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The L'dor V'dor of Jewish Education

Capstone Project

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Dedication

This Casebook is written in dedication to Abby Meyers. Abby helped inspire the idea for my capstone and unfortunately passed away January 2024. Abby taught religious school with me. During one of our first genuine conversations, Abby told me how she hated Judaism growing up and would do anything possible to get out of class. She was laughing about how far she had come where she now goes out of her way to teach Judaism. The last time I saw Abby I wanted to tell her about my Capstone and unfortunately did not get the opportunity.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Introduction	4
Cases	7
Rachel: The Day School Experience	9
Ben: Jewish Acceptance.....	12
Leora: Jewish by Blood	15
Faye: “I’m giving my children what I didn’t have, and I think that's what every parent wishes for.”	20
Discussion	24
Community	24
Family.....	25
Content Knowledge	26
Finances	27
Positive and Negative Experiences.....	27
Israel.....	28
Temple Judea	28
Leadership Implications	30
Credo Statement.....	34
Bibliography	35
Appendix A: Interview Questions	36

Introduction

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָבֵיהֶם וְדַבַּרְתֶּם בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְכֶם וּבְלִכְתּוֹתֶיךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשׁוֹכְבֶיךָ וּבְקוּמֶיךָ:

“Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.” Deuteronomy 6:7

The basis of Judaism stems from the idea that you must pass what you learn down to your children and to their children. “Jewish education serves as the vehicle through which we train successive generations of Jews to negotiate their own way, as Jews, in the American arena” (Sarna, 1998 p.10). Jewish education works to pass down Jewish tradition from generation to generation.

This is a casebook about different families’ engagement with Jewish education. I have always been curious about what prompts families to be engaged in Jewish education and why families engage in the ways they do. As a rabbi’s kid, I always felt I had to engage, but it was not until I was older that I developed my love for Judaism. After my bat mitzvah, a lot of my synagogue friends stopped coming and I realized that not everyone felt connected in the way that I did. It seemed so foreign to me that we grew up going to synagogue every week, and suddenly, they were not interested anymore, while I felt more connected than ever. Last year, I was talking to a parent at religious school, and she shared how she felt guilty forcing her daughter to go because she hated going to religious school. A year later, I still think about this regularly: why did she hate religious school? If she hated it, why did she send her daughter? What do parents think is the role of Jewish education? Do parents expect their children to come to class for a few hours a week and learn everything they need about Judaism? Kaplan (1934) argues that everyone is responsible for teaching about Judaism, not just teachers. I want to examine if parents still believe that they play a significant role in their children’s Jewish education by exploring why they choose to enroll their children in Jewish education.

Keysar and Kress (2021), conducted a longitudinal study exploring Jewish education. They followed students from their b mitzvah to high school graduation, evaluating their

connection to Jewish education. Years later, they contacted participants to follow up on the study. Although many expressed positive experiences throughout the original study, most did not enroll their children in Jewish education. I found this to be surprising because I had imagined if someone had a positive experience, they would want their children to have the same experience. This led me to begin to explore the ways that people make decisions for their children's Jewish education.

After observing how different families in my residency at Temple Judea navigate Jewish education, I decided my capstone would focus on the question: To what extent does a parent's personal experience of their own Jewish education effect the decisions they make about their child's Jewish education? Samson Benderly, known as one of the first reformers of Jewish education, believed that education was the future of Judaism (Heller Stern, 2004). Do parents still believe that education is the future of Judaism? Do parents view the purpose of Jewish education to keep Judaism alive? How can I, as an educational leader, respond to the individual viewpoints of the families in my congregation?

At the suggestion of an educator in the field, I decided to ask about diverse types of education; how parents' experience is similar or different from their child's experience; and how current structures of Jewish education relate to parent's experiences with Jewish education. Additionally, I looked at enrollment choices for their children and how they supported their children's learning at home. For families that do not enroll in "traditional"¹ supplemental Jewish education, I inquired what new educational innovations affected their decision. For families who chose the "traditional" structure, I inquired how the structure and learning has changed since they were enrolled and if they believe it changed for the better or for the worse.

To understand this question, I examined parents' connection to their own Jewish education as children to see how it affects their educational decisions for their children. I was able to perform two pilot interviews to help me gain clarity as I began my capstone. Originally,

¹ A once-a-week classroom-based model.

one of my ideas was to compare a person who converted to Judaism with a person who grew up Jewish to see if the conversion affected any of their decisions. For one of my pilot interviews, I interviewed a man who converted to Judaism. As I was coding his interview, I found that for the sake of this study, I would rather focus on people who were raised Jewish because they have had more time to reflect on their experiences growing up.

Cases

I was interested in people's individual experiences with Jewish education, and how they influenced the choices they made for their children's Jewish education. I began my interviews with the hope of learning how people are engaged with Judaism and the similarities or differences between parent's and children's Jewish education.

Through a conversation I had with Lori Sagarin, RJE², a Jewish educator from Chicago, she was able to give me insights as to how to craft my open-ended interview questions so that people would be able to answer honestly. She shared with me some of her techniques on how to get people to tell their story.

When I began to determine who I should interview, I limited the variables by only interviewing members of Temple Judea in Tarzana, California. I spend my time working on the education team. Temple Judea has two options for students to learn Judaics. The first option is the weekly religious school model that is similar in many synagogues across the country. The second model is Camp Sababa.

Three of the four families interviewed have children who participate in Camp Sababa. Camp Sababa is an alternative religious school offered at Temple Judea. Camp Sababa runs for two weeks over the summer, a week over winter break and has four events throughout the school year. Camp Sababa works to combine the best of camp with the educational content of religious school. Abby Meyers, a parent, and a teacher with whom I worked, liked to tell me how Camp Sababa would sneak in learning opportunities so that her son would not even know he was in class. Camp Sababa was originally created to be a replacement for the religious school requirement but has since been adapted because most of the families have used it to supplement their children's religious school. In three of the four cases, the children will be attending this summer: one of the children will be at Camp Sababa for the first time while the

² Sagarin, L. (2023, December 19). *How to Interview Parents*. personal.

other two families have been involved for many years. During my second year at Temple Judea one of the responsibilities of my residency is serving as the director of Camp Sababa.

As I began to work on my capstone, the director of education and I went through the parent committee and different groups of parents involved at Temple Judea. Together we determined 4 ideal candidates³; Rachel, Ben, Leora, and Faye. Rachel is a mom of two, she has a daughter at Temple Judea for preschool and a son in a local Jewish Day School. Ben has two kids enrolled in Temple Judea religious school. Leora has a son enrolled in Camp Sababa and religious school. Leora is known throughout the education office as the Camp Sababa cheerleader. Faye has two daughters and is a member of the Temple Judea board. Her older daughter is a first-year student in high school who is enrolled in all our teen programming. Her younger daughter is in upper elementary school and is enrolled in both Camp Sababa and religious school.

I reached out to the four of them and they agreed to be interviewed. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Two of the interviews were conducted in person, one was over Zoom and the last was over the phone. I worked to schedule the interviews around the parents' calendars, which then determined how I conducted the interview. The parents that I have chosen have children ranging from 2-15 years old. I chose to do semi-structured interviews to elicit biographical narratives that shed light on the parent's own experiences and how those experiences influenced the decisions they made for their children.

³ All names have been changed for anonymity.

Rachel: The Day School Experience

Rachel is a mom of two young children, one in preschool at Temple Judea and the other in kindergarten at a nearby non-denominational Jewish day school. Rachel and her husband both went to day school in the Los Angeles area. Rachel's husband works as a day school Judaic studies teacher. When Rachel went to college, she minored in Jewish Studies and was in a Jewish sorority. Although she never went to overnight camp because she was worried she would be too homesick, her sister loved overnight camp and went to Ramah for many summers, "so it was always an option" for her. Rachel shared that she and her husband both had good experiences in Jewish day schools so she felt it was a 'no brainer' that they would send their kids to day school. They wanted their kids to have the same positive experience that they had. Although Rachel spoke about her husband's love of Jewish education, she was the primary decision maker for her kids' schooling.

Rachel has family connections to three different synagogues including Temple Judea. She worked extremely hard to find the synagogue that was right for her and her family. She weighed each one before finding her community, even though her family belonged to Temple Judea. She was equally thoughtful when choosing her son's school. Although she lived five minutes from the day school where her family worked, she opted to send her son to the other day school 30 minutes away. She found it to be a better fit for her family for now and in the future. This school has a transitional kindergarten class (an extra year of preschool for younger students) which she thinks might be a good option for her younger daughter in three years. In nine years, when it is time to look for high schools, she believes she knows where she will send her son, even though it is not the school from which she and her husband graduated, and where he teaches. The power of community was an important factor in Rachel's decisions, and she searched until she found the place that best fits her family's needs.

As the interview shifted away from Rachel's personal Jewish education and towards her children, Rachel was sometimes unable to pull herself out of the equation. Every anecdote she shared about her children was either connected to her volunteer work at their school or her

education. Her love for Judaism shined through as she spoke about her kid's engagement, growing up in a Jewish community and the goals she has for her family.

As Rachel toured the different day schools for her son, she remembered how much she loved her own experience. She shared that many of her friends are still her friends from her day school time. Rachel expanded by saying she does not remember meeting most of her close friends because she knew them from growing up. She felt that “the Jewish community [at her school] was really good at fostering that.” When asked if she has any overall memories about her Jewish education, she shared that she loved her time in day school because she loved her school; even the subjects that she disliked, she remembers liking in elementary school because “she loved her school.”

Although Rachel finds herself in the minority of parents from Temple Judea preschool who plan to send their children to day school, she explained that their shared need for a Jewish foundation helps bond her to the other parents. Rachel loves that as co-president of the parent committee, she knows most of the parents and children in the preschool.

Rachel wants to replicate these experiences for her children. She wants them to have a positive Jewish community that they can turn to, “I know people say that we live in a bubble sometimes... but there is something nice about being in the warm Jewish bubble. 99% of the time, we go somewhere, and I know somebody... it is not a bad thing to show your kids that you have friends and that your friends came from relationships you made in Jewish settings.”

When asked what Rachel wished she had spent more time learning in her Jewish education, she named liturgy. Rachel regrets that although she knows all the prayers, she learned them before she could read. Now she notices that she does not always say the prayers correctly and does not know what they mean, “is it keeping me up at night? No ... but it would be nice if my kids could know what the prayers mean.” Rachel views liturgy as one of the few gaps in her knowledge of Jewish education.

While Rachel's daughter is a little too young to understand Jewish education, her son loves it. He is close to his grandma, Rachel's mother-in-law, who is a Jewish educator. He loves

to tell her what he is learning at school, and she helps him expand his knowledge. She spends a lot of time teaching him about the Jewish holidays and practicing his Hebrew. She shared with me that last year she did not sign her son up for Temple Judea's Camp Sababa because "he doesn't need to, he goes to Jewish day school." However, many of his friends from Pre-K went to camp last summer and loved it.

In reflecting on how she thinks education has changed since she was a kid, she shared that she believes keeping education current is an effective way to keep kids engaged. For people who hate Hebrew school, why would they want to continue Judaism if that is their connection? It is important for people to enjoy what they are doing. Rachel began to reflect on why her son's friends loved Camp Sababa, "Sababa is a great idea because it's fun, it's interesting, you are still involved... My son, I know, will not mind the Judaism that is thrown in for two weeks this summer, but other kids are going to be looking at it like oh, I get to play relay games..." Rachel shared that she does not know much about the details of Camp Sababa even though she signed her son up, but she does not care. She knows that he will be in a fun environment with his friends, learning about Judaism. That is what she believes is important.

Rachel shared that she believes, "community equals comfort." However, Rachel lamented about how finances create a barrier to Jewish education. If you have the funds to send your kid it should be easy, but day schools are an expensive investment. Although she does not know how to fix it, so that Jewish education is more affordable, she believes that it is one of the greatest challenges surrounding Jewish education.

When asked what she believes to be the most important part of Jewish education Rachel shared, "to me it almost isn't about the education, to me it's about the people you surround yourself with... the firmer those foundations are the greater the chance of you loving being Jewish as you get older." Rachel believes that if you love being Jewish when you are older the more you will want your children to have a Jewish education, "community and education go hand in hand. You really cannot have one without the other.

Ben: Jewish Acceptance

Ben grew up in Los Angeles with a Catholic father from Chile and a Jewish mother native to Los Angeles. When the discussion of religion came up, his dad said that since they lived in Los Angeles near his mom's family, and they would celebrate holidays with her family, they should raise the kids Jewish. They never celebrated Christian holidays except for what he calls a *Yahrzeit* dinner on Christmas Eve. This dinner was to honor his grandpa, but Ben did not know why the dinner was on Christmas Eve, just that it was.

Ben and his wife grew up at Temple Judea, but they did not know each other then. Ben's family joined Temple Judea when he was in 5th grade and getting ready for his bar mitzvah. His family joined Temple Judea because, "all the temple's that we had looked at would not allow my dad to stand with me on the *bimah* for my bar mitzvah." He shared that although his dad agreed to raise him Jewish, he did not feel accepted by Judaism until Temple Judea. Ben went through Temple Judea's religious school through confirmation.

Ben had an "overly complex experience" with Jewish education, "being from a mixed background, I didn't feel like I fit in anywhere... Even though my mom was Jewish, my dad was not always accepted into places where we wanted to go." Ben shared that growing up he found Judaism to be exclusive rather than inclusive. He felt, "that it was Jews against the world" and that was something that made him feel left out of the community because his dad was not Jewish.

However, when asked about any good memories surrounding Jewish education, he shared how comfortable he felt with his classmates at Temple Judea. He felt remarkably close with his friends even though they did not go to the same secular schools. He strongly reflects that on the breaks between classes his friends would hang out together, "...it was boys, it was girls. We had known each other for a long time. There was no pretense of I have to be a certain way, I just felt comfortable." The word comfortable came up several times when he described spending time with his classmates.

Ben thinks the most important parts of Judaism are *Tikkun Olam* and communal values. He really likes that Temple Judea focuses on teaching values, "... now there aren't many places other than directly inside the family, there are not many places where community values are experienced." He likes that he can show his kids that as Jews we all share certain values and look out for each other.

Ben shared he has been thinking a lot about the idea of b mitzvah because his daughter will get the date for her bat mitzvah next school year. Ben reflects that when he thinks back on his bar mitzvah, he thinks it was "silly because my parents had to refinance the house, they had to spend tens of thousands of dollars for a one-night party. The question that I ask myself is, what is the value of a bar mitzvah?" He thinks that the ceremony is becoming less impactful as the parties get larger and larger. He believes that a b mitzvah is supposed to be "a recognition of the work that someone has done to get to that moment and the idea that the community has appreciated your growth and would like to continue to support that growth." However, he dislikes the idea of the big party. He thinks it does not reflect the value of having a b mitzvah, and it is a waste of money. Ben and his wife have been thinking about taking their kids on a trip instead of a party because not only will it be cheaper, but it will help their kids learn about life in various parts of the world.

His family chose to belong to Temple Judea because it had been their community growing up. While they were not originally sure when they wanted to join, they ended up joining at an early age and enrolling both kids in the preschool and religious school. His kids are currently in kindergarten and third grade. As a parent, he wants his kids to learn how to question things. He believes that Judaism is strong on learning and questioning and he wants his kids to be able to know how to ask questions. He still feels like it can be Jews against the world, but it is not as strong (at least in Los Angeles in the Valley) as it was when he was a kid. Most of the people he knows now do not worry as much about intermarriage or if the people around them are Jews as he remembers from his childhood.

He believes that his kids have an incredibly positive outlook on Jewish education. He was a stay-at-home dad when his kids were little, so he volunteered in the preschool classroom.

They celebrate all the Jewish holidays with both sides of the family. He wants his kids to have the ability to explore other religions as they get older so that they know Judaism is not the only way of living, but he thinks that the idea of their exploration relates to a central part of Judaism.

When asked about the changes in Jewish education, he shared how it used to be very formula based while now at Temple Judea each year the teachers are given a theme. Throughout the year the teachers find ways to teach the theme to the students. He provided an example for *Tu Bshvat* and all of the different ways that you can use *Tu Bshvat* to learn about the environment, sustainable food, climate change or even planting things like his younger son did in kindergarten.

As Ben and his wife think about their kids in Jewish education, they care a lot more about social experiences than Jewish experiences. They believe there are lots of ways to teach Judaism, but the social experiences need to be created for them. He believes that his goal is to teach his kids the foundation of Judaism so that they will know how to ask the right questions. Ben believes that the most important part of Jewish education is the sense of community and shared values. His kids feel at home at Temple Judea and know that if there is a problem, they can ask anyone for help. He reflected on how the community at Temple Judea still resembles what it did when he grew up. His family joined because they accepted his dad, and he still feels it is as close and accepting as that for his kids.

Leora: Jewish by Blood

Leora grew up in the valley, she is a triplet born to Israeli parents. Leora's mother grew up as a daughter of Holocaust survivors. Both of Leora's mother's parents lost most of their family in the Holocaust, and her mother lost her sister from polio when she was seven and her sister was five. Leora's maternal grandparents were anti-religion, "they used to say if there is a God, why is God doing this to us?!" Leora's dad grew up with an American mother who comes from a long line of rabbis. She met her husband when he was in the British Navy as the British were ruling Palestine, and they moved to Israel. Leora's father came from an Orthodox background, leading to a battle over how religious their home would be, but no matter what they always "had traditional family holiday gatherings, we sat down for Pesach, we did Shabbats. We didn't get a lot of religion in those situations, but we did understand that you come together as a family. The stories were there but we were meeting because we were family."

Growing up she went to Hebrew school for a few years. She recalls the focus of the school was more about learning Hebrew than about the holidays. She does not remember much about the content of the Hebrew school, but she remembers having fun with her friends. Her family was also involved in the JCC. She and her siblings went there for after care most days after school and throughout her teenage years her family was part of a havurah at the JCC. The family had no affiliation with any synagogue as she was growing up. All her memories of growing up Jewish, besides going to Chabad, were fun and good. Leora disliked going to Chabad because she could not sit with her dad, and rarely went except the couple of times he forced her to go for special days such as Yom Kippur. Her mom never went to services. As she told this part of the story, Leora's voice changed from the typical upbeat tone I have gotten to know over the last year and a half. She expressed that it was a shame her family did not get to synagogue more regularly.

Leora and her sister did not become bat mitzvah, but they did have big parties in place of a bat mitzvah. Her brother had two traditional b'nai mitzvah. One in Jerusalem and one in Los Angeles. Leora felt really connected to the idea of a Jewish bloodline. She reflects, "I always

understood that being a Jewish woman means that I extend the Jewish bloodline. It was always told to us that my sister and I, as far as our choices of partners goes, it wouldn't matter because we are Jewish. And that our brother would have to marry Jewish in order for him to continue a Jewish bloodline, which he has." Leora and her sister both have non-Jewish husbands and her parents do not care because their children are halakhically Jewish.

Leora has always been proud of her Judaism, but she almost wishes she had learned more when she was growing up. She believes that her son is learning a lot more about Judaism than she did at Temple Judea. Leora reflects, "I am really glad I had a boy, because I wouldn't want to have a conversation with my dad about if I had a daughter and I wanted her here [having a bat mitzvah at Temple Judea]." However, he does not mind that her son is at a Reform synagogue because he will have a bar mitzvah in Israel. She has brought her dad to a few events beginning with a preschool Shabbat and he could not believe that there was a woman on the Bimah.

When Leora had her son, she wanted him to speak Hebrew as his first language but knew it would be difficult because her husband does not speak any Hebrew. She enrolled her son in a *Gan* (daycare) so that he would learn Hebrew. Her siblings all have kids around the same age, so they all went to *Gan* and Temple Judea preschool together. She reflects that her son had a good basis of Hebrew, but he lost it all when he started at Temple Judea's preschool.

Leora reflects on how when she was growing up, they knew all the fun stuff about Judaism, but not much of the background. When her son was too old for the *Gan*, she knew that she wanted him to be in a Jewish preschool. As he finishes elementary school, Leora is beginning to look at middle schools and is considering enrolling him in a Jewish middle and high school. Growing up, Leora felt torn between her parents' battle with religion. So, she wants "him to know how important it is to keep his Judaism, keep his faith, promote his faith. I would want him to marry Jewish and continue the Jewish bloodline, because that is important to me."

As Leora and her siblings began to look at different preschools, they did not know what to expect from a real Jewish foundation since they did not have experience with Jewish

education. Leora and her brother came to a parent meeting at the Temple Judea preschool, and she immediately knew this was her family's place. She felt at home. Although all three of them originally belonged to Temple Judea, her brother and sister have since moved out of California. Leora's brother does not belong to a synagogue now, and she tries to not have an opinion about it. Her sister just moved back to California, and she hopes that her sister will find a synagogue so her nephew can become a bar mitzvah. She would like for her sister to join her at Temple Judea, but she is unsure if it will work out for them. When asked what she thinks is holding her sister back, she shared "It's a commitment, you know, and I choose the commitment for [her son], and he likes it."

Leora shared that all her close friends are other moms that she met when her son was in preschool. The boys have since gone on to different public schools, but the moms still are close, "I feel when they put our class together, they really picked them right." She said they often wonder if the other classes had parents who are still so close as they are, or if she just found herself with a good group of parents.

Now, as he is older, her son loves coming to synagogue, "he never says no, he never says I don't want to." He is always so excited to go to religious school. Leora shared with me that when he comes home from weekly religious school, he is eager to share everything he learned. He recently had to do an assignment for school about what he wanted to do when he grows up, and he said he wants to be a rabbi.

Her son had to skip his first few years of religious school because of Covid. In summer 2022, he enrolled in Camp Sababa as one of the original campers. While many families at that point used Camp Sababa as an alternative option for religious school, he chose to take part in both programs. As we talked about the success of Camp Sababa over the last few years, Leora shared, "I wish they would just make a day school here already!" Leora would like to send her son to day school, but she worries that most of the day school options in the area will not be feasible for her family and wishes he could enhance his learning at Temple Judea through a day school. Her son spent a few summers at another synagogue with a day school, but her family did not connect to the vibe of the day school.

When I asked her why she wants to make this shift she explained, “now the temperature of the United States is so volatile that really grounding yourself in your Judaism is so important. We cannot be scared to be Jewish. We cannot hide from our Judaism, and we cannot let Judaism die, we cannot.” She knows her son will thrive in an environment where he can feel comfortable and safe being Jewish,

He sees me... [she reaches to her multiple Jewish star necklaces] I’m not scared... We are proud and we are Jewish, and I feel that those things go together. But I don’t want him to be in a school, like the school that he is in now, where there is so much politics. I feel he wouldn’t be the first to raise his hand and say, ‘I’m Jewish.’ I want him to really feel proud of who he is.

As she continued to reflect, she shared “I don’t know, it’s important for me but is it fair to my son?” As a mom she feels a tension by how she wants her son to feel about being Jewish. She knows that he will thrive in a Jewish school and that she will feel safer knowing he is around other Jews.

Leora says her son feels “we have a fun religion.” She shared a story from when she was playing with a Catholic friend in junior high and they were dressing up with makeup. The friend's grandma came into the room and yelled at her that she was going to go to hell for putting on makeup. She remembers thinking how heavy that felt, and how grateful she is that we do not have such strict laws grounded in punishment. She is glad that as a child Judaism does not place such a heavy burden on our children. Instead, Judaism focuses on the idea of right from wrong and having good morals. She continued to express just how beautiful she thinks Judaism is.

She has not yet taken her son to Israel, but her family often comes to visit. She said they want to start a summer exchange program where she sends her son to her cousins, and they send their kids here to become immersed. She would like to take him to Israel soon, but she worries because she is not sure when they will have the opportunity, given the current situation⁴.

⁴ This interview was conducted a few months after October 7th, 2023.

Leora's husband was raised Catholic but never had a strong connection. He can see so much beauty in Judaism. This is his second marriage, and he has a son from his previous marriage. His ex-wife married a Jewish man when their son was young, and although they are now divorced, the son spent most of his childhood being raised Jewish by his stepfather. This caused her husband to be exposed to Judaism through his son before he even met Leora. Leora felt lucky because when they met, he already knew about Judaism and saw how great it was for his older son. Everything comes from a place of progressive openness for her family.

Leora believes that the most important part of Jewish education is understanding humanity, and that the basis of Judaism comes from the idea of loving your fellow man. She believes that Judaism brings a sense of peacefulness to your life. She believes that all denominations of Judaism lead from a sense of understanding that brings us together as Jewish people. She loves that she feels connected to every Jewish person she meets. She has never felt alienated from another Jewish person because she is Reform, "my son is no less Jewish because he doesn't have a Jewish father, he is just as Jewish as anyone else. Whether you converted, or your mom is Jewish, or your dad is not... you are still Jewish because that is what you choose, you choose to identify as Jewish." Leora really feels that "there is nothing not to love about the Jewish religion. If anybody really stops and looks at it, it is beautiful."

Leora reflects that she wishes she had more exposure to Jewish texts when she was younger, even though she does not agree with some of the stories. She reflected a lot about Cain and Abel and the horrible idea of brothers killing brothers, but she still thinks that everything is meant to teach morals that we need to have as people. She wants her son to have more Judaism than she did. She plans for her son to have two different b'nai mitzvah ceremonies, one at Temple Judea and one in Israel. Leora ends by sharing how meaningful her time at Temple Judea has been for her family and how proud she is of her son and his relationship to Judaism.

Faye: "I'm giving my children what I didn't have, and I think that's what every parent wishes for."

Faye is a first generation American. Her parents are Eastern European. Her dad was a refugee from the former Soviet Union and had little connection to Judaism. Her mom grew up in Hungary and was the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. While Faye had religious grandparents, she did not pass much Judaism down to Faye. Faye's parents were more focused on assimilating to the United States than teaching their kids Judaism. Faye always knew that she was Jewish even though she did not have a religious upbringing.

When Faye was in fourth grade, she met a girl at a bat mitzvah who was more religious than she was. This friend, who she also went to school with, exposed her to more Judaism. The following summer at her friend's encouragement she went to a Jewish summer camp. That summer was her only Jewish education experience, "it was not a part of my everyday life, unfortunately." When she was 26, she went to Israel for the first time for her cousin's wedding, "That's when I pretty much said ok, there's something here. I can no longer hide it and be ashamed of it and not embrace it... the songs that I learned at that one year at camp, I heard those songs and those prayers recited at a Shabbat dinner in Israel and it blew my mind. And I realized that Judaism, no matter where you are in the world, is no different than it is in Encino or in Hungary or in Israel... and I realized I need to embrace this." This experience helped shape Faye's adult life. Faye realized that she only wanted to date Jewish men and that she wanted to give her children a Jewish home because "I just wanted them to be proud of who they were, because there's not a lot of us out there..."

Faye was a member of an adult bat mitzvah class through Temple Judea. She became a bat mitzvah about three weeks before our interview. She first heard about the class at a synagogue board meeting and thought it would be a fun experience. She signed up for the class with a friend who is also on the synagogue board. Her older daughter had just had her bat mitzvah a few months prior and Faye said, "I was so proud of her, but at the same time during the service and during Shabbat or High Holiday services, I just never felt connected because I didn't understand the prayers and I didn't know when to bow..." Faye realized that those

around her knew the prayers so much better than her and she thought “I want to do that too.” As Faye began to think about the program more carefully, she realized that her bat mitzvah would take place in 2024, the same year that she would turn 50, so she decided “why not give this gift to myself for my 50th birthday... I wanted to be more connected to the Temple and to my faith so that's why I wanted to have a bat mitzvah...” She shared with me that as a mom, she finds that she does everything for her kids and does not take time for herself. She felt that “I wanted to do something for me. It was about me. It wasn't meant in a selfish way; it was about how do I better myself. How do I enhance my life? So that's why I did it.”

Faye has two daughters; one is in upper elementary school and the other is in high school. Faye and her family ended up at Temple Judea due to a chance encounter at a local Target. She was at Target; she ran into a distant relative who mentioned a free play group that was meeting at Temple Judea. At the time the building was going through a major construction project, so they were looking for creative ways to bring life to the community while having limited access to the campus. She started going weekly and found a nice community of people who were at the same stage of life as her. A few months later the building was open enough to start a ‘mommy and me’ class for an incredibly low price. From there she continued to enroll her daughter in programming. Once she realized that she wanted her daughter to go to preschool at Temple Judea, she began to grow more involved. She is about to step down from the board after six years, “this is my last year on the board, I am no longer allowed to be on the board.”

Faye signed her daughter up for religious school in kindergarten to be with her friends from preschool, but she was not happy with it. She felt as if it “was glorified babysitting because for me to drive from [her city] to Tarzana so that my daughter could color, on a Sunday, it just seemed pointless... I wasn't happy with what they were providing for the education for the religious school component.” There was a change in the leadership of the religious school and the new principal was a good friend of Faye's. Faye felt that if her friend was in charge along with the new director of education, it would be a much better experience.

Both of her daughters are deeply involved in Jewish education. They spend their summers at Jewish overnight camp and at Camp Sababa. Her younger daughter is still a participant while her older daughter works at Camp Sababa. Her older daughter takes part in most of Temple Judea's high school programming including volunteering as part of the madrichim program. Her younger daughter goes to the weekly religious school. Faye shared that "I could not wish for anymore because they are so connected to their Temple... I wouldn't change a thing. I really think that the trajectory that my family is on is really helping their Jewish identity... everything that I wanted is happening. I'm giving my children what I didn't have, and I think that's what every parent wishes for."

When Faye and her husband began thinking about overnight camp for their older daughter, they were worried about the finances since they were a one-income house, but their daughter really wanted to go. The original camp they chose was shut down due to wildfires, so they had to pivot close to the beginning of summer. She found a new camp that was a few days longer than the original camp and cheaper. "Me, trying to be economical, I was like if I can send her away for a longer time for the same amount of money, if not less, than why not go that route." Faye sent her older daughter to this camp, and "when we picked her up, all the kids ran to their parents but when we got [her daughter] she was crying because she didn't want to come home." From then on, she fell in love with camp and counts down the days every summer for camp.

When I asked Faye if she thinks her kids have a positive outlook on Jewish education she quickly responded, "Oh God yes!" Her younger daughter does not always like to say how much she likes it, but Faye can tell that she loves it.

Faye wants her kids to have good relationships within the Jewish community. She would like them to marry Jews and continue to pass on their heritage to their kids. Faye expressed, "everything that I didn't have, everything that I didn't feel, I want them to have." She wants her kids to find their Jewish community.

Faye puts a big focus on the history of Judaism, and how although it has adapted, many parts have remained the same for thousands of years. She expressed, “the prayers that they say and the songs that they sing were done by their ancestors... it’s deep.” Faye shared a personal story about her grandfather in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. He lost his first wife and two sons, “they died for who they were, and we can’t ever forget that.” She believes we should not fear our Judaism just because of persecution, “we need to continue it and we need to build it and we need to keep it strong.” Faye wants her kids to know their history and be proud of who they are.

Faye consistently spoke about the tradition of Judaism, “it was much bigger than something that I’ve understood or grasped in my life.” She noted how strong Judaism is and wants her daughters to feel comfortable finding a Jewish community wherever they go in life, “if they go to Europe, or abroad they can still celebrate Shabbat or Passover or Hannukah, and it will still be the same. It will be uniform; it might be slightly different, but it is still theoretically the same.” She wants them to be able to go to a synagogue anywhere in the world and feel at home.

Faye wished more people felt connected to Judaism. After the events in Israel on October 7th, 2023, she was so thankful that she had a community at Temple Judea to fall back on. She shared during her recent bat mitzvah speech, Temple Judea was the first time in her life that she felt safe, “I genuinely, wholeheartedly have to say that Judea is my safe place. It is the place where I belong, where I feel connected.”

Discussion

Throughout the cases, the research question explored was: To what extent does a parent's personal experience of their own Jewish education affect the decisions they make about their child's Jewish education? The themes that emerged from the interviews were community, content, finances, regret over a lack of education, values, and family. Each theme emerged differently in every conversation, but the consistency of the themes helped determine that these themes are important for families. As a leader it is important to identify themes that families value to help everyone feel comfortable.

Community

Rachel's continuously spoke about the Jewish bubble. She shared that although there may be issues with the idea of living in a bubble, she loves that she can use the Jewish community to teach her kids Judaism.

Ben had a difficult view of community in the beginning. Ben's family originally did not fit into any communities because his dad was not Jewish. He often found himself as an outsider looking into the community. Once Ben began at Temple Judea, he pushed some of those negative feelings aside. Ben felt at home and comfortable with those around him. He was not able to share many specific educational experiences, but he reflected on the feelings of belonging he had during those experiences. As a parent, Ben appreciates that the community show his kids how Judaism is not just a religion, but a guide for life.

Leora initially was unable to share with me any Jewish education she participated in growing up. During our interview she spoke highly of her time at the JCC or in family *Havurahs*. For Leora, the community came first and everything else followed. It was not until after our conversation when she spoke with her siblings that she was reminded of her time in Jewish education programming.

Faye did not have a Jewish community growing up. She found Temple Judea by chance and joined the community. For Faye, community was a place to learn more about Judaism. Faye

began to enroll her daughter in Jewish education so that she could stay with her friends. At each entrance Faye found herself learning and connecting with Judaism. Community became the vehicle for Faye to connect with Judaism.

Parents in these interviews view community as the most important piece from their Jewish education making it a determining factor in deciding how to enroll their children in Jewish education.

Family

In addition to these themes, there were also some differences that emerged through the interviews. In most of the cases, the person I interviewed spoke about their partner when they discussed the choices they made for their children. In case four, Faye only mentioned her husband once or twice, even though as a teacher, I see him at drop off and pick up way more than I see her.

Ben spent a lot of his interview discussing challenges he faced growing up with a Jewish mom and a Christian dad. Although his dad fully accepted that his kids would be raised Jewish, Ben found that he was not always accepted as Jewish by outsiders. Leora's son is being raised in a similar family structure; however, Leora did not speak of any difficulties that this caused for her son. Leora often mentioned that her son is "fully" Jewish because she is Jewish, and she does not feel that her husband is treated any differently in Jewish settings because he is not Jewish. Although Ben and Leora's son had similar family structures, they have opposite experiences as to how Judaism views them.

A factor in Pomson and Schnoor's (2008) study that proved to be especially important to the research was extended family. The more present the Jewish extended family was, the more often the families observed Jewish traditions. This was validated by the parents with whom I spoke. In every interview there was an emphasis on extended family. It is important to the interviewees that they can celebrate the holidays with their extended families. In each case the extended family helps the kids feel connected to Judaism as they grew up and helps their kids continue to feel connected to Judaism.

Content Knowledge

Each family interviewed had their own Jewish traditions. Some of the families practiced in specific ways while others adapted their traditions to those around them. Interviewees spoke about how Judaism was passed down to them and how it is their role to pass it down to their children. No matter the parent's feelings about their own education, they were determined to pass it down to their children.

As an educational leader, I view tradition in a broader sense to include the idea of content. Although I was not very surprised, content was rarely brought up in my interviews. It is my job to share this content with my students so that it can be part of the experiences. I must find a way to share the content in a fun and engaging way so that my students do not feel that they are being pulled away from community building.

Although Rachel feels like she has a strong understanding of content, she regrets that although she knows all the prayers, she learned them before she could read. Now she notices that she does not always say the prayers correctly and does not know what they mean, "is it keeping me up at night? No ... but it would be nice if my kids could know what the prayers mean." She hopes her kids can understand the prayers. Although she had a different background, Faye also spoke about her experience with prayer. Faye regularly attends services but "during Shabbat or High Holiday services I just never felt connected because I didn't understand the prayers and I didn't know when to bow...." She feels that after all of this time she still did not understand the Jewish liturgy. While Rachel feels that her Jewish education is sufficient and is not actively seeking out an opportunity to learn prayers, Faye enrolled herself in the adult b mitzvah program so that she would learn the prayers.

Leora expressed that it was a shame her family did not get to synagogue more regularly. She wishes that she had a stronger background on Jewish tradition so that she could pass it on to her son. Throughout the interview Leora repeatedly shared how excited her son is to tell her what he learned at religious school, but that she does not know any of the stories herself.

Despite this, she still feels welcome in Jewish spaces and is happy that her son is learning so much from his Jewish education.

All four cases include a mention of strong values that Judaism teaches their children. Each parent discussed how important Jewish values are to them. Throughout all the cases, the parents spoke about how grateful they are that their children can learn these important values from Judaism in a way to show that it is a communal value and not a specific rule set by the parents. These parents think it is important for their children to be taught content surrounding Jewish and family values.

Finances

All four interviewees discussed finances. Rachel spoke about her fear for Jewish education since it is growing in cost. Ben named how much money his bar mitzvah cost his parents, and how he is already thinking about his kid's ceremonies. In case three Leora talked about how she wants to enroll her son in a day school, but they might have to make some lifestyle changes so they can afford it. Faye spoke about how money impacted where she would send her girls to overnight camp, and how that one choice affected her girls in such a positive way. Access to Jewish education is becoming increasingly more expensive and can act as a barrier to entry for some families. It has impacted the choices that these families made about their children's Jewish education.

Positive and Negative Experiences

Rachel was the only interview that had a fully positive experience with Jewish education growing up. Rachel grew up going to day school and was fully involved in her Jewish community. She was able to be fully herself and felt fully connected. While Ben spoke highly of his experience at Temple Judea growing up, he did not always feel comfortable in Jewish spaces because his dad was not always welcomed. Leora and Faye both found their place in Jewish education as adults. While I expected each case to have a range of connection to Jewish education, I did not expect for only one of the people to have had a fully positive experience.

Since she had such a wonderful experience, she is the only one that wants to fully replicate it for her kids. I am curious if this affects the fact that as of right now, she is the only one who has her kids enrolled in day school and not Temple Judea religious school. Does this show a correlation between type of education and connection to Jewish education?

Israel

This casebook is being written in the spring of 2024. Following Hamas attacking Israel on October 7th, 2023, there has been a strong wave of fear among Jews around the world. As this casebook is being written, many Israeli hostages are still being held in Gaza. I conducted some test interviews for this project as part of an assignment for a different class. In the first interview I did, I did not mention Israel, but it was brought up often. I made a choice to not mention Israel again for these interviews to see if it will come up naturally. The case interviewees referenced the terror attacks and relationship to Israel.

Israel was only mentioned repeatedly in cases three and four, in which those families include older children. I am curious if this has anything to do with the fact that the older children can better understand the current events in Israel, or if it is a coincidence and those are the only people I interviewed who feel connected to Israel. I chose not to ask specifically about the role of Israel in their current choices, but I do wonder if it will have a different impact on decisions parents make post October 7th, 2023.

Temple Judea

As I read the interview transcripts, I learned that no one said anything negative about Temple Judea. I went through my questions to see if they were leading, but I think that everyone really felt such a positive connection to Temple Judea. This makes me unsure if I have an accurate sample size, or if I subconsciously only picked people who would have something positive to say. As a student working at Temple Judea, I at once felt at home within the community. Throughout many conversations with my faculty mentor, we have discussed how special Temple Judea is, but I have never been able to articulate why I feel this way. Throughout

these conversations I began to realize that there is a stronger reason that community is so important to Jewish education. These families feel at home at Temple Judea. Temple Judea is the community that best matches these family's needs for how they would like to educate their kid Jewishly.

All four of the families began at Temple Judea when they enrolled their kids in the preschool. They felt a strong connection to the community at Temple Judea and decided to make it their Jewish home. Every interview spoke highly about how they were welcomed into the preschool and how it served as a foundation for their children's Jewish education.

Leadership Implications

Throughout interviewing, I spent time getting to know families more. I found that the more I learned about them, the more I would understand them and was able to relate to them. I also discovered that the better I understand each family, the better an educator I can be for them. As Leora told me about how her son was enrolled in *Gan*, I recalled a conversation that the education team had a few days before. We were discussing how impressed we were with him because even though he was only in his first year of Hebrew learning, he was picking everything up much faster than his classmates. I realized now that I understood more about his background, I am able to help him learn Hebrew at a faster rate. This level of understanding has helped me grow in leadership work such as being better at building relationships. Once I have strengthened the relationships, I will be able to have a clear vision for how I can help families. As leaders working with families, it is crucial to take time and build relationships.

As I began to analyze the interviews, I examined them through the lens of the four frames (Bolman and Deal, 2021). The idea of the four frames serves to analyze situations to help determine if leaders are analyzing situations from multiple angles. The four frames are structural, political, human resources and symbolic.

As I read the interview transcripts I began to find examples for each frame. The political frame focuses on the idea of a hidden agenda. In Faye's interview she spoke about how a friend pushed her to go to camp one summer. Years later when she was at a Shabbat dinner in Israel, she recognized the songs from her summer at camp. This is what helped her get more involved in Judaism. The human resource frame focuses on people's needs. Ben found himself at Temple Judea because it was the only place that his family felt accepted. The symbolic frame addresses a sense of need for purpose in life. For Faye this is seen through her having a bat mitzvah and doing something for herself. For Leora this can be seen through the idea of a Jewish bloodline. Finally, the structural frame is task oriented. In my conversations with Rachel and Faye, they discussed the different day school options, one going until 8th grade and one going to 6th grade. Both families found themselves wanting the school that went through 8th grade so that

they would not have to transfer their children to a school for 7th and 8th grade and then transfer again to another school for high school.

As an educational leader, it is important for me to be able to use the four frames to create change in my institutions. For the human resource frame, I believe I must learn where people come from so that I can meet them where they are. For the structural frame I will work to talk to people individually before I make group decisions. For the political frame I will work to find creative ways to bring in content to reach my educational goals while also meeting the needs of the community. For the symbolic frame I learned how people feel valued when you listen to their story. By listening to people, I make them feel important and gain insight into what they need.

Throughout my interviews I found an enduring dilemma of community and content. Every interview had a large focus on community and how the community makes the family want to come back. As an educational leader I believe in community and am constantly thinking about the community as I plan programs. However, as an educational leader I also have goals around content and what I want to teach my students. Content was not prevalent in the interviews as much as I originally imagined. I began to view that for most of these families they place a greater value on community than on the educational content. As an educational leader it has become my job to find a balance between creating community and not only providing but illustrating the value of content.

“Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:7). Parents are responsible for teaching their children Judaism (Sarna, 1998). This was a statement that I agreed with before I started my case book. That is true only for cases one and two. In case three and four, Leora and Faye really found Judaism themselves. Once they were older, they began to reflect on how they were not raised with as much Judaism as they would have liked. They worked to learn more and teach their children what they did not know themselves. In case one, Rachel spent a lot of time discussing how she chose which day school for her son. Her reasoning mirrors the findings by Pomson and Schnoor (2008). I began to realize that while your

childhood Jewish education can serve as a foundation, many adults find themselves connected with Judaism much later in life. As a Jewish educational leader for children, this worries me that I must put a greater weight on how I ground my students, but it also helps me feel more relieved that I am not the only opportunity for these children to connect to Judaism. Additionally, I began to realize that my students are not just the children in my classroom, but their entire family. Many times, when kids get home from school their parents ask them what they learned that day. If a student answers honestly, they often could be teaching the parent what I taught them in class. As a teacher, my lessons will often reach a larger amount of people than I realize.

As I finished analyzing my interviews, I returned to my original question; Do parents still believe that education is the future of Judaism? Do parents view education to keep Judaism alive? How can I, as an educational leader, respond to the families' changing viewpoints?

As I began by reflecting on my own leadership stance, I began to think differently about the enduring dilemma of community and content knowledge. Community is more than just people you are with; it is about the support and strength you get from those relationships. Judaism has been around for thousands of years and there is so much rich tradition to teach. As a leader how do I work to teach all the rich traditions to my students while also helping them to build a strong community? As a Jewish educational leader, it is my job to determine what I will do with this information. I plan to continue to explore the enduring dilemma of content knowledge and community focusing on informal and experiential learning techniques to help continue to “sneak” in education as we work on building Jewish community.

I suggest that other leaders take the time to get to know the people they are educating, to learn how to create the best community - building programs possible. Once educational leaders know their community, they will be able to determine the best programs for their institution. Every person I interviewed seemed so honored to share their story with me. They made me feel like I was doing a favor for them by listening and not that they were doing a favor for me by sharing their story. If leaders take the time to get to know the families that they are

working with, they will not only have stronger relationships, but those relationships will carry more value, enabling growth to come from within the community.

Credo Statement

As I begin my work as a Jewish educator I would like to think about the needs of the community before I begin my programming. Before my capstone, I always knew that community was a strong part of Jewish education, but I never knew how important it was for those receiving Jewish education. Throughout my capstone I got to know different families and learn about their specific wants and needs from Jewish education. Once I got to know each of the families, I discovered why the programs that their children are enrolled in work so well for them. In an ideal world where I am creating the programs, I would like to do this in reverse.

I want to begin each job in the future by getting to know those who I am serving before I create any change. I cannot create any change if the people I am serving do not think I am present. By listening to and learning people's stories it allows me to be present and shows the community that I care. It is important that they find value in our relationship before I can properly lead them. As an educational leader it is my job to listen to people's needs and respond to them in terms of structure and content. As I enter new communities it will become important for me to determine the need before I make any adaptations to the curriculum, whether it be additions to the current curriculum or creating a new program.

Jewish educational leaders need to get to know the people that they are leading before they make any changes so that they can lead in the best way possible.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

I divided the questions into different subjects. All subjects are titled. The probing questions are the biggest bullet point below the title. The smaller bullet points were follow-up questions I predicted I might need. I did not ask every follow up question.

- Demographic
 - Name, where did you grow up, can you tell me about your religious experience growing up
- Personal Jewish education
 - Can you tell me about your experience with Jewish education (growing up)?
 - Type of Jewish education?
 - Where did you go? What did you do?
 - How long did you engage in Jewish ed- ex till BM or till college
 - How did you feel about it?
 - How did your personal experience it affect how you think about Jewish education at large?
 - How did it affect your relationship/engagement with Judaism?
 - Did you make connections to Jewish people or just Judaism?
 - Community
 - Was it a positive or negative experience?
 - How did Jewish education affect your social group? Did you have a core group of Jewish friends?
 - Is there a particular story, learning experience, or memory that sticks with you?
 - What Jewish learning experiences do you hope to replicate for your children?
What do you hope is different?
- Jewish Community
 - How did you choose Judea for your Jewish community? What led you to that decision?
 - Did you have a Jewish community before Judea? What was it like?

- Children
 - What type of Jewish education are/were your kids enrolled in? How did you decide to enroll them in those programs?
 - What is your larger goal for their Jewish education?
 - What factors helped you make the choice to enroll them in that/those programs?
 - Do you think your children have a positive or negative outlook on Jewish education? What do you think affects their view?
 - As you make Jewish educational decisions for your children, do you consider the social experiences?
 - What are your goals for your kid's social relationship with Judaism/Jewish people?
- Closing questions
 - How has Jewish education changed since you were a kid? If you had the options that are available now, do you think your experience would be different?
 - Do these new options affect how you look at your children's Jewish education?
 - What about Jewish education do you think is the most important?
 - For you?
 - For Jewish families in general?
 - Do you think that your experience with Jewish education affect the choices you make for your children's Jewish education? Why or why not?
 - Is there anything else you would like to share with me that I did not ask you?