

Recruitment...or Training? by Joan Kaye and Debi Rowe

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Introduction

In 1994, the Orange County Bureau of Jewish Education received a five year, \$200,000 Covenant Grant to institute a community-wide project on the hypothesis that congregants who are excited about their own Jewish learning and their participation in congregational life would provide the best source of teachers for their own congregational schools. Further, their desire for personal Jewish growth would lead them to Jewish teaching in their own synagogue as a means of augmenting that growth. While the funding ended in 1998, the original project, involving eight schools, has resulted in a community-wide cultural shift: the understanding that teachers are learners, too.

Among other points, this article deals with the experiences that led us to reframe the central problem of staffing supplementary religious schools as one of training rather than recruitment and to understand the key roles that educational directors and rabbis must play in any teacher development effort in a community such as Orange County.

Context

Located between Los Angeles and San Diego, Orange County is “Jewishly disadvantaged.” There are no schools of Jewish education or universities with Judaic studies departments from which to draw either teachers or training programs, nor has the community been able to generate the resources necessary to provide its Bureau of Jewish Education (BJE) with the appropriate funding to begin to meet these needs.

Ten of the twenty Orange County religious schools educate more than 90% of the 3,200 students currently enrolled in grades K-8; nine are staffed by full-time educational directors. Seven of these ten directors have master’s degrees in Jewish education; all continue to demonstrate strong commitments to their own personal and professional growth.

Rationale

On the assumption that religious school teaching is a profession, numerous efforts have been and continue to be made throughout the country by bureaus of Jewish education and other agencies to provide ongoing teacher education and invest teachers in their own teaching and learning: in-service days, extra salary for more classes, salary scales based on experience and learning, trips to Israel for study, programs to participate in writing curricula, etc. Few of these efforts succeed. It is our thesis that they fail because they do not recognize the reality that the “average” person who teaches for a few hours a week is not a professional. While he or she may desire to acquire materials to make his or her classroom successful, she or he does not want (or is unable) to put in the time necessary to create these materials. The hours spent teaching and preparing for teaching represent a small fraction of this person’s life and they hold an appropriately small priority in that context.

Tacitly acknowledging this, many educational directors in Jewish supplementary schools have initiated efforts to make teachers (most of whom are not congregation members) feel part of the congregations, on the assumption that this will strengthen their commitment to the school and to their work. We sought to view the situation in reverse: Rather than try to make teachers feel part of the congregation, we would start with congregants and try to make them teachers. We proposed that congregations would identify potential teachers for their own religious schools from among the adults dedicated to the congregation and excited about their own Jewish learning. Although these “avocational teachers” would receive salaries, they would not consider teaching a profession, but rather an extension and sharing of their own Jewish growth.

The Project

Project Overview: We projected a two-year training process with the recruitment and development of avocational teachers as its central focus. Each school director would choose two to four congregants for the program. Each year would offer 60 hours of Judaica in weekly meetings of two hours each, along with twelve two-hour pedagogic seminars in year one and nine in year two. In the first year, ideally a pre-service one, on-site observations and practice teaching, as well as pre- and post-teaching conferences would supplement the seminars. In year two, teachers would be assigned to their own classrooms. At the end of year two, they would receive stipends to attend advanced training programs such as CAJE.

Obviously, a program this extensive needed on-site personnel and systems to support the training period and sustain it thereafter. Therefore, the initial vision asked educational directors to identify one mentor teacher for each one or two avocational teachers. Mentor teachers would meet monthly over two years for training in skills necessary for working with the new teachers. The trainees would do their practice-teaching in the mentor teachers’ classrooms and, in year two, the mentor teachers would help supervise and offer support as the avocational teachers entered their own classrooms. Educational directors, also meeting in monthly seminars, would learn and practice supervisory skills while exploring the nature of educational leadership. In addition, they would convene monthly meetings with mentor and avocational teachers to discuss on-site issues and review progress. Finally, school boards would embark on a four-session process to define their educational visions and begin to develop a set of goals for their institutions.

Recruitment of Teachers: The project director helped principals develop guidelines for appropriate candidates. Ideally, we were looking for active synagogue members who were: twenty-one or older, open to learning, reflective, and willing to commit themselves to the rigorous training program followed by a year of teaching in the congregation’s religious school.

The overwhelmingly clear commonality among all first-cohort avocational teachers revolved around their expressed desire for personal study and growth. A clear secondary reason among these teachers was the desire to be role models for their own children of life-long learning and Jewish practice both at home and in the synagogue. At the conclusion of the program, we were struck by the way many teachers had integrated personal, professional and religious growth. One spoke of how learning to set goals in lesson plans taught him to set goals in anticipation of difficult personal confrontations; another related how Jewish learning informed her teaching, while teaching increased her hunger for Jewish learning.

Pedagogic Training and Support for Avocational Teachers: Avocational teachers attended monthly seminars on the “art and science” of teaching in a Jewish school.

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First-year participants observed in classrooms, practice taught under the direction of their mentor teachers, and kept a journal in which they noted classroom observations.

Mentoring: Each avocational teacher was paired with a veteran teacher who concurrently received training in mentoring. Mentor teachers facilitated reflection after avocational teachers’ observations of veteran teachers in their own schools, directed lesson planning, guided reflective practice and, in general, brought the new teacher into the culture of the school.

Practice Teaching in Mentor Teachers’ Classrooms: During the second semester, avocational teachers practiced teaching in their mentor teachers’ classrooms eight times. Mentor teacher and both avocational teachers jointly planned each practice teaching session as a team of three. Each avocational teacher observed the other as did the mentor teacher. The mentor facilitated a post-teaching conference on the day the practice teaching took place.

A Year of Supervised Teaching (2nd year): During the second year, avocational teachers were assigned to their own classrooms. Both mentors and educational directors were expected to make frequent observations. (Mentors were given release time from their classrooms to observe on a monthly basis.)

Judaic Training: The religious imperative to study was achieved by enrollment in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. In order to bring together the Judaic learning and the pedagogic training, avocational teachers were asked to translate the Judaic content they learned into specific lessons and units for their students.

Other Learning Opportunities: The seminar leader for the avocational teachers was, in one sense, the lead “teacher of the teachers.” However, it is clear from the reflective statements of the seminar participants that their mentor teachers were also their “teachers,” as were the Melton faculty, to some extent. Similarly, the veteran teachers in the various religious schools became part of the “teaching team” in that they were earmarked as “master teachers” during the observation phase of training.

It is also clear that peer teaching played an important part in our program. During a seminar of the second-year avocational teachers, one asked how to teach the Jewish dietary laws to her students and her own children. Together, her seven classmates helped define two parallel avenues of content as the foundation from which to build. Sources were shared from classic texts and personal libraries. The group then brainstormed possible teaching techniques and lesson formats that might work best. It appeared that all participants took away something of value from that brief, spontaneous discussion.

Finally, every opportunity was taken to demonstrate and reflect upon good teaching practice. Each year, our opening meeting had, as one of its goals, “to demonstrate excellent Jewish teaching practice.” To this end, each member of the Covenant staff led one part of the program; each part was designed to demonstrate a different technique. At the end of the day, the group identified and discussed each teaching strategy and the reasons for its use.

The Successes

Twelve teachers successfully entered classrooms after one year of training. Their educational directors were delighted with their work, and, in one instance, commented on the difference between the teacher before and

delighted with their work, and, in one instance, commented on the difference between the teacher after six months in the program as contrasted to an unsuccessful teaching experience she had a few years earlier. The teachers, although they agonized over what they could not do, shared wonderful examples of student learning. They expressed surprise at and delight in the depth of expression and understanding they elicited from their students. This fulfillment, in turn, fueled and motivated their learning and teaching.

The Challenges

There were four major challenges for our work. The first, tensions between expectations of the central agency and project staff and demands and needs of the participating schools, is endemic to any situation in which a central agency invites schools to participate in a project with clearly defined goals and criteria (despite the involvement of these schools in determining those criteria). Tensions internal to the schools can also undermine the project and its impact. Lay/professional relationships, contract disputes and changes in personnel all create stress and tension. Each synagogue school has standards and values not necessarily shared by other schools or the central agency. These not only have to be respected, but also incorporated into the program. Each institution is unique and must be treated as such.

Time demands on the avocational teachers constitute the third challenge. Our initial vision was of non-working women or retirees. In fact, more than half the teachers in the program held full-time jobs when they started; three others began full-time work shortly after entering the program; a majority had young children at home; in addition, many of them became involved in major life cycle events during their training periods.

Teachers in the pre-service year, with travel time, devoted six to ten hours per week to the project; once they actually entered the classroom, they still had weekly classes, monthly seminars, and monthly observations with pre- and post-conferences. While there was not a single drop-out during the two-year training period, modifications clearly need to be made to the program to reduce it to a more manageable one.

Our final challenge was staffing this project in "Jewishly disadvantaged" Orange County. The Director of the BJE decided to act as project coordinator and hire top people in the field for specific teaching assignments. The educational directors were taught by the San Diego Bureau director (100 miles from the BJE) and a member of the faculty of Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles (45 miles from the BJE), the teachers by a nationally-recognized teacher trainer who lives in Los Angeles (50 miles from the BJE). The only local staff member, the teacher for the mentor seminar, was a highly regarded principal of a nearby elementary school.

This plan forfeited the opportunity for real interaction among this staff of superbly qualified theorists and practitioners. The second loss was any opportunity for the avocational teachers' seminar leader to observe her students in their own settings. While educational directors and mentors provided on-site support and videotape was occasionally used, the seminar leader viewed the lack of on-site visits a serious detriment. The trade-off for our one local staff member was knowledge of Jewish education. Her experience was solely in the secular world. She had difficulty understanding both the time constraints under which Jewish supplementary schools operate and the lack of "professional" staff. At the same time, her expectations from the secular world pushed the rest of us to raise our expectations for what can be accomplished in our religious schools.

Insights

Training Rather than Recruitment: Despite the cries of the educational directors, recruitment of Judaic teachers

is only occasionally an issue in Orange County. Furthermore, “avocational” teachers are not a new concept here; only the name is different. With the exception of a few Israelis who teach Hebrew, our synagogue schools are staffed almost entirely by congregants of the synagogues in which the schools are situated. Through this project, we have become increasingly convinced that, when congregations rely primarily on congregants to teach in their religious schools, the critical issue is training and not recruitment. Educational directors can find congregants to staff their classrooms; they can sometimes find congregants who are public school teachers; their challenge is turning those congregants into Jewish teachers.

Need to Integrate Pedagogy and Judaica: As we explored the question of training, we faced two discrepancies. The first arose around the content of the “training.” Our experience with the schools indicated teachers need both the pedagogic skills and Judaic knowledge. Yet, the teachers and educational directors see the need primarily in the former. Knowledge is less important than technique, boring children a greater sin than misinforming them. The majority of teachers in the project’s first cohort joined the project in order to grow Jewishly. They happily told us how their lives had been changed by their Jewish learning, but felt they weren’t given enough pedagogical training. According to their educational directors and mentor teachers, they are successful teachers in their settings, yet they clamored not for more Jewish knowledge, but for more pedagogy. It is fascinating (and sad) that even these teachers, whose personal goals were Jewish learning and growth, saw such goals as separate from their needs in the classrooms in which they teach. It seemed to us that the program’s almost three-to-one ratio of Jewish study to pedagogic study made a strong statement about the connection between Jewish learning and Jewish teaching. Obviously, it was not as self-evident as we believed; on the contrary, the program design may have reinforced the separation. If we have been unable to get this group of teachers to understand the centrality of lifelong Jewish study to Judaism, and, therefore, to perceive the connection between personal Jewish growth and the quality of their teaching, how can we expect to convince others?

It is clear that the only way to do so is to combine the pedagogy with the subject matter in such a way that teachers will see the learning as meeting their needs. It is not a new discovery that adults are utilitarian learners; it probably should not be a surprise that our avocational teachers separate their two sets of goals: personal growth and teaching skills. At this stage, it seems that, in a community setting, it is possible to begin the process, to teach new teachers basic pedagogy and Judaic content skills in community-wide forums. We would strongly suggest, though, that pedagogy be viewed as a vehicle through which to teach Judaism and not the other way around; that is, that a careful plan be devised in which the pedagogic knowledge deemed essential is planned so that each Judaica class incorporates the teaching of pedagogy. We have begun to plan such a course to create “literate” Jews while providing teachers with basic knowledge in the major areas that they might be called upon to teach. This would replace the Melton Mini-School plus pedagogy seminar with a three year, three-hours-per-week structure. Clearly, such a course would be an option only for the most motivated of potential or existing teachers.

Need to Invent Site-Based Models for Avocational Teachers: When we met with each of the school faculties to find out what kind of education they wanted, we uncovered the second discrepancy, that which exists between what teachers say they want to learn and the amount of time they are actually willing (or able) to spend learning. Simultaneously, we learned that our local religious school staffs are almost entirely comprised of avocational teachers. The course described above would be wonderful for the most highly motivated among them, but what could we do for those who were not prepared to spend extra time on their “avocation?”

Inspired both by the avocational teacher project in Lansing, Michigan, which tied the Judaic learning and its translation into classroom practice together, and a course taught at the University of Judaism's Summer Institute, called "Tough Topics in Jewish Education," we developed a series of seminars to be given in each synagogue. They were team-taught by the synagogue's rabbi and the Bureau's teacher educator. The topics were the same; the pedagogy was the same; but, each rabbi was able to offer the views of his or her movement on issues such as God, revelation, and immortality. The educational director and the project's mentor teachers would be available on-site for follow-up work with all the teachers. Each faculty participated in one seminar in the fall and one in the spring over a three-year period. At the very minimum, this provided each school's faculty with some understanding of the basic ideas in Judaism, with opportunities to explore their own attitudes in these areas and some specific methodologies to bring back to their classrooms.

Need to Develop Indigenous Resources: In a (Jewishly) resource-poor community such as ours, it became increasingly clear that there are three primary sources of teacher training, support, and recruitment: the educational directors, the rabbis and the teachers themselves. Educational directors have the incentive and will make the time for professional development; they are, in fact, our only educational professionals in the schools. We need to exploit this human resource and generate the financial resources that will allow them to become top professionals with the skills needed to develop their own faculties. They should engage in ongoing discussion and inquiry about what their teachers need and how to provide it.

The changing emphasis, within our Covenant Grant, from training teachers to educating educational directors, acknowledged their central role in any process.

Rabbis are our communal resource for adult Jewish education. The difficulty of finding teachers for the Melton Adult Mini-School program vividly brought home the fact that, with two or three exceptions, there literally are no other teachers who combine Jewish knowledge and skill in teaching adults. We needed to mobilize the rabbis to provide this crucial missing piece for their own and one another's faculties and to do so within formats that met both theirs and their teachers' time constraints. We were able to create a network in which the rabbis of all the schools in the community included in their adult education offerings each semester a course whose content is chosen from a list requested by the teachers.

Finally, the teachers themselves offer a tremendous resource for one another. Through the teaching seminar, our avocational teachers learned how to support one another. They shared their problems and developed solutions. They said that they want to continue their monthly meetings and asked that we provide a facilitator for them. They were very clear that they were not looking for someone to lead or teach new skills, but for a person who would help them teach one another.

Further Areas of Exploration: We suspect that our findings about congregations relying primarily on their own members to staff their schools is one that would be repeated in other isolated, small or newly developing Jewish communities and, perhaps, in the larger, established communities as well. If this is true, a whole new set of issues arises for recruiting and managing congregants who are employees of their own congregations. The rewards for doing so can be seen in the successes of this project; the problems, from creating new policies about employees serving on synagogue boards to not knowing how to fire the president's wife, are still to be addressed.

Establishing Ongoing Jewish Learning as the Key to Jewish Teaching: The chasm between Jewish teaching and Jewish learning that existed in Orange County in 1994 has narrowed to a small gap. It is now accepted that teachers study as well as teach. Every teacher spends a minimum of 10 hours per year in Jewish study; most devote an additional six hours; at least 10% learn for a minimum of 30 hours. Every congregation understands the importance of teachers' learning. Every congregation provides resources for teachers: through release time, stipends, salary scales that depend on learning, and classes taught by rabbis and educators. We began the Covenant project seven years ago with the conviction that the spiritual or religious dimension of one's life informs one's teaching. We still believe that by nurturing our teachers' Jewish souls, we enable them to inspire and nourish our children.

Joan S. Kaye is the Executive Director of the Orange County Bureau of Jewish Education. Under her leadership, the Bureau has expanded its offerings to reach every segment of the Jewish population and is currently engaged in a community-wide professional development initiative funded by the Covenant Foundation.

*Debi M. Rowe is the Director of Education and Programs at Cong. Tifereth Jacob in Manhattan Beach, CA. Ms. Rowe and her father, Rabbi Lawrence Mahrer, have co-authored *A Guide to Small Congregation Religious Schools*, published by the UAHC Press. She also has written several student textbooks and teacher guides for Torah Aura Productions.*

Endnotes:

1. The problems they articulated, for the most part, seem to be endemic to the individual schools or to the enterprise of supplementary schooling itself. They include: students arbitrarily switching assigned class sessions, students arriving late, split-session class schedules not leaving enough time for close-down and start-up between sessions, texts too hard (or too easy) for grade level, what is taught in school being negated at home, and insufficient classroom space (or sharing space).