

The Impact and Influence of “Tot Shabbat” Participation

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Shabbat programs for young children and their families have become increasingly common in American synagogues over the past few decades. This article is a summary of the 2018 Research Project “Exploring Tot Shabbat: A Study on Tot Shabbat Programs and Their Effect on the Engagement in Jewish Life of Families with Young Children.” The project sought to

- a) explore, identify, and describe Tot Shabbat programs
- b) explore the impact that participation in Tot Shabbat programs can have on the engagement in Jewish life of families with young children.

Data was collected via survey from 113 adult participants and 146 leaders of “Tot Shabbat” programs that met the following criteria: designed for children under age six attending the services with their families,¹ typically are led by the same person or persons at a non-Orthodox Jewish institution² with a history of at least three years of facilitating these services and an average attendance of 10 or more children for the past year, occurs at least 8 times per year, and does not require temple “membership” or other cost for participation. Twenty-one follow-up interviews were conducted to gather additional insight.

The data confirmed the hypothesis that Tot Shabbat programs encourage families with young children to engage in Jewish life. Additionally, it verified that they provide an environment for young children and families to celebrate Shabbat while engaging in social and educational opportunities that allow them to explore music, ritual, and prayer in the context of Jewish community. The data revealed trends and provided a much more specific description of not only what Tot Shabbat programs typically include, but also a richer depiction of what Tot Shabbat programs look and feel like; their impact and influence; their challenges and highlights; the reasons that participants attend; and the goals and motivations of the communities and facilitators who host them.

The respondents almost unanimously agreed that Tot Shabbat is an experience during which music, prayer, and Jewish ritual play a significant role as young children and their families gather to learn about and celebrate Jewish life and community. Tot Shabbat is a gateway into Jewish life and an opportunity to build community and foster relationships with members of that community. The vast majority of participants (more than 90%) agreed or strongly agreed that Tot Shabbat “provides a positive Jewish experience for my family, helps connect my family to Jewish community, encourages my family to participate in Jewish life, provides opportunities to create and nurture relationships with members of the synagogue community, and helps connect my family to Jewish ritual.” Most participants (more than 75%) also agreed or strongly agreed that Tot Shabbat “teaches my family about Shabbat, makes me think about my family’s Jewish practice, helps connect my family to Jewish prayer, influences the way my family engages with Judaism, and teaches my family about Jewish concepts and beliefs.”

AN EXPERIENCE RICH WITH OPPORTUNITIES

Tot Shabbat is an experience rich with opportunities. All Tot Shabbat programs can provide connections with other Jewish families, relationships with Jewish professionals, and knowledge about Judaism and how it might be relevant to the stage of life that families with young children are experiencing. The specific nature of the opportunities

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varies by community and depends upon the community's goals, facility, and culture; they might offer early childhood learning options, recruit for adult learning options, or facilitate chavura groups that create support networks — the list of possible offerings could be endless. Like worship experiences for any population, the services likely share a skeleton, but the actual experience is conducted by leaders in a unique physical environment for a community of individuals, so each community offers its own special variances while providing a familiar overall experience to participants. The participants bring their own backgrounds, expectations, and personal preferences to the experience, which also frames their perceptions.

Eighty-nine percent of participants indicated that participation in Tot Shabbat programs encourages their participation in at least one of the Jewish life engagement examples provided, and 96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Tot Shabbat encourages my family to engage in Jewish life." The vast majority (93% or more) of participants either agree or strongly agree that Tot Shabbat helps connect their family to the Jewish community, encourages their family

The information the Tot Shabbat participants provided and the examples that were the most popular closely align with the UJA findings. Analogously, Tot Shabbat Influence (see chart at end of article), which conveys the participants' opinions regarding the influence of Tot Shabbat participation on their family's choices and behaviors, shows that the most popular of the engagement examples provided was also directly related to the creation of community through relationships.

Ninety-seven percent of participants report that they have social interactions with other families with Jewish children, and 68% believe that Tot Shabbat participation encourages this type of Jewish engagement, making it the most commonly-cited influence of Tot Shabbat attendance. This is a particularly powerful example of Jewish engagement that is likely the first step in encouraging many different positive and Jewishly-oriented outcomes. Repeatedly, the research highlights that the facilitation of the establishment of friendships is one of, if not the most, powerful things that Jewish communities can do in order not only to encourage families to raise Jewish children, but to support young

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to participate in Jewish life, and provides opportunities to create and nurture relationships with members of the synagogue community. These three points upon which participants agreed are mutually inclusive, and each one reinforces the other. At the conclusion of the Early Childhood Parent Research project, after considering the stated priorities of Jewish mothers with young children collected through focus groups, the report suggested that:

If we shift our desired outcomes away from only Jewish rituals and affiliation as evidence of Jewish engagement, and more towards relationships among Jewish parents, we can help create and support a vibrant Jewish network made up of meaningful and purposeful relationships...Let us commit the time and effort to building relationships between and among families as an investment in the future, a time when they could be more able and willing to engage in new types of learning and living" (Rosen et al. p. 12).

children's development across domains. Dr. John Bartkowski, who led the research team that studied the impact of religion on the development of young children, found that the relationships constructed through young families' religious attendance builds a community network that promotes social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development:

Consistent with the adage that "it takes a village to raise a child," it is likely that the network closure provided by congregations (that is, interaction and instruction provided to youngsters by non-parental adults who reinforce parental values) is a vital part of promoting pro-social outcomes in children (Bartkowski et al. p. 18).

The same study also concluded that "the effects of parents' religious attendance are stronger and more persistent than those related to the family's religious environment, thereby underscoring the importance of parental integration (and, likely, children's integration) in religious networks for steering youngsters toward positive developmental outcomes"

(Bartkowski et al. 18). Several Tot Shabbat leaders shared that their ability to impact the Jewish identity and practice of a child and his/her family was limited by the constraint of time, because a child would be most shaped by the way the family practices and discusses Judaism at home. This conclusion that each individual family's religious environment is less consequential than the parents' religious attendance actually underscores the finding that Tot Shabbat participation is a particularly powerful influence, and the scope of the impact reaches beyond the time that the Tot Shabbat program meets. This is particularly significant for this study, as the Tot Shabbat participants come from many different types of family religious environments: 100% of the respondents indicated that they light Chanukah candles, read Jewish books for children, and either attend or host a Passover seder, and 97% indicated that they use Jewish ritual objects in the home. In addition, 73% recite blessings not related to Shabbat at home, and 53% report that they incorporate Jewish elements into their bedtime routine. Beyond their personal observances, however, Bartkowski's assertion suggests that the impact of Tot Shabbat is not determined by each family's Jewish environment at home, because they are nurtured through the network in which they participate, which yields greater effects.

In relation to this specific population, "Jewish Early Engagement in New York," a project commissioned by the Jewish Federation of New York, argues the following:

Whatever the reasons underlying the parent's institutional choices, when a family becomes involved with secular institutions instead of with Jewish institutions, the outcomes are predictable. Parents will be less likely to establish friendships with other parents who are involved in Jewish life and will be less likely to encounter Jewish role models. Since Jewish friends and role models have a strong influence on whether parents make Jewish choices for their children, these parents will tend to be uninvolved with Jewish tradition during their child's early formative years (Rosen et al. p. 3).

Both participants and leaders described experiences that led them to agree with this assertion, that development of relationships is a crucial foundation for Jewish living and that the period of time directly adjacent to becoming parents is critical. This very sensitive period of growth that occurs for young children and their families is well documented in both secular and Jewish research. In the seminal book, "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development," the data highlights the critical opportunity for development that each child in an early learning environment experiences:

From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any

subsequent stage of life. What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows (Shonkoff pp. 26-7).

AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP JEWISH IDENTITY

Similarly, the early childhood years represent a crucial opportunity for children to begin to develop their Jewish identities with their families and form connections that foster future Jewish communal engagement. The article "If Not Now, When?" in "What We Now Know About Jewish Education," argued that early childhood Jewish education offers a potent opportunity to strengthen "the future viability of the North American Jewish community" because it "instills a Jewish identity in children...strengthens the Jewish identity and practice of families, provides an important venue for adults to connect with other Jewish adults, and serves as a pivotal gateway into further involvement and commitment (Vogelstein 383). This opinion is further affirmed by the fact that the parents of young children are, themselves, undergoing a period of rapid identity development that synagogues can support:

New parents — who had been so confident in their careers — find themselves in uncharted waters when they start preparing to welcome their first child. Rather than focusing on what parents and their young children can contribute to the synagogue, synagogues need to see themselves as having something to offer these parents as they start their parenting journey. Synagogues must be intentional in their efforts to meet the needs of today's parents, beginning with knowing those needs (Rolland et al. p. 10).

All of these data illustrate that Tot Shabbat programs are an especially valuable opportunity for synagogues to connect to and impact the lives of families with young children. Not only is this a critical time of development for the children who attend, but the nature of the programs in this study, designed for children aged 0-6 to attend with their families, also further primes the participants for impact: "Programs that combine child-focused educational activities with explicit attention to parent-child interaction patterns and relationship-building appear to have the greatest impacts" (Shonkoff p. 11). This assertion, that programs that wish to maximize impact must attend simultaneously to the children's learning and the parent's learning as it relates to familial participation, was additionally described in the 2005 study "Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today." This study sought to compile a description of "The Current Moment in Jewish Education Today," which called attention to the following 21st century reality:

Today, Jewish families and educational programs do not operate in two separate spheres, but rather mutually

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reinforce one another. Clearly, family engagement with Jewish education ranges across a spectrum from more to less intense participation, but it is no longer helpful to look at families as divorced from the Jewish educational process, any more than it is useful to imagine schools and informal education as operating independently of families (Wertheimer p. 11).

Many findings of the project aligned with the trends discovered by that project. One example is that 90% of families indicate that they participate in other events at the synagogue where they attend Tot Shabbat, and 41% of the families credit Tot Shabbat participation for encouraging this behavior. "Linking the Silos" also found that "A number of parents report that their child's participation in religious school has led them to become more involved in the synagogue" (Wertheimer 16). This was additionally affirmed by the descriptions and objectives both leaders and participants provided: Tot Shabbat was repeatedly called an "entry point" or a "gateway" to synagogue life.

Tot Shabbat programs, as defined for the purposes of this study as services children attend with their families, are uniquely at the intersection of critically important dynamics: Family engagement opportunities that jointly invite the parents and the young children to interact with one another, learn about Judaism, and build relationships not only with like-minded families in a similar development state, but also with experts (leaders who are teachers, rabbis, etc.), in a brief and vulnerable time period. These ideas, that Tot Shabbat timing is critical and that the relationships established in this window deeply matter, were also intuitively understood by leaders and parents. One example was provided by a parent who described her child's birth as a welcome "excuse" that allowed her to find her place in the community, a place she was acutely aware that she was actively missing. When asked, "Why do you bring your family to these experiences?" she described her belief that participation could offer a significant opportunity for her:

I've never really lived anywhere where I didn't actually feel like I belonged to the Jewish community...but living here, I really felt like an outsider, for a really long time. Having "kiddo" was really sort of my excuse to find my inroads in creating a community — and I work for the Jewish community, it's also a really weird thing to say — but I didn't feel connected. Even though I work for the community. It's really an intentional way for us, for me in particular, because "husband" comes sometimes and he doesn't know...Really intentional for me to start to make more personal connections and get to know people and to start to feel like less of an outsider. If this is where we're going to be long-term, then this needs to feel like home, and I

need to do things to make that the case.

She went on to describe connections and friendships that she has started to meet the goal she set for herself. From a different perspective with a similar outlook, a rabbi, when asked, "Why do you host these services for young children and their families?" answered:

It is a great welcoming tool...I think a recognition that (and I don't want this to come across as seeming sneaky) [there is] a sense of vulnerability of that time of life for families that they are looking for 'Jewish' and they are looking for connection...this is exactly what a synagogue is built for.

This rabbi went on to describe what she hopes children and families will gain from their Tot Shabbat participation:

To me, actually the number one thing that I hope that they gain is connections with other families. Nothing makes me happier than seeing families who met through Tot Shabbat making plans to go to the playground. Even just right after Tot Shabbat, even through sort of [an] organic connection. I hope they make connections with the clergy and the community, and I hope that they have sweet and positive Jewish experiences that make them feel like, 'Oh, this could have meaning in our lives going forward.'

In almost every Tot Shabbat leader interview, the leader responded affirmatively when asked if /she believes that Tot Shabbat encourages families who participate to engage in Jewish life. Several specified that they know not every family is impacted, but each was able to identify examples that provide evidence for this phenomenon. This section will present the Tot Shabbat leaders' perspectives and observations on this topic.

One cantor's perspective offers a limitation on the data that remains true for all of the responses collected: there is simply insufficient research to definitively determine the specific origin of the impact. When asked, "Do you think participation in your program encourages the families to engage in Jewish life outside of this specific experience that you're providing?" the cantor replied:

I don't know that I can definitively say that. I don't know if it's a chicken or an egg...It's [the suburban community in which the families live] pretty well engaged, there are lots of opportunities to be Jewish in this town without having to belong anywhere. So I don't know that I can definitively say, yes, it's because of our program that people get involved in things.

Further research would be required to determine true causal

relationships, but this study is able to describe the correlation effects of the data that the populations provided and is the richest collection of anecdotal evidence to date. Several Tot Shabbat leaders shared stories of the parents of the children who attend Tot Shabbat experiencing enormous shifts in their own relationships with Judaism. This is one element of a theme that emerged through all of the data collection: Tot Shabbat programs are presented for young children, but the adult participants are experiencing mature, meaningful learning and make profound connections that deeply affect their lives. Tot Shabbat leaders remarked repeatedly that Tot Shabbat is a time of life when the adults are also at a life stage that is particularly ripe for influence.

A cantor who leads Tot Shabbat describes a phenomenon with which he is very familiar:

When people graduate from high school, graduate from college, it is typical to drift away from Judaism — heck, after Bar/Bat Mitzvah, they drift away from Judaism! I'm talking about this [Tot Shabbat] as an entryway into Jewish life, it makes it a non-judgmental way to reinforce the lessons of Judaism with these adults, and I've seen it a number of times when people start to engage with their curiosity, and it may ignite a real passion for Jewish texts to

There was a moment that I witnessed, just because I was sitting maybe in the right place at the right time, where we had a little bit more order...I remember seeing grandparents who were crying because they just had this opportunity to have a ritually-created moment to bless their grandchildren. And we [the Tot Shabbat leadership team] were the conduit through which they were given this gift. I want to call it a gift. We don't take time out, you know. I don't know what many families do at Shabbat dinner at home. The kids are running around and they're going crazy, and we sit down and maybe we'll have ten minutes of order where we can sit and talk and then the kids are crazy again...to be able to facilitate those moments of holiness, those sacred moments for families to have a time to bless their children, it is just the same as a Bar/Bat [Mitzvah] family, you know. They'll get up on our bimah, and after their child reads the Torah and gives a d'var Torah,³ they will have a moment to really share what they think and really share what they believe in a way that is...you really can't do that in your home as well...or during a Ketubah⁴ signing. I invite the cameras to leave and say, 'all right, everybody, it's time. We're going to go

(The rabbi) said that one of the reasons that his synagogue hosts Tot Shabbat programs is “for them to establish a relationship with one of the rabbis of the congregation at that level of connection that makes it more welcoming for them to participate in other elements of the congregation.”

Jewish music and study and community.

He goes on to give an example that he says isn't atypical:

There's one couple in particular who kind of stepped forward, they stepped up to the plate, and said, 'Wow, we'd love to know more about the community, and we'd love to reengage with Jewish life.' They ended up enrolling their child in our early childhood center. They became active in the community. The dad is now one of the co-chairs for my men's retreat, so it's significant that [Tot Shabbat] is a way that we're able to provide an opportunity for couples to come in with their young children, and they are able to take a step into the Jewish life.

This leader went on to compare the depth and meaning of other life cycle events to describe the significance of the experiences he is able to facilitate at Tot Shabbat:

around and we're going to say: What do you really wish for this couple?' So, the ability for a family to do that is a significant gift.

His testimony highlights the deeply intimate and emotionally-connective part of the Tot Shabbat program that he clearly treasures. His approach towards Tot Shabbat as one small piece of the journey the families are embarking upon was shared by other people leading Tot Shabbat programs.

One rabbi spoke about the relationship he was able to build with the individual participants of the Tot Shabbat he facilitates as the path to encouraging engagement far beyond the time the children could identify as “tots.” He said that one of the reasons that his synagogue hosts Tot Shabbat programs is “for them to establish a relationship with one of the rabbis of the congregation at that level of connection that makes it

more welcoming for them to participate in other elements of the congregation.” In his experience, the relationship established early in the child’s life can determine the choices the family makes regarding future life cycle events: “I feel comfortable saying that when the time comes for their children’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah or lifecycle events, there could be a likelihood that I’m going to be the one that’s officiating, because they have a relationship with one of their rabbis in a very intimate and personal way.” The connections between the children and the clergy, as well as the parents and the clergy, can individually and collectively yield immense impact.

STRENGTHENING PARENTS’ CONNECTIONS TO JUDAISM

An early childhood director who facilitates Tot Shabbat testified that this phenomenon, that the opportunity that Tot Shabbat presents to parents to shift their relationship with Judaism, can also occur to non-Jewish parents:

I have an interfaith family right now...the dad was really not interested in Judaism but has chosen this program for his kids. But little by little, we’ve been talking about things and inviting him to come. Finally, he came to a Tot Shabbat; now they come every single month. He asks me if we can have them more, and he’s gotten involved in the Dad’s Club. (The dads got together, and they did a little fundraiser last year that’s now becoming an annual thing. They did a cornhole tournament that was sort of their own idea.) They are coming to the annual event and talking about joining the temple. Now, they come to our Friday morning school Shabbat, and the mom who is not Jewish is really loving it and super involved — when Dad was out of town and she posted a video of herself lighting the Chanukah candles with the kids...that’s just one example, but there are so many more. I definitely think Tot Shabbat is helping the families to create traditions around Judaism.

Another early childhood director who leads Tot Shabbat with a rabbi and song leader tells the story of the enormous impact one toddler’s brief experience can have on a family and their relationship to a synagogue community:

A little boy who was two at the time came to Tot Shabbat — the family comes every month. After Tot Shabbat, there is an oneg for the kids and families. As it is in process, the regular adults service is starting in the same sanctuary where Tot Shabbat was held. The boy asked to go into the sanctuary again, and since the service hadn’t started yet, the parents said OK. He went up to the bimah. He wanted to talk to one of the song leaders he loves — the boy loves the guitar and wanted to go and talk to her. After the child and the song leader chatted for a few moments, the rabbi and the song

leader were ready to start the service. His parents called him: “Come on down, they’re ready to start.” But the rabbi and song leader said: “No, no, no, he can stay. He can stay and help lead.”

So here’s this adult service with 200 people and this little tiny two-year-old standing up on the bimah — and he actually put in his request for his favorite songs, so the rabbi and song leader kind of re-did their plan so they could do the songs that he wanted to lead. After that, they said: “Now you can go find your parents.”

The next day we got an email from a parent, from the mom in particular, saying: “I wasn’t raised as part of a synagogue. I knew I was Jewish but Jewish meant family and food, and it never really meant going to a synagogue, and my son has had such a different experience. He feels so at home here at the synagogue. The rabbi could’ve easily said to him, “The service’s starting. Go, get off the bimah,” but instead you allowed him to lead this service. It’s like the highlight of his life. It made him so happy. And because of that, I feel so much more connected to you and to this congregation. I’ll have this connection forever, just because of the way that our family has been valued here.”

This moment, while Tot Shabbat-adjacent, did not happen during the program — it was a spontaneous occurrence that most likely happened as a result of several elements unique to this community: the personality and attitude of the leadership, a flexible community climate that could allow a toddler to take over the bimah, and a scheduling approach that created opportunities for different populations to be visible to one another. While the details of the experience are specific to this community, the theme that the parent’s understanding and identification with Judaism and Jewish rituals can shift as a result of the family’s participation was shared by both leaders and participants, again and again.

One song leader described the way that the Tot Shabbat leaders welcomed a family that impacted not only the members of that family, but also each of the community’s members. She shared that the person who is currently their synagogue’s education director and youth group advisor told her that:

It was through Tot Shabbat that her non-Jewish husband felt that this was a community that really embraced him and really embraced his kids and made him feel comfortable enough to start doing other things at the synagogue as a family. Kids got involved, they got involved, and now she’s the head

of a religious school and youth group.

This is yet another example of the enormous changes that can all start at Tot Shabbat, in this case, not only for this family, but also for the synagogue community and all of the families they serve.

Another Tot Shabbat leader, the synagogue's director of education, describes one of her favorite rituals and the evidence that a parent offered to her about the way that Tot Shabbat encourages participation in Jewish life:

We will have 'Shehechyanu' moments in which I will ask, before we say the prayer, the families to share what happened to them between the last time and last service and this service. For example, if somebody lost a tooth or got potty-trained, the parents traveled somewhere, or the grandparents came to visit...

She goes on to describe a parent in a family that participates in this ritual at her program: "They went on a hike and they climbed all the way up, and the kid (about four years old) said, 'Mommy, this is...this is the perfect Shehechyanu moment!'" She explained that this is why she believes she is able to encourage families to engage in Jewish life through their participation in Tot Shabbat: "You know this is the 'ah-ha' moment, when what I'm doing here, connected to a family's experience, was really meaningful for me. And that sort of stayed with me. So that's one of those experiences when we're able to create meaningful enough interactions that stay with the family afterwards." This leader was able to impart a lesson to this four-year-old in a meaningful enough way for the child to independently make a connection to a moment outside of the context of Tot Shabbat, that an exciting achievement merited the recognition of being a shehechyanu moment. This is one example of the ways that interviewees offered to make evident that Tot Shabbat attendance encourages families to engage in Jewish life.

This director also knows that this anecdote is not reflective of every family's experience. When asked, "Do you believe that participation in these programs encourages the families who participate in Tot Shabbat to engage in Jewish life in other ways?" she further explains:

I know that for some people this will be the only experience they choose to participate in, and some people [are] not knowledgeable enough and comfortable enough to facilitate Shabbat at home. So while, of course, internally that would be my goal, that the atmosphere and the experiences that we create affect the Jewish choices of the parents outside the synagogue because we have only this much time with them and then they have the rest of the week and the year with the children. But I see

different people who practice differently and for some this might be it. And that's why I'm also trying to make it a little bit larger than just the service because I realized that for some families this will be the ultimate Jewish experience they are going to have with their children.

This limitation is likely true about all of the communities that attend Tot Shabbat – the level of impact that each family experiences will fall on a spectrum. However, the data gathered clearly state that a majority of families are positively influenced to make more Jewish choices. Other examples of Tot Shabbat rituals that made their way into the everyday lives of the participating children include children's spontaneous singing of "Yom Huledet Sameach"⁵ when a family member celebrates a birthday, a child who takes small Israeli flags and marches around her house and calls this ritual "playing Shabbat" (which is a ritual at her Tot Shabbat celebration), the baking of challah at home, and the purchase of wooden Shabbat sets.⁶

While the vast majority of parents credit their Tot Shabbat participation as meaningful to their family, not all parents immediately identify their experience as meaningful for themselves. For example, when asked, "Is participation in Tot Shabbat meaningful for you?" one parent responded, "Hmm. Separate from the children as prayer experience? I don't feel like it is a spiritual or eye-opening kind of thing in that regard. As a community building thing, yes, absolutely. And it gives me a chance to connect with other families in the preschool community who we've grown close with over the years ..." This answer also illustrates how the word "meaningful" can be understood in many ways.

Ninety-seven percent of participants strongly agree or agree that Tot Shabbat provides a positive Jewish experience for their family. The participants generously offered their observations that their children make connections, express joy, and demonstrate increased understanding as a result of their Tot Shabbat participation. One way that these data were collected was through a survey question that asked the participants to finish the line "My favorite part of Tot Shabbat is when..." which was almost entirely made of examples of a participant watching his/her own child engage, express happiness, or show familiarity with Tot Shabbat (46%) or, more specifically, watching his/her child sing (31%).

In her interview, one mom described her favorite part of Tot Shabbat as what occurred outside of the specific experience. She is a Jew by choice, married to a man whom she described as being raised in a "Christianized" way by Jewish parents in a small town in Georgia because they would "say Christian prayers before bed...his family exchanged Christmas presents,

which seems really weird to us.” She indicated that they were able to continue singing songs or practicing rituals they shared during the program: “Between the two of us growing up kind of atypical, the Tot Shabbat has really helped us to get a grasp on how we can introduce our child to Judaism in a way that feels natural and is fun.” When asked, “How was participation in these programs encouraged your family to engage in Jewish life in any other way?” she described the impact she has witnessed in her three-year-old daughter:

She’s become a much more active part of the candle lighting, Shabbat evening...she’ll sing lots of songs from services...it’s just become second nature for her, which is good because otherwise she isn’t really exposed to much Jewish stuff. Her daycare is Christian-run. We started going to Tot Shabbat when she started singing “Jesus Loves Me,” so we thought OK, we’re going to have to come to this [Tot Shabbat]. And so now she brings her Torah to daycare instead.

The mother expressed entire satisfaction with her Tot Shabbat experience. When asked if she had advice or suggestions she would offer to her Tot Shabbat leadership, she had none: “This is working the way it is, and it’s really beautiful.” This family’s background was unique, but the fact that Tot Shabbat can help families better navigate the observance and celebration of Jewish life with toddlers proved to be a crucially important part of what parents with very strong Jewish backgrounds appreciate, as well.

Another mom, who is a Jewish professional with rabbinic ordination married to a congregational rabbi, described her toddler’s experience at Tot Shabbat (which one of his parents leads) as a reason that her child loves being in the Temple:

When we go on a regular Friday night, not for Tot Shabbat, we are in there for a little bit, but we review beforehand... ‘we sit quietly in services and you sit next to Ima, we’re not running around. If you need to run around, we’re going to go outside, and you can run around in the hallway.’ We’re not there for that long...it is a little harder. I think he participates a lot more in Tot Shabbat than he does in other services.

When asked to clarify how Tot Shabbat has influenced her family’s established practice of Judaism, she described the experience as helping her recognize her child’s relationship with Judaism in a new way:

“Kiddo” has expectations and excitement about Shabbat and knows that it’s coming. He has no sense of time, but whenever anything is exciting, I’ll say “Kiddo, do you know what’s happening tonight?” and he assumes that the right answer is Shabbat,

which is adorable (but it’s not always Shabbat, sometimes it’s, like, grandma and grandpa are coming). I think in that sense, it really pushed me to not dial it in so much on Friday nights, which is really easy to do. I think in some ways as a rabbinic family, it’s harder to ‘do Jewish’ because my husband is not home. We don’t eat Shabbat dinner together as a family by any means...but his excitement about Shabbat has pushed me to think, how do I, how do we, mark Shabbat as special no matter what, even if it’s not all of us together?

She continued about the ways that Tot Shabbat participation has impacted the Shabbat observance she shares with her child, even on the weeks that it doesn’t occur:

It is this reminder that Jewish life is now about us and not just about me, and [this] reminded me to be intentional — how are we going to do this, we’re going to go to Tot Shabbat next week, but there’s no Tot Shabbat this week, so what are we going to do to mark Shabbat? Because my kid is expecting it... and it has made Shabbat candle lighting, in particular, all the more meaningful to me because we do it together. It used to be this very quick thing that I would do, and it was pretty inconsequential, but now we normally do it at home, “kiddo” loves it.

In these two interviews with mothers of Jewish toddlers, each cited Tot Shabbat participation for increasing the meaning, joy, and participation shared in their home candle lighting ritual. In the first family, neither parent has formal training in Jewish learning, and both lack personal experience to share with their child; they are working intentionally to make Jewish choices as their child’s day-care teaches her to sing about “Jesus’ love.” In the latter, both parents are ordained rabbis with rich Jewish backgrounds.

Interestingly, these testimonies are very clear examples of the conclusions that Spagnola and Fiese identified when they studied young children’s development in the context of a family’s routines and rituals. Families and children each benefit from predictable patterns of meaningful rituals, especially when emotional connections are an element of that ritual. The lighting of Shabbat candles is an example of what they call a “transactional” model of ritual observance that “emphasizes the mutual effects between parent and child, embedded and regulated by cultural codes. In this model, child outcome is neither predictable by the state of the child alone nor the environment in which he or she is being raised. Rather, it is a result of a series of transactions that evolve, with the child responding to and altering the environment” (Spagnola and Fiese p. 291).

The same study argues that the most vulnerable time when parents seek ritual is when infants become toddlers. In the first few months of a child's life, the parents are consumed with caregiving, but parents will seek meaningful rituals as those babies mature into toddlers. As children mature, their "family routines and rituals provide a structure for the socialization of culturally acceptable behavior" that allows them to practice emerging skills that offer "opportunities to foster skill development that encourages autonomy as well as connection with others" (Spagnola and Fiese pp. 287-8). An intentional approach to this process will yield best results: "for families with young children, the emotional investment in routines starts with an awareness that these settings are opportunities for learning as well as for building relationships" (p. 289). This shift in attitude and readiness to create meaningful rituals was echoed in several interviews. One mom described the shift in her own approach towards Judaism that parenthood inspired:

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You can have the Jewish ceremony, you can get married under the chuppah⁷ and you could break the glass, and you could do all the Jewish customs walking around your husband seven times, and yeah, that's all great. But then as a couple after you're married, what do you do? And there's nothing, it's not really that important. And you go to High Holiday services...I think I went a couple times to maybe my parents' Temple activities, as a couple, just to kind of support my dad, but I would say nothing really helped us as a couple with the Judaism aspect.

She describes her husband's initial attitude towards Jewish life as being that he "wants nothing to do with it, going to services, nothing do with the Temple" because he "grew up going to an Orthodox temple and Yeshiva⁸ and he felt like it was being shoved down his throat and he did not enjoy it." She credits Tot Shabbat with helping her family connect. She says that his attitude has shifted as a result of the positive experiences the family shares attending Tot Shabbat at several different congregations and said that her husband is now more willing and able to appreciate services, in general:

For instance, we went to the High Holiday services at 'Synagogue,' and he really enjoyed it for the first time. He actually walked away with something,

and I don't know if he would have done that had we not done Tot Shabbat for so many years and just had that comfort level, going to that 'synagogue' for Tot Shabbat and being comfortable and knowing the 'Rabbi,' and getting to know him. I don't know if he would have the same feelings.

When asked about how the Tot Shabbat experience is meaningful to her, she answered, "I would say the Tot Shabbat kind of brings us together as adults...being together as a couple and seeing our children enjoying Shabbat and seeing my husband enjoying Shabbat, whereas before he never used to enjoy it." This sentiment, that Tot Shabbat offered a platform for parents with divergent attitudes to reconsider and perhaps even start to reconcile their approaches to Jewish parenthood, is of rising importance in an increasingly diverse Jewish community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Host communities and leaders need to recognize and accommodate to the fact that the most consequential opportunity their Tot Shabbat can offer is the facilitation of relationships.

The data highlight the significant impact and potential of synagogue programs that invite families with young children to celebrate Shabbat. The testimonies of the participants and documentation offered by the literature reinforce the uniquely powerful combination of traits that synagogue programs for families with young children typically maintain as they:

- Facilitate opportunities for families to create and maintain peer relationships the participants actively seek that can grow into an influential network.
- Welcome family members who are candidates for membership to learn about the synagogue community without commitment while beginning relationships with synagogue leaders and staff and (sometimes) sharing information about other opportunities to participate.
- Invite families to engage at a vulnerable and critical developmental stage in the lives of both the adults (constructing their identity as parents) and the children.

As such, the leaders and the communities that host Tot

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Shabbat programs should craft their programs with careful attention to these three elements to maximize the benefits of the experience for not only the individual families but the community as a whole.

The communities that host Tot Shabbat must consider practical environmental and safety issues.

Tot Shabbat programs are encouraging families to engage in Jewish life and the participants are generally happy with their experiences. However, the data collected from the survey questions regarding challenges and the leaders' perspectives highlight areas of opportunity. The families are most challenged by logistical, practical concerns (see chart at end of article). Synagogues that wish to maximize participation in their programs need to communicate with their program's potential participants and address their concerns: Can small children reach the sink in the bathroom? How can a family with multiple children of diverse ages participate? Are programs scheduled with regard to the bedtimes of the children? Are the candles and matches out of the toddlers' reach? Are the electrical outlets covered? Are choking hazards entirely removed from the environment (hard candies, balloons, etc.)?

Lines of communication must be open, and participants invited to share their specific concerns and feedback. Similarly, some of the adult participants shared serious concerns (sensory issues, children with anaphylactic allergies, special needs diagnoses, etc.) through the survey and interviews. Parents also shared that they had never thought to share their challenges with the host synagogue's leadership, even when they perceived those leaders to be people who would be open to feedback. The communities that host Tot Shabbat programs and their leadership could greatly improve their participant experiences by establishing a process that invites them to provide feedback regarding such concerns.

The communal norms and behavioral expectations of both the children and the adults who participate in Tot Shabbat programs need to be articulated and communicated.

Both data populations shared concerns about the participants' behavior (both children and adults) and the ways that they engage in the program, but relatively few research participants referred to any communication about or understanding of the community's expectations of behavior. The research participants who did make reference to the sharing of these norms remarked on a two-step process (one, leadership decided what was acceptable and, two, communicated those guidelines) and noticed an immediate and marked improvement. The communities that host Tot

Shabbat programs and the leaders who facilitate them should decide and articulate the behavioral guidelines for all participants (not only children) to address this challenge.

The leadership teams who plan and facilitate Tot Shabbat programs would benefit from additional training and/or support to better understand the developmental needs of the program participants.

In academic settings, the critical importance of developmentally appropriate practice is well established. However, the leaders, participants and experts all agree that Tot Shabbat leaders and their approach often reflect an insufficient understanding of the developmental capabilities of young children and often reflect that the developmental needs of the adult participants have not been sufficiently considered.

Tot Shabbat leaders can be better equipped to plan and lead their programs by utilizing resources and referencing literature on a variety of relevant topics.

While a body of resources and research on "Tot Shabbat" or specifically about programs that seek to jointly engage young children and their families in Shabbat worship experience is still lacking, there is an immense body of literature and resources available that can help leaders understand and improve their roles, their leadership styles, and their programs. Leaders volunteered that what they found to be the most useful information or relevant skill set that informed their leadership came from an enormous diversity of experiences, some with more obvious connections to Tot Shabbat leadership than others: nursing, counseling, songleading, teaching, performing, parenting, and crafting, to name only a few. Similarly, best practices of program facilitation and educational pursuits, like collaborative planning, goal setting, and assessment, should be utilized by communities hoping to improve their Tot Shabbat programs. Each leader's individual academic and personal background as well as his or her particular interests should inform the topics that can be pursued to develop their Tot Shabbat leadership ability.

Leaders of Tot Shabbat programs and Jewish community leadership need to recognize Tot Shabbat programs for what they are and what they can be.

When asked to define Tot Shabbat, none of the research participants described the opportunities to meaningfully impact the practice of families with young children or the significant adult education component of Tot Shabbat programs. An expanded understanding of Tot Shabbat programs and a recognition of their potential is a first step

that communities can take in improving the ways that they invite families with young children to participate in their community. The consideration of the data presented in this report in conjunction with the literature highlighted will prove beneficial to those who choose to take intentional steps towards improvement.

CONCLUSION

The research project explored Tot Shabbat programs and the ways that they might encourage families with young children to engage in Jewish life. Participation in these programs does, in fact, influence the families to engage in Jewish life and encourage behaviors (namely, social interactions with other Jewish families and the forming of new relationships). This is consistent with relevant research and extensive literature that argue that these are the most potent ways to increase Jewish identity. A slightly less anticipated finding of this project is the fact that, while Tot Shabbat participation facilitates what is designed to be a developmentally-appropriate learning experience for the children, the adults that participate in Tot Shabbat can be affected in meaningful, mature, and identity-altering ways.

Tot Shabbat programs are “for” the children in the same way that a child’s first pediatrician’s appointments are “for” the children. While it is certainly imperative that a child’s physical wellness is monitored, the majority of the appointment is spent in dialogue between the doctor and the child’s caregiver(s). A relationship is established or nurtured so that the parents understand the scope of the doctor’s expertise and various services the office provides. The parents ask questions that help the doctor not only address their concerns, but better understand the background and perspectives this family is bringing to their parenting. Since 2010, the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that mothers be screened for post-partum depression during an infant’s well-child visits because, while the pediatrician certainly can’t treat this condition, a pediatrician is in a unique role to be able to identify it, as that mother’s wellness cannot be detached from the wellness of the child. Often, the Tot Shabbat leader is an expert and the synagogue is like the doctor’s office, with the benefit of a built-in referral network.

Throughout the interviews, the Tot Shabbat leaders gave testimony to the opportunities that Tot Shabbat presented for relationships to be established or nurtured in a way that truly changed lives. Clearly, the care that is given to a baby in the first stage of its development sets the foundation for its health. The dynamics of the relationship between that child, its caregiver(s), and the doctor will influence not only the wellbeing of the child but the wellness of the family.

The data made clear that the potential that Tot Shabbat

programming presents is substantial. It can support not only the children’s religious and spiritual development but invites families with young children to form relationships that can yield positive impacts for each participant’s educational, social, emotional, and religious needs. This participation also nurtures each individual participant’s Jewish identity. This study affirms that Tot Shabbat participation encourages families with young children to engage in Jewish life in their home and community.

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Explanatory Notes

1. Families define themselves; the members may include adults or siblings of any faith or background. This study is not investigating the impact of the presence or effect on siblings who participate, nor the effect on non-Jewish adults that participate, although those areas may both be worthy of further investigation.

2. The researcher included data from leaders of Tot Shabbat programs in non-denominational or multi-denominational synagogues, as well as communities that don’t specifically identify as “synagogues” but serve and support the Jewish educational, communal, and prayer needs of families with young children, though they weren’t specifically described in the original data population plan.

3. Prepared remarks shared with the community regarding a person’s perspective on a particular passage of Torah.

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4. A marriage contract that requires a ceremonial signing by two witnesses that typically takes place in a private ceremony before the more public ritual during which the couple is formally married.

5. A popular Hebrew translation of the “Happy Birthday” song.

6. A commercially available toy set that includes the items typically utilized in a Shabbat celebration: wine (Kiddush) cup; two candles and candlesticks; and a platter and cover for challah.

7. A canopy under which Jewish couples stand during their wedding ceremony.

8. A Jewish educational institution that focuses students’ attention on religious texts.

The entire project is available for download at www.MissEmilyCelebrates.com.