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HOT TOPIC: Should the paradigms of Hebrew School change to meet the needs of its constituents?

WHAT SHOULD A HEBREW SCHOOL IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD LOOK LIKE?

by Jill Eisen

In a time when families no longer live down the street from the synagogue, both parents work, public/private school has extended school time, and traffic has increased, parents have difficulty getting their children to religious school during the week. The Hebrew School in Your Neighborhood program is an alternative for unaffiliated families who are not ready or do not want to belong to a congregation as well as the families who cannot make it to the main religious school in the synagogue. These neighborhood schools take place during the week in private and public schools, a law office, and a showcase art space. What should this neighborhood school look and feel like? This is a tremendous opportunity to explore the best of religious school and a *chavurah* style of learning in order to build the neighborhood school into a positive, exciting, and communal Jewish learning journey that is convenient and close to home.

Six years ago, I participated in a series of meetings with lay leaders, educators, clergy, and administrative staff as we imagined a type of Jewish education that would give congregational families more for their membership. Our hypothesis was if families have positive experiences in their Judaism in and out of synagogue, they will strengthen and enjoy their Jewish identity and their ties to the congregation. We engaged families who expressed the desire for active participation in their children's Jewish education, deeper relationships with the clergy, and knowing they mattered to the congregation. *Chavurah Chadasha* (Pioneers in Group Learning) was born; it is a unique and progressive alternative for expressive, personal, and community family learning. The word *chavurah* is Hebrew for group study. Ten families became pioneers in a beautiful amalgamation of religious school, home study, group activities (retreats, field trips, and *tikkun olam*), and spiritual involvement. The experiment was successful -- the families became close, supporting each other through the passing of loved ones, celebrating *s'machot*, sharing Jewish holidays, and even planning their own retreat getaways. The students had higher attendance records than those who attended regular religious school and the parents became active leaders in the congregation. The hypothesis was proven and *Chavurah Chadasha* elevated Jewish education to an integral part of these families' lives. What made this program work? What lessons should we adapt to develop and include in the Hebrew School in Your Neighborhood program?

After years of evaluation of the *Chavurah* program, a key component emerged to be the essence of what made the program a success: the right personnel. It is the educator/coordinator who makes all the difference. He or she must be engaging to both

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students and parents, and also be charismatic, outgoing, knowledgeable, creative, energetic, and caring. This person was the most important motivating factor to ensure that the families willingly and eagerly participate in all areas of the *Chavurah* program. If the educator/coordinator did not have these characteristics, the program suffered greatly. **So, rule number one for the Hebrew School in Your Neighborhood program is to hire teachers who are friendly, caring, and willing to ensure that all the families involved feel welcomed, important, and special.**

The students in the *chavurah* rarely missed a class, weekdays in the home or Sundays in the religious school. What made it so important for them to be in class? The students became a family through shared experiences while participating in the *chavurah*. They didn't want to miss seeing each other twice per week. The teacher created the lesson plans centered on the students' interests and utilized experiential and hands-on learning, critical thinking, kinetic learning, and discussion methods. The students learned at their own pace and assimilated the knowledge learned within their personal thought processes, so that the information became part of their way of being and not information to be memorized and forgotten. As a result of these experiences, Jewish identity became an integral and important aspect of their lives. **This brings rules numbered two and three for our Hebrew School in Your Neighborhood: Create a community for the students where they feel important, heard, and valued and tailor the lesson plans to the learning the students' and families' needs and desires.** It is essential to note the majority of families enrolled in the Hebrew School in Your Neighborhood program are interfaith families, which makes it crucial to listen and respond to the families needs.

The *chavurah* took the lessons learned and applied them. Experiencing, creating, and doing were important components of the inner workings of the *chavurah*. *Shabbat* dinner was hosted by a different family each month. The hosting family and educator would lead the rest of the families in the *Shabbat* rituals and then the family gave a *D'var Torah* (*Torah* lesson) in their own special way: limerick, songs, plays, etc. Families came to a consensus on a group *tikkun olam* project. Families participated in a majority of the congregational Jewish holiday services and programs, *Shabbat* services, and other cultural events. **Rule number four is to have the students learn about and come to consensus when deciding on where to donate their *tzedekah* and what organization they want to honor and help. Rule number five is to design a few programs outside of the classroom where families can experience *Shabbat*, Jewish cultural programs, and *tikkun olam* projects together, thereby strengthening their Jewish community within the neighborhood.**

Chavurah Chadasha and Hebrew Schools in Your Neighborhood are organic. They are living programs that require constant evaluation and assessment to ensure the needs of the families and the congregation are mutually met. Thus the **last rule, number six, requires listening, forthright communication, and compromise from all parties involved.**

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A mission statement was created by adopting the six lessons learned in studying *Chavurah Chadasha*. The mission of our Hebrew Schools in Your Neighborhood is to create a Jewish community outside of the immediate Beth El vicinity that cares about Judaism and Israel. These schools make Jewish education accomodating and convenient to those families living in the chosen neighborhoods. The environment in the classroom encourages students to explore, discuss and create their own Judaic ideals. The students are taught through multi-sensory, hands-on, and interactive methods that give them personalized learning experiences. Hebrew language, vocabulary, and phonetic reading are used to build confidence and self-esteem. Families are empowered to celebrate the Jewish holidays and *Shabbat* and to perform social action in their neighborhoods. Through the curriculum, families, in particular the students, develop pride in being Jewish. We work with interfaith families to teach them about Judaism through discussions and hands-on activies in order to help all family members be comfortable in a Jewish setting.

In today's society, most likely both parents are working, students have hours of homework, and the families are over-programmed. Hebrew school is just another time commitment to fit into the puzzle. Bringing the Hebrew school into their neighborhood -- holding class in a nearby school or office building -- gives the parents added convenience, reduces the drive time, and creates an opportunity to meet other Jewish families in the area. These six rules simply direct us in preparing a Jewish way of life for these families by teaching, guiding, and connecting Jewish values within their everyday lives and making it easy for them to identify Jewishly on different levels that they may or may not have otherwise thought of before this Hebrew school experience.

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