

MACHON L'MORIM: BERESHIT

Lessons Learned

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Machon L'Morim: Bereshit is a professional development school change initiative for early childhood educators whose goals are to develop Jewishly knowledgeable personnel and educational environments that infuse every aspect of the early childhood experience with Jewish values, concepts and Hebrew vocabulary. The most critical findings indicate that teachers are not able to take new information from Torah L'Shema classes and translate it into developmentally appropriate activities without training and that the program is most successful when it involves the entire faculty of a school for a five-year period.

*Teach your children the path to follow
when they are young,
And when they are older they will not
depart from it.*

Proverbs

How and when do individuals develop their Jewish identity? Erik Erikson argues that personal identity originates in childhood as one starts seeking models to emulate and begins to realize that one's individuality is a variant of a group's characteristic (London & Frank, 1987). Identity is transmitted to children initially by their parents, but schools, community, media, and peers play an increasing role as parents spend less time with their children and "the family" expands to include more than the biological family unit.

Unfortunately, there is very little research investigating the role of early childhood education (for children under six years old) in shaping Jewish identity. Yet, a large number of studies have demonstrated the critical influence of the early environment on every aspect of the child's development. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that, in Lipset's (1994, p. 57) words, "Jewish socialization of the young child does in fact contribute to increased Jewish identity as they mature." One may further

assume that Jewishly literate early childhood educators would be more effective models for children as they develop their Jewish identity.

It is in the Jewish preschool that many young adults, now parents, reconnect, with Judaism, where many children learn their first Hebrew word, make their first matzah cover, experience their first Shabbat and celebrate their first Purim. The preschool is where many young children's Jewish identity and that of their families are formed and enhanced. Yet, many of preschool teachers are not Jewishly knowledgeable. In one large community—Baltimore—71 percent of Jewish early childhood educators had no Jewish education past the age of 13 (Gameron et al., 1994).

Machon L'Morim: Bereshit is a professional development school change initiative designed to ensure that Jewish early childhood educators are Jewishly knowledgeable. The program represents the first attempt by a family foundation to challenge the organized Jewish community and then partner with it in order to transform early childhood professionals and their educational institutions. It was designed and piloted in Baltimore and funded by the Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund. This article describes the program and its implementation process.

Machon L'Morim: Bereshit was originally conceived as a two-year initiative, but like many experimental programs it took longer to implement. In fact, it took five years to achieve its goals.

Curricular Guides and the *Indicators for Achieving an Integrated Early Childhood Center* may be viewed and purchased on line at www.machonlmorim.org.

The overall goal of *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit* was to develop personnel and environments that encourage fully integrated Jewish learning in early childhood education centers. The program was designed to have an impact on teachers, schools, children, and their families. Criteria for schools participating in the program included the endorsement of the governing body of the school, the full participation of the director, and consistent attendance and participation of the selected teachers. In return, *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit* would provide stipends, books, and resources to each teacher and director for participation; offer classes; and provide a grant to each school. Six preschools (three based in Conservative synagogues, two Jewish Community Center preschools, and a community preschool) applied to the program, and all six were accepted. Each school then identified three to four teachers to participate. The initial group consisted of nineteen teachers and six directors.

PHASE I: JEWISH LITERACY

The initial premise for the program was that increasing teachers' Jewish literacy would result in Jewishly integrated classrooms. Teachers needed to reconnect to Judaism as adults, as most of them had been approaching Jewish concepts from the limited perspective of their adolescent experience. Therefore, the focus of the first two years of the program was on "teacher as learner," and the classes were designed to provide them with a forum to discuss, challenge, personalize, and internalize new information and concepts. All 25 educators participated as a group in weekly evening study sessions led by a female rabbi.

The teachers also met at least twice a month in their own schools during the school day with a facilitator (*yoetzet*). The *yoetzot* were early childhood educators who had all served as directors of early childhood centers at one point in time. The purpose of those meetings with the facilitator was to provide an opportunity for the participants to make personal meaning out of the information, achieving philosophical and theological comfort. This was

critical to the success of the program, as the educational literature suggests that one of the major reasons most school reforms and/or new educational initiatives fail is that teachers are not given an opportunity to make meaning of the information for themselves (Black, 1995). Unless the teachers are emotionally, as well as intellectually, connected to Judaism, the Judaic content would not be internalized or implemented effectively in the classroom.

The year was divided into three trimesters, each with a different theme. *Simchah* focused on Shabbat and the holidays, *Kedushah* on life-cycle events, and *Kehillah* on the Jewish community.

At the end of two years, seventeen of the original nineteen teachers and four of the six directors were still enrolled in the program. As indicated by their responses to an evaluation of the program, 100 percent of the participants felt they were more Jewishly literate, 93 percent felt more competent to teach Jewish concepts, and 83 percent enjoyed the text study. However, this personal understanding and philosophical comfort did not translate into new pedagogy and had not made its way into the classroom.

PHASE II: ADAPTING JEWISH CONCEPTS TO THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

In year 3, a second phase of the program was launched in which teachers were taught how to take adult concepts and adapt them to the early childhood level. For example, how do preschool children understand the concept of *kedushah* (holiness)? Which of the concepts that we derive from the *Bereshit* story (i.e., God as Creator, Shabbat, separating the holy from the ordinary) can a young child understand?

The year was divided into two parts. The first half was devoted to enhancing the Judaic units that were already part of the curriculum. Teachers studied sources that were related to the Jewish units they already taught, such as Shabbat, the holidays, and *mitzvot*. These texts differed from the *simchah* texts of the first year in that they were chosen specifically because their core concepts could be applied

to an early childhood classroom. The second half of the year was devoted to integrating Jewish concepts, values, and Hebrew vocabulary into secular units. The teachers chose the units they wanted to integrate (i.e., My Body and Fall).

The first week of each month the participants did text study with the rabbi. The next two weeks they discussed how to make the material developmentally appropriate using various educational paradigms (such as webbing). Teachers also met with their *voetzot* during this time. In the fourth week the teachers demonstrated how they changed the curriculum unit based on the new information from the prior three weeks. This gave the teachers an opportunity to practice their new skills in a protected environment—in their classrooms in front of their *Machon L'Morim* peers and without students. Educational literature indicates that teachers need an opportunity to try out new curriculum ideas in a safe environment (Black, 1995; Dorph, 1995; Fullen, 1993; Little, 1993; Lord, 1994).

The last six weeks of Phase II were devoted to writing integrated curriculum. A curriculum specialist, who was Jewish, had taught in a JCC preschool, and was currently a mentor for the public school system, was recruited to help teachers learn how to incorporate these ideas into specific lesson plans.

Phase II yielded significant results. First, Jewish values, concepts, and Hebrew vocabulary were integrated into seven units—Chicks, I am Special, All About Me, Fall, The World around Us, Firefighters, Dentist. For example, before participating in *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit*, the goals of the unit on My Body in one preschool were teaching body parts and care of the body. Now the unit is called “I am Special,” and it teaches the children the concept of *b'tzelem elokim* (being made in the image of God), two blessings from the Morning Blessings, and the Hebrew words for the body parts. Second, 21 early childhood educators now understood the distinction between being a Jewish early childhood educator and a preschool teacher in a Jewish setting. When asked to choose a role definition, they all

responded that they were Jewish early childhood educators.

At the end of Phase II we had learned the following:

- Teachers need time to create personal meaning from new information.
- Personal meaning and increased literacy do not automatically transfer into classroom application.
- Teachers must be taught how to transform adult concepts into early childhood concepts.
- Teachers must be given the opportunity to practice their new skills in protected environments.
- Teachers benefit from modeling new behaviors in front of other early childhood teachers.
- Teachers benefit from engaging in professional dialogue with their peers.

We learned something else about this transformational process. Our goal was to create personnel and environments that modeled integrated Jewish early childhood education. While we were clearly moving in that direction, three obstacles still prevented us from reaching our goal. First, though teachers had become more comfortable integrating secular units with Jewish values, Hebrew vocabulary, and concepts, this integration was limited to “circle time,” which usually occupies only 20 minutes of a 2½-hour school day. To achieve our goal, we had to help teachers integrate Jewish values and vocabulary throughout the day (i.e., during free play and “specials”). Second, if we did not engage the entire faculty of the school, our impact was limited to the seventeen teachers and four directors involved in the program, and wholesale institutional change, a shift in the entire environment, would not occur. Third, we needed to engage the child’s family, not just the child. The implicit goal of that transformation of the educators and the school environment would be a significant and positive influence on families. This proved to be our greatest challenge.

PHASE III

The findings of Phase II led us to institute Phase III of the program (years 4 and 5). Two of the original six schools (one with seventeen teachers and one with six teachers) agreed to involve their entire faculty and remain in the program for another two years.

The four schools that did not participate in Phase III were encouraged to continue to engage in text study as part of their regular faculty meetings, were visited once a month by the Center for Jewish Education's Director of Early Childhood Department, were asked to participate in the writing of additional curricular guides, and were invited to a semi-annual reunion. The directors of these four schools were encouraged to invite non-participating faculty to join in the text study and the curriculum writing. Unfortunately, only one director continued the text study, involved new faculty members, and continued the peer dialogue with her faculty.

It became clear that without the guidance and leadership of the central agency, the schools were not able or willing to continue this transformational process themselves. So in the second year of Phase III (year 5) the Center for Jewish Education hired a part-time early childhood educator to work specifically with those four schools. Her job was to observe every teacher in each school once a month, to help teachers increase their Hebrew vocabulary, and find ways for them to introduce and integrate more Judaic content into the classroom. This educator also encouraged the directors to introduce *Torah L'Shema*—continuing Jewish education—classes or to include at least a half-hour of text study in every faculty meeting.

This initiative had mixed results. The individual classroom observation was well received by the directors and the teachers. However, continuing Jewish education did not occur in a systematic way. There are several possible reasons why it did not happen. The directors may not have seen it as a priority, they were unable or unwilling to require their faculty to study Jewish texts as part of their job requirements, there was no money to pay the teachers

stipends to attend monthly sessions, or the directors did not have time to arrange for an instructor and they were incapable of leading such discussions themselves. We are currently interviewing the directors to ascertain why introducing regular text study did not happen.

For the two schools that continued with the program, the experience in Phase III was very different. The first year of Phase III (year four) was designed to take the best sessions from Phase I (as determined from the evaluations) and condense them into a single year of text study. All teachers new to the program (*chadashot*) attended study sessions three times a month. The graduates of Phase I and II (*bogrot*; about half of the staff) at each school met monthly with an educational consultant who trained them to be *yoetzot*. Each school had its own consultant; both were professors of early childhood education at a local university.

Each *bogeret* was paired with a *chadashah* (preferably one who taught the same age group). The pairs met once a week. This peer dialogue gave participants the opportunity to explore new concepts in a safe environment. It also fostered the development of professional relationships among the teachers and encouraged a new collaborative culture within the schools that was not present before. There were no expectations that the *chadashot* would immediately begin applying new information to their classrooms.

By the end of the first year of Phase III, we had achieved several objectives. First, the entire faculty of the two schools had gained exposure to the same core Jewish knowledge, Jewish experiences, and Jewish vocabulary. Second, all the teachers had opportunities to explore with each other the new concepts in a safe context. Third, through peer dialogue with the *chadashot*, the *bogrot* were able to allay fears and anxieties regarding the formidable task the school had undertaken, answer questions regarding the course material, and begin discussions about how these concepts could be integrated into the classroom. The *chadashot* moved more easily into these application discussions than had the original group

in Phase II, even though the text study did not have as powerful a transformation impact on them as it had on their predecessors. While we have no definitive data to explain why this occurred, we believe it is because the *chadashot* observed the *bogrot* going through this experience and knew what was expected of them. We attribute the reduced intensity of the participants' emotional/spiritual awakening to some combination of the following factors:

- The *chadashot* were not self-selected. They agreed to participate because their directors had asked them to do so.
- The group dynamics were different. The group was smaller (13), less diverse (all coming from only two Conservative congregations), and older. There was one dominant personality among the *chadashot*, and it was initially difficult to draw out the group and get them to interact.
- The group met three times a month instead of four. Depending on the calendar, two to three weeks might pass without a group meeting.
- The faculty did not engage the teachers to the extent they had in Phases I and II.
- The directors did not participate with the teachers as they had in Phases I and II.

Nevertheless, much of the desired outcome was achieved. The teachers' level of Jewish literacy was increased, their sense of Jewish identity was heightened (for some, Jewish ritual practice was increased), and their understanding of and commitment to the school initiative were deepened. In addition, they found value and pleasure in engaging in peer dialogue. While mentoring skills were not fully developed, the *bogrot* found both personal and professional satisfaction in assuming this new role.

Three goals still eluded us. One was the integration of Jewish vocabulary, values, and concepts into non-circle time. This material was clearly part of the teachers' thinking and planning, but not sufficiently part of their daily action. Two, the new participants could not yet independently develop curriculum inte-

grated with Jewish vocabulary, values, and concepts. Three, we had not adequately addressed the family education issue.

To realize these remaining goals, we implemented the final year of Phase III (year 5). In this year, the *chadashot* were exposed to Phase II of the initial program, and a Jewish early childhood specialist was hired to work with teachers individually and assist them with integrating Jewish concepts, values, and vocabulary into their classrooms, not just at circle time. For this purpose, the consultant observed each teacher in her classroom and, with the teacher, developed a plan of action to be carried out over the course of a month, at which time the consultant returned and observed the progress made. Some of the classes were videotaped for training and teachers were asked to keep journals. Finally, each school used faculty meetings, professional days, and/or small group meetings to develop a strategic school-wide plan for family education.

The goals for year five were partially met. The *chadashot* learned how to integrate secular subjects with Judaic content and created another four integrated units. Both schools developed a yearlong school-wide family education plan. (The integration of family programs is still being addressed.) However, while more Jewish content was implemented into non-circle time activities, ability of the *chadashot* to integrate Jewish values and Hebrew vocabulary into their classroom was not as strong as the *bogrot's* integration skills. This observation was confirmed in the evaluation on *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit* conducted by Leora Isaacs, Director of the Mandell L. Berman Jewish Heritage Center for Research and Evaluation in Jewish Education. Isaacs found a substantial difference between the behaviors of the *bogrot* and the *chadashot*. The *bogrot* consistently utilized Hebrew language and Jewish values throughout the day, not just during formal teaching times. The length of time in the program may be one of the contributing factors to this outcome. The *chadashot* were only in the program for two years and only had one year to work on implementation strategies.

Another outside evaluation of *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit* reported that "it provided evidence to support participants' reports of gains in their Jewish knowledge, increases in the richness of their Jewish teaching, and changes in the cultures of their schools, encouraging a more open, change-oriented approach to teaching" (Holtz et al., 2000). Here are some concrete examples of changes in the culture of the schools.

- Most teachers want to engage in text study. Both schools have made arrangements for ongoing text study independent of the *Machon L'Morim* project.
- Teachers found the professional dialogue so meaningful that it has also been incorporated into the structure of each school. In one school the faculty meetings have been extended one hour each month to allow for professional dialogue. In the other school, teams meet formally once a month and informally as needed.
- Teachers are thinking differently with regard to Jewish values. They are continually asking, "What is Jewish about this topic?" or "How can I integrate this unit with Jewish concepts?"
- Teachers are more creative in their presentation of Jewish concepts. There is a greater use of Hebrew in the classroom and a greater comfort with Jewish concepts, values, and vocabulary. "Hebrew comes out more naturally. Also, phrases and Jewish values are more fluent now. *Mitzvot, midot tovot, simchah, kedushah, and kehillot*—these concepts are now incorporated into my classroom on a daily basis" (*Machon L'Morim* 1998 Survey).
- There is a genuine effort to integrate all aspects of their classroom: "I am able to intersperse Jewish concepts with the secular ones with much greater ease" (*Machon L'Morim* 1998 Survey).

The success of *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit* does not simply lie in the personal, professional, and institutional changes. Its ultimate success will lie in taking these key lessons from the program and applying them to other pro-

fessional development programs.

- Systematic change takes a minimum of four to five years. Serious professional development initiatives should receive long-term funding and have a coherent plan sustained over time.
- Teachers need time to engage in professional dialogue. They need time to reflect, analyze, internalize, and practice the new information presented to them. They need to do this as a community of learners during the school day.
- *Torah L'Shma* classes do not automatically transfer into classroom application. They do have the power to affect the teachers' personal and spiritual lives and to excite them, but adult education without application to the classroom context does not transfer naturally or easily to new classroom pedagogy and activities.
- Teachers need to be taught how to transform new Jewish adult information into developmentally appropriate lessons/activities. A step-by-step process includes learning the new information, identifying core concepts, making personal meaning out of the information, identifying concepts relevant to an early childhood experience, developing activities to teach/reinforce concepts, implementing activities, and then evaluating activities. This need to be facilitated by an educational consultant.
- Unless the program is administered from within the school by a trained director or professional development coordinator, it will not be sustained once the program ends and the outside coordinator leaves. The program requires a coordinator knowledgeable in Judaica, professional development, and early childhood education. It also requires time to coordinate and arrange for the learning sessions. Directors must believe the goals of the program take priority over other school issues in order for them to devote the appropriate time to oversee the program. Many directors do not have sufficient Judaic or professional development training, let alone the time to administer the *Machon L'Morim: Bereshit* pro-

gram. Directors/professional development coordinators need to be trained to implement the program, or it will not sustain itself after the external coordinator leaves.

Machon L'Morim: Bereshit has transformed teachers, classrooms, and schools. Perhaps the most gratifying indicators of the success of this program have been termed "Machon Moments." These refer to those times when a teacher realizes that there is a Jewish application to something he or she has been doing for years and has never realized before. Most are simple, such as associating things we shake (*lulav* and *grogger*) with shaking the parachute during gym. This is the true strength and beauty of the program: helping teachers help students and families see the world through Jewish eyes in an integrated Jewish early childhood program. As our tradition teaches,

ומצדיקי הרבים ככוכבים
לעולם ועד אלו מלמדי תינוקות

"Those who uphold the community are like the stars forever. Who are they? The ones who teach the young" (Baba Batra, p. 8, side 2).

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