

BUILDING COMMUNITY



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Children Become Teachers

BUILDING UP ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION

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In July of 1998, Congregation Beth Israel of Chico, California hired us as its “Rabbi Team.” Probably like most rabbis who are new to a congregation, we had ideas of what we hoped to do, and we launched several initiatives. But we discovered quickly (again, probably like most rabbis) that some of our initiatives worked and others didn’t. Our “Family Holiday Workshops” attracted only a handful of members. Maybe people were just too busy at the beginning of the school year to participate in a Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur workshop. And our “Saturday Night at the (Jewish) Movies” series was not well received. Other initiatives, such as involving the congregation in planning for the Rabbi’s weekly, potluck tisch (table) that we have after Shabbat evening services, also had limited success.

Sometimes we just weren’t sure why one initiative worked and another one didn’t. But of one thing we were *absolutely* sure. The members of our congregation, like congregants everywhere, wanted to see their children more involved. So we kept asking ourselves, How can we make religious life and learning appealing to *young people*?

We began with a strategy as old as the Torah itself: *Ask challenging questions*. We started by creating a curriculum for the older Hebrew school students that was built on questions. This curriculum emphasizes

comprehension of the Hebrew prayers for Friday night (when most families are present), but also requires students to grapple with the related Torah concepts. We also began to teach the tunes for the Friday night service. Now the children are often the most enthusiastic *daveners*. So that helped.

We then created a *weekly* 15-minute, Friday-night service for children, which begins at an early hour (and after which, childcare is available). This also helped. Every Friday evening at six, Moses arrives in costume to talk with a modern Jew in a brief drama that, based on stories from a variety of Jewish sources, asks and answers a question about the Torah reading. At the end of the drama Moses engages our young people by asking them challenging questions about the meaning of the story. For example: After his wife Rachel told Rabbi Akiva, “You thought we were unfortunate, but there are people even poorer than we,” why do you think he said to her, “Bless you for your words”?

Every week our young people also struggle with questions that we ask as part of our *chayat hashavua* (animal of the week) *devar* Torah. On one Shabbat they answered these questions: Can anyone teach us why this is a particularly good time to be talking about *lice*? What do you think it means that the heavens, the tablets of the commandments, and the plague of lice were all created

by “the finger of God”? What can we do about lice if they get on us or in our clothes? What do you think is the meaning of the proverb that says, “He who killed lice on the Sabbath is as though he killed a camel”?

These additions to the Shabbat evening service got the young people participating. But we wanted to go beyond that. We wanted to involve them in *teaching* the congregation—to get *them* asking the questions.

Our answer was Midrasha—a class for young people who can passably read English, typically eight years of age and older. Midrasha also answers another question: How do you get young people not only to learn and live Judaism but to teach it too—based on Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, and commentaries—and have fun doing it? Now, once a week, on Thursday afternoons, our young people gather for an hour and a half to prepare a *devar* Torah, which they present every other week on Friday evening. Their *devar* Torah takes the form of readers’ theatre. The dramas, which Magidah Khulda writes and directs, illuminate the weekly Torah readings. Over time we’ve added costumes (from clothes bought at thrift stores), simple cardboard scenery (made by the children from refrigerator cartons) and short songs—all of which add to the learning *and* the fun.

Reader’s theatre doesn’t require any memorization, since the young people hold the scripts in their hands as they teach. Since there is no memorization, the intensity of their learning and the frequency of their teaching are much greater. In their first ten months our young people made 28 *devar* Torah presentations. Equally important, without any need for memorization they have much less “performance anxiety” when they are on the *bimah*. Indeed, they are not performing. They have learned that what they are doing is *teaching*. And of course, in order to teach the Torah, they must first come to understand it themselves. So again, the concept of challenging questions comes into play. For instance, recently the Midrasha students were asked and answered these questions: Why is it considered worthier to give *tzadakah* anonymously? When we give anonymously, what are we trying to protect?

But one of the most striking aspects of the Midrasha Class has resulted from our efforts to set expectations for the children about the culture of the group. The key features of the Midrasha culture are the concepts of teaching and teamwork. As a regular part of the class, young people explore what it means to be a teacher in Israel, in contrast to a performer or entertainer. Students also explore what it means to be a team member, for they are teaching as a team. This is not difficult since most have had experience with a sports

team. Team members support and encourage each other—team members cooperate to succeed. We have often seen these two aspects of Midrasha culture played out by our children. We have watched on more than one occasion while a child gave up a part for a newcomer. We have seen older children act on their own to help younger ones, those who were struggling with their parts, whispering their lines to them.

As a result of Midrasha, many children are now actively involved in the week-to-week religious life of the Congregation. They *and* their parents regularly attend Friday evening services. (What parent would forgo the *nachas* of seeing their child(ren) on the *bimah* teaching the Congregation?) Moreover, adults in the Congregation have told us that they also have learned much about Judaism and Yiddishkeit from the young people’s teaching.

Which principles have contributed most to this outcome? We believe the following were the most important:

□ We believe that bringing young people of diverse ages and abilities together markedly reduces the pervasive peer pressure that ordinarily favors the values of popular culture rather than those of Judaism. *So we challenged them to form themselves into a more diverse group, one that would reflect the whole community of young people and that would be committed to the Torah vision in daily practice.*

□ We sought to challenge young people rather than entertain them. We assumed that the congregation would never be able to compete successfully with the entertainment available to them through films, television, computer games, and the like. On the other hand, challenges—accompanied by support and follow-up—when successfully met are uniquely effective in building self-esteem and self-confidence. These are the most important ingredients in a young person’s desire to join any activity. *So we challenged them to learn and grapple with their heritage from the most important Jewish texts, while having a good time and building their self-esteem.*

□ We believe that young people benefit immeasurably by learning the meanings of the words of the Hebrew prayers and the associated Torah concepts, which can be accomplished much less painfully in the context of singing rhythmic music in the service. *So we challenged them to learn the Hebrew meanings and Torah concepts, and encouraged them to overcome their initial embarrassment and anxiety about singing enthusiastically before a large group.*

☐ We challenged young people not only to learn but also to teach. Our experience is that young people tend to be put off by expectations that they be passive consumers rather than creators and producers, at least some of the time. *So we be challenged them to assume their rightful and essential roles as teachers in the dor l'dor education and uplifting of the Jewish people, in ways which fit their knowledge and skill.*

☐ Midrasha Class is not kid's stuff. We believe young people tend not to value a program or activity that they know, by virtue of adult attitudes and behavior, is "kids' stuff." *So we challenged them to participate at an adult level in the life of the congregation.*

☐ We took steps wherever possible to involve parents and other adults in the Midrasha Class. We could see that some adults could be very helpful not only in creating costumes and scenery, but also in helping to teach the youngsters. *So we challenged their parents and other adult members of the congregation to make limited*

commitments of their time to contribute their knowledge and skills to the Midrasha Class.

It has been exciting to watch the change in the participation of young people *and* their parents in the week-to-week *adult religious life* of the Congregation. This transformation was highlighted at High Holy Day services, ironically, by the nearly constant presence of Midrasha. The young people filled 65 roles, presenting five Readers' Theatre devar Torah teachings—on Erev Rosh Hashanah, the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the second day of Rosh Hashanah, on Erev Yom Kippur, and at Yom Kippur Mincha.

Who would have ever imagined that our young people would be so ubiquitous at services, or that adults would so often be following them and learning from them?

(Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Magidah Khulda bat Sarah are Co-Directors of Gather the People, a nonprofit organization for education and training in congregational community development and organizing. Their web site at <http://www.gatherthepeople.org> offers extensive downloadable resources without charge.)

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