

CONTACT

AUTUMN 2002/CHESHVAN 5763 VOLUME 5 NUMBER 1

THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE NETWORK / חברים כל ישראל

I HAD A BRIS



**Jewish Early
Childhood Education**



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Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Some of the photographs in this issue appear courtesy of Art Today. Cover drawing by Ilana Weisman, four years old, telling the story of her baby brother's bris.

Remembering JJ Greenberg

As this issue of *Contact* was being readied for publication, the staff of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation received the tragic news that its beloved Executive Director, JJ Greenberg, had been fatally injured by an automobile while riding his bicycle in Israel.

JJ served as Executive Director of JLN from its inception in 1995. He had previously conducted the initial research which provided the scope and definition of the nascent Foundation. He was intimately involved in all the



Foundation's activities, from educational and cultural programming at Makor to the landmark activities of Birthright Israel. To his entire staff, JJ was a role model, teacher, cheerleader, jester and friend. On a personal level, JJ's generosity, humility and gentleness of spirit were an example to us all. He treated everybody, from the most illustrious philanthropists to our office custodial staff, as the embodiment of *tzelem elokim*, or the image of God.

JJ was committed to finding new ways of expressing his exuberant Jewish spirit in every aspect of his life. He believed that each of our deceptively "minor" actions has the potential to transform the world. Here at

JLN, JJ manifested this belief in his concern for the well-being of his staff and of the planet, whether in passing out vitamins at staff meetings or in introducing environmentally conscious practices into our office. On 9/11, when he volunteered with rescue workers at Ground Zero, JJ donned a name tag so that people would approach him to ask for help. From that day forward, JJ continued to wear the name tag wherever he went. To him, it was a tangible symbol of the necessity, now more than ever, of our mutual responsibility for one another.

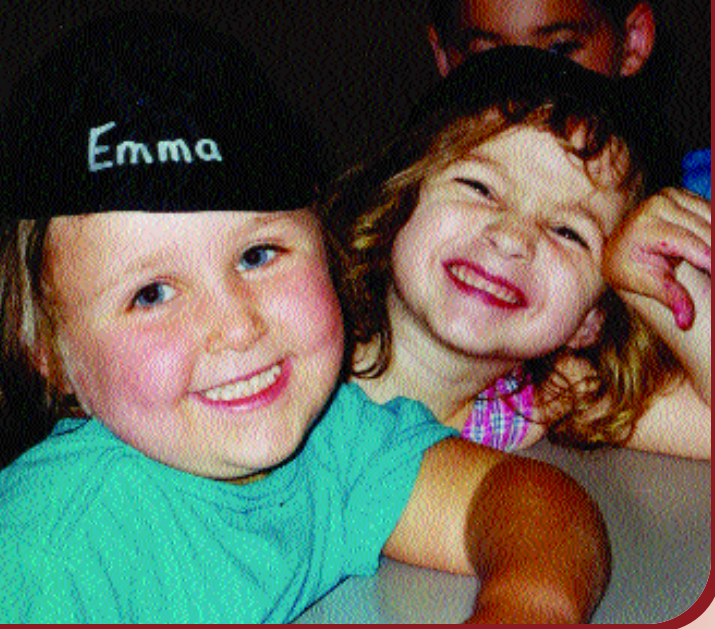
In some ways, it seems fitting that our tribute to JJ should coincide with this issue of *Contact*. Among the greatest joys of JJ's life was spending time with his cherished nieces and nephews, in teaching them by example the best in Jewish ethics and Jewish joy. JJ himself is evidence of the invaluable importance of Early Childhood Jewish Education. His parents inculcated Jewish values and spirit in JJ from an earliest age. He, in turn, was devoted to the early childhood experience as a bedrock of a vibrant Jewish life.

JJ often spoke of Jewish Life Network as a family. Our Foundation, he felt, is not a consortium of independent projects but a network of intertwined programs informed by common roots and a common destiny. For those of us fortunate to have known JJ as a colleague and a friend, his memory will live on in our work and in our lives.

Eli Valley

Eli Valley

To learn more about JJ and to leave your own reminiscences, please visit www.jjgreenberg.org.



Nurturing the Next Generations

by ILENE C. VOGELSTEIN

RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH wrote: “The most important and decisive age in education is early childhood, the ‘age of the suckling,’ during which the child must be prepared to accept the noble foundations for a moral life.”

It is ironic, then, that as the organized Jewish community struggles to create programs that will transform American Jewry, it continues to neglect the one program that successfully introduces children and their families into Jewish living. Approximately 100,000 children currently attend Jewish early childhood programs. There they obtain the foundation for subsequent Jewish involvement and experiences. Nonetheless, Jewish early childhood education programs receive little attention or support in the majority of Jewish communities across the country. This neglect has created a crisis in Jewish early childhood education.

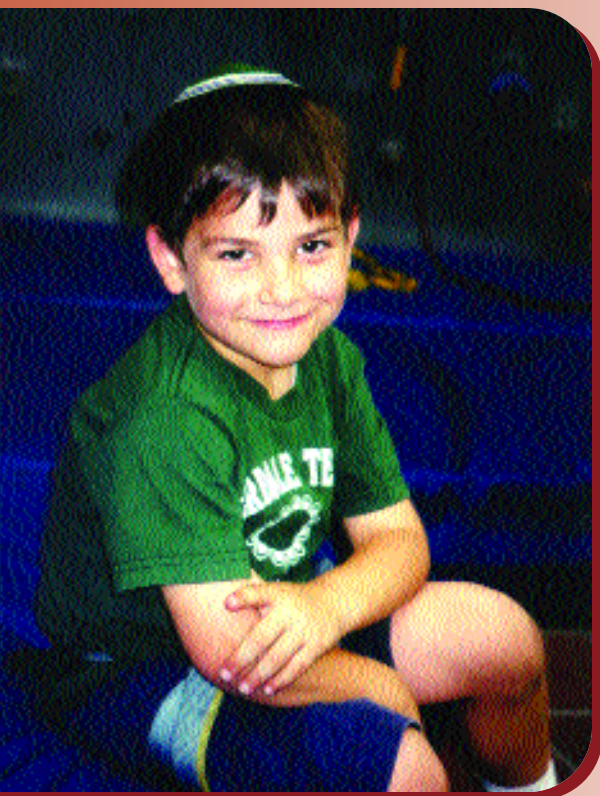
The History of Early Childhood Programs

When Jewish early childhood programs first emerged in the United States in the 1930's, the goal was to help children adapt to American culture. The programs were part-time and primarily focused on creating opportunities for children to interact with other Jewish American children.

However, changes in employment patterns in women, the increase in dual working families, and the increase in single parent families has significantly expanded the demand for non-parental care for preschool children. Furthermore, the National Center for Educational Statistics has determined that mothers who are well-educated and who have moderately high levels of income are more likely to enroll their children in non-parental childcare programs.

Consequently, the responsibility of raising young children is no longer the sole, or primary, responsibility of the mother. Rather, it is a partnership between the early childhood center and the family. The National Jewish Early Childhood Education Demographic Study, commissioned by the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership (JECEP), recently found that many children two to four years of age are spending between 20 and 40 hours a week in early childhood programs. This shift to non-parental care for a child during these critically impressionable years has major implications for the child, for the families and for early childhood education. The early years of life are when children develop their sense of identity. It is a time when parents are as eager as the children to learn and experience. This is the ideal time to lay a foundation of Jewish values. It is also the ideal time to invite families to participate in synagogue activities and to become involved in the Jewish community.

The effects of Jewish early childhood education are profound.



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Jewish early childhood education has great potential for transforming ritual practice and community involvement in families. But first, it must be recognized as a credible educational experience, and resources must be invested in enhancing and developing exemplary programs.

In a study commissioned by JECEP, two-thirds of the families interviewed indicated they are “doing something different regarding their Jewish practice as a result of the preschool experience.” The study also noted that there was an increase in synagogue membership as a result of participation in a synagogue-based preschool. Jewish early childhood programs impact the children, the family and, indeed, the entire community.

Facing the Challenge

Unfortunately, while enrollment in early childhood education programs is on the rise nationally (see *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 9, 2002), the National Jewish Early Childhood Education Demographic Study suggests it is declining in Jewish early childhood centers. In *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), A. Keysar, B. Kosmin and J. Scheckner note that there are approximately 600,000 Jewish children in the United States between birth and six years of age. Although it is significant that 100,000 children attend Jewish early childhood programs, approximately 500,000 children in the same age range do not attend such programs. Although the potential population for Jewish early childhood programs equals or exceeds the current college age population, no significant dollars are allocated to Jewish

early childhood education.

In addition, the majority of children enrolled in these programs are between two and four years of age, with a significant reduction in enrollment for five year olds. According to a study commissioned by JECEP, this is because parents choose public kindergartens over Jewish kindergartens. Now that public three- and four-year-old programs are becoming available, we are in jeopardy of reduced enrollment in the core three- and four-year-old population. Why would parents pay several thousand dollars for a program when they can get a comparable one for free? Unless the community actively supports and promotes its programs, only the most Jewishly-committed parents will send their children to Jewish early childhood education programs.

A further challenge facing Jewish early childhood education is a crisis in personnel. Most early childhood educators in Jewish programs are between 30 and 50 years old and college-educated, and yet they earn salaries that are comparable to parking lot attendants (\$19,400 annually), without any benefits. Starting salaries for public school early childhood educators are approximately \$25,000 plus benefits. Without appropriate compensation, only those who are the most committed to Jewish education will consider employment in Jewish early childhood

centers. Furthermore, one-third of the current early childhood professionals are not Jewish. Of those who are, the majority have no formal Jewish education beyond their afternoon religious school training. This might explain why the primary, and sometimes only, Jewish content in most preschools is the model Shabbat on Fridays, a model seder, and making channukiot for Channukah and grogers for Purim. Is this enough to distinguish a Jewish early childhood education program from a secular early childhood program?

Making A Commitment

Jewish early childhood education has great potential for transforming ritual practice and community involvement in families. But first, it must be recognized as a credible educational experience, and resources must be invested in enhancing and developing exemplary Jewish early childhood programs.

This means increasing salaries and benefits so that they are competitive with the compensation of public early childhood educators. It means providing serious, ongoing professional development programs. We must establish easily-accessible tools and resources. In July, 2002, CAJE established an Early Childhood Department that will be the central clearinghouse for early childhood resources. Additionally, guidelines for



Jewish Early Childhood Education Comes of CAJE

IN MARCH 2001, the Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, Ben and Esther Rosenbloom Foundation, Jim Joseph Foundation, and Temma and Alfred Kingsley established the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership (JECEP). The goal of JECEP was to stimulate Jewish organizations and federations to recognize the power, potential and importance of a Jewish early childhood education. To date, the organization has completed two important surveys on the quality and effectiveness of Jewish early childhood education (available on www.JECEP.org), set up a national online Jewish early childhood center directory, and co-established, with the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), the National Coalition of Organizations that Support Jewish Early Childhood Education.

JECEP was established as a short-term partnership charged with placing Jewish early childhood education on the national Jewish agenda within 18 months of its inception. Simultaneously, the Board of CAJE has determined that early childhood education will be one of its three current priorities. As of July 1, 2002, CAJE assumed the operations of JECEP and established a new Early Childhood Department. This department will serve as the central clearinghouse for all professionals working with children from birth through six years of age who are enrolled in synagogue-based, JCC, independent and day school early childhood programs in North America.

The CAJE Early Childhood Department will encourage other organizations, lay leaders and foundations to understand the power and potential of Jewish early childhood education, and address the numerous issues facing the Jewish early childhood profession. It will also help to integrate early childhood pedagogic best practices into a Jewish early childhood environment; create ongoing professional development programs for directors as well as teachers; coordinate the establishment of a national coalition of organizations that support Jewish early childhood education; strengthen existing Jewish early childhood professional organizations; and obtain and maintain a presence for Jewish early childhood education on the national Jewish agenda.

The Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund, Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, Ben and Esther Rosenbloom Foundation, Jim Joseph Foundation, and Temma and Alfred Kingsley will provide the initial grant for the new CAJE Early Childhood Department. Additional partners are currently being sought to join and help sustain this initiative. For more information, including resources, links, and a listserv for early childhood educators, please go to <http://caje.org/earlychildhood/index.html>.

excellence in early childhood Jewish education and/or an accreditation program need to be developed so that all Jewish early childhood centers, irrespective of their religious denomination, will aspire to the highest standards of excellence. We must also increase our focus on families by enabling families to learn and experience Judaism together and by adding parent study sessions to the early childhood educational experience.

Finally and perhaps most important, we must redefine the role of the educator. Early childhood professionals must understand, believe and accept that they are *Jewish educators*, not preschool teachers and certainly not nannies or babysitters. Our educators, who spend several hours a day with our children, are helping them form values with which they will view themselves and the world. Our educators need to see themselves as having an identical mission as religious school and day school teachers. The Jewish community must respect and honor its early childhood educators as indispensable resources in inculcating the identity of the next generations.

The imperative to teach our children (“*Vshinantam l’vanekha*”) is one of the distinguishing features of the Jewish community. Jewish education is the core of our identity: it shapes who we are and how we behave. The future of the American Jewish community depends on the quality and expertise of our early childhood educators, programs, and centers. ❀

Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life

A SURVEY OF JEWISH PRESCHOOL PARENTS IN THREE CITIES

by PEARL BECK, Ph.D.



DURING THE PAST DECADE, Jewish organizations have pursued a variety of creative strategies to reach out to unaffiliated Jews. However, scant attention has been paid to the large numbers of peripherally affiliated Jews already “in the system” — specifically, individuals whose children are enrolled in Jewish preschools. Our research found that much can be done to strengthen these parents’ Jewish affiliations and to enhance their Jewish identities.

The study on which this article is based was funded by the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership (JECEP). It explored the reasons families send their children to Jewish preschools and the impact of Jewish preschools on family life. The target group included Reform, Conservative and JCC-affiliated schools in Baltimore, Denver and Chicago.

We visited nine schools and interviewed 90 families with children attending the schools. Approximately 25 percent of the sample consisted of families who were either intermarried (17 percent) or families in which one parent had converted to Judaism (8 percent). Although almost none of the parents in the sample had attended Jewish day school, most had received some religious school education prior to their becoming a bar or bat-mitzvah. In about one-

half of the families, at least one parent had visited Israel. In addition to the families, we interviewed preschool directors and experts in the field of Jewish early childhood education.

Parental Motivation and Satisfaction

While positively disposed to a school’s Jewish content, most families were not primarily concerned with providing a Jewish education for their children. As one family stated, “The Jewish education was a plus, but it was not something we were looking for.” Others gave visceral reasons to the question of why they chose a particular Jewish school. Convenience to home, availability of swimming pools and beautifully appointed play areas were reasons offered more frequently than a school’s Jewish curriculum.

There was a subgroup whose concern for Jewish content was a primary consideration as part of a compensatory educational strategy. One parent explained, “We wanted a religious based preschool because we knew that we were going to send our kids to a secular primary school and wanted to first give them a base in religious education.

Once they chose a Jewish school, parents expressed overwhelmingly positive sentiments about their child’s Jewish experience. On a traditional satisfaction scale, 87 percent of the parents reported being “very satisfied” (the highest rating) with the school as a whole, and 91 percent reported being “very satisfied” with the Jewish programming.

The Jewish Curriculum

Most of the Jewish content in these schools focuses on Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. On Shabbat, a girl and a boy typically serve as the Shabbat “*Ima*” (mother) and “*Aba*” (father). Parents are invited on the occasion of their child’s serving in one of these roles. Some preschools gather the entire school together for a weekly Shabbat “sing,” which was clearly the high point of the week.

The “Shabbat Backpack” was singled out as a particularly successful program. Children are sent home with backpacks containing traditional Shabbat ritual objects – candles, challah and grape juice, along with the appropriate blessings for lighting Shabbat candles, making Kiddush and blessing the challah. A stuffed bear is often included to “participate” in the experience along with the child. This attempt to link school life with Jewish life at home is furthered by the inclusion of a journal to record how the contents of the backpack were used.

Israel-related and Hebrew-language programs appear to be the weakest component. The only Israel-related programming is the celebration of Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day. Because few staff members speak Hebrew, let alone have visited Israel, some schools hire local Israelis to conduct programs, which consist mostly of Hebrew songs and dances.

Among personnel, there is a consensus that the Jewish programming could be vastly improved. Very few schools have designed their own Jewish curricula,

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especially ones that address the children's cognitive, affective and behavioral needs. Many schools are at a loss for non-holiday related programming. There are exceptions. There are schools in which one hears Hebrew music and bible stories, finds Jewish ritual objects, notices posters with pictures of Israel on the walls and sees Hebrew writing even when a Jewish holiday is not approaching.

“Graduates” of Preschools

Only 16 percent of the Jewish preschool graduates continued in Jewish day schools. Fourteen percent of the graduates attend private school, while 70 percent attend public schools.

Much of the increased membership in synagogues is attributable to the substantial percentage of children (52 percent) who continued their formal Jewish education in synagogue-affiliated religious schools upon graduating from the preschools. And, of those families whose children were not involved in a Jewish educational program during the past year, the majority (80 percent) have a specific plan to enroll their child in a religious school within the next year or two.

Impact on Family Life

Despite curricular gaps, children enrolled in Jewish preschools appear to be learning a great deal about Jewish traditions, rituals and holidays. But parallel learning opportunities are rarely available for parents. Anecdotal accounts indicate that when such programs are offered, parents are enthusiastic partici-

pants. Indeed, nearly 70 percent of the interviewed families were “doing something different” as a result of their child's Jewish preschool experience. Jewish ritual and lifestyle changes included lighting Shabbat candles, joining a synagogue and deciding to send a child to a Jewish day school.

These parents are recruitable. Unfortunately, the majority of synagogues did not attempt to recruit new members from among the preschool parents. Contact between the sponsoring Jewish establishment and preschool parents was often minimally maintained. Most parents received the synagogue bulletin, but typically that was the extent of the connection. Nearly 35 percent reported that they had not met the rabbi at all. Parents, however, were open to getting to know the rabbi and to learning more about the synagogue.

When the synagogues did undertake outreach, substantial success was reported. Indeed, despite the lack of formal outreach, synagogue membership rates among the interviewed families skyrocketed over time. Prior to their child's preschool experience, only 40 percent of the families were synagogue members. In contrast, at the time of the interviews, 80 percent of the families were members.

Changing “Tourists” to “Permanent Residents”

Jewish preschools have unique features unavailable to many outreach programs. It is not necessary, for example, for parents to be familiar with Jewish rituals and

Hebrew, or even to be Jewish, to send their children to Jewish preschools. Moreover, parents experience Jewish preschool activities as non-threatening, fun and, most important, involving the entire family. For these reasons, Jewish preschools have the potential to make Judaism accessible, especially to individuals who lack Jewish backgrounds, such as converts, the intermarried and the peripherally affiliated.

To further strengthen their ability to serve as vehicles of outreach, Jewish preschools should:

- Develop their Judaica curriculum and sponsor staff training, especially in areas related to Israel, Hebrew and Jewish studies;
- Provide more family education in order to include parents in the “learning curve” and to strengthen the bonds between parents and the institution;
- Establish more linkages between synagogues and preschools and especially between rabbis and preschool families; and
- Create opportunities for community-building among parents to demonstrate positive aspects of Jewish community (e.g., by forming *chavurot*, or study groups).

If, as one of the directors noted, many parents join the preschools as “tourists,” it is perhaps the Jewish community's challenge and responsibility to encourage these parents to become “permanent residents” of the larger Jewish world. ✿



Of Playpens and Torah

by LEE M. HENDLER

What if every new mother gave as much thought to her toddler's Jewish education as she did to the contents of her baby's playpen?

“SO WHAT WILL YOU be working on, Mom?”

The question came from my sixteen year old daughter as we discussed our summer plans.

“A few projects, but first I have to write an essay on Jewish early childhood education.”

“Oh, that's easy,” she quipped. “Just stick 'em in a playpen with a Torah!” Her comment was irreverent, a halachic impossibility, but the idea brought me up short for a moment. What if every new mother gave as much thought to her toddler's Jewish education as she did

to the contents of her baby's playpen?

Acutely aware of the nature vs. nurture debate, new parents hedge their bets and agonize over every toy, television show, song, book and crib accessory to which their infant and young toddler is exposed. It's been suggested that the first call after a birth may not be to the new grandparents but to the elementary school of choice. In a word, parents are taking early childhood seriously when it comes to giving their offspring every secular advantage.

The reasons for this are clear. Recent research now confirms what experienced teachers and savvy parents have always known: the years from birth to age five are one of, if not *the* most significant learning periods in our lives. It is the time when language is acquired at an astonishingly rapid rate, when imaginations are born and special gifts emerge, when individuals learn how to trust, to

share and to love. It is time for the Jewish community to pay serious attention to this phenomenon.

Whole Family Engagement

Early childhood education presents us with two natural windows of opportunity. The first is self-evident: it is the ability to shape the hearts and minds of the newest members of our communities. But the second window, often overlooked, involves the parents of our newest students. When parents begin to make educational choices for their children, they often consider exactly what ethics and cultural values they wish their children to acquire. Parents of preschoolers are especially eager for a hands-on school involvement and a strong home-school relationship. Finally, parents of young children are particularly receptive to the concept of community.

For all these reasons, Jewish early

With her siblings Terry, Zoh and Joe, **Lee M.**

Hendler oversees the Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund. The Fund launched Machon L' Morim, a comprehensive five-year Jewish early childhood professional development program in Baltimore, and gave the founding grant to establish the Jewish Early Childhood Education Partnership.

childhood education has the potential to transform the Jewish identity of the entire family. Indeed, many families light Shabbat candles and say *berakhot* for the first time because of their child's Jewish preschool experience. In some instances, this is the parents' first opportunity to reconnect with the Jewish community since their Hebrew school education. Early childhood education can be a springboard to adult study about Jewish parenting that can lay the foundation for lifetime parent-child relationships. It can also reach across the generations to involve grandparents. Currently, most schools and institutions fail to recognize the enormous potential of early childhood education for the entire Jewish family. They fail to nurture the relationship with families, only to wonder why families are so difficult to engage later on. Experience has shown that after a quality early childhood educational program, discriminating parents demand more Jewish education and connection for their children and for themselves. This results in increased enrollment at day schools, increased hours in afternoon religious schools, increased activity in synagogues, JCCs and adult study sessions, and a heightened involvement in a plethora of other Jewish community activities. Simply put, Jewish early childhood education should be considered *whole family engagement*.

Towards a New Model of Early Childhood Education

It is time for the Jewish community to cease giving lip service to the noble and distinctively Jewish notion of cradle to grave learning. We must appreciate that quality Jewish early childhood programs are one of the most important investments we can make in the future of the Jewish community. We must create such exceptional programs and generous incentives that Jewish parents, the most discriminating and demanding of all educational consumers, couldn't imagine and cannot find anything better for themselves or their children.

The average full time Jewish early childhood teacher earns about \$19,400 a year (without benefits) for

helping to mold the minds and spirits of the future leaders, parents, professionals and artists of Jewish life. Why is the Jewish community so ready to spend millions of dollars on camping, day schools, Israel experiences and adult education and so reluctant to support early childhood experiences?

In Pirke Avot, Rabbi Yehudah ben Tema teaches the Jewish version of an educational plan: "At five, the study of bible; at ten, the study of Mishnah; at thirteen, responsibility for the mitzvot; at fifteen, the study of Talmud; at eighteen, marriage..." Every additional decade marks another level of developmental achievement, girded by the love for Torah that began in early childhood.

If we were to take this seriously, the entire early childhood program would be imbued with Torah. Teachers in our early childhood programs would be certified and fully confident in their knowledge of Torah. Teachers and directors together would create stimulating, pedagogically sound centers of excellence brimming with Jewish values, images, vocabulary and behavior. Early Childhood Directors would see themselves as the master teachers of their institutions responsible for the careers of their faculty and for shaping the curriculum and mission of their schools. A constant cycle of reflection, application, refinement and new learning would energize the successful program with a productive restlessness. Some parents would volunteer in the classroom, knowing that they would always learn something new, excited by the Jewish and early childhood educational expertise of their children's teachers. And parents would be seen as learners in their own right. Jewish early childhood programs would offer classes to teach Jewish parents about the wisdom and practices of our tradition, to help them create loving Jewish homes.

Stick 'em in a playpen with a torah? Not exactly. But let's work to assure that Torah is the principal informant of every Jewish early childhood program. And after age five? As Rabbi Yehuda ben Tema suggests, if you do it right from the beginning, the rest must follow. 🌸

PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

IN ORDER TO FACILITATE greater synergy among Jewish early childhood educators, two professional organizations have emerged to provide ongoing networking opportunities and resources for teachers, administrators and preschool directors.

THE NATIONAL JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD NETWORK (NJEEN) was established to provide Jewish cultural, educational and networking opportunities for Jewish early childhood educators attending the annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Network provides unique services to its members during the conference, including visiting local Jewish early childhood programs, experiencing the Jewish history of the host city, organizing lectures from local Jewish scholars, sponsoring a Shabbat dinner and havdallah service, and preparing workshops and networking opportunities for members. Throughout the year, the Network publicizes job opportunities, curriculum ideas, and philosophical approaches that reflect excellence in the field of Jewish early childhood education. The Network maintains a membership list of 600 people, with 250-350 attendees at each NAEYC conference. For more information, please go to www.jecep.org/njecn/.

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALISTS (NAJECS) consists of early childhood consultants who provide community-level advocacy and professional development services to early childhood programs throughout North America. NAJECS provides a forum to assess and advocate for Jewish early childhood education. It organizes programs to provide intensive course work in Judaic topics and in Jewish early childhood education; implements on-site staff development; organizes regional conferences; engages in curriculum development; and operates leadership training programs for directors, including seminars, retreats, councils and study groups. For more information, please contact Lyndall Miller, co-chair, at lmiller_acaje@yahoo.com.



ADVENTURES WITH
PEER K. EXPLORER:

Preschools and the JCC

by DR. RUTH PINKENSON FELDMAN
and MIRELE B. GOLDSMITH

HOW CAN WE INFUSE early childhood education programs with Jewish content that will make a real difference in the lives of children and parents?

The Jewish Community Center (JCC) Movement is particularly well-placed to respond to this challenge. Each year, 60,000 boys and girls attend JCC preschool programs, making the JCC Movement the largest provider of Jewish preschool programs in North America. JCC early childhood programs attract families with a wide variety of Jewish backgrounds, including those with little or no prior involvement in Jewish life. The JCC Association has made a commitment to lead the way in developing innovative strategies for enriching the Jewish content of early childhood education. We hope the tools we are developing will eventually benefit all Jewish early childhood programs.

The **Brill Fellows Program**, the first of three initiatives launched by the JCC Association, strikes directly at the heart of the challenge facing our educational

system. Funded by the Brill Family Charitable Trust, the Fellows Program enrolls teachers and directors in an intensive Jewish educational experience studying Jewish texts in Israel. The program has had an extraordinary impact on the participants. The first eighteen alumni have become advocates for Jewish education within the JCC Movement. They have shared their experiences at conferences, volunteered to experiment with new curricula, developed innovative programs and assumed new leadership positions. We have produced an online journal and a ten-minute video about the Brill Fellows Program, and we hope to repeat the Program within the next few years.

Our second major initiative, funded by the Covenant Foundation, is **This New Month**. Over one hundred JCC's are currently participating in this curriculum initiative. The project was designed to stimulate teachers to celebrate *Rosh Chodesh* in the classroom. It takes advantage of the flexibility of technology, allowing teachers to access information on demand that can deepen their own Jewish learning and enrich their teaching. Teachers turn for ideas to our interactive website (www.jcca.org/thisnewmonth), and they utilize a wonderful series of posters that we have produced for use in

the classroom.

Our most ambitious initiative integrates professional development with a multi-media curriculum addressing the needs of teachers, children and families. **An Ethical Start** provides a framework for the integration of Jewish language, history, values and ideas into classroom life. An Ethical Start has received funding from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, the Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Awards Committee, and the Brill Family Charitable Trust. As additional foundations join us, we hope to expand the project to new sites and to continue to develop the materials. In 1999-2000, eighteen JCC early childhood programs participated in the first year of our pilot of An Ethical Start. This year we are adding ten more.

An Ethical Start is based on a few simple ideas. First, that Jewish education should begin with traditional Jewish sources. An Ethical Start curriculum units are built around selected *mishnayot* from *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers (and Mothers!). Using *Pirkei Avot* as a source exposes teachers, children and parents to a time-tested source of Jewish values and deepens their understanding of how Jewish culture is transmitted. The *mishnayot* have been selected for their relevance to

Dr. Ruth Pinkenson Feldman is Director of Early Childhood Education at Jewish Community Centers of North America. *Mirele B. Goldsmith* is the Evaluation Consultant for An Ethical Start.

ON THE WEB

young children. They are introduced by a wonderful character, Peer K. Explorer, the children's guide to the world of *Pirkei Avot* and Jewish tradition.

The second idea that underlies An Ethical Start is that Jewish educational materials must be of the highest quality. The multi-media materials we provide must be as exciting, creative and polished as what children are exposed to elsewhere. For better or worse, we are competing with extravagantly produced music, videos and toys available at the local shopping mall. We are especially proud of the 16 original songs on our musical CD, each an interpretation of a specific *mishna* from *Pirkei Avot*. The materials include a Family Participation Guide and six children's books for parents to read aloud at home. The books are designed with provocative illustrations that will encourage conversations between parents and children about the timeless lessons of *Pirkei Avot*. A Peer K. Explorer doll is provided for classroom use.

The third idea that underlies this curriculum — and our other projects as well — is that training teachers is the key to progress. There are no pre-planned lessons for An Ethical Start. Teachers are introduced to An Ethical Start at an intensive four-day institute, and continue their training on-site at each JCC. The teachers learn how to study the texts on an adult level. We know that if we just show them a phrase from *Pirkei Avot*, it won't work. If they don't fully understand the place of Torah in Jewish life, they cannot convey these ideas to children. Throughout our training, we emphasize that the teachers themselves must become part of the chain of Jewish learners teaching the next generation of Jewish learners. Once they have a grasp of the texts, they can work through the curriculum's planning process to help them interpret and present the texts from *Pirkei Avot* in ways that young children can understand.

We are only at the beginning of a long period of experimentation and learning. We are taking it slowly, soliciting extensive feedback from the teachers, studying their documentation of what is actually happening in the classroom. We are thrilled and honored to be part of the renewal of Jewish early childhood education, and look forward to sharing what we have learned with the JCC Movement and with the entire Jewish Community. 🌸

THE JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' ELECTRONIC TOOLKIT

Initiated by the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) and the Bureau of Jewish Education of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties, the Electronic Toolkit is a model of an effective partnership project between national and local organizations. The purpose of the Toolkit is to assist in the professional development of early childhood educators in Jewish settings. It consists of two components, each located on a different website.

The national component (<http://www.jesna.org/cgi-bin/earlychild.php3>) is an information clearinghouse for early childhood educators in Jewish settings. It contains a plethora of links to Jewish resources, including learning materials and lesson plans, as well as links to professional development resources for all early childhood educators.

The local San Francisco site (<http://www.bjesf.org/ECEhome.html>) is divided into monthly Jewish educational themes, and provides curricula, ideas and resources for educators. Although the local site is primarily designed to serve San Francisco Federation educators, its curricular materials, activities and resources are a valuable tool for Jewish early childhood educators everywhere.

JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' EXCHANGE

In the summer of 1999, Amy Estrin-Weisman, a Jewish early childhood educator in Boca Raton, Florida, found that although the Internet contains sundry resources for early childhood educators, few if any catered to the needs of Jewish education. In an effort to fill this need and to create a forum in cyberspace for other Jewish early childhood educators, Amy launched her own website, www.jewishearlychildhood.com. The site, which does not receive outside funding, contains a wealth of reading materials, classroom activities, texts of workshop presentations, book reviews, and links to Jewish and non-sectarian early childhood education sites. Since September, 2000, the site has received over 19,000 hits. One of the hallmarks of the site is its emphasis on community and information sharing among Jewish early childhood educators. In November, 2000, Amy expanded the site with a mailing list and discussion group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/jeceee>).

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DIVISION OF THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR ISRAEL'S DEPARTMENT FOR JEWISH ZIONIST EDUCATION

In existence for approximately twenty years, The Early Childhood Division of the Jewish Agency offers consultation to early childhood education programs, conducts training seminars for early childhood educators in Israel and the Diaspora, develops and translates curricular materials, and selects and trains Early Childhood *Shlichim* sent to Diaspora communities. Its website, www.jajz-ed.org.il/child, includes professional development programs and extensive curricular materials, including several downloadable children's books. For more information on The Early Childhood Division's programs and services, please contact Shira Ackerman Simchovitch, Director of The Early Childhood Division, in Israel at 972 2 621 6397 or by email at shiras@jazo.org.il.

It is necessary to infuse the element of depth into prayer and ritual from the very beginning.

JEWISH NURSERY SCHOOLS: Day Schools for Little Children

by SAUL P. WACHS

EARLY CHILDHOOD education, typically, is another name for *good* education. Individualization of learning, respect for the child and the family as critical partners for effective curriculum development, and concern for the creation of rich learning environments characterize all self-respecting early childhood environments. The experience of “Head Start” and the common-sense experiences of untold numbers of parents reveal that the quality of early childhood education can make a tremendous difference in the intellectual and social development of a child.

Unfortunately, with respect to the specifically Jewish aspects of Jewish early childhood education, we often ignore the great potential for learning. I should emphasize at the outset my deep respect for what many Jewish nursery schools currently accomplish. I am frequently amazed at the dedication of nursery school teachers, who work creatively and energetically despite the difficult circumstances and lack of appropriate compensation. It is the purpose of this article to suggest ways in which we can improve Jewish early childhood education so that it lives up to its enormous potential.

Investing Education With Prayer

Bluntly put, the “J” in too many Jewish nursery schools is anemic, superficial and limited. To use one example, the teaching of *berakhot*, or blessings, is typically limited to the *berakhot* for grape juice (wine), bread, cookies and

Shabbat and Hanukkah candle lighting. But since the first six words of every *berakhah* are identical, it is easy to teach a far greater number of *berakhot*. Indeed, *berakhot* are meant to convey our sense of wonder at the miracles of life. There are *berakhot* for seeing a rainbow, hearing thunder, seeing the first buds of spring, hearing good news and bad news, meeting scholars, etc. In teaching a rich diet of *berakhot*, we arm the child with an invaluable tool through which he or she can respond to daily experience in depth.

At a circus, for example, we observe other human beings who are physically different. Many people laugh because they are nervous or afraid, but a Jewish response is to make a *berakhah* thanking God for the existence of variety in the world. We are taught to understand that variety is part of nature and therefore, it is not to be feared. *Berakhot* celebrate the wisdom of the body and the gift of uniqueness. They teach us that each of us has infinite value not because of our accomplishments or possessions, but by virtue of having been created in the image of God.

In addition to *berakhot*, daily prayer and/or meditation offer excellent opportunities to create moments of serenity for the young. Images of God as a loving parent, wise leader and devoted friend can be very meaningful to the young child. Young children are perfectly capable of having deep conversations about their feelings, nature and God.

Preschool as Day School

Another area that needs serious reevaluation is the use of Hebrew

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in the early childhood classroom. There is much evidence that the early years offer a golden opportunity for children to learn a second or even a third language. If age-appropriate bilingual programs were instituted in our nursery classrooms, the accomplishments of the later years, whether in day schools or supplementary schools, would be radically transformed. Presently, at least one program of age-appropriate Hebrew language instruction, developed by the Jewish Theological Seminary, is being tested out in Jewish nursery schools (see sidebar).

For those who would not adopt a full bilingual program, there is every reason to integrate the use of key Hebrew terms and value-concepts into the early childhood classroom. Little children can easily learn the Hebrew names for the ritual objects we use in Jewish life, as well as the non-translatable value-concepts that are the building blocks of classical Jewish theology.

Infusing Spirituality With Depth

Anyone who is familiar with patterns of behavior in Jewish schools will agree that younger children seem to enjoy mastering the skills of ritual and prayer.

As the children grow, this enthusiasm seems to wane among many of the pupils. They begin to “shut down” and even to “act out.”

As a student of prayer-education, I am convinced that the problem is rooted in what is happening in the younger grades. The folk saying “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” is inapplicable when it comes to the realm of spirituality. When children perceive prayer and ritual as nothing but skills to master, there comes a time when the learning of skills is no longer self-reinforcing. A preferable strategy is to say, “Fix it before it breaks!” In other words, it is necessary to infuse the element of depth into prayer and ritual from the very beginning. By “depth,” I mean significant ideas, feelings and the sharing of personal meaning.

Other religious groups have had success in enabling their children and youth to maintain a sense of reverence for prayer and ritual throughout the years. This is because the element of depth is a constant in their experiences of prayer and ritual. Good nursery classrooms involve an element of depth, but it is currently typically separated from experiences of prayer and/or ritual.

A Paradigm Shift

Let us entertain a paradigm shift in our thinking. Let us think systemically. Let us regard the early childhood classroom and school as integral parts of a system of Jewish education that can contribute significantly to the strengthening of individual growth and Jewish identity.

John Dewey, in what many consider to be his most important book, *Experience and Education*, argued that the meaning of an educational experience is to be understood and evaluated in two ways: first, in terms of how it is experienced at the time and, second, in terms of how it is remembered and what it leads to. A conception of Jewish early childhood education that is self-contained, isolated and cut-off from the larger goals of Jewish education robs us of the unique contributions that can be made during these pivotal developmental years.

Structurally speaking, Jewish early childhood education must be recognized for what it can be: Jewish day schools for little children. That paradigm change in our thinking, with all of its implications, is the key to Jewish early childhood education taking its rightful place among the priorities of all who care about the Jewish future. ✿

F L U E N C Y b e f o r e A G E F I V E

RECOGNIZING THAT the early childhood years represent the best time to acquire foreign languages, the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary has introduced a Hebrew Immersion program for Jewish preschools. Begun in 1999, the Early Childhood Hebrew Immersion Project has spread to eight schools in Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia and Detroit. “Immersion” means just that: 1.5 to 3 hours per day of curricular content taught exclusively in Hebrew, usually by native Hebrew speakers.

According to Dr. Steven Brown, Director of the Melton Research Center, one of the benefits of Hebrew immersion is increased preparation for

advanced Hebrew school and day school learning once children reach kindergarten age. “These preschools are really day schools for kids,” Dr. Brown noted. “By achieving Hebrew fluency by age five, we can vastly improve the synagogue school system, and we can give day school kids a tremendous jump start on the kind of Hebrew they will have access to.”

Some parents are concerned that Hebrew immersion might distract from other educational content. “Parents should understand that it’s not either/or,” Dr. Brown said. “Hebrew is integrated into the entire day. It actually enhances the educational experience.” Dr. Brown pointed out that learning a second language at a young age

increases the child’s academic and intellectual functioning. Other benefits of Hebrew immersion include a heightened awareness of Jewish culture and an early identification with Israel.

The Melton Research Center is currently seeking funding to expand the program to a national level. This will require intensive recruitment and training of faculty, further development of curricular materials and the implementation of formal standards and testing. Dr. Brown argues that one day Hebrew immersion will become an indispensable asset to Jewish preschools. “If I were offering French as an early childhood marketing tool, Jewish parents would probably flock to it,” he noted. “The idea is to make Hebrew as alluring as French.”

Building A School From Scratch

by JEAN GRINSPOON

ALTHOUGH MOST Jewish preschool programs are linked to Jewish Community Centers, synagogues or day schools, many schools operate independently of any denomination or movement. We asked Jean Grinspoon, Executive Director of the Bet Yeladim school, to share her thoughts on forming and operating an independent school.



Perhaps the largest benefit of being independent is that we have the freedom to determine our own mission and educational philosophy. We are not tied in to another group. We make decisions independently, in consideration of parental needs and teacher beliefs. We are self-reliant. When we see the need for curriculum changes, we change them. We plan our own co-curricular programs. When research and experience indicate that policies and procedures should be amended or revised, we are capable of doing it. Our Board of Directors and administration work cooperatively.

Another positive aspect to our independence is our diversity. We choose to accept children into our programs no matter their affiliation or lack of affiliation. This, in turn, helps keep us from getting stuck in a stagnant perception of what a Jewish preschool should look like. We've had the luxury of having children of all races and religions playing and learning together in a creative, multicultural environment. Recently, Bet Yeladim participated in a four-day interfaith, multicultural program with six congregations. What a great experience to share our values and cultures. Since we are independent, it was an easy task to be a part of this valuable program.

We are able to manage our financial, personnel and other resources independent of any "powers that be." The people who make decisions in these areas are knowledgeable in early childhood education and have the school's best interest at heart. They will not be compromised by outside influences, such as the synagogue board, the rabbi or the congregants. The same is true in our hiring and firing practices. We are able to maintain a high-quality staff without being influenced by outsiders.

Recent research on independent school teachers indicates that more than 84 percent are very satisfied with their teaching jobs, a much higher satisfaction rate than that of the general job market population. Perhaps this is due to the fact

that independent schools allow their teachers to influence the design of the curriculum. We value their input. At Bet Yeladim, we empower teachers by encouraging them to invest in the program with their ideas and creativity.

At the same time, Bet Yeladim staff continuously reap rewards, whether it be through staff development classes, seminars and professional days; through our generous leave policy; or through the ability to purchase supplies specifically for their classrooms. This is usually not the norm for affiliated schools, where budgets are often set without any input from staff. Independent schools are "independent" in governance and finance; therefore, we are afforded freedoms that are absent in the typically central organizational style of affiliated schools.

Now, are there disadvantages to being an independent school? Certainly! One of the biggest is that as a Jewish preschool we do not have the continuous presence of a spiritual leader. We have to plan for visits with the local community's rabbis and cantors. Also, we do not have the advantage of being housed in a synagogue, with the opportunity to see the Torah, Ark or eternal light on a daily basis. Of course, the age-old problem of financial support always rears its head. Sometimes we are unable to acquire grants that are allocated specifically to affiliated religious schools. Being totally dependent on tuition and fundraising presents a constant dilemma: teacher salaries are low and renting space consumes at least 75 percent of the school's budget. Naturally, it would be nice to have an "ally," when needed, in these situations.

Would Bet Yeladim change its status of being an independent school? After 27 years of growth in becoming an outstanding and award-winning early childhood education preschool and kindergarten, my answer would be "no." Our enrollment has grown from 21 children to 275. We have worked diligently to provide the highest quality secular and Judaic education to children, reaching beyond the classroom by engaging the family and the community. We're comfortable, and we're making a difference in the not-so-new city of Columbia, Maryland. You know the old saying, "If the shoe fits ..." Well, we've become a gently-worn slipper. Jewish early childhood education is the process of teachers transmitting knowledge, beliefs and values. Bet Yeladim has been fortunate to have this small Jewish community support our efforts over the past 27 years to enhance and enrich the educational experiences of our young children and families. 🌸

WHEN BET YELADIM was founded in Columbia, Maryland, in 1975, there were no Jewish early childhood education programs for the community. One reason for this might have been that Columbia was a "new" city, originating in 1967, and, as such, it did not have freestanding synagogues. All Jewish services were held in interfaith centers where space was shared with Protestant and Catholic congregations. Since Jewish congregations were young and struggling to meet the needs of their congregants for Shabbat and holiday services, early childhood education was not a priority. A single Columbia Jewish community school existed for three Jewish congregations.

Just as Columbia's Jewish community began to grow, so did the needs of its parents with young children. We wanted a Jewish preschool, and so a small group of parents — independent of any Jewish organization or congregation — started Bet Yeladim to provide a high quality secular and Judaic education to children 18 months to five years old. Over the years, Bet Yeladim's independence and autonomy has brought its share of challenges. However, I feel the rewards and benefits have definitely outweighed the obstacles.

Jean Grinspoon is Executive Director of the Bet Yeladim school in Columbia, Maryland.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



IN RECENT YEARS, several initiatives have emerged to improve the quality of early childhood educational programs. Whether concentrating on accreditation, curricula, professional development or adult education for parents of preschoolers, the programs share a commitment to making Jewish preschools the foundation of a vibrant Jewish family life.

GUIDELINES FOR EXCELLENCE

Accreditation of Early Childhood Programs

In 1997, in an effort to assess and enhance the quality of education at Jewish early childhood centers, the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education implemented a pilot accreditation program modeled on the accreditation instrumentation of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Since then, similar programs have been implemented in several cities, including Boston, Chicago, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The accreditation process includes a self-study, questionnaires for parents and staff, and classroom assessments that evaluate the Judaic curriculum and the integration of Jewish concepts into the overall program. The Early Childhood Department at CAJE received a grant from the Ben and Esther Rosenbloom Foundation to create national guidelines for excellence in early childhood Jewish education.

The Migdal Or Jewish Early Childhood Models of Excellence Project (MOE)

Based in Miami, Florida, the Migdal Or Jewish Early Childhood Models of Excellence Project (MOE) is currently developing laboratory schools that will demonstrate the highest levels of pedagogical and professional practices in Jewish early childhood education. Centers

engaged in this project will be intensively engaged in Judaic studies, early childhood education theory and practice, the restructuring of learning environments, reflective practices, experimentation, documentation and evaluation. All professional development will be reflective of the guidelines set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the teaching practices developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). MOE is funded by the National Covenant Foundation and administered through The Helene and A.B. Wiener Early Childhood Department at the Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education in Miami. For more information, please contact Margie Zeskind, MOE Project Administrator, at 305-576-4030 x 147, or by email at margiezeskind@caje-miami.org.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Machon L'Morim Bereshit

Machon L'Morim Bereshit is the first professional development initiative to create educational environments that integrate Jewish values, concepts and vocabulary into every facet of the classroom experience. Begun in 1995 by the Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund in Baltimore, Machon L'Morim uses a four-step sequential program to enhance the Jewish knowledge and identity of early childhood educators and to instruct them in the creation of a developmentally-appropriate preschool curriculum. The program includes Jewish and pedagogic education seminars for teachers, education leadership workshops for Directors, and systematic and strategic planning for Jewish family education programs. The program is available for dissemination. A CD-ROM containing 17 integrated curricular units may be purchased on the website, www.machonlmorim.org.

Jewish Early Education Enrichment Project (JEEEP)

JEEEP is a joint collaboration between the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hermelin-Davidson Center for Congregational Excellence at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit. The purpose of JEEEP is to provide professional development and Jewish enrichment for early childhood educators. In the past two years, the program has trained more than 200 educators in the Detroit area through biweekly Jewish learning ses-

sions, days and evenings of learning and trips to Jewish museums. For more information on JEEEP, please contact Harlene Appelman, Director of the Alliance for Jewish Education, at 248-642-4260, or Frieda Robins, Educational Consultant to JEEEP, at 212-678-8030.

FURTHER INITIATIVES

Union of American Hebrew Congregations

The Department of Jewish Education at the UAHC now has a full-time early childhood education director. Nancy Bossov, Reform Jewish Educator (RJE), provides support services to the Union's 350 early childhood centers and more than 800 religious schools. The office is currently concentrating on teacher training, Jewish parenting practices, accreditation options, and strategic planning. The office has developed a professional organization, G-JEC (Gateways to Jewish Early Childhood) and publishes *Ganeinu*, a semi-annual newsletter for home and school use, and *Family Shabbat Table Talk*, an on-line compilation of insights about the weekly Torah portion, available at www.UAHC.org/Shabbat. For more information about early childhood Jewish education programs at UAHC, please call Nancy Bossov at 212.650.4110 or by e-mail at Nbossov@uahc.org.

Florence Melton Adult Mini-School for Preschool Parents

Located in 60 American cities, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School provides approximately 5,000 adults with a two-year adult-education curriculum. Recently, the Avi Chai Foundation approached the Adult Mini-School with the concept of creating a mini-school geared towards parents of children in Jewish-sponsored preschools. The goal was to help families enhance their knowledge of Jewish customs and history. The adult mini-school curriculum was adapted with texts and analysis geared towards Jewish parents of preschool children. In addition, a family education component was included in order to assist parents in teaching their children. The underlying philosophy is, "parents learning, parents teaching." The first three pilot programs, in which parents meet once a week, thirty weeks a year for two years, will be launched this Fall in Portland, South Palm Beach (Boca Raton), and St. Louis. For more information, please contact Sally Brown-Winter, Director of Parent Education at Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, at 847-714-9843, ext. 306.



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The early years of life are when children develop their sense of identity. It is a time when parents are as eager as the children to learn and experience. This is the ideal time to lay a foundation of Jewish values. It is also the ideal time to invite families to participate in synagogue activities and to become involved in the Jewish community.

— Ilene C. Vogelstein