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Rethinking -- and revitalizing -- religious schools

By Julie Gruenbaum Fax, Education Editor



Fourth grade teacher Irina S. works with a group of students

Like most kids Jewish kids in the 1970s, Devorah Moos Hankin didn't like religious school, nor did she get much out of it. She remembers learning by rote, with a teacher standing at the board writing Hebrew letters.

Her sons are having a much different experience at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills.

Last year Jacob, then in third grade, wrote a story about lying. Matthew, who was in sixth grade, collaborated with a small group of kids to create a book about Passover, with drawings, poems and stories. Both boys plowed ahead in a self-paced Hebrew program.

Temple Emanuel's new approach to supplementary Jewish education does away with the 1950s model of religious school, bringing in a campier feel with student-driven art, drama or high-tech projects replacing classroom learning. Kids work independently to learn Hebrew, with teachers circulating to help where needed.

"My kids were much happier last year, and seemed to learn Hebrew with more facility than they did in a more standard classroom environment," Hankin said. "I'm a big fan of the new program."

A growing number of synagogues around Los Angeles and throughout the country are upending the time-honored idea of Sunday school. Some synagogues now offer their kids classes on Shabbat; others are condensing 26 Sundays into three weeks of camp. Many are trying to bring parents out of the carpool line and into the school. This year, a handful of synagogues in Los Angeles will embark on an 18-month professionally guided process to completely restructure their educational culture.

At their worst, supplementary schools offer inexperienced or uninspired teachers who cover tired and repetitive curricula that seems divorced from anything else in the students' life. Parents are uninvolved, kids come to class tired after a long day at school, and the commitment to attending is considered a lower priority than soccer or hip-hop. Even if only one or two of those liabilities apply to most religious schools -- and some defy all of these stereotypes -- it's hard to get around the reality that congregational schools are the white elephant in the realm of Jewish identity diminishment.

That reality is supported by anecdotal evidence and reams of research. In fact, one study even shows that people who went to one-day-a-week school were less likely to stay meaningfully Jewish as adults than kids who had no formal Jewish education at all. In other words, doing nothing was better than going to religious

school.

And yet, congregational-run supplementary school remains the primary way that most Jewish kids get a formal Jewish education. In Los Angeles more than 12,000 kids attend these schools.

"The number alone warrants serious attention to doing whatever possible to make those programs as effective learning environments as possible," said David Ackerman, director of educational services at the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles. "If a congregation is willing to look seriously at its program and is willing to make some changes and take bold steps, and is willing to ask questions about what are its goals and what it wants to achieve, perhaps we will discover that religious schools can be significantly more effective than they have been until now."

Ackerman is hoping to achieve that through the bureau's work with the Experiment in Congregational Education's Re-Imagine project, a program created by the Reform Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's Rhea Hirsch School of Education. Re-Imagine will work with seven synagogues locally on a process of deconstructing and then reconstructing the educational goals for their entire congregation, and determining how youth education fits into that picture.

"I think a lot of congregations have been very focused on the idea that if we teach kids the skills they will practice the skills, so let's teach them about Shabbat, let's teach them the blessing, with the assumption that the act of actually doing the blessing and observing Shabbat will be taken care of at home," said Amy Asin, who is coordinating Los Angeles' Re-Imagine effort. But that scenario of Jewish home life has been outdated for decades. "So the question is, is the goal only to teach confidence and content, or is there a need

for acculturation? And the answer to that will be different for every congregation."

Leo Baeck Temple, Temple Israel of Hollywood, Temple Judea, Temple Adat Elohim in Thousand Oaks, Adat Ari El, Temple Beth El of San Pedro and Temple Isaiah each contributed \$12,000 to fund the program, and The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and a donor from the Jewish Funders Network contributed the rest to make up the \$450,000 price tag on Re-Imagine.

Temple Judea -- the largest supplementary school in the city, with more than 1,000 kids on campuses in West Hills and Tarzana -- has had a jump-start on Re-Imagine.

In addition to the traditional two-day-a-week school, Temple Judea has about 100 kids in private Hebrew tutoring and Sunday morning Judaica. That option is reserved for kids who have difficulty in a classroom setting, or who have extreme schedule demands -- such as those who are professional actors or athletes with Olympic aspirations.

Beginning in 2008, kids will be able to opt to forgo the regular classes to enroll instead in day camp for two weeks at the end of the summer, where from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. they will pray, learn Jewish content and participate in regular camp activities like music, art and sports. During the year those same kids will attend a weeklong winter camp, six family holiday sessions, and a few Shabbat dinners and weekend retreats. Fourth- through sixth-graders will also take part in the Hebrew tutoring program.

Rabbi Bruce Raff, director of education, said with this schedule kids will actually be studying more hours than they do in the usual 25 Sundays and Tuesdays in a year.

"We can create with repetition and intensity the kinds of things that get created in summer camp that you don't create as well in school," Raff said. "If we do Birkat Hamazon [the blessing after meals] every day for 11 days in a row, you're going to learn it."

But will the intensity -- and knowledge -- of August wear off by November? And does condensing religious school into a few weeks in the summer and winter send the wrong message about the consistency of commitment required for Jewish learning?

Raff believes the flow of events throughout the year will keep the summer spark alive.

"What it becomes is something exciting and fun. Kids don't respond to school in the same way they respond to camp. Kids love going to summer camp, and unfortunately, the average child doesn't like going to religious school," he said, adding that nevertheless kids at Temple Judea's regular religious school are quite happy there.

Raff is likely to face some opposition when the synagogue tries to change a model that is so entrenched in the American Jewish culture. New models can be perceived as dumbing down the curriculum; capitulating to families' dwindling willingness to invest time in building Jewish identity. And some experiments might be too radical, or require too much participation from parents.

Some pilot programs have garnered attention, according to Isa Aron, a professor of Jewish education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, and a founder of the Experiment in Congregational Education. In Boston, Keshet, an after-school daycare, offers informal study time, Judaic electives and Hebrew study. At a

congregation in Rye, N.Y. that just went through Re-Imagine, children and their parents separately and then together study a specific value with accompanying Torah text and prayers, following up by acting out that value in social action and then creating a family project.

Aron's favorite model is the Shabbat learning community.

"If a family is going to services on Shabbat every week and learning for 10 years, that is going to change people," Aron said. "It doesn't always make them Shabbat shul-goers, but it gives them a sophisticated concept of Judaism and it makes what you are learning about in the school context true to how you are actually living."

IKAR, a spiritual community in Los Angeles, has adopted the Shabbat model.

"Our philosophy is to teach Jewish life as Jewish life is happening, and it doesn't happen in two-hour blocks on Tuesdays and Sundays, it happens on Shabbat," Lisa Alpern, director of education and family programming said.

Founded in 2004 and now 300-member units strong, IKAR is launching its religious school this year, with one weekday afternoon of Hebrew study and a Shabbat program with parallel prayer and study tracks for kids and adults, based on IKAR's vision of the intersection of spirituality and social action.

But the Shabbat model has one significant challenge: Parents are required to make the same time commitment required of their kids.

"Most parents, though they are dedicated to instilling within their children a love for Judaism are not necessarily willing to partake in in a consistent way, not because they don't have an authentic love for Judaism themselves, but rather

that their ultimate interest is the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony," said Meirav Finley, who runs Ohr HaTorah's religious school, which meets on Shabbat and has about 70 kids. "They are more attracted to the kind of school where they can drop their kids off on Sunday, and go to the tennis court or shopping or to work."

Meirav and her husband, Ohr Ha Torah spiritual leader and founder Rabbi Mordecai Finley, have created the religious school in the mold of the synagogue, whose nondenominational, progressive congregation meets in the Faith Tabernacle Church in West Los Angeles. The Finley's vision is for the kids as well as the adults to understand that Jewish tradition, appreciated in the full context of history and spirituality, can be immeasurably enriching – if the whole family is actively involved.

"Sure, we can teach Shabbat observance. However, if it is not practiced and experienced by the family is it not absorbed and creates conflict at the home as well as the classroom," Finley said.

While regular Shabbat attendance is not the norm for all communities, many schools are trying different approaches to integrating parents into the process. Some require parents to attend Sunday morning classes, others send material home for parents and kids to complete together. Schools are working toward parents reinforcing what kids learn through rituals in the home.

At Temple Emanuel, parents are invited to six chagigot, holiday celebrations, where kids present their projects, opening up avenues for family discussion and creating a more cohesive community among the families.

Last year Emanuel switched to project-based learning. After a short introduction from the teacher about the matriarchs, for instance, kids might research, write

and perform a play on the life of Rebecca. Kids reap the benefits of studying topics in depth, choosing to work alone or in groups and picking a medium that interests them -- comic books, art or video productions said Geoff Prass, Emanuel's religious school principal.

Educational experts agree that mastering a topic to present to others is one of the best ways to learn it. Focusing on specific aspects of a holiday or Torah portion also avoids repetition from year to year.

For Hebrew study, Temple Emanuel adapted the Union for Reform Judaism's Mitkadem curriculum, in which kids work independently to learn to read the prayers, grasp their meaning and translate important Hebrew words' roots, then progress to the next level when they pass an evaluation.

The approach has motivated kids to work hard and allowed for the appropriate level of teacher input and time, said Rabbi Jonathan Aaron, director of education at Temple Emanuel.

Aaron and Prass both say they see kids excited about the progress they make. Of course, there are challenges as well.

"There are some families who believe that real learning only happens in a classroom with a teacher in front teaching, and they don't like the individual approach," Aaron said. "And sometimes kids don't love it because it forces them to work -- we're going to know if you're not learning anything."

Still, experts are hoping these early successes will focus communal attention and resources on fixing more schools.

"The Jewish community can do anything -- they can get Jews out of the Soviet

Union, out of Ethiopia. If the Jewish community were to see Jewish education as important as getting Jews out of Ethiopia, it would turn its pockets inside out to do it," Isa Aron said. "I think people have done that for day schools. Now it's time for the Jewish community to do this for religious schools."

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