

COMBATING EDUCATOR BURNOUT

by Rachel Kasten

I have yearned to be a Jewish educator since first breathing in the *ruach* at a URJ summer camp at age 13. And yet, after my first year in the field, I was seriously considering giving up on my dream. The work was truly meaningful, and I was honored and excited to have an impact on so many Jewish children and teens...but I was exhausted. The kind of exhaustion that you feel in your bones; the kind that can't just be cured by a good night's sleep. If you are a Jewish educator, you probably know the feeling all too well.

One of the biggest challenges facing Jewish education today is teacher and administrator burnout. Our schools have some of the most innovative educational models, vibrant curricula, and dedicated lay leaders. We have so many resources at our disposal, but they cannot be implemented without enthusiastic and energized administrators and faculty. My perspective comes from working in a large congregational school as a young professional, but the following suggestions for combating educator burnout could apply in many different settings.

During the end-of-year review with my supervisor, I expressed the fear that I would barely make it through another year, despite my love for the job. There are a hundred different responses she could have given, but what she did made all the difference: she cared. We often remind our teachers to show interest in their students' lives outside of the classroom, and many classes take time each week to "check-in." As administrators, we need to lead by example and show that same emotional investment in our staff. This doesn't mean we should blur the line between personal and private lives, but the more we know about our educators, the better we can address their needs. This caring, whole-person approach is one of the many things that separate working in the Jewish world from working in the secular world, and it must be preserved.

What is it that so overwhelms Jewish educators? The simple answer is too much work and not enough time. In my role, I oversee our *madrachim* program (with nearly 95 teens), family programs, retreats, 7th grade *B'nai Mitzvah* program, 8th grade *Mitzvah* Corps, and more. This workload is comparable to that of many full-time Jewish educators, and it is easy to see how it can become too much to handle. Often, our schools put too much emphasis on the number of programs offered in the hope that with dozens of options, each student will be able to find a niche. While that is a worthwhile goal, it can put unrealistic expectations on our educators. On Sunday mornings, I am often scheduled to be in two places at once – something that is unlikely to happen unless I can find a way to clone myself.

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Instead of trying to fill our calendars and brochures to the brim, we should emphasize quality over quantity. If a program requires a vast amount of time, but consistently fails to meet its objectives (especially if it is not well-attended), then schools need to be willing to cut it. Doing away with certain programs can be a difficult decision, especially in the case of annual events that have “always” taken place. However, schools should take a close look at their offerings and do a cost-benefit analysis of individual programs. Ultimately, this will allow both time and money to be directed towards more vital and vibrant programming.

Time is certainly the rarest and most precious resource we have as Jewish educators. And while it may seem impossible, we must use some of this time for personal and professional renewal. I learned that lesson the hard way my first year. There were weeks I barely had time to go to the grocery store, and professional development was so far down the list of priorities that I never got around to it. I am going into my third year now, and my supervisor has helped me set aside a day during the week and to seek out opportunities for my own Jewish learning. It may help to think of this time as an investment: taking a little time now to refresh ourselves will allow us to bring more energy to our work later. In particular, taking time for professional development will bring fresh ideas and better developed teaching skills into our schools.

The issue of burnout pervades the field of Jewish education, and there are no simple solutions. However, by calling attention to it, we can work to retain our passionate, knowledgeable administrators and teachers for longer. Showing interest in the “whole-person,” prioritizing tasks (and making cuts where necessary), and taking time for personal and professional renewal are all strategies to combat burnout. I look forward to learning even more strategies in what I hope will be a long and fulfilling career as a Jewish educator.

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