

Report of Temple Educator Ira J. Wise, D.J.R.E. to the Annual Meeting of Congregation B'nai Israel Thursday, June 20, 2019

As we have all been saying and hearing for much of the past year, B'nai Israel is in a period of transition. At a luncheon with colleagues from other congregations two weeks ago, I was asked how those transitions were going – and they seemed to be looking for me to dish some dirt. “Isn’t it stressful?” “Are people treating you and others poorly?” “Don’t some people act like they are being dragged kicking and screaming into the ‘new era?’”

In a word, no.

Certainly change can be difficult and we all have moments when stress gets the better of us. And there are many things about our congregation that most of us like just the way they have been. One of the reasons I came to B'nai Israel so long ago was because this congregation had already demonstrated that it was a place that embraced growth and valued the people – members and staff – who called it home.

As much as we like who we are as a congregation, change has been in our DNA for 160 years. Let me map some of the changes of the past year in terms of Jewish learning at B'nai Israel as well as show some of the steps we are taking to keep moving forward.

Shorashim and Etgar – Roots and Challenges

The sign of a good pilot program is when it becomes the norm. The summer before this year’s Confirmation class was entering Kitah Daled (4th grade), we were challenged to provide an alternative to our long-standing religious school model. The challenge (*Etgar* in Hebrew) was accepted and the Etgar program was established.

The idea of this pilot program was to integrate Jewish studies and Hebrew learning into one class and to offer Sunday/Thursday alternative to Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. And so Etgar was born. We called the older model *Shorashim* (Roots) since it was well established.

After six years, Etgar posed a different kind of challenge. It was no longer a program. It was how people wanted their children to learn. With fewer than ten students expected in *Shorashim* this past year, we eliminated the older model completely, offering tutorial support to the few families who were unable to make the switch.

The big discussion in Jewish education today is focused on how we can best meet the changing needs of families with young children. The Etgar/Shorashim experience shows that listening and flexibility are both critical.

How you say it matters

Language is a funny thing. Since we also teach (and pray in) Hebrew here, it can be twice as challenging for us. For twenty three years, we have put two teenagers in most of our Sunday classrooms that serve younger students. Originally just Gan – Kitah Gimel (K – 3), since 2010 we have also done so

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through Kitah Vav (6th grade). Our goal for them was threefold: 1) they served as role models to younger students, both in terms of classroom behaviors and as something to which they might aspire; 2) the teens provided a teacher with additional eyes, ears, hands and legs. As the teenager develops skills, the possibilities for creative learning expands exponentially for the class; and 3) the teens develop into pretty well trained teachers themselves. I have helped them find jobs near their colleges and two of them have returned to teach for us here!

For all of that time, we called them *madrikhim*. It literally means "those who show the way," deriving from the route *derekh*, which means road or path. *Madrikhim* describes a group of them, with at least one member of the group being male. A single male would be a *madrikh*, a single female a *madrikhah*, and an all-female group would be *madrikhot*. A nice word, very descriptive. But language is a funny thing. Hebrew is a gendered language. And we have two veterans of that group who each prefer to be called they/them instead of he/him or she/her. Hebrew gives us no help.

One thing the Torah and our rabbis have taught us all – again and again – is that B'nai Israel is and must continue to be a place where ALL will feel welcome. That includes people whose understanding of themselves is different from what others might choose to think. So this past year we ceased using the various forms of the word *madrikh* to describe our teen educational leaders. Instead we refer to the *program* in which they participate as Team *Hadrakhah*. Same root, but the translation is "Leadership" which is perfectly descriptive. While the word may be in the feminine form, we are not using it to label the gender of those in it. We refer to them as Hadrakhahniks (like Kibbutznik!) if we need a descriptor like that.

Got Keif?

When we began Etgar seven years ago, it meant that those older students finished their class time while our younger students still had an hour left to go. Some were picked up at 11:00, and others stayed until noon. We offered our (then called) *Madrikhim* to provide some fun programming and supervision for the extra hour. It was ok. Not great. Just ok. Over the years we tried different activities, some led by parents, to engage those kids who were hanging around.

This past year we took another leap with those grades. One of our teachers, Susan Walden (who also serves on the Vision Team and the Board of Trustees) had an idea that we implemented this year. We extended the Sunday morning schedule for Kitot Daled Vav (4th – 6th) by 60 minutes, ending the same time as the younger grades. But we did not add more *class* time. Instead we built more time for both guided and free socialization so our young congregants can really get to know one another. Each grade gathers at a different time each week for activities, snack and some time to just hang out. We call this part of our morning *K'vutzat Keif* (Fun Team), but mostly we just say it's time for *Keif*. It is coordinated by our Youth Director, Marisa Underberger and assisted by the teenagers who work in our classrooms as part of the *Hadrakhah* team.

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After the opening session of Religious School, Stephanie Schechter – one of our parents – posted on the Friends of B'nai Israel Religious School Facebook Group: "My kid lost his mind when he heard he had an extra hour of Hebrew school today. When I picked him up—he said he was glad they did it because having a chance to do something fun and social made the rest of it worth it. Kudos to the Vision Committee. So far so good." Another parent, Rachel Yurdin added "SO glad to see this active interaction with smiling faces! Wonderful addition!"

One afternoon, I asked Kitah Vav (6th) student Sacha what he thought about Keif and he said "It is so fun! I felt like I learned a lot, but in a really fun way." Interestingly, there is no Jewish content in Keif. What we want them to learn is all about who their classmates are and how to engage one another and build relationships and community. Sacha's remark suggests that the emotional and social learning in Keif may be carrying over to the cognitive learning when they return to the classroom.

We "got Keif" – and it continued to be a smashing success for the rest of the year. There other developments worth discussing, such as the new genealogy curriculum called My Family Story in Kitah Zayin (7th) in conjunction with Beit Hatfutzot – the Museum of the Jewish People at the University of Tel Aviv and our growing Prophecy and Tikkun Olam curriculum in Kitah Hey (5th). Both began this year and will be further developed in 5780.

Going Forward

Everything we know about the demographics of our community and the demonstrated behaviors (and the research into those behaviors) of Millennials and Generation Z (the group following Millennials) suggests what we have known for a while: the assumptions of the past will not bring the Jewish people into the future. These younger generations – like every younger generation before them – want something different. Many of them are now 4th, 5th or even 6th generation Americans. They are not driven by the same priorities as my generation, and certainly not as the generations of my parents or grandparents.

We as a congregation are in the process of figuring out what that means and how to change to meet the needs of these generations without disenfranchising or disenchanting those who have been here for decades. A colleague has referred to this idea as changing the tires on a bus while the bus is still moving. We do not have the luxury of simply stopping everything – hold the presses! – and sitting down to flesh out where we are going. There will be Shabbat this weekend. There will be Religious School in the fall. And Bonim continues without more than week-long break all year.

Focusing our Vision

The Religious School Vision Team has established three working groups that have already begun to meet. They will continue through the summer and into the

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new school year, but hopefully not beyond the end of the coming year. Their task is to come up with the plan for changing one or more of the tires on the bus of Jewish learning so that it can be implemented.

One group will be focused on Pedagogy – how we teach. For the past five years, I have been working with the faculty on developing experiential learning techniques as well as developing goals that will enhance social, emotional and spiritual learning. This working group will help us move that work forward.

A second group is focused on Curriculum – what we teach. The current curriculum was developed by me, the faculty and the Religious School Committee (precursor of the Vision Team) in 1999. The youngest student in the school at that time is 26 years old. It is time to make sure we are teaching what we want our children of today to learn.

The final group is focused on Branding and Marketing. That sounds very non-educational on the face of it. Actually Branding and Marketing are at their core an educational practice. They are how we frame the conversation about what Jewish learning is all about at B'nai Israel. And how people talk about that will determine whether or not they want to join our congregation and bring their children into that experience. We hope to rename what we have been calling Religious School in a way that speaks meaningfully to parents of young children. And we will rely on you to help us tell that story and use that language. As I said earlier, words matter.

Experiential Learning

As stated above, we know we cannot move forward as if nothing has changed. Our learners are learning differently today than those of twenty years ago. The way they are encountering their world is changing, and not just because of technology. We need to focus more on how we teach and how they learn. experiential learning is one of the keys to that.

Let's flesh out this idea a bit more. Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience, and is more specifically defined as "learning through reflection on doing". Hands-on learning is a form of experiential learning but does not necessarily involve students reflecting on their product. In other words, no experience is educational until we talk about it. Until we make meaning from it.

Our Tefilah curriculum is based on some of these ideas. We don't merely pray the prayers or learn about the ideas behind the prayers. We discuss them and explore how we as individuals can connect to the ideas. It is all about making meaning. In order to raise the bar on experiential learning, we are taking a two pronged approach.

Nancy Parkes is a world-class Jewish educator and the founder of JTeachNow. She will be coming to our congregation several times in the coming year. She will do workshops with our teachers (as well as an additional workshop for all of

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the teachers in our community) to help them develop and hone their skills in experiential learning.

I have been accepted as a fellow in the M² Senior Educators Cohort (SEC) at M² – The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education. The SEC is an international 10-month program providing 40 outstanding educators with a holistic approach toward the theory and practice of experiential Jewish education. Over the course of three, five-day convenings, participants gain exposure to signature educational pedagogies, multidisciplinary perspectives and cutting-edge methods that enable them to articulate, refine and sharpen their practice in an immersive cohort environment. In short, I will be learning how to better help our faculty transform our school.

Adult Jewish Learning

Like Jewish living, Jewish education is not a strictly pediatric activity. We also need to raise the bar for adult learning. While it is premature to say much at this point, I am looking forward to working with our senior staff team and a newly constituted Adult Jewish Learning committee that will take a year-long approach to engaging all of us on our Jewish journeys and growth.

***Modim Anachnu Lach* – We give thanks to you – Gratitude**

None of this is possible without the sincere efforts of many people. Students, thank you for doing your best – even when you are tired, over-programmed and annoyed with the kid sitting next to you. Parents, thank you for making Jewish learning a priority for your children and telling them that through your words and your deeds. Adult learners, thank you for making a priority for your own spiritual growth and for serving as living examples for our young folks.

I want to extend gratitude on all of our behalf to our leaders on the Board of Trustees, Rachel Cohen and the members of the Religious School Vision Team and Jonathan Dizney and the volunteers and room parents who make up the Community Building Team, bringing us picnics, apple-picking and carnivals.

I know you join me in thanking Rabbi Prosnit for his 29 years of leadership including this past year as well as Rabbi Schultz, Cantor Blum and Alexa Cohen. I also want to thank our Facility Director, Eric Braisted and his team for making sure the environment is always ready for our learners and teachers.

And none of this would be possible without the hard work in and out of the classrooms by our teachers and *Hadrakhanikim*. *Todah Rabbah* – a multitude of thanks!