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WHAT COULD BE: SUCCESSFUL SUPPLEMENTAL ED: CONGREGATION MAGEN AVRAHAM, OMER, ISRAEL¹

by F. Penina Hoffnung

My family is still mortified by the memory: in 2007, I cried every Shabbat in synagogue. I was not making a spectacle of myself loudly, mind you, just quietly weeping as if I were the grandmother of the Bar Mitzvah, not an American Jewish educator on sabbatical in the Negev. I cried so routinely that they began to sit a row away. It wasn't hormones, or burnout, it was joy and frustration. I was witnessing a professional vision come true. Joy because I saw supplemental, short-term Jewish education that worked; frustration because I couldn't replicate it, on a technicality.

In the years since, I've pondered how to overcome that technicality, and I think I've figured it out. But first,

First there's the ceremony. The *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* almost singlehandedly conducted Friday and Saturday's prayers, chanted *Torah* and *Haftarah*, and gave an amazing *D'var Torah* referencing *Talmud*. The *Bar Mitzvah* child's parent(s) publicly spoke about the impact the *Bar Mitzvah* process had on them. The president of the congregation presented an intimate biography of the child: interests, hobbies, achievements, friends, pets' names, the out of town guests' names and hometowns, without notes. I have no idea how to replicate that: the man's simply a genius. Then the rabbi, with great fanfare, reviewed all the child preparatory work and then led the audience in loud applause. But I was puddled, because in some cases, *less than a year before, the child had never been in a synagogue.*

Obviously, these are not Orthodox children. They are upper class secular children of extreme, even militantly secular, parents. In their social milieu, except for Orthodox cousins, a *Bar Mitzvah* equals a party, a three-day professionally-produced resort-based affair followed by a trip abroad.

But *these* kids chose to have "*aliyah l' Torah.*" So they enrolled in Magen Avraham's "*Chug Bar Mitzvah,*" an after school once-a-week program, just like tennis, fencing, soccer and other extra-curriculars. The content? It should sound familiar: Jewish values, Jewish history, and an explanation of Jewish holidays, ritual practice, and prayer.

¹ I'm indebted to Rabbah Tamar Elad Appelbaum for creating my dream-come-true at Magen Avraham, and for helping me to re-create the particulars for this article.

But the ceremony was just the start: Among Magen Avraham's Sabras, those who did not come from a culture of synagogue affiliation, most tell identical stories: *they joined because of the transformative experience of their child's Bar Mitzvah, and they stayed*. Significantly, native Israelis are now the *majority* of the congregation. As for the kids, they stay, too: there's an active youth group—even though there's competition from more established Zionist youth movements. Teenagers regularly return and participate ritually.

Get it? The ceremony's the *beginning* of family involvement in Judaism/synagogue life, not the end of it! At *THIS Bar Mitzvah* factory, the product was engaged Jewish families!

I was witnessing success, but, alas, unattainable success. As I dissected the components of Magen Avraham vs. my community, the only real significant difference was Hebrew; time was not lost to mastering phonetic sight-reading, so it was all spent on content-rich, meaningful stuff.

How to learn Hebrew, if not in Hebrew School?

The Proposal.

Only 3 Steps--

1. Move Hebrew out of Hebrew School; remove rote teaching of *alef bet*, decoding, vocabulary, etc. Instead, expand teaching of more essential, meaningful material. Options can include tutoring or Jewish early childhood immersion programs to achieve basic Hebrew literacy.
2. Have Hebrew taught primarily in local public schools, not charter schools, regular public schools. Financially subsidize Hebrew teaching there, including covering the teacher('s/s') salary, if necessary.
3. Work with other local *ethnic communities*—i.e., Chinese/ Indian/ Korean civic associations, Muslim mosques, local school districts, state departments of education, and state legislatures to create ethnic and heritage-based world language programs in public schools. Train current foreign language teachers to supervise these new programs.

Intended Consequences:

1. **Improves the quality of supplemental Jewish education, the preferred system of most American Jews.** Liberated from "*bah, bah, beh, beh,*" religious schools could truly teach values, sacred literature, ritual, and history in meaningful ways.
2. **Lets everyone-including unaffiliated-access "free" Hebrew education.** We could finally reach those "hole-in-the-bagel" Jews, unaffiliated for a variety of well-documented, oft-maligned reasons. In a best case, this basic free cultural education might spur their interest further. Worst case, it will create a minimally literate Jews. Current world language offerings include cultural study, so they'd have basic cultural literacy.

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3. Creates a more cost-effective means of delivering better education. Currently facing shrinking Jewish philanthropy, our synagogues and Federations could conserve financial resources by investing in the training and maintaining of a small number of highly skilled Hebrew language/culture teachers, instead of the cadre of part-time, avocational teachers today. Smaller, more professional synagogue schools could achieve expanded goals if Hebrew no longer drained time and talent.

4. Seizes the historical opportunity of this recession. Public schools in funding crises are open to alternative funding sources and new ideas. The Chinese government is already training and sponsoring Chinese teachers in America.² If local ethnic groups banded together and likewise offered to improve the relevance and quality of their school district's World Language programs, at little cost to the school districts, it would be hailed as civic heroism.

5. Improves America's world standing via world language literacy. A 2006 US Department of Education world language initiative noted³: "American students must master critical need foreign language skills for our nation to remain competitive and continue the progress in securing our nation." The DOE, along with Federal security agencies noted in the report that there's a "Critical need... foreign language skills are necessary to advance national security and global competitiveness." The report continued:

- More than 200 million children in China are studying English, a compulsory subject for all Chinese primary school students. By comparison, only about 24,000 of approximately 54 million elementary and secondary school children in the United States are studying Chinese.
- According to the Center for Applied Linguistics, only 31% of American elementary schools (and 24% of public elementary schools) report teaching foreign languages.
 - 79% of those schools focus on giving introductory exposure to a language rather than achieving overall proficiency.
- Only 44% of American high school students are enrolled in foreign language classes as reported by the 2002 Digest of Education Statistics. Of those students, 69% are enrolled in Spanish and 18% in French.
 - Less than 1% of American high school students combined study Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Japanese, Korean, Russian or Urdu

In my area's local suburban public schools, French and Spanish are offered universally, with German, Italian, and Latin also offered in some districts.

² Dillon, Sam, "Foreign Languages Fade in Class — Except Chinese." New York Times, Published: January 20, 2010

³ Teaching Language for National Security and American Competitiveness, Department of Education, US Government, 2006 <http://www2.ed.gov/teachers/how/academic/foreign-language/teaching-language.html>

At “Back to School Night” this year at my fifth grader’s public school, her teacher spoke of a recent poll he’d done, identifying the languages that classmates were intimately engaged with at home. They were Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindi, Korean, Urdu, and Spanish.

Which list most closely resembles the DOE/NSA’s desired proficiency: the ones currently offered, or the ones being spoken in the students’ homes? The resources are in our own communities! Yet my daughter’s 5th grade world language experience was Spanish, for 30 minutes every two weeks due to cutbacks!

6. Improves the Jewish community’s relationships with other local ethnic communities by forming alliances and working together on an issue common to all, linguistic heritage preservation. The Jewish community, both because it is the most established and developed in organizational structure, has a history of interfaith work, (and frankly, because its language will not appear on any Federal language wish-list) should be the lead community in this effort. Creating a public education system that strengthens our nation’s competitiveness and security in the world is in everyone’s interest.

Recently, I shared a ride to a JCRC-sponsored interschool panel about comparative religions with a member of the Muslim community, and we discussed the poor state of our children’s relationship to their sacred texts. “The trouble is that they have to study the Qur’an in translation,” he said. “Their Arabic is nowhere near the level it needs to be for understanding.” I shared that we had the same struggle. He noted that relying on another’s translation and interpretations allows manipulation of meaning by extremist elements. I pitched him this public school proposal. With enough support, I said, public schools could offer Arabic or even his native Urdu. He was enthusiastic and intrigued.

Conclusion

Transforming Hebrew school isn’t going to be easy. But all the essential elements to do so already exist: We have money for Hebrew instruction, but we use it haphazardly. We have teachers, but insufficient contact hours. We have ethnic richness in our towns, but communication gaps between ethnicities. In New Jersey, there’s even a World Language law that makes alternative language instruction a right, but it goes unused. We have a poor selection of world language options, when we need bilingualism most in the world, We have a readiness to fund school programs in new ways, but no connections being made. And finally, we have a country needing bilingual world citizens, with the potential teachers to provide it in our own neighborhoods, but not being tapped.

Success is attainable; I saw it in the Negev. We just have to re-think and rearrange the status quo we have now, and work at building new alliances to improve both our public and religious schools.

If we will it, it is no dream.

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