

The Unique Place of Congregational Education in the Lives of Children, Teens, and Families

Dr. Rob Weinberg

At its worst, congregational education is vilified as the boring, ineffective, waste of time that both adults and children love to hate. At its best, congregational education is something quite different. In select congregations in New York City, Washington, Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit, San Francisco, and elsewhere, children are telling their parents they don't want to miss a moment of congregational education—even when they have soccer conflicts or a sore throat—because they want to help finish their group's project. Teens are finding friends and feeling responsible as leaders and mentors of younger learners. Adults are privileging congregational education in their busy weekly schedules because they are finding meaning and community in regular engagement with Jewish text, prayer, and observance; with their children and with other adults and families who share their Jewish journeys.

This short paper explores the distinctive positive characteristics of congregational education that give it a unique place in the Jewish educational lives of children, teens, adults, and families, and outlines a set of questions that leaders in our field must consider when contemplating new models and strategies.

DISTINCTIVE POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Part of what differentiates congregational education at its best is innovative models with powerful pedagogies such as project-based learning or story-based learning, strong professional learning for teachers, and intentional design. But other differentiators have to do with effectively harnessing the positive characteristics of Jewish learning that are fully integrated into a healthy, vibrant congregational setting and culture. Other, much touted Jewish educational settings such as Jewish overnight camp, Jewish day school, and Israel trips either do not share these characteristics or do so in a fleeting and temporary way. Consider the following:

- **Community-embeddedness:** Congregations provide a ready, active, living Jewish community into which learners can become enculturated so that Jewish learning and living are seamlessly integrated. When fifth graders take on a yearlong project to develop, illustrate, and publish a new siddur for the young children and families of their congregation, they understand themselves to be

part of a community of people who learn and pray together. When children, teens, and adults in a Shabbat community education program come together for a Torah service during which one family shares an interactive drash on the weekly parsha, they feel part of a community that learns and prays together where they are known, seen, and heard. When families go with other synagogue families to feed the homeless or teens engage in interfaith dialogue and service learning projects they understand themselves to be part of Jewish community that acts on Jewish values in the wider community. It is difficult to think of other contexts in which children, teens, adults, and families can find this kind of community.

- **Intergenerational and family learning: Learning with people of multiple age groups brings a richness all its own and supports the sense of a living community, not a contrived one.** When Jewish learning takes place within the context of a congregational community, opportunities abound for intergenerational and family engagement. Many of the more recent models of congregational education view the family as the unit for whom learning is designed. **And learning as a family not only provides families with a new and meaningful type of “quality family time” but also holds promise for much greater transferability of learning from the synagogue-based or sponsored experience to Jewish life in the home.** Finally, a number of congregations have found success in creating “near-peer” education models in which older children—often teens—engage with younger children in Jewish learning. This provides teens a sense of being needed, relied upon, and looked up to and younger learners role models to emulate. Like the relationship between campers and staff at camp, they can imagine themselves growing into these roles, thus providing a vivid, ongoing path of engagement.
- **Longevity of relationship and engagement:** Congregational education typically engages learners over a period of several years at least and a lifetime at most. Two of the highly regarded immersive experiences that research tells us contribute positively to ongoing Jewish identity formation—camp and Israel trips—can largely be episodic in nature. Children (and their parents) may enter congregational early childhood programs at a very young age or religious school at age 5 or 6 and remain involved at least until bar/bat mitzvah at age 13 or beyond, through high school. Adults may engage in congregational Jewish learning opportunities throughout their adult lives. And they may interact with the congregational community in a variety of ways in addition to learning experiences. **Thus congregations have a unique opportunity to engage learners and build deep relationships with them over a period of many years, not just weeks or months.**
- **Continuity and regularity:** Most congregational education programs meet weekly throughout the school year and learners participate year after year. **This creates a rhythm, a predictability, an opportunity to create meaningful**

routines and rituals that are the signs of a strong culture. When Jewish learning happens week after week throughout most of the year, it can create a sense of comfort and a way to mark time and witness growth. When learners meet regularly they can forge connections to one another and their teachers and clergy, and develop a sense of Jewish learning and living being simply part of “how I live my life.” The synagogue can become a special place for learners to pause, reflect on, and make sense of their daily lives in a Jewish context. **When educators focus exclusively on skill building and knowledge acquisition these opportunities get lost.**

- **Significant opportunity to address the whole person:** One of the many strengths of Jewish overnight camp is its ability, in an immersive 24-hour closed environment, to create experiences that impact and engage the whole person, encompassing knowledge, action, beliefs and values, and a sense of belonging. The best day schools address the whole child as well. And, due to the combination of the attributes described above, congregational education, too, presents a distinct opportunity for Jewish learning that goes beyond knowledge acquisition to address the whole person. **The fact that the learning is nested in an ongoing intergenerational congregational community with longevity and regularity—not a temporary, episodic, or age-limited one—means that the learning can reach well beyond what learners do in the synagogue or in specifically Jewish observance at home to impact how they live their daily lives, the choices and decisions they make.**
- **Flexibility and freedom to experiment:** Congregational education faces few actual hard constraints such as state or federal standards or regulations to satisfy. Though movements may offer standards or curricula, they have no enforcement mechanism. Despite the prevalent times and locations of congregational education for children, teens, and adults, nothing is actually set and—as congregations have begun to demonstrate—the possibilities are limited only by our creativity.

POTENTIAL AND REALITY

The evidence suggests that the majority of children who receive any kind of Jewish education receive it in a congregational context. Yet congregations do not always live up to their full potential as the locus of meaningful, inspiring, life-changing Jewish learning experiences. Many—perhaps most—congregations’ education programs do not seem to deliver on the distinctive positive attributes set out above. We are leaving much of the power of congregational education locked away.

What accounts for the gap between the potential and the frequent reality? Often it’s the so-called school/ shul silos. **Congregations that exhibit these**

distinctive attributes build their educational models within highly integrated, intentional cultures that don't have to "link the silos" because they never erected them. Or they've consciously worked to become congregations of learners in which Jewish learning is incorporated throughout everything the congregation does. They've created models of Jewish education that lead generations and families to learn together, that locate learning in authentic Jewish time and experience, that consciously work at building relationships, and that address the whole learner—helping learners relate Judaism to their daily lives and supporting them as active agents in creating their own meaning through the learning process.

Congregations that leverage their distinct advantages—community embeddedness, intergenerational/ family learning, longevity of relationships/engagement, continuity and regularity, whole person learning, and flexibility—create learning experiences that occupy a unique and meaningful place in the lives of children, teens, adults, and families. **The challenge is to let go of the familiar shores of congregational schooling and venture forth on the uncertain seas of innovation to create compelling, inspiring, joyful learning experiences that realize the distinctive potential of the congregation as a place of powerful Jewish learning and living.**

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- 1- Rob Weinberg makes a bold case for the untapped potential of congregational education. Do you see this as an accurate assessment or as an exercise in wishful thinking?
- 2- Are there elements in your congregation's educational programming that foster the characteristics identified in the article?
- 3- Are there changes you would consider making in order to promote this vision of the congregation as *"a ready, active, living Jewish community into which learners can become enculturated so that Jewish learning and living are seamlessly integrated."*
- 4- What is the responsibility of a national organization of Jewish educators to promote the positive, untapped potential of congregational education?