What's Wrong With Hebrew School?

BY MINDY SCHILLER
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Ari Madoff was literally dragged—kicking and screaming—to Hebrew school.

His mother had just pulled up to the Highland Park, Ill., synagogue where he attended classes, and his carpool buddies were grabbing their bags from the station wagon. Only Ari's seatbelt remained buckled. His mother craned her head around and looked at him quizzically, waiting for him to follow suit. But Ari had made a decision: he was done with Hebrew school. "I'm not going," he told her resolutely. "I'm not budging."

He wasn't exactly sure which part he disliked the most: the boring classes, the waste of valuable time he could be spending with friends, or his peers' tiresome penchant for goofing off. But it didn't really matter. Hebrew school was now in the past—at least according to Ari.

There was only one problem: his mother wasn't quite on board. In fact, she took one look at her 9-year-old son and said the only thing she knew would work: "If you don't get out, I'm going to go get Mrs. S."

Mrs. S. was Ari's teacher, a diminutive Israeli Sabra whom Madoff, now 28 years old, remembers fondly. To the untrained eye, she looked harmless, but Madoff knew better. "They don't make them like that anymore," he recalls. "She was really tough—the ultimate Israeli."

When Ari saw his mother and Mrs. S. walk out of the building toward the car a few minutes later, he tightened his grip on the seatbelt. At first, Mrs. S. spoke sweetly, almost convincingly, about how much fun class would be. Still, Ari would not budge. "No," he said firmly. "Leave me alone."

That's when his mother went into combat mode. "That's it," she nodded to Mrs. S. "He's going and that's the end of it." Without further ado, she grabbed Ari's hands and, with a little help from Mrs. S., dragged him out of the car—Ari flailing his arms and legs pathetically as he went.

It's no secret that Hebrew schools are not exactly popular. Most children, if given the choice, would rather be playing soccer or practicing ballet—or doing almost anything, for that matter. Unfortunately, it's also no secret that Hebrew schools don't exactly work—or, at least, not as well as they should. In fact, some hard-line critics would even call them a failure. Indeed, if Madoff's sentiments are any indication of the roughly 70 percent of Jewishly educated kids who attended Hebrew School, it's no wonder that every other Jewish conference deals with how to engage young Jews in their Judaism. With memories like these, some might say, it's a wonder that Jews have anything to do with Judaism at all.

"As a program," says Joel Hoffman, a resident scholar at Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford Corners, N.Y., "Hebrew schools are failing."

"It's a disaster area, not worth trying to fix," says a recent paper published by the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA), a national agency that works for innovation in Jewish education.

Indeed, the numbers echo these sentiments. A recent study conducted by noted sociologist Steven Cohen and the United Jewish Communities concludes that students who attend one-day-a-week Sunday school are more likely to intermarry than are students who receive no formal Jewish education—suggesting that some Hebrew school experiences might actually be worse than none at all. And, other studies show that Hebrew schools fall far below other forms of Jewish programming—such as camps, trips to Israel or day schools—in creating Jewish observance.

A primarily American invention, Hebrew schools grew out of the Eastern European model of the *cheder*, or the Talmud Torah. Jewish immigrants, seeking to hold on to their religion while still integrating into the American mainstream, sent their children to after-school classes that could supplement the secular education they were receiving in public schools. And, while these Talmud Torahs might have begun as free-standing community institutions, by the late 1920's they were almost completely absorbed by local synagogues or temples. Today, nearly every Conservative or Reform congregation in America offers a religious school program, with more than 200,000 students enrolled, according to Jack Wertheimer, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary and author of a recent study. Indeed, roughly 70 percent of the children who receive a Jewish education get that education in Hebrew school.

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Hebrew school is a rite of passage for many Jewish youth, but are they being well-served by the experience?

It should come as no surprise, then, that the issue of Hebrew schools is playing an increasingly central role on community agendas. This past summer alone, for instance, two major conferences focused almost entirely on supplemental school education—PELIE, the Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education, held one in Philadelphia in July, and CAJE, the Coalition for Advancement of Jewish Education, held one in St. Louis in August. In fact, the issue has become so difficult to avoid that next summer, CAJE plans to devote its entire conference—an annual gathering of 1,600 number educators and leaders—to figuring out how to fix what some refer to as the "Hebrew school dilemma."

And it's no wonder. With the vast majority of today's Jews being educated in the Hebrew school system, the question of where Hebrew schools went wrong—and where they might be going "right"—seems like one well worth answering.

What Went Wrong?

The Cohen study is only the latest in a series of discouraging Hebrew school studies dating back to the 1960's. In 1969, for instance, the prominent Jewish educator Walter Ackerman published an essay claiming that the products of Hebrew school education had "only the most infantile notions of biblical thought and ideas, and a capability in Hebrew which hardly goes beyond monosyllabic responses to carefully worded questions." A 1988 study conducted by the New York Board of Jewish Education found that there was "no correlation between correct pupil responses [and the] number of instructional hours per week." Indeed, in 2002 the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education (ACAJE) conducted a study to answer what most educators felt was a universal problem: students dropped out of Hebrew school as soon as their bar- or bat-mitzvahs are over, suggesting that their attendance was mandated by a looming event—not personal motivation.

Yet personal anecdotes are no better. Tamar Schiller (no relation to the reporter), a 27-year-old attorney who grew up in Southfield, Mich., attended a Conservative synagogue that boasts 1,500 families. She enjoyed her Hebrew school classes and consequently continued them through high school, yet she says she never really felt as though she owned her knowledge. "There'd be a bar mitzvah and someone's Israeli cousin would come in," says Schiller, "and some little 6 year old would stand up and sing *Anim Z'mirot* and we'd be like, 'Crap, we just got stood up by a 6 year old,' you know? Here we are—adults, fairly proficient in the service … and then they introduce a new prayer and we're like, 'I don't know what to do.'"

Miriam Kass, a 36-year-old educator who attended Hebrew school at a Conservative synagogue in Chicago, Ill., echoes Schiller's statement. "I always

resented going because it ate up so much time … and I think we always felt we didn't know as much as we should have for going as long as we did."

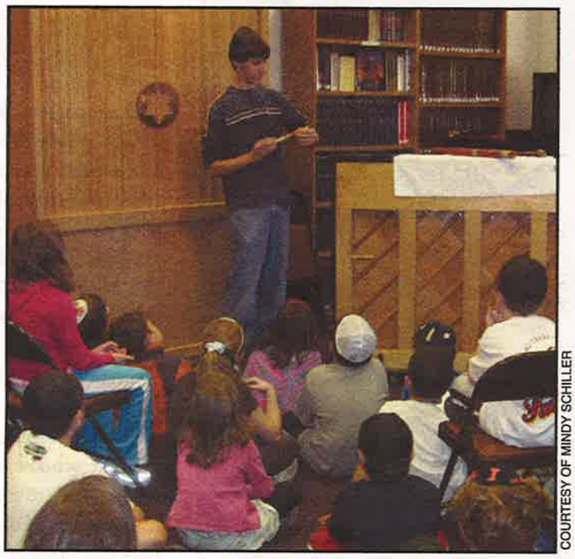
According to Joel Hoffman, the chairman of next year's CAJE conference, Kass' sentiments are not surprising. Hoffman specializes in language acquisition and consults for various synagogues, helping to improve their education programs. To him, the paucity of knowledge is a given. "If we have a kid who shows up from out of town in sixth grade [with little or no Hebrew education], he's not four years behind [the rest of the class]. He gets a tutor for a month and he's all caught up."

Isolating the Variables

So, if Hebrew schools aren't making the grade, what's the reason? Well, according to many authorities in the field—such as JTS' Jack Wertheimer, Hebrew Universitity's Steven Cohen, or CAJE's Jeff Lasday—there are a series of them.

1. Timing

Most Hebrew schools meet on weekday afternoons, beginning around 4:00 p.m., and on Sunday mornings, around 9:00 a.m. (Sunday schools meet exclusively on Sundays.) Neither of these times are ideal spots for extra classes. "Having a class for 11 year olds at 6:15 in the afternoon is asking for failure," says Hoffman, alluding to the fact that such students have already spent the entirety of their day in school and aren't exactly itching for more of it. "And what about the kid who took Ritalin at noon? By 4:30, it's wearing off. What do you do with that kid?"



COURTESY OF MINDY SCHILLER

Students at B'nai Tikvah Congregation in Deerfield, Ill., watch a musical presentation on shofars.

2. Educators

Another problem repeatedly expressed by critics of Hebrew school focuses on the teachers. Put simply, most are part-timers looking to earn a little extra money. (Unfortunately, educators say that hiring full-time teachers is something that most Hebrew schools cannot afford.) In fact, the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism estimates that approximately one third of Conservative schools employ a full-time education director. "If you're working this as a supplementary job, with a supplementary salary, then that means it's not your main focus," says Saul Kaiserman, Director of Lifelong Learning at Temple Emanuel in Manhattan. "Even if you have a great, committed, involved teacher, they've got other things that are vying for their attention."

3. Curriculum

Simply put: Hebrew school can be boring. Critics cite a holiday-based curriculum that recycles the same topics year in and year out, encouraging students to "role play" or perform, but not to integrate the material into their lives. "I think they underestimated [our] ability to learn and engage something," says Kass about her experience as a kid. "We were never given material that made us wrestle with it …" On the other hand, some say certain schools bend over backwards so much to avoid a "boring" curriculum that they offer students nothing but "fluff."

4. Unclear Expectations

Ultimately, however, these smaller problems mask the more fundamental ones. For instance: many Hebrew schools have cut back their hours, claiming that more students would come if the commitment

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were not so great. But now, with even less time in which to cover the same amount of material, the educators' task becomes even more difficult. "We come up with wildly unrealistic goals," says Hoffman, "and the kids … fail to meet those goals and … by and large walk away feeling stupid." For instance, says Hoffman, most schools see it as a primary goal to teach Hebrew. "We think we're teaching kids to read Hebrew. In point of fact we're not. We're not even attempting [it]."

What schools *are* doing, he says, is teaching kids to memorize the prayers and learn pattern recognition. "Unfortunately, they and the teachers think they're learning how to read. Then they find themselves, even after four years, unable to pick up a *siddur* and read anything fluently, and they come to the conclusion that they're just not very good at Hebrew." After all, points out Hoffman, many of these same kids have been learning Spanish or French in their secular schools and have already mastered basic skills in just a month. So the question then becomes: what do schools do with this information? For Hoffman, the worst possible answer is "to waste the kids' time."

Mission Impossible

The question of teaching Hebrew speaks to a much larger issue: what is the mission of a Hebrew school education? Is it, as its name suggests, to teach Hebrew? If so, is it Modern Hebrew? Conversational Hebrew? Biblical Hebrew—to use in decoding ancient texts? Or liturgical Hebrew—to use in synagogue prayer services? Perhaps it's not Hebrew at all, but, as Hoffman calls it, "identity formation" and "first, do no harm." "I would much rather have someone who loves being Jewish and doesn't know an *alef* from a *bet*," he says, "than someone who is a Hebrew scholar but thinks that Hebrew is the same as Chinese because they're both something that has no relation to him or her."

Hoffman may be on to something. According to Temple Emanuel's Kaiserman, there's a fundamental assumption that Hebrew school leaders know what they're supposed to do, which, he says, is a fallacy. For example, he mentions the Cohen study showing a possible correlation between Sunday school attendance and intermarriage, and jokes, "It's like, oh, so is *that* what my job is about? I was supposed to be preventing intermarriage?" Overall, he says, there isn't a great deal of clarity about the goals of supplementary education.

Others agree. For example, the JESNA policy paper mentioned previously discusses the notion of bar- and bat-mitzvah "training camp." Many schools have accepted the fact that students often leave after b'nei mitzvah and, consequently, have tailored their curriculum accordingly—making this their primary goal. But, writes the author, while Hebrew-school teachers bemoan this fact, they may not realize how their own curricular choices may be ensuring it. Ultimately, it seems like a question of chicken or egg: are synagogues molding their curriculum to the bar mitzvah because students leave after the event or are students leaving because it would appear there isn't much left to do?

This is just one of the many unanswered questions Hebrew schools are asking themselves. And, with a limited amount of time in which to accomplish their goals, it becomes even more important that they define them. In fact, Jack Wertheimer goes a step further. According to him, many congregations tie their education programs to bar mitzvah training because this will give them "leverage" with families. Indeed, most synagogues require parents to join the synagogue—a not unjustifiable requirement if part of the goal is to teach synagogue skills.

But synagogues do not have a monopoly on questions of mission. In fact, another major problem is that ultimately, parents don't know what they want from a Hebrew school. Are they sending their children merely to fulfill some sort of communal or family obligation? Or are they hoping that their children's experience will be better than their own?

Not necessarily, says Marvin Schick, senior consultant for the Avi Chai Foundation, a Jewish philanthropy organization. Some parents reason that "it worked for them," he says, so why shouldn't it work for the next generation? "Why isn't that good enough?" Moreover, says Steve Cohen, there's nothing wrong with imposing obligations on one's children. The problem is when those obligations turn up hollow.

Admit Defeat?

Of course, some might say that the only way to solve the problems of Hebrew school education is simply to admit defeat and look elsewhere for help—to day school, for instance. "That's partly why I didn't send my kids [to Hebrew school]," says Miriam Kass, whose two daughters attend a local day school. "I didn't see a way to make it better than it is." Others are considering the Hebrew-English charter school option, though this comes with its own set of problems—namely, that the

constitutional "separation of church and state" prevents any sort of religious education. And, with only one such school in existence (in Florida)—whose educational effectiveness is yet to be proven—the concept seems more theory than anything else.

But some people are not yet ready to give up on Hebrew schools.

First of all, says Steven Kraus, the executive consultant of JESNA, educators must face the reality that most parents still are not choosing day schools. And, if Hebrew school is their comfort zone—if Hebrew school is what they want—then "[educators] need to be smart enough and innovative enough to give them that."

Moreover, says Kaiserman, synagogues provide a community that's different from the one provided by day schools. He touches on what some consider to be the most vital part of Hebrew school of all: tradition. It's not merely "my grandfather did this and so will you," but the fact that, for college-age kids who find themselves bombarded with the merry-go-round of ideas on a university campus, it's their experience in Hebrew school that reminds them they are Jewish.

Silver Lining

But are *all* Hebrew schools a failure?

"The fact that Hebrew schools haven't been working is old news," says Nathan Laufer, executive director for PELIE. "The news is that there are beginning to be things that are working, and our task is to accelerate that."

Enter B'nai Tikvah, a 700-family, egalitarian, Conservative congregation in Deerfield, Ill. On a recent Sunday in September, parents are scurrying up the stairs with their 9 year olds, already late for school. Brightly painted murals adorn the hallways and teachers stick their heads out of classroom doors, whisking in the stragglers. In one room stands a middle-aged woman with glasses, a floral skirt and an Israeli accent. "Boker tov, yeladim," she begins, cuing her fourth graders to answer her in Hebrew. They respond, somewhat bewildered by their own abilities. Every inch of the walls is covered; there are lime-green and turquoise *alef-bet* letters trailing along one side, pink posters for each month of the Hebrew year, and six different bulletin boards, each covered in charts or images. One of the boards asks brightly, "What is today's weather?"—in Hebrew, of course—and another displays the seven species of fruit native to the Land of Israel. Nine year olds in shorts and mesh Chicago Bears jerseys sit relatively quietly in their desks, a few muffled whispers escaping now and then. It is a warm and inviting room—the kind that children can't help but want to enter—and where, even if they happen to nod off for a few minutes, they'll probably still be learning by osmosis.

Today's lesson incorporates a cornucopia of Judaism 101: the symbols of Rosh Hashanah, the meaning behind the 10 days of repentance, Jewish perceptions of God, the various shofar blasts, the story of Jonah, conversational Hebrew, an instrumental presentation and, of course, a song for good measure. In less than two hours, the observer is convinced that these students will not only return home happy, but will probably "show-up" their parents at the Shabbat table.

B'nai Tikvah, it would seem then, is not your mother's Hebrew school. Students are engaged and learning, and staff turnover is almost non-existent. (One teacher, who calls herself "new," has been there for 10 years.) The question is: is B'nai Tikvah representative?

According to JESNA's Kraus, the answer is yes. He sees a great deal of improvement in recent years—a sentiment echoed by even the toughest of critics. For instance, he says, in the last 3 years, over 700 congregations have or are still are participating in one of the 15 synagogue/school change initiatives monitored by JESNA—which amounts to roughly 40 percent of schools. (He does, however, point out that not all of these initiatives are of the same level of intensity or duration.) "[Change] is never fast enough, it's never good enough, but I think if you take one step back, it's not all black or white." Kaiserman, of Temple Emanuel, agrees. If there has been a shift in the last decade or so, he says, it's "the idea that life in the synagogue and in the school should matter … [Parents] don't want it to be irrelevant to their lives." If anything, parents are demanding better for their own kids than what they experienced themselves. And synagogues, in turn, are responding in full. After all, he says, "[They have] to compete in the marketplace."

In the Name of Progress

So how, exactly, are they competing in the marketplace? By doing the only thing possible: returning to the drawing board. Changing Hebrew school education requires looking at the overall system, says Kraus, and undergoing a paradigm shift. "[We have to have] the guts to make the argument and to set realistic goals and outcomes."

Several organizations are doing just that.

The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), for instance, recently created *Chai* and

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COVER STORY

	Inmarried	Most/all closest friends Jewish	Ritual scale (average out of five)	Synagogue member	Being Jewish very important	Very attached to Israel
Day school: 7-12 years	73%	38%	3.8	61%	64%	55%
Day school: 1-6 years	77	32	3.2	47	58	39
Supplementary school: 7-12 years	73	30	3.0	53	51	35
Supplementary school: 1-6 years	65	28	2.9	49	40	21
Sunday school: 7-12 years	67	28	2.7	44	40	16
Sunday school: 1-6 years	55	29	2.7	39	39	18
No Jewish education	63	25	2.7	33	36	20

The impact of formal Jewish education on Jewish identity, taken from the United Jewish Communities' 2004 Report on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001.

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Mitkadem, two new curricula that adhere to the pedagogical model of "backward design"—i.e., they begin from the question of "what do we want the student to know?" and work backwards. Chai, (literally, "live") focuses on religious content—Torah, prayer and values—and Mitkadem, (literally, "advance"), focuses on Hebrew as a language. While the entire curriculum will not be completed until 2009 and, even when completed, is only meant as a core for educators to supplement, Chai has already been instituted in over a quarter of the Reform movement's congregations and Mitkadem in 15 percent.

The Conservative movement has been hard at work, too. In 1999, the Melton Center at the Jewish Theological Seminary joined with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to create a detailed curriculum for grades 6-8. Operating under the assumptions that student attrition begins immediately after bar- or bat-mitzvah and that grades 6-8 are the most difficult ages, Project Etgar attempts to marry educational goals with cognitive research on how students learn best. Thus, it focuses on collaboration, student-generated learning and the question of personal meaning. According to Steven Brown, Dean of JTS' Davidson Graduate School of Education and a founder of Project Etgar, it also operates under the theory of multiple intelligences—that is, the idea that students have an array of different "intelligences"—and therefore incorporates dance, music, math and other disciplines as well.

Chai, Mitkadem and Project Etgar are three movement-generated stabs at reexamining Hebrew school education. PELIE, the Partnership for Effective Learning and Innovative Education, is not movement specific. Begun only last year as an offshoot of JESNA and modeled after parallel organizations like the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) or Avi Chai—both philanthropic organizations focusing on day school education—PELIE attempts to transform what it calls "complementary" education, thereby reversing the community's perception of it and helping to raise its funding. As of late, PELIE has focused its efforts on recreating two local models: the Boston-based Kesher program that combines after-school childcare and Jewish education, and NESS, Nurturing Excellence in Synagogue Schools, Philadelphia's attempt at revamping six of its local schools.

There are other efforts too: The Covenant Foundation, which honors Jewish educators and bolsters creative educational programming, or the Experiment in Congregational Education, begun in Los Angeles. There's Hartford's *Le'atid* program, designed to focus on "organizational change," or New York's 's Re-Imagine Project. The list goes on, both locally and nationally, and it's growing. What unites these programs is their belief that the Hebrew school system can be changed and—more important—that it's worth changing.

But Hebrew schools are still not in the clear. Despite all of the change, writes the JESNA study mentioned previously, a majority of the programs still have not been transformed, and instead have "essentially the same educational structure as they did half a century ago …"

When it comes down to it, there is no "silver bullet" to identity formation. Every Jewish programming effort—day school, Hebrew school, trips to Israel—is just that: an effort; not a promise. But, since Hebrew schools touch the majority of children receiving a Jewish education, their future seems worth examining. Today's Jewish children are going to grow up—whether they've been endowed with an identity or not. Whatever direction they choose for their Judaism, they'll lead the next generation there as well. For many, then, the question has to become: where will that be? And can educators play a role in that now, while they still might have an impact? If the answer is yes, then there is a great deal to be done and very little time in which to do it. After all, says Brown, "I don't want to lose 70 percent of Jewish kids to Judaism … We can do better by them." WJD

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