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Dear Rabbis Joseph and Schwartz,

Before I arrived at biweekly congregation X, the roster listed six children in the congregation, ages 3-13. There was no formal education for them whatsoever, and the children rarely came to services. I thought it was a *shanda* that the needs of these kids weren't being served, so after one semester (when I got my bearings), I instituted a "youth group" and held events every time I came to town. I used art, food, and Jewish culture to "hook" the kids in, and after they had all attended a handful of times and begun to form community, I realized that it wasn't a youth group at all... I was actually teaching religious school, and so should label it as such. I contacted the ISJL for their help, relied on resources at HUC, and finally, with all that in mind, created a curriculum that revolved around holidays and *mitzvot*. I also began teaching the 13 year-old the *alef bet*, and in April of that year she told me that she wanted to have a Bat Mitzvah. The school was immediately a success, and by that May a new family with two young children had joined the temple.

I returned to the biweekly for a second year, hiring an additional teacher (a student from a local college) so that I could split the kids into two classes based on age. The school flourished, and I have since officiated at the now 14 year-old's Bat Mitzvah. I set up the school and the curriculum so that it could be sustained after I left. The additional teacher will stay on with the incoming rabbi for the sake of continuity, and the children are all very invested in their ongoing Jewish education.

What follows is the sermon I gave in January of the school's first year, to kick-off the new endeavor and try and garner congregational support.

Thank you for your consideration!

A few days after the High Holidays, I received a letter from a temple congregant and his wife. They thanked me for what I had contributed to the congregation, and stated that they were looking forward to the rest of the year. Then they said something that made me tear up. “As sentimentalists,” they wrote, “we love the sound of a child in the synagogue, which reminds us of the cacophony of children’s voices we used to hear in [Temple X] 40 years ago.” Reading this note, I felt honored, and touched. Not only was my son being welcomed and included in Temple life, but he, independent of myself, was making a difference: his mere presence was filling a void in temple that I hadn’t even known existed. Babies and children bring love, laughter, and joy to a community. They offer us hope, because we dream who they will grow up to be and what they will accomplish. They are our future.

A few moments ago, we read from *parashat Sh’mot*, the first Torah portion of the Book of Exodus, about how the Hebrew midwives ensured the Israelites’ future. Pharaoh decreed that the midwives should kill all newborn males, but our heroines, Shifra and Puah, “did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.” (Ex. 1:17) When Pharaoh asked why, they told him that the Jewish women gave birth too quickly, before they even got there. They could not carry out his command. Shifra and Puah only spoke *two sentences*, but those two sentences had a *tremendous* impact. In standing up to Pharaoh, they saved the Hebrew boys. And through saving the Hebrew boys, they guaranteed the continuity of their people.

A third-century *midrash* expands the concept even further. Genesis Rabbah tells this folktale: that after Pharaoh gave his decree, Amram, Moses’ father, decided that it would be cruel for the Israelites to ever have more children. He divorced his wife Joheved, and all the *other* Israelites divorced *their* wives to follow suit. No women got pregnant, and no children were being born. Then Miriam, his daughter, objected:

“Said his daughter to him: ‘Your decree is more severe than that of Pharaoh; for Pharaoh decreed only concerning the male children, and you decree upon males and females alike. Besides, Pharaoh being wicked, there is some doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, but you are righteous and your decree will be fulfilled.’ So he [Amram] took his wife back and was followed by all the Israelites, who also took their wives back.” (Genesis Rabbah 1:13)

The rabbis who created this story knew, like Shifra and Puah, that without the possibility of children, the Jewish people would die out. Miriam tells her father that his decision to divorce his wife, and to thereby remove all potentiality of carrying on his line, is more dangerous to the Jewish people than is the very edict he hopes to destroy. The Jewish future would be lost. As another *midrash* states, “No children, no adults; no adults, no sages.” (Genesis Rabbah 42:3) Without sages, or even just knowledgeable adults, who will carry on our traditions? How will we survive? Shifra and Puah in Exodus, and Miriam in Genesis Rabbah, ensured that Judaism lived on, and that the babies born today were able to grow up to become the sages of tomorrow.

Now let me tell you a more modern tale, a sadder one. It is the true story of a small synagogue, in a small Midwestern town much like this one. I’m not going to name names, but know that this little synagogue had a thriving Jewish community not less than thirty years ago. Jews from towns miles away would come for Shabbat services, and Pesach seders, and Rosh Hashanah dinners, and Purim shpiels. The members of the communities had kids, and the synagogue was filled with laughing, shouting children running in the halls. Then, as time passed, the children grew up. They went to college in larger cities, and they got married in larger cities, and they never moved home. The religious school closed. There were a few children left, who were younger and hadn’t moved away. But they had little to no Jewish identity, and came to temple only once in a blue moon, when their parents made them.

Eventually, those few kids grew up too. Since there was no new religious school, no new families with young children ever joined again. The elderly members of the community gradually passed away. And, as the American Jewish Archives records, this small-town synagogue closed its doors for good in 2007. It had only *five people* – not families, but people – left.

Here, in [town X], it's a fact - the “cacophony of children's voices” is forty years past. The children on *our* roster number less than ten. But we don't want to be like that other small town synagogue. We don't want to die out. Instead, we want to follow in the footsteps of our Biblical role models and ensure our own continuity. The problem is, we don't know how. How can *we*, today, revitalize our temple? How can we make as great a change in *our* world as Shifra, Puah, and Miriam did in theirs?

My answer is one word: education. In a world of acculturation and assimilation, Jewish children *must* be educated about our religion, otherwise they will not remain Jewish. This is not a modern idea. The Bible itself discusses the importance of Jewish education, when it tells us in Deuteronomy, in the passage we say in the *Ve'ahavta*, that “thou shalt teach them [the laws of Judaism] diligently unto thy children.” (Deut. 6:7) Talmudic tractate Sukkot gets even more specific: “As soon as a child learns to talk, his father must teach him the verse, ‘*Torah tziva lanu Moshe.*’” “Moses commanded us a law, as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.” (b. Sukkot 42a, quoting Deut 33:4). We as Jews and temple members make up that “congregation of Jacob,” and it is our responsibility to ensure that our children know their place in our tradition. We *must* provide a Jewish education for our kids – for as education goes, so goes the future.

Rachel Stern of the Institute for Southern Jewish Life, or ISJL, told me a story about a different temple. This name I will tell you – it is Temple Shalom, in Lafayette, Louisiana. The

congregation was founded in 1881, and was originally large and vibrant. Even in 1980, one hundred years later, there were still over 600 Jews in Lafayette. But as it happens, the younger generation moved out, and, according to the ISJL, “By the mid-1990s, only about 250 Jews still lived in south central Louisiana.” (<http://www.isjl.org/history/archive/la/lafayette.htm>) The temple was so diminished that it was forced to merge with the only other congregation in the area in order to survive.

Then, the remaining members called the IJSL. Rachel and her team introduced Temple Shalom to new ways of educating their members, through adult education, but also, through getting their children involved in congregational life. The *children* wanted to be at temple, and brought their families with them. Today Temple Shalom has 65 families, but it has a whopping *18 students* enrolled in its religious school. It has been so energized by its new educational policies that it has actually *attracted* new members, especially Jews coming to Lafayette from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. It is a small congregation, but strong, and vibrant, with intergenerational membership, and committed Jewish children.

Like Temple Shalom, we here in [town X] are going to revive our community, through revitalizing our Jewish educational program. Talmudic tractate Shabbat states that “the very world rests on the breath of children in the schoolhouse,” and starting tomorrow, January 8th, we will be *providing* that schoolhouse (b. Shabbat 119b). Every Saturday afternoon from now on our front doors will be open to welcome our children into a new youth group program. We have six student RSVP’s so far, and we hope that more will join us as time goes by. We’ll start off tomorrow with pizza and making our own Jewish desserts. Later we’ll have Jewish movies, and Jewish art projects, and Jewish field trips. Our children will make connections with each other, and form their own community. They will have fun at temple, and learn that coming here can be

fun, and exciting. And most importantly, they will learn to love their heritage, and to cherish their Judaism.

Now, I don't know where this new program will lead. I only know what I *hope*. I *hope* that our children will want to walk through these temple doors as often as possible. I *hope* that more children will join. I *hope* that this program will be long-lasting, and that it will continue beyond me, to the next student rabbi, and the next, and the next, until it is a staple of this congregation, like Saturday morning Adult Education. I hope that one day, we may even be able to re-form a religious school. I hope that this new program is the first step.

According to Allan Kay, of the Jewish Education Service of North America, "the best way to predict the future is to invent it" ("Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st Century: A Lippman Kander Institute Walking Paper, JESNA). Each and every single person here is *inventing* our future. We want to revitalize our congregation. So we will. We want to preserve our Jewish future. So we will. And we want to be a modern-day Shifra, Puah, and Miriam. Say it with me – so we will. *Ken y'hee ratzon*, may it be so.

Shabbat shalom.

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
Cincinnati, Ohio

PRIZE AWARDS 2010-2011

The **FERDINAND M. ISSERMAN PRIZE** to be awarded to the senior rabbinical student who in the judgment of the faculty contributes the most toward the development of community relations, awarded to **ARIEL PLOST**.

The **SIMON LAZARUS MEMORIAL PRIZE** for that student of the graduating class who upon the recommendation of the faculty has attained the highest academic standing, awarded to **AARON MEYER**.

The **ROBERT L. ADLER PRIZE** to be awarded to a rabbinical student on the Cincinnati campus who best exemplifies Robert Adler's values in making contributions to the community awarded to **RACHEL JOSEPH**.

The **NATHAN STERN PRIZE** to be awarded to the student who completes the program leading to the degree of Master of Arts with the highest academic standing, awarded to **NICOLE ROBERTS**.

The **RABBI FREDERICK C. SCHWARTZ PRIZE** to a rabbinical student who in the judgement of the faculty has made the most significant contribution to furthering the goals and objectives of the Union for Reform Judaism's camping system for youth and NFTY awarded to **AARON MEYER**.

The **STEPHEN N. LEVINSON MEMORIAL PRIZE** to be awarded to that member of the senior class who has rendered the most significant service to HUC-JIR and its student body, awarded to **JOSHUA LEIGHTON**.

The **Society for Classical Reform Judaism Prizes** are given to "encourage students to explore the connections between the topics of their course work and the history, thought and liturgical expressions of the Classical Reform tradition within the Reform Movement."

JOSHUA LEIGHTON
JASON LEVINE
MAURA LINZER
ARI LORGE
MICHAL LOVING
ARI PLOST

During this past academic year there have been many fine sermons preached in our Chapel. Our fourth and fifth year students merit congratulations on their outstanding contribution to our religious services during the academic year.

The Committee has chosen the following as especially meritorious:

The **ISRAEL BETTAN MEMORIAL PRIZE** to be awarded to that senior student who has been most creative and imaginative in his/her pulpit presentation to **JOSHUA LEIGHTON**.

The **CORA KAHN PRIZE** to be awarded to that graduating senior whose sermon delivery and oratory are considered best during his/her senior year to **SANDRA BELLUSH**.

The **RABBI MORRIS H. YOUNGERMAN MEMORIAL PRIZE** to be awarded for the best sermon preached in the Chapel during the academic year to be awarded to **AARON MILLER**.