textbooks and materials, and methods of evaluation. The school uses some commercially available curricula, such as the Melton Bible, Holidays, and Rashi material and the Behrman House Hebrew and Heritage Siddur track. Most of the curriculum offerings are teacher-designed. The teachers and school committee were involved in the curricular process.

The school presents itself as a serious institution. Report cards are issued twice yearly. There is an Open House for parents in which teachers discuss student progress. Interim progress reports are available for students whose work is flagging. Students seem to be learning real content, from real Jewish texts such as the Humash and Siddur.

Evaluation is done through oral questioning and the use of commercial workbooks which accompany the texts used in the school. If the publishers make tests available, the teachers use them. Several of the more creative teachers are using projects and rudimentary exhibit-based methods of assessing student progress. A Bible teacher uses a checklist provided by the principal to measure student learning. In the absence of national standardized tests, evaluation at this school, as in other supplementary schools, varies from teacher to teacher.

The staff is a strong one. They are veterans with a range of five to fifty years of teaching experience. They are knowledgeable, including in their ranks two rabbis, a cantor, three European-trained, nationally licensed Hebrew teachers, two Israelis who are professional educators, seven secular educators, a professionally trained librarian, and the youngest member of the staff, an enthusiastic, "artsy" college student (the daughter of a rabbi.) There is no one "Bnai Zion style"; the approach toward instruction is an eclectic one.

The staff is a very stable one. In a faculty of seventeen, two are new to the school this year. The principal meets with new teachers individually to orient them to the life of the school. Only the college student was truly new to the school. The other new faculty member was in fact a parent. Relationships between faculty and students are cemented through longstanding family connections. Many of the children's parents were taught by the "old-timers" on the faculty. Most of the faculty belongs to the synagogue. Approximately half of them attend synagogue services regularly, where they may run into their students.

I have discussed affective experiences earlier in this paper. I want to note that the Shabbat and prayer experiences were first suggested by the parents. The principal reflects that she is in the fortunate situation of keeping up with the parents. She notes that there is a core of activists who wanted more for their children. "They drive me," she said. They wanted her to send information home on Thursdays for Shabbat evening table talk. They are a committed group who, although not opting to send their children to day school, want a program with integrity. They are searching for spirituality for themselves and their children. They seem to have made this year an exciting one for the principal and faculty.

In addition to the programs mentioned earlier, the school is planning a family retreat for November 1992. The goal is to capitalize on the parents' interest and train them as enablers in a "see one, do one, teach one"

mode. Before they attend the Shabbat retreat, they will participate in a series of preparatory workshops. Upon their return, they must commit to inviting other families to a Shabbat experience. Other family programs include the consecration service in which parents participate as Torah readers and prepare family heirlooms like *wimpels* and scrapbooks, and a "Roll Out the Torah" program which features the making of flags for family *parshiyot*.

## Supervision

The principal supervises the faculty formally twice yearly. The process includes a pre-observation and conference. The school has been involved in the United Synagogue's U-STEP program as a part of its regular commitment to professional development. Faculty members are regulars at conferences sponsored by the Bureau of Jewish Education. The school's proximity to the Bureau's Resource Center means that Bnai Zion faculty are "regular customers."

The principal also avails herself of the Bureau's new teacher induction programs. Her new faculty members are also members of the Bureau's *Morim* program, a teacher-training course for secular teachers new to Jewish education.

The principal herself is a certified teacher who received a Master's degree in Jewish education from the Jewish Theological Seminary. She is seen in the synagogue community as a strong advocate for her school. The involvement of both rabbis and the *hazzan* in the life of the school has made them much more sensitive to the role of the school in the synagogue and much more likely to care about it.

The parent-involvement programs in the school are worthy of including in our Best Practices Index. The consecration service, the family Shabbat morning experience, and the Shabbaton (after it takes place) are well worth sharing with other communities. One finds in Bnai Zion, more than anything else, an ability to deal with problems as they arrive. the principal is able to engage the various stakeholders in a serious, creative effort to relate to difficulties and to come up with solutions in a confident and responsive manner.

# Midrasha Aleph

*Bureau of Jewish Education of X City*

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Carol K. Ingall

**Date:**
March, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Midrasha Aleph

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Transdenominational

**Approximate Number of Students:**
110

**From Ages:**
13 to 18

**Number of Teachers:**
20

**Students Attend:**
5 hours per week
(*2 days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget**
**(*if available*):**
$77,000

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
Affective education through informal activities

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Carol K. Ingall describes "Midrasha Aleph," a five-hour-per-week community supplementary school for post b'nai mitzvah-age students. It draws from both afternoon schools and dayschools, its students representing all positions on the denominational spectrum, although the large majority come from Conservative congregations. Aleph has done an excellent job of providing students study of serious subjects in an inviting fashion while providing affective education through its informal activities.*

*Classes in the Midrasha are wide-ranging in subject matter and are characterized by a pedagogic style oriented toward discussion. The Midrasha has a stable faculty and the teachers often are known to students from other arenas. Students are learning from texts and are learning serious subject matte. The school monitors progress carefully and graduates no one who does not meet the school's minimum standards for graduation.*

*The Midrasha is particularly oriented toward promoting Jewish values through informal programs.*

## Systemic Issues

**A. Background**

Midrasha Aleph is a community supplementary school for post *b'nai mitzvah*-age students. It draws from both afternoon schools and day schools, its students representing all positions on the denominational spectrum, although the large majority come from Conservative congregations. All matriculated students must sign up for five hours a week. Certain courses, two of which are offered for college credit (an arrangement made with a local college) and one of which trains students to become teacher aides, are open to the community. Of the 103 students enrolled, only four are nonmatriculated. When the school was first constituted, there were those who proposed a two-hour-a-week school and those who advocated a five-hour-a-week school. The maximalist faction won. The issue of hours resurfaces periodically, but by and large the battle has been won.

The Midrasha Aleph is nine years old. The result of a merger between the high school of one synagogue on the east side of the city and the High School of Jewish Studies of the Bureau of Jewish Education, the Midrasha was born amid compromises. The issue of hours was nonnegotiable; the issue of location was not. To satisfy the east side parents and those of the Bureau students in the southern suburbs, the board that created the school effected a compromise. The school meets for three hours on Sunday at the synagogue and two hours on Wednesday at a synagogue in one of the suburban towns. There is busing for southern area students on Sunday mornings and for the city students Wednesday nights.

The school is responsible to a governing body which is a standing committee of the Bureau. This Midrasha committee consists of representatives of the Bureau, the three large Conservative congregations whose graduates attend the school, community representatives, and a student representative. This group raises funds, supervises curriculum, develops and monitors the budget of the school, suggests informal activities, and sets tuition and fees. A unique feature of the school is that the three cooperating synagogues pay a sum determined by the committee to help defray the costs of the school. This year the sum is $75 per student for each of their congregation's children enrolled in the Midrasha. Each congregation also donates an hour of rabbinical teaching time or its financial equivalent. Tuition is $375 per annum, including busing. Scholarships are available to those who show financial need. The Bureau, through its Federation allocation, makes up the rest of the school's deficit.

**B. Goals**

The goals of the school are as follows:

**1.** To raise the level of Jewish knowledge of students and their parents

**2.** To create informal settings for community youth to socialize

**3.** To foster commitment to Judaism and the state of Israel

**4.** To promote spiritual sensitivity, love of family, and love of the synagogue

**5.** To instill Jewish values and ideals, turning them into lifelong habits

**6.** To encourage a love of *k'lal Yisrael*

**C. Articulation and Communication of the Goals**

The goals are disseminated through a Student/Parent Handbook, in the course catalog, and through weekly articles in the local anglo-Jewish press an monthly articles in the Federation newspaper. The principal pays visits to the feeder schools, where she speaks to parents and students about the goals of the school. Because these congregational schools have a part in the governance of the school, because their rabbis teach in it and they pay a capitation fee for their graduates who go on to the Midrasha, the rabbis include articles about the Midrasha to their *b'nai mitzvah* when they address them from the pulpit. The school has created a brochure for potential students and their families, as well as an effective slide-tape presentation. There is and annual Open House to entice new students and parents. Each of these occasions is an opportunity to promulgate the vision of the school as it is articulated in the goals delineated above. Probably the most effective method for the dissemination of the goals is through students and parents discussing them with their peers.

**D. Stakeholders**

The Midrasha Aleph committee worked on the goals together with the faculty of the school. The goals were also reviewed by the board of the Bureau of Jewish Education. Because the committee is so broad-based, it represents the input of the principal stakeholders.

**E. Implementation of the Goals**

**1.** The cognitive goals are implemented in the course offerings of the school. The curriculum is driven by its goals. There are course requirements for graduation, including courses in Israel, Bible, Jewish values, and Jewish history.

**2.** Parent education is addressed in two parent-child courses, one open to ninth and tenth grade students and their parents, and in parent participation in many of the informal programs of the school. The jury is still out

on whether this involvement produces love of family, one of the stated school goals.

**3.** Informal activities are wide-ranging, including participation in *Panim el Panim*, a carnival for residents of a home for the retarded, and informal hugim (interest groups) based on social action themes. For examples, students studied rabbinic texts on the saving of human life and then learned how to administer CPR.

**4.** Israel is an important component in the life of the school. Eighth graders study a mandatory course on Israel, and there are numerous opportunities to expand on that foundation. Midrasha Aleph promotes summer study programs in Israel as well as routinely sending its students to the Alexander Muss High School in Israel. Since the Bureau staffs an Israel Desk, and Midrasha students receive substantial stipends from a Bureau-administered Federation Endowment Fund, Midrasha students are often the staffer's best customers. This summer sixteen Midrasha students will be studying in Israel.

**5.** The school tries to address the spiritual needs of the students. Sunday mornings begin with a voluntary prayer and breakfast session. Nearly all school-wide meetings include a tefillah component. Students receive modest course credit for leading services in their respective synagogues. Whether this achieves the goal of loving one's synagogue is unclear. Like the goal of promoting love for family, it is not as easily quantified as connectedness to the state of Israel or provision of opportunities for Jewish teenagers to socialize.

**6.** The school promotes Jewish values through its informal program. Students demonstrated their solidarity with the newly arrived Russian teenagers by making them welcome bags, including in them Midrasha calendars and coupons redeemable at teen hangouts. Every Hanukkah they stage a Midrasha talent show at the Jewish Home for the Aged. Selling candy before and after school gives the students a *tzedakah* kitty which they divide among local, national, and international agencies. They worked at Amos House, a city shelter, and Trevor's Place in Philadelphia.

**7.** The school promotes its goal of awareness of *k'lal Yisrael* by involving the students in Federation's Super Sunday and other community events. Students traveled to Washington for the big Soviet Jewry rally in 1987. The school practices a commitment to *k'lal Yisrael* in its day-to-day activities. There are several students with moderate to severe learning disabilities enrolled in the school. They are accommodated without fanfare, through creation of modified programs or selection of courses that the student can master.

**8.** The school does well in keeping attrition to a modest percentage. These students are in school voluntary. Their parents want them to meet other Jewish teenagers, something that doesn't come easily in a state with 17,000 Jews in a population of 1,000,000. Perhaps 10 to 15 percent of the eighth graders drop out by tenth grade.

The number of dropouts used to be higher four or five years ago. Recognizing the high correlation of students who completed ninth grade with students who graduated in the twelfth, the principal embarked on an active program to hold onto eighth and ninth graders. She introduced a Shabbaton geared to younger students, created a special forum for newcomers to the school to meet periodically with her, and devised a Big Brother/Big Sister pairing. Attrition has been substantially lessened. The principal and committee not that there is a strong correlation between a synagogue's sense of ownership of the school and student

attrition. The synagogue that is most lukewarm in its support of the school has the greatest percentage of dropouts.

The principal is just beginning to collect data on what Midrasha students do in college. The vast majority continue to take Judaic Studies courses as undergraduates, perhaps 60-70%. Several Midrasha graduates have gone on to major Judaic Studies. The analysis of the principal's data should be most informative.

The social aspects of the school cannot be minimized as a factor in its success in keeping its students. The busing, first considered only as a political quid pro quo, has become a potent force in creating friendships. The Wednesday bus leaves the local Jewish Community Center at 6:00 P.M. Students start congregating at 5:30, knowing this is an opportunity to meet and socialize. Even when students receive their driver's licenses, they still take the bus. Only in their senior year, when their lives seem so pressured and saving fifteen minutes by driving seems a major savings, do some students then take the family car to Midrasha.

## Curriculum and Instruction Issues

**A. Formal Curriculum**

The school has a lengthy curriculum framed in terms of behavioral objectives, learning activities, texts, and means of evaluation. The curriculum was mandated by the accreditation process of the Bureau of Jewish Education. Most of the curriculum is teacher created, although commercially available material for adults and young adults is used in the school. Because the school claims to be a community, not a denominational school (although most of the students come from Conservative congregations), the principal is careful to include materials that come from the UAHC or, in the case of the few Orthodox faculty members, material with which they are comfortable.

**B. Content**

Students are learning from texts and are learning serious subject matter. The school monitors progress by calling up students who are absent several days in succession, by graduating no one who does not meet the school's minimum standards for graduation, and by issuing report cards twice yearly. Interim progress reports are sent to parents whose children are not performing satisfactorily. In the eighth grade students may grumble about attending, but by their senior year, particularly after a trip to Israel, students know why they are there. The principal reports that older Midrasha students and graduates repeatedly tell her, "Now my Midrasha education makes sense."

**C. Instruction**

If there is any one Midrasha style of instruction it is discussion. Several classes are limited in numbers to promote a seminar-like atmosphere. There is a healthy respect between students and teachers. Students know their teachers from other arenas. Six are rabbis; five have congregations of which the students are members. Fourteen are Jewish professionals, educators in communal institutions which may have once trained these students. Three are secular educators with strong teaching skills. Four are knowledgeable Jewish laypersons, involved in the lives of their congregations.

A number of teachers are devotees of cooperative learning and incorporate it into their teaching. No one relies on lecturing as his or her primary method of instruction. The flavor of Midrasha Aleph is child-centered and problem-oriented, in the best of the progressive education tradition.

The staff is quite stable. This year fewer than 15% had to be replaced. The principal reports that this is about average. The school has a reputation for paying its faculty well. Since

the Bureau promulgates a teacher code with a salary component, it behooves the Bureau's high school to be in compliance. The principal meets with new staff members to orient them individually, in addition to requiring them to attend the annual opening faculty meeting.

**D. Affective Experiences**

The "practice" in Jewish living as exemplified by the informal *tzedakah* programs of the school are noteworthy. The carnival for residents of the Ladd School and the overnight programs at Camp Ramah in Nyack or in Vermont to work on ecological concerns are outstanding. Prayer, as I have indicted earlier, is a regular part of the life of the school. Although the principal rues the fact that tallitot and tefillin are not second nature to all the students and the large majority of parents, graduation ceremonies begin with communal prayer. Arts programs may not be represented as well as they should be. There are occasional classes in Jewish art and several times students worked on art projects in the course of *hugim*. This year a course is being offered in the image of the Jew in American film.

**E. Parent or Family Education**

In 1991-1992 Midrasha Aleph offers two opportunities for parents to study with their children: a semester course for parents of juniors and seniors to study American Jewish literature with their children, and an eight-week course for the parents of ninth and tenth graders to study Jewish heroes with their children. Here I am not a disinterested bystander: I am teaching the latter course. I am amazed at how seriously the families have been taking their commitment. Today two parents attended without their children, who are on private school break, visiting grandparents in Florida. (Two students who attended without their parents noted that it is they who should be commended. Their parents would never have known if they hadn't come.)

## Supervision Issues

**A. Regular Supervision**

The principal formally supervises her teachers twice yearly. Each observation is preceded by a review of a pre-observation form and followed by a review of a post-observation form. The principal also visits classes informally on a regular basis.

Consultants are regularly used. The special education coordinator of the Bureau helps with placement of special needs students. The principal has brought in faculty from the Hebrew College of Boston as well as local Jewish educators for her faculty meetings. Teachers are told that they must attend three to four in-service programs annually. The Midrasha has a modest professional development line in its budget for this purpose. Faculty members are also encouraged to apply for teacher-training stipends from the Bureau. These stipends help offset the cost of CAJE conferences and other workshops.

**B. Perceptions of the Principal**

The principal is considered a serious Jewish professional. She is one of the best-trained principals in the community, having received a Master's degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary and received Bureau certification as a principal.

# Emeth Temple

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Samuel Joseph

**Date:**
May, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Emeth Temple

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Reform

**Approximate Number of Students:**
365

**From Ages:**
4 to 15

**Number of Teachers:**
31
(*plus 23 madrichim*)

**Students Attend:**
2½ to 5 hours per week
(*1½ days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
$175,000
(*some programs have separate budgets in addition to this*)

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
Many areas, as noted in the report, but note particularly the way that the school participates in the life of the congregation

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Samuel Joseph describes the synagogue school of "Emeth Temple," a large Reform congregation in a midsized Midwestern city. Emeth Temple is an example of a school that has undergone a great deal of change and improvement in the last few years. The growth of this school can serve as a model for progress and development in other synagogue settings.*

*The success of the school has been growing during the past few years. In many areas of involvement there is a marked increase in participation by students from the school. The numbers of students attending UAHU summer camping programs greatly increased, and participation in Israel experiences, UAHC, and other programs rises each year. Most impressive is that there are virtually no dropouts after bar/bat mitzvah until at least through tenth grade. This year's twelfth grade class will graduate with two-thirds of the original religious school class.*

*One of the strongest aspect of this school is how it participates in the life of the congregation. Emeth Temple as a congregation has a core value of responding to the social issues facing the city and beyond. The school is a full partner in any response.*

## Goals

There is learning going on in the "Emeth Temple" Religious School. There is excitement in the classrooms and the hallways. The school is a vital presence in the congregation and the community. This school can be counted as one of the "best practice" schools.

The goals of the Emeth Temple Religious School are taken directly from the national goals articulated by the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's Joint Commission on Jewish Education. Several years ago the Education Committee of the temple adopted these goals as part of a curriculum review. The goals were then ratified by the board of trustees of the congregation. Though only part of the curriculum of the school comes from the UAHC, the entire program is founded on these goals.

Each year the school publishes a Parent Handbook that is distributed to each family. Prominent in the handbook are the goals of the school. It should be added that the Parent Handbook also includes statements by the rabbis and educator about the importance of the goals and that these goals are not just for the children in the school but form a lifelong learning agenda for all congregants.

The school seeks to create Jews who actively and knowledgeably participate in the life of the synagogue and the Jewish community. Since this end is not achieved in one's youth, but as an adult, it is difficult to measure. It may even be too early to measure if we are to look solely at the children. But some things clearly can be seen.

In many areas of involvement there is a marked increase in participation by students from the school if one looks at the data over a period of several years. During the past few years the number of students attending UAHC summer camping programs greatly increased. The number of students participating in Israel

experiences, UAHC, and other programs rises each year. The B'nai Mitzvah Program, a very extensive community action curriculum, gets stronger and stronger. The temple youth group is very large and active and, because of demand a junior youth group is vigorous. Most impressive is that there are virtually no dropouts after bar/bat mitzvah until at least through tenth grade. This year's twelfth-grade class will graduate with two-thirds of the original religious school class. (The school keeps very accurate records concerning who registers and who does not each year.)

In a goal area where it may be more difficult to "see" the increase in involvement, the school attempts to model that behavior during school time. Tefilot are an example. The school now has tefilah every week in school so the students can practice Jewish life behaviors.

Since the issue of retaining children after the bar/bat mitzvah is frequently raised in discussions of supplementary school Jewish education, I tried to discover why so many students remain at Emeth Temple.

Essentially there are a constellation of reasons for this phenomenon. I spoke with the educator, rabbis, parents, teachers, b'nai mitzvah tutors, and students. All confirmed that the reason for the high retention rate is complex and multifaceted. I will attempt to explain what I learned.

Clearly there is a tradition in this congregation for post b'nai mitzvah schooling. It may be a historical reason, since the early Reform congregations frowned on bar mitzvah and tried to replace it with confirmation in ninth grade. This congregation, founded by the "father" of Reform in the United States, to this day has large confirmation classes in tenth grade. My thought is there is a strong expectation by the temple and parents that students remain through confirmation.

Add to the expectation of "at least tenth grade" the fact of the community's Reform Jewish high school. This program, ten years old, is run jointly by five congregations. It meets for three hours per week on Sunday evenings. All ninth–twelfth graders of those are eligible to attend, and over 200 do! The high school is the meeting place for a large segment of Jewish teens in this city. A report on the high school needs to be written some day, but suffice it to say for now that its presence is a strong motivator for students to remain post bar/bat mitzvah.

Emeth Temple has a strong youth program. The junior youth group and the senior youth group are also a factor in retention. These groups have a core value of Jewish knowledge, involvement, practice, and action. There too is the expectation of further Jewish education.

I also found that the Reform movement's camping program was a factor. More and more of the students are attending the summer camp. Again, the value of a continuing Jewish education is held high.

Finally, when a bar/bat mitzvah and his or her family meet with the senior rabbi, approximately a year before the event, they must sign a pledge promising that they will commit to continuing in the religious education of the temple. The rabbi believes that this factor is a very powerful one in keeping students in school post b'nai mitzvah.

I must report that the b'nai mitzvah program itself is probably a factor as well. The students spend a year working with a private tutor on their Torah and Haftorah reading. At the same time they meet twice a week in class studying what it means to be an active member of the Jewish community. The students like the program.

## The School and the Congregation

One of the strongest aspects of this school is how it participates in the life of the congregation. Emeth Temple as a congregation has a core value of responding to the social issues facing the city and beyond. The school is a full partner in any response. For example, the congregation is part of a coalition called the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Every few months homeless people are sheltered and fed at the temple for several days. The students in the school are cooks and bakers for these people. The students decorate with welcome posters the classrooms where the cots are placed. The children made curtains for the rooms. They make cards of welcome to put on each cot. They even made *shlach manot* during Purim for these people needing shelter.

The students collect all kinds of supplies, from toothbrushes and toothpaste to mops and brooms, as part of the temple's work with a project called Hope for the Homeless. Every grade in the school is involved in yet a third project, which matches congregants with over 33 social service needs projects in the community. Last year over 600 congregants participated along with children from the school.

It is easy to see how the vision of the school, and the congregation, is communicated everywhere one looks. There is a weekly faculty bulletin containing articles from the world of Jewish education, secular education, Judaica, and Hebraica. Teacher growth is a major goal here. The temple bulletin has monthly articles about the school. The parents have their own newsletter called Emeth Parents. Even the hallways are covered with letters thanking the students for tzedakah projects they performed.

## The Life of the School

There is a wonderful feeling in the school. Yes, there are discipline problems at times, usually in the upper grades. But the troublemakers tend to cause problems in only small ways—talking too much when it is quiet time, for example, or not listening to the teacher. Yet the school has a policy of rewarding positive behavior. Each semester teachers, following a specific list of criteria, select students in their class who exhibit "correct" behavior. Students receiving this reward are called a Class Act. They have their names published and they receive ice cream certificates, or movie passes, and a certificate of recognition.

Overall, the discipline philosophy and policies of the school are admirable. Parents are sent a full description of the behavior philosophy, discipline policies, and the Class Act Program at the beginning of the year. Post cards are sent home after each class session if needed. These cards range from "We missed you hope you are okay" to "You should know that your son/daughter was wonderful in class today." The school also keeps exact records regarding referrals of students to the office and contacts with parents when required.

After analyzing the systemic issues in the school, one is a bit overwhelmed by Emeth Temple Religious School's efforts to be a "good" school. They are committed also to improvement and growth. And they are aware that a status quo really does not exist.

## Teachers

The teaching staff at Emeth Temple Religious School most certainly is the heart of the program. There are 31 paid teachers and 23 madrichim. It should be noted here that the school includes grades pre-K through 8, with grades 9 to 12 as part of the community-sponsored Reform Jewish high school. The educators and the rabbis are centrally involved in the high school program.

Approximately 40% of the teachers at Emeth are congregants, 30% are rabbinic students from Hebrew Union College, 10% are students at a local university of Cincinnati, and 20% are from the general Jewish community. More than half of the staff are veterans of the school, having worked there for more than five years. In fact, the only real turnover is caused by the graduation and ordination of the teachers who are also full-time students.

The rabbinic students bring a great knowledge of Judaica/Hebraica to the school. The other members of the staff are less able in this area. At the same time the teachers clearly express a desire to know more, so they do participate willingly in learning opportunities offered by the school, temple, and the BJE/community. Faculty meetings are regularly dedicated to enhancing the Jewish knowledge of the staff and their teaching skills.

The teaching styles of the veteran teachers are very rooted in informal educational methods. All the classes have a strong discussion component; there is a little or no lecturing. Projects are key in every grade. Two grades should be singled out here. First is the Open Room for prekindergarten and kindergarten. This Open Room has been going for 16 years! There are five teachers, three madrichim, and a music specialist. There are about 62 children in the Room. The staff is expert at managing and teaching such a program. The other area of note is cooperative Learning. The sixth-grade teacher is an expert in this methodology and uses it successfully with her class. She is now training other members of the staff to use it also.

During the summer months the educator meets several times with any new teachers coming into the school. She uses those times to help them prepare for the school year, whether they require curriculum support, administrative assistance, or the like. It is also a chance to begin to ease the newcomer into the culture of the school.

The temple itself has a fine resource that must be noted for its importance to the school—its library. The library has over 16,000 volumes! It must be one of the largest synagogue libraries in the country. There is a very knowledgeable librarian who is on site almost full time and assists teachers and students with their research needs.

## Curriculum

As was stated earlier, the curriculum of the school begins with the national curriculum of the UAHC. This is followed through grade 4, and then there is a straight subject matter curriculum. The course work is enriched with special areas such as music and art. Parents and teachers receive a fully written out copy of the curriculum so they can see the course of study as a whole.

Every grade level has one major project each year that relates to its area of study. This project usually culminates with a large program, frequently including parents. For example, the eighth-grade tzedakah unit culminated in a project called Life Savers. The students developed a set of criteria for judging a person as performing "life-saving" acts. Using the temple bulletin and mailings to homes, they called on congregants to nominate members of the congregation who perform(ed) such acts, and the class voted on to whom the awards should go. Another grade studied Shabbat and culminated with a Family Day on Shabbat.

Each class participates in family Shabbat dinners at the temple followed by services. Several classes have a Grandparents' Day on a particular Sunday. The class studying life cycle has a big wedding, at which parents attend and participate. Tu b'Shvat was also a parent involvement day.

More work needs to be done in this area, but there is a strong desire in that direction. Next year will see even more of these types of events.

Materials used in the school, both print and nonprint, come from about every source possible. All the major denominational and nondenominational publishers are represented. The educator is committed to providing the teachers and the students with the best resource for a particular class regardless of who publishes it.

Evaluating what the students are learning is somewhat difficult in this school. The Hebrew program is an exception, probably because it is skill related. Each Hebrew class has testing all through the year and a final assessment before the students move to the next level. The other classes are not tested in a traditional manner. Yet looking at the projects of each of the grade levels, looking at the programs in which they participate, and taking into account the overall level of participation in temple life, it does seem that learning is going on.

The school does send home report cards twice per year, called Progress Reports. The teachers relate the student's achievements in class directly to the objectives of that particular class in three areas: academic, Hebrew, and citizenship. Most important, the teachers have to write a narrative comment about the student so the parents have a context for the "grades." Each Progress Report is signed by the teacher, reviewed by the educator, and signed by the educator.

## Supervision

In-service training for the staff is a core value of the school. The teachers are paid to attend an all-city in-service day run by the BJE. The school itself uses outside paid consultants several times a year to work with the staff. In fact this past year the teachers attended three workshops at the temple, one on cooperative learning, one on children and death, and another on legal issues and teaching.

The educator uses a monitoring approach to classroom supervision. She *is* frustrated that she does not have the staff to use a clinical style. It is a priority to add supervisory staff to the school.

One thing that does prove useful is that teachers are required to turn in lesson plans at least a week in advance of the lesson. The educator reads each plan, writes comments, suggestions, and hints, then returns them to the teachers.

Overall the educator is a fine model, an educational leader, for the teachers. She is especially effective in the area of planning and accomplishing goals. Teachers do look to her as their leader.

The educator is perceived by the temple community as *the* professional educator. She is always consulted; no staff member or congregant would plan an educational event without her input. Even more, she is viewed as a Jewish professional leader. This fact is apparent when she is asked by the rabbi to deliver a sermon from the pulpit.

The educator is involved in the city-wide Principal's Council, and she helped in the formation of the Tri-state Area Reform Temple Educators group. She is very professional, very competent, very confident.

At one time the religious education program at Emeth Temple was extremely weak. People connected with the school had a low self-image, as did the entire school system. Since that time the school has been on a meteoric rise with no limits in sight. There are areas to work on, to improve. But people are saying "How do we get there," "When do we get there," not "We're satisfied; it's not important."

# Congregation Reyim

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Stuart Schoenfeld

**Date:**
July, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Congregation Reyim

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Reform

**Approximate Number of Students:**
250

**From Ages:**
3 to 16

**Number of Teachers:**
20 (*plus 20 co-teachers*)

**Students Attend:**
5 hours per week
(*2 days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
$30,000

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
School is almost completely staffed by members of the congregation

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Stuart Schoenfeld describes the school at "Congregation Reyim," a Reform synagogue of 250 families located in the outlying suburbs of a large Canadian city.*

*Congregation Reyim school runs a successful and innovative program that is characterized by an enormous amount of parental involvement, particularly as teachers, tutors, and aides in the classrooms. "Teaching our own" is the slogan of Congregation Reyim, and this approach is seen clearly in both the parental involvement and the rabbi's connection to the life of the synagogue school.*

*By systematically training parents and graduates to become school staff, Congregation Reyim addresses two perennial issues in North American Jewish education–first, teacher recruitment; second, the gap between home and school.*

*The synagogue, through its rabbi, educational director, and lay leadership, places a large emphasis on the role of education. The education committee is reported to be the most prestigious of the eighteen or nineteen committees in the congregation. It has ten members; new families are brought on each year. It sets school policies, assists in all activities, discusses curriculum, and deals with exceptional cases.*

*This involvement with the school creates community and also presents important role models for the students. Students see continuing involvement with Judaism lived out before them in school among adolescents as well as parents. Older students stay after bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah, become teachers' aides, serve as bar/bat mitzvah tutors or teachers, and are active in the youth group.*

## The School and Its Setting

"Congregation Reyim" is located in one of the newer suburbs of a large Canadian city. Reyim was founded in 1973 and is often thought of as being out of the mainstream of the city's Jewish community. There are two other small congregations several miles to its north and south. There are no other Jewish institutions in the immediate vicinity. Members of these congregations are scattered among non-Jewish neighbors. Their children rarely have other Jewish children in the same class, sometimes not even in the same school.

A Reform congregation, Reyim is continuing to grow, with a current membership of about 800 (250 families) and a school enrollment of about 250. About 20% of the congregation's families are intermarriages and about an equal number are conversionary marriages. Professional leadership is provided by Rabbi Bill Miller (pseudonym) and Mrs. Susan Gross (pseudonym), director of education.

The synagogue does not have school classrooms. The school meets on Sunday mornings and Tuesday evenings at a Catholic

school with is about seven blocks away from the synagogue. That school is a new, well-equipped educational facility, reflecting the province's policy of funding a public Catholic school system as well as a nondenominational school system.

## What the School is Known For

The back cover of Congregation Reyim's 1991-1992 school booklet lists 60 school staff (35 female, 25 male) and 16 bar/bat mitzvah tutors (10 female, 6 male). Forty of the school staff are teachers; the rest work in some other capacity—office work, volunteers, aides. Thirteen of the bar/bat mitzvah tutors are also school staff. The overwhelming majority of the staff and tutors (all but two Hebrew teachers) are members of the congregation. This is a substantial percentage of a congregation with 250 families. By systematically training parents and graduates to become school staff, Congregation Reyim addresses two perennial issues in North American Jewish education—first, teacher recruitment; second, the gap between home and school.

The work put into teacher recruitment and training reflects a conscious strategy. As the school booklet states, "Our school is bases on the commitment to 'teaching our own.'" Teachers and parents are role models. When students see parents teaching, they learn that their parents value Jewish study and contributing to the community. While this is presented as an educational strategy, it is also understood as a strategy of community building. Many families join because they want to send their kids to religious school. The congregation's strategy accepts that this is motivation for many families. The congregation's educational strategy draws parents as well as children into the school.

It also defines the context for those families whose initial inclination is to have a minimal family involvement, one limited to sending the children to school. "It becomes our role," said the rabbi, "to see how subversive we can be—and I use that word advisedly—changing their behavior and seeing if we can encourage more Jewish activity in the family context. Our success is mixed, but the secret is to create expectations right off the bat and also to have a critical mass." Recruiting parents as teachers is important in its own right, but it is also an important in its own right, but it is also an important way of building up the critical mass of parents and students who are role models to the less involved. The critical mass is further developed by having many activities in the congregation organized around the school, by including adult education in the responsibility of the education committee, and by cultivating older students as teachers' aids, bar/bat mitzvah tutors, youth group members, and eventually teachers.

## Format of this Report

For purposes of comparability with reports of other settings, the findings will be reported using the categories of Holtz's "Guide for Looking at Best Practices...." An additional category, "Other comments," is added at the end of major sections.

## Systemic Issues

**1. Goals**

Organizational goals may be expressed at different levels of abstraction. At the most abstract level, organizational goals state the ultimate purpose of the collective action which takes place in organizational roles. As an outsider I would say that the ultimate purpose

of the collective action which takes place in organizational roles. As an outsider I would say that the ultimate goal of Congregation Reyim is to use the resources of Judaism to nurture and sustain decent human beings through study, community building, and role modeling.

Neither the rabbi nor the educational director nor any documents given to me used this kind of abstract rhetoric. However, this vision is implicit in what I was told and what I observed about the school's educational strategy. I would say that this strategy has three central elements: (1) We teach our own. (2) We build a close link between congregation and school. (3) We learn in order to do. The school is organized around these proximate goals. This educational strategy integrates study, community building, and role modeling.

It should be noted, of course, that as in any organization, what people actually do is guided by the interaction between organizational goals and personal agendas. Comments relevant to personal agendas appear elsewhere in this report, but a fuller study would be required to speak confidently about the personal agendas of various members of the system. Any attempt to adapt the educational strategy of Congregation Reyim to other settings should take the personal agendas of the people in those settings very seriously.

**2. Stakeholders and the School's Educational Strategy**

The school's educational strategy grew along with the congregation. The congregation has always been led by Rabbi Miller, who came as a student to a group of seventeen families. When the congregation decided to hire their student rabbi, they were also accepting his educational strategy. The congregation has had only two educational directors, both of whom have worked as a team with the rabbi and have shared the commitment to "teaching our own." The present educational director, Susan Gross, was previously a high school teacher and teacher of English as a second language; she became a religious school teacher when her children entered the school in the late 1970s and educational director when her predecessor left for another position. The education committee is reported to be the most prestigious of the eighteen or nineteen committees in the congregation. It has ten members; new families are brought on each year. It sets school policies, assists in all activities, discusses curriculum, and deals with exceptional cases. The education committee has supported the school's educational strategy form the beginning and is guided by it in the decisions it makes.

The educational strategy is not so much a topic for debate, articulation, or validation as it is a fundamental part of the culture of the school—something that has always been there and is now taken for granted is the implementation of the strategy. The continuing activities that implement the strategy and the monitoring of progress toward better implementation keep the strategy a living part of the school.

The commitment to the educational strategy does not extend to all parents and children. There are families that are ambivalent and marginal about their Jewishness, and some classes where children from these families are the majority. The school and congregation have programs to draw these families in, and the school and congregation communicate clear expectations from the beginning. As is noted above, "teaching our own" contributes

to building up the critical mass of involved families so that they, rather than the marginal ones, set the tone.

**3. Communications/Vision**

The school's distinctive educational strategy is communicated in writing in the 1991/1992 school booklet. The director of education writes in her welcoming letter:

> Our school is based on the commitment to "teaching our own." The involvement and participation of our parents is the model that guides and encourages our students. There are numerous ways in which parents both can and do join in the most important task of educating their children.
>
> Parents are urged to become involved in our teacher-training programme, to help as administrative assistants or as parent-aides, to work on the Education Committee, or to join the adult education programme or the adult Hebrew programme. Reyim's tradition has taught us that parental involvement enriches both the formal and informal Jewish experience of the entire family.

Similar sentiments are expressed in the letter of the chair of the school committee. The inclusion of adult education within the responsibilities of the education committee and in the school booklet also communicates the vision of the school as a setting for adults as well as children.

Reyim's educational vision is also communicated each year when the educational director and rabbi meet with new parents. In the orientation session they explain the philosophy of the school: education is something that takes place not just in the school but also in the congregation and in the home. The ways in which those links may be made are presented. Participation in various school activities is described, and parents are invited to become involved in the teacher-training program. If individuals are unable to commit themselves to the program, they are encouraged to help as volunteers and to move into the teacher-training program when they have the time.

As well, the education committee periodically publicizes the teacher-training program and encourages particular individuals. Individuals with particular talents, such as in Israeli dancing or art, are personally called and asked to volunteer.

The vision of a community of teachers as well as learners is also communicated through the way that older students are incorporated into the educational strategy. Among the bar/bat mitzvah tutors, teenagers outnumber parents. Students approaching bar/bat mitzvah know that the school encourages them to use the skills they have learned as tutors in the school. Many students two or three years past bar/bat mitzvah enter the teacher-training program. The vision of older students becoming involved with the education of younger ones is dramatized through the *l'dor va dor* ritual. During the Shavuot service "Grade Nine students call the Junior Kindergarten students to the *bimah* to honor them and to formally welcome them to the study of Judaica and Hebrew" (school booklet).

**4. Emotional Tone**

Intensive research would be required for an adequate understanding of how good it feels to be at Congregation Reyim and in what ways learning is enjoyed. The following anecdotal comments from my Sunday morning visit are suggestive: Coffee and cake were laid out in the large teachers' lounge before class. Teachers were sitting at tables talking. The director of education spoke with teachers as they came

in. The atmosphere was active, but friendly and unhurried. The school day began with "O, Canada" and "Hatikvah" and announcements on the P.A.

The announcements included a mention that I was visiting and asked that I be welcomed. As I was walking through the halls, a child came over and said, "Welcome to our school." I was told to go into whatever classes I liked, and I visited five of the eighteen classes as well as the teacher-training class. I observed no "control" problems. Students were praised for what they knew. They felt free to say they didn't know and to admit they hadn't done the work. Questions and discussions were permitted and encourage. Students who were not "tuned in" were not disruptive; they were encouraged to get back into the lesson and sometimes did.

After the first hour on Sundays the classes come together into two groups (older and younger) for *tefillah*. I went to the older *tefillah* group, which was held in a carpeted assembly hall, without chairs; students sat by themselves in groups of the floor. *Tefillah* was led by a teenager. The students sang *berakhot* and *Shema*, from memory. An older class took the stage and acted out a compact play consisting of God's promise to Abraham, Herzl's vision of a Jewish state (along with the singing of Debbie Friedman's "Im Tirztu"), and the many attacks on Israel and their failure (concluded with the singing of "hatikvah"). The play was simple by imaginatively stylized and sincerely presented. The senior youth group meeting after school was announced. *Tefillah* concluded with Kaddish, also said by heart.

After school the senior youth group—27 teenagers attending—held a lively, friendly, and productive meeting in the same room where *tefillah* had been held. There were no adults (except me) present.

I had a chance during the morning to speak to parents, teachers, and students. What many of them said fit into an emotional pattern. The parents have decided, by virtue of economic circumstances or the location of their work, that they will live in a town where Jews are a tiny minority. However, by joining the congregation, they had made a statement that they somehow intend to continue to live as Jews. The congregation is the only local framework in which doing this is possible. Enough of them to "set a tone" accept that they will have to put much volunteer time into the congregation if Jewish life is to mean anything. The school cultivates this orientation by making it central to its educational strategy. For the kids, Congregation Reyim means peer support in the sometimes lonely confrontation with the public Christianity of public school, shopping malls, and neighborhood. It feels good to be together, to have Jewish friendships which extend over many years, and to know that your parents, or parents of friends, care enough to want to be your teachers.

The emotional tone of the school is also shaped by the use of ritual, music, and symbols. An anecdote indicates the importance of symbols as learning tools. The rabbi and educational director were both present at the end of "Kallah," the post bar/bat mitzvah class. Each was wearing a stylized "*shalom*" pin on a chain. I was told that this is the congregation's "status symbol," given only to Kallah teachers and graduates. What do students learn from the way this pin is used as a symbol? Respect for learning and achievement, identification with and respect for their senior teachers.

A final comment on emotional tone. Students see continuing involvement with Judaism lived out before them in school among

adolescents as well as parents. Older students stay after bar and bat mitzvah, become teachers' aides, bar/bat mitzvah tutors or teachers, and are active in the youth group.

**5. Commitment Past Bar/Bat Mitzvah**

Over 80% of students stay past grade 7. Grades 8 and 9 are followed by the Kallah program, to which students must be specially admitted. The Kallah year closes with a creative graduation service around Shavuot. Kallah graduates are recruited as student teachers. The congregation offers to subsidize a trip to Israel, which is under the auspices of the NLFTY Israel tour, for Kallah graduates. However, Reyim specifically design its trip to include a 2½-week Ulpan. The students it subsidizes make a commitment to teach for at least two years when they come back. In the summer of 1990 the congregation sent three students; in the summer of 1991, four.

Three youth groups (grades 4–6, 7–8, and 9–13) supplement school with religious participation, social events, and social action. Much youth group activity, formal and informal, takes place on Sundays. The junior youth groups are led by parent volunteers. The senior youth group (grades 9–13) has fifty members. It is led by a part-time paid youth adviser, who is also the head bar/bat mitzvah tutor. The combination is natural, as the majority of tutors are also members of the senior youth group.

**6. Other Comments**

**A.** There is a financial dimension to this educational strategy. Teachers are not volunteers, but paraprofessionals. As such, they are paid, but not anything near the Board of Jewish Education salary scale. Religious school teachers are paid $5 an hour, assistants $1–$3. Hebrew teachers are paid close to Board of Jewish Education scale: $18–$35, and assistants $8–49 an hr. Hebrew teachers are paid more because they have been scarcer. The congregation has been holding adult Hebrew classes and gradually replacing teachers who drive in from the city. The savings in teacher salaries is combined with the savings of not building a school. Consequently, "teaching our own" also means lower dues than would otherwise be the case.

**B.** "Teaching our own" with paraprofessional parents is also connected to flexibility in teaching assignments. Particularly in grades 7–9, where the morning is normally divided into two sections, teachers may teach on a part-time basis. This system accommodates those parents who do not make a commitment to teach every week by allowing them to teach, for example, an eight-week unit for one hour a week.

**C.** The link between religious participation and school is very strong. The importance of prayer came up again and again in the discussion with the rabbi and educational director. There were certainly other things of importance to the congregation and the school, but in a fundamental way the ability to share in common rituals is central to the system. The rituals of Jewish worship link the identity of the members to other Jews in time and space. Regular attendance at services is not required, but much is done to encourage it. Friday evening services are held for young families on an average of twice a month. About sixty people will come to a regular Friday night service. About thirty will come on those Saturday mornings on which these is no bar/bat mitzvah. The school self-consciously promotes "service literacy," familiarity and comfort in services. Each class and youth group conducts

a service during the year. The Hebrew program is oriented toward knowledge of prayers. *Tefillah* takes place in school. The rabbi works in the school, and the educational director goes to services and is often on the *bimah*.

The philosophy of "we teach our own" is connected to the importance of ritual in the congregation and the school. Parents who teach are not just role models of parents who know about Jewish things and talk about them; they are also role models of parents who know prayers and go to services.

## Curriculum and Instructional Issues

**1. Curriculum Definition**

The school booklet contains a curriculum outline for Judaic Studies from junior kindergarten through Kallah, and Hebrew levels from primary through *kitah vav*. The educational director provided me with mimeographed curricula for each grade. These curriculum documents, however, do not define the curriculum; they are only one element of it. Moreover, as new curriculum materials become available and the educational committee reviews what happens in the school, the written curriculum is modified, either in writing or with the understanding that the modifications will be incorporated into written revisions.

The educational director and rabbi spoke of curriculum in a broad way.

First, they included the synagogue experiences as part of the curriculum. Neither the mid-morning *tefillah* described above nor the involvement of school classes in Shabbat services is listed in the curriculum outline, yet both are spoken of as important parts of the school's instructional strategy. The educational director commented that the curriculum that the Reform movement has recently published is consistent with the importance given to learning Hebrew prayer in the school. Each year, each class and youth group leads a service. Six to eight weeks will be spent preparing for the service.

Second, the educational director and rabbi consider those Sunday morning activities that create a Jewish atmosphere and that encourage socializing to have full status as parts of the curriculum. Rabbi Miller said:

> We consider the social statements to be part of the curriculum. Kids may come into the class announcing a youth group meeting coming up; someone may come in announcing a bake sale for tzedakah. That's fine, we consider that to be part of the curriculum. Number one because it influences values. Number two, just getting Jewish kids together to shmooze with each other and enjoy each other's company is an important component of our school and who we are in the town.

The educational director further explained the interaction between different aspects of the school:

> Our grade 7, 8, and 9 student teachers are not always needed the full morning. They may have the middle of the morning off and they'll have a youth group meeting. all of a sudden the school becomes something that's central to their Jewish identity; it becomes a youth group morning, a fund-raiser, a sisterhood activity...We create our Jewish world. The aura is very, very special; you can't walk into the building without feeling it.

Third, bar/bat mitzvah preparation (20–25 per year) is a separate area of instruction, involving bar/bat mitzvah tutors (who are members of the congregation, often teenagers), the educational director, and the rabbi.

Fourth, the school booklet lists "additional educational programmer" discussion groups and adult Hebrew classes, preschool, teacher training, family education, and a lending library.

**2. Learning of Content**

Content learning takes place partly in the classroom, following the printed curriculum. All the classes observed were focused on content of some kind. There is homework. One of the classes I observed consisted of reports of individual projects. There are report cards. Members of the Kallah class must pass a three-page exam (Hebrew terms, fill in the blanks, short answers, and an essay). Students also participate in voluntary learning activities which supplement what the school does—the Rikudiyah, Zimriyah (both sponsored by the City Board of Jewish Education), Bible contest (sponsored by the Canadian Zionist Federation), and Israel quiz (sponsored by the Reform movement). While the formal curriculum covers the standard elements of Jewish education, there is a tilt toward instruction in synagogue skills and knowledge of religious topics.

Because the curriculum is broadly conceived, formal lessons in the classroom are not the only way in which content is learned. Continuous involvement and participation in synagogue-sponsored activities are given a high priority. The educational director commented:

> Our classes run services. The kids come up on the *bimah* and chant from Torah on a regular basis. They are not strangers because it has become more than a subject; it's part of who they are. There are some things that suffer because of it. On the other hand, if it were only school, if Hebrew were only like French, we'd lose something because it wouldn't be important for them. The importance grows as they become involved in the process. We have a wonderful retention rate of kids who do not leave us after bar and bat mitzvah.

**3. Teaching Styles and Background**

The staffing of Congregation Reyim by parents and older students is the school's distinctive characteristic. The eighteen classes of 20 to 22 students are well staffed. Most classes have more than one teacher. Student aides and volunteers are frequently present. The training and supervision of teachers will be covered below in the section on "Supervision Issues." Only the implications for classroom experience will be noted here. The observations recorded above on "Emotional Tone" are consistent with the rabbi and educational director's summary comment on teaching style—it is "relaxed." Teachers are encouraging but are conscious about not making the learning of content the exclusive, or even the most important, goal of their work.

I would also add that the teaching style is cooperative. There is usually a team in the classroom. In grades 7 through 9 the students have multiple teachers. The morning is divided into an hour of Hebrew and two one-hour lessons; in each hour the class may have a different teacher.

Reyim teachers have all been trained by the rabbi and education director, who continue as their supervisors. The overlapping of statuses as parents, congregational members, members of a teaching team, and graduates of a common teacher-training program contributes toward a teaching style that reflects identification with an organizational culture rather than a technical division of labor.

**4. Affective Education**

The curriculum documents describe content, but the educational director and rabbi spoke much about the integration of feelings and behavior with knowledge. There is a self-consciousness about role modeling, creating the proper atmosphere, learning in order to do and to feel like doing. Linking the school to participation in the synagogue has an affective dimension. The children's transitions in the school are marked by synagogue events: junior kindergarten and grade 1 students are welcomed in September; the grade 9s and the junior kindergarten participate in the l'dor va dor service; the Kallah graduation is a creative service. Each class (from grade 4 up) and each youth group runs a service. The Friday night family services are not formally school sponsored but are part of the congregation's "package."

Other affective programs—retreats, tzedakah, trips, and *Zimriyah*—are also present. The intentional use of the school setting to promote social activities falls into the category of affective education, as does the dinner that the rabbi hosts at his house for the Kallah class.

**5. Family/Parent Education**

PARENT EDUCATION. Two levels of adult Hebrew, with about fifteen students, are taught at the same time that the rest of the school meets. The teachers of these classes are also parents. Sunday morning discussion groups sponsored by the education committee are periodically held. The director of education leads a Judaica study group on Wednesday nights.

FAMILY EDUCATION. There are family services on Friday nights about twice a month. The rabbi leads prayers with his guitar, tells stories, and invites kids to come up and act them out. Every grade is invited to specific Shabbat morning service. From grade 4 up each grade runs a service. A few special programs are held in other grades. Grade 1 has Shabbat afternoon and *Havdalah* around Tu b'Shevat, with parents, run by the educational director. In grade 7 the first five weeks of school are a family bar/bat mitzvah program, with students and parents attending together. Grade 8 has a four-week family program on parents' and children's views of what makes a Jewish home In grade 10 parents are in the classroom for the session on mixed marriage.

## Supervision Issues

**1. In-Service Education**

In 1991/1992, about half a dozen adults joined the teacher-training program. Students in grades 9 and 10 are given the opportunity to join the teacher-training program and be teaching assistants. In 1991–1992 about ten students joined. Not everyone who begins the teaching-training program completes it, but most do.

The teacher-training program is held on Sunday mornings. Teacher-training students meet together for an hour. The educational director, rabbi, or sometimes a guest (usually a parent who is a teacher, principal, or educational specialist) will present a topic. The outline of weekly topics is included here as Appendix A.

For the other two hours, each teacher in training goes into a grade, where he or she will spend either the full year or half a year (they may switch in the middle if they want). Trainees move from observing to teaching parts

of lessons to teaching full segments of lessons under the guidance of the classroom teacher. Where possible, the educational director or rabbi will observe their teaching.

At the end of the year, those in the teacher-training program are given a form which asks them their feelings about the program, what sessions have been best, which ones they would like to see changed. This feedback is used for planning of the next year's program. They are asked which grade level they see themselves most comfortable with and which content they prefer to teach.

Their teaching assignment is discussed at a conference with the educational director. In most cases, the new teachers are placed as associate teachers rather than main teachers.

The morning on which I observed was near the end of the year. The teacher-training class that morning was led by the rabbi. The class began with five students; three more arrived soon. It was composed of teenaged boys, teenaged girls, adult women, and adult men—two of each. The class began with role playing: "It is June, you two are co-teachers planning your first day in class." After about six minutes there was a discussion, led by the rabbi, of what to do when planning the first day. Then more role playing: "This is September, the first day of class. We are the class. Start the class." The rabbi role-played a student who first thing asks to go to the bathroom. After this short role playing, the rabbi led a discussion by raising questions: "What do you do before you get into class? What do you do on the day of class before students arrive? When the students come in, what impression do you want them to have of you? How do you keep the administrivia of the beginning of the year from getting in the way of teaching?"

The school also holds professional development sessions through the year and discusses teaching issues at staff meetings.

**2. Supervision**

Since the financial rewards of teaching are minimal, the primary rewards are personal satisfaction and social approval. These rewards affect the supervisor/teacher relationship. The goal of supervision is to have everyone in a place where they can creatively use their talents. If someone is not working well as a teacher, personal satisfaction and positive feedback will be low. It is also significant and positive feedback will be low. It is also significant that teachers are members of the congregation. This means, I was told, that they can't be fired. If a class is not working and the support provided doesn't help, the teacher will be encouraged to move. Sometimes the teacher will work better with a different age level or be encouraged to volunteer at the school in another capacity. Sometimes the class goes through several teachers or grades before they find a teacher that reaches them. Some classes and grades present more problems than others. Since most classes are team taught and volunteers and aides are part of the instructional strategy, a variety of interventions are possible.

**3. Director of Education's/Rabbi's Role**

The educational director is responsible for hiring and assigning teachers. She is also responsible for general administration and implementation of educational policy. She gets to know particular classes as they move up through the grades and uses a variety of interventions with problematic classes. She described one class which had

been challenging, which "gave our teachers a run for their money for about three years." Different parents were brought in, and finally they got the right combination of teachers who helped them focus on a tzedakah project which bonded them together, making them feel very good about what they were doing in school.

The educational director and rabbi are both teachers of teachers. They share the teacher-training program, observe classrooms, give seminars during staff meetings, and "are there when the teachers need us." Both see accessibility and the presence of the rabbi as someone who knows the children and is involved in the school as important.

**4. Other Comments**

Neither the director of education nor the rabbi has formal training in teacher training. Mrs. Gross has an M.Ed. in history and philosophy of education. She worked as a high school teacher and an English as second language teacher before becoming educational director. Rabbi Miller has only the courses that were part of his program at HUC and his camp experience.

## Some Concluding Comments

This concluding section situates the training of parents as teachers in the context of other aspects of the congregation and raises the question of the long-term effects of Congregation Reyim as compared to other schools.

**Context**

While the use of parents as teachers is the most readily noticed aspect of this school, this aspect does not stand alone. It is one part of the way the school works, and it makes sense only in relationship to the other parts. Although these other aspects of the school have already been discusses, this concluding section highlights them. It is important to recognize them as they affect the transferability of the teacher-training program from this setting to others.

**1.** *The relationship of the rabbi to the school.* Rabbi Miller teaches, invites students to his house, makes school classes central to the yearly synagogue schedule, and gets personally involved in bar/bat mitzvah. In his relationship to parents whom he would like to recruit as teachers, he sets an example.

**2.** *The stability of the educational strategy.* The school's educational strategy was introduced by the congregation's one only rabbi almost twenty years ago. The present and past educational directors subscribe to this strategy. It is part of the culture of the school, a shared understanding taken simply as "the way we do things." Building this orientation toward Jewish education as a change introduced into other settings would raise challenges not faced at Reyim.

**3.** *The size and isolation of the congregation.* Reyim is still small enough so that it doesn't feel like a bureaucracy. A similar program might work in a larger congregation in a largely Jewish neighborhood, but it wouldn't feel quite the same as at Reyim. It would not necessarily be worse or better, but it would definitely be different.

**4.** *The financial dimension.* "Teaching our own" at paraprofessional pay makes it possible to have a team in the classroom and still keep dues lower than they would otherwise be. Financial considerations may be different at other congregations, depending on the level of affluence and family lifestyles.

**Long-term Effects**

Can an educational strategy like the one followed at Reyim have the long-term effects that proponents of Jewish school reform hope for?

Despite their pride in what they have done, no one at Congregation Reyim expects this educational strategy to be *the* solution to the problem of Jewish continuity in North America. The identities shaped at Congregation Reyim are also shaped by public schools, peer groups, and the mass media. Moreover, Reyim still has its share of marginal and ambivalent families who resist the commitments the congregation promotes. Some join the congregation and enroll their children in school only to please their own parents. The children in the school all have non-Jewish friends. Older students interdate. When they leave home for university, their ties to the congregational community will weaken. The friends they make on campus, their adult value commitments, their romantic involvements, and their marital choices are all uncertain.

It is possible, though, that what is done at Reyim may shed some light on broader issues raised in the discussion of Jewish continuity. It is now becoming common for writers on Jewish continuity to note that neither the Holocaust nor Israel has the same emotional impact on commitment to Jewish identity that they did a generation ago. Yet identification with Jewish suffering and a reborn nation-state are still used to mobilize adolescents and young adults because (it is said) they don't know anything else about being Jewish. The students who go through Congregation Reyim may come out knowing something else. They will have seen their parents, or parents of classmates, take responsibility for making a synagogue school work. After they leave, they may carry with them the knowledge of what it feels like to be part of a community that uses ritual and study to gain access to a rich intellectual and emotional tradition.

## Reyim Teacher Training Course Weekly Topics, 1991–1992

**First Semester**

Role of the Congregation Reyim Teacher

How to Teach About God

Teaching Strategies #1

Teaching Strategies #2

How to Teach Torah

Lesson Planning #1

Lesson Planning #2

The Special Child

Midrash

Class Management #1

Class Management #2

Active Learning

**Second Semester**

Ancient Jewish History

Jewish Story Telling

Jewish Resources

Questioning Skills

Medieval Jewish History

Modern Jewish History

Overview of Curriculum

Crafts in the Classroom

Learning Centers

Kohlberg and Moral Development

Peer and Parent Communication

Special Topic

The First Day

Last Session

# Congregation Beth Tzedek

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Michael Zeldin

**Date:**
May, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Congregation Beth Tzedek

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Reform

**Approximate Number of Students:**
400

**From Ages:**
5 to 17

**Number of Teachers:**
20
(*plus 20 co-teachers*)

**Students Attend:**
4–4½ hours per week
(*2 days per week*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
$230,000
(*some programs have separate budgets in addition to this*)

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
Educational activities outside of school (*e.g., The Show*)

School-congregation relationships

Professional leadership

Madrichim (*post bar mitzvah aides*)

Hebrew Center (*curriculum enrichment*)

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Michael Zeldin describes "Congregation Beth Tzedek," a Reform congregation in a large West Coast city. Beth Tzedek is characterized by its ability to create a sense of community through a variety of imaginative educational experiences. The professional staff and lay leadership of Congregation Beth Tzedek have created a vibrant community despite the geographic challenges of suburban life in Southern California.*

*The goal of the religious school can be captured in one word: Continuity. The educational programs are all designed to instill within students and adults a commitment to the continuity of the Jewish people. Since the congregation is the most tangible representation of the abstract idea of "the Jewish people," commitment to the temple serves as a bridge to large commitments. The loving atmosphere thus contributes to the educational enterprise: Students and their families become committed to the Jewish people by first becoming attached to the congregation.*

*Much of the success of the school is attributed to efforts of it longtime principal. The principal is a central focus for the school's activities and an advocate for the school and for education in general within the congregation. She has been particularly successful in her efforts to link school life with congregational life. When the leaders of the synagogue talk, it is difficult to discern the boundaries between the congregation and the school, if indeed there are any.*

*Beth Tzedek is an example of how a synagogue committed to education working with a strong and energetic educational leader can build an involving and dynamic school with a host of programs designed to address the needs of contemporary Jews.*

## Introduction

Seventeen-year-old Becky B. bounces out of her classroom door like a kid bursting into a candy store. She bubbles with enthusiasm as she descends the stairs and enters the courtyard of the school building. She is eager to talk about how much the temple means to her; she says that the temple is her second home. She is an alumna of many of its educational programs and she now co-teaches a first grade class because "she wants these kids to have the same exciting experiences I did growing up."

Cindy and Wayne S. are co-chairs of the religious school committee. They sit quietly at a picnic table in the courtyard discussing how they became involved with the religious school. Like so many other adults, they remember their own religious school experience as something worth forgetting. Here, though, they find that parents don't force their children to come; "kids make the parents come." Now, they are happy to play a role in supporting the temple, its programs, and its staff because they believe

that the religious school makes Judaism a joyous experience for everyone who is involved with it.

Debbie teaches at the temple almost every day of the week. This is her first year teaching after a three-year hiatus while her family was living in New York. She was thrilled when she had the chance to move back to town so she could once again teach at the temple. It is such a warm, loving place, she explains, that she missed the family feeling she gets there and which, she hopes, she in turn gives to her students.

Becky, Wayne and Cindy, and Debbie are a few of the many people whose lives have been touched by the magic of Congregation Beth Tzedek in a large California community. The city is a sprawling metropolis with a Jewish population of 75,000. The temple is located downtown, on the same site on which it has been located for over 100 years. Most Jewish families no longer live nearby; they live scattered up the coast and inland through the newer suburban valleys that stretch out into the California desert. A northern suburban branch school offers easier access to the temple's school on weekday afternoons, but on Sundays parents *shlep* their children downtown so they can be part of the Beth Tzedek experience.

## More Than a Synagogue, A Community

The professional staff and lay leadership of Congregation Beth Tzedek have created a vibrant community despite the geographic challenges of suburban life in Southern California. Senior Rabbi M.S. has served the congregation for close to 20 years. Assistant Rabbi L.C. has family roots in the city that go back more than a generation and is raising her own young children in the congregation. Educational Director H.S. has been part of the Beth Tzedek community for more than a quarter century. And Congregational President B.B. is a lifelong member of Beth Tzedek; her children and grandchildren have grown up in its schools.

The stability and sense of family created by the congregation's leadership pervade the school: Every weekday afternoon and Sunday morning Educational Director H.S. welcomes children as they get out of their cars. She greets parents as well and frequently asks about their families and, in particular, their older children. With a smile and a few kind words, she makes them feel part of a community. She also handles many potential problems casually so they don't become major issues.

For Cindy and Wayne, the school committee chairs, communication is what makes this "temple family" work so well. The temple staff is responsive to what parents have to say, they explain. As an example, they cite a recent meeting which addressed a problem many parents expressed: The temple had not offered programs for teenagers since the high school youth group became dormant several years ago. The meeting brought together the rabbis, the educational director, the school committee chairs, and a group of interested parents. Together they developed a plan of action, which the staff then implemented. Cindy explains that this is typical of how the temple works: Parents have an idea, they approach the rabbis and educational director, and they in turn respond. The result is an educational program with a diverse series of options.

For Debbie, the loving atmosphere that makes the temple so special starts with the rabbi

and educational director. Their warmth sets the tone for the entire congregation. H.'s effusive personality, and the hugs and kisses which she freely dispenses, have earned her the appellation "Eema." She is always ready to hold a hand, put an arm around a shoulder, dry a tear, or share a triumph with a smile of encouragement and pride. Teachers and students alike know that to be in H.'s presence—or in the presence of any of the staff members who have "caught the love bug" from her—is to be safe and secure. Debbie smiles, laughs, hugs, and kisses students in class and when they pass her in the courtyard. She wants her students to feel as comfortable and appreciated at temple as she does.

## The School

Beth Tzedek is more than a place where children come to feel good about themselves; it is also a place where they come to learn about being Jewish. The goal of the religious school can be captured in one word: Continuity. The educational programs are all designed to instill within students and adults a commitment to the continuity of the Jewish people. Since the congregation is the most tangible representation of the abstract idea of "the Jewish people," commitment to the temple serves as a bridge to larger commitments. The loving atmosphere thus contributes to the educational enterprise: Students and their families become committed to the Jewish people by first becoming attached to the congregation.

The school's curriculum addresses the school's goals in many direct and indirect ways. A mural outlining the curriculum adorns one wall of the courtyard. It was painted several years ago by students as part of a school-wide project. The mural depicts the continuity of the Jewish people from the time of Abraham in Ur until today in the United States. Students who take the time to stop and admire the mural do not miss its message: It is *their* responsibility to ensure the Jewish people's continuity into the future.

In addition to Jewish history, students learn about Jewish holidays and values, for these too are paths to Jewish commitment. In all these content areas, though, the school has made a choice: Amassing large amounts of knowledge is not as important a goal as developing a commitment to Judaism and a thirst for knowing more. The hope is that when students are older and more able to understand the deeper philosophical principles of Judaism, their experiences as children and the commitment they have developed will lead them to a desire to study more.

Outside the classroom, students learn about Judaism in more informal ways. They celebrate Shabbat at camp or at a Shabbat dinner at temple. They work several Sundays at a local shelter for the homeless as part of their bar or bat mitzvah preparation. They learn tzedakah by bringing used clothing, toys, or children's books as the price of admission to temple activities.

The atmosphere of the school is quite informal. Children engage in serious learning, using materials from national Jewish publishing houses, but the feeling one gets is that the classrooms are more like clubhouses than schoolrooms. Children are relaxed, but attentive; casual, but not blase. It is rare for students to be sent to the office for misbehaving; they are too involved in activities to have time to act out.

The Hebrew program in particular has a relaxed atmosphere. As part of their program,

students often go to the Hebrew Center, where a cornucopia of independent learning materials for enrichment, remediation, and review awaits them. Materials in the Hebrew Center have been designed by its professional staff and by older students, under the guidance of the educational director. Ten self-paced units from the core of the Hebrew Center. Each unit focuses on a different theme and helps students learn vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills based on that theme. Activities in each unit include reading, writing, listening, vocabulary development, and enrichment. Students are free to select their own activities in each area. The Hebrew Center thus fosters a sense of independence and freedom that counteracts the feelings of boredom and resentment that students in other schools often feel.

The enrichment activities, in particular, add excitement to the process of learning. Students can choose to make a videotape, write a story, play vocabulary games, work on computer programs, or prepare a puppet show. As part of each unit, teachers also have access to videotapes, games, and other media that make whole-class presentations as involving and motivating as the independent work. For example, one videotape is designed to reinforce reading skills related to final letters. Prepared by post-bar/bat mitzvah students, the videotape includes segments in which Bert and Ernie of Sesame Street explain to one another how to read final letters, and a rock song, complete with electric guitar, which introduces and explains the various final letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Children find all of these materials highly motivational because they "speak the language of children" and feature older students who serve as models of young people who know and care about Hebrew.

Parents are drawn into the learning process too. The school often sends home Hebrew homework packets. As the School committee chair explains, the packets "help parents learn while helping them help their children learn." Parents are also encouraged to help out with the many special projects and programs in the school, using their skills as cooks, seamstresses, carpenters, or anything else. Even the many intermarried couples find themselves drawn into temple life, he explains, because their children are so involved in its educational programs.

## Beth Tzedek's Other Curriculum

Part of what makes Beth Tzedek such a special place for children and their families is its veritable alphabet soup of educational programs that take place outside of school. There is a program to meet every family's needs and interests. The temple has its own preschool and day school (which will not be described here), an infant and toddler program, a religious and Hebrew school, a performing troupe, a post-bar and bat mitzvah Hebrew program, a young-adult volunteer program, and a summer day camp for 2 to 5 year-olds. In past years the temple has also had its own summer sleep-away camp. Because of the family atmosphere and shared commitments of the temple, there are few conflicts between the various programs. Even the day school is an integral part of congregational life on par with other programs, neither overshadowing them nor being overshadowed. Since the day school became financially self-sufficient, it no longer competes for resources with other programs, and day school children participate in the out-of-class educational programs alongside their religious school and Hebrew school counterparts.

The shining star among these programs is the annual Show. Each year students from 8 to 16 volunteer to spend Sunday afternoons preparing a musical variety show based on a Jewish theme. C.F., a dynamic and gifted composer and director, writes each year's production under the guidance of the educational director. C. then teaches students the Jewish content on which the show is based and lovingly guides them as they prepare to sing, dance, and act. Recent shows have focused on immigration to America (featured in Shofar magazine and performed onstage throughout California, even at Disneyland), Jewish heroes (including a home-made rock video featuring more than 100 student performers), and the Book of Esther.

Last year's production, "The Role Model," was set in a drama class. As the show opens, students in the class are dividing into groups to prepare skits about Jewish heroes. One member of the class comes late and is not accepted into any of the groups. He watches as one group presents the life of Theodore Herzl and another the heroism of Hannah Senesh. As he is worrying about what hero he will select, he dozes off and dreams of a magical history book which brings to life the prophets and sages, the warriors and poets of our people. When he awakes, he realizes that the people who work with the elderly, the disabled, and the homeless are the real heroes of the world. The show ends as he—and his fellow student—realize that "maybe someday I'll be one of these quiet heroes." The audience sat in stunned silence as the story unfolded. Adults in the audience realized how much children in the show had learned...not just about theater but about Jewish history and Jewish values.

The Show is typical of the extracurricular programming that makes Beth Tzedek so successful and so loved by children and parents. Children spend many extra hours at temple. They make close friends. They feel they are part of "something larger than themselves." They feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. And they learn about Judaism in the process.

The longest-running program is Madrichim, a program conceived by the educational director more than twenty years ago, which she still teaches herself. Many years ago, before she became educational director, H. realized that the only way to keep teenagers involved in temple life was to make them feel important and to assign them to leadership roles. So she volunteered to begin a class for Hebrew school graduates, which she called "Madrichim." The teenagers were to be assigned specific responsibilities in the school: They were to make presentations to younger students, to teach them occasional Hebrew lessons, and, as a culmination to the year, to be "counselors" at "Hebrew Camp," a weekend conclave for students in the Hebrew school. In order to be effective as leaders, the teenagers were to practice oral Hebrew and learn leadership skills in biweekly classes. The goal set before them was to make Hebrew come alive for younger students. As a result, Hebrew came alive for them too. After several years of success, H. expanded Madrichim, and now there are "Mad 1" and "Mad 2" programs that bridge the gap between Hebrew School graduation and confirmation for a "select group" of students (any students that apply, and each year more than 75% of those eligible do).

Another highly successful program brings young families into the Beth Tzedek community by offering what their extended families no longer offer: ongoing support and advice

about childrearing. Most young Jewish families in San Diego are transplants from elsewhere; "Bubby" may live a two-hour-drive north in Los Angeles or a three-to-five-hour flight to the east. She is no longer near enough to give the young parents advice. Beth Tzedek becomes a "surrogate extended family" for young moms and dads as they assume their new roles as parents and heads of Jewish families. The ties that they forge with one another and with the temple remain strong as their children grow.

Many young people from the city go away to college but then come back home to start their careers. Some of them become teachers in the religious or Hebrew school, but most cannot take time out of their careers to teach all year long. But many do come to Beth Tzedek a few Sundays each year as part of V.I.P.s (Volunteers in Programming). They help out by preparing and conducting occasional school-wide programs and by playing the roles of characters from Jewish history in classes. Through V.I.P.s they remain connected to the Jewish community during the years when many of their peers stray from their Jewishness.

Another temple project, Camp Beth Tzedek, ran for several years in a rented facility outside the city. It provided day school and religious school students a chance to experience a Jewish environment filled wit summertime fun. The camp utilized the best techniques of Jewish educational camping (including twice-daily educational programs utilizing experiential learning), an atmosphere suffused with Jewish rhythms (including daily tefillah and full Shabbat experiences), and a Hebrew-language environment (particularly in the dining hall). Supervised by H.S. and led by local college students, Camp Beth Tzedek provided both educational and inspiration to its staff and campers.

Becky B., the seventeen-year-old co-teacher, is an alumna of most of these programs. She went to preschool, religious school, Hebrew school, and confirmation. She participated in Madrichim and spent several summers at Camp Beth Tzedek. And she starred as Haman in a recent Show production. She talks about how the Jewish friends she made over the years growing up at Beth Tzedek are still among her closest friends. Her social group from temple has remained close even though they attend high school far away from one another. Her fondest memories of growing up are memories of going to camp with her temple friends. She doesn't plan on staying in the city for college, but she is sure that when she goes away she will seek out Jewish activities and Jewish friends.

## A Dynamic Educational Leader

When asked what made the experiences at Beth Tzedek so wonderful, Becky did not hesitate in crediting "Eema," H.S. H. has been part of the professional staff at Beth Tzedek since she and her husband moved to California. She was looking for a way to share some of the excitement she felt growing up in a Conservative, Zionist family in Detroit, and she landed a job teaching Hebrew at the local Reform temple. She taught Hebrew for a few years under creative educational directors who encouraged her to use her talents to make her classrooms as lively and stimulating as possible. When the congregation was looking for a new educational director a few years later, its leaders turned to her. She agreed to become the educational director and has been in that position ever since.

H. is a tireless leader, who recognizes and encourages the talent of others. She is constantly on the lookout for people with a special spark to share with the temple and its children. Over the years she has encouraged many talented young people to become part of her "team." Some of them have gone on to other leadership positions in Jewish education, but many are still part of the Beth Tzedek family. H. has inspired her staff to care deeply about the school, the children, and their activities. For example, when H. hired a new school secretary several years ago, she brought her to CAJE. She wanted her to be more than an office manager; she wanted her to feel part of the school and to understand the excitement of a dynamic Jewish program.

Much of H.'s success is due to her efforts to link school life with congregational life. In this she is joined by the rabbis, synagogue president, and school board chairs. When any of these leaders talk, it is difficult to discern the boundaries between the congregation and the school, if indeed there are any. H. attends every meeting of the congregation's board of directors and finance committee. She feels that she needs to stay involved in all of the congregation's programs and all of its deliberations. By knowing the "big picture" in the congregation, particularly its financial condition, she has become an able and credible advocate for Jewish education. When she presents a budget for the congregation's educational programs, lay leaders know that she understands and appreciates the other strains and stresses on the congregational system.

## Education: *The Centerpiece of Congregational Life*

In return, the congregation places education at the core of its program. The centerfold of the High Holy Day issue of the congregation's bulletin describes the year's educational programs. Monthly, the bulletin lists educational programs and financial contributions members have made to support those programs. Temple events are often held for the benefit of one or another of the educational programs. The current president of the congregation attends all of the events connected with the school—from Show productions to the annual Children's Festival and concert. At every opportunity, she publicly praises the school and the parents and grandparents who bring their youngsters to events at the temple. At this years Children's Festival (a day filled with arts and crafts activities, an arts display of work done by religious school children, and a concert featuring children's composer and performer Craig Taubman) she greeted the concert audience by saying, "It's so great to see so many kids who brought their parents and grandparents."

Each of these actions has great symbolic value. They remind congregants and visitors that Jewish education lies at the heart of congregational life. By reaffirming the centrality of Jewish education, the congregational leaders set the stage for congregational actions which translate symbolism into action. For several years the school has been operating on two sites. In order to help students get to school on time, the temple provides transportation (including taxis) to pick students up at their public and private schools and ferry them to religious school.

No form of support is more concrete than the decision to erect a new school building. The temple has recently bought property for a future relocation. Its location will make it especially accessible to young families. In addition, it is

in an area that is less congested on weekday afternoons than the current downtown site, which will make driving to Hebrew school easier for most families. The congregation has decided that when construction begins, the first building erected will be the school building. This is a most powerful reaffirmation of the importance of education in the life of the temple.

The symbiotic relationship between school and synagogue was expressed by an event held a few years ago: a confirmation reunion. Congregation Beth Tzedek is more than a century old, and living confirmands range in age from 15 to 85. The school located as many former confirmands as possible and brought them together for a weekend at the temple, including Shabbat services and a family picnic. A video made for the event sought to draw its viewers back to temple life and to Jewish life. In addition to messages from the rabbis and educational director, the highlights of the video were the reminiscences of confirmands from as far back as 1915. They all shared one common theme: how much growing up at Beth Tzedek and going to its schools meant to them...and how they still feel that Judaism is an important part of their lives.

Becky B., the first-grade co-teacher, was not at the last confirmation reunion; she had still not been confirmed. But not doubt when the next reunion is held, she will come back to the city from wherever she is. She will come to see old friends, to renew her connection to Congregation Beth Tzedek, and to reaffirm her commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. When she comes, she will be one of many people whose lives have been enriched by their years in Beth Tzedek's educational programs. What will she find then at Congregation Beth Tzedek? No one can say for sure. But given continued hard work and creativity by the temple's leadership, continued support from the congregation, and continued commitment to Jewish learning in a loving environment, she may find that the temple has built on its past successes. She may find new programs that no one today has even imagined. She may find children happily engaged in Jewish learning, and young parents coming to temple to find ways to maintain the Jewishness of their families. In short, she may find that Congregation Beth Tzedek has met its goal, helping to ensure Jewish continuity.

# Temple Akiba

## INFO SHEET

**Report By:**
Joseph Reimer

**Date:**
June, 1992

**Name of the School:**
Temple Akiba

**Denominational Affiliation:**
Reform

**Approximate Number of Students:**
359

**From Ages:**
K to 7
(*not counting 8-12 high school*)

**Number of Teachers:**
21 (*Sundays*); 11 (*Hebrew program*); 4 overlap

**Students Attend:**
6 hours per week (*3 days per week*)
(*with options for less; see report for discussion*)

**Approximate Annual Budget (*if available*):**
$245,000

**What particular emphases of this school are worth noting:**
Hebrew curriculum

# OVERVIEW

*In this report Joseph Reimer describes "Temple Akiba," a Reform congregation in the suburbs of a large East Coast city. Professor Reimer's report is based on a long-term research project studying two successful congregational schools and therefore is enriched by a considerable amount of detail and firsthand experience in the school.*

*This report describes the success that a supplementary school committed to serious learning of subject matter can have in introducing and maintaining a demanding curriculum, in this case in the area of classical Hebrew.*

*Although the report focuses on the Hebrew curriculum developed by the Melton Research Center, the issues raised by Professor Reimer here are applicable to any serious curriculum project in the supplementary school arena. Professor Reimer emphasizes that the success of the program depends on a number of factors, most of which would be relevant to other curricular areas as well.*

*Professor Reimer's report indicates that, given the proper support and dedication, here is a possibility for serious pedagogic endeavors in the supplementary school.*

## Introduction

The literature on supplementary education in synagogue schools is replete with examples of what goes wrong in the process of Jewish education. But it is only recently that researchers have begun to focus their attention on examples of supplementary education that seem to work, that, in the words of the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicot, provide students with "a good enough" basis for future development as a Jew in American culture.[1]

In this essay I drew from the ethnographic research I conducted during two school years (1989–1990, 1990–1991) at a large, urban Reform synagogue that I call "Temple Akiba."[2] I chose this synagogue and its school for study after consulting with well-informed Jewish professionals in its metropolitan area and learning that this school had the reputation for providing "an exceptionally good" educational program. I was curious to learn from close weekly observation what "good" means in synagogue education and how this school is organized to provide that quality education.

While it is beyond the limits of this essay to tell the whole story of the Temple Akiba school, I will focus on one aspect of its educational program—the teaching of Hebrew—to illustrate how what might be called "best practice" operates in a synagogue school. I was drawn to the Hebrew curriculum because, from previous reading about synagogue schools, I had come to believe that teaching Hebrew has become the weakest link in the curricular chain of synagogue education.[3] Yet here was a Hebrew program that seemed to have genuine curricular coherence, a solid core of teachers, good administrative support, and, most important, engaged students who over a period of five

years showed a progression in learning how to read and comprehend Hebrew texts. This seemed a remarkable educational achievement for a contemporary synagogue school, and I wanted to determine from close observation how the daily realities of classroom life matched the very positive reputation of the program.

I set out not to evaluate this program, but to describe the synagogue and school in which it is embedded. I offer my descriptive material as a possible example of "best practice" in a synagogue school, but I do so with a cautionary caveat: if this be best practice, it is not a panacea for all the dilemmas that surround supplementary Jewish education. For as I will show, a close-up view of a "good enough" synagogue school reveals a complex picture in which some strong teaching and solid learning take place within a context of a secularize or assimilated Jewish community that remains ambivalent in its Jewish commitments. Even while evincing support and enthusiasm for the quality of education that the school provides, many families chose not to take full advantage of the programs the school offers—including the Hebrew program I am about to describe.

In this essay I will provide: (1) a historical context for understanding the evolution of the Hebrew program within the life of this synagogue and its school, (2) a picture of the educational staff of the Hebrew program, (3) an in-depth look at teaching and learning in the Hebrew program, (4) a discussion of whether the Hebrew program meets its goals, and (5) why what may be considered as an example of "best practice" still has limited appeal.

## Melton Hebrew in a Reform Congregation

Before coming to know Temple Akiba well, I would not have imagined that this historic Reform congregation, once famous for its classic and even radical Reform stance, would adopt a Hebrew curriculum that was developed by the Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary. How, I came to wonder, did this *shidduch* come about?

Some historical background is helpful here. During the early decades of this century Temple Akiba prided itself on providing a quality Reform Jewish education for children in a professionally run religious school. But until the 1940's its religious school met only on Sundays and did not include Hebrew as a major part of the curriculum. As services for adults were conducted in English, and as classical Reform Judaism was non-Zionist in orientation, there was little perceived need for teaching Hebrew to the children. With a change in rabbinic leadership in the 1940's came two significant changes in temple philosophy that affected the place of Hebrew in the curriculum. First, more traditional prayers and rituals (including bar mitzvah) were introduced into the liturgy. Second, the congregation became more supportive of Zionist efforts to establish a homeland in Palestine and to revive Hebrew as a spoken language. After World War II the temple for the first time opened a regular Hebrew program for students in the school.

This new Hebrew program, however, was neither mandatory nor fully integrated into the religious school. Rather, religious school continued to meet on Sundays, and those students who wished to learn Hebrew came during the week to the voluntary Hebrew program. Over the years, as more and more families became interested in their children's becoming bar or bat mitzvah, the midweek Hebrew program grew in popularity, for to become bar or bat mitzvah one had to know enough Hebrew too participate in the increasingly Hebraized Shabbat service. Yet participation

remained voluntary, and families who followed the classical Reform model tended not to send their children to midweek Hebrew.

In the late 1970's the current senior rabbi came to Temple Akiba with a serious interest in making Jewish education even more central to the mission of the synagogue. He had doctoral training in classical Judaica and a passion for introducing textual study into the curriculum of both the religious school and adult education. He and the rabbi who serves as temple educator had as a first priority making the great texts of Judaism more accessible to their students—both young and old.

When they learned several years later of the availability of the Melton Hebrew Language Program, it seemed to fit their goals for the midweek Hebrew program. This is not a program with a denominational slant, but one that places the learning of Biblical Hebrew at the forefront of the curricular agenda. The rabbis recognized that they could not expect their students in a part-time program to learn both modern spoken Hebrew and classical literary Hebrew. If a choice had to be made, they agreed with the authors of the Melton curriculum that synagogue schools should give priority to learning the skills of reading and comprehending classical Hebrew texts and leave for later grades learning modern spoken Hebrew.[4]

In 1983 an experimental first-year Melton Hebrew curriculum was introduced into the beginning level in the midweek Hebrew program. In subsequent years the next levels were introduced until there were four years of the curriculum in place. In 1986 the decision was made to start the Hebrew program a year earlier at the third-grade level, and by 1990 the students completed the four-year Melton program by sixth grade and devoted the seventh grade to learning a Biblical text in Hebrew and beginning to learn spoken Hebrew.

## Assembling a Staff

To put in place a curriculum as extensive and demanding as the Melton Hebrew Language Program requires that the school invest in a faculty that can master the theory and practice of the curriculum in question. We know that ambitious curricular designs can easily falter on the shoals of underqualified or resistant teachers.[5]

At Temple Akiba Rabbi Don Marcus, the temple educator, built over the course of several years a solid foundation for assembling his teaching staff. Here are the most significant steps that he initiated.

**1.** *Coordinator*. Realizing that he had no expertise in Hebrew language instruction, Rabbi Marcus worked to support the creation of a new position, Coordinator for the Hebrew program. This is a master teacher whose job it is to oversee the implementation of the Hebrew curriculum. She is especially responsible for the training and supervision of teachers who are hired to teach in the program.

**2.** *Salary Increases*. Realizing that there are limited numbers of teachers who have the competence to teach in a Hebrew program of this kind, Rabbi Marcus lobbied hard to increase significantly the salary base for the faculty. He wanted to attract the most able teachers available and knew that paying more would make a difference in recruitment and retention.

**3.** *A Wide Net*. Though he is committed to both a Reform religious perspective and a core of professional teachers, Rabbi Marcus casts a wide net in his hiring practices and brings in teachers who are neither Reform Jews nor experienced teachers. He believes that as long as a new teacher knows Hebrew and Judaica well and is willing to respect both the ideology of this synagogue and the diversity of its student body, that person can learn on the job to do a professional job in teaching in this program.

**4.** *Training and Supervision*. The school has arranged for a trainer from the Melton Center to come at the beginning of the year to offer initial training to teachers new to the Melton curriculum. But the great majority of training comes through the constant supervision provided by the Hebrew coordinator. She regularly observes classes and offers teachers ideas about and feedback on their work. No teacher is left alone to learn how to teach the curriculum; instead there is constant dialogue with the coordinator on their work.

## The Teachers

In 1990–1991 there were ten teachers teaching in the five grades of the Hebrew program. All taught classes that met for one and a half hours on both Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. In addition some taught Hebrew on Sunday mornings.

Of the ten, three were veteran teachers. Vicky, the most veteran, had been teaching for over twenty years, including serving for several years as the Hebrew coordinator. Barbara, the youngest of the veterans, had been teaching in this program for six years and was now also working as a principal in another synagogue school. Of the seven relatively new teachers, five were Americans, four of whom had taught here previously; one was new this year. The other two were Israeli teachers who were also new to this curriculum.

I observed in eight of the ten classes and found a vast range in teaching skill—from the veterans, who were each outstanding teachers, to Richard, the newest teacher, who could barely manage his class and had to be let go midyear. In the middle were the majority who, though not formally trained as teachers, clearly knew how to manage their classes, organize a lesson, and relate to their students. But they were still learning how to keep on top of the demands of this curriculum and were being visited regularly by the coordinator.

The teachers' backgrounds were equally various, ranging from Rachel, who was a product of American Orthodoxy, to Liat, a secular Israeli who had come to study at a local graduate school. In between were the majority of young adults who grew up in either Conservative or Reform congregations, were active in youth movements, studied Judaica in college, and spent time in Israel mastering the Hebrew language. The veterans could be seen as professional Jewish educators, but the younger teachers were primarily teaching while pursuing other career paths.

## Melton Hebrew in Practice

To tell an educational program that *looks* good from one that actually works—that meets the goals that it sets for itself—requires careful study and evaluation. While my research intent was not evaluative but rather descriptive, I can offer glimpses of teaching and learning from observing in the classes in this Hebrew program that the reader can him or herself evaluate. To assist that evaluation, I will add what the school has announced as the goals of this program.

We begin with short excerpts from Rachel's third-grade and Liat's fifth-grade classes. I observed both of these classes during late September and early October of the 1990–1991 school year. I chose these as representative samples of the basic work of the Hebrew program—students' mastering of the mechanics of Hebrew as a classical language.

It is in third grade that students first come during the week to study Hebrew. They receive initial exposure to the language during first and second grades in religious school, but learning to read and comprehend begins in earnest during third grade. This class comes during third grade. This class comes during the seventh week of the school year, when their learning is clearly in progress.

After spending the first half hour of class working with the third graders on recognizing and ordering Hebrew letters, Rachel places the word *yom* on the board and asks the class: "How do you say in Hebrew—'day', 'today' and 'Sunday'?"

Hands go up and students eagerly supply *yom* and *hayom*, but no one knows the Hebrew for "Sunday." Rachel introduces *yom rishon* on the board, asking if anyone knows why *rishon* means first. Miryam suggests it is because of the *re* at the front of the word. Rachel says that is a clever thought, but not correct. She has them look at the word to see if any other Hebrew word is contained within. They spot *rosh*, still familiar from the recently celebrated Rosh Hashanah. Why, Rachel asks, is that holiday called "Rosh Hashanah." Ten hands fly in the air as clearly they remember the connection between "head" and "first" in the word *rosh*.

Rachel then says in Hebrew "*Hayom yom shlishi*" [Today is Tuesday] and asks them to repeat that short sentence. Each of the 15 students says it aloud. Using hand motions, she asks "*Ezeh yom hayom*?" [What is today?] and each responds again "*Hayom yom shlishi*" [Today is Tuesday].

Rachel introduces the word *machar* [tomorrow] and asks if someone will write it in Hebrew on the board. Shlomo volunteers and writes the *mem* but then is stuck. Other students coach him as he is locating the letters on the Hebrew alphabet chart that is printed above the board. With their help he locates and writes the next two letters. But what about the vowels under those letters? Shlomo shrugs; Rachel calls on Chana, who eagerly supplies the vowels.

While this exercise is being completed, there is plenty of restless behavior in the room. As she is talking to Shlomo, Rachel is walking around the class touching some children on their shoulders, closing some extraneous English books, putting away the pencils of the doodlers, and handling requests to go to the bathroom. What impresses me is how she accomplishes a considerable amount of classroom management without ever interrupting the lesson or breaking from her pleasant demeanor.

With *machar* fully inscribed on the board, Rachel introduces the Hebrew song they know about the days of the week. At fifty minutes into the lesson the singing serves to review the Hebrew, focus everyone's attention on a shared task, and allow these 8 year olds to expend their energy in the service of a focused goal.

Rachel is a middle-aged woman who, as an observant Jew, wears skirts and long-sleeved blouses to teach. In contrast, Liat is a tall, thin woman in her twenties who tends toward jeans, shirts, and running shoes. Rachel smiles a lot and moves her class along at a moderate but steady pace. Liat drives her fifth grade as an army on the move; yet for all her Israeli toughness, Liat displays a distinctive sense of warmth and charm.

By fifth grade the students are involved in reading the stories in the Melton curriculum that are written in Biblical Hebrew but deal with non-Biblical themes. A regular part of their learning entails homework, which they are regularly assigned and which the teacher checks at the beginning of each class. Liat begins this class with 20 minutes of homework review and then moves on to the first new lesson of the day. She has the class open the workbook from the Melton curriculum that goes along with the story they have been reading in Biblical Hebrew.

**Liat:** What is the verb for "crying" that appears on this page? How do you say "crying"?

**Sam:** *Bacha*.

Sam's answer is correct, but it is not the verb used here in the story. The class searches for

another verb until Eric finds *vatizaak*. Liat asks for a translation and Laura correctly translates it as "cry out." Liat shouts "Excellent" and calls for more work on breaking down this verb.

**Liat:** What is the *vav* here?

**Brian:** "And."

**Liat:** What is the *tof* here?

**Karen:** For a woman.

**Liat:** What do you mean "for a woman"?

**Karen:** "And she [cried out]."

Breaking down the verb is an essential part of the lesson. The students are expected to learn how verbs are constructed in Biblical Hebrew so they can accurately identify and separate the base of the verb from the letters that indicate gender and preposition. Liat is having them practice this skill.

**Liat:** What word appears her twice?

**Nathan:** *Haradah* and *Vatecharad*.

**Liat:** What does it mean?

**Nathan:** Let's look it up in the dictionary.

**Jeremy:** "And she trembled."

**Liat:** Which of the two words?

**Jeremy:** The second.

**Liat:** How do you know?

**Nathan:** It has the *tof* in it.

**Liat:** Excellent!

Liat is pleased that they can recognize a single base in both a noun and verb form and can translate it with the use of a dictionary. More important, they know how the construction of the verb indicates the female gender.

Not all the students are equally involved. Liat spots Gabe with his head down on the desk and walks over to ask him if he is all right. She offers him a chance to go out of the room, but he chooses to stay. He begins to participate in the lesson but on his first try misses the correct meaning of the next verb, *shma*. Someone else gets it right, but Gabe stays tuned in even after his miss.

Liat asks that someone read from the Hebrew story. Six volunteer and she calls on Scott, who begins to read slowly but accurately. Then he misses a word. Liat stops and asks that he work on it, but he is having difficulty. She writes the word on the board and underlines the letter *zaddik* which he is mispronouncing. Five other students are eager to pronounce it correctly, but she waves them off. "It's like 'pizza,'" she says to Scott, and this time he gets the pronunciation right. She asks what the word means, but Scott does not know. Peter helps out with the correct translation.

Liat asks who can summarize this Hebrew paragraph. Jenny shouts her readiness and accurately summarizes in English. Liat looks pleased and eight hands go up with requests to read on.

Liat's voice shoots up and dips down. Her pace is crisp and exciting. The students respond with alacrity, wanting to please, aiming to be correct. When there is a pause, she shouts in her Israeli English, "Hey, you guys, wake up!" And they do. Of a class of eleven students, eight students participated actively and the others were called on by Liat.

What these two excerpts highlight is the language drill that stands at the heart of teaching the Melton curriculum. One can see that the fifth graders are working on far more complex word constructions than the third graders and are reading whole narratives in Hebrew rather than single words or sentences.

What struck me in observing broadly in this program was that a curriculum based so heavily on mastering language skills through repetition could hold the interest of these children. I observed no class other than Richard's in which there was a discipline problem beyond some restlessness and inattention. These teachers were

adept at noticing when certain children were fading out and made the effort to drew them back into the lesson. They were also keenly aware of the need to vary the activities in class. Any one class would be made up of several 20–25 minute segments, and each segment would feature a different approach to learning the Hebrew.

One popular approach was the use of games. Especially at the close of the first hour (in an hour and a half class) teachers would tend to use a competitive game to review the Hebrew. One such game was called "Around the World." The teacher would pair two students and hold up a flash card with a Hebrew word they had just learned in the lesson. The two would compete to see who could be first to read (and sometimes translate) the word correctly. The "winner" would then be paired with a next student and compete again. No prizes were given to winners and there was no tangible loss for the losers, but even those students who during the previous hour had seemed most out of the lesson would rouse themselves to compete energetically in "Around the World," trying greatly to read faster and more accurately than their neighbor.

The carefully honed structuring of classroom time seemed to create a classroom environment in which students were engaged by a variety of activities and were seldom visibly bored for long stretches of time. They responded positively to the demands of the program and showed clear evidence of progressing from year to year in their mastery of Hebrew. Though there were variations in progress one could go from one grade to the next and see that the level of mastery grew from third to fourth, fourth to fifth, etc.

## Hebrew and Judaica

In Temple Akiba the study of Hebrew does not represent a goal unto itself. In the *Parent Handbook* that is distributed to all the parents[6] the goal is stated more broadly:

> Our Hebrew programs seek to integrate the study of Hebrew language, liturgy, mitzvot and Jewish thought in a graded five-year curriculum. It is our belief that familiarity with the Hebrew language enables students to attain a richer understanding of themselves as Jews....Comfort with Jewish liturgy and texts, including a more powerful link to the Hebrew Bible, are some of the benefits of even a limited knowledge of Hebrew language.

Looking for evidence of the integration of Hebrew and Judaica, I could point to moments in Rachel and Liat's classes that were not excerpted above. Liat began her class by writing on the board in Hebrew several key terms from the liturgy of Yom Kippur that had been celebrated that week. While she did not review the theology of the holiday, she reviewed the Hebrew terms that are central to understanding that theology.

In Rachel's class the students were learning Hebrew words that featured the letter *lamed.* Among those words were *lulav* and *Elul.* Rachel first asked the class, "What fruit do we use with the lulav?' Several answered *Etrog*. She then asked if they knew which *hodesh* was Elul? When Shaul answered, "April," she praised him for knowing that *hodesh* meant month but corrected his information by saying, "It is the *hodesh* before Tishre." Nahum replied, "It is the Jewish December." Thinking he meant it came during December, Rachel began correcting him when Nahum more fully explained his thought: as December is the last month before the Christian New Year, Elul is the last month before the Jewish New Year. Rachel heartily agreed and then explained about blowing the shofar during Elul. The introduction of Judaic material into the Hebrew lesson was a regular feature of the classes I observed. But the fullest integration takes place during the seventh grade,

when the students have completed the official Melton curriculum and move on to applying their acquired skills by starting to study in Hebrew the Biblical Book of Jonah. As *Jonah* is a narrative that raises significant theological issues, its careful study is an opportunity for the students to both increase their mastery of Hebrew and to wrestle with questions of faith central to traditional Judaism.

I observed Barbara, one of the veteran teachers, teaching the seventh graders the first chapter of *Jonah* and found the integration to be fully in evidence. To illustrate I excerpt from a class she taught during February 1991.

## Study Jonah

Barbara, an artist by training, spent much of her adolescent years living in Israel and still speaks a beautiful Israeli Hebrew. Blessed with a rich Judaica background, she began teaching here as a way of supporting herself, and over the years has become more professionally involved in Jewish education. yet her training as a teacher has been on the job teaching this curriculum for the past six years.

When Vicky was the Hebrew coordinator, she designed this curriculum for studying *Jonah* that follows the principles of the Melton approach. Barbara noted in conversation that while in earlier years she had classes that were less able and more resistant to making this transition, the current class and its predecessor were more positive in attitude and more capable in skill level.

On this day of winter rains, the five of seven students present are using loose-leaf texts rather than Hebrew Bibles. The students are given large-print texts that can be written on rather than small-print sacred books. In these editions the students have the Hebrew text without the English translation, but with a dictionary of Hebrew terms to help with word comprehension.

Staci begins reading in Hebrew the first sentence of *Jonah*: "The Word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai."[7] Barbara asks in modern Hebrew, "Who spoke to Jonah?" and "Who is Jonah's father?" She is checking for simple comprehension; Debby and Andrew supply correct single word answers. Barbara reads the next half-sentence and without referring to her dictionary, Nancy translates: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it."

Debby concludes the second verse by reading in Hebrew, "for their wickedness has come before Me," and starts down the road of a spontaneous translation. She first spots the word *ra*, which she knows means "bad." Barbara asks, "What then is *ra'atum*?" Debby correctly identifies the suffix as meaning "their" and demonstrates the Melton approach of "Breaking down the word" into its component parts. But she is stuck on the word *alta* (gone up or come before).

**Barbara:** You know the word *aliya*. What does it mean?

**Staci:** A Torah portion.

**Barbara:** Where do you go for the Torah portion?

**Debby:** On the *bimah*.

**Barbara:** How do you get there?

**Debby:** You go up.

**Barbara:** Yes, and that is *aliya*.

**Staci:** Couldn't you tell us that?

**Barbara:** I wanted you to figure it out.

More than helping the students with the meaning of this verb, Barbara is connecting the Hebrew of the Bible to the more familiar Hebrew of synagogue life. She wants them to see that the phrases commonly used in their bar mitzvah preparation have a meaning and history that extend back to the Biblical text.

The class continues with the Hebrew reading: "Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service." In the previous session the students had done research on the map of the ancient Mediterranean world to identify the geography of the Jonah story. They know that Tarshish is a port city located in what today is Sicily. Andrew identifies Nineveh as being in ancient Assyria, which today is Iraq (much in the news, as this class takes place during the Gulf War). The students realize that Jonah is fleeing in the opposite direction of Nineveh and consider that Jonah may be hoping that God won't see him if he heads in this other direction.

They take on the second half of the third verse: "He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the Lord." Debby remembers the Hebrew for "ship" and Nancy the word for "found." Andrew successfully works on the verb "went down" and identifies Joppa as the port city of Jaffa in Israel. Rebekka puzzles out word by word "to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the Lord." Her skill in translating without the use of a dictionary is impressive.

With the hard work of translating this complex verse completed, Debby comments, "I don't understand why Jonah did not want to do what God asked."

**Barbara:** What do you think?

**Debby:** He was afraid they [the people of Nineveh] would kill him.

**Barbara:** Why would he worry about that?

**Andrew:** They would capture and torture him. They weren't your "Hi, I'm your nice neighbor" type.

**Barbara:** Are you confusing Nineveh of then with Iraq of today?

**Andrew:** No! Even then there was conflict between Israel and Assyria.

**Barbara:** I'm sorry. You are right. There always were armies, debates, and travel.

Barbara relishes the moments when students open up the discussion and is not about to close off possibilities by herself answering Debby's question. Debby imagines Jonah's fears about being killed by the people of Nineveh, a point that Andrew elaborates. Remembering that Andrew earlier identified Nineveh with the current Iraq, Barbara checks out on which historical plane he is operating. When it is clear Andrew has his history straight, she apologizes and reinforces his point.

Andrew then turns the discussion from Jonah to God.

**Andrew:** Why does God care about them? They [the people of Nineveh] don't even believe in God.

**Barbara:** That's a great question!

**Debby:** He wanted to be the god of everyone.

**Barbara:** You mean that His laws are for everyone.

**Andrew:** It doesn't work that way.

**Staci:** That's why you have a prophet.

**Barbara:** You mean that from our perspective, as people who believe in god, we want His word to get to them, and how can it get there without a prophet?

**Staci:** Yes.

**Andrew:** Why should he [Jonah] go? They won't believe him. They will probably torture him?

**Debby:** If he's scared they will capture him, he should realize God wouldn't ask him if it was going to hurt him.

**Barbara:** He should have more faith. If it is not in his best interest, it is in the best interest of humanity.

**Andrew:** A prophet of God wouldn't run unless he had a good reason.

The students enter the Jonah story with the full force of their imaginations as they try to understand the actions of God and Jonah. Andrew is the pragmatist in the discussion. Why should God care about these people who do not even believe in Him? Why should Jonah undertake this mission to Nineveh if it is not likely to succeed and he will end up being tortured for delivering the unwelcome message? Debby and Staci see God as having an important mission to accomplish through the prophet Jonah. God is acting as the divine ruler of the larger world and surely will provide Jonah with the needed protection against the wrath of Nineveh. Andrew, though, cannot see why God is so invested in this mission and is less certain about divine protection.

Barbara limits her role to amplifying their comments and drawing out more explicitly the theological assumptions of the story as she understands them. I am struck by how these students intuit the main themes of *Jonah* and how willing Barbara is to engage in the theological discussion. In fact the discussion moves from this point more directly to God's role in people's lives.

I observed Barbara's teaching more than any other in the school to get a better sense of how the integration of Hebrew and Judaics works. Barbara, like Rachel in the third grade, is so comfortable with and knowledgeable about Judaism that she tends to include as much reference to Judaic content as the lesson will bear. Not all teachers have that level of comfort and knowledge, but all do at a minimum what Liat did: at holiday time make explicit connections between the learning of Hebrew and the celebrating of the holiday.[8]

## Are the Goals Realized?

In describing the goals of the Melton curriculum, Ruth Raphaeli writes that the curriculum "deals with the central themes of traditional Jewish thought" and in focusing on ideas "is ineluctably also text-oriented.[9] "In explaining in an interview his devotion to this Hebrew program, Rabbi Marcus spelled out its goals as he sees it:

> We are providing the foundation so that their mastery can be reactivated in later years. But our goal is not just language as language, but really it is critical reading skills. I am enamored of this approach which inculcates and reinforces the skills of critical reading skills which enables us—more in English than in Hebrew—to do text teaching.

In Barbara's class the students demonstrate that they can (1) read the Biblical text and translate it (some word by word and some phrase by phrase) with a degree of fluidity, (2) read with comprehension and ask meaningful questions of the text, and (3) with Barbara's encouragement, engage in a process of inquiry by which they read the text closely and add their own thoughts about what lies behind this narrative and makes it such a compelling story.

Were we to judge whether this Hebrew program achieves its goals on the basis of evidence from Barbara's class, I think the judgment would be overwhelmingly positive. These students excelled in the close reading of the *Jonah* text as they have displayed their initial mastery of Hebrew language skills. At age 13 they are on the threshold of becoming—as it were—the ideal type of Jew that this synagogue sponsors: one who has the knowledge and commitment to engage with the tradition in an ongoing search for ways of leading one's life as a modern Jew in contemporary American society.

On the last day of school in May these seventh graders shared with their fellow students in the Hebrew program the evidence of what they were accomplishing. They staged in Hebrew a short production of Cinderella. Though Barbara wrote the script (using a mixture of Biblical and modern Hebrew), the students committed it to memory, and with help of certain props and a generous usage of nonverbal communication, they thoroughly entertained their peers, who seemed to follow easily the dramatic action. As Rabbi Marcus said at the conclusion of this assembly, the presentation dramatically illustrated that learning Hebrew is a lively goal in this school to which the younger grades could and should aspire.

## The Hebrew Program in Context

But Barbara's class is not the whole story. They represent the seven best students in the seventh grade. In the room next to Barbara's class was Richard's class, which did not enjoy the same quality of teaching or reach the same level of Hebrew achievement. When I asked the Hebrew coordinator to explain the discrepancy in levels of achievement, she pointed not to differences in the children's native capacities, but to the different histories that these classes had in the school. Barbara's students had continuously attended the five hours of midweek Hebrew instruction whereas several of Richard's students returned to that track in sixth grade after choosing a less intensive Hebrew program in earlier grades. They had fallen behind and never quite caught up to Barbara's students, who, because of their abilities, had received an accelerated Hebrew curriculum.

The fact that Hebrew study came to Temple Akiba as a voluntary option has remained a significant factor to the present day. While the synagogue leadership has invested heavily in supporting the three-day program (Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday), a family whose child is entering the third grade of religious school can choose one of three options: the three days of schooling a week, Sunday in school with a once-a-week tutor in Hebrew at home, or only Sunday. In 1990–1991, of the total population of 236 students in grades 3 to 7, 126 attended for three days, 85 attended on Sunday and had a tutor during the week, 20 attended on Sunday only, and 5 attended a midweek class for students with special needs.

During this year the religious school committee, working closely with Rabbi Marcus, decided to change the school's policy and institute a new policy of mandatory Hebrew. That meant there would no longer be a third option of choosing Sunday only and all the children would have to attend some midweek Hebrew. This proposal was greeted with protest from some vocal parents who thought it was wrong to institute a mandatory Hebrew policy that went against the temple's ideological grain of providing people with choices on how to be Jewish. Yet the proposal was adopted by the board of trustees. Hebrew was now mandatory, but the three-day program was not. As Rabbi Marcus confided, the proposal would never have carried if it had eliminated the second option of Sunday plus the tutorial at home. Too many families were invested in keeping that option to call its legitimacy into question.[10]

Yet Rabbi Marcus and the Hebrew coordinator are convinced—as we can see with Richard's class—that it makes a big difference to children's education if they come to regular classes for Hebrew or are tutored at home. One hour of tutoring cannot cover what is learned in two hours of classes, and in addition, there are the socialization benefits of regular school attendance that are attenuated when the study is at home. Rabbi Marcus contends that three-day attendance is the best predictor for continued attendance in the temple high school, for the

children who attend for all three days make the deeper connection to the school and want to continue the relationship into their high school years.[11]

## Best Practice in Perspective

Thus a more complex picture emerges. The Temple Akiba school illustrates that a synagogue school can effectively put into place a demanding curriculum—such as the Melton Hebrew Language Program—if the synagogue invests in a well-paid teaching staff, a good system of supervision, and a principal who is fully committed to realizing the articulated goals of the program. But even with the curriculum in place, it may not be the case that all the students make the commitment to learn the maximum that the program can teach. At Temple Akiba the best students do their teachers proud, but many of the students, while certainly learning, do not realize the full potential of learning that their school offers.

Perhaps, for some, seeing the larger picture at Temple Akiba will disqualify this Hebrew program from being considered an example of "best practice." If only 126 of 231 eligible students are taking the full program, it may by definition not be "best practice."

I see the matter differently. The clergy and educators at Temple Akiba have a clear picture of what they hope to achieve in their educational programs. They have selected the Melton Hebrew Language Program as a vehicle for arriving at some of those goals. They have not compromised in their efforts to put this program in place as effectively as they could. But they have compromised with the history and social realities of this temple. They have moved ahead with a program while leaving primarily in place a congregational legacy of Hebrew study as voluntary.

"Best practice" in my view refers to the quality of educational practice that is observable from careful observation. It is not the same as "effective education"—or the producing of the highest average level of achievement. If this program be "best practice," it is because the teaching and learning within it are judged to be of high quality, because the goals that it sets for itself are largely met. We may regret—as these rabbis do—that in Temple Akiba, given its history and population, universal attendance in the three-day program is not currently an attainable goal, but that does not take away from the quality of the Hebrew program it offers.

"Best practice" programs are a joy to observe. Their presence helps restore our confidence in what it is possible to achieve in a synagogue context. But they are not panacea. Even when such programs exist, the work of convincing reluctant Jewish families to take full advantage of what they offer is likely to continue. Even excellence cannot conquer ambivalence.

## Notes

**1.** See D.W. Winnicott The Child, *The Family and the Outside World* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1964) for elaboration on the concept of "good enough" that appears in Winnicott's discussion of mothering. See my *The Synagogue as a Context for Jewish Education* (Cleveland: Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1990) for discussion of both the critique of supplementary Jewish education and the research effort to search for "good" synagogue schools.

**2.** "Temple Akiba" is a pseudonym, as are all the other names used to refer to the staff and students of this synagogue.

**3.** See *Jewish Supplementary Schooling: An Educational System in Need of Change* (New York: The Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, 1988) for effort to evaluate the level of Hebrew learning among students in 40 synagogue schools in the New York area. "Conversational Hebrew" ranked lowest among all ten subjects surveyed in terms of levels of Jewish knowledge (p. 84).

**4.** For a full statement on the goals of the Melton Hebrew Language Program, see Ruth Raphaeli, "The Melton Curriculum and the Melton Hebrew Language Program for Afternoon Hebrew Schools," in *Studies in Jewish Education*, Volume 4 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1989).

**5.** For a classical treatment of an ambitious curricular project that failed in part because of lack of proper teacher involvement and training, see Seymour B. Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974), chapter 4.

**6.** The Parent Handbook distributed to each set of parents is a 45-page document that provides not only information on the school, but also extended statements on curricular goals and school policy. It is a rare exercise in spelling out in writing what the principal and staff see as the rationale for the education they provide.

**7.** Rather than quote these biblical verses in the original Hebrew as they were read in class, I am supplying their translated versions that come from the *Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

**8.** Passover was the holiday for which I observed the greatest preparation in the Hebrew program. Regular Hebrew instruction was interrupted over a period of several days of instruction for teachers, with the coordinator's help, to do a unit on Passover. Different grades took different angles on the holiday, but there was a regular emphasis on introducing Hebrew terms that were central to the holiday's celebration.

**9.** Raphaeli, p. 122.

**10.** The rationale that Rabbi Marcus offered for why the school had to offer the tutoring option is that there are two types of students who legitimately cannot come to the regular midweek Hebrew program. They are students who live in suburbs geographically distant from the synagogue and students who attend private schools that have mandatory sports programs on those afternoons. But besides these students, there are others who live closer and attend public schools but choose this arrangement for its convenience. They choose it even though the school discourages the option and charges the family $940 per student per year to pay for the tutor whom the school hires and supervises. Tutors teach the same Melton curriculum that is offered in the school; this is not bar mitzvah tutoring. Tutors report back to other coordinator on the progress of each student. Some students, as in the case of Richard's class, return to the regular program after a year or two of tutoring.

**11.** Figures on continued attendance beyond seventh grade—the year of bar and bat mitzvah—are not broken down by the Hebrew program attended. Of the 43 seventh graders in 1989, 42 continued on to eighth grade. Of those, 28 continued on to ninth grade. Clearly eight-grade attendance was not contingent on Hebrew program attended, and I do not know beyond the rabbi's statement how that factor influenced choice of remaining for ninth grade. These figures refer to continuing attendance at the temple's one-day-a-week high school that runs from eighth to twelfth grade.