Unleashing the Power of Congregational Education

Ever since the 1992 National Jewish Population Study, many of us—educators, clergy, philanthropists—have been engaged in heroic efforts to revitalize congregational education. While we have had made notable progress for which we should be rightly proud, this field has remained stubbornly resistant to deep transformation. This past October, The Davidson School of JTS brought together a group of scholars, rabbis, educators, and change practitioners from across denominations and North America to learn together and begin to design an innovative path forward. Out of this gathering came a renewed sense of hope, a desire for collaboration among diverse institutions, and a revitalized sense of transformative purpose.

In this issue of Gleanings, we present a selection of the papers that participants wrote for our deliberation which stimulated rich dialogue. Included first in this issue

The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education is the largest multidenominational school of Jewish education in North America, granting masters and doctoral degrees and providing professional development to educators currently in the field. Drawing upon cutting-edge thinking in both Jewish and general education, its pedagogy emphasizes experiential education, is informed by best practices and new developments in teaching, and engenders leadership in a variety of educational settings from day schools to summer camps, Jewish community centers to congregational schools, Israel experiences to environmental education, and early childhood to adult Jewish learning.

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is a nascent, overarching vision of education toward covenantal community, which emerged during the gathering. Despite the many efforts of the last two decades, what we have lacked is a common vision of what we see as emerging among congregations engaged in change, which is not unique to each congregation, but rather weaves these individual inventive efforts together into a larger whole, providing transformative direction, and energizing further change.

Looking toward the future, we also offer a set of principles that surfaced during the discussion for how educators, clergy, families, consultants, federations, and philanthropists could be working together to make this vision concrete in the lives of more and more Jews. It is time for us to come together across denominational boundaries, professional and lay roles, and throughout North America, akin to a social movement, and finally transform congregational education into a powerful builder of engaged Jewish life for the next generation.

A Draft Statement of Shared and Renewed Purpose

BILL ROBINSON, PHD

In their essence, congregations share an aspirational vision of covenantal Judaism—of a voluntary community bound together across generations in a web of mutual obligations, inspiring and guiding individual acts of self-expression and tikkun olam in the world, grounded in a dynamic (sometimes difficult) relationship with the divine.

Each congregation that aspires to this paradigm will manifest it somewhat differently. While one may emphasize prayer, another may stress social justice. (Though we are not talking about congregations that only concern themselves with prayer and only do so on Shabbat. The covenant demands more.) And while each congregation fulfills to different degrees the promise of this vision, they all struggle with it. What congregations have in common and what arguably distinguishes them from other Jewish institutions both as description and aspiration is their core being as a covenantal community.

Jewish education within a congregation then is first and foremost education toward living in covenantal community. Education happens best—actually education only truly works—when it exists in real and tactile relation with a lived experience toward which one is being educated. Learners need to see and actually experience a community of adults engaged in serious and joyful practice of Jewish living in order to make meaningful and relevant the Jewish education they are undertaking. To appropriate a term from the sociologist Peter Berger, the life of the congregation makes plausible the vision of Jewish living toward which they are being educated (enculturated). In other words, education does not work if the life toward which one is being educated is not being regularly and powerfully experienced by the learners. To put it another way, borrowing from Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, we not only need text people whose lives are the text that our students read; we also need text communities. Thus, we ask ourselves: What would an educational curriculum for the life of the congregation look like? Following from above, it would focus on the three core aspects of covenantal community:

1. Building character that strives toward making our world a better place and is guided by Jewish values, practices, and stories.
2. Discovering and wrestling with the divine presence in one’s entire life without the easy and trivial separation of secular and sacred, and how one responds to that call.

3. Learning the ways in which one accepts and takes upon oneself the yoke of obligation within a community of mutual caring and support.

The last seems particularly lacking in today’s educational curriculum; yet it is arguably the most important. For where else do we experience this and in reflection learn to live it? Despite the power of other forms of educational experience—day school, camp, Israel trips—only in congregations is a voluntary community (particularly of families and intergenerational) to be possibly found in its fullness. Its potential countercultural nature places the congregation dialectically in a unique position to offer children, teens, adults, and families both an alternative and a solution to our society’s overindulgence in individual sovereignty and its correlate of consumer narcissism.

A reasonable response to this integration of educational focus and congregational life could be to declaim the decline of congregational life. If a necessity of great congregational education is a vibrant congregational life, then we may be doomed. Yet, the news of congregations’ death has been greatly exaggerated, to paraphrase Mark Twain. Congregations are undergoing a societally grounded shift that is arguably as great as the one that brought about the growth of the suburban synagogues in the 1950s and 1960s. While many individual synagogues are surely facing existential threats, the congregation itself is not. It has (in one form or another) been with us for two millennia; what it may be facing is a structural transformation. In all such processes there is loss and growth. The question we find important and productive is: Where is the growth taking place?

This we can see already from the independent minyanim to the larger urban congregations that are embracing diversity within and breaking down the boundaries between home, synagogue, and city, and thus between sacred and secular. The growth is happening in places that offer people choice in their expression of Judaism, while providing Jewish experiences that deeply matter. There is room for concern, but there is also reason to be optimistic about the future.

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finding friends and feeling responsible as leaders and mentors of younger learners. Adults are privileging congregational education in their busy weekly schedules because they are finding meaning and community in regular engagement with Jewish text, prayer, and observance; with their children and with other adults and families who share their Jewish journeys.

This short paper explores the distinctive positive characteristics of congregational education that give it a unique place in the Jewish educational lives of children, teens, adults, and families, and outlines a set of questions that leaders in our field must consider when contemplating new models and strategies.

DISTINCTIVE POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Part of what differentiates congregational education at its best is innovative models with powerful pedagogies such as project-based learning or story-based learning, strong professional learning for teachers, and intentional design. But other differentiators have to do with effectively harnessing the positive characteristics of Jewish learning that are fully integrated into a healthy, vibrant congregational setting and culture. Other, much touted Jewish educational settings such as Jewish overnight camp, Jewish day school, and Israel trips either do not share these characteristics or do so in a fleeting and temporary way. Consider the following:

- **Community-embeddedness:** Congregations provide a ready, active, living Jewish community into which learners can become enculturated so that Jewish learning and living are seamlessly integrated. When fifth graders take on a yearlong project to develop, illustrate, and publish a new siddur for the young children and families of their congregation, they understand themselves to be part of a community of people who learn and pray together. When children, teens, and adults in a Shabbat community education program come together for a Torah service during which one family shares an interactive *drash* on the weekly *parsha*, they feel part of a community that learns and prays together where they are known, seen, and heard. When families go with other synagogue families to feed the homeless or teens engage in interfaith dialogue and service learning projects they understand themselves to be part of Jewish community that acts on Jewish values in the wider community. It is difficult to think of other contexts in which children, teens, adults, and families can find this kind of community.

- **Intergenerational and family learning:** Learning with people of multiple age groups brings a richness all its own and supports the sense of a living community, not a contrived one. When Jewish learning takes place within the context of a congregational community, opportunities abound for intergenerational and family engagement. Many of the more recent models of congregational education view the family as the unit for whom learning is designed. And learning as a family not only provides families with a new and meaningful type of “quality family time” but also holds promise for much greater transferability of learning from the synagogue-based or sponsored experience to Jewish life in the home. Finally, a number of congregations have found success in creating “near-peer” education models in which older children—often teens—engage with younger children in Jewish learning. This provides teens a sense of being needed, relied upon, and looked up to and younger learners role models to emulate. Like the relationship between campers and staff at camp, they can imagine themselves growing into these roles, thus providing a vivid, ongoing path of engagement.

- **Longevity of relationship and engagement:** Congregational education typically engages learners over a period of several years at least and a lifetime at most. Two of the highly regarded immersive experiences that research tells us contribute positively to ongoing Jewish identity formation—
camp and Israel trips—can largely be episodic in nature. Children (and their parents) may enter congregational early childhood programs at a very young age or religious school at age 5 or 6 and remain involved at least until bar/bat mitzvah at age 13 or beyond, through high school. Adults may engage in congregational Jewish learning opportunities throughout their adult lives. And they may interact with the congregational community in a variety of ways in addition to learning experiences. Thus congregations have a unique opportunity to engage learners and build deep relationships with them over a period of many years, not just weeks or months.

- **Continuity and regularity:** Most congregational education programs meet weekly throughout the school year and learners participate year after year. This creates a rhythm, a predictability, an opportunity to create meaningful routines and rituals that are the signs of a strong culture. When Jewish learning happens week after week throughout most of the year, it can create a sense of comfort and a way to mark time and witness growth. When learners meet regularly they can forge connections to one another and their teachers and clergy, and develop a sense of Jewish learning and living being simply part of “how I live my life.” The synagogue can become a special place for learners to pause, reflect on, and make sense of their daily lives in a Jewish context. When educators focus exclusively on skill building and knowledge acquisition these opportunities get lost.

- **Significant opportunity to address the whole person:** One of the many strengths of Jewish overnight camp is its ability, in an immersive 24-hour closed environment, to create experiences that impact and engage the whole person, encompassing knowledge, action, beliefs and values, and a sense of belonging. The best day schools address the whole child as well. And, due to the combination of the attributes described above, congregational education, too, presents a distinct opportunity for Jewish learning that goes beyond knowledge acquisition to address the whole person. The fact that the learning is nested in an ongoing intergenerational congregational community with longevity and regularity—not a temporary, episodic, or age-limited one—means that the learning can reach well beyond what learners do in the synagogue or in specifically Jewish observance at home to impact how they live their daily lives, the choices and decisions they make.

- **Flexibility and freedom to experiment:** Congregational education faces few actual hard constraints such as state or federal standards or regulations to satisfy. Though movements may offer standards or curricula, they have no enforcement mechanism. Despite the prevalent times and locations of congregational education for children, teens, and adults, nothing is actually set and—as congregations have begun to demonstrate—the possibilities are limited only by our creativity.

**POTENTIAL AND REALITY**

The evidence suggests that the majority of children who receive any kind of Jewish education receive it in a congregational context. Yet congregations do not always live up to their full potential as the locus of meaningful, inspiring, life-changing Jewish learning experiences. Many—perhaps most—congregations’ education programs do not seem to deliver on the distinctive positive attributes set out above. We are leaving much of the power of congregational education locked away.

What accounts for the gap between the potential and the frequent reality? Often it’s the so-called school/shul silos. Congregations that exhibit these distinctive attributes build their educational models within highly integrated, intentional cultures that don’t have to “link the silos” because they never erected
them. Or they’ve consciously worked to become congregations of learners in which Jewish learning is incorporated throughout everything the congregation does. They’ve created models of Jewish education that lead generations and families to learn together, that locate learning in authentic Jewish time and experience, that consciously work at building relationships, and that address the whole learner—helping learners relate Judaism to their daily lives and supporting them as active agents in creating their own meaning through the learning process.

Congregations that leverage their distinct advantages—community embeddedness, intergenerational/family learning, longevity of relationships/engagement, continuity and regularity, whole person learning, and flexibility—create learning experiences that occupy a unique and meaningful place in the lives of children, teens, adults, and families. The challenge is to let go of the familiar shores of congregational schooling and venture forth on the uncertain seas of innovation to create compelling, inspiring, joyful learning experiences that realize the distinctive potential of the congregation as a place of powerful Jewish learning and living.

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The State of Synagogues

CANTOR ADINA FRYDMAN

INTRODUCTION

I believe that synagogues are timely and timeless and can and should be responsive to the changing social contexts while bridging our ancient and rich tradition. The setting in which most American Jews are educated is the synagogue. Thus, if Jewish learning is to flourish we need to understand the transformations impacting that setting. I will address some of the changing social contexts in which synagogues find themselves and some of their implications: the narrative of scarcity, transactional vs. relational, the universalistic vs. particularistic focus, the nature of choice, and our changing understanding of the synagogue space and its application to congregational education.

THE NARRATIVE OF SCARCITY

Membership rosters at many synagogues and similarly, at congregational schools, have been on the decline for a number of years for several reasons, including, but not limited to, changes in patterns of belonging/joining, individuals marrying and having families later, and a reversal of the suburban flight as many empty nesters move back to urban centers. We see this acutely in the geographical areas that experienced the most proliferation of synagogues in the 1950s and 1960s. As those running these synagogues realize that there is no quick marketing or programming fix to this trend of membership decline, panic has begun to set in. This panic and anxiety often leads to a narrative of scarcity. As resources are diminished, synagogue professional and lay leaders begin to fear any new entity that might appear in their backyard. What results
from this lens of scarcity is often a pervasive and unhealthy competition. This competition can exist among synagogues or between synagogues and entrepreneurial ventures, JCCs, Chabad, or anything that appears to be a threat to the diminishing pool of prospective members.

The problem, as we are all aware, is that we continue to compete over the same third of the pie instead of applying a lens of abundance and seeing the opportunity that is ripe with the remaining unengaged two-thirds of the pie. By changing the lens, synagogues could be more open to exploring creative partnerships and approaching their challenges with innovation. Synagogue change agents spend a lot of time on changing the narrative. They do this both with individual synagogue leaders and/or their boards by starting with “appreciative inquiry” and focusing on the existing assets (both material and people). In addition, they try to help synagogues uncover what their market potential is and then focus their efforts and their vision on that market. By honing in on their unique value and focusing on a particular niche, synagogues may remain stable and possibly experience growth. Trying to be one size fits all and offering something for everyone often is not good for anyone.

**TRANSACTIONAL VS. RELATIONAL**

Living within the larger context of a service economy has led many synagogues to become service stations—you pay for what you want and get it right away. This dynamic has led us down a rabbit hole mired in dues, abatement committees, and the erosion of the shared covenant between all stakeholders who the synagogue community is built upon. And this transactional relationship is not limited to the synagogue as a whole, but to its various components (i.e., congregational schools), which are more and more viewed as à la carte services. In *Connected Congregations: From Dues and Membership to Sustaining Communities of Purpose*, Beth Cousens writes expansively on this. We live in a context in which the word “community” is used freely in a wide variety of contexts, so much so that I use this word with caution. However, synagogues are in the business of building spiritual communities of purpose, and these communities must be nurtured over time on the core building blocks of relationships and what Allison Fine, author of *The Networked Nonprofit* and most recently *Matterness* calls “mattersness.” Mattersness is what individuals feel when they are connected to a synagogue and they feel known, valued, heard, and seen. Creating this environment takes time and intentionality; it is a practice. The trend we began to observe in the publication, *Are Voluntary Dues Right for Your Synagogue? A Practical Guide*, was that synagogues, in turning the conversation from mandatory to voluntary, were not merely saying, “This is a choice”—because it had been already for a number of years—but rather were saying “through your financial contribution and involvement you get to have a role in making this community happen.” While this dues model is not right for every congregation, the conversation that it evokes is most certainly critical for all. The financial model upon which most synagogues are based assumes a religious school fee built into everyone’s membership, even while sometimes adding on an additional fee for religious school families. As we see more and more people questioning the overall membership dues model, synagogues are moving toward considering alternative funding and engagement models. Congregational schools might benefit from being part of these critical conversations as they will not only be impacted by the outcome, but may have some valuable thinking to contribute given their deep connections with families and their children.

**UNIVERSALISTIC VS. PARTICULARISTIC**

Living in an “I” world, we have seen time and again that people seek connections with others through networks and communities, enhanced, expanded, and made more accessible by the ability to be virtual. And we have seen vast networks form to impact social change. The synagogue, rather than being seen as one of the original loci of community, is seen as antiquated and out of touch. As people lean further toward universalism, Judaism in general and synagogues specifically continue to be symbols of particularism. This
dichotomy is forcing us to bifurcate our identities and the way and with whom we spend our time. In other words, synagogues become the place where we “do Jewish” and connect only with Jews, while the rest of our identities, particularly those thirsty for social change, are relegated to finding an outlet outside of the synagogue and are divorced from our Jewish selves. We are bombarded in our daily lives and through the media with images of social injustice. What if we could make meaning of these injustices and act on our values with others who felt similarly within the context of our synagogue? The clergy could speak about these issues from the bimah, the synagogue could join in solidarity with other local faith communities to address these issues, and synagogues could be the place where religious and moral obligation meet regularly and not just on mitzvah day. Now let’s be honest: to really do this means to sometimes hold in tension what we are told by our religious tradition and what we know through our contemporary sensibilities. But this authentic dialogue between the past and the present, between modernity and tradition, between the sacred and the secular can and should take place within the synagogue and its congregational school and would make both newly relevant.

OUR CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF THE SYNAGOGUE SPACE

As our lives are increasingly mobile and virtual, it seems somewhat anachronistic that our synagogues are confined to the synagogue building. The implication is that we rarely think outside the walls of the synagogue building to meet people where they are and that we are often willing to go down with the building rather than adapt to our changing needs. In addition, we exclude, and often feel threatened by, some of the most creative modern iterations of “spiritual communities” because they don’t “look like” synagogues. In the face of changing needs, over the past year we have seen creative and innovative uses of existing synagogue buildings. Some synagogues are deliberately downsizing while others are seeking creative partnerships to share space. There are models of collaborative education, as well as models in which the education is taken out of the formal classroom and into other spaces such as people’s homes, museums, and coffee shops. For many years as synagogues were expanding, we invested heavily in prime real estate, and now that that real estate poses a real threat to our sustainability, there is an opportunity to embrace this limitation as a way to think more creatively about our use of space.

THE NARRATIVE OF CHOICE

We live in an era of infinite choice. This proliferation of options has created an open marketplace for just about everything. We are no longer in the days when the sole option for supplementary Jewish education was at the synagogue. Private tutoring, non-synagogue-based benei mitzvah training programs, and online training have grown in the marketplace. Synagogues can no longer afford to assume that families will come to the school because it is the only choice. Not only must the synagogue compete on quality, but it must also compete on price and the ability to customize or personalize the experience. There are significant implications for all Jewish educators as they consider alternative models and frameworks for engaging the 21st-century learner. As we learn from David Brooks’s article “The Moral Bucket List,” we need to focus on building both the “résumé virtues,” skills one brings to the marketplace, and the “eulogy virtues,” the ones that are talked about at your funeral. While synagogues contribute somewhat to the résumé virtues, where synagogues truly might corner the market is on helping build eulogy virtues. Synagogues and synagogue educators are in the core business of developing mentschlichkeit.

CONCLUSION

These issues reflect but a few of the changing social contexts that synagogues and their congregational schools currently face and must urgently address in order to continue to thrive. While the synagogue, on the one hand, has all of the gravitas and weight of tradition, it has also seen great change since its inception.
This legacy of agility is one that we must build on in order to assure its future. Synagogues must continue to be responsive to the changing social contexts while bringing to bear all that their tradition has to offer.

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Leading in Front, Beside, and in the Middle

RABBI HAYIM HERRING, PHD

INTRODUCTION

Jewish educators are often on the frontlines of change. They glimpse the future more quickly than others who work in congregations and Jewish organizations because they experience social, educational, and technological change with each incoming group or class of students. Jewish educators are typically the catalysts and designated leaders of educational change, but within a congregation or organization they frequently partner with rabbis. In this paper, I focus on a rabbi’s role in effecting change. My hope is to provide insights into contemporary leadership theory and practice that rabbis and educators who work with them can apply to any change initiative. These insights are meant to increase the likelihood of success of initiating, leading, and rooting congregational-change initiatives.

Congregational change and rabbinical leadership are integrally related. Generally, rabbinical leadership determines the effectiveness and sustainability of congregational change efforts, whether in individual congregations or as a part of a broader community coalition. Of course, excellent school and lay leaders, outside experts, and stakeholders are essential. However, a rabbi’s personal and ongoing involvement is a key success factor in significant congregational change.

These ideas are the result of my primary research on denominational and independent rabbis and congregations, a review of substantial secondary research on congregations and nonprofit organizations, scholarly literature on leadership, and extensive work with rabbis, congregations, and nonprofit organizations. While certain fundamentals of leadership are enduring, other needed attributes of leadership are emerging in today’s environment of expected transparency, immediacy of communications, disruptive technologies, and the chaos they engender.

My colleagues who have successfully transformed congregations have a repertoire of leadership stances. They practice leading in front, leading beside, and leading in the middle. They move in and out of these roles as they initiate and attempt to anchor transformational change.
Every successful change effort begins with a person’s inspirational vision and passion. An effective change mobilizer maintains the passion but seeks out a core team of people who enrich it because it resonates within them. Competent stewards of congregations and organizations invest significant energy into management, a complex set of activities and skills that include issues such as board and professional leadership development and adherence to the highest professional standards of governance. Rabbis who execute these responsibilities well are fulfilling a reasonable expectation of professionalism. But effective rabbinical change leaders view stewardship as the beginning of their work.

Rabbinical leaders are tenaciously focused on a vision of how their congregations change people’s lives and their broader communities. You know them when you meet them because it feels like the vision has taken hold of them. They are unable and unwilling to let it go no matter how many times people suggest that they do. That is what I mean by a rabbi leading in front: communicating a simple, powerful, and inspirational picture of a significantly better future and engendering confidence in his or her ability to make it a reality.

LEADING BESIDE

Rabbis who effectively lead change learn that they need to move from leading in front to leading beside. In other words, they continue to directly participate in the change and implementation process, but stand far enough away so that they can also more objectively observe how the change is unfolding. As they release control of the grand vision to an initially small group and then a larger group of people, they ensure that the people who are doing the work have the necessary supports to move from ideation to implementation. They have the greatest knowledge context and content (they see the whole picture), better perceive the unanticipated gaps, and determine how to bridge them so that the process continues to advance. In their role as observer, they know how to keep individuals and groups focused on discrete tasks and guide them to see how they are contributing to something even more transcendent than any singular piece. As participants, they provide their team with momentum, modified as needed, but they do not compromise the most essential aspects of the vision. They keep the bar high when others are tempted to lower it, and challenge the group to raise it higher as they gain traction.

LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE

Leading from the front is like being the conductor of an orchestra: a hierarchically structured group of musicians with a director who interprets the music and unifies the group around it. Leading from the middle is more akin to leading a jazz band. Great jazz emerges from minimal musical structure and maximal musician autonomy. The conditions of minimal structure and maximal autonomy call for musical leaders and musicians who expect unpredictability, know when to let one another solo and when to play together, and assume mistakes will happen. But the leader understands that mistakes are opportunities for nimble adjustments and segues for continued learning. The truly incomparable jazz bandleader appreciates that innovation emerges from fusion and some confusion, finds exceptionally talented musicians, and challenges them to surpass the limits of what they believe are their own abilities. They are masters of improvisation and inhabit the domains of chaos and unpredictability. Jazz bandleaders not only thrive in disruption but also actually provoke it to prevent great musicians from devolving into great technicians.

A small number of rabbis in established congregations—and many rabbis in emerging congregations—are learning how to lead from the middle. They surround themselves with colleagues and volunteers who do not tolerate mediocrity. No one—not a staff person or volunteer—is automatically entitled to be involved in a major change effort, and these rabbinical leaders learn over time to politely say no to those who are interested in helping but not suited to the effort. They do not wait to complete 100 percent of the plan,
but know that 80 percent is preferable, because they will fill in the details faster and more accurately by launching, learning, and improvising. They openly speak of mistakes, and while their volunteer leaders expect fiscal responsibility, they also understand that the pathway to excellence and success is often through trial and error. Leading in front is an established leadership attribute. Leading beside requires blending old and new skills. Leading from the middle—provoking learning through disruption and identifying and cultivating expert improvisers, may emerge as one of the more important new leadership capacities.

CONCLUSION

I offer this framework of leadership of in front, beside, and in the middle as one way of organizing enduring and emerging rabbinical leadership roles and, I believe, leadership roles in many other organizations. The truly great rabbinic leaders who change congregational life and their communities move in and out of these roles as needed; they are certainly not linear once the leading in front phase begins, but iterative. Within these rubrics, we can fill in many specific operational leadership tactics. However, for the purpose of this gathering, I hope that this leadership framework will provide helpful ideas in reconsidering congregational educational efforts and stimulate additional use ones.


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Insights from the Thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel Toward a Reconception of Congregational Education

PETER A. GEFFEN

What follows is a small section of a paper on the topic of congregational education adapted from “Heschel’s Spiritual Humanism: Jewish Education for the Twenty-first Century,” an article originally published in Modern Judaism (2009) 29 (1).

I shall attempt to bring to the discussion around the reconception of the afternoon school some insights I have gained over the years from studying the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Of course only I can be
responsible for conclusions drawn and suggestions made that do not come directly from Heschel, although as I think you will see, he did offer direction and guidance to the synagogue schools of his time, and did so rather forcefully.

I would suggest we start in the realm of philosophy. What is the purpose of these schools? Heschel sets us on this path with the following words:

A central concern in Jewish thinking is to overcome the tendency to see the world in one dimension, from one perspective, to reduce history exclusively to God’s actions or to man’s action, either to grace or to man’s initiative. The marvelous and the mundane, the sacred and the secular, are not mutually exclusive, nor are the natural and the supernatural, the temporal and the eternal, kept apart. The heart of the relationship of God and man is reciprocity, interdependence. The task is to humanize the sacred and to sanctify the secular.”

Are not the sacred and the secular mutually exclusive? Somehow our entire educational system—and not just parochial Jewish schools—is convinced that they are. Heschel’s charge to “overcome the tendency to see the world in one dimension, from one perspective” represents a paradigm shift in educational thinking.

We have become wedded to a false idea, that the quantity of education our children receive determines quality. This may, of course, be so in the realm of skill acquisition. But in the realm of values, identity development, and the broader issues of critical thinking (or what Heschel might have called “overcom(ing) the tendency to see the world in one dimension, from one perspective”), quality of time far exceeds quantity. In other words we can stop feeling sorry for ourselves because we are relegated to a few hours per week and honestly face the fact that what we deliver and how we deliver it will be the index against which our success or failure will be (and already is) measured.

While virtually all contemporary educators speak of teaching “critical thinking skills” they (ironically) often practice a highly dogmatic way of thinking critically. They do not accept the necessity of thinking critically in order to force the student (and teacher as well) to reach into the deepest recesses of their beings. And they certainly do not think about the relationship between God and human (if they think about it at all) as being one of “reciprocity” and “interdependence.” Heschel’s conceptual elevation has profound implications for all power relationships: teacher and student, parent and child, citizen and government, small nation and large nation, etc. Heschel is making clear that when you break down the assumed divide between conceptual realms, you produce vital and vibrant relationships.

And then, as he often does, he drops the bombshell of his thought at the end of this already overwhelmingly powerful paragraph. The way to reach this goal of non-compartmentalization is to change the model, by “humanizing the scared and sanctifying the secular.” To sanctify the secular sounds almost blasphemous. But it is highly unlikely that Heschel could ever be accused of blasphemy. Integrating our thinking this way builds our interdependent and reciprocal relationship with God, nothing less and much more. Heschel turns the tables of our accepted way of thinking upside down.

Heschel recognized the positive power of the openness of American society. In contrast to other mid-20th century rabbis of comparable eastern European descent, he welcomed the new intellectual and social environment that America offered. America’s open society led him to imagine a significant role for himself in the social struggles of the 1960s. Rather than keeping the traditional distance from non-Jews, Heschel embraced them, considered their theology seriously, taught in their seminaries, entertained and studied with their clergy, and spoke in their churches. By being engaged within and outside the Jewish world, he could

come closer to fulfilling the teachings of the prophetic tradition that so captivated him throughout all of his adult life.

In contrast, contemporary Jewish education can rightly be characterized by its insularity and an unspoken practice that is often little more than “survival training” cleaned up for the public audience by its nickname “continuity.” This model of Jewish education often consists of inoculations against threats, real and imagined, posed by the “outside world.” Heschel challenged this perception of Judaism with the following words:

The significance of Judaism . . . does not lie in its being conducive to the survival of this particular people but in its being a source of spiritual wealth, a source of meaning relevant to all peoples.²

Heschel’s words offer a challenge to radically re-conceptualize the Jewish educational enterprise. We are not engaged in a circular and self-serving endeavor, he said, and we cannot fulfill our mission if we do not engage “the other” in curriculum, program and experience.

Seeing the Jewish school as a place to teach the significance of Judaism as a source of “spiritual wealth . . . [and] meaning relevant to all peoples” would require us to shed our fears of outside influences. It would allow us to understand ourselves with a greater sense of integrity while welcoming the opportunity to be the place where Jewish children first and most forcefully recognize the “creative” beauty in different religions, worldviews, and of course races, languages, and cultures.

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Changing Synagogues and Changing Schools

ISA ARON, PHD

“Why,” as so many people ask, “has deep and systemic transformation in the field of congregational education proven challenging and elusive?” “And what can we learn about this from relatively recent efforts to transform synagogues?”

In this brief paper I do my best to answer these questions via a quick tour of some theory and some research. The paper covers a lot of ground pretty superficially (though there are endnotes for those who want to follow up). It begins with a general theory of organizational change and moves on to research that sheds some light on the factors that enable or impede synagogue change. I offer my own best guess about a major obstacle to change in congregational education, and review a theory that might help us understand what deters synagogue professionals from engaging more fully in change initiatives. In conclusion, I consider the implications for JTS, as it considers the role it has to play.

To begin, let’s acknowledge that this problem is not unique to synagogue education; the deep and systemic transformation of most organizations is also challenging and elusive. Synagogues are just one of many institutions whose culture is deeply rooted in tradition. One theoretical framework for thinking about organizational change is the “Change Formula,” which begins with the assumption that resistance to change is to be expected. The older the organization and the more embedded its culture, the greater its inertia. Proponents of this theory hold that resistance is best overcome by a combination of three factors: dissatisfaction with the present state; a vision of the future; and a series of practical first steps. Moreover, they argue, the relationship between these factors is multiplicative, rather than additive. Hence the resulting formula:

\[
\text{Resistance} < \text{Dissatisfaction} \times \text{Vision} \times \text{First steps}
\]

Recall third-grade math, in which we were taught that the product of any number multiplied by zero is zero. The change formula hypothesizes that if any one of these three elements is absent, the resistance to change will always be greater than zero; in other words, it will be too great. That is the bad news. The good news is that even the tiniest presence of one factor can multiply in the presence of the other two.

An important caveat: in this formula, resistance is defined as the perceived cost of change, not its objective or demonstrable cost. Two individuals who agree on the actual costs and benefits of a particular change (in terms of customer satisfaction, revenue, staff re-configuration, etc.) might still differ in their perception of these costs, based on their values, their optimism or pessimism, and their comfort (or discomfort) with risk.

While this formula is not based on rigorous research, it makes intuitive sense and has served as the theoretical underpinning for many organizational change initiatives, including the two most popular in the synagogue world: the Experiment in Congregational Education and Synagogue 2000. The formula also helps us reframe the original question from “Why do so many change initiatives in Jewish education fail?” to “What is the source of resistance to change in synagogues?” and “Why does the resistance seem even greater when it comes to synagogue education?”
The sources of resistance to synagogue change are easily identified. The mission of the synagogue is to maintain age-old traditions. Among liberal Jews who are fully integrated into secular/Christian society, the Jewish religious tradition is morphing and eroding. In reaction, many synagogue leaders dig in their heels to maintain traditions, whether they are based in halakhah, minhag, or simply “the way we’ve always done things here.”

Second, synagogues (and religious organizations in general) are hugely under-resourced. The responsibilities of synagogue professionals are dictated by the calendar, life cycle events, pastoral duties, and the need to raise funds. Lacking time for reflection and planning, they take the path of least resistance, which is to reproduce the status quo.

Given that resistance to change is so pervasive in congregational life, why do some congregations succeed while others fail? One answer can be found in the work of Penny Edgell Becker, a sociologist of religion at the University of Minnesota. For her book, *Congregations in Conflict*, Becker studied 21 churches and two synagogues in Oak Park, Illinois. She argues that congregations develop distinct cultures that shape how they define themselves and determine which of their activities are central. Among the Oak Park congregations, Becker found four distinct “ideo-cultures.”

In the study at the core of our book, *Sacred Strategies*, my coauthors and I found that seven of the eight synagogues that succeeded in making significant, lasting change fell into one of Becker’s four types—“Community,” which we called “Kehillah.” Kehillot are distinguished by their concerted efforts to create a sense of community among their members. In contrast to congregations Becker terms “Leaders,” Kehillot pay little attention to their standing in a denomination or their public profile in their area; unlike the congregations we called “Local Shuls” they do not expect community to happen organically; unlike Becker’s “Houses of Worship,” which we termed “Centers of Celebration,” they are not afraid of conflict and are willing to make demands of their members.

The connection between Kehillot and the change formula is direct, almost tautological. Kehillot are transformed when their leaders invest their time and energy into the activities highlighted by the change formula. They strive to articulate their vision, do not hesitate to voice their dissatisfaction with the current state, and undertake many steps (not the least of them participating in change initiatives) to enact that vision. In contrast, the eight congregations in *Sacred Strategies* that did not succeed at changing had distinctively different ideo-cultures, despite the fact that several aspired to become Kehillot. In fact, I would guess that the majority of synagogues in America aspire to become Kehillot, if one goes by the mission statements on their websites. However noble the aspiration, they are held back by competing priorities, autocratic leadership, and a resistance to introspection that are the hallmarks of the other three of Becker’s idioculture.

Now for my hunch: Over and above the factors that make it difficult for synagogues to change in the areas of avodah and gemilut hasadim, there is another, very large factor, the proverbial elephant in the room, that most pretend not to notice. To quote the blog of a young rabbi (whose name I wish I could remember, so I could credit him properly), “Bar mitzvah is the crack cocaine to which synagogues are addicted.” The business model of most synagogues relies on the membership dues of many families who join when their oldest child gets to the third or fourth grade and drop out after their youngest children celebrate their benei mitzvah. These families are not looking for community or meaningful worship or vehicles for gemilut hasadim. Perhaps they have found community, opportunities for gemilut hasadim, or even spirituality elsewhere. Nonetheless, they join a synagogue because they want benei mitzvah for their children. As Stuart Schoenfeld has taught us, bar/bat mitzvah is at the core of the Jewish folk religion.
Fully aware of this problem (though they may only speak about it in hushed tones), synagogue leaders (both lay and professionals) hesitate to “rock the boat.” To take just one example: most acknowledge that synagogue-based Hebrew instruction, which begins in third or fourth grade, is so ineffective that many reach seventh grade unable to decode Hebrew. Thanks to Lifsa Shachter (a former JTS faculty member) and Nachama Moskowitz (of the JECC of Cleveland), there is now a viable alternative that is much more enjoyable, efficient and effective, called Hebrew Through Movement (HTM), which takes only 15–20 minutes each time it is taught. If HTM were taught in every grade, decoding could easily be delayed until sixth grade, when students would have a sufficient vocabulary base to retain it easily. Unfortunately, even those who have read the work of Shachter and Moskowitz and accept their conclusions hesitate to make this change because of two fears: first that parents will fret that their children won’t be ready for their benei mitzvah; second, and most important, that parents will now have a reason to delay enrolling their children in religious school for a few more years.

What lies behind these fears? Why do so many educators and rabbis prefer to avoid the issue rather than educating the parents in their schools? To understand this, we need to consider the work of Robert Kegan, a Harvard-based developmental psychologist, on the stage he calls “self authoring.” At some point, perhaps when they are 30, perhaps later, adults come to realize that conventional wisdom is incorrect and that their own judgment may be better than that of their superiors and their mentors. They learn how to assert themselves and “manage up,” rather than simply doing what is expected. Kegan and his colleague, Lisa Lahey, see self authoring as the key to overcoming what they call “immunity to change.”

The fact that the capacity for self-authoring may not develop until one is 30, if it develops at all, has huge implications for institutions like JTS and HUC. It takes maturity and a sense of self-efficacy for a leader to promote and implement innovation. While each of us can probably point to the exceptional graduate students who arrived at our institution fully “self authoring,” we must acknowledge how rare these exceptions are, and how unfair it is to expect this capacity of our younger (both chronologically and developmentally) students.

In conclusion, consider the implications for graduate schools of Jewish education like JTS:

- Alumni, not students, make the best change agents; they should be the key participants in change projects.
- These alumni will not succeed alone. Consider how to support them in their efforts, including a good deal of mentoring and targeted workshops for their colleagues and lay counterparts.
- JTS can provide “thought leadership” through research and writing. Consider funding a team of researchers headed by Dr. Jack Wertheimer to write the sequel to the book Learning and Community.

Dr. Isa Aron, professor of Jewish Education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, HUC-JIR, was the founding director of HUC’s Experiment in Congregational Education, and is currently codirector of the B’nai Mitzvah Revolution. She is the author of Becoming a Congregation of Learners (Jewish Lights, 2000) and The Self Renewing Congregation (Jewish Lights, 2002). Together with Steven M. Cohen, Lawrence Hoffman, and Ari Y. Kelman, she is the author of Sacred Strategies: Becoming a Visionary Congregation (Alban Press 2010), winner of the 2010 Naish Book Award.
Good Education and Meaningful Congregational Life

BILL ROBINSON, PHD

A basic principle of good education is that one teaches toward a set of clear and compelling outcomes. Yet, most congregational education happens without those outcomes, beyond preparation for the bar/bat mitzvah and having learners feel happy. Most teachers cannot answer the questions: If I were successful, what would my learners be thinking, feeling, and doing at the end of the year? In what ways would their time with me contribute toward a particular understanding and engagement with Judaism in their everyday lives? What is our congregation’s vision for Jewish life toward which we are educating our young (and their parents for that matter)? This is an enduring challenge throughout all Jewish education, but an endemic and fatal problem for congregational education.

Moreover, education happens best—actually education only truly works—when it exists in real and tactile relation with a lived experience toward which one is being educated. Learners need to see and actually experience a community of adults engaged in a serious and joyful practice of Jewish living in order to make meaningful and relevant the Jewish education they are undertaking. To appropriate a term from the sociologist Peter Berger, the life of the congregation makes plausible the vision of Jewish living toward which they are being educated. Or, to borrow from Professor Isa Aron, the founder of the Experiment in Congregational Education, toward which they are being enculturated.

But, in how many congregations does this truly happen? How often are children during their education exposed and immersed within a vibrant adult Jewish culture toward which they could personally aspire? It’s not surprising that the one aspect of congregational education that “works” (leaving aside the incredible amount of wasted time on teaching Hebrew) is preparation for the bar/bat Mitzvah. To what other aspect of congregational life are children continually exposed? To what other aspect are they asked to take their role leading as an adult member? But, we must seriously ask to what extent is a Judaism centered on the congregational prayer service actually meaningful and relevant to the lives of today’s young children and teens as they contemplate the myriad of issues and opportunities facing them in their future lives? Even if we accept (which I do) the importance of instilling within our young the desire and capacity for a spiritual life, how often do congregational prayer services offer a true experience of the divine? Or (though it is changing) even a truly joyous experience? Just ask any child who experienced the splendor of prayer at a Jewish camp.

Now, I have intentionally offered an incomplete portrait of congregational life. Much else happens in congregations from joyous communal celebrations of life cycle events to voluntary and meaningful social action. And, when the Jewish education of the children combines with their seeing and participating in these aspects of congregational life, the learning becomes an understandable and aspiring path toward living a Jewishly prescribed “good life.” Nevertheless, if we were to look at the curriculum of most congregational schools, very little time is spent connected to these aspects of congregational life.

Even more importantly, while these other activities certainly play a role in all congregations, they are not those that are most central to the lived values (in contrast to stated values) of most congregations. And, children are perceptive purveyors of what really matters to adults (not just what they say). Prayer services still dominate the public heart of the congregational experience. And we must ask ourselves: How meaningful and relevant are or will be the prayer services of their parents (and more accurately
their grandparents) to them? Is this the heart of Jewish life toward which we can rest our educational enterprise? It is not inconsequential that the congregational models for the creation of the Experiment in Congregational Education were those congregations that put learning at the center of the congregational experience for adults as well as children.

The underlying assumption of this brief essay is that Jewish education is the endeavor of preparing the next generation for active and articulate participation in the culture of our people. Now, the culture of our people also takes place outside congregations, and students in congregational schools should be exposed to those vibrant aspects of Jewish life found out there as well. Yet, if the life of the congregation is not experienced as similarly vibrant and worth aspiring to, then congregational education either fails or becomes a means to prepare the next generation to live outside of congregations. One could thus interpret the recent Pew study data on North American Jewry as a result of decades of poor congregational education that taught the irrelevance of God and synagogue. The success of congregational education is inexorably and dialectically tied to the vibrancy and relevance of congregational life.

In today’s voluntary society, this involves building not only the skills but the desire to become a fluent participant in congregational life. This does not mean that as they become adults our children will not also change the culture of congregations. Yet, as with jazz, one typically becomes a skillful player of the music before one becomes an innovator.

Last, as Leonard Cohen says, “There is a crack in everything. That’s where the light gets in.” Despite the picture I painted, not all is dismal. There are plenty of congregations exploring and experimenting with new forms of worship service and shifting the focus of their activities and purpose to Jewish experiences that are more profound and meaningful to both adults and the children. Congregational education works best when it follows those emerging lights (instead of filling in the cracks with what’s missing). This involves a different course than the one we have pursued in the past. Instead of designing “good education” in the abstract and then trying to shove it in to congregations, we must design educational experiences that prepare children and teens (and adults) for the vibrant Jewish life that is just emerging in (some) congregations.

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So, Where Do We Go From Here?

Over the last several decades, there have been numerous efforts aimed at transforming congregational education. Many are still happening and have made important achievements, if still falling short of the goal of deep educational transformation. Their achievements, to use an analogy from the organizational guru Peter Senge, may best be seen as having sparked and spread defined educational inventions. But true transformation requires bringing these inventions together in an innovative way that transforms structure, content, and purpose.

In this view, the full value of any one invention cannot be realized and spread until many inventions become part of a larger (financially sustainable) innovation, which then replaces the newly outmoded traditional form. Thus, experiential models of education (such as project-based learning), new areas of Jewish content (such as environmental justice), and new structures (such as full-time teachers), each by themselves are not transformative of Jewish education. They must be brought together into a meaningful whole that inspires the learner, connects to the life of the community in which it is embedded, and is compelling enough to replace the old forms, such as years of Hebrew study in preparation for bar/bat Mitzvah.

This demands of us a holistic approach that is both strategic in its mapping out of all the inventions (or to use a more common term, levers of change) that need to be in place, while remaining entrepreneurial in the sense of facilitating—not mitigating—bottom-up (local and communal) experimentation. We need to join in ways that have not been achieved in our typically fragmented Jewish world (with some recent exceptions, such as Jim Joseph Foundation’s multi-community teen initiative). A collective impact approach would allow us to recognize the unique roles of each organization (from congregations to central agencies to entrepreneurial start-ups and beyond) in the endeavor. It would also facilitate continual learning among the participants as we build toward a shared vision, which itself would become more clear and influential as it became realized locally in unique ways.

Which inventions are most important and the particular roles of each participating organization will need to be determined. Yet, during our gathering in October, we began to name those that will likely be vital to our success:

**Imbue faith in leaders and in families.** When freed of the typical, too common, cultural norms of congregational life, we believe and have seen that clergy, educators, and families would all choose more meaningful forms of communal life and prayer and more relevant educational rituals. We have to trust and let go in order to let everyone’s energies come.

**Pursue education grounded in both Jewish thought and the aspirations of actual people.** The great Jewish thinkers of the last century (such as Heschel and Kaplan, among others) continue to offer us vital practical guidance in grounding today’s Jewish education in millennium old and still relevant Jewish ideas. This is not antagonistic to making Jewish education “meaningful,” but rather elevates education from meeting the existing (societally influenced) needs of people to addressing their deepest aspirations.

**Think globally but act locally.** Change happens locally, even when supported and inspired at the communal and continental level. It is important to provide resources that free congregations to break boundaries and experiment with new ideas, both in education and throughout the life of the congregation.

**Provide continental-wide inspiration and legitimacy.** Change is difficult and involves loss that is hard for local leadership to achieve against the resistance of tradition and entrenched interests. National bodies that can articulate an attractive, overarching vision for educational change can tip the balance for local communities and congregations to make the necessary hard choices.
Ensure collaboration among all congregational stakeholders. If congregational education truly encompasses the life of that congregation, as we have put forth, then educational change requires that clergy lead and work collaboratively with educators and families. The educational vision needs to be the vision of the congregation, not just of the school. And the work can’t be pushed off into the hands of educators and religious school committees; it needs to be the responsibility of the whole staff and congregation working in partnership.

Train for change. Change is challenging and not something that clergy or educators have spent much time learning in pursuit of their initial pre-service degrees. Training in the craft of leading change is sorely needed.

Go deep, then wide. In mobilizing change, it is useful to focus resources first on a few sites as laboratories of change in order to learn quickly and demonstrate success. These initial laboratories can also serve as regional spaces for teaching, similar to teaching hospitals. Then we need to focus considerable resources (more than we have in the past) on highlighting these successes and strengthening networks in order to mobilize professional and lay stakeholders across the continent.

Build upon what exists. The enterprise of educational change in congregations has been going on for over two decades now. We need to build upon the achievements of denominational endeavors, communal agencies, and individual congregations. The question before us is how we support and enhance what is already happening, not how we build something totally new.

The future is already emerging. We believe that the transformation of congregational education is emerging already in small but significant ways in congregations throughout North America. The task before us is how to spur and guide this emergent future. As our esteemed colleague Jon Woocher often quotes from the sci-fi writer William Gibson: “The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed.”