

IN THE FIELD OF RELIGIOUS SCHOOL: TIME TO STAND AND APPLAUD



As the Director of BJE's Center for Excellence in Part-Time Jewish Education, I have come to know our 50 Religious Schools in greater Los Angeles intimately, becoming familiar with their challenges and dreams, convening several professional groups in the field, and in many cases, visiting the schools. I have a deep admiration for the Religious School Directors and Assistant Directors. They are dedicated, love our children, and help keep Judaism alive in thousands of homes.

The past month in Religious School education has been, as with everything else, unlike anything we have ever experienced. The initial challenge was to move in-person schools to the digital landscape within 7-10 days. BJE convened its long-existing Religious School Educators Network (RSEN), for a discussion on how to actually accomplish this task. Many of our directors and educators knew little or nothing about the digital landscape; let alone how to run a school within it. How would we get teachers to create virtual classrooms that are of value to their students and parents? How do we create content and curriculum on a computer screen that is modern and engaging when none of us are computer programmers? It was just when so many of us had identified the mountains we needed to climb that blessings started raining down upon us.

There are many people to thank for their help over the past few weeks, but the first to reach out to us were our cherished partners, the PK12 department of the Jewish Federation, and three LA-based online Jewish educational content providers. The content providers instantly offered free online materials and held countless meetings with our Network members, training them on how to move their schools online. BJE, partnering with PK12, identified additional local content providers and mental health professionals who donated their time and expertise to support the professionals and students. This was an enormous effort yet every school was able to make the change within two weeks.

During that time, BJE established an online resource bank upon which schools have been relying. Our Network now meets twice weekly and has never been better attended. But this is where the story of the past few weeks reaches new levels of inspiration.

I have had the pleasure of observing more than a dozen online religious schools. I have seen over 500 kids' faces in boxes on my screen for the better part of three weeks. I often leave those observations with tears of joy in my eye. Our kids need connection, they need to see their friends, and they need to have some sense of normalcy during an abnormal time. I've heard dozens of kids express to their classmates both their fears, and their unbelievable joy at being in their religious school. In addition to the Jewish

learning and connections, kids want to talk about the new world with a community of trusted and valued peers and adult role-models/teachers.

Attendance for religious school has never been higher than over these past three weeks! Not only did religious schools transfer faster and more effectively to the digital landscape than many of the other schools these kids also attend, but kids are coming to digital religious schools in droves! In the case of our younger kids, parents are often joining in, engaging alongside in the learning. My guess is they are partly there for the same reason I join with my kids - after I provide technical assistance in logging on, I see the magical Zoom room filled with smiling faces who love being with their community. Parents just want to keep watching it!

None of these wonderful initial results would have happened without the leadership of our schools, and a community that rose to support them. BJE has been the lynchpin - from BJE's national role, through the Shinui Network, connecting to communities across North America, to our local partnerships with the Jewish Federation and Jewish educational nonprofits throughout LA County, to our decades old relationships with our schools and their professionals - we were able to bring everyone together to make this miracle happen.

I ask everyone to recognize what our Religious Schools have accomplished, especially during these difficult times, and to stand and applaud their professionals. From what I've seen, their value has never been higher!

I am buoyed that the discussion of the future of religious schools will begin not with the decades-old false narrative about the plight of religious school, but with the story of how religious schools kept their communities together and made them stronger during a time when we could not physically be together.

To all of you who give your money, your time, who work as Jewish professionals in the field, who are BJE's partners in this work, I express my sincere thanks.

David Lewis

Director, BJE Center for Excellence in Part-Time Jewish Education