

# Jewish Preschools as Gateways to Jewish Life

## A SURVEY OF JEWISH PRESCHOOL PARENTS IN THREE CITIES

by PEARL BECK, Ph.D.



**D**URING 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. ✿