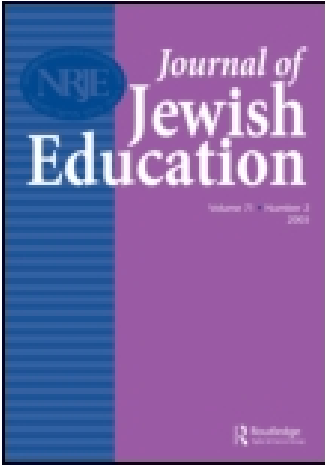


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Upending the Grammar of the Conventional Religious School

ISA ARON

This article provides an overview and analysis of a relatively new phenomenon: congregational schools that have altered the conventional grammar of schooling, either through their structural arrangements or through their curricular approaches. Five pre-bar/bat mitzvah models are discussed: family schools, schools as communities, informal / experiential programs, afterschool/day care programs, and those that deconstruct and reconstruct the conventional model. In addition, three curricular innovations are examined: project based learning, learning organized around the interests and abilities of the students, and Hebrew Through Movement. Also considered are the factors that are necessary to the survival and proliferation of these new structures and curricular arrangements.

From Phillip Roth to the Coen brothers to the “I Hate Hebrew School” videos on YouTube, the outmoded, boring Hebrew school is an American Jewish cultural icon. For nearly a century, most Jewish organizations seem to have shared this impression, largely ignoring congregational schools, even as they lavished their attention on day schools and Israel trips. Because of this attitude of benign neglect and because congregational schools are heirs to “two extremely conservative organizational forms” (Lynn-Sachs, 2011, p. 40)—the congregation and the school—they barely changed during the 20th century. Although the hours of instruction were steadily reduced, and new curricula and new textbooks came and went, the defining characteristics of these schools, such as the age-graded classroom in which students sat in desks and the teacher stood at the front, remained. Following the seminal work of David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995), educational scholars call this basic pattern the “grammar of schooling”:

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Practices such as age-graded classrooms structure schools in a manner analogous to the way grammar organizes meaning in verbal communication. Neither the grammar of schooling nor the grammar of speech needs to be consciously understood to operate smoothly. Indeed, much of the grammar of schooling has become taken for granted as just the way schools are. (p. 85)

The persistence of this grammar does not mean that anyone has been particularly satisfied with the public school; in fact, critiques of the public school have intensified over the years. But the grammar of schooling is so deeply embedded that even as reformers devised alternative arrangements, they were unable to mobilize enough public support to overcome the many pockets of resistance they encountered.

This situation may be changing. Once quiet and relatively marginalized, educational debates are popular in the media and among politicians. A range of alternatives are now embedded into the public school systems in more than 35 states. Graduates of programs like Teach for America have gone on to create their own public schools. It is impossible to predict, of course, whether these new forms will become popular enough to up-end the grammar of conventional schooling; they are worth noting, however, because they set the context for the growing interest in new forms of synagogue schools.

In this article I explore this relatively new phenomenon, in an attempt to summarize, categorize, and analyze newly configured congregational schools. Either through their structural arrangements or through their curricular approaches, these schools challenge the conventional grammar of the congregational school.

This article focuses on schools for students of kindergarten through pre b'nai mitzvah age; a discussion of new programs for postb'nai mitzvah students would require an entirely different study and a different article. I delineate five alternative models—schools whose structure has been significantly altered. They are:

- Family School
- Community as School
- Informal/Experiential Programs
- The Afterschool Model
- Lego-like Models

Following this, I discuss three curricular innovations:

- Project Based Learning
- Learning Organized Around the Interests and Abilities of the Students
- Hebrew Through Movement

Toward the end of the article I touch briefly on the factors that are necessary to the survival and proliferation of these new structures and new curricular arrangements.

THE GROWTH OF ALTERNATIVE MODELS FROM THE 1990S TO 2014

There are, of course, many ways to tell the story of these innovative schools, but one credible place to begin would be with the 1990 Jewish population study and the many commissions it spawned (Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1990; Aron, 2011). Initially, most of the attention and funding coming out of the various “continuity commissions” of the 1990s was bestowed on preschools, day schools, and Israel trips. Over time, however, came the realization that neglecting congregational schools meant neglecting as many as half of American Jewish children.

The year 1992 marked the founding of the first synagogue change project, Hebrew Union College’s Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE). While several synagogues in the ECE’s first cohort created alternative models of the religious school, it was only a decade later that the ECE began identifying and promoting a range of alternative models, launching the RE-IMAGINE project in 2003. Other organizations followed suit. A 2008 report by Jewish Education Services of North America (JESNA, 2008) identified 11 initiatives to “improve and renew” congregational education, some based in central agencies, some in denominational movements, still others free-standing. By 2014 a number of these organizations no longer existed, and several had changed their focus; but newer organizations have arisen that have devoted even more effort and more funding to the creation of new models.

Researching these new models poses a challenge. Scholarly references are sparse and outdated, though articles about different models appear periodically in the popular Jewish press. The best sources for information are reports written by the central agencies that are most active in promoting them. Once I knew the name of the program and/or the synagogue that houses it, I could usually (though not always) find some basic information on the Internet. I followed up this initial exploration with interviews and email exchanges (often several of each) with the many educators and researchers who are acknowledged at the end of this article.

NOMENCLATURE, OLD AND NEW

Before I begin my classification, I would like to clarify the language I use for both the conventional and the alternative models. Throughout the 20th

century synagogue schools were most often called “Hebrew schools;” this appellation lingers today, reinforced by the fact that many schools separate Judaic subjects (typically taught on Sundays) from Hebrew (taught midweek). Many synagogues prefer to use “religious school,” which more accurately denotes their mission. Communal leaders, for their part, use the term “supplementary schooling,” a holdover from a time when many of these schools were communal, rather than congregation-based. With the rise of independent, noncongregational schools, this designation is still relevant.

To complicate matters further, before its demise in 2013, JESNA adopted the term “complementary education.” Jonathan Woocher, who led JESNA during much of its existence, saw this as a “re-branding” that “allow[ed] for thinking about a number of different experiences that complement one another to create a larger whole, rather than merely supplementing one another.”¹

Rather than becoming enmeshed in semantics, and needing an overarching term for all of the various programs, I use the terms religious, congregational, and synagogue school interchangeably for educational programs located in congregations, and supplementary school when including those that are independent.

In addition to a debate about the appropriate modifier, there is a second, parallel debate about the noun itself. The conventional model was, as will be discussed, modeled closely after the public school, so it is appropriate to call it a school. One measure of the degree to which the new alternative models depart from the “grammar of schooling” of the conventional religious school is their choice of new names, often in Hebrew, like “*Shabbaton*,” “*Mishpacha*,” and “*Beit Midrash*.” Since there is no global term for these alternatives, I have chosen to simplify things by calling them schools, as well.

ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES

Categorizing and Assessing the Models

Categorizing the alternative models presented an even bigger challenge than identifying them. Each of the agencies that promotes alternative models has created its own typology, and these typologies differ in significant ways.² Rather than trying to reconcile these different classifications, I created my own, based on a framing question: “What problem(s) of the conventional

¹Jonathan Woocher, personal communication, December 17, 2013.

²See the following websites (<http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Coalition-Handbook-Vol-21.pdf>;

<http://lev.jewishlearningventure.org/>; <http://www.cjp.org/Innovative-Models-JLC-Pilot-Programs.aspx>; http://issuu.com/nadivlev/docs/ce21brochure_online).

religious school does this model try to solve?" I identified four different questions, which, in turn, can be seen as the conceptual foundation for five different models, because the fifth question has been answered in two distinct ways.

The questions, and the models they inspire, are summarized in [Table 1](#).

In addition to pointing toward a particular model, each question suggests a criterion for assessing all of supplementary Jewish education ([Table 2](#)).

While each of these criteria seems straightforward, each contains within it a dilemma that cannot be fully resolved. Moreover, the values and assumptions embedded in each criterion can conflict with the values and assumptions embedded in one or more of the others. The result, as I will argue below, is that it is difficult to maximize all four criteria. In satisfying one criterion, each model comes short of meeting at least one other.

TABLE 1. Problems of the conventional religious school, and the models they inspire.

Question	Model the question inspires
How can the school compensate for the paucity of Jewish practices at home?	Family school
How can the school compensate for the Jewish neighborhood, in which "everyone knows your name?"	School as community
Why are Jewish camps perceived as being both more enjoyable and more effective than Jewish schools?	Informal/experiential
How can supplementary Jewish education be made to work for busy families?	Afterschool "Lego" model

TABLE 2. Criteria implied by each of the problems identified in [Table 1](#).

Question	Criterion implied
How can the school compensate for the paucity of Jewish practices at home?	Enculturation
How can the school compensate for the Jewish neighborhood, in which "everyone knows your name?"	Community building
Why are Jewish camps perceived as being both more enjoyable and more effective than Jewish schools?	Experiential learning
How can supplementary Jewish education be made to work for busy families?	Convenience/ practicality

Four Criteria by Which the Models Should Be Viewed and Assessed

ENCULTURATION

In 1976 John Westerhoff, an eminent scholar of Christian education, published a slim volume entitled *Will Our Children Have Faith*, in which he proposed two competing paradigms of religious education. The first, which he termed instruction, is what most people think of when they think of education—age-graded classrooms with desks and textbooks, and the overall purpose of transmitting knowledge and skills. Westerhoff argued, however, that the overriding goal of Christian education is not instruction, but rather bringing children into a faith community, in which beliefs, attitudes, and values are at least as important as knowledge and skills. The term Westerhoff gave to this paradigm was enculturation, the process by which a neophyte is inducted into a culture. While a newcomer to the Christian faith should eventually acquire knowledge of the Bible, the principles of the faith, and the faith traditions, this knowledge is less important than the genuine feeling of belonging to a community of faith.

According to Westerhoff (1976), enculturation is effortless in small churches of about 300 members, most of whom attend regularly, and incorporate the doctrines of their Christian faith into their daily activities. In this kind of congregation, age-graded “Sunday school” classes, curricula, and professionally trained teachers are superfluous; children learn the community’s attitudes, values, and practices from their families and the activities of the community in which their family participates.

Westerhoff’s (1976) distinction, critical to religious education, is also helpful in thinking about secular education. Even in the public schools enculturation forms a necessary foundation that enables the goals of instruction to be met. Children whose parents read to them and engage them in intellectual conversation are, all things being equal, more likely to succeed in school.

Enculturation is a key component of Jewish education (Aron, 1989a, 1989b). For example, children whose families recite *brachot* at home, and attend synagogue services regularly, will, all things being equal, master key phrases from the *siddur* more quickly. Of course, highly motivated children and highly effective teachers can compensate for cultural deprivation; but one can’t count on exceptions. Enculturation provides a social context that validates what is taught and offers learners opportunities to utilize what they have learned. Without enculturation instruction is inefficient at best, and futile, at worst.

But while it is necessary, enculturation is not sufficient, at least for Jews. Protestants are a dominant group whose sacred texts are in English, and who have relatively few rituals to practice, so it is possible that Westerhoff’s ideal church could do away with all of its educational programs for children. But for Jews, whose civilization (to use Mordecai Kaplan’s term) is based on

sacred texts in two different languages, and commands us to obey hundreds of *mitzvot* (if not all 613), instruction is essential. The challenge for Jewish educators in general, and for alternative models in particular is: what is the optimal balance between enculturation and instruction? To make this challenge even more complex, one could ask two questions: How can an alternative model of the religious school enculturate a group of adults and children who have a range of prior Jewish experiences? And how does one provide sophisticated and challenging information for those who are ready to acquire it, without leaving the others behind? To the extent that a model reaches an optimal balance between enculturation and instruction, it runs the risk of fragmenting the community.³

COMMUNITY

“Community” means many different things, from a classroom community to an international community; from a small face-to-face group to a vast conglomeration of contributors to an online website. I find the following continuum helpful in thinking about alternative models of the religious school. Consider the ways in which supplementary school families might increasingly see themselves as being “in community”:

1. They are affiliated with the same institution.
2. They are loosely associated with one another.
3. They perceive and acknowledge the ways in which they are all connected.
4. They feel a sense of responsibility toward one another.
5. They have ongoing interactions outside of the confines of the institution.
6. They acknowledge the value of the collectivity, and work to maintain and enhance it.

Community is woven into every aspect of Jewish life, and synagogue schools aspire to become communities. In their publicity materials, they describe themselves as “warm, diverse, supportive, engaging,” and so on. But the conventional religious school is only minimally a community, with most parents only loosely affiliated, or associating with one another only occasionally. What percentage would actually appreciate deeper involvement?⁴ Where in the spectrum does a group fall if its community comprises only children and teachers?

³This will be discussed below in the section on family schools.

⁴In *Congregations in Conflict*, Penny Edgell Becker (1999) identified a type of churchgoer who is only interested in worship, and does not stay around to socialize after the service. In *Sacred Strategies* my coauthors and I suggest that a comparable group for Jews might be congregants who are only interested in sending their children to the religious school.

INFORMAL/EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

The grammar of the conventional religious school derives from that of the Talmud Torah of the early 20th century, with its age-graded classrooms and textbooks (Krasner, 2011). But the founders of the Talmud Torah also laid the groundwork for an array of informal educational institutions—including summer camps, community centers, and youth groups. Within the Talmud Torah itself, they created junior congregations, Sabbath assemblies (devoted to singing and storytelling), theater, and clubs of all sorts. In his later years, Samson Benderly, director of the first Bureau of Jewish Education, wrote to a colleague: “I have felt all along . . . that atmosphere and real spiritual influence can be obtained more outside the classroom than inside the classroom” (Krasner, 2011, p. 194).

In subsequent decades, however, the supplementary school and its extracurricular siblings became estranged. Barry Chazan (2003) writes:

Much of twentieth-century Jewish education was shaped by general education, and unfortunately it repeated this mistaken dichotomy of “formal” versus “informal,” ultimately treating them as separate and distinct domains. These two worlds, developed independently throughout the century, did not always communicate well with each other, and often operated with mutual misunderstanding and suspicion. (p. 5)

Fortunately, the boundary between formal and informal Jewish education is dissolving. The renaissance of progressive education, first in the 1960s and 1970s and again today, led school-based Jewish educators to rediscover the power of art, drama, small group activities, and other teaching modalities they had previously neglected (Reimer, 1997; Epstein & Kress, 2011). Informal educators, for their part, have become convinced of the value of curricularizing their programming by articulating goals and objectives and writing out their programs in the format of lesson plans. Today, a typical career path for a Jewish educational professional might easily cross over from informal to formal, or the reverse, several times.

The field’s terminology has also been changing, with “formal” and “informal” being used to refer to settings, and “experiential” used to denote a certain type of teaching and learning, whatever the setting. Jeffrey Kress (2014) lists six elements of experiential education:

1. Strong relationships and sense of community
2. Engagement of emotions and spirit
3. Multiple entry points and opportunities for cocreation
4. Scaffolded opportunities for reflection
5. Connections with other experiences with similar goals
6. Authentic integration of Jewish content—broadly defined (p. 18)

Here “community” seems to point to a sense of connection among students, not only because informal settings group children by age, but also because many adults are uncomfortable with experiential learning in Jewish settings, because they are so uncomfortable with Judaism itself. To the extent that parents and other adults in the community are “received knowers” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Schuster, 2003), they are likely to resist “cocreating” knowledge (Kress’ third point), engagement of emotions, and even opportunities for reflection. To the extent that enculturation seeks to have parents teaching their children, and to the extent that community building includes adults, there is a somewhat uneasy fit between these criteria and experiential learning.

PRAGMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

Today’s families face a range of pressures related to time. They may be single parents, or working multiple jobs, or live a considerable distance from their synagogue, especially when one factors in the increasingly heavy traffic. It is not uncommon for Jewish children to attend a public school with only a small percentage of Jews. Moreover, we read a great deal about the added pressures on today’s children, which include mounds of homework, helicopter parents, and a plethora of organized afterschool activities (Pope, 2001).

Several of the alternative models derive from an acceptance of this complicated environment in which today’s Jewish children are growing up. Rather than asking, “What is the most organic and ideal form of Jewish education?” (which might yield the criterion of enculturation), or “How do we re-create the power of Jewish neighborhoods?” (indicating the importance of community), or “What powerful experiences might the child have?” (which would point to experiential learning), the new models ask, “How can we provide support and assistance, rather than presenting an additional demand on everyone’s time?” Beginning with these pragmatic considerations does not in any way preclude having a vision for the ideal form of education or community, or creating a setting that maximizes powerful experiences. Along the way, however, compromises of one sort or another get made, as will become clear in the discussion of the models.

VARIATIONS WITHIN EACH MODEL

Even after devising my own categories, I faced the recurrent question of whether some of the institutions I identified were different enough from conventional religious schools to be considered actual models. To take the simplest example, the earliest, and still most popular, of the alternative models is the family school, in which parents attend with their children.

Some family schools meet weekly, others biweekly, which in itself is a big difference. Assuming both of these should be called family schools, what of the program that meets only four times a year? Should that be considered a “diluted” family school, or a robust program of family education in an otherwise conventional religious school? So an additional complication in the typology is that within each model there is a continuum ranging from a “full-strength” alternative to something that is more like an enhancement of the conventional religious school.

Family Learning and Family Schools

The enculturation of children begins at home, where children develop attitudes and values; ideally, home is where they can effortlessly learn basic practices and absorb rudimentary knowledge and skills. But demographic studies conducted over several decades have shown that parents whose children attend congregational schools do not engage in many Jewish practices at home. For example, only 34% of Conservative Jews and 10% of Reform Jews light Shabbat candles regularly.⁵

The idea of working with parents, as well as their children, goes back to Samson Benderly (Krasner, 2011) and to Mordecai Kaplan (1934/1981), who wrote: “If Jewish education is to prove its worth in this country, the scope of the Jewish teacher must be enlarged to include the home of the child he teaches” (p. 496). From the 1940s to the 1990s a handful of synagogues sponsored either stand-alone family programs or, less frequently, programs in which parents attended with their children on a regular basis.⁶ The Whizin Institute, founded in the 1989, functioned as both a think tank and a training ground for Jewish family educators (Bank & Wolfson, 1998). During the 1990s central agencies and Federations began advocating for and investing in family education programs (Schiff, 1998; Sales, Koren, & Shevitz, 2000). Yet at this point, family education was still perceived as enriching, rather than replacing, the congregational school.

To the best of my knowledge, the first contemporary family school, where parents attend along with their children, was created in 1994 (Block, 1995; Langer, 2002). By 2011 there were at least 29 family schools in congregations affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism,⁷ and an unknown number in Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Independent synagogues.

Most, but not all, family schools meet on Shabbat, some in the morning, others in the afternoon, still others rotating between different time slots. They

⁵See (<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-4-religious-beliefs-and-practices/>).

⁶These programs were gleaned from the *The Pedagogic Reporter's* “Annual Roundups of New Programs in Jewish Education.” See especially Winter 1974–1975 and November 1988.

⁷Lisa Langer, personal communication, January 2012.

typically include whole group activities like *tefillab*, *shirab*, and storytelling; times when the whole family learns together; and age-graded sessions in which parents and children study separately. There has not been any study of the influence of family schools, but the anecdotal evidence is strong that they can transform the lives of parents. For example, a parent in one such program wrote:

After five years, how has *Shabbaton* affected our family? For one thing, it has demonstrated to our children that Jewish learning is not only for children; we are involved in their learning, and in our own. When they go to religious school, we go to religious school. When we come back together, we each have an experience to share on a common Jewish topic. Additionally, we are practicing what we preach: We tell our children that Shabbat is a time for relaxation and study; each Shabbat, we relax and study with other Jewish families at our synagogue. But perhaps the most meaningful outcomes have been personal. As much as anything I have learned at *Shabbaton*, I have learned how very much I have yet to learn. I discovered the depth of my hunger to further my understanding and appreciation of our Jewish heritage. (Aron, 2000, p. 19)

By definition, the family school meets the criterion of enculturation, because it educates parents along with the children, and because regular attendance on the part of parents demonstrates that they value Jewish learning. There are also many stories about how parents and/or children in a family school form a close community, maintaining contact even after their children have grown. On the other hand, in doing research on family schools (Aron, Cohen, Hoffman, & Kelman, 2010), I interviewed parents who voiced frustration with the low level of learning for adults; some of them chose to drop out, rather than sitting through adult learning they considered too elementary. As for the extent to which family schools provide a high level of experiential learning, we have no way of knowing the answer, in the absence of participant observation studies. However, it is worth noting that both experiential learning and family-based learning require special skill; maximizing both poses a challenge to even the best of educators.

One thing we do know is that the family school is not particularly convenient. Families that are able to incorporate weekly participation on Shabbat appear to be in the minority. Family schools that might be called “full-strength” meet two or three times a month, while more “diluted” programs require parents to attend four or five times a year. I know of no full-strength family school that enrolls more than 50% of congregant families; some enroll as few as 10%. Synagogues that are sufficiently large and/or well-endowed can maintain a family school alongside the more conventional school. Based on the data available to me, I surmise that congregations that

cannot afford the expense of parallel tracks reduce the number of sessions, in an effort to get parents to attend.⁸

Finally, it is important to ask, can parents can be “required” to do anything in supplementary education? All family schools have wrestled with this question. Some hope for the best and ignore late arrivals, early departures, and excessive absences. Some synagogues that have maintained their conventional schools do not allow a family to re-enroll in the family school if it has missed too many sessions. At least one family school takes attendance and sends “make-up assignments” home.

The family school illustrates two major points that apply to all of the models. First, it is difficult to maximize all four criteria. Second, absent a great deal of research, it is difficult to know how good an alternative each of these models represents.

School as Community

It is not by accident that “strong relationships and sense of community” tops Kress’ list of the elements of experiential learning. Community is what scholars of organizational development call a “stereotypical goal” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 64), universally cited on mission statements and websites, despite how difficult it might be to define and to achieve. In fact, this goal is very difficult to achieve in a 3–6 hour per week conventional school. A number of alternative models are structured with the criterion of community as the highest desideratum. Here too, there is a continuum, one that stretches from unconventional new structures to relatively small enhancements of the conventional structure.

CHILDREN’S *CHAVUROT*

In 2012, after a planning process that lasted two and a half years, Temple Beth Shalom of Needham, MA re-structured its entire religious school to form a program called *Mayim* (water).⁹ Their logo riffs on the chemical formula, for water, H₂O, with the O standing for *Omek* (depth) of two different H’s; *Ha-Kehillah* (the community) and *Ha-Limud* (the learning). *Mayim*’s curriculum, and how it leads to depth of learning, will be discussed below, in the section on project based learning. In this [section I](#) focus on how

⁸One small congregation has found a clever solution; they divide the year into three trimesters, and require all families to attend their family school for the trimester of their choice. This means that for three months a year the family experiences what I would call the full-strength enculturating option (<http://sholomnj.org/node/30>).

⁹Their website offers 10 explanations for the name (<http://tbsmayim.org/what-were-all-abou/why-mayim/>).

the program's novel structure satisfies the criteria of both convenience and community.

Mayim's 350 students are divided into 15 *chavurot* (6 each in clusters spanning grades 2/3, and 4/5, and 3 spanning K/1). Each *chavurah* is led by two teachers, who are called Jewish Learning Guides (JLG). Rather than meeting at the same time, the *chavurot* are scheduled at six different time slots during the week, allowing parents to select the slot that is most convenient for their families. At any point in time no more than 80 children are in the synagogue building and, at times, as few as 40. This means that the educational leaders (a Director of Elementary Learning and a Pedagogic Coach) can get to know all of the students. Second, it deepens the sense of community among the JLGs, who work for 15–26 hours each week. JLGs are also paid for approximately 10 hours of planning and/or professional development per week; other assignments at the synagogue are found for those who wish full-time employment.

One additional feature of the schedule exemplifies the school's commitment to community. Because each *chavurah* is led by two JLGs, each can be subdivided into two *mifgashim* (meetings), which meet for the first 30 minutes of each session. During the *mifgash* students sing, play games, and tell one another about their week; the *mifgash* also offers children the opportunity to hear and practice common Hebrew phrases.¹⁰

A more limited variation on the *chavurot* at Temple Beth Shalom are the "Tribes" at Congregation Emanu-El in Manhattan. In an effort to build community and strengthen relationships, students in grades 3–5 are divided into tribes, under the leadership of a teenager, who is the tribal chief. The 20 minutes devoted to tribal activity include a mix of special tribal rituals, team-building exercises, and lessons taught by the tribal leaders, in which students analyze and apply verses from Pirkei Avot. For celebrations relating to holidays, the time spent in tribes is extended.

In an interview, one of the teenage tribal chiefs reflected:

[It's a] challenge to convey grand concepts to third to fifth graders—how to live your life. Not the easiest thing in the world, but they do understand it. [It's] amazing to say something to them, and 4 weeks later have them give an example of how they applied it to their life in the last couple of days.

Not only did the children learn from these mini-lessons, but the tribal leader himself became more reflective:

Teaching the kids was great, but when we talk about the lesson plan and go over it, when you teach the kids, and have to explain how it applies to my life . . . hear how the kids apply it to their lives, it inspires me to

¹⁰See (<http://tbsmayim.org/our-program/chavurot/mifgash-small-group-encounters/>).

apply it in my own life. *Gibor*, someone that is strong, [I] wouldn't have thought about it on my own.¹¹

Although not as extreme a “makeover” as *Mayim*, Tribes requires intentionality and dedication among the staff. Other ways of strengthening relationships are less complex. For example, in the Chavura and Limud program at Community Synagogue of Rye, students in grades 5–7 meet weekly at home or other site with a facilitator. “The agenda for the learning is typically set by the interests and questions of the group.”¹²

Though all three of these programs create community, I imagine that the quality of both the learning and the community are different in each. Since neither program involves parents, they do not meet the criterion of enculturation.

The Camp Model

Hunting through old educational journals, I discovered articles by two legendary educators, Philip Arian (1965) and Barry Chazan (1968) about day camps (*Mabaneb Horef*, a winter camp and *Mabaneb Givah*, a summer camp) Arian created at Temple Israel, in Albany, NY. These camps supplemented religious school, rather than replacing it. But one might call them precursors of the camp model, which seeks to transform the religious school using some of the “magic of camp.”

Created in 2010, *Nisayon*, a program at Temple Judea, Tarzana, CA, replaces religious school with all-day (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.) camp for two weeks in the summer and one week during the winter break. Activities at *Nisayon* include daily *tefillah*, arts, sports, and community building, as well as formal instruction. In an effort to both involve parents and maintain a sense of community through the rest of the year, there are also six family programs on Sunday afternoons.¹³ Over 250 children in grades K-8 participate; this program is an alternative to a large religious school. *Nisayon* has received a great deal of national attention,¹⁴ but, to the best of my knowledge, has only been replicated in one congregation,¹⁵ probably because it is rare for a synagogue to own a camp or be located near a site that is sufficiently large and bucolic to accommodate a camp structure. A number of congregations

¹¹Thanks to Saul Kaiserman for sharing with me these quotations from interviews with the mentors.

¹²See (<http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Coalition-Handbook-Vol-21.pdf>), p. 158.

¹³The number of contact hours for the day camp plus the family programs is equivalent to about 4 hours of religious school a week, depending upon how many weeks the school is in session.

¹⁴See (http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/lomed_guidebook_full.pdf).

¹⁵See (<http://www.betham.org/learning/youth/campbetham>).

interested in adapting this model have been deterred by the cost of renting a facility.

A more limited form of the camp model can be found in the programs at two Los Angeles congregations that have replaced Sunday religious school with once-a-month 9 a.m.–3 p.m. Sunday programs at nearby camps. Teachers in these programs report that the advantages of the informal setting and opportunities for outdoor activities are, to some extent, outweighed by the long bus trip each way, and by the fact that the homework for Monday might still be hanging over the heads of students. Nonetheless, momentum seems to be building for additional experiments in experiential programming in camp-like settings. This notion is promoted by the Jewish Theological Seminary's ReFrame Initiative,¹⁶ which works with five Conservative synagogues.¹⁷ In addition, three Conservative synagogues in Los Angeles have collaborated on a camp-like model set to open in the fall of 2014.

As with all the models, the camp model spans the continuum from “full strength” to more diluted. Many congregational schools hold one or two camp-based Shabbatonim; like the episodic family program, they are best seen as enhancements, rather than alternative models.

At “full strength,” the camp model meets at least three of the four criteria. Providing extended time for children to be together, it creates community. Being based in a camp, most of its activities are experiential, though the quality of the experiences (as always) depends upon the staff. Assuming the costs of a site can be borne by the congregation, this model is also highly practical, because it relieves the crowded schedules of students and parents, and provides day camp for children during school breaks. When it includes a significant number of family days, as *Nisayon* does, the camp model can also serve as a vehicle for enculturation.

A Hybrid of Family School and Camp

Though I have tried to categorize the different models according to their primary structures, one program, at least defies categorization—“baseCamp,” a hybrid of a family school and camp at Congregation Rodef Shalom in San Rafael, CA.¹⁸ Students in the fourth to sixth grades attend twice a month, once on Shabbat afternoons (from 4–6 p.m.) and once, with their parents, from 4–8 p.m. on Fridays (these sessions extend into Erev Shabbat services and dinner). To further the goal of enculturation, baseCamp encourages

¹⁶See (<http://blog.jtsa.edu/reframe/about/>).

¹⁷See (<http://blog.jtsa.edu/reframe/about/pilot-communities/>).

¹⁸See (<http://www.rodefsholom.org>). The website appears to have been last updated in 2011, so no information on baseCamp, created in 2012, is on the Internet.

monthly Shabbat dinners at people's homes during a third Shabbat, and is contemplating the addition of a group *tikun olam* project.

Informal/experiential learning is accomplished by forging strong connections to the local Reform camp, URJ Camp Newman. As much as possible, the program's activities and rituals are patterned after similar ones at Camp Newman. In addition, all children are expected to attend a Jewish camp for 2 weeks in the summer; most attend Camp Newman. Children in baseCamp are divided into "bunks;" in the summer of 2013, one bunk of boys at Camp Newman consisted entirely of the same bunk at baseCamp, which created a strong sense of community.

This attempt to "link the silos"¹⁹ between camp and synagogue is so appealing and so logical, that it seems surprising that no other Reform camp has created a similar model. Perhaps only a large congregation can afford to have a program like this as one of its alternatives (the synagogue has two other alternatives, a family school and a more conventional school). The combined requirement of parent participation and camp enrollment may, however, reduce the pragmatic appeal of baseCamp. To date only 40 children are enrolled in this program.

Combining School with After Care

Unless their jobs are extraordinarily flexible (or unless they can afford a nanny), parents working full time require care for their children after school; combining supplementary schooling with afterschool care would seem like a natural fit. Though slow to develop—the first model of this sort was created in 1991 (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009b) and did not spread beyond the Boston area until 2006²⁰—variations on this model can now be found in at least 11 different cities in the United States and Canada.²¹ They open with the arrival of the children with the earliest dismissal time, and close after the last parents picks up their children. They offer ample free time, as well as time for more structured learning. Most operate 4 or 5 days, and allow parents to select the number of days they wish their children to attend. Some also offer day-long programming on school vacation days.

The structure of the after-care model may be dictated by necessity, but is also strongly influenced by the experiences of its creators in informal settings. To quote the website of Berkeley-based *Edab*, a leader in *Nitzan*, the network of Jewish afterschool programs:

Edab builds on the existing structures and youth development goals of afterschool programs, the experiential, immersive, free-choice learning

¹⁹This term was popularized by a report of the AVI-CHAI Foundation (Wertheimer, 2005).

²⁰See (<http://www.nitzan.org/affiliated-programs.html>).

²¹Nitzan is an umbrella organization for 11 of these schools (<http://www.nitzan.org>).

environments fostered at high quality Jewish summer camps, the commitment to daily Jewish learning and Jewish *chevreh* that characterize Jewish day schools, and the value of families learning and practicing together embodied in high quality family education programs. (Dorph, 2013)

Since there is limited information available on the websites of most of these programs, I rely on research I have done on Keshet Cambridge and Keshet Newton. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009b). In addition to time set aside for teaching *Yahadut* (Judaica) and *Ivrit* (Hebrew), Keshet's schedule includes *Z'man bachutz* (time to play outside) and *Z'man Chofshi* (free time), which are considered integral to the program, essential prerequisites for creating and sustaining a sense of community. Teachers are paid for this time as well as for their formal teaching, so that they can interact informally with the students; each school is kept very small (approximately 100 students) so that everyone knows everyone else.

Although all the examples of this model that I could find are independent and pluralistic, I can think of no reason why this model could not be adapted by a synagogue or consortium of synagogues.

Most afterschool programs are similar to *Edah* and *Keshet* in seeking to maximize experiential learning. How closely do they meet the criterion of enculturation? By definition, enculturation means working with parent as learners. One would not, for example, use this term for a camp, however immersive and richly educative it is for children. Since little information and no research is available on the other programs, my answer is based on research I conducted at Keshet Cambridge and Keshet Newton in 2007–2008. That year Keshet sponsored relatively few events for families, although about a third of the parents regularly came at the end of the day for *shirah* (singing). Despite the paucity of activities for parents, even those who were members of a synagogue spoke of Keshet as Jewish their community. One father who was not a member of a synagogue was more emphatic:

Keshet is not only the kids' educational resource, but also their Jewish community. . . . My wife [who is not Jewish], for example, is not really all that interested in going to synagogue, but she loves coming here for Shabbat dinners and for *Havdallah* services and other events. I think that for people who are either not Jewish but married into interfaith marriages, or people who are very secular in their orientation, or just ambivalent, who haven't gotten around to joining a synagogue, this is a central focal point for their Jewish life. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009b, pp. 38–39)

Although the exact mechanism by which it enculturates is not clear, Keshet does, as this quote suggests, meet the criterion of enculturation, at least to some extent.

For students who attend every day after school, Keshet provides a strong community and a practical solution to the busy lives of parents and children. However, Keshet's fees are high; in 2008 they were approximately \$50 more per month than the fees at local afterschool facilities for each day of the week that the student attended. As a result, most students attended Keshet only two days a week. For these children, I would characterize Keshet as hovering somewhere between an alternate model and an enhanced supplementary school.

Deconstructing the School and Recombining the Pieces

The fifth model includes a cluster of programs that aim to maximize convenience for families by deconstructing the synagogue school and recombining its elements—such as prayer, *tikun olam*, and studying various subjects, etc. Rather than attend one site on an ongoing basis, students fulfill requirements (or, as some programs put it, earn badges) from participation in variety of different activities, which might be located in different places. For lack of a better name, I call this the “Lego” model. It is most often found in postb'nai mitzvah programs that feature “electives” combining text study with the arts, drama, service learning, and/or outdoor activities.²² I did, however, find three instances of this approach offered to pre b'nai mitzvah students; given the publicity surrounding these programs, I suspect that we will be seeing more of these in the future.

The most ambitious of the Lego models is the Jewish Journey Project (JJP), a consortium of six synagogues and the Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Manhattan. Students in grades 3–7 may choose from a dazzling array of options on a variety of topics in a variety of settings (including museums, parks, and a *Krav Maga* studio) at a variety of times (including school vacations).²³ Each participant is assigned an advisor who meets with him or her twice a year to help select the courses.

The JJP has received abundant philanthropic support and enthusiastic attention in the Jewish press. As noted above, however, nearly every model must compromise somewhere. JJP's approach is convenient for families. It meets many of the criteria for experiential learning: there are multiple points of entry; many opportunities for stimulating informal experiences; and if the mentor has a strong relationship to the child, s/he can stimulate reflection. But, almost by definition, maximizing options for individuals minimizes opportunities for community building. The synagogues that participate in the

²²See, for example, the *Havayab* program at Temple Beth Elohim (Aron & Moskowitz 2009a, pp. 249–254), and the Arts, Theater Music (ATM) program at Congregation Or Ami, Calabasas, CA: (<http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/?s=Using+the+ATM+to+Bring+Teens+into+Temple>).

²³See (<http://www.jewishjourneyproject.org/home#/works>).

JJP require their students to attend programs at their sites; these programs are called names like “Meet Up,” or *Makom*, and their frequency and length varies. The challenge is to build community through experiential learning in a synagogue setting, with many of the same teachers who teach in the religious school.²⁴

At least two congregations offer “Lego-like” models with fewer choices but more opportunities for community-building and parent involvement. *Beit Midrash*, an alternative program for third to fifth graders at Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley,²⁵ centers on a book group for children who have done their reading at home. Family learning, holiday celebrations, *tefillah*, and optional *tikun olam* and arts events round out the program (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009a, pp. 258–260).

In Connections, a new program at Congregation Beth Am, in Los Altos, CA, families are divided into small *chavurot* that work with a mentor to hold 25 “events” a year, including Shabbat and holiday celebrations, opportunities to engage in *tikun olam*, outdoor adventures, and ongoing group learning projects.²⁶ A formative evaluation conducted by a professional evaluator²⁷ who is also a program participant, found that, at least for some parents surveyed, the criterion of enculturation was met:

Being a part of Connections has caused me to think more deeply about the Jewish education and experiences I want to provide for my children moving forward. It’s made me realize that if I want them to have a strong Jewish identity, I need to bring Jewish practice into our home on a more regular basis.

My children have transferred knowledge about Shabbat as well as the other holidays we have celebrated together as a group. They talk about the holidays at home and we talk about how we will celebrate them next year.

One of the most important findings of the interim evaluation is that only half of the parents felt connected to the others in their group. One of the explanations for this is that “connections did not always happen organically; these opportunities needed to be incorporated into group activities.” (Ibid.)

As has been stated repeatedly, an innovative structure only goes as far as the staff’s ability to work within that structure. Addressing this point, the report found that the talents of the mentors varied. Though the synagogue hopes to eventually enroll every one of its families in a *chavurah* of this type,

²⁴Laurie Phillips, personal communication, March 20, 2014; Lori Forman-Jacobi, personal communication, May 12, 2014.

²⁵See (<http://tbewellesley.org/article.aspx?id=83751862699>).

²⁶See (<http://www.betham.org/learning/youth/connections>).

²⁷Connections Interim Memo, March 15, 2014.

it has decided not to expand the program beyond the initial five *chavurot* during the second year, in order to fine tune the program and find a better way to match the abilities of the mentors to their roles.

Because the Lego model is flexible by design, it can continue to evolve in order to maximize the various criteria. But it is important to recognize that, in general, practicality runs counter to both community building and enculturation.

Finally, worth mentioning because of its popularity, is a smaller, more limited example of the Lego model, in which midweek Hebrew is taught at students' homes in one-on-one tutoring or in groups of three to five students. Another variant has students working with a tutor via Skype. These options do not replace the entire school; rather, they are offered in combination with either the conventional Sunday program or one of the other models. Aside from the convenience, this approach is almost certainly more efficient. With most Hebrew instruction reduced to practicing decoding, anecdotal evidence, at least, suggests that students learn to decode more effectively when there is a low student-teacher ratio. However, this approach to Hebrew has some obvious limitations, which will be discussed below in the section on Hebrew Through Movement.

ALTERNATIVE CURRICULAR APPROACHES

Why did the first two decades of innovation in supplementary Jewish education, from 1990–2010, focus primarily on the *structure* of the religious school? Perhaps it was because, as Richard Elmore (1995) argues, structural changes are relatively easy to make, and call attention to themselves in a way that curricular change doesn't. Perhaps structural changes took on a special urgency in Jewish education, because of the dissonance created when practices meant to be observed within the family (celebrating *Shabbat*, to take just one example) are taught, out of context, in a classroom. Whatever the reasons, changing the structure might be necessary, but it is not sufficient. Rob Weinberg, director of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), argues that successful innovation is dependent upon the alignment of four additional factors: curriculum, teaching, leadership, and infrastructure (which includes governance and resources).²⁸ This section discusses recent innovations in curriculum; following that are sections that deal with the other factors.

²⁸See http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDeQFjAA&url=http://phoenix.natenet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Aligning-the-Jewish-Learning-System-NATE-20121.docx&ei=JHh9U_LYI9PdoAStnYHgCw&usg=AFQjCNG9KUcwE4Vjg106ZCwI0yc1guLN1A&sig2=BSEm0-V90gBECX5Jk8cgg8g&bvm=bv.67720277,d.cGU.

Implicit in the conventional grammar of public schooling are certain assumptions about the subject matter: that it is divided by discipline (e.g., math, language arts, and social studies); standardized across schools in the same district; segmented into set blocks of time; and delivered by a teacher, through a series of textbooks. Attempting to replicate the grammar of schooling as closely as possible, Samson Benderly and his followers in the early decades of the 20th century took these premises as a given (Krasner, 2011).

Like the structure of the school, these instructional conventions went largely unchallenged in Jewish education throughout the 20th century. The major changes in those years were the periodic introduction of new curricula in the Conservative and Reform movements. Two of the most notable were the Conservative movement's Melton Curriculum, produced between 1979 and 1995 (Holtz, 1992) and, more recently, the Union for Reform Judaism's Chai curriculum,²⁹ produced between 2002–2008. The Melton Curriculum contained scripted teachers' guides for Bible, Holidays/*Mitzvot*/Prayer, Biblical Hebrew, and Jewish Thought. At the height of their popularity, these curricula were used in approximately 500 religious schools. The Chai Curriculum is organized around the concepts of *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *G'milut Chasadim*; its companion curriculum, *Mitkadem*, teaches *siddur* Hebrew through individualized student packets. In 2009, either *Chai* or *Mitkadem* or both were used in about 400 Reform and 350 Conservative religious schools.³⁰ These curricula were written by veteran educators, following curricular approaches that were popular in their time—Schwab's (1978b) Practical in the case of Melton, and Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTigh, 2005) in the case of the Chai Curriculum. Melton, in particular, took pains to pilot and revise its curricula, to hold ongoing seminars for teachers, and to help them adapt lessons to their own particular settings. Nonetheless, the basic assumptions remained the same: more or less standard units of instruction to be delivered by teachers in classroom settings, with or without textbooks and workbooks.

In contrast, John Dewey and the "Progressive" educators who followed him, argued that what is taught should grow organically from the child's day-to-day experience. Though the purpose of education was for children "to share in the intellectual and moral resources" of the surrounding culture, Dewey wrote, "the true centre [sic] of correlation of the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities" (Dewey, 1897, p. 78). In the lab school founded by John and Alice Dewey, daily activities such as cooking and building served as vehicles for learning subjects such as math, physics, and chemistry (Dewey,

²⁹See (<http://urj.org/about/union/pr/2002/020116/>).

³⁰Personal communication, Jan Katzew, February 27, 2009.

1902/2009; Tanner, 1997, pp. 38–63). In the classic Deweyan curricular unit, children visit an orchard to pick apples; write essays or poems describing the apples; multiply the quantities in a recipe so they can bake an apple cake for the entire class; experiment with different ingredients and cooking methods; and, based on their experiments, revise and annotate the recipes. Today's progressive schools follow the same principles, though they are more likely to start in a supermarket than an orchard.

These kind of interdisciplinary experiences are difficult for teachers to plan and facilitate (Schwab, 1978a), but they often leave an indelible impression, because they include many aspects of experiential learning discussed by Kress (2014) and others: they take place outside of the “ordinary” classroom; they are more likely to involve physical activity; students cocreate knowledge, rather than simply receiving it; and the arc of learning is longer, and more holistic, than the segmented learning of the conventional school. Taken together, these factors make the learning vivid, engaging, and memorable.

In the 20th century, at least two “progressive” day schools, Beit Hayered in the 1940s and 50s (Krasner, 2011, p. 401), and Beit Rabban in the 1990s (Pekarsky, 2006), and two open classroom supplementary schools (Koller-Fox, 1972; Aron, Greenspan, Rous, & Wolf, 1976) were founded. These were isolated experiments, however, having somehow managed to find teachers who shared their assumptions about learning through experience.

Compelling as it might be in theory, however, Deweyan pedagogy poses difficulties when applied to Jewish education in general and the congregational school in particular. For students baking an apple cake for the entire class, the connection between this project and the multiplication tables is obvious and direct. Linking the average religious school student's daily experiences to the study of Jewish texts and Jewish practices, though possible, is much more challenging; it requires more knowledge, skill, and creativity on the part of the teacher than a project related to everyday math. A second impediment is the lack of time. A “complete” Deweyan unit, such as the one on apples, might last 20 hours and be spread over an entire week. A deep exploration of the ways children's experiences with their siblings and parents reverberate throughout the book of Genesis could easily last 40 or 60 hours; in a religious school, those hours would have to be spread over 20 weeks or more.

Of greater importance is an underlying ideological issue that is rarely discussed. The ideological challenge to Dewey is best expressed in the work of E. D. Hirsch (1987). Hirsch has argued that an egalitarian, just society requires cultural literacy; students must acquire and retain a set of historical and cultural terms that will enable them to fully participate in social discourse. Hirsch makes a strong case for breadth over depth, which even the most ardent supporters of Dewey (and I count myself among them) find difficult to dismiss, when applied to Jewish education. How can one participate

in the Jewish civilization without knowing the meaning of the most basic prayers or the critical narratives and laws of the *Torah*?

The debate between Dewey and Hirsch, like a parallel debate, in Judaism, between *keva* and *kavannah*, is an enduring dilemma that can never be fully resolved. Each educational institution must decide on its own the optimal balance between these compelling, but opposing values. The Melton and Chai curricula chose to focus on specific content areas. They connected these to the world of the child through set inductions at the beginning and application exercises at the end. For example, in introducing the *hashkivenu* prayer, the Melton curriculum suggests that the lesson begin with a question: “Have you ever heard anyone say they are afraid of the dark?”³¹ More recently, LOMED—a joint project of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), the Jewish Education Project (JEP) and the Leadership Institute (itself a joint project of Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary), which will be described more fully below—advocates the use of “Whole Person Learning” that strikes a balance between “what a learner knows (head), puts into action (hand), believes (heart) and values (heart), and where the learner belongs (feet).”³²

The curricular innovations reported in the following sections tilt further in the direction of Dewey, the learning anchored more firmly on ongoing projects, at the expense of core knowledge. They include Project Based Learning; the use of experience in music, drama, and nature; and Hebrew Through Movement.

Project Based Learning

Project Based Learning is a teaching methodology that has gained popularity in the last decade.³³ Particularly influential in Jewish schools is the “expeditionary method” of Ron Berger (2003) who has lectured a number of times at workshops held by the Hebrew Union College and at the National Association of Temple Educators. In Berger’s classroom, subjects such as math, science, and English were taught through the students’ participation in long-term projects—such as creating a fictional character and producing artifacts that illustrate his or her life, or sampling the town’s water to test for contamination. As with other Deweyan methodologies, this can only be translated to the congregational school in abbreviated form, with less elaborate projects and more scaffolding from the teacher.

The first to adapt project based learning to an entire religious school curriculum was the *Mayim* program, whose organization by *chavurot* is one

³¹Personal communication, Gail Dorph, May 21, 2014.

³²See (<http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Coalition-Handbook-Vol-21.pdf>), Chapters 2–4.

³³See (<http://bie.org/>).

of the community building models discussed earlier. One project for fourth graders, which involved making their own *siddurim*, is described in detail on their website.³⁴ The children began by reflecting on their own *tefillah* experiences, and how they might use a *siddur*. They interviewed clergy and congregants about what to include in the *siddur*. They divided into four groups: (a) Design and Layout, (b) *Kavannah* (intentionality), (c) Illustration and Graphics, and (d) Content and Order. Here, for example, are some of the questions discussed by the *Kavannah* group:

- What wording can we use for translation that is accessible for a K-5 reader?
- Should God be referred to as a “he” or a “she?”
- Do translations of prayers need to be literal?

The Content and Order group thought about questions such as:

- What prayers must be included in our community *siddur*?
- Should morning or evening prayers be included in our *siddur*?
- Should transliterations of the Hebrew into English characters be included in our *siddur*?

The educators at *Mayim* have chosen depth (*omek*) of content over breadth, and analysis and synthesis over knowledge and comprehension (Bloom, 1956). The *Kavannah* group, for example, learned different things than the Content and Order group. But an anecdote from the *Mayim* program illustrates how they have balanced the tension between core knowledge and experience-based learning. As part of a year-long exploration of the value of *tzedek* (justice), students in a different grade created their own *haggadot*, highlighting the Exodus story and issues related to social justice. Realizing that the project did not leave room for Passover “basics,” such as learning to recite the Four Questions or reviewing the items on the *sefer* plate, the leadership decided to make a place for this kind of core knowledge in the future, by changing the schedule to include periodic 30-minute time slots that they call *Masoret* (tradition).³⁵

Other examples of the use of project based learning in religious school settings include JQuest at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia,³⁶ Temple Chayai Shalom in Easton,³⁷ and a bar/bat mitzvah pilot program at Congregation Har Hashem in Boulder.

³⁴See (<http://tbsmayim.org/our-program/chavurot/project-based-learning/project-siddur/>).

³⁵Rachel Happel, personal communication, May 22, 2014.

³⁶See (<http://kenesethisrael.org/jquestk-6/>).

³⁷Cited in (<http://www.cjp.org/Innovative-Models-JLC-Pilot-Programs.aspx>).

Connecting Jewish Subjects to the Interests and Abilities of the Students

In their search for topics that have special appeal to their students and can be easily connected to Jewish subjects, some congregational educators have turned to the arts and to social justice. At least two large California congregations offer theater-based programs as alternatives to religious school.³⁸ Students mount several theatrical productions, some of which they write themselves. As a prelude, they study the relevant texts and historical periods; in addition to writing and rehearsing they design and fabricate the sets, props, and costumes, which provides opportunities for more research into the period in which the play is set.

The most ambitious program of this kind was created in 2009 at Temple Isaiah, Lafayette, CA. Rabbi Nicole Greninger, the educational director, cites a verse from *Mishlei* (Proverbs) as part of the inspiration for this program:

As we create educational experiences for our children, I've found the phrase *al pi darko* ("according to his way") to be an especially powerful principle to follow. What is a particular child's "way" of doing things? What does this child do best? What are this child's strengths, interests, and passions? It is only when we answer those questions that we can begin to create an educational path that matches the child's "way" and will, hopefully, lead to the sort of experiences that stick for a lifetime.³⁹

In keeping with this idea, the entire religious school is divided into interest-based tracks: *Teva* (nature) and *Omanut* (art) for third and fourth graders; *Shirah* (song), *Edab* (culture), and *Yetzira* (creation) for fifth and sixth graders. Among the activities in the *Teva* track, for example, is a hike up a mountain. When they reach the top, students discuss why the Torah was given on top of a mountain. The following excerpt is from a description of the *Omanut* track:

In *Omanut* you will have the opportunity to spend time immersed in Jewish art, deepen your artistic skills and your spirituality, learn about many of the great Jewish artists and Jewish art-forms, and create your own works of art based on Jewish topics.⁴⁰

In one *Omanut* activity, students discussed a range of statements about God (e.g., "God is everywhere" and "I feel God's presence through nature"). Each student then selected two statements that best summarized his or her beliefs, and created two paintings representing these beliefs. They then cut

³⁸See (<http://www.vbs.org/page.cfm?p=879>; <http://www.betham.org/learning/youth/hagigah>).

³⁹Greninger in *Ruach*, the congregational newsletter, December 2009–January 2010.

⁴⁰See (<http://www.temple-isaiah.org/education/3-6-curriculum/>).

the paintings into strips and combined strips to form of a three-dimensional collage in the style of Yaacov Agam. Only a combination of participant observation and interviews would reveal what the children gained from this project. But the school's assumption is that, for artistically inclined students, this kind of artwork leads to learning that is deeper, more nuanced, and more memorable than the learning gained from more conventional school activities such as discussions or stories.

Because social justice-based programs are generally held off-site, most of these programs are limited to postb'nai mitzvah students. One exception is the BM³T program at Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA.⁴¹ Sixth- and seventh-grade students spend one and a half to three hours every two to four weeks volunteering at one of eight to 10 sites, such as a food bank or a recycling center. To make the connection between Judaism and their volunteer work, each site visit begins with a 20- to 30-minute text study; to maximize the personal impact of the work, students keep journals.

Hebrew Through Movement

The most significant curricular development in recent years has been the exponential growth of Hebrew Through Movement (HTM). HTM is an adaptation of a popular method for teaching foreign languages, Total Physical Response (TPR), created in the 1960s by James Asher, an emeritus professor of psychology at San Jose State University. Originally introduced into Jewish schools in the 1980s by Bina Guerrieri at the San Francisco Bureau of Jewish education, the revival of Hebrew TPR was spearheaded by Lifsa Shachter, professor at the Cleveland College of Jewish studies, and then packaged and promoted by Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz, Senior Director of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland. The HTM website describes TPR in the following way:

TPR is based on the premise that . . . we can teach more effectively if we follow the process by which infants acquire their first language. . . . Children are not expected to respond orally in the first year or so of life—there is a long silent period before the child speaks his or her first words and then sentences.⁴²

If this premise is correct (the evidence is reviewed in Shachter, 2010), then the method used by the conventional congregational school—in which students first memorize letters, then spend several years practicing their

⁴¹BM³T stands for B'nei Mitzvah Magical Mystery Tour (<http://tbewellesley.org/article.aspx?id=83751862700>). See also Aron and Moskowitz (2009a), pp. 254–258.

⁴²See (<http://www.hebrewthroughmovement.org/>).

decoding skills without much comprehension—is exactly backwards. In contrast, Hebrew Through Movement opens up the Hebrew of our blessings, prayers, and rituals by offering a structure for teaching vocabulary in an engaging, playful way. When students eventually begin learning letters, they can understand what they are reading.

HTM is typically taught in short 15- to 20-minute sessions, making it especially practical for use in congregational schools. The teacher calls out infinitive verbs while acting them out (e.g., *likpotz, lasbevet*); the students simply follow along. Over time the students gain tacit knowledge of the verbs, and can perform without the teacher's demonstrations, first with a group, then individually. New words, are added as student comprehension grows; eventually the commands are lengthened into full sentences (*likpotz el halu-ach ve' lakachat kipa*). As the website explains:

While it may seem awkward to use the infinitive (*lakum*) rather than the proper conjugated-command-form (*kum* or *kumu*), the infinitive enables an immediate understanding of the command—only one form is used for males and females, or for an individual or group.

HTM may be started as early as early childhood, and is still enjoyed by middle school children. The JECC encourages schools to use only HTM until sixth grade, in the expectation that it will take no longer than a year for students to learn to decode, since they will already know many Hebrew phrases. This allows schools to teach more about the meaning of prayers, not to mention considerably more Judaica, in earlier grades.⁴³

As of January 2014, over 325 teachers from 100 schools⁴⁴ had participated in one or more training workshops on the use of HTM. The JECC continues to develop other initiatives that shift the model of Hebrew learning in part-time Jewish educational settings.⁴⁵

OTHER CRITICAL FACTORS

Training and Supporting Teachers

As noted above, structure and curriculum are but two of the factors necessary for a thorough, durable revitalization of the congregational school. A curriculum, for example, is only as good as the teachers who are using it. There

⁴³There is also an expectation that its students will enjoy Hebrew much more (Greninger, 2014).

⁴⁴Most of these teachers are in congregational schools; several are in day schools or independent afterschool care programs, and at least one is in a Chabad school.

⁴⁵See, for example, Let's Learn Hebrew Side-by-Side (<http://LetsLearnHebrew.org>), an online and hands-on program for teaching Hebrew decoding to fifth and sixth graders.

has been some research on teachers in congregational schools, though this research is probably outdated. A 1998 study of Jewish teachers conducted by the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE) found that 64% of supplementary school teachers taught 1–4 hours a week, and 32% taught 5–12 hours; only 4% taught 13 hours or more (Gamoran, Goldring, Robinson, Tammivaara, & Goodman, 1998, p. 12).⁴⁶ Only 19% of these teachers were trained in both Jewish and general education; 12% were trained in Jewish studies only; 35% in general education only; and 34% were trained in neither (p. 6). In the years since this data were collected the hours of instruction have diminished, rather than grown; and though there are more opportunities for staff development, it is likely that the level of education among teachers has, if anything, decreased with the number of hours available to teach.

Schools facing these conditions squarely have gone in one of three directions. Three that I know of have raised funds to hire only full-time teachers (Kaiserman, 2007). In addition to teaching five days a week (since these schools run multiple sessions), teachers write curricular materials and have time for joint planning; their duties include maintaining ties with their students and their parents beyond the classroom. A variation on this approach is taken by *Mayim* and *Kesher* (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009b). They too hire teachers who work on multiple sessions and are paid for planning time, for a total of at least 20 hours a week. While these schools may be unable to find the funding for all of their teachers to work full-time, they attempt to find additional work for every teacher who wants a higher salary.

In contrast, some congregations have opted to “grow their own” avocational teachers, by identifying promising congregants, training them, and supporting them in their work (Aron, 1997; Feiman-Nemser, 1997). This approach was more popular in the 1980s than it is today, but it remains a viable alternative.

In between the extremes of the true professional and the purely avocational lie various possibilities for upgrading the knowledge and skills of current teachers. An example of this approach is the Mandel Teacher Educators Initiative (MTEI), which works with senior educators of both day schools and religious schools, to:

- 1) develop deeper Jewish content knowledge; 2) explore a range of assumptions, ideas and practices that foster inquiry-based professional development; and 3) create a collaborative, investigative professional culture among teachers and students in their settings.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Teachers from three communities were surveyed—Atlanta, Baltimore, and Milwaukee.

⁴⁷See (<http://www.mandelfoundation.org/JewishEducationContinuity/Pages/MTEI.aspx>).

Founded in 1995, MTEI has 250 alumni, and is in the process of recruiting participants for its seventh cohort. With some leading researchers at its helm, it has produced an impressive roster of studies and publications.⁴⁸

Because it works with schools in the New York area, LOMED has taken a different approach to what it calls “professional learning.”⁴⁹ It promotes teacher training that is at the school site, rather than at a conference; collaborative; and focused on the content the teacher is currently teaching.⁵⁰ To best support these teachers LOMED has created the position of “coalition educator,” a LOMED staff member who spends a third of her time (to date, they have all been women) working with both the educator and the teachers (Schumer, Siegel, & Zions, 2013). Other agencies that work directly with teachers are the Center for Advancement of Jewish Education in Miami⁵¹ and the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, through its Teaching Technology Fellowship.⁵²

Leadership

We have the illusion that we know a great deal about leadership in innovative schools, because the world of congregational education is relatively small, and because so many of the full-time positions are filled by the alumni of a handful of graduate programs. In fact, everything we “know” is anecdotal. I myself am particularly interested in studying the factors that have influenced the educators who have created alternative models. I believe that Robert Kegan’s writing on self-authoring is particularly relevant (Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009), but am just beginning to study this, together with my colleagues Diane Schuster and Michelle Lynn-Sachs (Schuster, Lynn-Sachs, & Aron, 2014).

Resources

External resources have been critical to the development of many, though not all, of the alternative models and curricular innovations. The Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) was the first national project to bring new models to the 55 congregations with which it worked. Central Agencies in Kansas City, San Francisco, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia followed, promoting these models and working with congregations to adapt

⁴⁸Ibid. See also Dorph (2011).

⁴⁹I use quotation marks here, because it is difficult to think of teachers who teach so few hours as professionals; I do agree wholeheartedly that teachers require intensive staff development.

⁵⁰See (http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/lomed_guidebook_full.pdf).

⁵¹See (<http://caje-miami.org/index.cfm?pageid=157>).

⁵²See (<http://www.jewishboston.com/Nina-Price/blogs/1230-cjps-teaching-technology-fellowship-is-launched>).

them and/or design new ones. Most recently, ReFrame, a project of the Jewish Theological Seminary, began work with five Conservative congregations in January 2014.⁵³ At various junctures, funding and support has come from organizations such as the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project⁵⁴ and the Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education (PELIE).⁵⁵

Finally, it is worth mentioning the many “education resource providers” (to use the language of the JEP).⁵⁶ These are independent organizations that focus on areas of interest to congregational educators—such as environment and sustainability (Hazon),⁵⁷ multimedia Torah study (ExploraTorah and Torah Godly Play),⁵⁸ and bar/bat mitzvah (B’nai Mitzvah Revolution).⁵⁹ These organizations partner with a range of supplementary schools to create curricular units, train and support teachers, and/or re-imagine parts of their programming.

QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

In keeping with the theme of this 80th anniversary issue of the *Journal*, there is still a great deal we don’t know about new approaches to congregational schooling. Below a number of questions that call out to be researched:

How Well Are the New Models Working?

The most important thing we don’t know is the extent to which these new approaches are making a difference, as compared to the conventional model. Do learners find them more engaging? Do they learn more content and retain what they have learned? Do they inspire learners to incorporate Jewish practices into their lives? These questions are extraordinarily difficult to answer, but they are the questions that ultimately matter the most. Through the B’nai Mitzvah Revolution (BMR), 10 congregations have been conducting assessments of some aspect of their programs through action research. Rabbi Nicole Greninger (2014) of Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, CA, having introduced Hebrew Through Movement into her congregation’s school, is studying the cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects of

⁵³See (<http://blog.jtsa.edu/reframe/about/>).

⁵⁴See (<http://www.legacyheritage.org/ip/>).

⁵⁵See (<http://www.pelie.org/PELIE-Fact-Sheet.pdf>).

⁵⁶See (<http://www.thejewisheducationproject.org/search/node/Education%20Resource%20Providers>).

⁵⁷See (<http://hazon.org/capacity-building/overview/>).

⁵⁸See (<http://www.explora-torah.com/Explora-Torah/Welcome.html>; <http://hebrewcollege.edu/torah-godly-play>).

⁵⁹See (<http://www.bnaimitzvahrevolution.org/>).

changing Hebrew learning from print-to-sound to sound-to-print. Temple Beth Elohim of Wellesley, MA has commissioned a number of studies by an outside evaluator, and are now assessing in house the impact of their BMR experiment.

LOMED has been most ambitious and assiduous in studying the outcomes of the new models they have helped spawn. In 2010 they commissioned a survey that compared 20 “innovating congregations” to 74 others in the New York area. “Innovating congregations” were defined as:

Congregations that have been engaged in Jewish educational innovation over a period of years, have successfully piloted and implemented new educational models, are creating professional learning communities among their faculty in support of those new models, are measuring the impact of the learning on learners, and are documenting and sharing those innovations with others.⁶⁰

Innovating congregations came out higher on the scales they had developed for characteristics such as vision, collaborative leadership, professional development, critical collegueship, and culture of experimentation.

A second study commissioned by LOMED sought to operationalize success in activities with learners. Rosov Consulting’s researchers observed 79 programs in nine LOMED congregations and three congregations that did not participate in LOMED. The goal was to determine whether programs in LOMED congregations were more likely to include “whole person learning,” which they defined as:

1. Anchored in caring purposeful relationships;
2. Seeking to answer the questions, challenges, and meaning of everyday life;
3. Enabling individuals to construct their own meaning through inquiry, problem solving, and discovery;
4. Content-rich and accessible.⁶¹

The study concluded that programs and classes that were part of the alternative models promoted by LOMED were, in fact, more likely to include these four characteristics than those in conventional schools.⁶²

⁶⁰See (http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/benchmarking_report_-_final.pdf), p. 8.

⁶¹See (http://www.thejewisheducationproject.org/sites/default/files/uploaded/PDF/JEP_LOMED_Phase_II_Final_Report_2013107_RC2.pdf), p. 7.

⁶²A careful review of this study is beyond the scope of this article. It would address some of the questions I had as I read the report: Is dividing students into small groups equivalent to creating purposeful relationships between them? Were some of the classroom examples truly content rich? This

LOMED has also attempted to define “high impact” models, and to investigate the factors that lead to the development of these models. They have worked with teachers to “notice” the outcomes of these models, in terms of student engagement and learning.⁶³ I hope some of their findings will be published soon, ideally in the *Journal of Jewish Education*.

What Does Success Look Like?

The 1980s gave us David Schoem’s (1989) ethnography of a mediocre congregational school. The 1990s gave us Joe Reimer’s (1997) ethnography of a conventional school that was “succeeding,” at least on its own terms. Where are today’s ethnographies of the new models of the 21st century? If this article inspires one researcher to consider such a study, and one potential funder to support it, it will have succeeded.

Finally, a question that requires a crystal ball is discussed in the next section.

How Far Are We From the Tipping Point?

While there are probably a few new models being created in the Midwest and the South, it is not an accident that most of the models I have found are located in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area, since these Jewish communities are heavily into re-imagining the religious school.

As Malcolm Gladwell (2002) has taught us, innovations take root after reaching a point at which it seems that “everyone” aspires to adopt them. How far are we from the tipping point for new ways of thinking about the congregational school? Based on Tyack and Cuban’s (1995) analysis of public school reform, the answer might be a very pessimistic “we will never reach a tipping point.” On the other hand, the context of Jewish education is different from that of the public schools. It has no teachers’ unions and no standardized testing; neither elections nor real estate prices hinge on the achievements of Jewish students. Can we overcome the inertia of institutions and the ambivalence of parents? The institutions discussed in this article (from the national organization to the local school) are hoping that we can.

type of discussion would be a crucial second step in laying out a research agenda for congregational schools.

⁶³See (<http://innovatingcongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Coalition-Handbook-Vol-21.pdf>).

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