NOT YOUR PARENTS' RELIGIOUS SCHOOL: ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF JEWISH EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT

Regarding Jewish supplementary education, the narrative of "I hated it, you'll hate it, and after your Bar Mitzvah, you can quit," has become far too common between parents and children. This project examines how alternative models of Jewish supplementary education compare to traditional models. The literature review explores the history and the current state of Jewish supplementary education. It also identifies common challenges of traditional religious schools: religious schools as a flawed structure, under-qualified teachers, insufficient parental involvement, and Jewish education as a low priority. To find out how alternative models compare to traditional models, I selected three religious school programs representing three different alternative models in California to explore: 1) *Tiyul: Shabbat B'yachad* (TSBY), at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, 2) *Chodesh*, at Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills, and 3) Temple Isaiah's religious school in Lafayette. For each program, I prepared a document review, observed the program in action, and interviewed the director. I found that structural changes common to many alternative models are only part of the answer to the religious school problem. More important is developing core components; a strong curriculum, well-trained teachers, and a shared vision.

INTRODUCTION

"I never realized this could be so fun!" Rachel, a fifth grade student, new to Temple Isaiah's alternative religious school program, *Tiyul: Shabbat B'yachad*, volunteered during lunch, after the first day of class. "Everything I'd done before was boring, but this was actually interesting," she continued, remarking on her previous experience at the synagogue's traditional religious school. Rachel's enthusiasm is not what one might typically expect from a religious school student, yet it was not uncharacteristic of what I heard from students enrolled in alternative programs of Jewish education.

Growing up attending religious school three days a week, and later teaching at several religious schools, I came to understand that Jewish education is in need of transformation. I noticed a trend of uninterested students, dispassionate teachers, and absent parents, just to name a few challenges. The narrative of "I hated it, you'll hate it, and after your Bar Mitzvah, you can quit," has become far too common between parents and children. Especially considering the reality that congregational schools are where the majority of Jewish children receive their Jewish education, it is not acceptable that they continue operating at subpar standards.

Jewish educators have begun to confront the negative reputation preceding congregational schools, making changes ranging from minor tweaks to complete transformations. As a result, new, alternative models of Jewish supplementary education have emerged. In this capstone paper, I first explore challenges common in the "traditional" model of Jewish supplementary schools and then analyze several "alternative" models of Jewish supplementary programs. The purpose of this project is to

understand what inspired the creation of these alternative programs and in what ways they differ from traditional models. Having observed several alternative Jewish supplementary schools, I found that structural changes common to many alternative models are only part of the answer to the religious school problem. More important is developing core components; a strong curriculum, well-trained teachers, and a shared vision.

TERMINOLOGY

The first question regarding Jewish supplementary education is what to call it – religious school, Hebrew school, congregational school, or supplementary education? Though used synonymously, each term brings with it different connotations. Referring to a program as a "school," for example, triggers images of desks and textbooks. "Education," on the other hand, has a more general understanding, encompassing formal, informal, and experiential education. As more programs leave behind textbooks, desks, and even classrooms, excluding the word "school" from their title has becoming increasingly common. In this paper, I use the terms "religious school" and "Jewish supplementary education" interchangeably.

I will also be referencing "traditional" and "alternative" models of Jewish education. In a traditional model of supplementary Jewish education, students are grouped by grade and meet once or twice weekly, on Sunday mornings and one weekday evening. In "alternative" models, I include programs that differ from the traditional model. In some cases, a program may be alternative to a synagogue's traditional program, meaning that the synagogue offers two or more options, while in other cases, a

program is alternative in that it differs from the way religious school is typically structured, even if it is the only option.

A HISTORY OF JEWISH SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

The "traditional" religious school we know today is a product of the communal Talmud Torah center of the early twentieth century. The Talmud Torah was a model of Jewish education developed by immigrant families living in large cities, in close proximity to other Jews. It was in this period that the term "supplementary school" was born, as the Talmud Torah was designed to supplement Jewish living that organically happened in homes, communities, and synagogues. At a time when anti-Semitism was rampant, the Talmud Torah was designed to blend in to its context. It was consequently modeled to look like public school, with students grouped by grade, and learning at desks with textbooks. As Jews moved to the suburbs from big cities in the 1940s and 1950s, congregational schools, rather than communal schools, became the dominant model of Jewish education. Despite the changing needs of the communities, the structure of congregational school remained the same as the Talmud Torah.

The 1950s and 1960s marked the height of congregational schools, in which, "synagogue schools became respectable institutions, which engendered excitement, dynamism and hope" (Chazan, 1987, p. 170). The mix of active Jewish family lives and excitement over the newly founded State of Israel contributed to the success of congregational schools. More recently, as needs and interests of the Jewish community evolved, congregational schools failed to evolve with them. This, combined with the growth and success of Jewish day schools, preschools, summer camps, and Israel trips, diverted attention away from congregational schools. Congregational schools

consequently lacked support they needed to develop and flourish. This phenomenon, known as benign neglect, has negatively affected religious schools for decades, and what ensued is "an institution that Jews love to hate" (Weinberg, 2008).

COMMON CHALLENGES IN JEWISH SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

Several factors contribute to religious school being known as an institution that Jews love to hate. These include religious schools as a flawed structure, plagued by under-qualified teachers and insufficient parental involvement, and Jewish education as a low priority. While it is clear that something needs to change, efforts to change are oftentimes met with resistance.

FLAWED STRUCTURE

The typical structure of meeting twice weekly, on a weekday afternoon and on Sunday afternoon, is a remnant of the Talmud Torah centers of the early 1900s. Meeting weekdays after school was ideal for young Jewish students with no competing activities and close ties with their community school. Meeting on Sunday mornings was ideal to maintain the appearance of being just like their Christian neighbors, whose children attended Sunday school while their parents went to mass. Furthermore, religious schools historically maintained a deliberate and formalized structure in an effort "to seek legitimacy within the field by conforming to ritualized, expected ways of operating, rather than organizing their work according to purely rational, goal-oriented demands" (Aron, 2011, p. 697).

Today's reality is significantly different. Jewish education has achieved legitimacy within the field, and the new challenge in Jewish education is gaining support from parents and students. Meeting this challenge will require transforming the old

structure. Between secular school and other commitments for both parents and students, convening at four on a weekday afternoon is difficult. After sitting in classrooms for eight hours, it is not fair to ask students to focus for yet another couple of hours. Physiologist Csikszentmihalyi explains, "Attention is a scarce resource – perhaps the most precious scarce resource there is" (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995, p. 68). Meeting after a long day of school, with demands coming from every direction, makes it nearly impossible to capture students' attention.

UNDER-QUALIFIED TEACHERS

The problem of under-qualified teachers is among the most common critiques of religious schools. This is often linked to teacher shortages, which leave educators with little choice but to hire teachers who are not qualified for the job, either because they lack teaching experience or do not know enough about the topics that they are teaching (Schiff, 1987). Teachers not trained in curriculum design, lesson planning, or classroom management are likely to replicate programs they experienced as kids, programs that are often outdated and not relevant to the students (Bryfman & Reimer, 2008, p. 9). So long as religious school teachers face low wages and limited hours of instruction, attracting qualified teachers will remain a difficult task (Levitt, 2011, p. 14).

LACK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The amount of family programming at congregational schools has increased over the past few years, but some parents are unable or unwilling to participate in their children's Jewish education, especially in programs that ask parents to commit to coming every week (Levitt, Alloway, Berwin, Jacques, Weinberg, & Weissman, 2011). Meanwhile, many parents are putting pressure on synagogue schools to reduce the

number of hours, stating that they are only willing to take their children once a week (Aron, 2011, p. 709). Demands for less class time could be understandable if children were also practicing Judaism at home, but this is often not the case. The term "supplementary school" stemmed from the notion that these schools were to supplement the Jewish education kids were getting at home. Religious schools today do not necessarily supplement the Jewish education kids receive at home, often being the only source of Jewish education for many students. They are still supplementary in the sense that they supplement a Jewish child's secular education. Parents' lack of support for their children's Jewish education is not a new challenge; a 1987 report on the state of religious schools in New York reported this same challenge (Schiff, 1987, p. 6).

LOW PRIORITY

Children today balance packed schedules, and Jewish programming, including education, tends to become a low priority (Pet & Daniels, 2002, p. 6). Additionally, parents tend to place Jewish education in the category of discretionary, which results in declining enrolment rates as well as high levels of absenteeism. It should not come as a surprise that religious schools have become a low priority given their poor reputation. Even Jewish professionals historically set low expectations for the schools that they support, and Judaic studies are understood to be less important than general studies (Aron, 2011, pp. 695-697). This means that demands of students' secular education, including homework and science fairs, commonly trump religious school attendance.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Despite these challenges plaguing religious schools, parents have proved resistant to support change. Isa Aron notes that inertia is one of the greatest challenges holding

back congregational schools, and that schools are typically unable to make changes or sustain changes once they have been implemented. One reason for this is that parents have gotten accustomed to being passive rather than active participants, and changing the model would require them to take on more active roles (Aron, 2011, p. 709). Additionally, some parents are not interested in supporting new models of education because they see the current model as being good enough; they want a traditional school, even when that model is not succeeding (Yanklowitz, 2013). Furthermore, parents who grew up attending congregational schools expect their children to have the same experience that they had. Change is hard, but imagining a new system is even harder. Many parents may not be ready to experiment with their children's Jewish education, so it falls on Jewish educators to take risks in redesigning the model, and bring parents on board as they do so (Levitt, Alloway, Berwin, Jacques, Weinberg, & Weissman, 2011).

CURRENT STATE OF JEWISH SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

The phenomenon of supporting other Jewish educational enterprises, including day schools and summer camps, at the expense of religious schools began to turn around in 1990, when the Rhea Hirsch School of Education of the Hebrew Union College launched the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE). ECE aimed "to create both congregations of learners (in which more people participate in richer and deeper learning) and learning congregations (which are reflective, ready to experiment, and practice collaborative leadership)" (Weinberg, 2002). Basically, the purpose of ECE was to transform the way that synagogues approach Jewish education. In its first decade, ECE worked intensively with fourteen congregations throughout North America, and this number has continued to increase steadily. As of 2011, Dr. Isa Aron estimated that 30-50

synagogues had taken measures to restructure their schools, focusing more on things such as enculturation, project-based learning, and more frequent family education programs. Measures of restructuring range from minor improvements to major transformations (Aron, 2011, p. 707).

Rob Weinberg published an article in 2008 titled, "Finding New Models: Alternatives to Religious School," in which he offers a preliminary exploration of emerging alternative models of Jewish learning. Weinberg identified about a dozen alternative programs that he grouped into five models: 1) Shabbat communities, in which families attend together during Shabbat for two to three hours, consisting of prayer, children's learning, and parents' learning. Some Shabbat community programs favor family learning, where parents and children learn together, while in other programs, parents and children learn separately. 2) Congregational learning, in which congregants (including post *b'nei mitzvah* teens) coordinate theme-based learning units for congregants of all ages, each unit spanning two to eight weeks. 3) Afterschool care and study, where students commit attending two to five afternoons a week, with the primary goal being to develop community, and to learn through experience rather than instruction. 4) Flexible learning options, which offer choices such as individualized Hebrew tutoring, independent study projects, and/or intensive day camp. 5) Religious school enhancements, which add learning opportunities for students and families, including more frequent family programs, retreats, and project-based learning.

Weinberg identified several trends in these alternative models, including the importance of integrating learning and living, increased parent involvement, and creating community. He concludes with several questions for additional research, including

"How well are these emerging alternative models working?" a question that I explore in my own research.

METHODOLOGY

I selected three religious school programs representing three entirely different alternative models in California to explore: 1) *Tiyul: Shabbat B'yachad* (TSBY), at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, 2) *Chodesh*, at Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills, and 3) Temple Isaiah's religious school in Lafayette. I wanted to study different models of alternative supplementary education in order to gain an understanding of the broad range of emerging alternative models. I chose these three programs in particular because of my access to them. As a graduate intern at TSBY, I help facilitate the program with the director, and I also write lesson plans and supervise teachers. I first attended Chodesh as an observer, but was later hired as staff, and therefore attended all subsequent Chodesh sessions. Finally, having taught at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette I have a relationship with Rabbi Greninger, the religious school director.

For each program, I prepared a document review, observed the program in action, and interviewed the director. The document review included websites, curriculum, grant proposals, evaluations, blog entries, pamphlets, and announcements. I observed full sessions of TSBY and *Chodesh* on several occasions, taking field notes and conducting informal interviews with participants. I observed Temple Isaiah's religious school for one full day. Finally, I interviewed the current directors of each program, as well as one former (and founding) director. Interview questions varied slightly from program to program, but some questions were consistent:

- Can you describe the program (what are the requirements, how often, in addition to or in place of traditional Sunday School)?
- What are the goals of the program?
- How do these goals differ from regular/traditional school?
- Why was this program started?
- Where is it successful?
- What are its challenges?

I recommend that future research evaluate these programs also using interviews or surveys of students, parents, and teachers.

FINDINGS

TEMPLE ISAIAH, LOS ANGELES

Families at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles have two options to consider in regards to their children's Jewish education: in addition to a weekday Hebrew school attendance, they can enroll their children in the traditional religious school on Sunday mornings, or families can join *Tiyul: Shabbat B'yachad* (TSBY), which Weisberg would classify as a Shabbat community model. TSBY is a program for families with children in preschool through eighth grade. In TSBY, parents attend together with their kids for three hours on Saturday, sometimes in the morning and other times in the evening. For morning sessions, families gather for an informal breakfast of bagels and fruit, then participate in a Shabbat morning service, sometimes celebrating a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. This is followed by separate learning sessions for parents and children. Families then come back together for lunch. Evening sessions are similar, beginning with snacks, followed by separate learning sessions, and then everyone comes back together for a short *havdalah* service and dinner.

Temple Isaiah's website describes TSBY as a place where "families pray together, teach each other Torah, and experience parallel learning for adults and

children." Rabbi Rick Kellner, who created TSBY, valued parallel learning, where parents and children all studied the same topic, but separately. Today, first through sixth grade students continue the tradition of learning the same topic. Parents, however, study different content. The theme of the year is Pirkei Avot, and on any given day of TSBY, each class is studying the same verse at a level that is developmentally appropriate.

The program director creates and disburses the lesson plans for grades one through eight. The process is time consuming for her, but she does it to preserve a certain standard. The program director explained her reasoning for this responsibility in an interview:

> If you give teachers an outline of the curriculum and they have to come up with their weekly lesson plans, they are half-assed. They come up with them the night before, if at all, or they completely wing it. Even though it's a little more work for me, I feel like if they are handed a lesson plan with clear goals and objectives, and they read it beforehand and can tweak it in any way they want, but when they actually know what the goal of that day is, it is more likely to be a successful lesson.

I noticed a tendency, however, of teachers looking over the lesson plan for the first time minutes before the start of class, leaving no time "tweak it" or internalize the goal of the day. Ultimately, it seems that having the director write the lesson plans helps maintain consistency throughout the grades who are all studying the same content, and it also ensures quality of curriculum. It does not, however, ensure quality of instruction. The success of a class depends on the teachers, the energy they bring and their enthusiasm for the topic. As described below, one teacher is passionate about Jewish education and is studying to earn his teaching credentials. Another teacher is an aspiring actress teaching at TSBY to supplement her income. These discrepancies in their commitments to Jewish education are evident in their classrooms.

Walking into one class, I see students focused, quietly making their way around the classroom to comment on all the different pages. It is a review day, and students are participating in a gallery walk, where all the verses they have studied from Pirkei Avot have been printed onto a large page, with space around the edges for students to add their own thoughts and questions. Students have so much to write that their teacher has to quickly find extra paper to accommodate their commentary.

Next, I stop by another class. They are working through the same lesson and are already reviewing the comments from the gallery walk. The teacher, sitting, picks up a page and quickly and reads through all the comments. It is clear from the number of responses on each page that not every student participated. The comments are mostly brief, but students bring up interesting points that warrant a follow-up question. For example, in response to the verse, "Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: When your friend becomes angry, don't try to calm him," a student wrote, "Not always." This would have been a great opportunity for the teacher to ask students what they meant, but instead she asks, halfheartedly, if they have anything else to say. No one responds, and she moves on.

Now approaching the end of the session, I return to the first class. I see the raised hands of students eager to contribute to the class discussion of Hillel's famous quote, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?" (Pirkei Avot 1:14) The teacher stands at the head of the class, clearly in command of his classroom. Students have a lot to say, but each waits his or her turn and they challenge each other's comments. When students contribute unclear statements, the teacher asks them to explain themselves, therefore pushing students to excel.

When I go back to second class with five minutes left, I see students are sitting at their tables, chatting with friends. Their teacher looks up at me and asks if I have any more suggestions on what they should do next. They finished the material early and are waiting to be excused for lunch.

I mentioned earlier that the parents do not study the same content as the children, though this was the original intent for TSBY. This is because parents, along with clergy that led the parent sessions, felt constrained by this structure. On the one hand, parents at TSBY are passionate about their unrestrained learning sessions with the clergy, and they appreciate the deep learning in which they engage. But on the other hand, it seems the divergence from studying the same topic as the children happened with no consideration of how it aligns with TSBY's espoused value of community, which is enhanced when every participant is studying the same topic. In order to uphold their commitment to community, they could consider incorporating some family sessions, or maybe equip parents with questions to ask their children.

One morning, I watch as families trickle in for bagels before services begin. It is the third session of the year, and families are still adjusting to a new program director and a new cantor. Parents sit together around round tables, chatting; their kids are running around and playing games. A mother approaches, asking me whether we will be doing the "normal" *henei mah tov* melody this morning, adding that she and *all* the families agree that nobody likes the new melodies we have been singing at services. She continues, "Everything keeps changing here; why can't we just do the melodies we all know and like?" The truth is that TSBY has been challenged with numerous leadership changes since Rabbi Rick Kellner introduced the program in 2008. It does not take long

to notice that the changes are hard, especially for families that have been involved with TSBY since the program's beginning.

The changes to the parallel learning model and lesson planning seem small at first glance. I suspect, however, that they are indicative of a larger challenge, of how a program is translated and implemented from one director to the next. It is natural that changes are made to a program as it develops, and as it moves from one director to another, but changes should be made with the goals and values of the program in mind.

Ultimately, TSBY fosters community in a way that only a family program can. Parents' commitment to attend religious school weekly, alongside their children, models Jewish learning as a lifelong endeavor, not something that ends with one's *bar/bat mitzvah*. Finally, TSBY succeeds at demonstrating that regular synagogue attendance is an important family value.

KOL TIKVAH, WOODLAND HILLS

Jewish education at Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills falls under the model that Weinberg calls "flexible learning options," meaning offering choices such as individualized Hebrew tutoring, independent study projects, and/or intensive day camp. Rabbi Becky Hoffman, the rabbi-educator at Kol Tikvah, introduced an array of programs to accommodate congregants' busy lives. Fourth to sixth grade students, for example, are required to enroll in one Hebrew and one Judaica program each year. For Judaica, students choose between weekly two-hour sessions, on Tuesdays or Sundays, or they can enroll in Chodesh, the program I observed. Chodesh meets eight Sundays throughout the year for a seven-hour day at a nearby camp. Each day of Chodesh follows a similar schedule:

9:15am	Drop-off at Kol Tikvah
9:25am	Bus departs for camp
10:15am	*Tefillah* (prayer)
10:45am	Snack and Bathroom Break
11:10am	Educational Activity
12:10pm	Lunch
1:05pm	*Chugim* (elective) Rotation 1
1:50pm	*Chugim* (elective) Rotation 2
2:35pm	*Chugim* (elective) Rotation 3
3:20pm	Snacks, Closing Circle
3:40pm	Bus ride back to Temple Kol Tikvah
4:15pm	Arrive at Kol Tikvah for Pick up

Kids gather at 9:15am in the large social hall waiting to board the school bus that will take them to Brandeis-Bardin, a camp thirty-five minutes away. They are handed a mock blank passport and a marker and told that they will be traveling to different cities throughout Israel. The day's topic is "The Land of Israel," and the first program will begin one hour later, with *tefillah* (prayer). Once at *tefillah*, the cantor, wearing a beige suit with matching heels that stands in contrast to the rugged, outdoor prayer space, leads a service slightly different than the usual one. Before one blessing, she quickly explains that a *niggun* is a wordless song and engages the kids in fifteen seconds of singing a *niggun*. At the service's conclusion, the program coordinator (different from the program director) explains that the service was different to represent Tzfat, the home of mystic Judaism. She hastily adds some key phrases about mystic Judaism with little or no explanation, before continuing to the rest of the day's activities. The lack of depth in this lesson on mystic Judaism and Tzfat is indicative of Chodesh as a whole.

One hour of the day is set aside for formal education, which is simultaneously not enough time and too much time. Sixty minutes is certainly not long enough to cover a lot about "The Land of Israel," but for a child at camp, that one hour just before lunch and

electives feels like an eternity. During the "educational activity" hour, more than any other part of the day, I notice the students struggling to stay on task as they engage in side conversations and repeatedly inquire about the time. Rather than setting aside an hour for formal education, they could instead weave experiential learning opportunities throughout the entire day. To name just a couple of examples- a meditative *Tefillah* could have been a successful introduction to mystical Judaism with a little more planning context, and cooking pita bread over an open fire could have been a captivating entry into Bedouin life, but both the cantor leading tefillah and the camp specialist cooking pita failed to make the connection between the activity they led and the land of Israel.

Chodesh's coordinator disclosed in our interview that one of her greatest challenges was integrating Jewish learning throughout the day. She explained this was because of a lack of support from Kol Tikvah staff and resistance from Brandeis-Bardin staff. Both the program director and the coordinator voiced that the ultimate goal of *Chodesh* was for students "to feel good about being Jewish." They understand that Chodesh elevates affective goals over cognitive goals, though it is not clear whether parents understand this key difference between Kol Tikvah's traditional and alternative programs, because it is not stated in any of the materials distributed to parents.

Kol Tikvah's website advertises about *Chodesh*, "all the benefits of camp once a month," a phrase which does not quite make sense. One might suggest that the greatest benefit of camp is the community that organically forms out of the intense time kids spend together, day after day. But creating community while meeting once a month is challenging, and a student who is absent for just one session of *Chodesh* will not see his or her *Chodesh* community for two full months. Kol Tikvah values both community and

flexibility, but achieving both is unlikely. In being flexible to the needs of each individual, the program compromises its commitment to community.

My observations aside, *Chodesh*, based on their espoused goal of participants "feeling good about being Jewish," is a successful program. Students have fun at *Chodesh*, and they look forward to the next session. During my first day of observing Chodesh, a curious sixth grade girl asked why I want to be a Jewish educator. When I explained to her my vision of religious school being both a fun place to be, and a place of serious learning, she looked puzzled. "I always have fun here," she responded. "Yeah, *Chodesh* is the best," her friend added. *Chodesh* is the only religious school experience these girls know, and they clearly love it.

TEMPLE ISAIAH, LAFAYETTE

At Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, California, Rabbi Nicki Greninger introduced a variety of paths to Jewish learning to accommodate various learning styles and interests of students. According to Weisberg's classifications, Temple Isaiah's religious school falls very neatly under the model of "religious school enhancements." More so than the other two models I observed, Temple Isaiah's religious school looks like a traditional model on the surface: students in third through sixth grade attend twice a week, one weekday afternoon and Sunday morning. Look closer, however, and one finds a distinctly unique religious school.

Inspired by the Proverbs teaching, "*Chanoch la-na'ar al pi darko* (educate youth according to his or her way)," Rabbi Greninger introduced a track system. Some students, for example, gravitate towards learning through art, while others prefer theater or nature. Third and fourth grade students choose between *Omanut* (art) and *Teva*

(nature), while students in fifth and sixth grade choose between *Shira* (music), *Edot* (culture), and *Y'tzira* (creation/storytelling). Instead of the one-size-fits-all model of grouping students by grade level, the tracks appeal to individual students' interests. All tracks are designed to be two-year programs, but students can decide to switch tracks after one year. Parents are invited to attend three sessions throughout the school year, in addition to two family sessions per grade. Rabbi Geninger explained that a parent with children in multiple tracks at religious school is invited to come for at least ten of the twenty-six Sunday sessions.

Walking through the school, down the hallways and inside of classrooms, I notice student work all around. The projects are remarkable and thoughtfully displayed, with clear descriptions of the work. Rabbi Greninger values excellence, always striving to bring out the best in her teachers, and in return, in the students. She finds teachers who are passionate about their work and then motivates them to be fully committed to Temple Isaiah's religious school. The art teacher is a local artist with a background in education. Her class has been learning about Jewish artists with varying styles, and examples of these artists' work hang above the white board at the front of the room. Students selected an artist to whom they were most drawn, and drafted a sketch of a Jewish symbol in the style of that artist. Now, they are now ready to begin the next step of the project, a class mural. Each student sketches his or her symbol on a large canvas and takes turns painting it. In the end, the mural showcases many different styles and symbols, reflecting the diversity of the class.

When she wanted to introduce a new track, Rabbi Greninger turned to Maimone, who had been involved in Temple Isaiah religious school for several years as an assistant

teacher. Knowing of Maimone's background in filmmaking and running interactive mysteries for kids, Rabbi Greninger asked, "How can we use your talents, your passions, and your work that you do outside of your community and bring that into our religious school setting?" They brainstormed and together created *Y'tzira*, the newest track, which has been a popular choice for fifth and sixth grade students. His classroom looks like a movie set, with props all around and old movie posters on the wall. Four boys are in the hallway, filming an action scene of the battle between David and Goliath. Inside, four girls sit huddled at a table, working on a storyboard of a narrative between King David and the prophet Natan.

To further motivate teachers, Rabbi Geninger secured a grant to offer additional funds for teachers developing a new curriculum ($1000) or tweaking an existing curriculum ($500). Teachers' job descriptions clearly state their responsibility of developing curriculum, maintaining contact with families, and sharing lesson plans with the education director ahead of time. The extra funds serve as motivation to fulfill what is clearly expected of them.

Temple Isaiah religious school's new structure was introduced slowly and methodically. When Rabbi Greninger arrived at Temple Isaiah in 2008, the religious school was structured like a typical religious school. Then, in 2009, Rabbi Greninger introduced its first track- *Shira* (music), for students in fourth through sixth grade. Students could choose between a class with their grade cohort, or *Shira*. The following year, the *Omanut* (art) track was introduced. Comments Greninger, "It became clear after those two years that there was such interest in this way of engaging with Jewish education that then we moved our whole model to this format the following year. By the

time we really moved our whole program, there was already a huge amount of buzz and buy-in for it in the community, it wasn't just an all-of-a-sudden new approach."

With so many changes to the program, I wondered whether Rabbi Greninger and the religious school committee rewrote the goals of the program. She responded that they did not rewrite the goals, but they did revisit them: "If you look at our mission statement and stated goals, they are the same as they've always been. I think we're meeting those goals a lot better now." The goals are those articulated by the Union of Reform Judaism:

> Temple Isaiah Religious School goals: At Temple Isaiah we strive to provide a program of Jewish education which will enable children, teens, and adults to become Jews who:
>
> - Affirm their Jewish identity and bind themselves inseparably to their people by word and deed;
> - Bear witness to the brit (covenant between God and the Jewish people) by embracing the Torah through the study and observance of mitzvot (commandments) as interpreted in light of historic developments and contemporary liberal thought;
> - Cherish and study Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people;
> - Value and engage in tefillah (prayer);
> - Further the causes of justice, freedom, and peace by pursuing tzedek (justice) and chesed (loving deeds);
> - Celebrate Shabbat and the festivals, and observe the Jewish ceremonies that mark significant occasions in their lives;
> - Esteem themselves and others, their own family and the families of others, their own community and the communities of others;
> - Express their kinship with K'lal Yisrael (the community of Israel) by actively seeking the welfare of Jews throughout the world and by developing a relationship with Israel- its people, the land, and the state.
> - Support and participate in the life of the synagogue.
>
> We believe these goals are best accomplished through educational experiences which touch the whole person: body, heart, mind, and soul (Temple Isaiah, n.d.).

Temple Isaiah's religious school is successful, but not without its challenges, the biggest one being attendance. On that topic, Rabbi Greninger commented, "Kids come, they don't come, they're gone for three months during certain sport seasons, they come late, they leave early… It's very hard to have high quality work from the students when

they aren't there consistently enough to improve it." The project-based learning approach asks that students make multiple drafts and participate in peer critiques. Students who are absent are unable to reap the full benefits of this approach.

CONCLUSION

When I began my research, I identified four challenges facing traditional religious school models: Jewish education as a low priority, insufficient parental involvement, unqualified teachers, and resistance to change. I hypothesized that alternative models held the answers to these challenges. What I realized, however, is that simply introducing an alternative program into the mix has its limitations. Transforming a program from a traditional model to an alternative model directly addresses only one of these four challenges, that of the flawed structure; however, all four challenges need to be addressed for a religious school program to reach its potential and be fully successful.

In order to address these issues, there are a few measures that the programs could implement. Taking kids out of the classroom and into a camp is a great idea, but paired with staff who are uncommitted or undertrained, the success of the program is limited. For Chodesh to operate at its full potential would involve greater staff support on the part of Kol Tikva and Brandeis-Bardin. Rather than being sent the day's program, Chodesh staff could collaborate in the planning process and therefore be more invested in its success. Also including Brandeis-Bardin staff in the planning process would help ensure support in incorporating themes from the content in every part of the day's programming, not just the activities run by Kol Tikvah staff. TSBY could also benefit greatly from more collaboration between staff, a process that was prioritized in the first few years of TSBY.

Asking more of teachers and staff is not something that can be changed from one day to the next, but rather it needs to be written into their job description. It is important that teachers and staff understand exactly what is expected of them, and it also makes expectations easier to enforce. Asking more of one's staff might require higher pay, which is a big challenge in many congregations and is not always possible. By securing extra funding to support teachers in developing curriculum, Rabbi Greninger helped ensure that her teachers stay motivated, but educators could consider offering other, non monetary, incentives to show appreciation for their teachers and help keep them motivated.

Adding a parent involvement component could strengthen Chodesh's program. Dedicating one of the eight sessions of Chodesh to a family day could be a fun and refreshing way to include parents and build community. TSBY could make small changes to their program to take advantage of it being a family program, like have parents and kids occasionally learn about the same topic, and then provide questions to inspire conversations that transcend age.

Of the three programs I observed, I found Temple Isaiah's religious school to be the most successful at addressing the challenges of traditional religious schools. While changes to its structure are minor compared to the other programs, Rabbi Greninger has thoughtfully and effectively addressed the challenge of under-qualified teachers by working with teachers individually to highlight their strengths. This program has also found a balance of parental involvement that satisfies the desires of the parents and of the educator, a balance that is often difficult to strike. Inconsistent attendance suggests that

religious school may not be families' highest priority every week, but this remains a challenge that all three programs have yet to overcome.

In short, Temple Isaiah Religious School, TSBY, and Chodesh are all representative of the types of innovative, alternative models of Jewish supplementary education that are emerging nationwide. They are not, however, without their challenges. By making small but thoughtful changes, all of these programs have the potential to move beyond programs that are not just fun, but also provide the opportunity for deep learning and spiritual growth.

Rob Weinberg described religious schools as an institution that Jews love to hate, but observing the three alternative models of religious school, I sensed an incredibly high energy level, and I saw students eager to participate. This leaves me feeling optimistic about the future of religious schools. Perhaps, as alternative models become the norm rather than the exception, and as educators focus their attention on addressing all the underlying challenges facing religious schools, religious schools will one-day transition into an institution Jews simply love to love.

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