PARENTAL PARTNERSHIP: MOVING BEYOND “BUY-IN” IN JEWISH EDUCATION

By

Ted Dreier

Capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the joint masters degree in Jewish Nonprofit Management and Jewish Education

February 2015

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

LOS ANGELES SCHOOL

SCHOOL OF JEWISH NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

RHEA HIRSCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

PARENTAL PARTNERSHIP: MOVING BEYOND “BUY-IN” IN JEWISH EDUCATION

Ted Dreier

Approved By:

_____
Advisor

_____
Director, SJNM

_____
Director, RHSOE

Table of Contents

Abstract **4**
Acknowledgments **6**
Introduction **8**
Research Questions 8
Literature Review **10**
Methodology **15**
Limitations of this Study 16
Terminology Used Explained 16
Findings **18**
Parental Learning 18
Motivations for Parental Learning
Preferred Learning Models
What Parents Want to Learn
Major Factors Against Participation
Role of Parent 23
Discussions with Children 25
Topics of Relevancy
God, Spirituality, and Prayer
Who? When? Where?
Additional Important Responses 29
Recommendations **31**
For Communal Leaders, Educators, and Clergy 31
For Future Research 33
Connection to Curriculum Guide **34**
Bibliography **36**
Appendix **38**
Interview Protocol 38
Interviewee Consent Sheet 41

Abstract

Religious schools are often referred to as supplementary schools, but I have always been plagued by the question, are supplementary schools really supplementing Jewish education at home? While much quantitative data exists on what types of rituals and practices families are engaging with at home, far less qualitative research exists that examines how parents are talking Jewish with their children.

This study explores what roles parents view themselves as having in their children's Jewish upbringing, the Jewish dialogues that families are engaging in, and how adult education factors into these previous two topics. The literature review investigates patterns in adult learning, looks at the state of the American Jewish family, and explores children's yearning to engage with their parents in meaningful, rich dialogue. To this end, I interviewed ten parents of religious school students, ranging in ages and grades. All families were members of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, with five parents enrolling their children in the traditional religious school and five parents in the family-based Tiyul Shabbat B'Yachad (TSBY) program.

Through detailed, hour-long interviews, the conclusions I reached suggest that, while many parents view themselves as teachers or role models, there is a conflict between speech and action. In addition, parents are engaging in conversations with their children on topics such as Israel and social justice but shy away from topics such as God, prayer, and spirituality. Parents who are members of the TSBY program, however, and therefore are engaging in adult education on a regular basis, speak with more clarity as to their role and the role of their community in their child's Jewish upbringing, as well as with more confidence in discussing Jewish topics with their children.

In response to these findings, my recommendation to Jewish communal professionals is

to devote more time, energy, and financial resources to parents. While the content, modality of learning, and physical setting will vary, depending on the specific needs of the community, a high level of sophistication is required. In addition, parents in particular need to be challenged in subject areas in which they feel unable to support their children's Jewish development. By doing so, educators can begin to rely on parents as partners in their child's Jewish upbringing.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the loving support of my family, particularly my mother, Marsha Silbert Dreier. Her unconditional love and constant support has always allowed me to explore my passions and come to a better understanding of who I am, as a person, as a professional, and as a Jew.

To my friends and classmates, I am eternally grateful. Your laughter has helped me through the frustrations and allowed me to see the beauty in our world, even when I stubbornly pushed back. Specifically, I would like to thank Nicole Berne, my loving girlfriend, who has provided me with stability and a compassionate voice of reason. Also, to Sarah Magida and Ben Zeiger, my compatriots in this Joint-Masters program: our summers together were challenging and inspiring, and I look forward to reading your works in the future!

Absolutely none of this would be possible without my first mentor, Michelle Shapiro Abraham. Before I understood it myself, she saw a spark in me that would propel me to follow my passion of Jewish education. Her creativity, self-reflection, patience, and love of her community modeled for me what a successful and compassionate professional should be. In addition, I would like to thank Richard Siegel and Mandi Richardson. Without their leadership and kindness, the School of Jewish Nonprofit Management would not be as strong a program as it is today. Furthermore, Sarah Benor, my research adviser, kept me honest and on-track, and pushed me at every turn of this project.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Temple Isaiah community: Rabbi Aimee Gerace and Carla Kopf, who opened their congregation to me and helped facilitate my meetings with parents, and, of course, to the parents who spent their free time sitting down to coffee with me, in

their homes and throughout Los Angeles, and allowed me to ask often personal questions, all out of the kindness of their hearts. I am eternally grateful for everyone's support in this project.

Introduction

In the past six years, I have been extremely fortunate to work at six distinct religious schools. Each one differed from the next in observance levels, average household income, learning structures, and the overall feeling of community. While no two synagogues are the same, a series of patterns emerged for me that have been consistent throughout every school in which I have worked. One of the most disturbing phenomena I have observed is the lack of parents' involvement in the Jewish education and upbringing of their children. As a religion that began in the home, familial participation in Jewish living, tradition, and lifelong learning is the key to forming a strong Jewish identity and maintaining a Jewish sense of self throughout one's life. I believe that a necessary component to Judaism in the home is educated and committed parents. It is because of this that I have chosen to research the following questions:

- What Jewish topics do parents most enjoy learning?
- Do parents view themselves as partners in their child's Jewish upbringing? If so, how?
    - Is "supplementary school" really supplementing at-home Jewish learning/practice?
- How comfortable are parents engaging their children in conversations about Judaism's "big ideas"? (God, values, Torah, prayer, Israel, etc.)
- What is the role of community in Jewish learning?

It is my belief that we, as a Jewish people, need to be committed to lifelong Jewish learning and living. However, it is difficult to do so when individuals feel an inability to approach and discuss topics because of a lack of familiarity or comfort with Judaism's "big ideas." By engaging parents in substantive learning on the subjects that they find most interesting, we can help bolster their interactions with their children on Jewish issues. Judaism should begin in the home and radiate outward. The first step to building a strong and literate

Jewish community is building strong and literate Jewish parents, who will find greater meaning in their Judaism and engage their children with Jewish themes in every aspect of their lives.

Literature Review

Since 1990, with the release of the National Jewish Population Study, the Jewish educational world has been ablaze with programs, educational models, and academic articles trying to grapple with the amorphous task of Jewish identity building. In the wake of the 2013 Pew Study report outlining the landscape of American Jewry (Pew, 2013), a renewed passion for finding the panacea to assimilation and the loss of strong Jewish identity began. Among the many communal interventions designed to respond to this crisis, we find some synagogues reorganizing their models from congregation schools with only a single program track to incorporating family models, from a top-down approach to a model of cooperation, and a focus on the Jewish people rather than the institutions of Judaism. However, while many of the institutional elite focus on how to cultivate Jewish identity, increase attendance and affiliation, and stifle the trend of exogamy, a foundational characteristic of our tradition is missing. While parents are the foundational body of the Jewish enterprise, many are ill-equipped to fulfill the commandment handed down in Deuteronomy 6:7, וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ, "You shall teach your children" (Woocher, 1994, p. 15).

Trends in adult learning would seem to belie this reality. Research shows that adults are eager to engage in Jewish learning (Deitcher, 2013, Grant & Schuster, 2003, Schuster, 2003, Wise, 2013). They want intellectually stimulating and spiritually challenging material that doesn't feel "dumbed-down," and they want that learning to be relevant and interesting (Bryfman, 2013, Grant & Schuster, 2013). The reign of the top-down model, of educators deciding what to teach, is rapidly declining. Adult learners want to be a part of the decision-making process in order to learn what they deem worthwhile, not only what professionals say they should know (Aron, 2000). The trend in adult education, of which parental education is a

subset, is for more choice and greater involvement by students in curriculum determination.

The evidence for this trend can be seen throughout the world. Where once adult learning was simply under the purview of the congregational rabbi, the model has expanded tremendously in the recent decades. Limmud International[1], founded in 2006, is an international adult learning community, led almost entirely by volunteers, with regional branches in 85 communities throughout 40 countries. The Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning[2] is a worldwide academy, headquartered at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which serves 5,500 students weekly. These Melton learners, who represent those more interested in academically rigorous study, "responded expansively about the pleasure they derived from making connections between the texts and their contemporary lives" (Grant & Schuster, 2003, p. 16). While these international learning centers exist, adult learning is organized through more traditional community institutions as well. Synagogue-based learning programs such as Temple Beth Elohim of Wellesley's *Living Torah 21*[3] and Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills' litany of classes[4] taught by clergy and laity, or the JCC Manhattan's constant rotation of classes[5] from Jewish text to cooking to spiritual meditation, are capitalizing on a population that is motivated to and capable of spending time, money, and energy devoted to Jewish learning. While Melton students may be more textually minded, the vast array of classes throughout the United States suggests that adults' interests are as eclectic as the individuals themselves.

Keeping adults' desire to be active participants in determining how and what they learn in mind, does it therefore follow that if parents want to learn, they also want to teach? While one

---

1 http://limmudinternational.org/about-us
2 http://www.meltonschool.org/aboutus/about-melton
3 http://tbewellesley.org/LivingTorah21
4 http://www.tebh.org/schools/lifelong-learning
5 http://www.jccmanhattan.org/jewish-learning

may posit the affirmative, in reality, the answer to this question is moot. It seems clear that, whether or not they actively choose to be, parents are their children's first and most important teachers, though they may be unaware of when and what exactly they may be teaching their children (Diament & Kushner, 2000, Kessler, 2000). Children see the objects in their houses, the activities their parents engage in, and the way their parents speak about different topics, and they learn. "Unconsciously, parents teach their children complicated constructions such as manners, grammar, and gender roles" (Diament & Kushner, 2000, p. 3). While current research suggests that Jewish identity development is a lifelong process and changes over time (Horowitz, 2000), it does not detract from the profound influence that parents exert over their children, even if unintentional. Judaism is certainly not in the same category as manners or gender roles, but it shares certain institutional and practical similarities. All are ideologically based, involve actions of one kind or another, and, as mentioned above, are taught.

What about the younger audience's interests and predispositions? Children are inherently attracted to ideas of spirituality, wonder, and amazement. In the course of their natural questioning, they turn to the adults in their lives for guidance (Covey, 1989, Kessler, 2000). While these adults are, at times, traditional teachers, parents too play an important role. Any parent can attest to a child's disposition for inquiry and to ask why things are the way they seem to be. As educators, we can capitalize on a child's inquisitive nature and yearning for spiritual engagement. Uncovering these dispositions, however, particularly those that involve spiritual discovery and understanding, takes significant amounts of time, time that, as Jewish educators, we are not afforded with our students. We need help. We need partners (Kress, 2007).

One very popular way to cultivate these partners is through family education. Family education was the product of a series of confluences in Jewish education, including the rise of

assimilation, exogamy, and the professionalism of the Jewish educational field (JESNA, 2003, Riemer, 1991). In addition, as Riemer highlights in his critique of the traditional religious school model, "Parental involvement in the schools is virtually nonexistent. Parents rarely are in contact with the teacher or principal of the school and have only a vague idea of what to expect from this education. Neither do they evince much desire to get more involved" (Riemer, 1991, p. 271). Educators looked for creative solutions to the aforementioned challenges and surmised that family education may be the answer. Ever since, a litany of program models has flourished, such as community-wide events, which bring together large numbers of families for exciting experiential learning, or intensives, which are organized at retreat centers or camps that bring Jewish learning to the student in a holistic manner. Parallel learning, where both parents and children learn the same topic, in separate classrooms, in developmentally appropriate ways, and then return for discussion is also extremely popular and creative (JESNA, 2003). While family education is but one response to a series of challenges the American Jewish population faces, Wolfson suggests that, "The field of Jewish family education will continue to expand as we empower more families to create a Jewish home that is a *mikdash m'at*, a small sacred sanctuary for our ever-frenzied parents and children" (Wolfson, 2004, p. 24).

So what is missing? Any parent would tell you that, in a world of over-programming and constant connectedness, they would relish more opportunities to have a conversation with their child about something meaningful. Children have a desire to engage with adults spiritually. Their lives are "bound up with matters of meaning, purpose, and connection, with creative expression and moments of joy and transcendence" (Kessler, 2000, p. xvii.). Heschel calls this radical amazement (Heschel, 1951). What, then, is stopping parents from speaking with their children on the topic of spirituality, divinity, and the soul? Prell suggests that parents are engaging with their

children in “talking values,” but reports no other findings in the area of parent-child dialogue (Prell, 2007, p.16). Is it a lack of knowledge that limits parents to discussing only values? Is it an inability to articulate their own opinions about Jewish concepts, or, more simply, is it a fear of being wrong? All of these are valid reasons, but also ones that, through active Jewish learning, can be addressed and ameliorated. Through my research, I intended to find out the reason or reasons behind parents’ reticence to engage in these conversations.

Methodology

For a qualitative research study such as this, interviews were used. This choice was made to ensure that a thorough and deep conversation could take place in which participants felt comfortable discussing sensitive, and often overlooked, topics. The interviews took place between July 30th, 2014 and October 9th, 2014. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes at various locations throughout Los Angeles, for the convenience of the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent (see Appendix), and all participants are referred to by pseudonym throughout the paper.

Interview participants were all members of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles. This community was chosen for two reasons: access and programmatic variability. The leadership of this synagogue was very gracious to past Hebrew Union College students, providing easy access to their community for the purposes of research. In addition, Temple Isaiah runs two religious school programs simultaneously. One program is a traditional Sunday/Tuesday religious school model. The other is a Shabbat-based, family education program, which varies in style and content. Five parents from each program were interviewed, providing a diversity of opinions and involvement. This diversity is reflected and highlighted throughout the study, as is necessary to fully understand an interviewee's responses. Participant names were suggested by the leadership of the programs, and I contacted each one individually. Every participant contacted agreed to be a part of this study.

The interviews were clearly structured into four sections. The first section included background questions, so that the researcher could have a better understanding of the participants' Jewish upbringing, or lack thereof, which frames their Jewish experiences. The second section concerned participants' personal learning styles, topics of Judaic interest, and

learning practices, which has influenced my educational work (see Curriculum Guide), and influence parents' confidence in engaging their children in Jewish dialogue. The third section, which is the focus of this project, revolved around the parents' Jewish interactions with their children, highlighting specifically how often, in what ways, and on what topics parents "talk Jewish" with their children. The fourth section deals with the participants' view of community in Jewish learning. Please see the Appendix for the interview protocol, upon which all interviews were based.

Limitations of this Study

While this study provides an introductory look into the views of a small population of parents, it is not meant to be exhaustive in any way. As a result of the restrictive nature of this project, significant variables were not taken into account. In particular, the analysis does not control for the following variables of the interviewee: ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, and profession. These areas were outside the scope and size of this paper. While many of these variables are highly influenced by region, for an in-depth look at a particular Jewish community which accounts for these variables, see Prell 2007.

Terminology

Throughout this study, the terms "traditional religious school" and "TSBY" are used to refer to different tracks within the congregational school, and a short explanation is required. "Traditional religious school" is a reference to the Sunday/weekday model that was popularized in the 19th century. Students learn Hebrew and Judaica in separate, grade-divided classrooms that often resemble the structure of a public school classroom. "TSBY," or Tiyul Shabbat B'Yachad, translates to 'A Shabbat Journey Together.' Families enrolled in this program meet for two Saturday mornings and one Friday evening a month. During these meetings, there is communal

prayer, parallel learning, and family learning sessions that center around a particular topic or theme. Parents at Temple Isaiah must choose one track.

Findings

Parental Learning

Motivations for Parental Learning

Many participants reported interest in learning as motivated by multiple interests. While these interests are not mutually exclusive, when it comes to motivations for parental learning, there appear to be two major trends. The first and most reported of these trends is relevancy. Every parent interviewed discussed, in some ways, the importance of learning as relevant to their lives. One aspect of relevancy was with regards to the practice of parenting. Topics such as Jewish life cycle events or Jewish holidays were important because these are subjects around which parents would naturally interact with their children. Knowledge in these areas would be important in teaching the history, meaning, and ritual surrounding the event with their children. Imparting this knowledge was a paramount concern of many of the parents interviewed. A second aspect of relevancy is the greater world around them. The two major topics here were Israel and antisemitism. Many parents expressed a desire to be more informed on the particulars of Israel and Israeli society and politics, for two complementary, but separate reasons: Israel's prominence in the media and a desire to become more educated participants in conversations on the topic. Whether it was because of discussions with friends, helping their children understand the realities of the world, imparting Jewish tradition to their children, or something more, the importance of relevancy in learning was highly apparent in every interview.

The second is an interest in learning as an intellectual endeavor. Four of the parents interviewed expressed their desire to learn because it would challenge and satisfy them on a cognitive level. Grant and Schuster's 2003 study on the Melton Mini-School corroborates this. One participant, Michael, suggests a reason for this rationale. "Once we leave school, we sort of turn off that portion of our brain. It would behoove any well rounded person to take a class, an

intellectual class, in anything...” This represents an important understanding by adult learners. Learning is sometimes understood in terms of ends. If parents are going to use their valuable and limited time away from their children learning, they often want that learning to be useful and applicable to their lives, as mentioned above. However, Michael has articulated an approach to learning which mirrors the Jewish value of *Torah lishmah*, learning for its own sake. This idea, that time spent studying is worthwhile for its own sake, is valuable for professionals to consider.

The last motivation was not strongly represented throughout the entire sample cohort, but expresses a unique perspective worth highlighting. In this singular case, John describes his learning as “my time.”

> I have a job in politics. It’s a 60-70 hour a week gig. I have 3 children and a wife. A mother with Alzheimer’s. I have a lot going on. Most of it is stuff for other people...99% of my time is spent doing things for other people. So I need stuff that feels like I’m filling the void. The stuff that I want to do that helps me grow and helps me be more informed in something I’m interested in intellectually and helps me grapple with the questions in life that get more important as you get older. And that’s what I get out of all of that. It’s my time.

This learner expresses a combination of the relevancy and intellectual endeavor motivations outlined above, finding the few opportunities available to learn as a chance to escape the frenzy felt throughout the week and explore deeper questions of meaning and connectedness. In this way, learning serves as a type of therapy. While this motivation was the least reported amongst interviewees, it is nonetheless an important aspect of parental motivations for learning.

Preferred Learning Models

In the interviews, parents discussed two separate styles of learning in which they enjoyed participating. These two models, the classic lecture model and the community-based discussion model, represent two, dichotomous styles. Only two of the ten participants expressed a

preference for the former. This model highlights a more traditionally academic style, with a teacher, usually a rabbi, present at the front of the class. The students are viewed as vessels to be filled with knowledge, knowledge that the rabbi owns and conveys to the learners. Despite generally being decades out of formal learning, parents find this method of study easy to associate with, as it is often a type of learning of which they understand the structure and expectations. The expert teaches, and the students learn.

The latter model values community to a high degree. The remaining eight out of ten interviewees preferred this model, with all five of the TSBY families interviewed being part of this group. The diffusion of power, with each member of the group being able to act as both teacher and student, makes this a more attractive model of learning for many. Ronit, an American-born Israeli, noted that, "I have never done learning without a community." Similarly, Olivia expressed that:

> By learning in a community, I have come to find that so many different people hold so many different views and opinions on things. And they are all right, when it comes to Judaism, there are so many different ways to see things in Judaism. And I have learned a great deal from the community.

Olivia's opinion represents that of most of the members of this second group. Parents in this group appreciate the variety of opinions their co-learners have and find it meaningful to hear the thoughts and philosophies they express; a multitude of opinions is more compelling than a single, traditionally authoritative opinion.

What Parents Want to Learn

The topics that parents are inclined to learn about are just as diverse as the parents themselves. Some include Israel, Talmud and other sacred texts, Jewish lifecycle, and Jewish

parenting. There appears to be no discernible pattern to these inclinations, though interests are highly influenced by background, profession, and prior knowledge areas.

It is worth noting, however, that, while no single content area received a majority vote, there exist three subject matters that many interviewees were hesitant to take on in a learning context when asked: prayer, God, and spirituality. While parents may feel uncomfortable in multiple content areas, the sensation of discomfort with these particular subjects translated, more than others, into a hesitance to engage in the study of them. Prayer, God, and spirituality were often associated with observance or higher levels of religiosity, which Reform Jews often distance themselves from. Prayer was understood most often as a traditional-style prayer, where liturgy is recited out of a siddur in a synagogue setting. Some interviewees related the benefits of communal prayer as an agent for socialization or as a period for bonding with their child. Ronit smiled while saying, "Even if it's a total of two hours a month, it's two more hours than I would have otherwise had with my kids." The benefits of prayer as a religious obligation or an up-lifting spiritual experience were not mentioned.

God was spoken about from many different cultural understandings, but an overall hesitation to engage in learning about God was evident. Two major ideologies perpetuate this hesitation; the perceived irrelevance of God in an age of science, or an inner struggle, which either prescribes reluctance towards engagement or forces feelings of an inauthentic belief structure. Multiple parents expressed a lack of authenticity when speaking Jewishly about God, particularly compared to their more orthodox neighbors or family members. While personal transformation is always a possibility, it must begin from within. Even if belief is not a prerequisite to learning about God, an openness to new ideas is.

The latter ideology however, internal struggle, represents the core of Judaism. The

reluctance that ambiguity of belief elicits is completely natural and, through study and practice, can easily be changed. The second subsection of this dilemma, the idea that one's belief structure is inauthentic or somehow contradictory to Judaism, is a real and problematic challenge. It is important that, for this cognitive hurdle to be overcome, educators take seriously both people's personal struggles and their individualized worldviews. By doing so, Jewish educators can incorporate Jewish tradition, practice, and authority in ways that their learners find approachable, and a willingness to engage will come more readily.

Spirituality was discussed in very similar ways to God, and the above responses apply to this topic as well. The implications of these discomforts will be explored below when they are applied to parents' dialogues with their children.

Major Factors Against Participation

When discussing the rationales for why parents were not engaging in adult learning of their own, the overwhelming response was a lack of time. In some form or another, every parent articulated in some fashion that, with all of their other responsibilities, there was simply not enough time to engage in this type of personal and intellectual development. While three of five parents who are enrolled in TSBY felt satisfied with the amount of learning in which they are currently engaged, the remaining two also cited time as the reason why they were not pursuing more educational opportunities. Other interviewees offered a lack of interest, the difficulty of finding affordable childcare, and the sometimes burdensome cost of learning as reasons for their lack of participation in adult study.

Margaret, a mother of three, expressed that, "My number one priority is my kids and their activities, followed by the house, followed by my writing. After that, there is not time." According to Margaret, whose children are a part of the traditional religious school model, adult

Jewish learning is not a priority in her life. While interviewees cited the aforementioned reasons for not participating in adult learning, it would appear these are merely symptoms of the larger rationale: that adult Jewish learning is simply not a priority in many of the interviewees' lives. This factors less for parents of TSBY families, as the program contains within it a Jewish learning component. However, for the families interviewed in the traditional model, and some in TSBY, there exist competing items of precedence.

Role of the Parent

The views parents have of their role in their child's Jewish upbringing are highly complex but generally fell into three categories: role model, facilitator, and enforcer. Within this range, many parents expressed multiple identities with regards to their role, sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradicting previous statements about the topic.

Anne, a mother of two girls, viewed herself very much as her child's Jewish role model. "As my girls' same-sex parent, they watch what I do, and they replicate it. Initially, it is my responsibility, but after a while, they take over and take charge of their own Judaism. It is my job to give them a foundation, but then it is out of my hands." However, despite this very acute sense of responsibility for her child's Jewish upbringing, Anne is not involved in any sort of adult Jewish education of her own and spends little time engaging in Jewish dialogue with her children. Another parent, who voiced her role as an agent of socialization, described her situation as "outsourcing the details to the temple." Both of these parents are members of the traditional religious school because of the time requirements of TSBY, and neither was engaging in the learning they believed their children should be receiving.

Hannah, a TSBY participant, who described herself as a facilitator of her children's Jewish upbringing, related that, "Family engagement is critical to engendering motivated parents.

If you have community...you know you're going to go, if you're interested in what they are teaching or not, you are going to go because of your community. You are going to learn by osmosis. And you are modeling for your kids." Hannah commanded a strong, culturally literate Jewish vocabulary and engaged in her own adult learning outside of TSBY. Her deep Jewish and Zionist background, which appears to have greatly impacted her prioritization of Jewish learning, is impossible to replicate in another. However, especially for those with very young children, starting at a later age is not necessarily a negative, and can highlight for children the ebbs and flows of Jewish life.

While the small sample size of this study inherently precludes generalizing this trend throughout both programs at-large, Hannah's opinion reflects very accurately that of all of the TSBY families interviewed. Some engage in adult education outside of the program, but all learn together with a rabbi or educator during their meetings. While role modeling was mentioned by over half of the interviewees, including members of the traditional religious school, every member of the TSBY program expressed its heightened importance.

What about partnership? As a foundational research question for this study, I imagined it would be among the responses given. This was not the case. Not a single parent expressed a sense of partnership when asked about their role in their child's Jewish upbringing. When prompted with a question that included the word partnership, some parents expressed a sense of partnership with their child, their spouse, or the synagogue or clergy. Pamela responded to the question regarding partnership with, "Definitely not the temple. Because they are the teachers. They already know the answers, whereas I'm the learner, and my child is the learner." While this highlights a hierarchy between the synagogue and the learner, she equates the learning of her and her child. This understanding represents an allure for some towards TSBY, where families learn

together equally. She went on to say, "You're kind of a partner and a teacher at the same time with your children. That's just kind of life." This clarification makes an important point, that one is able to occupy the position of both teacher and student simultaneously, without cognitive dissonance as to status differential or appropriateness. It is with this foundation that role modeling and partnership in Jewish education can take shape.

Discussions with Children

Topics of Relevancy

Parents were also asked about what types of Jewish dialogues they are having with their children. The types of discussions parents are having with their children mirror closely the topics they are interested in learning about. The most reported subject areas had to do with perceived relevancy and translated into dialogue about Israel and antisemitism. As a result of the regularity in which these two topics are seen in print and digital media, both children and parents are constantly coming into contact with them. In the American Jewish context, many parents feel the need to prepare themselves and their children to be advocates for themselves and for Israel in a global arena, which has, of recent, become more critical of Israel than ever before. Natalie, a mother in the traditional religious school, spoke at length of her desire to learn more about Israel because she is, "not informed enough to be an advocate." The BDS movement, which has been particularly successful on college campuses, was worrisome to two parents who had older children about to finish high school. Antisemitism has become topical as a result of the recent spikes in activity throughout Europe.

It is important to be aware that, within this group, relevancy seems to trump topical interest. While the topic of Israel straddles the line between the two, it is difficult to distinguish heartfelt interest from an understood cultural and personal pragmatism. I would posit that, for most, it is the latter. As a result of the regularity with which these parents interact with Israel

through news media, it appears more vital and dire. It is important to remember that this is not the only form of relevance. For example, one parent described the practice in his home of ripping pages out of newspapers or magazines and taping them to his children's door, which would be passed around the house until the family came together and could discuss the matter if the children were interested.

In addition, multiple parents described that their Jewish discussions with their children were heavily dependent on the time of year or what was happening in their family life. When a particular Jewish holiday was in season, it was discussed. Shabbat, as a result of its continuity throughout the year, appeared the only constant. Furthermore, family dynamics play a consistent role. The death of a close relative or family pet will bring up questions about death and the afterlife. Micaela describes,

> "[We are] going through the process with my grandparents...I feel like seeing it and experiencing it, knowing why we do certain things and asking, "Why is it that we do this? Why do you cover the mirror? Why do we sit *shiva*?" Experiencing it allows me to explain it better. I think death and dying is a tricky topic to discuss with children. And there isn't always an answer. But it is helpful to have that additional layer to reflect on helps with explaining it to the kids."

Parents understand that relevancy is crucial, because they must find it compelling, but even more so because they will lose their children's attention otherwise. Four of ten parents expressed a direct concern with, when discussing Jewish topics with their children, their children losing interest or possessing a disinterest in dialogue. These parents reported that often their children were simply looking for answers, not more questions or a deep, philosophical discussion.

<u>God, Spirituality, and Prayer</u>

As previously stated, parents' hesitation to learn about God, spirituality, and prayer impacts their ability, willingness, and comfort with discussing these matters with their children.

This discomfort is recognizable to a child and may thereafter stunt the child's own spiritual development and growth, making them unable to articulate, or even appreciate, the benefits of spirituality. Without a plausibility structure that a child can emulate, their own soul cannot be nurtured and evolved.

The answer to this is the same as before, study and practice. This is not to say that answers will be found to Judaism's "big ideas," but rather, that through study and practice, one can gain familiarity with rituals, philosophical themes and principles, and experience a spiritual life first-hand (see Recommendations). By doing so, the vocabulary and understanding of self will emerge to produce conversation that would otherwise be unattainable.

While this hesitation is real, it is not completely pervasive, as a small group of parents expressed a desire to discuss God with their children. In addition to providing, as one interviewee claims, "the type of meaty conversations parents love to have with their kids," it also provides parents with an opportunity to explore for themselves. Micaela asserts that, "I would be comfortable discussing God or spirituality with my children. In those conversations, the pluses are that they make me think about it. 'Oh, how do I feel about that? What does that mean to me?'" An opportunity to engage with one's child is seen, at least in this case, as an opportunity to engage with oneself.

Additionally, parents brought up two phenomena that were not originally intended to be part of this study, but are highly important and worth mentioning. The first is that younger children seem to engage in questioning these topics more than their older counterparts. While research suggests that children do interact with soul-searching questions at a young age (Bennett, 1984, Covey, 2004, Dickie, 1997, Kessler, 2000), there is no reason to believe they stop this questing at an older age. They may, however, be less likely to express that seeking to adults. The

second is that females are more likely to engage in rich, meaningful dialogue than males. While societal convention may compel or coerce a boy to dispel of such inquires, no research has suggested this is uniformly true.

Finally, and most strangely, some parents reported a sense of overt happiness or accomplishment when describing their child's belief in God. Feeling as if parents had tied their children to something higher than themselves was found to be praise-worthy, even by parents who express a negative, non-existent, or skeptical association with God. One parent, who had difficulty articulating her own ideas about God and was uninterested in discussing it with her children, reported that, "my kids seem to have more faith than I do...and I'm very happy they do. I feel like that's a big success." This sentiment was confirmed by two other parents as well. While this group does not represent a majority, it is an important aspect of understanding a parent in relation to their child.

Who? When? Where?

In order to better take advantage of the questions children ask, interviewees were asked to describe the broader details of these conversations, such as who was asking them and when and where they were being asked. In some areas, such as when, there appear to be no patterns for time of day or week. However, with regards to the location in which these conversations occur, whether prompted by parent or child, there were two reported answers that occurred multiple times: at the dinner table and in the car. Michael reasoned this was, "because kids are a captive audience in the car. So if you need twenty minutes to talk to your kid, wait until they need to be driven somewhere, and talk to them." I might add that, similar to art or play therapy (American, 2015), by taking a child's attention off the conversation and onto an additional stimulus (dinner or the scenery outside a window), they may be more apt to discuss painful, philosophical, or

abstract topics.

Additional Important Responses

Lastly, there were a number of responses parents gave regarding their Jewish dialogues with their children during the interviews that warrant mentioning. A preliminary explanation as to why parents were hesitant to engage in Jewish topics with their children was a fear of being wrong or a reluctance to appear uninformed. This position may contradict the God-like image young children often have of their parents (Dickie et. al., 1999), a relationship some may want to preserve for as long as possible. This hypothesis was proved wrong. In stark contrast to early postulation, seven of ten parents interviewed expressed comfort with telling their children, "I don't know, but let's find out together." The remaining three interviewees expressed neutral opinions, meaning that no parents in this study would be actively opposed to showing doubt or a lack of knowledge in a subject. Pamela expressed that responding to a child's question in this manner felt "empowering because it helps them realize that we don't have all the answers and they need to be free thinkers. One of the biggest lessons they can learn in the world is that no one has all the answers...and not knowing is okay." John felt similarly as well.

> I would love it. It would be great. It would be interactive and a chance to share some values. I would love to have that experience. It would make me feel like a good parent. And like we're sharing something and that I'm helping him make a positive connection with me and with this mountain of understanding to be chiseled away at.

While this report of parental openness is refreshing, as mentioned above, there is a reluctance to force discussion on certain topics, depending on the child. One participant replied that "If I tried to sit my kid down for 20 minutes every day and to talk to them about this stuff, it would quickly become a toxic environment." This is important to consider as it means that, while parents may be able to have a particular discussion, they are discerning with regards to when and

how often it is appropriate. While it is wise to be cautious of being heavy-handed with Jewish content with some children, help in identifying and capitalizing on these teachable moments may be needed.

Lastly, continuing the dilemma these parents have with God, spirituality, and prayer, and coinciding with the more hesitant views Reform Jews generally hold on these three topics, in these instances, parents are reluctant to give definitive answers to a child's question. Why this is differs between parents. While some parents may be unsure of their own positions, and therefore uneasy about sharing a definitive answer, others refuse to believe that such questions have definitive answers, and still others understood a personal lack of textual Jewish knowledge left them without authority when speaking on behalf of Jewish tradition. The majority of participants fell into the former two categories. For these parents, questions appear to be more important than answers.

Recommendations

For Communal Leaders, Educators, and Clergy

For many Jewish communal leaders, educators, and clergy, adult Jewish education is often an afterthought. Much attention is given to the religious school, because of the volume of students that pass through it, or the preschool, because of the revenue it generates. These institutions symbolize the ideology that education needs to be child-centered, as children are the gateway to Jewish survival and continuity, and that these children represent the most likely model for success, however that is defined. My recommendation for these professionals is to devote more attention and resources to furthering adult Jewish learning opportunities. It deserves a greater investment than it is often given. First, adult education engages its learners in Jewish institutional life, which allows for a more invested Jewish communal experience. Second, it provides a generation of Jews, who are financially and intellectually capable, with the cultural literacy needed to make the informed choices that will shape their Jewish identity and life. This cultural literacy is the foundation of Jewish life throughout the world, a foundation that many progressive Jews in the United States currently lack. Third, it is clear from my research that many adults hunger for the intellectual and spiritual challenge that high-level learning can offer. It is our responsibility to provide that opportunity for them. It is a mistake to focus all our resources on the younger generation without serving those who desire meaningful and transformative education in the older segment of our communities.

One approach that has been highlighted in this study through the example of TSBY is the family-based, community learning model. Family education models have exploded in popularity in recent years for a myriad of reasons, and it is my opinion that this surge is well founded. To begin with, these programs inherently foster a sense of community, one which can be lost in a

traditional religious school model because of the volume of students and the formal nature of classroom settings. By having families spend a significant amount of time together, learning, praying, and grappling with real-world issues, a bond is formed between them on a foundation of shared experience and mutual respect. A broad range of opinions can be brought to a conversation, which many of the interviewees in this study highly valued. Most importantly, it models lifelong learning to our younger students. By showcasing to their children that learning is a lifelong process and that Jewish life continues to involve study throughout, parents are practicing what they are asking of their children. While I understand that not every congregational school has the resources or interest to reorganize their entire education system in this manner, role modeling the importance of learning is a necessity that every institution of Jewish learning should strive to showcase. It is a matter of authenticity and moral alignment. As one parent put it, "Once you have kids, they call you on everything. They are pretty observant." As Jewish professionals, we must provide avenues for parents to exemplify this core Jewish value to their families, which will not only set positive family norms, but has the advantage of being transformative for parents as well.

Lastly, it is important for education professionals to not only consider the mode of teaching, but also to be critical of what they are teaching and why. As was mentioned above, parents are their children's first teachers, and they have an innate desire to connect with their children in a meaningful way. Because of this, parents are in a unique position to be both learners with and teachers to their children, harnessing the power of that relationship for the benefit of both parent and child. Particularly in the area of God, spirituality, and prayer, where the parents interviewed expressed a hesitation to engage and about which children are particularly curious, educators can nurture two generations simultaneously. By teaching parents

the knowledge, language, and confidence (see Curriculum Guide for a more detailed description) to engage in dialogue with their children about these content areas, educators have a rare opportunity to cultivate spiritual growth for both groups. In this type of education, questions are just as important as answers, but these questions need guidance to be fully developed. Without providing parents some direction and identifying teachable moments and how to best utilize them, these professionals are missing a key opportunity for education, community building, and meaning making.

For Future Research

This study aimed to highlight trends and points of interest in the areas of adult Jewish learning and parental interaction with their children. However, it is confined to a single congregation in Los Angeles. Similar studies should be carried out in various geographic centers, and a larger quantitative study could expand this research even further.

Furthermore, to better understand parents' opinions on adult learning and their dialogues with children, additional research may shed light on the direct effects of various types of religious school models. Comparing the models based on how they engender parental motivation for adult learning and their ramifications on parent-child dialogue would be highly valuable. The results of such research would help those educators and professionals in the field struggling with parental involvement to better understand the realities they face, particularly from the perspective of their model of Jewish education.

Connection to Curriculum Guide

In response to the above findings and my personal interest in the topic, and in fulfillment of my culminating project for the masters program in Jewish Education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, I am creating a curriculum guide that will respond to the concerns outlined above. In particular, it will address parents' discomfort with broaching the topic of spirituality through dialogue with their children. Its aim will be to give parents the knowledge, language, and confidence to engage with their children in meaningful, rich, and deep conversations regarding the unknown, the pain, and the joy of life. It is important to recognize that this project will not be a curriculum intended to teach parents to believe in God.

These goals appear ambiguous and require a small amount of explanation. By knowledge, I refer to the vibrant Jewish lenses and history through which scholars and theologians have wrestled with such topics. In my curriculum guide, parents will study together Heschel's concept of radical amazement and the value of awe, as well as Buber's understanding of relationship through I-Thou and the value of compassion. By studying and experiencing these concepts together, learners will begin with their own spirituality, in order to engage with their children's spiritual lives.

Language alludes to the fact that because one has experience with something does not mean one is proficient with articulating his or her beliefs or practices, particularly using Jewish terminology. Not only will parents study the outlined topics, but they will also organize for themselves a reference guide for future use. This will allow parents to personalize what is meaningful to them, what they think will be meaningful to their children, and how to transfer their cognitive knowledge into practice and dialogue.

The last, confidence, is the most elusive of all three, as it is not a concept that can be directly taught. Instead, parents will gain confidence in their own knowledge, through study and the validity of their own experience, to engage children about spirituality through a Jewish lens. For more information or to obtain a copy of the curriculum guide, please contact me directly at trdreier@gmail.com, or the Rhea Hirsch School of Education.

Bibliography

American Art Therapy Association. 2015. *About Us*. Available from http://www.arttherapy.org/aata-aboutus.html.

Aron, I. (2000). *Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Avi Chai. (2005). *Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today*. Wertheimer, J.

Bennett, J., et. al. (1984). *The Spiritual Hunger of the Modern Child*. Charlestown, WV: Claymont Communications.

Bryfman, D. "The Value of Jewish Learning and Living in the 21st Century." *ELI TALKS*. 13 Apr. 2013. Web. 19 June 2014.

Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Free Press.

Deitcher, H. (2013). Where is God? Critical Questions in Young Children's Lives. *Ejewish Philanthropy*. http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/where-is-god-critical-questions-in-young-childrenslives/utm_source=Thurs+July+3&utm_campaign=Thurs+July+3&utm_medium=email

Diament, A., & Kushner, K (2000). *How To Raise A Jewish Child*. New York: Schocken Books.

Dickie, J., et. al. (1997). Parent-Child Relationships and Children's Image of God. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 36* (1), 25-43.

Grant, L., & Schuster, D (September 2003). The Impact of Adult Jewish Learning in Today's Jewish Community. *UJC Renaissance and Renewal Pillar.*

Heschel, A. J. (1951). *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Young.

Horowitz, B. (2000). *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*. New York: UJA Federation of New York.

Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) (2003). *Spotlight on: Jewish Family Education*. Accessed from http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=343

Kessler, R. (2000) *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum

Development.

Kress, J. (2007). Expectations, Perceptions, and Preconceptions: How Jewish Parents Talk about "Supplementary" Religious Education. In J. Wertheimer, *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice* (143-180). Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.

Pew Research Center. 2013. *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*. Available from http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/

Prell, R. E. (2007). Family Formation, Educational Choice, and American Jewish Identity. In J. Wertheimer, *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice* (3-33). Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.

Riemer, J. (1991). Jewish Family Education: Evaluating Its Course, Look To Its Future. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. Jewish Communal Service Association of North America (JCSA), *67*(4). 269-278.

Schuster, D. (2003). *Jewish Lives, Jewish Living: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice.* New York: UAHC Press.

Schuster, D. (Summer 2003). Placing Adult Jewish Learning at the Center. *Agenda: Jewish Education*. Jewish Eduation Service of North America (JESNA), *16*. 9-13.

Wise, I. J. (2010). *Put Your Own Oxygen Mask On First, And Then Help Your Children*. Growing Challenging Times: A Roundtable on Critical Challenges and Opportunities. eJewish Philanthropy, Service of North America (JESNA). 31- 32.

Wolfson, R. (Spring 2004). Who Will Teach the Families? *Agenda: Jewish Education*. Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA)*, 17*. 24.

Woocher J. (1994). Toward A "Grand Unified Theory" of Jewish Continuity. *Jewish Education Service of North America*.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Background Questions

- Please tell me about the religiosity of your home when you were growing up.
- Before graduating college (or the age of 22), which of the following did you participate in, and for how long?
    - Jewish sleep away camp
    - Jewish day camp
    - Religious school/Hebrew school
    - Youth Group (NFTY, BBYO, USY, B'nai Brith, etc.)
    - Birthright
    - Campus Hillel
    - Jewish studies classes in college
    - An extended Israel trip (21+ days)
- Can you tell me a little about 2 or 3 moments that you felt had a really strong impact on your Jewish upbringing/education as a child, either positively or negatively?
- Is there anything else that is meaningful that you think I would like to know or would be relevant to my understanding of your Jewish upbringing?

Personal Learning Questions

- Have you ever participated in a formal, adult Jewish learning program (Melton, lectures, classes at your synagogue, etc.)?
    - If so, which one and for how long?
    - What originally made you start this program?
    - If not, why do you think that is?
- What about more informal methods of Jewish learning, such as museum visits, film festivals, or cooking classes?
    - If so, which?
    - What do you like about these informal types of learning?
- If you were to take an adult learning class, what topics would you want to learn about? (God/spirituality, Torah, prayer, living Jewishly, Israel, Life Cycle, etc.)
    - What about those topics do you find interesting?
    - How do you think you would use that knowledge? Would it be relevant/applicable to your life or just interesting to learn about?
- Is there anything else that is meaningful that you think I would like to know or would be relevant in understanding your Jewish learning as an adult?

Interactions with Your Children

- What role do you see yourself playing in your child's Jewish upbringing?
- Do you see yourself as a partner in your child's Jewish upbringing?

    - Who do you see yourself partnering with?
    - What are some examples of this partnership?
    - If not, would you like to be? How?
- Has your child ever asked you a question about Judaism that you felt unable to answer?
    - Can you tell me a little bit about that?
    - Afterward, did you reach out to anyone to learn more about what they had asked you?
    - Looking back, do you think anything could have prepared you for discussing that topic with your child?
- How would your child react if you answered their question with "I don't know, but let's find out together"?
    - How do you think that would feel?
- Do you talk to your children about God?
    - What do those conversations look like?
- How would talking to your children about their/your spirituality make you feel?
    - Why?
- How often would you say that you and your child talk about "Jewish things" outside of religious school?
    - What do those conversations sound like?
    - When do those conversations tend to happen?
    - Where do those conversations tend to happen?
    - Who initiates these conversations?
- TSBY ONLY: Tell me a little bit about how the program has been going for you?
    - In what ways has it impacted you?
    - In what ways has it impacted your children/family?
- TRADITIONAL ONLY: If you are engaged in Jewish learning, how does it impact your child?
    - If not, do you believe it would? How?
- As your child prepares for their b'nei mitzvah, have there been moments when your child has asked you for help? How did you react? (not having to do with party planning, guest lists, etc.)
    - How did you feel?
    - Did you reach out to anyone afterward and ask questions?
- Is there anything else that is meaningful that you think I would like to know or would be relevant in understanding your Jewish interactions with your child?

<u>Community in Learning Questions</u>

- Why did you choose the TSBY/traditional model for you and your children?
    - What led you to that decision/How did you decide?
- How do you feel when you interact with/are around other Jews?
- How do you feel in Jewish spaces? (synagogue, shiva call, religious school, etc.)

- What are three words that describe how you feel about your Jewish community?
- What is the role of community in Jewish education?
- Is there anything else that is meaningful that you think I would like to know or would be relevant in understanding your views on community in learning?
- Is there anything else that is meaningful that you think I would like to know or would be relevant to my research, having heard all of my questions?

Consent Form

DESCRIPTION: The researcher, Ted Dreier, wants to learn about parents' Jewish education and role in their child's Jewish upbringing. You are asked to be interviewed as part of this study. The identity of all participants will remain confidential – no names or other identifying information will be disclosed.

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT: Ted Dreier, 908-872-9375, trdreier@gmail.com, masters candidate in Jewish Nonprofit Management and Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are no risks associated with this study. Benefits include contributing to scholarship about the Jewish people and the field of Jewish education.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Interviews may involve 40 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes of your time.

PAYMENTS: There will be no payment for participation in this study.

AUDIO RECORDING: The recordings will be heard by the researcher (Ted Dreier). The recordings will remain in Ted Dreier's possession.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish – Richard Siegel, Director of the HUC-JIR School of Jewish Nonprofit Management: rsiegel@huc.edu, 3077 University Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90007, or toll-free at 800-899-0925.

Please sign and date: I give consent to be audio-recorded and interviewed for the purpose of this study, as well as to be identified, by pseudonym, in publications resulting from this research.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE_____

The extra copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Optional:
May I contact you with further questions? If so, please write your phone # or e-mail address:

PHONE #_____

E-MAIL ADDRESS_____

Thank you for participating.