Youth Education in Orthodox Synagogues

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An Orthodox synagogue finds itself in an unusual position as an educational institution. Although there are growing numbers of Conservative, Reform, and multi-denominational Day Schools, it is often a synagogue-based religious school that provides the primary Jewish education for non-Orthodox youth. An Orthodox synagogue, however, has no such imperative, since most of its constituents send their children to Day School.[1] The Orthodox synagogue may ask itself: if our children already attend a Jewish Day School, what is our further role in Jewish education? The problem is that this question is not even asked.

Why isn't this question asked? Many parents are satisfied as long as there is something for the children to do while the adults pray. Other parents expect the synagogue to reinforce what the children learn in school, but do not expect it to add anything to their children's Jewish development. Often, the youth programming at an Orthodox synagogue is of a social nature. At best, the Shabbat morning groups offer a place for the children to pray at their own pace, and at worst they provide glorified babysitting.

An Orthodox synagogue can, and should, see itself as a serious educational institution, even if it does not have a formal religious school. In order to do that, as members and staff of Orthodox synagogues, we must challenge our assumptions about children at synagogue. We must think outside the box—in fact, outside of several boxes. I have framed the conversation below in terms of four of these "boxes," which represent our assumptions and the resulting

limitations we place upon ourselves. Some of these ideas represent efforts I have implemented at my own synagogue in Chicago, while others are dreams and musings of what could be possible. The goal is not to be exhaustive, but to stimulate conversation and to help us rethink what we assume to be true about children and synagogue. Once we free ourselves from these assumptions, we can think creatively about what children can gain from their synagogue experience. We can build innovative models of synagogue youth education.

Box #1: We think like a school.

One of the biggest advantages of providing Jewish education in a synagogue context is that a synagogue does not have the constraints of a school, such as grade levels, testing, and curriculum requirements. This may be obvious—"shul" is not school![2] So then why are we thinking like a school? For example, why must our youth groups be organized by grade level? There certainly are advantages to dividing children by age: they share a similar level of knowledge and ease of social interaction, and it also is the easiest way for everyone to know which room to go to. But the grade model might be an unnecessary limitation for a synagogue.

What if we organized the youth groups by neighborhood? What if each Shabbat morning children of a range of ages, who live near each other, gathered together to pray and learn together? What if each child in grades K–6 was paired with a child in grades 7–12 who lives in his or her own neighborhood, and these partnerships formed a mentoring relationship? In small groups, the older children would teach the younger ones, under the guidance of a well-trained educator, who would guide and facilitate these interactions. What if these children then saw each other later that afternoon on their block where, on long summer *Shabbatot*, they would gather in someone's home for *hevruta* learning and *Seudah shelishit*? This is just one possible model, but we can simply recognize that there are many ways to organize the children into groups, and the grade division is just one. Once we let go of the assumption that "shul" needs to think like school, we open up richer and more creative ways of engaging the children.

The youth program could also tap into what is perhaps a synagogue's greatest asset—the synagogue's membership. This includes, but is not limited to, parents and grandparents who would be eager to participate and offer their presence and expertise. Young adults in the community are ready role models for teens

especially. We have one older member of our congregation whose family has been with the synagogue for five generations. He possesses a wealth of knowledge about the congregation's history, and some wonderful anecdotes about former rabbis and deceased members. He accompanied our B'nai Mitzvah group on a *hessed* outing to help clean up the synagogue's cemetery, which is over 100 years old. He was able to regale the children with stories of past members and give them an appreciation of the heritage of our community. What a treasure.

Box #2: Just as long as the kids enjoy coming to synagogue…

I recently asked a parent (not a member of my synagogue) what she hopes her children will gain from the Shabbat morning youth program at her synagogue. She presented me with something of a hierarchy of goals. First and foremost, she said, it needs to keep them out of my hair so that I can pray in peace. If they enjoy it enough to make them actually look forward to coming to synagogue, all the better. And if they even gain something educational from the youth groups, then that's wonderful.

Why have we set the bar so low? Shouldn't we expect the synagogue to actively contribute to our children's growth as Jews? Even in the best-case scenario, synagogues place unnecessary limitations on the education they offer. Some provide an extensive *Tefillah* program, where the children pray together at an age-appropriate pace, increasing the number of *Tefillot* as the children get older. In addition, they may talk about the *parasha* or play a game. These certainly are positive things for children to do, and these activities reinforce the skills and knowledge the children are already gaining in school. But can't we offer education that children are not already receiving elsewhere[3]?

The synagogue is a place that is ripe for compelling and immersive Jewish experiential education. Encourage the children to ask their "big Jewish questions," to explore ideas that their teachers do not have time to cover in school. Even within a *parasha* discussion, have the children get up and act out the characters in the story, or ask them what they might do in the same situation. One of the favorite games that our children like to play is "Agree/Disagree," where the youth leader makes a statement (for example, "All Jews should make *aliya*, and the children respond by voting with their feet—standing on one side of the room or the other to demonstrate whether they agree or disagree with the statement, or

anywhere in the middle to show where their opinion falls on the spectrum. They then defend their stance, which leads to rich conversations, and gets the children thinking about important Jewish issues.

If children are spending their time in engaged in these innovative and creative activities, when do they pray?

It is not necessary to eliminate praying from a youth group program. One can split the time wisely, or even weave some of these creative activities into the praying. However, there is another option: children can pray where the adults do. Which leads us to…

Box #3: Children and adults pray separately.

Most children who are readers are able to sit in synagogue and pray what they know. Even my two-year-old notices when we say "*Shema*," and she covers her eyes and approximates the words. I recall that when I first knew the *aleph-bet*, I would sit with my mother for a few minutes and "*daven*," reading the *aleph-bet* that was printed in the back of our *siddur*. After that, I could go outside and play with my friends. (Our tiny *shteibel* had no youth programming to speak of.) Sitting in synagogue is the best way to teach children about praying, and to show them the ways that the *Tefillah* is different on Shabbat than during the week. Bringing a book and a quiet snack also teaches children synagogue-appropriate behavior—to sit quietly and be respectful. Each parent knows his or her child, and knows what length of time is appropriate for that child. Bring your children to synagogue before groups start, and spend some time together in the sanctuary.

The youth groups can be designed to assume that children will be in synagogue with their parents beforehand. At our shul, we encourage our B'nai Mitzvah group (the 6th- and 7th-graders) to arrive for at least part of *Shaharit* and Torah reading. About halfway through Torah reading, the group meets for what we call "*Tefillah* Off the Deep End." They start by praying *Mussaf* together, then break for a short *Kiddush* of their own, and finally engage in meaningful and "deep" discussions, often driven by their own questions.

It is a shame for children to experience synagogue in a vacuum, away from where synagogue happens for the adults. When they walk in and go straight to groups, and get picked up by a parent at the end, they never set foot in the sanctuary and never grow to understand what actually happens in a *Bet Knesset*. There are

many ways to integrate children into the sanctuary. Our Yeladeinu group (1st- and 2nd-graders) comes into synagogue at the end, and sits together for the completion of services. They've learned to follow *Ein K'elo-heinu* and *Aleinu*, and they are even beginning to learn *Anim Zemirot* simply by hearing it each week. One rabbi I know has a "Bring Your Child to Shul Day" to encourage children to arrive before groups start. During Torah reading, he asks *parasha*-related trivia questions before each *aliya*, and the children search for the answers as the *aliya* is read. This is a great way to teach children to follow Torah reading, and to help them feel comfortable in the sanctuary.

An unexpected benefit to having children in the sanctuary is for the adults. There's nothing like a child to make an adult take his or her own synagogue experience more seriously. When we are aware that the children are looking to us as models, we are challenged us to be our best selves.

Box #4: Youth Education is the job of the Youth Director.

I have encountered rabbis who are not tuned into what the children are doing in their synagogues. A Youth Director would benefit greatly from guidance and vision of the Board, the rabbi, and other stakeholders. Synagogue activities often operate in silos—the youth program, the *hessed* committee, and the adult education classes, for example, have minimal interaction. Instead of each one operating in its own bubble, these functions can coordinate their efforts. If the social action committee is organizing a drive for winter coats for the homeless, then have the children learn about the concept of a *sukkah* as a temporary dwelling (coordinate the timing with Sukkot), and think about those who do not have permanent homes. Offer a similarly themed class to adults on an appropriate level. Have the children participate in the coat drive, along with the social action committee.

Ideally, the youth education, as well as every other area of programming, is an extension of the mission and vision of the synagogue itself. The Board should give the Youth Director its mandate, to reflect the goals and values of the institution. The Youth Director often feels like they have the lowest job on the totem pole and that community members don't respect the position. I believe this can stem from a lack of support and input from the synagogue stakeholders. The Board should engage the Youth Director as a partner in the synagogue's growth in carrying out its mission.

Challenges

Our Sages teach us, "*Emor me'at v'aseh harbeh*" (Say little, and do much). It is easy to pontificate but harder to take action. Challenging the status quo is especially difficult when the general sentiment is that everything is "fine." The children like coming to synagogue, and they're even praying a little… what's the problem? The greatest challenge is tapping into our creativity, peeking outside these constricting "boxes" and asking the question, "What if?"

It might also be challenging to motivate the children to actively engage in creative and thoughtful activity at synagogue. Jewish Day School students often see synagogue as a break from learning. They look forward to hanging out with friends or getting a good snack. However, children respond when they see that their time is being well-spent, and that they have much to gain. At our shul, I have parents who tell me that their kids jump out of bed on Shabbat morning because they don't want to miss their group. For many children, however, jumping out of bed on Shabbat morning for *anything* will entail a real paradigm shift.

Often, the difficulty of motivating the children stems from the parents. Adults have a variety of reasons they come to synagogue, as well as their own baggage about what it has or hasn't been for them. Parents who want their children to be happy about going to synagogue often hesitate to make it a requirement for their child. They worry that if they force their child to attend the youth group, it will make their child resentful. Some parents may recall their own feelings of being forced to go to synagogue when they were young, and do not want to recreate that for their children.

The problem with parents bringing their children very late, or not at all, is that they are depriving their children of the opportunity to develop an appreciation for the synagogue. How can your children enjoy something they barely get to experience? By trying to ease up on their children, parents are depriving them of a formative Jewish experience. Instead, parents should focus on modeling the desired behavior. Show your children how important it is for you to go to synagogue, and show that you are going in order to pray and to learn; that will send the message loud and clear that synagogue is worthwhile. If parents see the synagogue as place of growth and Jewish development, children will do the same. [4]

There are also some logistical challenges. In order to create a real youth education program you need real educators. Appropriate staffing can be difficult. Often, high school students are the ones running the Shabbat morning youth groups, but that makes it hard to create and implement high-level programming. At our synagogue, we hire graduate students and young professionals who are experienced educators to run our Shabbat morning program. However, in order to retain this level of employee, you need to pay well. We have made the commitment to pay them as would a competitive urban Hebrew school. That means devoting significant funds to the youth program.

What Lies Outside the Box

In the face of these challenges, it is extraordinarily helpful to constantly remind ourselves of what creative and engaging youth activity could look like, and where it can lead young people. One recent *Yom Kippur*, I had a group of middle schoolers arranged in the four corners of a classroom. I had asked them to stand in whichever corner represented their own metaphor for God: parent, monarch, best friend, or guide. Only one girl stood in the corner that represented God as a best friend. When I asked her for her thoughts, she said: “I think of God as my best friend, who knows what I think and is always on my side.” I was genuinely moved. To go from this exercise into an examination of the “*Ki anu amekha*…” prayer, where we lay out numerous metaphors for the relationship between God and the Jewish people, enriched the discussion immeasurably. If we can create this kind of atmosphere of curiosity and thought for our youngsters, they will grow up feeling more connected to the synagogue and to their Judaism, and will be ready to contribute to our community.

[1]Although there are numerous Orthodox children who do not attend Day School, for the purposes of this article I focused on synagogues where the vast majority of the children attend Jewish Day School. A synagogue with a mixed population of Jewish and secular schools faces a different set of challenges.

[2]It is, however, interesting to note that the colloquialism “shul” comes from the German/Yiddish word for school.

[3]I have chosen not to dwell on the idea of summer camp, but it certainly is another source of valuable Jewish education. Non-Orthodox summer camps have succeeded in being high-level immersive Jewish education. Orthodox camps also provide valuable experiential education although often not as thoughtful or thorough, but not every kid goes to camp, and shul can still supplement and offer what camp does not.

[4]The problem, of course, is that synagogue often is not sufficiently engaging for adults either. Another conversation for another time…