

**WHAT'S AT STAKE?**  
**CHABAD EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**  
**AND SCHOOL CHOICE**

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was in high school, a Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi began visiting our campus. I attended a residential school that provided for the needs of the Jewish students through a school-sponsored Jewish Student Union. The Jewish Student Union's faculty advisor was a Reform rabbi from a neighboring town. Our meetings and services were very sparsely attended, gathering once a week for dinner in the dining room, and on Friday evenings for a brief Shabbat service in the basement of the chapel.

When the Chabad rabbi began coming to school, he brought with him kosher Chinese food. The size of his meetings steadily grew, attracting students that had never once attended a Jewish Student Union event. Soon, the administration learned about this unsanctioned alternative to the Jewish Student Union. The administration asked the rabbi to stop visiting the campus, much to the disappointment of his loyal followers.

I remember that when I was in high school, I did not entirely understand why the rabbi was not allowed to continue to hold meetings on the campus. Was it the fear that young and impressionable students would be lured to a particular type of Judaism, incapable of standing up to the temptation of kosher Chinese food? Was it because this unrecognized group posed a threat to the existing Jewish club on campus? Was it because there was something sinister about the type of Judaism that the rabbi was promoting?

When I went to college, I saw that Chabad provided an alternative to the organized Shabbat observances on campus, and my friends described the warmth of their hosts when they attended a Shabbat dinner at Chabad; they talked about how they felt so welcome, how nice it was to be in a home, with a family. Personally, I felt

skeptical towards this type of Judaism. It did not resemble the type of Judaism with which I grew up, and I was wary of their “something for nothing” model. What were they really after? Did they want me to learn to bake challah and trade in my rabbinic aspirations? And yet, in spite of my own reservations, I found myself wondering what it was that created the sense of separation that I perceived in the Jewish community. If Chabad was reaching Jewish people who wouldn’t ordinarily get involved with Jewish life, why didn’t we all celebrate their success? And if Chabad was so successful in making people feel welcome, then why weren’t we looking to them to teach us about how to do this in other parts of the Jewish world?

I first became aware of Mark Rosen’s article, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents*, when I was working as the rabbinic intern at Temple Israel in Boston. While I was working there, Rabbi Elaine Zecher was in the early stages of creating a taskforce to do outreach work in the hopes of engaging new parents. With the Rosen article informing her work, Rabbi Zecher realized that there are many parents who don’t know how to connect to our Jewish communities. She wanted to find the parents who were making choices about their children’s school in the precious few years when parents are uniquely open to engaging in Jewish life. This planted a seed for me about the importance of outreach, this time in relation to young families and first time parents.

In the last few years, I have begun to hear about another area of growth in Chabad’s approach to outreach, this time in the form of early childhood education. While every congregation I have been affiliated with or where I have worked has had a thriving early childhood program, I began learning about Chabad’s growing early childhood offerings. I spoke with a parent who had recently enrolled her child at a Chabad preschool. A liberal Jew herself, she described initially rejecting the idea of

sending her child to a Chabad preschool, but she discovered that it worked well for her family. All of her fears about feeling judged and alienated were unfounded, and her son was getting a loving introduction to Judaism, something that she deeply valued.

Early childhood education and outreach sit at a critical nexus in the Jewish world. We know that it is essential that we reach families with very young children, who are often searching for guidance and Jewish community. We know that Chabad has done successful outreach work with a variety of age cohorts. As their early childhood programs grow, they have the potential to provide a model in the work that they are doing.

As I set out to do my research, I had a few different goals. I wanted to learn more about Chabad and what motivates their unique form of outreach. I wanted to learn about why early childhood education seems to be a particularly significant field at the moment, both in the secular world and in the Jewish world. And finally, I wanted to learn what motivates families to choose Chabad's early childhood programs. I hoped that this research would help me to understand how families make choices about their young children, and how the institutions where I will work can emulate Chabad's success.

I believe in the benefit of strong, pluralistic Jewish communities. I want to work in Jewish institutions that do not feel threatened by others' success. And, in learning from each other, I hope to strive for excellence in all facets of our congregations. With these larger goals in mind, the early childhood center seems like a pretty good place to start.

## CHAPTER ONE

### An Introduction to Chabad

*This chapter will provide an introduction to Chabad-Lubavitch. It will offer a short overview of their history and ideology, as well as insight into what motivates Chabad-Lubavitch's unique form of outreach. Finally, I will describe their approach to education both within their own community and in the Jewish world at large.*

When Menachem Mendel Schneerson ascended to his position as the seventh and most recent Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch in 1951, he used his first teaching as an opportunity to communicate his understanding of Chabad's mission. He explained:

“We are now very near the approaching footsteps of *Mashiach*, indeed, we are at the conclusion of this period, and our spiritual task is to complete the process of drawing down the *Shechinah* -- moreover, the essence of the *Shechinah* -- within specifically our lowly world.”<sup>1</sup>

Couched in an exposition of Jewish text, Menachem Mendel Schneerson laid out the ultimate task of Chabad-Lubavitch Jews. Schneerson assumed this position in a world mired in spiritual crisis, a world in which unbelievable atrocities had just been committed against Jews in Europe. It was a world in which many had or were in the process of straying far from Jewish teaching. Schneerson's vision took shape through the early years of his leadership. He asserted that Chabad's unique task was to transform the world into a suitable dwelling place for God. Rather than engage in the battle for Hasidic souls that was happening in Brooklyn, Chabad would go beyond its own community and bring *mitzvot* to the world. The successful achievement of this mission would do nothing short of bringing the messiah. This sacred mission has formed the cornerstone of Chabad-Lubavitch's work around the world and motivated their unique form of outreach to all Jews, living everywhere from midtown-Manhattan to the furthest reaches of the globe.

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<sup>1</sup>"Basi Legani (5711): Chapter 3," Texts & Writings, accessed October 02, 2012, [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/115098/jewish/Chapter-3.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/115098/jewish/Chapter-3.htm).

Chabad-Lubavitch began in 18<sup>th</sup> century Poland with the birth of Hasidism. Started by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, or the Baal Shem Tov, (often abbreviated as the Besht) Hasidism opened up new forms of Jewish practice and spiritual connection to God that became particularly popular among poor and uneducated Jews who had been excluded from the extremely hierarchical form of Judaism being practiced in their communities. In opposition to the norm that the most authentic Jewish practice was the domain of the scholarly, the Besht emphasized *davekut* -- a clinging of the soul to God, and the primacy of prayer over Torah learning.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Dov Ber, also called the Maggid of Mezeritch, succeeded the Besht as the leader of this movement. After the Maggid of Mezeritch's death, questions of succession and geographic distribution led the Hasidic community to split apart and many different sects emerged. One of them was Lubavitch Hasidism, founded by Schneur Zalman. Zalman's approach integrated Jewish scholarship with the cleaving to God that was characteristic in Hasidism.<sup>3</sup> His learning was deeply influenced by Lurianic Kabbalah and Hasidic tradition, as taught by the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch.<sup>4</sup> While much of Hasidism prioritized experiential Judaism (in particular ecstatic prayer) over scholarship, Zalman fused both as evidenced by the acronym used to describe this sect – Chabad --, taken from the first letters of the Hebrew words: *Chochmah* (wisdom) *binah* (comprehension) and *da'at* (knowledge). Chabad's own literature explains, "The Baal Shem Tov taught, 'God wants the heart.' Chabad teaches that you can reach the heart through the mind—through questioning,

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA in Association with the Keter Pub. House, 2007), s.v. "Israel Ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov."

<sup>3</sup> Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA in Association with the Keter Pub. House, 2007), s.v. "Chabad."



through meditation and deep contemplation, and through reframing your concept of the world.”<sup>5</sup> *Ahavat Yisrael*, or “love of all Jews,” has also always been a primary component of Lubavitch tradition.

Hasidic Jews began to arrive in America in the 1880s, but the majority came to the United States in the aftermath of World War II. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, arrived in New York in 1940. In their early years in the United States, Chabad-Lubavitch consisted of a very small community in the United States, primarily concentrated in the neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn. In the years following the Second World War, the future of Chabad looked bleak. Their numbers were small and Nazi and Soviet persecution had decimated their community.<sup>6</sup> While many Hasidic sects initially settled in Crown Heights, most moved to other neighborhoods in Brooklyn during the turbulent and often violent 1960s. In the face of the “white-flight” that occurred in that period, Schneerson encouraged his community to remain where there were, which created an enclave for the Chabad community that remains intact today.

*Ahavat Yisrael* has long characterized Chabad. The fifth Rebbe, Shalom DovBer, was the first to use the model of *shlichim*, also known as outreach emissaries. The sixth Rebbe was the first to send *shlichim* abroad with the express mission of bringing Judaism to places where Jewish people lacked Jewish resources. Schneerson, the seventh Rebbe, took an even more aggressive approach to outreach, seeing Chabad’s “primary target as nonreligious Jews with minimal Jewish education.”<sup>7</sup> The Rebbe first introduced his policy of *Uforatzto* (which means, “you

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<sup>5</sup> "What Is Chabad?," Frequently Asked Questions, accessed October 2, 2012, [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/776104/jewish/FAQ.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/776104/jewish/FAQ.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 4.

shall break out”) in 1958.<sup>8</sup> This vision included the philosophical and Jewish textual underpinnings for Chabad’s global outreach efforts.

The Rebbe presented a new notion of how traditional Jews can live in community. He taught that “observant Jews could be surrounded by unbelievers and the unobservant but would change the environment rather than assimilating into it.”<sup>9</sup> The best way of meet the modern world was not to shy away from it, but rather to confront it. Sending young men and women out to Jewish communities around the world would enable Chabad to meet people where they lived and studied. The Rebbe imagined a new path for Chabad and in so doing imbued the movement with new energy. In an address in 1972, the Rebbe put outreach at the top of Chabad’s agenda challenging his followers to dramatically increase the number of Chabad outposts in the coming years.<sup>10</sup> He capitalized on the conditions in the United States and abroad that enabled a new model of outreach. The growing ease of travel, an emerging comfort with public displays of Judaism and the enormous numbers of culturally aware yet disconnected Jews allowed Chabad to spread their message throughout the world. Over time, these representatives would infiltrate communities, bringing tastes of traditional Judaism and making performing *mitzvot* more accessible. “The *shluchim* would try to convince them to change, to become like them; but until the change came, they would accept them as they were.”<sup>11</sup>

Rabbi Schneerson quickly realized that this outreach model would be most successful when couples were sent together on these missions, something that had a significant impact on education for girls. Women had always been educated in Chabad, starting during the community’s earliest years in Brooklyn. As *shelichut*

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<sup>8</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 157.

<sup>9</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 159.

<sup>10</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 173.

became a greater part of Chabad's mission, women received more training in education. This enabled them to play key roles in the opportunities provided by a Chabad House, and trained them for the teaching that was often an essential role for *shlichim*. The importance of having women among the *shlichim* has led to the development of an annual women's *shaliach* conference where they share strategies and learn outreach techniques that complements an annual conference for men.

In spite of the hardships of traveling far from home, and building and sustaining a Jewish community, within Chabad, serving as a *shaliach* is seen as prestigious honor.<sup>12</sup> *Shlichim* are often sent out with minimal funding, or with an initial fundraising goal within the Chabad community and are then tasked with building a community in their new location and personally finding the funds to sustain it.<sup>13</sup> Part of Chabad's success relies on offering Jewish programming at little or no cost, and then doing separate fundraising to cover their expenses. Around 100 new couples have gone on *shelichut* each year since the Rebbe's death in 1994. As the network of Chabad houses continues to grow, not every couple must start from scratch as they had in the past. Now many young couples are sent to existing Chabad houses to provide support for already successful operations.<sup>14</sup> Chabad's emphasis on technology and publishing have enabled greater collaboration and resource sharing among *shlichim* in remote places. There is a growing move to standardization in many educational aspects of their work as well as in web development and publications.<sup>15</sup>

Schneerson used a parable to illustrate his understanding of Chabad's role in the Jewish world.

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<sup>12</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army*, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 259.

“In the old days there was a person in every town who would light the street lamps with a flame he carried at the end of a long pole. On the street corners, the lamps waited to be lit. Sometimes, however, the lamps were not as easily accessible....[T]here were lamps in forsaken places. Someone had to light even those lamps so that they would fulfill their purpose and light up the paths of others. Today too, someone must be willing to forgo his or her conveniences and reach out to light the forsaken lamps.”<sup>16</sup>

Chabad has sought to illuminate this darkness in a variety of different ways, primarily by focusing their outreach efforts on facilitating individuals' participation in mitzvot. They achieve this through the public campaigns. Large-scale menorah lightings in public spaces are often held in major cities around the world. Chabad also works to reach out to the individual stranger, as a traditionally dressed Jewish male will ask, “Are you Jewish?” before trying to get a passerby to shake the *lulav* or put on *tefillin*. According to Chabad's own literature, this campaign simply provides a stepping-stone, saying, “For countless individuals and families, that mitzvah in-the-street was the first step on the road to an intensified identification with Jewishness, with Jewish education and Jewish observance.”<sup>17</sup> Though many are familiar with these very public campaigns, education has also been an avenue that has enabled Chabad to reach out to less observant and secular Jews in a more sustained and intentional manner.

In 1940, Chabad established their first Yeshiva in Brooklyn. It quickly began attracting a combination of Chabad and non-Hasidic students. Two years later, Beth Rivka opened its doors to Hasidic girls. In addition to addressing the educational needs of the Jewish residents of Brooklyn, the sixth Rebbe quickly recognized the lack of serious Jewish educational opportunities throughout the United States. He was an early advocate of Jewish Day Schools and was soon sending yeshiva students to

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<sup>16</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 157.

<sup>17</sup>“The Campaigns for Mitzvot and Holiday Observance,” About Chabad-Lubavitch, accessed October 04, 2012, [http://beta.chabad.org/global/about/article\\_cdo/aid/244375/jewish/The-Campaigns.htm](http://beta.chabad.org/global/about/article_cdo/aid/244375/jewish/The-Campaigns.htm).

schools throughout New York, Connecticut and New Jersey to teach Jewish studies. Ultimately, this led to the establishment of a network of Chabad-Lubavitch schools, designed to educate primarily non-Lubavitch students. These schools provided students with rigorous Jewish education and played a more sustained role in bringing students and their families closer to a life of mitzvot. According to Lubavitcher reports, “As of 2007, [Chabad schools] had served more than 71,000 students, who were enrolled in about 630 Chabad-Lubavitch schools throughout the world.”<sup>18</sup>

A significant number of Jewish day schools in the United States continue to be run by Chabad. Furthermore, the recent growth in the number of Jewish day schools in the United States can largely be attributed to growth in Chabad’s school network. In 1998, a study sponsored by the Avi Chai foundation found that there were 44 Chabad schools in the United States. By 2008, that number had risen to 73. The report also shows that by 2008, there were 12,296 students enrolled in Chabad schools in the United States.<sup>19</sup> While Chabad was initially focused on establishing Jewish Day Schools in North America, Schneerson spent much of his early years as Rebbe encouraging *shlichut* as opposed to the establishment of more day schools; it was during this period that the number of non-Orthodox day schools grew. In response to this lack of Jewish educational options that *shlichim* found when they moved to more remote parts of the United States, there was a renewed interest in establishing day schools in the final years that Schneerson served as the Rebbe.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth noting that the Jewish schools established by Chabad do not necessarily meet their rigorous educational expectations for their own children. While their own children may attend Chabad preschool or primary school, by the time they

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<sup>18</sup> Heilman and Friedman, *The Rebbe*, 258.

<sup>19</sup> Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States: 2008-2009*, report (Avi Chai Foundation, 2009), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States: 2008-2009*, 14.

reach high school they are expected to learn in a more intensive environment. Families that are doing *shelichut* in remote areas are likely to send their children back to Brooklyn to be educated in the heart of the Chabad community.<sup>21</sup> This points to an ideological difference that exists between those for whom Chabad is a way of life, and the majority of the people with whom they interact. Susan Fishkoff writes, “The Chabad *shaliach* is non-judgmental and welcoming toward other Jews, while maintaining his own, ‘authentic’ credentials through strict adherence to Jewish law.”<sup>22</sup> For many, this distance is not problematic, and the perceived authenticity of Jewish experiences in a traditional environment is seen as an advantage to Chabad education.

In general, the Orthodox Jewish community in America has grown, and the Lubavitch community has exploded since Yitzchak Schneerson’s arrival in the US. According to Chabad’s website, “Today 4,000 full-time emissary families apply 250-year-old principles and philosophy to direct more than 3,300 institutions (and a workforce that numbers in the tens of thousands) dedicated to the welfare of the Jewish people worldwide.”<sup>23</sup> This widespread outreach to the Jewish people continues to be motivated by a belief that their work will hasten the coming of the Messiah. From the Chabad *shaliach*’s perspective, Rabbi Paul Steinberg writes, “putting on *tefillin* in the street, eating a kosher meal, or spending a Shabbat at a Chabad house just one time and never doing it again is an act that has the power to tip the celestial scales.”<sup>24</sup> Schneerson used this to energize the *shlichim*, explaining the potential

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<sup>21</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 243.

<sup>22</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 124.

<sup>23</sup> "About Chabad-Lubavitch," accessed October 5, 2012, [http://www.chabad.org/global/about/article\\_cdo/aid/36226/jewish/About-Chabad-Lubavitch.htm](http://www.chabad.org/global/about/article_cdo/aid/36226/jewish/About-Chabad-Lubavitch.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Steinberg, "What Can We Really Learn From Chabad: A Conservative Perspective," EJewish Philanthropy Your Jewish Philanthropy Resource, August 27, 2012, accessed October 08, 2012, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-can-we-really-learn-from-chabad-a-conservative-perspective/>.

impact of their work by saying, “Only through action can the Hasid make manifest the godly spark inherent in every aspect of mundane reality. The entire universe is interconnected, and every deed, good and bad, has cosmic repercussions.”<sup>25</sup>

On June 12, 1994, Rabbi Schneerson died at age 92. With his messianic promise a cornerstone of Chabad’s mission of outreach, and the widespread belief that he was the messiah, the Rebbe’s death represented a crossroads for Chabad-Lubavitch. Remarkably, “Most Chabad *shlichim* reacted to the Rebbe’s death by doubling their outreach efforts, drowning their grief in work, and trying to fulfill the mission their Rebbe has left them.”<sup>26</sup> There were murmurings throughout the Rebbe’s life that he was the messiah, even though in the earlier part of his life, he attempted to quell this notion. After a stroke in 1992, he could no longer address these claims, and the rumors began to capture more and more believers.<sup>27</sup> While there had been growing distance between those who believed that Schneerson was the messiah and those who did not, his death ushered in a new period that furthered that divide.

With the future of the Chabad in flux, Chabad institutions favored the notion of Schneerson’s posthumous leadership. Regardless of whether or not they believe he is the messiah, most accept the continued centrality of the last Rebbe.<sup>28</sup> This is primarily an ideological centrality, as the management component of the Rebbe’s role is now achieved by a governing body, with representation from Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch (Chabad’s educational arm), Machne Israel (Chabad’s social services arm), and Agudas Chassidei Chabad (the organization that encompasses the other two).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 98.

<sup>26</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 269.

<sup>27</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 264, 265.

<sup>28</sup> M. Avrum Ehrlich, *The Messiah of Brooklyn: Understanding Lubavitch Hasidism past and Present* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2004), 222.

<sup>29</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 262.

The divide between the messianists and the non-messianists still holds today. The messianists believe that Schneerson will be resurrected as the messiah or that Schneerson did not actually die. Their strongly held messianism has, in many cases, propelled them to extreme commitments to Chabad-Lubavitch. They have sought to discredit the non-messianists, and at times the conflict has reached beyond the boundaries of the Chabad community.<sup>30</sup> For now, the question of succession remains a controversial one. While Chasidism has long been built around the model of a single charismatic leader, avoiding naming a successor to Rabbi Schneerson has allowed different understandings of his mortality to persist within the movement.<sup>31</sup>

Even with this internal divide, the outreach that characterizes Chabad continues to extend to the farthest reaches of the world, with Chabad outposts in Brazil, Belgium, and Belarus. But their mission also provides bountiful work for *shlichim* right in the heart of the United States' most populous cities and those with the largest Jewish populations. For Chabad, the mission to ignite the spark in each Jewish individual continues to prompt tremendous outreach within our own Jewish communities, often attracting Jews who are disconnected, disenfranchised or disinterested in formal Jewish institutional life. Entrepreneurial young *shlichim* have combined their *ahavat yisrael* with strong, centralized, support from Chabad institutions in order to create Jewish programming and resources for Jews of all ages and stages of life. Early childhood education has become a perfect integration of Chabad's outreach mission and its emphasis on education. Chabad reaches out to young families through warm and welcoming, intensely Jewish early childhood educational environments, and introduces the youngest members of the Jewish community to the Chabad model and, by extension, their families. As you will see

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<sup>30</sup> Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army*, 270.

<sup>31</sup> Ehrlich, *The Messiah of Brooklyn*, 227, 228.



later in this thesis, their creativity, accessibility and warmth have led diverse Jewish families to take advantage of Chabad's educational offerings.

## CHAPTER TWO

### What's at Stake?

*This chapter will explore why Jewish preschool matters, beginning by looking at the research and innovation that has occurred in early childhood education, both in the secular and the Jewish world. It will then discuss research about the significance of Jewish early childhood both for the child, and in terms of family engagement. Finally it will explore how Chabad has grown their early childhood programming.*

In both the secular and the Jewish world, our understanding of the importance of high quality early childhood education has evolved in the last century. Once an age cohort whose educational needs rarely fell at the top of the priority list, young children have become the focus of a great deal of research and funding both within the secular and in the Jewish world.

#### *Secular Early Childhood*

While the first nursery school opened in London in 1910, there was already a move toward educating young children in Europe prior to that time. Rachel and Margaret MacMilan initially opened the first nursery school as a health clinic, and later converted it into a nursery school for poor children. Rather than academic readiness, they focused on, “secular social values and focused on the development of self-care, individual responsibility, and educational readiness skills.”<sup>32</sup> Around the same time, Maria Montessori opened a nursery school in a poor neighborhood in Rome. Having worked with children with mental retardation, she adapted her methods to work with a more diverse population of young children. She emphasized, “individualized self-teaching by children within a carefully prepared classroom environment.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel J. Meisels and Jack P. Shonkoff, "Early Childhood Intervention: A Continuing Evolution," in *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Meisels and Shonkoff, "Early Childhood Intervention: A Continuing Evolution," 5.

By 1907, Montessori's philosophy arrived in the United States. She visited America in 1914, and spoke to many eager audiences of mothers who were seeking to play a role in their children's early development. Montessori spoke about "procedure related to etiquette, standards of behavior, acts of kindness, common units of measurement and basic mathematics...She explained to women that every home had simple objects that could demonstrate essential knowledge and concepts to a child."<sup>34</sup> Soon, her philosophy was being taught to teachers at training centers around the world. An early advocate of inclusion, Montessori believed that students of different abilities could be educated together. Montessori also pioneered the design of child-sized furniture that enabled students to set the table, and clean up after meals.

There are two simultaneous stories to be told about the development of early childhood opportunities in the United States. Both the Depression and World War II led to an increase in the number of government subsidized daycare programs for young children. First, the Works Progress Administration subsidized programs that put unemployed teachers back to work in schools and provided the first public childcare programs in the United States. This period of investment in education led to greater opportunities for teacher training. Secondly, nursery schools were now seen as a form of childcare for families with two working parents. These public programs were designed to serve poor families.

The war increased the number of women working outside of the home, and nursery school remained a priority, providing a childcare option, and enabling women to participate in the war effort. The Lanham Act, which was in effect from 1941 to 1945, provided funding for neighborhood centers and staff to care for young children. Parents made a small contribution, but the majority of these centers were located in

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<sup>34</sup> Meisels and Shonkoff, "Early Childhood Intervention: A Continuing Evolution," 5.

public schools.<sup>35</sup> These government subsidies dropped off after the war, as many women returned home to raise their families.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, nursery schools appealed to middle class Americans, and served as “forums for the exchange of child-rearing advice and places where researchers and educators could study and foster children’s social and emotional enrichment.”<sup>37</sup> With less need for simple childcare, the emergence of nursery school also became recognized as a form of enrichment. In 1919, the first public nursery school was established in New York. It was founded by Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Harriet Johnson, who were also involved in the founding of Bank Street College, which was dedicated to training early childhood educators. Columbia University and the Merrill Palmer Institute in Detroit, Michigan started their nursery school programs in 1922.<sup>38</sup> Nursery schools began to take hold in the United States in the 1920s, and by the early 1930s there were around 200 nursery schools, many of which were associated with major universities. In 1924, Patty Smith Hill, who ran the nursery school at Columbia University, invited early childhood professionals from around the country to a conference at Columbia. Along with Abigail Eliot, who founded a nursery school in Boston, they took steps toward professionalizing the field, and established the National Committee on Nursery Schools, now called National Association for the Education of Young Children.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Harry Morgan, *Early Childhood Education: History, Theory and Practice* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>36</sup> Meisels and Shonkoff, "Early Childhood Intervention: A Continuing Evolution," 5, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Johnna Darragh, *Introduction to Early Childhood Education: Equity and Inclusion* (Boston: Pearson, 2010), 23.

<sup>38</sup> Morgan, *Early Childhood Education: History, Theory and Practice*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>39</sup> Darragh, *Introduction to Early Childhood Education: Equity and Inclusion*, 25.

The 1960s saw an emergence of social activism, and with it a renewed interest in early childhood education. Parent groups formed to petition for federal support for local early childhood opportunities and greater investments in educational equality in America. Concerns about the cycle of poverty also emerged, and government initiatives worked to combat this vicious cycle. In 1965, the US government established Head Start as way of supporting low-income families. Head Start began as an eight-week summer program that worked to provide early childhood education, food and medical services to poor families. Thanks to the government investment in early childhood, there became a greater interest in accountability and assessment, leading to an increase in research focused specifically on early childhood development and education.

Further research conducted in the 1980s brought a new lens to early childhood education. New neurological research demonstrated that brain function could be impacted by experiences for even younger children, beginning in the womb. Given the importance of these earliest years, the low quality of education experiences for children between the ages of birth and three were particularly alarming. In 1995, Head Start expanded the program to include infants and toddlers, as well as expectant mothers. Head Start remains a powerful tool in helping low income families to access the early childhood education that has the potential to significantly impact their child's life.<sup>40</sup>

The United States as a whole has continued to be attuned to the learning potential in young children and the enduring impact of positive experiences with early childhood education. The Goals 2000 Initiative was enacted under President Clinton and reflected these priorities, as a major goal of this far-reaching initiative was

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<sup>40</sup> "History of Head Start," Office of Head Start, About, accessed March 7, 2013, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/history-of-head-start>.

“school readiness.” More specifically the proposal states that “[b]y the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.” This recognizes that access to early childhood opportunities has the potential to influence a student’s preparedness for school as they mature, and that early childhood education must be accessible to all, regardless of their family’s ability to pay for it. The initiative also says that in order for this goal to become a reality, “all children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.”<sup>41</sup>

President Barack Obama made early childhood education an explicit part of his State of the Union address in February 2013, focusing the spotlight yet again on the youngest children in our educational system. He said: “Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But today, fewer than three in ten four year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program. Most middle-class parents can’t afford a few hundred bucks a week for private preschool. And for poor kids who need help the most, this lack of access to preschool education can shadow them for the rest of their lives...Tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America.”<sup>42</sup> While many wonder how an ambitious program like this will be paid for, its mention in one of the most watched presidential speeches of the year demonstrates the current White Houses commitment to early childhood education in the United States.

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<sup>41</sup> "Archived: SEC. 102. Nation Education Goals.," Archived: SEC. 102. National Education Goals., accessed February 12, 2013, <http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/GOALS2000/TheAct/sec102.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Barack Obama, "State of the Union" (speech, Washington DC, February 12, 2013), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

### *Jewish Early Childhood*

The first Jewish school with an early childhood component was established in 1940. Israel Chipkin, with the support of New York's Jewish Education Committee, conceived of Beth HaYeled, a Jewish foundation school that included both early childhood and early elementary in a richly Jewish environment. Beth HaYeled, "immersed youngsters in a bilingual, bicultural environment until third grade."<sup>43</sup> It was a trend-setting school -- by the early 1950s there were hundreds of Jewish preschools throughout the United States.<sup>44</sup>

The rapid increase in the number of preschools during the 1950s also reflected the growth of the suburban synagogue and the emerging emphasis on youth in Jewish life. In the years that followed World War Two, there was a shift in the priorities of the Jewish community. There was a commitment to having children and repopulating the Jewish world. Children and their role as the future of Judaism became the focus of Jewish life.<sup>45</sup> As suburban synagogue buildings grew to sprawling campuses, early childhood centers became a major component of synagogue life and preschools became a critical part of many synagogues' operating budgets.<sup>46</sup>

The Jewish community has more recently recognized the importance of excellence in early childhood education. In 2001, a group of philanthropists created the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership (JECEP) in order to learn more about early childhood education. JECEP was funded by The Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, The

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<sup>43</sup> Jonathan B. Krasner, *The Benderly Boys & American Jewish Education* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 401.

<sup>44</sup> Krasner, *The Benderly Boys & American Jewish Education*, 402.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Generation Three: Suburbs and Survival | Synagogue 3000," Synagogue 3000, Spirituality, accessed March 03, 2013, <http://www.synagogue3000.org/generation-three-suburbs-and-survival>.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Poltarak and Susan Topek, interview by author, November 19, 2012.

Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, Jim Joseph Foundation, Ben and Esther Rosenbloom Foundation, Inc. and Temma Kingsley.<sup>47</sup> This collaboration was meant to create, “a short-term partnership charged with placing Jewish early childhood education on the national agenda within 18 months of its inception.”<sup>48</sup> This group of funders established a center for Jewish early childhood work at the Early Childhood Department under the auspices of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE). CAJE partnered with Tufts University’s Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development in order to determine the measures of “quality” early childhood education. This research partnership spawned some major initiatives in the field of Jewish early childhood education, including the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI), a new Jewish Child Development Associates degree, and partnership with educational opportunities that concentrate on building skills around Jewish early childhood education.<sup>49</sup>

In 2002, *Contact*, a publication of the Jewish Life Network, which is a part of the Steinhardt foundation, dedicated an entire issue to early childhood education, intended to serve as a call to action. In Ilene Vogelstein’s opening piece, she writes, “Jewish early childhood education programs receive little attention or in the majority of Jewish communities across the country. This neglect has created a crisis in Jewish early childhood education.”<sup>50</sup> She identifies some key challenges that faced early childhood education at that time, all of which remain today in some form or another. For example, she identifies the potential for direct competition with free public early

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<sup>47</sup> Pearl Beck, *Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life: A Survey of Jewish Preschool Parents in Three Cities*, report (Ukeles Associates, 2002), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Ilene G. Vogelstein, "Nurturing the Next Generations," *Contact* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 3.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Ben-Avie et al., "Early Childhood Education," in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, by Helena Miller, Lisa D. Grant, and Alex Pomson (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 753.

<sup>50</sup> Vogelstein, "Nurturing the Next Generations," 3.



childhood programs as a key challenge. She also cites the decline in Jewish early childhood enrollment. Finally, she points to a “crisis in personnel” -- low pay and a lack of benefits for early childhood teachers will scare away all but the most committed. In addition, one-third of early childhood staff is not Jewish, and many who are Jewish have an extremely limited Jewish education. This inhibits their ability to fully integrate Judaism into the fabric of the early childhood environment. With all of these challenges, Vogelstein emphasizes the importance of investing in excellence in Jewish early childhood education. She calls upon the Jewish community to clarify the guidelines and measures of success in the field and to further professionalize the work of the early childhood educator.

In many ways, the founding of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative or JECEI was a response to Vogelstein’s challenge. The Steinhardt Foundation served as a lead funder of JECEI. The initiative was established in 2004 with the intention of creating excellence in Jewish early childhood education, and using their research and their standards of excellence as a tool to inspire greater Jewish engagement through the youngest members of our community. Understanding that the majority of parents of Jewish children prioritize excellent education over Jewish content, this organization believed that working to improve the overall quality of early childhood schools would encourage greater participation in available Jewish early childhood options.<sup>51</sup>

JECEI intended to reward deserving schools with JECEI accreditation, helping to lead schools through a process by which they would achieve the excellence necessary to merit this distinction. Integrating the Reggio Emilia model and five core principles, JECEI created a very thorough set of benchmarks that would make it

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<sup>51</sup> "History," JECEI - Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative, About Us, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.jecei.org/history.php>.

possible to evaluate if a school could truly be deemed “excellent” by their standards. The five principles are: relationships, vision, learning community, shared leadership, and environment. Included in those principles is a strong emphasis on engaging community families in addition to their children. Jewish learning and experiences are located at the core to each of these principals. The Reggio Emilia educational philosophy is woven through the enactment of all of these principles.

Named after a city in Northern Italy that began building early childhood centers in the wake of World War Two, the Reggio Emilia Style was championed by JECEI and has subsequently been embraced by many early childhood centers. Reggio Emilia schools were built out of a commitment to teach young children respect and collaboration in the hopes of avoiding the type of conflict that had just ravaged Europe.<sup>52</sup>

While the Reggio Emilia style shares some methodology with Montessori, the former has a distinct philosophy about how exactly children learn. In an article on the integration of Reggio Emilia and Jewish early childhood education, Ann Lewin-Benham writes, “Reggio educators recognize children’s rights: to have a voice in what goes on around them, to be in beautiful environments, to work in small groups and to use tools and materials of professional quality.”<sup>53</sup> The intention of this model is to allow students’ natural inquisitiveness and curiosity to drive their learning, rather than trying to force them to conform to one learning style and curriculum. The style also relies on intense family involvement in their child’s education, which occurs through parents contributing artifacts and objects to be used in the classroom, a high degree of intentionality regarding parent-teacher communication, and opportunities for

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<sup>52</sup> Ann Lewin-Benham, "What We Can Learn From Reggio Emilia," *Contact* 11, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 11.

<sup>53</sup> Lewin-Benham, "What We Can Learn From Reggio Emilia," 11.

parents to be present in the classroom. There is also a great deal of emphasis on documentation, tracking students' growth through comprehensive portfolios with explanations of how the students went about doing their work. The family integration in learning is one of the chief reasons that Reggio Emilia was chosen to complement and support the JECEI standards of excellence. Reggio Emilia provides the overarching philosophy, and easily integrates with Jewish content in a way that harmonizes the values of both the educational philosophy and the religion.<sup>54</sup>

In some ways, the trajectory of JECEI is emblematic of the current moment in Jewish Early Childhood Education. JECEI stopped the bulk of its work in 2011, but maintains its website with the standards of excellence that it promoted and many of the resources that it developed. As the recession changed the priorities of many people in the Jewish community, unfortunately JECEI's program became unsustainable. Their accreditation process required schools and their sponsoring institutions to make a significant investment of both money and time. Schools were not able to afford the expensive accreditation process and the model didn't seem to reflect the most pressing needs of many communities. Still, many schools that were engaged in the process of JECEI accreditation still refer to the distinction of being associated with the initiative<sup>55</sup>. Additionally, CAJE, once the home of the Early Childhood Department that spawned so much innovation, closed its doors in 2009.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Rose Garrett, "What Is Reggio Emilia?," Education.com, Preschool Choices, accessed March 6, 2013, [http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Reggio\\_Emilia/](http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Reggio_Emilia/).

<sup>55</sup> In the Colorado Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative Progress Report from Summer 2012, they include a timeline of their work to re-think their early childhood work. In 2011 they write, "National JECEI folds, but Colorado Jewish ECE Initiative works continues." Steven Wise Free Synagogue also mentions their JECEI accreditation on their early childhood webpage.

<sup>57</sup> The bulk of my research is based on New York City where there is free pre-kindergarten available by application. Among parents, when cost is mentioned as a motivation towards Chabad, no one cited free pre-k as an option that they considered.

The years of plenty that gave rise to some of the most exciting innovations in early childhood education have ended, and with that, institutions that were supporting excellence in Jewish education have closed.

An additional challenge for Jewish early childhood education today is the nation's investment in early childhood education. The Goals 2000 initiative has helped spark a movement to create universal pre-kindergarten options, meaning that all students would be eligible for public pre-kindergarten education. While this creates great opportunities for families who may not be able to afford the high cost of early childhood education, it's a development that has created some concern in the Jewish world, as it is expected that many families will now forego the expense of Jewish preschools.<sup>57</sup> As The International Handbook of Jewish Education states, "Up until recently, we could have expected natural growth to occur in Jewish Early Childhood Education as more and more school communities learned about the learning and development outcomes among young children...With the introduction of universal pre-k, this natural growth is not assured."<sup>58</sup>

Over the last decades, we have gained a tremendous amount of information about the potential of Jewish early childhood education in our communities, both in terms of education and in regards to engaging young families. The potential impact of excellent early childhood education in the Jewish world is twofold. The first is the general import of quality early childhood education. Research shows that this is a formative time in a young child's brain development. Thus, it is a critical moment for educating a child, particularly when it comes to creating the foundation for a strong

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when making a school choice.

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/PreK/default.htm>)

<sup>58</sup> Michael Ben-Avie et al., "Early Childhood Education," 751.

Jewish identity. Second, studies have shown that one of the best ways of reaching out to Jewish families is through early childhood education. Reaching families with very young children often provides a gateway in, and leads to a family's continued engagement in the Jewish community.

### *Research*

There is a significant amount of research that demonstrates the importance of high quality early childhood education for the child. Ilene Vogelstein's article in *What We Now Know About Jewish Education* explains that research on brain development supports the importance of early exposure to Jewish learning. She writes, "Brain development is now understood to be a complex interaction between genetically times periods of development (critical periods) and appropriate sensory experiences."<sup>59</sup> Essentially, there are windows of time when the brain is susceptible to a particular kind of learning. Vogelstein uses perfect pitch as an example -- if a learner is musical and exposed to the right experiences at the right time, they may be taught perfect pitch. If they are not, the moment may pass and they will never be able to learn this skill. This has bearing on Jewish education because, as Vogelstein writes, "the brain is literally molded by experiences."<sup>60</sup> As she writes in another article on the topic, "The early years of life are when children develop their sense of identity...this is the ideal time to lay a foundation of Jewish values."<sup>61</sup> Mark Rosen of the Cohen Center at Brandeis University adds, "Observational learning is one of the primary ways that

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<sup>59</sup> Ilene Vogelstein, "Early Childhood Education- 'If Not Now, When?'" in *What We Now Know about Jewish Education: Perspectives on Research for Practice*, by Roberta Louis. Goodman, Paul A. Flexner, and Linda Dale. Bloomberg (Los Angeles, CA: Torah Aura Productions, 2008), 373.

<sup>60</sup> Vogelstein, "Early Childhood Education- 'If Not Now, When?'" 373.

<sup>61</sup> Ilene G. Vogelstein, "Nurturing the Next Generations," *Contact* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 3.

identity is formed. Thus, since babies demonstrate learning as early as three months of age, it is conceivable that Jewish identity can also be acquired as a very early age.”<sup>62</sup>

Vogelstein also mentions that brain development occurs through human relationships. Child rearing in the early years impacts a child’s future confidence and social relationships. Though the parents are certainly the most important relationship in a young child’s life, teachers and other caretakers are also instrumental in a child’s early development.<sup>63</sup> The experiences and relationships that occur in a child’s early years, greatly impact that child’s future. There seems to be no doubt that early childhood education is important for a child’s formation as a learner, and Jewish early childhood education is also important for a child’s formation as a Jew.

Early childhood education provides the Jewish community with a window of opportunity to reach out to families in a way that is almost unparalleled in the rest of the lifecycle. If you speak with nearly anyone in Jewish early childhood education, they are quick to invoke “The Rosen Study.” In November 2006, Mark Rosen published a study entitled “Jewish Engagement From Birth.” The study analyzes ten Jewish communities that have created successful early childhood programming around the country. In particular, the research strongly focuses on, “how these communities find parents who are not connected to the community, and describes the programs they offer to help these parents make connections.”<sup>64</sup> While this is certainly not the first exploration of this kind, the findings are stark and instructive for all who work with the Jewish early childhood population.

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<sup>62</sup> Mark I. Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents*, publication (Waltham: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2006), 37.

<sup>63</sup> Vogelstein, "Early Childhood Education- "If Not Now, When?"" 374.

<sup>64</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents*, 5.

Rosen argues that the time is ripe to engage young families in early childhood Jewish education, though the work, at present, is not well coordinated. He writes, “new parents are looking for support and connections; unengaged parents are receptive to overtures from the community.”<sup>65</sup> The study notes that new parents often make school and childcare decisions with an eye towards what their friends are doing. Rosen writes, “Peer relationships have a strong influence on engagement.”<sup>66</sup> As an outcome of this, unengaged parents are unlikely to choose Jewish preschools. Jewish content is not a priority, and their preschool decisions are made with convenience as the primary motivator.

Unfortunately, while many new parents seem to be open to Jewish education at this point in their lives, lack of coordination and investment have made it difficult for this type of programming to succeed. Rosen reports, “Programs are offered by many different agencies and organizations; efforts are uncoordinated both within and across communities.”<sup>67</sup> Where there are successful models around the country, Rosen found that many of them could be achieving far more. He explains there are many examples of successful programs that have achieved their goals of welcoming unengaged parents and helping them to connect with others in the Jewish community, but most such programs have not yet reached their potential. With adequate resources and development, they could be achieving even more.<sup>68</sup>

Rosen’s study points to the great potential for outreach to parents of very young children in relation to programs provided by the Jewish community. Just as

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<sup>65</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First- Time Parents*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First- Time Parents*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First- Time Parents*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First- Time Parents*, 6.

young children's brains are open to development in finite windows, Rosen suggests that parents of newborns display openness to involvement in Jewish life that is powerful, yet also fleeting. He notes that when a child is first born, first time parents in particular are constantly learning. He writes, "The novelty of parenting creates a fresh learning dynamic. Parents become very receptive to new ideas during their child's first two years. During this time they are 'moldable,' highly inquisitive, and constantly seeking information."<sup>69</sup> In addition, parents of newborns also demonstrate a particular desire to learn more about Jewish values. Rosen attributes this to fears about parenting, with these parents searching for outside wisdom. Additionally, new parents see this time as an opportunity to think differently than they have before. This is their opportunity to avoid the mistakes that their parents made during their own upbringing.<sup>70</sup>

### *Current Initiatives*

Recognizing the importance of investing in early childhood education, there continues to be new initiatives to engage young families in Jewish life. Perhaps the most prominent initiative at the moment is PJ Library, a project funded by the Harold Grinspoon foundation that mails free literature and music with Jewish themes and content to families with children between the ages of six months, to eight years depending upon the community.<sup>71</sup> PJ Library began in 2005, with 200 families in Western Massachusetts receiving monthly free books and has now grown to serve 185

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<sup>69</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First- Time Parents*, 33.

<sup>70</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First- Time Parents*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> "Who We Are ," The PJ Library, a Program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, About PJ Library, accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.pjlibrary.org/about-pj-library/who-we-are.aspx>.



communities, with 175,676 active subscriptions. The Grinspoon Foundation provides up to 50% of the funding and then requires the rest to be paid by a local funder in each community.<sup>72</sup> Clearly a different model of early childhood education than that of an actual school, PJ Library focuses on casting the broadest net possible without requiring any kind of a commitment from participating families. Similar to the Taglit-Birthright free trips to Israel, PJ Library hopes to engage young Jewish families through an enticing program at no cost. PJ Library now receives funding from the Steinhardt Foundation, once a primary funder of JECEI.<sup>73</sup>

Another initiative meant to encourage Jewish early childhood engagement comes out of the Jewish United Fund in Chicago. The program, called Right Start, provides a voucher for parents who choose Jewish daycare or preschool for their first child, from \$500-\$2000 depending on how many days a week the child attends school. As the website explains, "Jewish early childhood programs especially have a major impact on a child's emerging Jewish identity and serve as an important gateway to other facets of Jewish life." In addition to the Jewish United Fund, Right Start is also supported by the Steven B. Nasatir New Directions Fund, and the Lewis and Alice F. Schimberg Special Purpose Fund.<sup>74</sup>

There has also been a renewed investment in professionalizing early childhood education. The Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute (JECLEI)

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, "Aiming to Spread Judaism One Book at a Time," *New York Times*, June 25, 2011, A13 ed., [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/25/us/25beliefs.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/25/us/25beliefs.html?_r=0).

<sup>73</sup> "PJ Library Takes Hold in the Big Apple," EJewish Philanthropy Your Jewish Philanthropy Resource, May 23, 2011, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/pj-library-takes-hold-in-the-big-apple/>.

<sup>74</sup> "JCC Chicago - JUF Right Start Program," JCC Chicago, JCC Early Childhood, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://www.gojcc.org/content/view/580/455>.

brought together its first cohort of early childhood educators and directors in 2012.<sup>75</sup> The initiative's mission statement reads, "JECALI engages participants in intensive Jewish study, in reflective practice and meaning-making in a social context. In the process, they acquire skills to successfully continue the learning and growth necessary to lead Jewish early childhood program communities now and in the future."<sup>76</sup> The program is a joint initiative of The Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion with The Bank Street College of Education functioning as a consulting institution. The initiative is funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation, one of the foundations that formerly funded the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership. The first cohort includes educators from a geographically dispersed, diverse group of Jewish early childhood programs. Participation in the initiative requires a 15-month commitment, and includes face-to-face learning as well as distance learning, an Israel trip and intense mentoring. This initiative demonstrates the recognition that in order to strengthen existing early childhood opportunities, the professional staff running them must be reflective about their work and equipped with the skills to serve as leaders in this critical field of Jewish education.<sup>77</sup>

These are just three among many local and national initiatives that are working on engaging families in Jewish education during the critical early years of their child's educational life.

### *Chabad*

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<sup>75</sup> "The Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute Opens Registration," MOFET JTEC - The Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute Opens Registration, 2012, In-Service Training, <http://jtec.macam.ac.il/portal/ArticlePage.aspx?id=1229>.

<sup>76</sup> JECALI | Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://jecali.org/>.

<sup>77</sup> JECALI | Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://jecali.org/>.

Clearly, there is a lot at stake when it comes to Jewish early childhood education. For a child and for their family, enrolling in Jewish early childhood educational opportunities has the power to impact their Jewish lives far beyond the toddler years -- and Jewish organizations are now taking notice. The early childhood initiatives described in the beginning of the chapter were pluralist endeavors, open to Jewish early childhood centers from across the Jewish world. Some Chabad early childhood centers participated in the JECEI accreditation process and continue to bear the mark of excellence that was the result of the JECEI process. And, when it comes to the research that is working to transform Jewish early childhood education, Devora Krasnianski, head of Chabad's Early Childhood Education Network, told me in conversation, "We read the same literature that everyone's reading on early childhood education."<sup>78</sup> This has led to a rapid growth in the emphasis within Chabad on early childhood opportunities nationally.

Chabad currently operates 400 preschools in the United States, as well as 500 "Mommy and Me" programs.<sup>79</sup> Chabad established their own early childhood national office in 2007, called Chabad Early Childhood Education (CECE) Network. When I asked Krasnianski about what prompted them to do so at that time specifically, she said that it was simply a matter of funding. Dr. David Walder emerged as the chief donor in this initiative. Founder and CEO of a biotech company in Chicago and an Orthodox Jew, Walder has made significant contributions to the development of Jewish education. He was also the visionary and one of the lead donors behind the Kehillah Jewish Education Fund in Chicago, a fund modeled on the European kehillah tax. Its many donors supplement the tuition for a variety of different Jewish

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<sup>78</sup> Devora Krasnianski, telephone interview by author, December 5, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> "Early Childhood," Chabad RSS News, Programs, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://lubavitch.com/program.html?h=617>.

day schools in the Chicago area.<sup>80</sup> It is not surprising that Dr. Walder would emerge in the flurry of activity that focused on Jewish early childhood excellence in the middle of the last decade. As the Chabad Early Childhood Education Network's website for "*shluchim*" reads, "Preschools have been recognized as springboards for Jewish continuity, with studies and experience showing that children attending quality Jewish preschools inspire parents to seek further Jewish education for their children and themselves."<sup>81</sup>

The CECE Network holds conference and meetings throughout the year, bringing Chabad early childhood educators to discuss everything from "*yiddishkeit*" in the classroom to integrating educational philosophies drawn from the secular world into their teaching.<sup>82</sup> Their mission statement says that, "The CECE Network is for Chabad Preschool directors to work collaboratively and support each other, as we explore and implement innovative practices to enrich and enhance our early childhood programs."<sup>83</sup> Because, by design, Chabad *shlichim* are widely dispersed, there is an active website with resources and discussion boards intended to offer support for educators who are geographically isolated. Finally, Krasnianski herself works to maximize their resources through her relationships with the women in the network. She believes that a centralized network allows all of its members to access what they need and increase their efficiency in their work.<sup>84</sup> This year, participation in the

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<sup>80</sup> "Growing Support in Difficult Times," Chicago Kehillah Jewish Education Fund, About KJEF, accessed March 2, 2013, [http://www.jewisheducationfund.net/artic\\_tt.php](http://www.jewisheducationfund.net/artic_tt.php).

<sup>81</sup> "CECE Network," Shluchim Office, Departments, accessed March 02, 2013, [http://www.shluchim.org/pages/39838/CECE\\_Network.html](http://www.shluchim.org/pages/39838/CECE_Network.html).

<sup>82</sup> "NY Area Educators Meet," Collive, September 6, 2012, section goes here, [http://www.collive.com/show\\_news.rtx?id=21676](http://www.collive.com/show_news.rtx?id=21676).

<sup>83</sup> *Chabad Early Childhood Education Network Application* (CECE Network, 5771-5772), 1.

<sup>84</sup> Devora Krasnianski, telephone interview by author, December 5, 2012.

CECE Network cost \$450 for new members, and membership is limited to those with two years of teaching experience.

Chabad nursery schools often integrate strong Jewish content with secular educational philosophy. The Montessori method remains one of the most influential models in early childhood education and is used in many Chabad preschools.<sup>85</sup> As Miriam Coates writes in *Montessori Life* magazine, “Jewish schools and Jewish parents are finding that Montessori meshes well with core principles of Jewish faith and culture, such as care for the environment, self-sufficiency, independence, and justice.”<sup>86</sup> Advocates of the integration suggest that parents believe that Montessori methods will enhance the typical quality of Jewish education. Chabad in Beijing now operates “Jewish Montessori” which supplies language acquisition materials created by Montessori, while integrating movable and sandpaper Hebrew letters -- both characteristic of the Montessori method. They also supply child sized ritual objects and sorting material that focus on *berachot* and holidays.<sup>87</sup> Research from 2009 found that there were at least 40 Jewish schools utilizing Montessori philosophy, from early childhood to upper elementary. The schools that I visited, and the parents with whom I spoke, also discussed the Reggio Emilia philosophy guiding the work at the Chabad school with which they were affiliated. This speaks to the diversity of educational styles that exists within the Chabad Early Childhood Education Network.

Chabad has successfully responded to the calls for Jewish early childhood education in many different ways. One of Chabad’s strengths is their geographic diversity. Chabad, as with so many other components of their work in Jewish life, has

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<sup>85</sup> "Early Childhood," Chabad RSS News, Programs, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://lubavitch.com/program.html?h=617>.

<sup>86</sup> Miriam Coates, "Judaism and Montessori," *Montessori Life* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 22.

<sup>87</sup> Coates, "Judaism and Montessori," 23.

worked to offer Jewish early childhood options in communities where there were previously none. In some cases, this means going to remote areas of the country with small Jewish populations. Other times, it means identifying neighborhoods that may be in close proximity to large Jewish populations, but which lack Jewish educational options.

In Rosen's study, he documents what he calls "The Schlep Limit," meaning that there is a limit to how far a family will travel to bring their child to school. Even in communities that may have many Jewish early childhood opportunities, young families may live too far away for these schools to be viable options. This limitation particularly manifests itself in urban areas where young families may not be able to afford to live near the city center, which is typically where the religious resources are located. Chabad has identified this challenge and has worked to open preschools in places that are more accessible to where young families live. Rosen writes, "Orthodox outreach groups such as Aish HaTorah and Chabad appear to be far ahead of the rest of the Jewish community in establishing centers in these areas. In Denver, for example, a number of rabbis affiliated with these groups have moved to outlying suburbs to serve the needs of young families."<sup>88</sup> While many areas of New York City have an abundance of Jewish options, there are neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens that are primarily served by Chabad.

Chabad has also recognized the move towards excellence in early childhood education, both in the secular and in the Jewish world. In areas of Manhattan and Brooklyn where there are a myriad of Jewish early childhood options, Chabad remains competitive with preschools across the religious and secular spectrum. In later chapters I will explore in more detail how they succeed at attracting parents to

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<sup>88</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents*, 65, 66.

their schools. Still, it is important to mention, that in a competitive early childhood market, Jewish and sometimes even non-Jewish parents are choosing Chabad preschools, and as such, the number of Chabad run schools continues to grow.

Chabad is also devoting significant financial resources to early childhood education. While *shlichim* are expected to create financially independent institutions and programming, Chabad often supports initiatives to strengthen existing programming and encourage growth. In 2010, David and Lara Slager donated 5 million dollars to the Machne Israel Fund, earmarked for early childhood education. This money was used to establish “The Early Childhood Initiative,” with the goal to provide grants to Chabad early childhood centers.<sup>89</sup> A former hedge fund manager, David Slager attributes his family’s commitment to Chabad to his children’s positive experience at the Upper West Side Chabad preschool, the Chabad Early Learning Center. He explains that his family’s Jewish practice was invigorated by his children’s early childhood experience. He gave his gift, as he explained, so that his family’s experience would, “hopefully be replicated in thousands of Jewish homes.”<sup>90</sup> The distribution of these grants led to the establishment of 18 new preschools in 2010, as well as financial support to grow existing programs.

Early childhood education is an essential part of preparing all children to learn throughout their lives. In the Jewish world, early childhood education has the potential to be a critical cognitive step for developing a child’s Jewish identity and a stepping-stone for a family into Jewish life. The early childhood years provide a ripe moment for outreach to those who are unaffiliated or were previously disconnected

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<sup>89</sup> "Machne Israel Development Fund Announces Major Gift," Chabad News, April 21, 2010, Education, <http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2028827/Machne-Israel-Development-Fund-Announces-Major-Gift.html>.

<sup>90</sup> "Early Childhood Education Gets a Head Start," Chabad News, July 30, 2010, Headquarters, <http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2029335/Early-Childhood-Education-Gets-a-Head-Start.html>.

from Jewish community. As we continue to weigh the needs and priorities of the Jewish community, it is clear that early childhood must remain at the top of the list. Investments in PJ Library, Head Start, JECELI and the two major gifts to Chabad designated for early childhood education are a hopeful sign that there is a renewed recognition of the importance of continued investment in Jewish early childhood education.



### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **How Does School Choice Work?**

*This chapter will address both how Jewish school choice works, and look at studies about why and how families choose particular schools for their child. It will also look at early childhood school choice, with a concentration on New York City, recognizing that early childhood in New York is an anomaly.*

“One of the most important ways in which parents are involved in their children’s education is through choosing the school they attend.”<sup>91</sup> Parents can be committed and involved in their child’s education every step of the way, but before that education even begins, students must find themselves in an environment where they can survive and thrive. While there are communities with more or fewer schools to choose from, at each step of their child’s maturation, parents will have the opportunity to make choices about their child’s education.

For most parents, the first school that they will choose is their child’s preschool. This choice is informed by many criteria, some practical, like location and cost, and some ideological, like religious outlook and educational philosophy. And there are still other intangible questions parents should ask during the decision making process: “did it feel right, did it seem warm and caring, would our family fit in?”

One scholarly article compared school choice to a landscape saying, “The experience of ‘choice’ is of a landscape that is neither flat nor uni-dimensional, nor linear, nor ordered, nor tidy...Information is rarely complete, decisions often seem to be ‘the best that can be done,’ provisional and fragile. From where you stand aspects of the landscape may be ‘out of sight’...Decisions are made about the possibilities

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<sup>91</sup> Ellen Goldring and Kristie J. Rowley, "Parent Preferences and Parent Choices: The Public-Private Decision about School Choice," proceedings of Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 8, 2006, San Francisco, CA, 2.

available on the basis of look, feel and judgment as well as rational reflection.”<sup>92</sup>

Making a school choice requires navigating a landscape filled with easily identifiable as well as less obvious considerations. In this chapter, I will explore how parents make educational choices for their children. I will consider in particular how religion plays a role in these decisions, as well as how the unique environment in New York City impacts school choice.

### *School Choice: An Academic Perspective*

While parents can educate themselves about their children’s educational options in a variety of ways, the methods of obtaining information all typically fall into two main categories. The first category is taking advantage of what educational researchers Goldring and Rowley call “interpersonal networks.” This term refers to all of the information that is gathered through parents’ social networks. Parents educate themselves though discussion with others in their neighborhood, friends, and family. The other way in which parents inform themselves is by means of “formal networks.” This refers to printed materials, open houses and websites aimed at perspective parents. Goldring and Rowley’s research shows that parents are far more likely to employ the wisdom of the first category than the latter. Their work reports that, “[w]ord of mouth’ and ‘talking to others’ are the most typical ways parents use to find out about schools and about school choice options.”<sup>93</sup>

In a study conducted by British scholars Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball, parents go so far as to suggest that the “grapevine” (informal networks) is indeed

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<sup>92</sup> Stephen J. Ball and Carol Vincent, "I Heard It on the Grapevine": 'Hot' Knowledge and School Choice," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 19, no. 3 (September 1998): 391.

<sup>93</sup> Goldring and Rowley, "Parent Preferences and Parent Choices: The Public-Private Decision about School Choice," 13.

superior to “formal networks.” Vincent and Ball’s research demonstrated that, “the grapevine is often seen as more reliable than other ‘official’ sources of information, especially those provided by the schools themselves.” Their scholarship provides another layer of complexity to Goldring and Rowley’s notions of “interpersonal networks” and “formal networks.” Vincent and Ball explain that “[o]fficial’ knowledge is ‘cold’ knowledge, normally constructed specifically for public dissemination. The forms this information takes are abstract examination results, lists of school activities, outlines of school policies, etc. ‘Grapevine’ knowledge is ‘hot’ knowledge, based on affective responses or direct experiences.”<sup>94</sup> While parents may look to “cold” knowledge as a reference, the “hot” knowledge is deemed more valuable because it is personal, and reflects that experience of a former consumer (in this case, parent).

This data is significant as it demonstrates that the “word on the street” can be as powerful as any glossy admissions brochure. It also suggests that communities can become self-reinforcing around school choice. “Where you live, who you know and what community you belong to are vital determinants of the particular grapevine that is open to you.”<sup>95</sup> This is particularly significant in a city like New York, where there are so many school options in close proximity to one another. Your neighborhood and social networks play a significant role in determining which schools you choose to explore and where you ultimately decide to send your child. As Victoria Goldman advises the parents reading her guide to nursery schools, “Neighbors are a terrific

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<sup>94</sup> Ball and Vincent, “I Heard It on the Grapevine”: ‘Hot’ Knowledge and School Choice,” 380.

<sup>95</sup> Ball and Vincent, “I Heard It on the Grapevine”: ‘Hot’ Knowledge and School Choice,” 381.

source of candid information, so call everyone you know with children in preschool.”<sup>96</sup>

When asked why Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York does almost no advertising for their nursery school, school director Ellen Davis explains simply, “The grapevine is very powerful”<sup>97</sup> -- so powerful, in fact, that word of mouth has the potential to overshadow factual information about schools. Goldring and Rowley’s research shows that, “Much empirical evidence demonstrates that parents typically hold very little information about their children’s school or the available school choices.”<sup>98</sup> In spite of parents’ interest and commitment to their children’s education, their decision making is not entirely based on hard facts.<sup>99</sup> This does not undermine the seriousness with which parents approach their task, but rather simply illustrates that they are responding to factors outside of the “cold” information available to them about potential schools for their child.

In an article that looks at school choice in relationship with how it impacts parents’ satisfaction, scholars Ellen Goldring and Rina Shapira explain that fundamentally, “[t]he basis for exercising choice is according to the family’s perceived needs or values. These are usually related to religious and pedagogical preferences.”<sup>100</sup> When parents make a choice about their child’s school they feel a greater sense of empowerment and investment. Goldring and Shapira also cite

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<sup>96</sup> Victoria Goldman, *The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools* (New York, NY: Soho, 2012), 17.

<sup>97</sup> Ellen Davis, interview by author, November 28, 2012.

<sup>98</sup> Goldring and Rowley, “Parent Preferences and Parent Choices: The Public-Private Decision about School Choice,” 14.

<sup>99</sup> Goldring and Rowley’s research relates to school choice in the primary school arena and focuses more specifically on school choice in relation to public and private school options in a community. In spite of the different context, their research can provide insight into parents’ thinking about school choice.

<sup>100</sup> Ellen B. Goldring and Rina Shapira, “Choice, Empowerment, and Involvement: What Satisfies Parents?,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 397.

research that shows that school choice strengthens the link between school and community. They explain that “when schools, families and churches share a commitment to common values and beliefs, education will be more successful”<sup>101</sup> This can create a self-perpetuating phenomenon within communities, as described in the Mark Rosen article. He writes, “Parents are more likely to make Jewish education choices if they have Jewish friends making these choices.”<sup>102</sup> Rosen also writes that Jewish parents are more likely to have Jewish friends if they eventually decide that their children should attend a Jewish school. “Jewish playgroups facilitated by Jewish community professionals have the greatest potential to forge long-lasting connections between Jewish parents.”<sup>103</sup> Education is enhanced when school choice is an outcome of participation in a group with shared values and priorities. And this is reinforced as soon as school starts with relationships between parents cultivated as an outgrowth of the school choice that parents make.

Goldring and Shapira’s research focuses on an older age cohort and educational setting, but their assertion that school choice works along side “rational choice theory” rings true in the early childhood context as well. They explain that rational choice is comprised of two components: “individualism” and “interest maximization.” In other words, the choice maker is assumed to be acting out of self-interest, and is expected to be making a choice that will yield the best possible results. This decision-making has the potential to benefit the educational process as many parents acting in their own self-interest can create more “public good” for everyone

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<sup>101</sup> Goldring and Shapira, "Choice, Empowerment, and Involvement: What Satisfies Parents?," 397.

<sup>102</sup> Mark I. Rosen, Ph.D., *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents*, publication (Waltham: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2006), 32.

<sup>103</sup> Rosen, *Jewish Engagement from Birth: A Blueprint for Outreach to First-Time Parents*, 32.

involved.<sup>104</sup> Schools must work towards excellence in order to attract parents who are looking for the best school for their child.

Even with intensive research in this field, school choice researchers still acknowledge the challenges of neatly defining just how these decisions are made. In the article “Schools for Parents,” Alex Pomson explains the four main criteria that influence school choice. “According to exponents of this ‘rational choice’ perspective, there are four broad considerations that (all) parents take up when choosing schools: (1) academic reputation and curriculum, (2) discipline and safety, (3) religion and social values and (4) convenience.”<sup>105</sup> These factors are certainly all critical in making choices about a child’s education, but choosing a school relies on a combination of information, and emotion. Parents choose schools that they believe will be the right fit for their child, both for reasons that they can easily articulate, and for some that they can’t.

### *School Choice: Popular Advice*

While there is certainly a science to the study of school choice, most parents searching for guidance on the process look to accessible resources. Social media and the Internet have expanded people’s “grapevines” and enabled more sharing of “hot” information. Nearly all parenting websites that I encountered offer advice and information about navigating early childhood school choice. Additionally, neighborhood-based list-serves for parents are often abuzz with information about local early childhood options.

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<sup>104</sup> Goldring and Shapira, "Choice, Empowerment, and Involvement: What Satisfies Parents?," 397

<sup>105</sup> Alex Pomson, "Schools for Parents," in *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press in Association with the AVI CHAI Foundation, 2007), 113.

The website “Kveller,” which calls itself, “a website for those who want to add a Jewish twist to their parenting,”<sup>106</sup> offers a list of suggestions for parents considering preschools for their child. It begins by encouraging parents to start their decision making process early. The website goes on to encourage parents to talk to people. Just as Goldring and Rowley suggest, speaking to friends and neighbors, and activating social networks is seen as a critical component of any decision making process.

Many resources suggest that parents consider the on- and offline parent community, reminding parents that their child’s early childhood community will impact the parents’ social lives as well. The Kveller article says, “Remember that this first school will really be a community building experience for you and for your child. Your child will be making friends -- as will you. So it’s important to really think about what you want for this initial community.”

All guidelines that I encountered encourage parents to think practically. PBS.com suggests that parents consider, “Do you want a school located near your workplace or your home? If the preschool is private, are the fees within your budget? What kinds of needs do you have regarding your schedule?”<sup>107</sup> Location is mentioned time and again as one of the most important factors in choosing a school.

Parents are also encouraged to visit schools to get a feeling for the place, the style and the community. Whattoexpect.com suggests that parents should be attentive to the space, considering factors like cleanliness and décor. It also suggests that parents watch for how the teachers communicate with the children. Finally, it

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<sup>106</sup> Jewish Family Life - Parenting Advice & Perspectives - Kveller, accessed February 03, 2013, <http://kveller.com/>.

<sup>107</sup> "Choosing a Preschool or Childcare Center," PBS, section goes here, accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/choosing/preschool/>.

recommends an awareness of the feeling in the building: is it “controlled chaos” or simply out of control?<sup>108</sup>

In Victoria Goldman’s “The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools” she similarly emphasizes practicality when choosing a school. The first question that she encouraged parents to consider is “how far from home is it?” She goes on to list a series of other practical questions, regarding affordability, hours, and admissions procedures. She encourages parents to educate themselves on the age children become eligible, and, perhaps surprisingly, does a child need to be toilet trained in order to begin school? She does not minimize the importance of the non-ideological details that can be deciding factors in parents’ choices.

Goldman reiterates though that the most important question falls into the category that Goldring and Shapira would call “interest maximization.” She writes, “Of course, there is the biggest item of all: What type of school is best for my child?”<sup>109</sup> In order to best determine that, Goldman encourages parents to educate themselves regarding some of the major philosophies and educational approaches currently popular in the early childhood education world.

While parents are advised to approach their school choice with as much information as possible, choosing a preschool includes a variety of different factors to consider. Emily Shapiro, the director of the Columbus Park West nursery school in New York City for 14 years, writes that she is “often reminded that parents do not enter this process as experts in early childhood education...Suddenly they are faced with the many wonderful choices among New York City nursery schools and the task of understanding what the differences are: what matters, what matters to their family,

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<sup>108</sup> “The Preschool Visit — How to Tell If You've Found a Good Preschool,” What to Expect, section goes here, accessed February 07, 2013, <http://www.whattoexpect.com/toddler/starting-preschool/school-visits.aspx>.

<sup>109</sup> Goldman, *The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools*, 4.



what is right for their child.”<sup>110</sup> She describes how many parents familiarize themselves with different educational philosophies and school styles, but this is not the sort of parental education that she encourages.

Shapiro suggests instead that parents educate themselves about a school’s “hidden curriculum.” The hidden curriculum refers to all that students learn by observing and interacting with their teachers and their environment. She explains that the hidden curriculum is “strongly rooted in the culture of the school.”<sup>111</sup> Shapiro describes nursery schools as the first time in a person’s life when they must learn to exist in a group and interact with the world around them. When children reach the developmental stage that coincides with enrollment in nursery school, they are able to understand themselves as part of a group. Less concerned with the “what” of the curriculum, Shapiro suggests that parents pay close attention to the “how.” She writes, “When you choose a nursery school, you are choosing the environment in which your child will practice asserting himself among peers and with authority figures who are concerned with the entire group, not just with him.”<sup>112</sup>

Shapiro recommends that parents ask questions to determine how messages about structure and conflict are communicated to the children in the classroom. She also advises parents to be attentive during school visits. She suggests that parents particularly watch for the ways that teachers connect with the students. Teachers send strong messages about what type of behavior is encouraged and acceptable versus what is not in many different ways, all of which is part of the “hidden curriculum.” Shapiro explains, “The best gift you can give your child in the nursery years is time

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<sup>110</sup> Emily Shapiro, “What to Look For in a Nursery School,” *The Parents League Review*, 2010, 89.

<sup>111</sup> Shapiro, “What to Look For in a Nursery School,” 90.

<sup>112</sup> Shapiro, “What to Look For in a Nursery School,” 91.

spent in a school environment where interpersonal relationships are valued.”<sup>113</sup> This quality is not associated with one particular educational philosophy, or a school that is large or small; rather it is a question of culture and values.

### *New York City: A Different World*

Preschool choice in New York City is different than almost anywhere else in the country. While all of the previously outlined factors impact school choice, it is worth considering some of the issues that make school choice in New York City unique.

In Victoria Goldman’s *The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools*, she begins:

“This is Manhattan, home of some of the world’s finest nursery schools, and at some of the top schools, the gun goes off at 7:30 A.M. roughly the day after Labor Day. Frenzied parents jam the phone and internet lines of schools they deem most desirable to request nursery school applications. There are schools that run out of applications by noon. Some parents send their babies and toddlers to parenting programs and play groups that are supposed to be ‘feeders to the feeders’ of the schools they will, they hope, secure a place for their offspring in an Ivy League college.”<sup>114</sup>

Goldman’s book is considered one of the best resources on New York City Nursery Schools, providing profiles for the majority of nursery schools in New York City in addition to helpful hints on how to navigate the process. This guide offers a window into the way in which New York City preschool admissions is unique.

In New York City, preschool admissions can be a highly competitive process. Often parents and their children are interviewed and vetted, as schools attempt to see into the future to determine if the family is the right fit. In a city where preschool admissions have been compared to those of Ivy League universities, preschool choice

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<sup>113</sup> Shapiro, "What to Look For in a Nursery School," 93.

<sup>114</sup> Goldman, *The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools*, 1.

is just the first difficult decision that a family makes about their child's education.

Pamela Weinberger and Kelley Ashton write in their guide for New York City parents, "You'll feel as though you're trying to get an eighteen-year-old into Harvard, not a two-year-old into a sweet little place where she'll play and eat crackers and drink juice."<sup>115</sup> Parents often elect to hire advisors to accompany them through the process, a service that ranges in cost from \$200 to \$3000.<sup>116</sup> Even the public school system can be difficult to navigate, as proximity is not necessarily a guarantee of enrollment in your local school.

The cost of New York City nursery schools is quite high. Nationally, a 2006 study showed that the average cost of childcare for children under age five ranges between \$3,803 to \$13,480 per year.<sup>117</sup> In New York, preschool tuition tends to skew toward the higher of those numbers while some schools significantly exceed the national average. In a 2009 survey, the highest nursery school tuition was Horace Mann School at \$34,050 per year.<sup>118</sup> While there is certainly a wide tuition range, the price tag for preschool in New York City is expected to be high. Preschool of the Arts, one of the premiere Chabad preschools in the city, cites a tuition range of \$14,000-\$19,000. This is comparable to many neighboring institutions. While in many communities, Chabad is considered a more cost efficient early childhood

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<sup>115</sup> Pamela Weinberg and Kelly Ashton, *City Baby New York: The Ultimate Parenting Guide for New York Parents from Pregnancy through Preschool* (New York, NY: Universe Pub., 2010), 189.

<sup>116</sup> Goldman, *The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools*, 18.

<sup>117</sup> Bonnie Erbe, "The High Cost of Preschool," US News, April 20, 2006, Opinion, accessed February 04, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/erbe/2006/04/20/the-high-cost-of-preschool>.

<sup>118</sup> Christine Werthman, "The Blackboard Awards | 2009 Manhattan Independent Nursery and Preschool Tuition Directory," accessed February 02, 2013, [http://blackboardawards.com/nursery\\_tuition\\_09.php](http://blackboardawards.com/nursery_tuition_09.php).

education option, in New York City their tuition remains as high as other schools of a similar style.<sup>119</sup>

The emphasis on outplacement, or where students matriculate after graduation from their early childhood center, is another way in which New York Schools differ from many others. Given the competitive nature of school admissions in New York City, parents look to their preschool as a critical stepping-stone to their child's elementary school. For some, this means gaining access to another religiously affiliated school, which involves another intense admissions process. For others, this means navigating the transition to a neighborhood public school. And for many, this means helping children gain admission to one of New York City's many private schools. As such, preschools develop relationships with elementary schools around the city and are tasked with helping their students gain entry and/or make the transition to the next step.

Parents in New York City often consider outplacement a major factor when considering nursery schools. Smart City Kids, an independent school consulting company that charges \$225 for an hour-long consultation, suggests that the notion of particular nursery schools feeding into particular private schools is no longer accurate. Due to an increase in competition for spaces in nursery schools, "...schools scour the city for qualified applicants, so nothing is guaranteed. While it is still true that some nursery school directors have stronger relationships with independent or public schools within their area, this relationship never guarantees a space."<sup>120</sup> Still, many nursery schools publish outplacement statistics, and allow the public access to a list of where their oldest students will matriculate in the fall.

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<sup>119</sup> Goldman, *The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools*, 341.

<sup>120</sup> Smart City Kids, accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.smartcitykids.com/>.

Proximity in New York City plays a different role in school choice than in other places. While in many communities throughout the country the options are inherently dispersed, in New York City there are an abundance of schools, and parents are encouraged to minimize their commute. In Pamela Weinberger and Kelley Ashton's *City Baby New York* they recommend that parents choose a preschool that is no more than 10 blocks away from their homes. They explain, "otherwise, you'll spend all your time getting there, when the school time itself is only two or three hours a day twice a week for children under three."<sup>121</sup> This is considered a luxury in a densely populated city with a wide variety of schools to choose from. Proximity and commute certainly play a role in school choice in all contexts, but the combinations of New York's dense population and the sheer number of schools available makes a desirable distance from home to school a matter of blocks rather than a matter of miles.

Finally, New York's demographics impact school choice in a way that is significant for the purposes of this paper. The size of the Jewish community in New York City allows for a higher number of Jewish educational options than is typical in most communities. According to the 2011 Jewish Population Survey of New York, the total Jewish population of New York City is now 1,086,000.<sup>122</sup> New York is home to the largest number of Jewish day schools in the country and sees the highest percentage of the national enrollment in Jewish schools. This is, largely, due to the Orthodox population that almost universally chooses Jewish schools for their

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<sup>121</sup> Weinberg and Ashton, *City Baby New York: The Ultimate Parenting Guide for New York Parents from Pregnancy through Preschool*, 190.

<sup>122</sup> Steven M. Cohen, Jacob B. Ukeles, and Ron Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, report (New York: UJA-Federation, 2012), 19.

children.<sup>123</sup> Even taking into account the impact of the Orthodox community on the statistics, Jewish parents from all over the spectrum of observance have a great deal of options when it comes to choosing Jewish education. Whereas in many communities elsewhere, parents must choose between Jewish and secular school options, parents in New York City often find themselves choosing *between* local Jewish schools.

### *Research on Day School Choice*

In the Jewish community, the bulk of the research that has been conducted on school choice focuses on Jewish day schools. This provides some information regarding the role that Jewish affiliation plays in parents' decision making as well as the reservations that may inhibit parents from choosing a Jewish school for their child. The existing research does not directly translate to the context of early childhood school choice because, particularly in New York City, religiously affiliated early childhood is more normative.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, parents look for a type of religious enculturation for their children during their early childhood that they may be more reluctant to embrace as their children grow older. Still, American Studies Professor Riv-Ellen Prell writes, "The study of family educational choices reveals that selecting schools, and schooling itself have the potential to launch a whole series of commitments and behaviors including some that might not have necessarily been anticipated."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States: 2008-2009*, report (Avi Chai Foundation, 2009), 24.

<sup>124</sup> Ellen Davis, interview by author, November 28, 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell, "Family Formation, Educational Choice, and American Jewish Identity," in *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press in Association with the AVI CHAI Foundation, 2007), 4.

Steven M. Cohen and Shaul Kelner published a recent article entitled “Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools.” After a twenty-five year growth in enrollment in Jewish day schools, their research is motivated by the leveling off that has occurred in day school growth over the last two or three years. An exploration of parents’ motivation and reservations about Jewish day school could inform outreach and marketing to potential day school parents. They write, “the next wave of sizable growth will require sharply different recruitment approaches, be they in terms of technique, message, or target audience.”<sup>126</sup> In search of insight into how Jewish parents currently think about Jewish Day School, they conducted a study of non-Orthodox parents affiliated with Jewish Community Centers in five major American cities.

Cohen and Kelner write about several assumptions about parents who choose Jewish Day School. Perhaps first among them is the question of “Jewish commitment.” While it is difficult to quantify and assess “Jewish commitment,” opting for Jewish day school has a tendency to break down along denominational lines. Citing the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey, they write that “the percentage of families in which any child has been in a day school exceeds 90 percent for the Orthodox, approximates 30 percent for the Conservative congregants, and falls short of 5 percent for the Reform.”<sup>127</sup> Recognizing the inherent conjecture made in linking denomination with “Jewish commitment,” they do support this claim with

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<sup>126</sup> Steven M. Cohen and Shaul Kelner, “Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools,” in *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press in Association with the AVI CHAI Foundation, 2007), 81.

<sup>127</sup> Cohen and Kelner, “Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools,” 82.

data that suggests that Orthodox Jews demonstrate quantitatively greater “Jewish commitment” than their Conservative and Reform co-religionists.<sup>128</sup>

This theory is not easily transferable to the Chabad preschool context. While parents who choose Chabad preschools may be demonstrating solidarity with a particular type of Jewish practice, they are also choosing a school that is not accompanied by congregational affiliation, possibly indicating a lack of Jewish commitment. The JCSNY reports that, “affiliation makes a huge difference in the level of engagement.”<sup>129</sup> Their study showed that both Reform and Conservative families that were affiliated with a congregation scored far higher on their “Index of Jewish Engagement.”<sup>130</sup> When parents choose Chabad schools, their children are educated in a richly Jewish environment by teachers who are highly committed to Judaism. At the same time, Chabad schools allow parents to avoid officially affiliating with any particular Jewish organization, an act which is often an indicator of Jewish commitment in their own lives.

Not only is “Jewish commitment” one indicator of Jewish Day School enrollment, but similarly “higher aspirations for the Jewish engagement of their children” is another contributing factor. Day school parents “believe in the efficacy of day schools, their ability to deliver on their promise of producing graduates who are indeed more committed to living Jewish lives.”<sup>131</sup> Parents opt for Jewish education not simply because of their own notions of religion commitments, but also out of a sense that Jewish Day School is a potential tool to ensure their children’s future commitments.

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<sup>128</sup> Cohen and Kelner, “Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools,” 82.

<sup>129</sup> Cohen, Ukeles, and Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, 27.

<sup>130</sup> Cohen, Ukeles, and Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, 27.

<sup>131</sup> Cohen and Kelner, “Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools,” 82.



This latter motivation does seem to have an impact on early childhood school choice. In an interview with Pearl Stroh who runs the Chabad Early Learning Center on the Upper West Side, she attributed part of her success to her parents' own perceived deficiencies. "They want to know how to pray, they want to connect to God, but they don't know how, it's hard for them. But it's so easy for the children, and they see that and they want it for their kids."<sup>132</sup> Part of parents' motivation is born of a desire for their children to have something that they themselves lacked. As mentioned before, it is possible that parents appreciate this type of religious exposure during their child's early childhood, but would be reluctant to sustain it themselves as their children grow older.

Cohen does point out in a different article that, "parents have a variety of reasons for enrolling their children in day schools, not all of which are directly related to assuring a quality Jewish education. Some unknown number of parents has been enrolling their children in Jewish day schools for reasons such as social status, community affiliation or interest in high-quality private school education."<sup>133</sup> Again, it is difficult to neatly explain all of the myriad factors that influence school choice, both in regards to Jewish day school and otherwise.

Cohen and Kelner name ghettoization, excellence and affordability as other factors that have long been believed to inhibit non-Orthodox Jewish parents from sending their children to Jewish Day schools. Fears about ghettoization lead parents to worry that their children will be denied a diverse educational experience that will appropriately prepare them for life as an adult in American society. Imbalance in school quality can also be a factor, if parents believe that the Jewish school option is

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<sup>132</sup> Pearl Stroh, interview by author, January 16, 2013.

<sup>133</sup> Steven M. Cohen, "Day School Parents in Conservative Synagogues," in *Jewish Identity and Religious Commitment*, publication, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, 1997), 19.

inferior to other educational opportunities. Finally, affordability has long been believed to be a barrier to entry for parents who may desire to send their children to Jewish schools but cannot make the financial commitment.<sup>134</sup>

Cohen and Kelner's research ultimately identifies an "ideal type," or someone who would be most likely to choose Jewish day school for their child. "For the non-orthodox, day schools exert special appeal to those who are (1) more involved in Jewish life, (2) interested in higher levels of Jewish commitment for their children, (3) confident about the ability of day schools to provide more committed youngsters, and (4) satisfied that day schools will not ghettoize their children."<sup>135</sup> They determined that high cost and excellence were not primary concerns for families considering Jewish day schools.

For parents considering Chabad preschools, the fact that they are choosing a Jewish school is significant. As I mentioned earlier, parents in New York City are often choosing Chabad as opposed to another Jewish preschool. Still, Chabad's unique ideology plays a somewhat unpredictable role in parents' school choices. A mother quoted in a recent article in the *Forward* newspaper said, "When my kids see somebody doing something nice even today, they say 'Now the *mashiach* [Messiah] is taking one step closer,' which I think is cute. I never correct them, because I think more good in the world is good."<sup>136</sup> The same article described a parent's surprise to hear their child calling God "Hashem." And, a parent quoted in another article explains, "Very religious Jews make me uncomfortable. And, you know, it's Chabad; they're proselytizers. I've had the experience of being approached by Chabad people

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<sup>134</sup> Cohen and Kelner, "Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools," 84.

<sup>135</sup> Cohen and Kelner, "Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day Schools," 99.

<sup>136</sup> Deborah Kolben, "Drawn to Chabad Preschools, Stuffed Torahs and All," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, February 8, 2013, <http://forward.com/articles/170458/drawn-to-chabad-preschools-stuffed-torahs-and-all/?p=2>.

on the street, which is definitely off-putting, but this isn't like that at all. It's very welcoming and inclusive, no pressure."<sup>137</sup> Chabad's particular way of practicing Judaism strikes people in different ways, making their ideology a difficult factor to assess when it comes to school choice. As such, studies about Jewish day school choice remain an imperfect match for this topic.

### *Conclusion*

School choice is challenging and personal, and it is difficult to assess parents' satisfaction down the road. Speaking with parents about their feelings towards school choice after they have landed on a decision can actually be a flawed measure of the success of their decision. Goldring and Shapira quote Erik Erickson who wrote, "Having made a choice, human beings do not like to be proven wrong and, hence, tend to demonstrate commitment by attempting to ensure that the choices turns out well."<sup>138</sup> As a result of this, parents are likely to want to see the good in their child's school, regardless of the inevitable areas of weakness that are present in all schools. This can lead to greater parent satisfaction and a desire for a more positive experience. It can also allow schools to meet or exceed parents' expectations.

After parents consider all of the options, activating their social networks, educating themselves on early childhood buzz words and educational philosophies, parents are typically pleased with the outcome. In a process that requires parents to act as their child's agents, and when the stakes can feel exceedingly high, in the end,

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<sup>137</sup> Ellen Umansky, "The Rebbe's Teachings," *Tablet Magazine*, October 29, 2009, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/19389/the-rebbe%E2%80%99s-teachings>.

<sup>138</sup> Goldring and Shapira, "Choice, Empowerment, and Involvement: What Satisfies Parents?," 398.

most parents are hard-wired to look back on the experience and believe that what they did was right for their child and for their family.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Original School Choice Research**

*This chapter will analyze my original research. I spoke with six parents who have chosen to send their child/children to Chabad preschools. I will provide a profile of each family surveyed and discuss some of the trends that emerged in these conversations.*

I conducted six interviews with parents of Chabad school children. In each interview I asked questions about their family's school choice, each family's Jewish practice, as well as each parent's religious experiences growing up. I also asked about their experiences and satisfaction with Chabad's early childhood education.

The families with whom I spoke were diverse in terms of their religious background. Two families had fathers who grew up abroad. In another family, the father continues to practice his Christian faith. One mother attended Jewish day school through the fifth grade as well as summer camp and spent a significant amount of time in Israel, while another mother said that Judaism was not a priority for her family growing up. There was no uniformity in terms of family background among these families.

The one commonality between all of the families, though, was the factors that contributed to their school choice. For many, the number of hours offered for very young children was an especially significant factor, having no other local school options that provided the hours that they required for their child. Jewish affiliation was also mentioned as a priority in their school choice or at least a benefit, and all of the parents spoke about the warmth and care that they found at the Chabad schools. Proximity to the home was also a significant factor, and determined between which schools families were choosing. Finally, many parents spoke about their own emotional response to the program, trusting their "gut" feeling that the Chabad school that they chose was going to be right for their child.

### *Method*

In each of my interviews, I spoke to parents for approximately thirty minutes. I integrated my questions (Appendix A) with our conversation to better allow parents' thoughts and reflections to emerge. I recorded each of the conversations and then went back and partially transcribed each conversation. This was not highly scientific research, but some definite themes emerged throughout the conversations.

I limited my conversations to people who live in Manhattan and Brooklyn. I spoke primarily with mothers, though in one conversation I had the opportunity to speak to the child's father as well. The fact that I spoke primarily with women was simply the result of people's schedules and the "grapevine" to which I had access. I also wanted to make sure that the families had chosen different schools within the Chabad network. In the end, I interviewed parents with children at three different Chabad schools. I have changed the names of the interview subjects, but not the associated institutions.

### *Holly, Preschool of the Arts<sup>139</sup>*

Holly is a mother of two. Her older daughter attended nursery school at the Brotherhood Synagogue, a Conservative synagogue on Gramercy Park. She had intended to send her son there as well. She is an active synagogue member, and her husband grew up in the congregation. Her husband's family served on the synagogue board at various times. She considers herself a part of that synagogue community, and was pleased with her daughter's early childhood experience. However, because of his

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<sup>139</sup> NYC Preschool of the Arts, <http://www.nycpreschool.org/>.

birthday, her son was not eligible to begin in the program for two-year-old children during the 2012-2013 school year; she would have to find another option.

When Holly began her school research, she discovered that most of the preschools in her neighborhood required students to be two years and four months in order to enroll. Her son would not make the age cut off and as a result, his school options were limited. The majority of the programs open to him required a parent or a nanny to remain with the child at school and Holly was not interested in that type of program. She and her husband wanted their son to have a “real school experience,” where they were able to drop him off at a school in the neighborhood.

At the beginning of my conversation with Holly, she offered this qualification: “I’ll put the disclaimer out there, we made this decision purely based on his birthday.” She was eager to let me know that choosing a Chabad preschool was never something that she and her husband had intended. Rather, it was an outcome of circumstance. She did, however, add that sending her son to a Jewish school was important to her family. She said that she had a sense that Jewish schools were “better run schools,” and that it was important to her and her husband that their children “get the Jewish traditions when they are young.” She also acknowledged a desire for her children’s schools to “fill in the gaps;” she wanted them to be exposed to “a lot of tradition that I don’t necessarily teach them.”

Holly’s family was affiliated with a Reform congregation during her childhood. She remains personally involved in Jewish life, although she categorizes most of her affiliation as “social.” She is involved at UJA-Federation, and has sat on a few different committees at her synagogue. She sees her Jewish affiliation as primarily community and service oriented. Her husband is involved with the men’s group at their synagogue, and Holly sees him as being more invested in worship than

she is. Her children are at Brotherhood about once a week for religious school or some other type of activity.

When Holly spoke about her hopes for her children's Jewish future, she began by looking backward. She explained that both she and her husband's grandparents were born abroad and that their Judaism was core to their identity. It is really important to Holly and her husband that their children have strong Jewish identities. They will become Bar and Bat Mitzvah; she wants them to have Jewish spouses. Her daughter now attends after-school religious studies at the Brotherhood Synagogue and she expects her son will go there as well.

Holly also spoke in a more expansive way about what she wants Judaism to *mean* for her children. She explained: "For me, it's purely values, the sense of social action and community involvement and giving back, and that's what's the most important thing and that's what I most want my kids to get out of Judaism." She would like for them to have a spiritual connection as well, but this was not a priority. She mused that her husband may feel differently, placing a higher value on their "religious" (i.e. spiritual) life. For her, she sees Jewish culture as the most important piece of the puzzle, believing that Jewish culture encourages Jews to help others. As she grows older and raises children, this becomes more and more important to her.

Holly was also clear about what aspects of Judaism are *not* for her. She said, "I am turned off by all the laws and the craziness, but you can practice how you want - its what you make of it." She described that, in the beginning, she was unsure about what it meant to send your child to a Chabad school. Initially, she said that sending her child to a Chabad school, "frightened me, I didn't know what to expect. Under no circumstance would it be acceptable for my son to wear a yarmulke at school."



She also shared an anecdote about anticipating the beginning of school. Holly and her husband were unsure about whether or not her husband should shake their son's teacher's hand when they met her in person. They were concerned that it would appear disrespectful, fearing that she did not touch men other than her husband. Ultimately, they decided not to risk embarrassment. She said, "We decided, there would be no touching."

In spite of her initial hesitation, Holly has been pleased with her experience at Preschool of the Arts. She used two words that I heard in each interview that I conducted: "warm" and "welcoming." She has happy to discover, "it wasn't too religious for me;" she was even surprised to find that there were two non-Jewish students in her son's class. She also mentioned that there was only one child in the class that seemed like he came from an "ultra-religious" family. She estimated that three-quarters of the mothers are international. Interestingly, while her perception is that there is a range of levels of religious practice, many of the boys in her son's class are waiting to cut their hair in accordance with Jewish practice.

Holly has also appreciated the educational style of the school. She is extremely pleased with her son's teacher, saying that, "she is one of the best teachers I have ever seen," noting that she is extremely young and lives in Brooklyn with her family. Holly does report, however, that people complain about a high rate of teacher turnover, as many of the teachers are young and often do not return after they start their own families.

Holly says that at Preschool of the Arts, "they always take that extra little step." The Reggio Emilia model that informs the school's work has certainly impacted Holly's experience of the school. She particularly likes the school's superior parent communication and the way in which they help parents to understand their

children's projects and artwork. She observes that the building is beautiful and built with the Reggio Emilia philosophy as a guide. Holly said the Preschool of the Arts is more expensive than the nursery school at the Brotherhood Synagogue, but she said, "we're getting what we paid for."

Holly's family has not gotten very involved in the community at Preschool of the Arts, though she acknowledges that it's not for lack of opportunity. There are Shabbat, holiday celebrations and open houses for families. She notes that people are all very friendly; personally, she just finds pick up and drop off to be hectic and she already has a Jewish community with which to observe Shabbat and holidays.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Holly's son's experience is the fact that they are seriously considering keeping him at Preschool of the Arts. When we spoke, she was considering applying to a few other schools now that he was old enough for other nursery schools in their neighborhood. The only place that she says they are very seriously considering is the Brotherhood Synagogue Nursery School. However, she says "the more time he stays at Preschool of the Arts, the more we are thinking about staying." When her son started they had been sure that it would only be for one year. Now, if he's offered a spot at Brotherhood, she's not sure she wants to transfer him out of Preschool of the Arts.

#### *Sarah, Chai Tots*<sup>140</sup>

Sarah is a mother of two. Her son attended Chai Tots in Park Slope, Brooklyn from age two until he started kindergarten this past September. Sarah's daughter is three and in her second year at Chai Tots. Sarah and her husband are not currently affiliated with a congregation, but have created an active Jewish life for their family

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<sup>140</sup> Chai Tots Preschool, <http://www.chaitotspreschool.com/>.

by taking advantage of many of the Jewish resources in their neighborhood. She says of her family's Jewish life that they, "kind of piecemeal it together." Occasionally, they go to the Chabad shul on 9<sup>th</sup> street in Park Slope, as well as to Beth Elohim, a local Reform congregation, for Shir l'Shabbat -- which its website describes as, "a weekly Shabbat party not to be missed!"<sup>141</sup> They also attend Shira b'Shishi, an "Israeli-style" Shabbat celebration on Friday nights. They go to Brooklyn Jews for High Holidays, though they don't find that to be particularly family-friendly and imagine that it will not work for their family for much longer.

Sarah characterizes her own childhood as "very Reform," although they were affiliated with a Conservative congregation. Sarah's mother grew up in New Jersey going to a Conservative synagogue that Sarah's grandfather had helped to found. Sarah's father had grown up a secular Israeli. Zionism was a cornerstone of her family's Jewish identity. Sarah and her siblings went to Conservative Hebrew school. Her family lit Shabbat candles every week but only because Sarah was "insistent," and her mother obliged "begrudgingly."

Sarah spent a few years at Jewish summer camp, attending Camp Ramah and Young Judea. She always wanted to learn more about Judaism. She explains, "I was always very interested, it was part of my calling, in a way." When Sarah was in her early 20s she made *aliyah*, remaining in Israel for one year. It was here that Sarah was exposed to a wide range of Jewish practice and learned how to navigate the *siddur*. She describes that she and her friends, "learned together how to *daven* in any *shul*." Sarah spent the bulk of her twenties living on the Upper West Side and "trying to find a husband." During this period of her life she spent time with Aish HaTorah, and she tried many times to become more religious. She found that living a more religious

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<sup>141</sup> "Shabbat at CBE," Congregation Beth Elohim, Prayer & Holidays, accessed February 12, 2013, <http://congregationbethelohim.org/content/shabbat-cbe>.

lifestyle wasn't for her. But, she considers herself a spiritual person and she remarks that she, "did crazy things and went to crazy parts of Brooklyn to meet different rabbis." She said that she prayed at Amuka, a site in the Upper Galilee where people make pilgrimage in the hopes that they will meet their soul mate. She said, laughingly, that she met her husband within a year of visiting Amuka.

Sarah's husband grew up in Venezuela in a family that is half-Sephardic and half-Ashkenazi, his family a blend of Persian and Russian roots. He grew up going to an Orthodox synagogue, as in Venezuela most Jews were "either Orthodox or nothing." They didn't keep Shabbat but they always had Shabbat dinners and celebrated holidays. They were religious in what Sarah called "a very Sephardic way." They lit candles, and believed in astrology and tarot cards. Their Judaism was heavily influenced by a profound sense of spirituality. Sarah notes that all of her husband's cousins now live in the United States, and they are all modern orthodox.

When I asked Sarah about her reasons for sending her children to a Chabad preschool, she had a very clear sense of what influenced her decision. She explained, "My first, and kind of gut reason, was that I felt when I went to visit [the school] that there was a lot of love in the building. I tend to make most of my decisions about life in general but especially the kids on...a gut feeling." In other words, her choice was rooted in how she felt during the visit, rather than any concrete factors. She talked about how she had always been impressed how in large, religious Jewish families, siblings cared for one another. Though quick to acknowledge that there can be exceptions, she said, "in general, its...a very loving environment."

She also said, "It was a little bit of a fantasy for me." She was educated in public schools and had wished that she could have attended traditional Jewish

schools. Her husband's family was very comfortable with Chabad as they were accustomed to the traditional Jewish environment in Venezuela.

Finally, Sarah mentioned that they chose Chai Tots because it was close to their home. The school is an easy commute from where her family lives in Park Slope. She noted, however, that this was not the only reason. They live across the street from Beth Elohim, so if convenience was the only factor, than Beth Elohim would have been the logical choice.

Beth Elohim has played a significant role in Sarah's family's Jewish life, though she and her husband have been reluctant to formally affiliate there. She explained, "We didn't want to identify [or] connect with a Reform synagogue. We didn't really understand what it was all about." She also shared a misgiving about the community. In spite of the fact that she considers herself an "open-minded person," she and her husband worry about the high numbers of intermarried families at Beth Elohim. She describes that at Beth Elohim, "intermarriage is welcomed with open arms, and I am an open person, but I don't want that for my children."

When I asked Sarah her feelings about Chai Tots being sponsored by Chabad, she reported that saw it as an advantage. "I think it made me like it, I felt happy to align myself." Sarah is happy that her children are getting an intensive Jewish education, recognizing that this may be the only time that they're going to be in that type of environment. She loves that from a very young age, the school presents, "God as a core thing." The kids are learning Jewish songs and practices, and she's really proud of that. She said, "it feels like its like that first spark has been lit...they're starting their lives out in the right place." She continued, "I want them to feel connected to Judaism and connected to God in a joyful way."

Sarah has become part of the school community, saying, “I have made my closest friends there.” She says that the community is “diverse,” and she was initially surprised to find that there were gay couples with children in the school. Sarah notes that there are some non-Jewish mothers, and says that she’s not entirely sure how the school deals with that. She’s under the impression that they’re honest, and acknowledge that they don’t consider their children Jewish, but Chai Tots won’t turn anyone away. She is happy with the teachers overall, saying that they are young and very open and warm.

As satisfied as Sarah is, she knows that their involvement at Chabad is not going to work for her family forever. Her son is now in public Kindergarten and attends the Chai Tots religious school once a week. She was intrigued by the idea of Jewish day school, but said that her husband wasn’t supportive. She particularly mentioned Hannah Senesh, a Jewish Day School in the neighborhood. However, the high tuition cost coupled with the excellent quality of their public school district made it a difficult expense to justify.

Though her children have been happy at Chai Tots, she sees the local Reform congregation as an inevitability in her family’s future. “There’s a point at a certain age, where now its all fine and good, like he gets there and they put *tzitzit* on him and its so cute and I love it and it makes my heart sing but you know, he’s not going to wear them at home, so eventually we’re moving over to Beth Elohim.” In spite of her reservations, Sarah feels that eventually, they will need to find a Jewish community that is more closely aligned with her family’s practice.

*Elaina, Chai Tots*

Elaina lives in Park Slope as well with her husband and two sons who are five-and-a half and seven. When her older son was ready for preschool she began looking around the neighborhood, knowing that she wanted a school in walking distance. The first school that she looked at was Beth Elohim, the local Reform congregational preschool. She discovered they didn't offer the type of program for which she was looking. Their program for two-year-olds only had class two days a week for two hours sessions, many of which required the presence of a caregiver. With Beth Elohim not a viable option for her family at this time, she broadened her search.

Elaina liked the idea of a Jewish preschool for her children, so she turned to the Internet resource "Park Slope Parents" for preschool ideas. She said she kept seeing comments from people who were pleased with their experience at Chai Tots. She read many comments that told perspective parents to "[not] be put off by the fact that it is Chabad." She got the impression that even "as a Reform Jew, I, and my family, would be welcome there."

Elaina articulated three primary reasons for choosing Chai Tots. The first was convenience; Chai Tots was walking distance from her home. The school also offered the hours that she needed and their program for two-year-olds enabled her to enroll her son for two full days a week. Finally, she said that she chose it over other neighborhood preschools that would meet those two prerequisites because it was a Jewish school. Though she had considered non-Jewish schools, she didn't look very seriously at the non-Jewish options.

Elaina had a Reform Jewish upbringing in New York City. Her family went to services on holidays and she became Bat Mitzvah, but Judaism was never a priority for them. When she was in high school, Elaina become interested in Judaism when

she enrolled in a Modern and Biblical Hebrew course that was taught by a rabbi. After graduating college, she spent one year in the rabbinic program at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion before deciding that it wasn't for her. She says that her commitment to her children's Jewish education is partially a response to her own experience – she wanted her children to have an experience of being Jewish that she didn't feel when she was growing up.

When I asked Elaina about her husband's background she explained, "we're a Jewish family, but one member is not Jewish." Elaina considers her husband a "religious person not a spiritual person." He grew up attending church every week and identifies as Catholic. Religious values, particularly in relationship to social justice, are very important to him. For this reason, he is very committed to his children's religious education even though it is in a faith different from his own. Elaina uses soccer games by way of illustration. When looking to enroll her sons in a soccer league, she was disappointed to learn that the games were all on Saturdays.<sup>142</sup> Whereas in her childhood, soccer may have trumped religious school, her husband is more certain; in their family, religious education is more important than soccer.

Elaina reflects that perhaps if she had married someone who shared her faith, she would not have felt as strongly about her children's religious education. But, she says since "they're going to see their dad going to church every week," she wanted them to start "building their sense of themselves as Jewish." Her husband's regular church attendance also influenced her commitment to synagogue; the family is at the synagogue at least once every week.

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<sup>142</sup> Congregation Beth Elohim offers families a religious school program called *Yachad* which is a "Shabbat school." Many students attend religious school on Saturday.



Elaina said that the husband's faith was not an issue at Chabad. She does not recall exactly if she ever had to indicate his religion on any of the paperwork but she says that they never asked any questions in person. She joked, "They were happy to take us, [and] to take our money." From her husband's perspective, it was a slightly strange environment. He found the school a little bit "alien" and "weird." She partly attributes this to the fact that he had joined her in the Jewish environments where she felt comfortable and, as such, had grown accustomed to more liberal Jewish norms. Still, she said that he appreciated that religious values are at the core of the school.

Elaina's children both attended Chai Tots for one year, before switching into Beth Elohim's early childhood center. When I asked her if it was hard to leave she answered simply, "No." She then qualified this, adding that, "it was a little bittersweet." But Elaina had reservations about having her children at a Chabad school. She explained, "I felt that their particular brand of Judaism was not mine, and as the kids got older, they would absorb that more and I wasn't comfortable with that." Elaina shared a story that she had heard from another mother. This mother told her son that he was adorable, and he responded, "That's the way Hashem made me." Elaina explained that this affirmed her choice to send her children to Beth Elohim. She saw it as evidence that the older children begin to internalize the "dogma" and she was uncomfortable with that.

When she spoke about what she valued about the school, Elaina likened the school environment to an Orthodox family: "They're large, they're warm, they're close." Though the teachers are young, Elaina believes that they are successful because of their experience with caring for their own brothers and sisters. She was quick with praise of the school. "It was a wonderful experience...I can't say enough

about the experience we had during the time that we were there...The teachers were loving and warm and dedicated.”

The emphasis on large families in the Chabad world that Elaina saw primarily as a benefit also proved to be a challenge. She talked about her younger son’s experience with a young teacher to whom he grew very attached. In the middle of the year, she got married and moved to Florida. A new teacher came in to take her place, but she wasn’t permanent and someone else soon followed. Elaina felt like they were just plugging someone in to fill the space. And, while Elaina said that the head teacher was wonderful and very competent, “something felt a little bit ad hoc about it that sort of made me a little uncomfortable.”

Elaina’s sons are now both involved at Beth Elohim and Elaina is a very involved congregant. She praised the Yachad program, which is the Saturday religious school program for families, remarking that it integrates the learning for the entire family. She explained “it feels very much like we’re not sending them to school, its part of our family process.” At the end of our conversation, Elaina said, “I went into it knowing already that we were only in it for one year.” And while she enjoyed the experience and opted for Chai Tots for both of her children, she is relieved to have her family’s Jewish experiences centered now at Beth Elohim.

#### *Susan, Chai Tots*

Susan lives in Park Slope and is the mother of three girls who are six, three, and eleven months. Her oldest daughter graduated from Chai Tots, her middle daughter is at Chai Tots now and she expects to send her youngest when she is ready to begin school.

When I asked Susan why she chose Chai Tots for her daughters, she began by saying that she was looking for a Jewish school. She then explained that in New York City, choosing a preschool is different from other places, as there's a tedious and involved application and admissions process. She said that she began by looking at all kind of programs, some Jewish and some secular, but she knew that she wanted a Jewish program. Ultimately, she says that she wanted them to have a Jewish experience as "the foundation of their Jewish consciousness comes from those early days."

As with other women with whom I spoke, the other Jewish preschool in the neighborhood was at Beth Elohim, the local Reform congregation. Beth Elohim's early childhood center was the only other program that she seriously considered. While she liked the school, she found that it was very secular and light on the Jewish content. At Chai Tots, the children learn the *berachot* and they learn about all of the holidays. In the end, she observed that Chai Tots is "fundamentally a Jewish preschool, whereas the other one is a preschool with light Jewish content." While she sees that her oldest daughter does not necessarily remember everything that she learned while at Chai Tots, Susan still thinks it's a good place to start. Susan said, "even though it's way beyond the level of Judaism that we practice, that's a great foundation."

Susan has been pleased with her daughters' experiences at Chai Tots. She finds the school to be "nurturing and loving." And she does not have strong feelings about the school's affiliation with Chabad, saying "the school is made up of people who love Judaism." She explains, "there's a certain character about a Chabad teacher... they're very young, enthusiastic." As others have mentioned, there is a risk of teachers leaving in the middle of the year because of their commitment to creating

their own families, but Susan has a generous approach to this saying, “you know going in there [that] there’s a high turnover rate.”

Susan is quick to praise Chai Tots to her friends. She said that they often say to her, “isn’t that pure indoctrination?” or “that’s just too religious for us.” Susan said that she responds by saying that she does not think that Chai Tots is too religious for anyone. “They’re just learning these things now, and it’s really just the basic knowledge of these Jewish prayers...they’re not forcing you to become, you know, that religious.”

Susan cherishes the Jewish experiences that she had as a child. She went to a Solomon Shechter school until 5<sup>th</sup> grade in Cleveland, Ohio and grew up Conservative, though she spent eight summers at Camp Wise, a reform Jewish summer camp. She also spent six weeks in Israel as a teenager, and returned for Young Judea Year Course before college, as well as a junior year abroad. Susan sees her informal Jewish educational experiences as those that really shaped her Jewish identity. Her husband grew up in Pittsburgh, with an American father and an Israeli mother. He grew up “Conservadox” and celebrated Shabbat every Friday night as a child. Israel was also a big part of his upbringing, and he spent most of his childhood summers in Israel.

Susan feels very comfortable in the Chai Tots community. She says that the parents are wonderful, and that the majority of her friends in Brooklyn she met through the preschool. Her perception is that most of the families have very similar backgrounds to her own. And she was surprised to find that, “there’s nobody that’s...ultra-religious.” She estimates that in her daughter’s class, maybe one or two people are kosher and keep Shabbat. She marveled that her family was one of the more observant families.

Susan explained that in their family, they now have Shabbat dinner every Friday. She sees her children's experience at Chai Tots as complementing and even encouraging their family practice. She explained: "We like [the kids] to know that we know what they're learning and we're happy with what they're learning." She and her husband had wanted to have Shabbat dinners when they had a family, and Chabad has played a role in supporting that practice.

At the moment, Susan's oldest daughter remains enrolled in the Chai Tots supplementary religious school. Susan recognizes that Chabad will not work for their family forever. She explained, "At some point, the Chabad doctrine will probably conflict with our personal family values." She wants her daughters to mark their Bat Mitzvah by reading Torah, and to have "a place in the synagogue." But for now, Susan is comfortable with her daughter in the religious school saying, "she's still too young to get that part of it."

When considering her children's future Jewish education, Susan says that, "day school has an appeal for me, but here it's really for the elite of the Jewish community." For Susan's family, Jewish day school is cost prohibitive. Susan imagines that they will eventually join Beth Elohim, and she's aware of Beth Elohim's religious school offerings, particularly noting Keshet, a Hebrew immersion supplementary school program. Still she says, "I have a strong, strong feeling that Judaism and Jewish consciousness comes from camp and trips to Israel." She looks forward to being able to provide these critical experiences for her own children as they grow up.

*Katherine, Chabad Early Learning Center*<sup>143</sup>

Katherine is the mother of two boys, one who is almost nine and the other who is five. She lives on the Upper West Side and sent both of her sons to the Chabad Early Learning Center. Katherine converted to Judaism before marrying her husband.

When I asked Katherine why she chose to send her children to Chabad, she told me a story. “I decided to send both of my boys to Chabad because a good friend from my synagogue, from B’nei Jeshurun, said when I was pregnant, ‘mazel tov, you will send your children to Chabad.’” Katherine was taken aback and said, “You’re crazy. They don’t even think I’m Jewish.” At the time, she dismissed the idea saying, “to think that I’m going to make that choice to go into an ultra-orthodox preschool and they would accept me just seems totally foreign.”

A year later, when Katherine was thinking more seriously about a program for her son, she learned that her sister-in-law was planning on sending her daughter to the Chabad Early Learning Center. She decided to look into the program. She spoke to people about the community, and gained the reassurance that she needed that it was a “mixed community.” She called, applied and met with the Chabad rabbi. She explained, “I met with the rabbi, who definitely had questions about my conversion, about my Judaism...He made it clear that I did not have an orthodox conversion, and they would want me to at some point.” But, she realized that the rabbi was concerned about her conversion for her own sake, not for her son’s. She also spoke to her own rabbi, who reassured Katherine that her son’s Judaism would not be questioned in the school. Their questions about Katherine’s conversion were for her, as she said, “they have a bigger game plan.”

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<sup>143</sup> Chabad Early Learning Center Jewish Preschool Upper West Side Manhattan, <http://www.chabadelc.com/>.

Katherine's visit to the school helped her to see that the school would be a good fit for their family. As opposed to her initial misgivings, Katherine explained, "When I went, I just felt very welcomed, and comfortable, and no one really questioned me or why I was there." She was impressed by the way that the teachers treated the children. "These people genuinely care about every child as if they were a gift from God." And she realized that though the teachers were very traditional, "they manage to make the parents feel welcome, but not stigmatized if they're not going to be part of that lifestyle."

Katherine was very clear about the three main factors that impacted her family's choice of Chabad. The first was proximity -- she lived six blocks from the Early Learning Center. The second was the schedule: from the time a child is eighteen months, they can be in school from 8:30-3:00. While Katherine typically sent her boys to school from 8:30-1, she liked knowing that they had the option of the extended day. She mentioned the challenge of having so many minor Jewish holidays off from school but, "it fit with the majority of our lifestyle." She noted that, "there are very few drop-off programs for kids who are not toilet trained, they're fine changing diapers...that was a huge determining factor." Finally, she said that she and her husband, "felt okay there." Overall, they were happy with the way the school felt, and they weren't overly concerned with academics for their children at that age.

Katherine added that what she came to be most grateful for, she didn't even know to look for in a school. She found that the Early Learning Center was cutting edge in the support that they give children with special needs, and they were aggressive about helping parents identify their children's needs. She was so grateful that, "they pinpointed what their issues were at a very young age." Both of her children have special needs and she credits the school with helping them identify what

was happening very early on. She explained, “If I hadn’t started there with them, I can’t say they would be doing okay now.”

Katherine was raised Catholic in New Jersey, both of her parents were born in Poland. She feels lucky to have had a CCD teacher that helped Katherine to understand at a young age that all of Christian understanding comes from Judaism. As a result she “always had a deep respect and understanding for Judaism.” She also explains, “I could never really make peace with Catholicism politically, and at some point, I realized that when I have kids I can’t really teach them this because...I don’t agree with the majority of our teachings, how could I pass that on?” This realization led to her openness to conversion when she began dating her now-husband. Very early on in their relationship he said to her, “this is very important to me to have a Jewish family and a Jewish home.” She was taken aback, but open to the idea. She is now very involved at B’nei Jeshurun, a congregation on the Upper West Side, and has served on the board and is the chair of their young families initiative.

Katherine’s husband grew up in Scarsdale, New York in a family that was “very culturally Jewish.” They were always involved at Westchester Reform Temple (WRT) and Katherine converted to Judaism with Rabbi Rick Jacobs, at that time WRT’s senior rabbi.

Katherine describes her own family’s practice as “definitely Reform.” They observe major holidays and are very involved at B’nei Jeshurun. They try to have Shabbat dinner on Friday nights, and they say the Shabbat blessings. She and her husband went to services regularly before they had children, but she said that her boys aren’t ready yet to sit through a full service. Both children’s sensitivity to noise makes children’s services overwhelming for them but she looks forward to them reaching an age when they will be able to attend services as a family.



Katherine's husband was initially surprised by her desire to send their children to a Chabad school -- "he thought I was crazy!" Still, she said, "slowly he started realizing, these people aren't out to get me, they don't want me to do something I don't want to do. They are just really lovely, nice people." He has now studied with an Aish HaTorah rabbi for several years, and Katherine credits his openness to studying with a more traditional rabbi to their family's experiences with Chabad.

Katherine describes the school community as "mixed." She described her perception of the different populations represented in the school. There are the "ultra-orthodox," these families typically live in Brooklyn, and the children's parents work in the school or other facets of the Upper West Side Chabad programming. Then there are the "modern-Orthodox" and these families go to one of many orthodox congregations on the Upper West Side. There are "the people like me," families who are affiliated with B'nei Jeshurun, or other liberal congregations. And then, there are the Israelis, who represent a range of different ways of practicing Judaism. Ultimately, "its really [a mix of] everything." In spite of the religious diversity within in the school, most families attend holiday related programming at school when it is offered.

Katherine describes that there was a significant learning curve associated with being part of the community. She recalls letting one of the teachers and her family use her apartment while they were away for one Shabbat. She had no idea how to prepare the apartment for them. She remembers calling friends about what kind of food to buy, and what kind of accommodations to make. She said she spent a lot of time just figuring out how to turn off the light in her refrigerator. In spite of the fact that so much was unfamiliar, she said, "they never made me feel weird or bad."

Katherine was extremely satisfied with her children's experience at the Early Learning Center. When I asked her what she thinks they gained, she spoke in expansive terms. They learned independence and they learned how to communicate. She was pleased with their early Hebrew foundation, saying with pride that they learned the "Alef, Bet" by the time they were two. Ultimately, Katherine and her husband are most grateful for the school's attentiveness to their children's special needs. She truly credits the Early Learning Center with helping get her children on the right track at a very early age and enabling them to know what they needed to succeed academically.

Katherine's older son now attends the Rodeph Sholom day school, a day school affiliated with the Reform congregation Rodeph Sholom. Her younger son is at Columbia Grammar. Katherine says that in many ways they chose Rodeph Sholom for the same reasons that they chose their preschool, proximity, program and the feeling in the school. "If he can get a Jewish education as part of his regular academics, why not? And it's a liberal setting, it wasn't Heschel and it wasn't any place where the observance didn't match what we were doing at home."

In spite of her initial satisfaction with Rodeph Sholom, she is not certain about how long her older son will remain there. Her younger son was not accepted at Rodeph Sholom and she worries that her older son's learning differences will make it hard for him to stay. At some point in the near future, she imagines that both of her children will be at supplementary religious school at B'nei Jeshurun.

Since Katherine's children are no longer in preschool, she is not as close as she once was with the school community. When I asked her if she is still connected, she said, "No, but I know I could be in a second if I wanted to...I always sort of feel like they're there waiting for me." As an active participant in liberal Jewish life,

Katherine is quite grateful for her children's academic beginnings at the Early Learning Center.

*Jessica and Roi, Alef Bet Prechool<sup>144</sup>*

Jessica and Roi have one son who went to two years of Alef Bet Preschool and is now in preschool at Rodeph Sholom. Their journey to Alef Bet Preschool, the preschool affiliated with Chabad of the Upper East Side, came by way of a slightly different path than some of the other families with whom I spoke. Roi was an active participant in the Chabad worship community on the Upper East Side. Their son was enrolled in another daycare but they were not entirely satisfied with it. Someone at Shabbat services asked Roi about where his son went to school and suggested that Roi look at Alef Bet Preschool.

Jessica and Roi were initially drawn to the program because of Roi's involvement in the community, but they also found that it worked for their family on a variety of levels. Roi is Israeli, and liked the idea that Hebrew would be a part of their son's education from a very young age. They keep a kosher home, and they have found it challenging to teach nannies and daycare how to be sensitive to their son's dietary restrictions. Jessica said that, at a Chabad preschool she thought, "the teachers would be nurturing and caring," and, "Roi liked the religious part." And, she said, "they had great hours and it was not thirty-thousand for pre-k."

Jessica had considered other preschools. As a teacher at the Rodeph Sholom Day School, she looked into their program but the hours did not work for Jessica's family. She joked that Rodeph Sholom's program for two year olds was, "five minutes a day and 18,000 dollars." In reality, the program met twice a week for two

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<sup>144</sup> Preschool - Chabad Israel Center,  
[http://www.chabadic.com/templates/section\\_cdo/aid/1626608/jewish/Preschool.htm](http://www.chabadic.com/templates/section_cdo/aid/1626608/jewish/Preschool.htm).

hours and required that children were accompanied by a parent or a nanny. Chabad had “daycare hours,” and their son was able to stay at school until 3:30 or 4, which is very atypical. Jessica explained, “they were very, very helpful in terms of what I needed as a working mom.”

Jessica and Roi had very different religious upbringings. Jessica grew up going to a Conservative synagogue, though she likened its style to Rodeph Sholom. Her family often had Shabbat dinner, though “it was not set in stone.” She said that her upbringing was very different from her own family’s practice now.

Roi grew up secular in Israel. When his family moved to the United States, they became more religious, his mother in particular. When his mother passed away seven years ago, he became more religious and started praying every morning, and has continued that practice to this day. He is kosher and tries to go to services on Shabbat. Jessica explains that “moving here coupled with his mom passing has made Roi more religious.”

Together, they keep a kosher home and they celebrate Shabbat every Friday night. Jessica said that Roi used to take their son to services every Saturday. She explained, “[Roi’s] recently stopped because of business, he’s crushed to work on Shabbat...its not what my husband is about...but he has to do it because business is suffering.” Jessica is quick to differentiate between her own feelings about her son’s Judaism and her husband’s feelings. “I’m trying to raise him as a good Jew, Roi is trying to raise him as a Jew-Jew.” She wants her son to be exposed to Jewish values and culture, whereas Roi is more concerned about the content of his Jewish education.

Jessica was pleased with her family’s experience at Chabad. She admits to having many reservations about the community. “I thought that I would be judged...I was worried that they would try to change you, and there was none of that.” Jessica

felt like she could be herself and be honest about her own practice. She said, “I felt like me not being religious, walking in, in my jean shorts...there’s no judgment whatsoever there.” And in addition to feeling comfortable, she emphasized over and over again how well the Early Learning Center worked for their family. It was less expensive than some of the other schools in the area, and they offered hours that were practical for their family. Jessica said, “I would highly recommend it to anyone.”

Jessica and Roi have different goals for the next steps in their son’s Jewish education. Jessica is happy to have their son at Rodeph Sholom, and imagines that he will continue there. She says, “I get concerned sometimes about my son being in an all Jewish day school -- you want some sort of cultural differences -- but living in New York City, you’re going to get that, he’s living in a melting pot.” Roi, on the other hand, worries that he will not learn enough Judaism at Rodeph Sholom, saying, “I would hope that they would teach him the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew, and how it is important to practice Judaism, and putting tefillin on, and Shabbat and Kiddush, and marrying Jewish...the whole shebang.” He recognizes that his son may not get the intense Jewish education that Roi desires in a liberal Jewish day school. “I don’t know if Rodeph is the right venue for that, I don’t know if they teach him how to put on tefillin, I don’t know...If they give him the core, if they give him the basics...I’ll complete the rest.”

And while Jessica teaches at Rodeph Sholom and their son is a student there, their primary Jewish community remains Chabad on the Upper East Side. There, Jessica and Roi feel like their different Jewish needs can be met, and their son can be part of a Jewish community that works for their family.

### **Analysis:**

Ultimately, it was obvious that families' choices balanced upon four primary factors: hours, age cutoff, proximity to the home, Jewish affiliation, and the emotional response to the program. These four considerations all combined to guide parents toward a Chabad school.

#### *Convenience*

All of the parents with whom I spoke, clearly articulated that the school "worked" for their families. Having flexible hours, changing diapers and offering a drop off program for two-year-olds were what set Chabad apart from other early childhood options. While for some parents this is just one among many reasons that they chose a Chabad school, parents from each of the three schools noted that the Chabad school's hours and flexibility were critical factors in determining their school choice. One parent with whom I exchanged emails but did not formally interview wrote, "We chose Chabad because they were the only school that took my young daughter. She was 22 months when she started. She went two days a week for two years. This was the only reason she went there."<sup>145</sup> Holly and Elaina both noted that they visited Chabad schools after realizing that their children would not be eligible at a school that had seemed to be a better fit ideologically.

Proximity was also a factor in all of these families' school choice but not the only factor, as they often had more than one school to choose from within walking distance. Particularly in Park Slope, parents mentioned that they had the opportunity to choose between more than one Jewish school within a reasonable proximity to their home.

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<sup>145</sup> Annie Sigal Medina, "Following Up," e-mail message to author, December 19, 2012.

### *Cost*

Cost played an interesting role in family's school choices. Jessica was the only person who admitted directly that cost was a major factor in her family's decision making process. She compared Alef Bet Preschool to alternative options and found that while the cost was significant, it provided necessary childcare for her family. She balked at Rodeph Sholom's program for two-year-olds because of its high cost and the fact that it required each child to come with a parent or nanny.

The parents from Brooklyn did not cite cost as a factor in their decision making process, though two did mention the prohibitive cost of Jewish day school. All three Brooklyn families with whom I spoke live in a wonderful public school district and none are seriously considering day school for their children's future. Both Sarah and Susan wished that day school was an option but had ruled it out because of the high tuition.

Holly mentioned that in her case, Preschool of the Arts was more expensive than the congregation school where she was also considering sending her son. In spite of that, she feels that the quality of the school makes the higher tuition seem more reasonable.

### *“Warm and Welcoming”*

Another trend that emerged was the fact that parents felt comfortable in an environment that was initially unfamiliar. Many spoke of anxiety in anticipation of visiting the school or bringing their child on the first day. Some had concerns about not knowing how to behave in the company of more observant Jews. Parents worried about somehow transgressing or unknowingly doing something that would make the teachers feel uncomfortable. For example, Holly and her husband wondered if her

husband should shake the teacher's hand; Katherine wasn't sure how to prepare her apartment to host a teacher's family for Shabbat.

Parents also worried that their practice and level of observance would be under scrutiny. Jessica worried that she would be judged for not being very observant. Katherine was uncertain that she would be welcome having converted to Judaism with a Reform rabbi. However, again and again, parents shared that they were made to feel welcome, and that they never felt judged.

This sense of welcoming and warmth was certainly apparent in the classroom as well. Parents expressed a range of opinions when asked about the importance of formal instruction for their children at such a young age, but they all appreciated the way teachers interacted with the children. They noted that the teachers were all warm and loving. The care with which the teachers treated each child was noted by parents, and made them feel at ease.

Parents were also surprised to find how *they* fit into the school community. There were children with one non-Jewish parent, or, in Holly's case, non-Jewish children in the school. Susan found that having weekly Shabbat dinners made her one of the more observant families in her daughter's class. Children's families practiced Judaism in a variety of different ways, and the parents to whom I spoke were happy to say that most of the other parents were "like me," feeling that they fit comfortably into the community.

### *Teacher Turnover*

The most consistent critique that I heard had to do with the rate of teacher turnover at the school. Elaina was unhappy when her son's teacher left in the middle of the year after having formed a strong connection with him. Holly and Susan also



mentioned that teacher turnover is a concern in their schools. Parents recognized that the demographics of the teachers and the child-raising demands in the Chabad community make it likely that teachers would not complete the school year. With that said, parents were overall pleased with the quality of the teaching and note the teachers' experience and expertise.

### *Upbringing*

None of the parents that I spoke to were raised in very observant Jewish homes, and there was a great diversity to how a parent's upbringing impacted their feelings about Chabad. Susan had a strong Jewish identity throughout her childhood, with a day school education through fifth grade as well as formative camp and Israeli experiences. For her, this emphasized the importance of instilling Jewish identity in a child from a very young age. Sarah, on the other hand, wished that she had richer Jewish experiences as a child, and saw her children's preschool experience as a partial way of giving her children something that she had never had.

Jessica and Sarah both have spouses who were not born in America. Holly and Katherine both made reference to the high number of non-American parents at Chabad preschools. Jews from abroad are less likely to have experienced liberal Judaism. Regardless of their own level of practice, they are accustomed to traditional Judaism being the only Jewish option. Perhaps it is for this reason that those parents who grew up abroad are less likely to feel uncomfortable with sending their child to a Chabad school. As Sarah described her husband's experience growing up Jewish in Venezuela, "you're either Orthodox or nothing."

*“Eventually...”*

Many parents talked about how pleased they were for their young children to get a Jewish “foundation” at a Chabad school. They spoke with pride about their children learning the “Alef, Bet” and the *berachot* by the age of two. Holly was happy to have her son’s school “fill in the gaps,” recognizing that he may have been exposed to a greater range of Jewish practice in school than he would be at home. The parents I spoke with were happy to have their children immersed in Judaism at this age, and were, for the most part, unconcerned that it did not entirely match their own family’s Jewish practice.

At the same time, there was a recognition that this would not work forever. Some of the parents had already connected to other Jewish communities, either while their children were in school or after they had left. Others continue to be primarily connected to their school, but recognize that as their children grow up, they will need to find another Jewish community. Susan worried about giving her daughter access to a full range of Jewish experiences. Elaina shared a story about an older preschool child who revealed that he had begun to internalize a theology that was quite different from his parents’ Jewish worldview. Katherine talked about how she was pleased to have her son in Rodeph Sholom Day School, because it matched her family’s Jewish practice. Parents were pleased that their child’s introduction to Judaism outside of the home was in the warm embrace of a Chabad school. Still, as they mature, parents look for a Jewish community for their family that more closely mirrors their own sensibilities.

### *Conclusion*

For all of the families I spoke with, their child's preschool was only one point of Jewish engagement for their family. Jessica is a teacher at the Rodeph Sholom day school. Sarah and Susan's families take advantage of programming at Temple Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, and Elaina and her family are active members of the synagogue. Holly is affiliated with the Brotherhood synagogue. Katherine's family is affiliated at B'nei Jeshurun and her son attends the Rodeph Sholom Day School. In considering this pattern, I acknowledge that it may not be normative and may be more reflective of those with whom I have been able to connect. It does, however, point to a universal comfort in moving between Jewish worlds, as well as a desire to take advantage of any Jewish experiences that are well suited to their family's needs.

What surprised me the most from the conversations that I had about Chabad preschools was the integration of a variety of different Jewish experiences that parents mentioned sharing with their children. Chabad early childhood programs were one step on a family's Jewish journey. For some, it was the best option because of their childcare needs. For some, it was about the rich Jewish environment. For some, it was the way that the school environment felt when they were there. For most, it was a combination of a few factors.

To use Sarah's words, each of the families were "piece-mealing it together." Enrolling their children in Chabad preschool was one piece of a puzzle that included all different points of Jewish experiences. In a post-modern world of fluid identity, enrolling their child in a Chabad preschool did not define their family's place in the Jewish world. Their enrollment in Chabad schools was just one part of a complex puzzle of Jewish affiliation, one that was very much still emerging as each family looked to the next step of their Jewish journey.

While research points to the importance of reaching out to Jewish families while they have young children, in New York City there are abundant ways to engage in the Jewish world. Each of these families was taking advantage of more than one Jewish community to support their family's Jewish life. While it is critical that our preschools are warm, and welcoming, and make parents feel comfortable, they are far from the only point of entry into Jewish life. Parents have complex backgrounds and diverse needs themselves, and are generally open to finding Jewish community in a variety of different places, often at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

My motivation for writing about Chabad preschool and early childhood school choice was twofold. I wanted to learn more about the factors that have enabled the rapid growth and successful outreach in the Chabad early childhood world. Additionally, I write from the vantage point of a Reform rabbinical student. My research is also motivated by a desire to discover what our movement's early childhood centers can learn from Chabad's success.

To be sure, much of Chabad's achievement in early childhood originates from their theology and the legacy of the Rebbe's orientation toward outreach. According to Chabad-Lubavitch theology, with each new *mitzvah* observed, the messiah comes closer. This belief serves as a powerful incentive to engage Jewish families in Jewish life. The notion that every individual Jew carries a spark of "Hashem" informs how Chabad schools work with their students and families. Devora Krasnianski, the director of the Chabad Early Childhood Network says, "The parents may not be able to articulate that, but they feel that."<sup>146</sup> When I asked Devora how they teach their teachers to treat each child with such warmth and love, she explains that they don't have to. She says, "Many of the teachers are born to the Chabad system, and the Chabad philosophy...it's who they are...the Chabad philosophy is very much about loving every person as they are."<sup>147</sup>

Pearl Stroh, the director of the Chabad Early Learning on the Upper West Side, has a very similar message, reiterating that "all of our teachers know that each child is a gift from God, and we treat them that way." She says that their parents see this when they are at the school, and they trust that their child is loved and taken care

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<sup>146</sup> Devora Krasnianski, telephone interview by author, December 5, 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Devora Krasnianski, telephone interview by author, December 5, 2012.

of. They appreciate that the teachers understand how special their child is.<sup>148</sup> Susan Poltarak, of the Jewish Education Project, explains that the teacher and directors at Chabad schools are, “secure in their Judaism and their values...this is their life and their mission.”<sup>149</sup> As a result, the teachers and administrators are perceived to be warm, non-judgmental toward other Jews, and they make everyone feel welcome in the school community.

The enculturation that comes from growing up in the Chabad community is difficult to replicate, and the theology not resonant with Jews from outside of that community. Most Jews are not raised with the intense *Ahavat Yisrael*, or love of all Jews, that characterizes Chabad. As much as liberal Jews may want to reach out to Jews from all over the religious spectrum, they lack the same fierce motivation that comes with the belief that this work has the potential to bring about the messiah.

In spite of these core differences, liberal Jewish preschools can learn something about school culture from Chabad preschools. Parents respond to environments that are “warm and welcoming.” They experience this in all aspects of a school, from the person who is answering the phone, to the way that teachers speak to the children in their class, to the way that the director greets them at the door.

Many parents expressed fear of judgment in a Chabad environment but were pleased to discover that they did not feel judged. Similarly, in liberal Jewish settings, parents’ often feel insecure in their knowledge about Judaism, or may not themselves be Jewish. Cathy Rolland, the director of the Early Childhood arm of the Union for Reform Judaism recalled a story from when she was an early childhood center director. A mother arrived in her office in tears because she did not know the

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<sup>148</sup> Pearl Stroh, interview by author, January 16, 2013.

<sup>149</sup> Susan Poltarak and Susan Topek, interview by author, November 19, 2012.

blessings for Shabbat and she was the “Shabbat Mom” in her child’s class.<sup>150</sup> In Reform early childhood centers, it is important to be mindful that parents come from a variety of different backgrounds. Many may not have had a Jewish upbringing, but are committing to raising Jewish children. Some families may not be Jewish at all, but are attracted to the high quality of the school. An attitude of warmth and a commitment to making parents feel that they are not being judged can make people feel more comfortable getting involved in their child’s early childhood center.

In New York City, Chabad preschools are by no means cheap, though in other regions Chabad tuitions can be significantly lower than other early childhood options. Still, price is just one part of the picture. Many parents spoke about the *value* of their children’s experience at a Chabad preschool. Parents compared the cost of a two-day-a-week program that required parental supervision to the option of full day care at a Chabad school. They saw that they were getting the childcare that they needed for their investment at a Chabad school, not simply an enriching program for their children.

In order for an early childhood center to work for a family, it must be affordable and it is essential that it is able to meet their needs. In a congregational school, the early childhood center has the potential to grow and sustain the overall temple membership and grow the community. For many years, nursery schools were simply seen as a “cash-cow” tucked away in the building.<sup>151</sup> Ze’ev Aviezer, the executive director at Larchmont Temple, in Westchester, New York, in a recent presentation at Hebrew Union College, explained that they do not give any kind of financial aid to preschool families. He explained that the preschool is a service for

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<sup>150</sup> Cathy Rolland and Stephanie Fink, "Today's Lost Tribe: Finding the Families That Aren't Looking For Us" (webinar, September 15, 2011), <http://urj.org/learning/meetings/webinars/archive/>.

<sup>151</sup> Susan Poltarak and Susan Topek, interview by author, November 19, 2012.

which people need to pay, unlike other aspects of congregational life for which they are willing to make adjustments.<sup>152</sup> Making preschool financially inaccessible to potential families has an impact on the school and is also a missed opportunity to reach out to a family for what could become a lifetime of Jewish engagement.

Choosing an early childhood center is also about meeting a family's needs for their child. Offering a program for children who are two-years-old, and in some cases, even younger, can have great appeal for families. The families with whom I spoke were looking for the option of full daycare for their very young children. Even when they did not take advantage of it, they appreciated having the option. When programming for very young children requires individual supervision by a nanny or a parent, the program becomes inaccessible for families with two working parents and who do not have fulltime childcare. In considering Mark Rosen's article, this has the potential to alienate a population who falls right into a unique window of openness to Jewish engagement.

Learning from Chabad's early childhood model does not mean that Reform congregations need to replicate the model. In fact, there is risk involved with trying to be all things to all people. Many schools are not interested in starting a program for young two-year-olds, and may also not be interested in offering the hours that make Chabad attractive to some families. In many communities, a Chabad school can complement other successful neighborhood Jewish preschools in offering a different menu of services. Jaci Israel, the director of the Early Childhood Center (ECC) at Congregation Beth Elohim (CBE) in Brooklyn wrote in an email, "The Early Childhood Center at CBE is a well-established and highly regarded preschool serving over 200 families in the community, and one could also say Chai Tots is thriving in

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<sup>152</sup> Ze'ev Aviezer, "Economics of Sacred Leadership" (lecture, Senior Seminar, Hebrew Union College, New York, February 21, 2013).



spite of CBE's ECC."<sup>153</sup> Clearly, she feels as though in Park Slope, each school can thrive without threatening the success of the other.

Still, when I spoke with Susan Poltarak and Susan Topek at the Jewish Education Project they explained that often the arrival of a Chabad school in the neighborhood sends directors of existing early childhood centers into a panic.<sup>154</sup> Across the board, there has been a decline in the number of families that choose Jewish preschools for their children. Whereas at one time, one in four Jewish families in American was choosing Jewish preschools, that number has dropped to one in five. This has serious implications for the survival of the 250 Reform early childhood centers in the United States.<sup>155</sup>

The Union for Reform Judaism is working on strengthening Early Childhood programs by creating a "Community of Practice" that is focused on encouraging excellence in early childhood centers. They have selected a small cohort of congregations to participate in an 18-month learning experience, in the hopes of raising the level of early childhood offerings in the Reform Jewish community and the Jewish community at large.<sup>156</sup>

The decline in a the number of families that are choosing Jewish early childhood shows us that we all have work to do. Chabad's expansion of its early childhood offerings has the capacity to reach more people and perhaps help young families find their way to the kind of Jewish connection that they seek. Their success can help raise the bar for all of us, as we continue to challenge each other toward

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<sup>153</sup> Jaci Israel, "Early Childhood Question," e-mail message to author, February 28, 2013.

<sup>154</sup> Susan Poltarak and Susan Topek, interview by author, November 19, 2012.

<sup>155</sup> Cathy Rolland, interview by author, November 28, 2012.

<sup>156</sup> Cathy Rolland and Jennifer Magalnick, "Pursuing Excellence Through Your Early Childhood Center" (lecture), accessed November 28, 2012, <http://urj.org/cong/cop/earlychildhood/>.

achieving excellence. The success of Chabad's early childhood programs has kept families engaged who may not have otherwise found a Jewish preschool that met their family's needs. Ultimately, when a family is enthusiastic and proud of their child's Jewish learning, though it may not bring the messiah right away, the entire Jewish community is strengthened.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Parent Interview Questions**

Why did you decide to send your child to a Chabad preschool?

What were the chief factors that impacted your school choice?

Did you consider other preschools?

How would you describe your family's Jewish practice?

Describe your Jewish background. Describe your partner's Jewish (or other faith) background.

Has your family life or religious practice been impacted by your child attending a Chabad preschool?

Did the fact that the school was affiliated with the Chabad system influence your school choice? How?

What is the school community like?

Have you ever felt discomfort with any aspect of the Jewish life of the school?

What is your child gaining from their experience in a Chabad preschool?

What are your plans for the continuing Jewish education of your child?

How do you envision the Jewish life of your family in the future?