



**ENGAGING
&
RETAINING
JEWISH YOUTH
BEYOND
BAR/BAT MITZVAH:
AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY**

The Auerbach Central Agency
for Jewish Education

Sharon M. Ravitch, Ph.D.



Engaging and Retaining Jewish Youth
Beyond the Bar/Bat Mitzvah:

An Action Research Study

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education

Sharon M. Ravitch, Ph.D.



This research and its publication were made possible by a grant from the
Lasko Charitable Fund,
a philanthropic fund supporting research-based Jewish educational
endeavors in the Greater Philadelphia Area.

Many thanks to Helene Z. Tigay, Rabbi Richard Fagan, and Susan Stone for their continued input and support throughout the research and writing process. Thanks also to ACAJE's entire CARE (Committee on Adolescent Retention and Engagement) advisory board for their guidance and feedback throughout the research process. A final thank you to all of the schools, parents, and youth specialists across the region as well as national youth specialists for their help and participation in this research.

Copyright 2002, The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education.
All Rights Reserved.



August 30, 2002
22 Elul 5762



Shalom,

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education is committed to the importance of research in Jewish education. Without it, hunches and fads would direct our planning; with it, we will have the knowledge-base to understand the needs of the community as well as the complexities of the issues that it uncovers- - the bases for informed and thoughtful planning, communal buy-in and innovative implementation.

A major challenge that faces us all is: how we can engage and retain our teens in the Jewish community during their adolescent years, a time when they are grappling with the critical issues of identity, community, and spirituality. These years, before college, are the window of opportunity to involve them in meaningful and exciting Jewish learning and living, so that their hearts, minds and spirits can be drawn to the Jewish world.

When I first met with our sponsors, the Lasko Charitable Fund's Board of Directors, to discuss the possibility of creating an initiative to encourage post Bar/Bat Mitzvah retention through exciting and innovative projects, it became clear to us that the first step in such planning should be a research study to determine the needs and interests of the teens themselves. The study started as a simple survey of a limited number of teens and expanded into a broader-based study which produced significantly more information which would have a greater potential for wider applicability.

This report summarizes the findings of the study and concludes with recommendations. It has already served as a catalyst to motivate communal leaders in Philadelphia to undertake a major initiative to redesign our synagogue schools in ways that are indicated by the study, as well as a follow-up research study to determine the unique needs in adolescent programming of a particular region in Philadelphia.

We hope that you, our readers, will be motivated to conduct further research and planning in this critical area. We look forward to sharing such efforts.

We are grateful to the Lasko Charitable Fund for its generous support and Dr. Sharon Ravitch for her outstanding direction of the project.

Sincerely,

Helene Z. Tigay
Executive Director, Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education

**Auerbach
Central Agency
for Jewish Education**
הסוכנות המרכזית
לחינוך יהודי בעלילתיה

*Mandell Education Campus
7607 Old York Road
Melrose Park, PA 19027
215-635-8940
215-635-8946 fax
info@acaje.org
www.acaje.org*

*Jonathan L. Levin
President*

*Helene Z. Tigay
Executive Director*



*Constituent of the Jewish
Federation of Greater Philadelphia*

*In the spirit of hal lehabdil "do not
destroy needlessly," this stationery
is printed on recycled paper.*



The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education (ACAJE) is a hub of educational endeavors in the Greater Philadelphia Jewish community. Established by the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia in 1987, ACAJE provides consultation, training, and resources for professional and lay educators in schools, synagogues, camps, youth groups, and other organizations throughout the Jewish community.

On the cutting edge of Jewish educational theory and practice, ACAJE consultants offer a full range of services and programs which enhance the efforts of educators from across the Jewish denominational and age spectrums. Consultants focus on critical issues which have impact on the future identity and continuity of the Jewish people and conduct research in order to inform planning for professional growth and the enhancement of Jewish pedagogy and practice.

Emphasizing creative methodology and materials, ACAJE professionals in the fields of early childhood, elementary, and adolescent education, special needs, the arts, and family education augment the professionalism of our Jewish teaching corps. Special areas such as Hebrew/prayer education, moral education, organizational development and leadership training, Israel and Holocaust education are the main foci of our efforts across curriculum and instruction.

Special programs administered by ACAJE professionals emphasize and intensify the Philadelphia Jewish community's connection to Israel and Jewish communities around the world. The Agency's insightful publications inform educators as well as lay leaders about cutting-edge research, innovative programs, and resources. The focus on organizational development helps synagogue schools function in a collaborative and systemic way.

The Seidman Educational Resource Center, which includes the Gold Pedagogic Reference Library and the Caplan Educational Activities Lab, houses one of the nation's largest and most up-to-date collections of Jewish educational materials and serves as a model for Jewish resource centers throughout the country.

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education
7607 Old York Road
Melrose Park, PA 19027

Phone: 215.635.8940
Fax: 215.635.8946
E-mail: info@acaje.org
Website: www.acaje.org

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	p. 2
II.	Problem Statement	p. 2-3
III.	Stages of the Research: An Overview	p. 3
IV.	Participant Selection	p. 4
V.	Research Methods	p. 4
VI.	Research Questions	p. 4-5
VII.	Research Findings	p. 5-13
VIII.	Implications of the Study	p. 13-17
IX.	Conclusion	p. 17-18
X.	Bibliography	p. 19-20

I. Introduction

Despite differences in ideology and school structure across synagogue schools in the United States, there is widespread consensus across movements, regions, and synagogue school directors that post B'nai Mitzvah drop out is an epidemic that threatens the future of American Jewry (Munitz-Gruberger, 2001; Saxe, et al., 2001, Woocher, 1992). As current studies on American Jewry document, American Jews are at an historical moment in terms of how to address the serious and ongoing assimilation into mainstream American society (Woocher, 1992; Saxe, et al., 2001). However, despite serious concern and widespread attention in this area, there seem to be many more questions than answers about how to remedy the current situation.

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education (ACAJE) of Greater Philadelphia set out to find answers to some of these questions in an action research study devoted to post B'nai Mitzvah drop out and retention. From September 2000 to August 2001, ACAJE conducted research in the area of adolescent retention and engagement in the Jewish community post B'nai Mitzvah. The goal of this study was to learn more about how to retain young people's involvement in the Jewish community beyond their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a time when the majority of young Jews become disconnected from Jewish life, thereby losing opportunities for Jewish learning just as they are developing their identities. This research was funded by the Lasko Charitable Fund, a philanthropic fund supporting research-based Jewish educational endeavors in the Greater Philadelphia Area.

II. Problem Statement

There is widespread concern about the high rates of post B'nai Mitzvah drop out in the United States. Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in research and writing on post-B'nai Mitzvah retention issues (e.g., Elias and Kress, 1997; JESNA, 2000; Munitz-Gruberger, 2001; Sales, 1996; Saxe, et al., 2001; Woocher, 1992). Despite the increasing concern about and attention to this issue, relatively little has been done to bridge theory with practice or to bring students' opinions and voices into the process of exploration into, and decision-making about, ways to improve their formal and informal Jewish experiences. In this study, ACAJE's goal was to learn about young Jews' interests, needs, and opinions vis-a-vis synagogue school education through engaging them in a research study. This study focused on youths' reflections on their synagogue school experiences before, during, and after their Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The initial goal of this research was to use the findings, which are primarily based on youths' responses, to stimulate innovative approaches to adolescent Jewish education and to serve as a springboard for community-based post-B'nai Mitzvah initiatives that will mitigate against post B'nai Mitzvah drop-out rates. As a result of the research process, the goals have been broadened to include the improvement of synagogue school education prior to Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The findings of this research will be used to stimulate planning for and implementation of youth initiatives, both in formal and informal Jewish educational spheres, in the Greater Philadelphia Area.

III. Stages of the Research: An Overview

The stages of this research were as follows:

- (1) Review of literature and national programs to learn about:
 - Existing programs (formal and informal) for Jewish adolescents;
 - Research on adolescent involvement in Jewish programs nationally and in the Philadelphia Jewish community specifically.
- (2) Creation of an interdisciplinary oversight committee comprised of professional and lay members committed to adolescent involvement in the Jewish community. This functioned as an advisory group during each stage of the research process.
- (3) Focus groups, interviews, and surveys with:
 - A diverse range of Jewish youth between the ages of 11 and 22 across the Greater Philadelphia Area, to learn about their experiences, needs, and opinions relating to Jewish education, both formal and informal;
 - Parents, to learn about their attitudes toward Jewish involvement generally and their children's Jewish education specifically;
 - College students, to learn about their reflections on their experiences in synagogue schools, youth groups, and Jewish camps, as well as the influence of their Jewish involvement on their lives;
 - Local and national youth programming specialists, to determine what comprises successful youth programs.

IV. Participant Selection

This research was conducted with Jewish youth in the Greater Philadelphia Area between the ages of 11 and 22, parents of Jewish youth who are Pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah, in their Bar/Bat Mitzvah year and post Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and youth professionals representing formal and informal realms of Jewish education, both locally and nationally. Diversity was sought with respect to the youths' age, gender, geographical region, movement affiliation, and nature of Jewish involvement (or non-involvement), with a focused attempt to include non-affiliated youth (i.e., both "drop-outs" and those who have never been involved in formal Jewish contexts) from a range of backgrounds and regions.

V. Research Methods

Approximately 800 Jewish youth from the Greater Philadelphia Area participated in this study. Of these youth, close to 500 participated in structured focus groups of between 10 and 15 students. Participants in the focus groups also completed surveys designed to elicit their individual opinions. An additional 150 youth were interviewed by phone and 150 youth completed surveys via E-mail. Parents and teachers were interviewed by phone and E-mail, as were youth professionals, who also completed detailed surveys.

VI. Research Questions

In this study, we sought answers to the following questions:

- What will it take to keep Jewish youth involved in the Jewish community post Bar/Bat Mitzvah?
- What are Jewish youths' experiences of Jewish education leading up to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and how/do those experiences influence their decision to stay involved in the Jewish community after their Bar/Bat Mitzvah?
- What are young Jews' interests and ideas in relation to Jewish education and Jewish life?

- What is the correlation between parents' attitudes towards Jewish education and their children's involvement in Jewish education and/or activities post B'nai Mitzvah?
- Do demographic differences account for any of the contrasting needs of Jewish youth vis-a-vis formal and informal Jewish education?

VII. Research Findings

The findings of this study, and therefore the focus of this report, reflect the youths' views rather than ACAJE's philosophical approach to synagogue schools. While readers might feel disappointed that this report does not focus on specific substantive curricular areas (such as spirituality or ritual, for example), it is important to bear in mind that the findings reflect what the youth focused on in their discussions of the issues.

The five findings of this study are complex and multifaceted, and they point to possible recommendations for the Jewish community of Greater Philadelphia and beyond. The complexity of our findings is due in large part to the fact that there is significant diversity within the Jewish youth population of the Greater Philadelphia Area with respect to Jewish family involvement, degree of participation in Jewish life (which includes formal as well as in informal Jewish programming), religious affiliation, geographic region, and socioeconomic status. These factors, along with age and gender, were found to significantly influence young Jews' interests and needs vis-a-vis their Jewish educational experiences.

One general finding is that the majority of the young people interviewed have informed perspectives on their Jewish educational experiences. They therefore have much to recommend to adults interested in enhancing Jewish education and improving the rates of adolescent retention in Jewish educational contexts and Jewish communal activities. Particularly evident was the fact that many of the young people interviewed have strong and sophisticated opinions about what they would like from Jewish institutions, both educational and social, and firmly stated that they want to be part of the decision-making process of determining curriculum and programming.

It should be noted that ACAJE began this study with the belief that the data collected would lead us to a better understanding of what types of programs would draw in and engage post B'nai Mitzvah students. The guiding assumption was that the primary systemic issue causing post B'nai Mitzvah drop out was that programs faltered

in their focus and quality after the Bar/Bat mitzvah years. Therefore, we understood our goal as to learn from students about how to enhance such programming. What we discovered was quite different from our original belief. In fact, after listening to students' thoughts about their experiences in synagogue school and the relationship to their choices about staying involved in Jewish education, it became quite clear that the issue of post-B'nai Mitzvah drop out and disengagement had more to do with youths' pre-B'nai Mitzvah formal Jewish educational experiences than anything else.

The overwhelming majority of the youth who participated in the study stated that by the time they became Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they had become increasingly frustrated by "boring" teachers and "repetitive stuff" and that, as a result, they saw no point in devoting their valuable time to the further pursuit of a Jewish education. These students communicated, with striking consistency, that they found synagogue school to be no more than the "same old stuff" year after year and that because it felt "so useless" there was no reason to return after they were not required by their families to do so. The following student's comments represent a common perspective, she stated, "I guess I, I like, keep learning the same exact stuff every single year, I know everything I need to, so I mean, why should I go?" It was striking, however, that despite the youths' feelings of frustration, there were relatively few students who said that they simply did not want to go to synagogue school. Most students reported that they did not mind going because many of their friends went anyway, but they were nonetheless clearly asking that their time be spent more usefully. As one student stated "I mean, like we're here anyway, so why can't they actually teach us something or make it fun?!" In the section that follows we will explore these findings and, in the final section of this report, we will discuss the implications of these findings for future research and programming, both locally and nationally.

Finding #1: The Jewish Education System Needs to Undergo a Paradigm Shift

Enlivening Jewish Learning: "This is Not Your Father's Hebrew School"

"I want to learn about why Judaism is so important, like really, for me today not just the Maccabees." –9th grader

"It would be so cool if Hebrew School had something to do with, you know, real life." –8th grader

The majority of participants across all age groups, regions, and movements reported that their synagogue school experiences lacked meaningful, active learning

and that, as a result, they often found themselves feeling bored and restless during school time. These students repeatedly requested that ongoing community service, debates on critical issues, increased social time, and the opportunity to mentor/tutor younger students become integrated into their synagogue school curricula.

It became clear across ages and contexts that students are savvy consumers of their educational experiences. In their interviews, the youth made it clear that they desire more than traditional, didactic modes of teaching and that they find the passive, frontal learning model left over from earlier years of synagogue school to be a bad fit with the way they want to learn. These findings are supported by a recent study conducted by Brandeis University, in which the research team found that, "More than half of the teens reported that at the age of 11 or 12 they seldom or never enjoyed Hebrew school... Two-thirds always or often felt bored, compared with one-third in regular school" (Saxe, et al. 2001). Given that synagogue schools are competing for students' time alongside a multitude of extracurricular activities, and that students are often given the choice by their parents as to whether they wish to attend synagogue school post B'nai Mitzvah (Saxe, et al., 2001), the fact that they do not find synagogue school to be a challenging, enriching, or meaningful experience does not auger well for retention.

Stated simply, throughout the research process it became clear that because today's youth are considerably more sophisticated in terms of their needs vis-a-vis their educational experience, they want, need, and expect more from synagogue school than their parents did. These higher expectations are due in large part to increased experience with student-centered pedagogy in their secular classrooms. Specifically, students expect that they will be actively engaged in learning and that the learning experience will reach beyond the confines of their synagogue classrooms. Our data point to a desire on the part of contemporary synagogue school students to be engaged by their teachers in various forms of experiential learning and in learning that is connected to critical thought and meaningful, ongoing forms of community action. As a recent study on the value of social action in Jewish education notes, "For young Jewish adults, being Jewish and caring about the world and working on it are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. They regard community service work as a part of being Jewish. They report that, in turn, their volunteer work has strengthened their own Jewish identity, giving them a greater understanding of their Jewish background and a greater sense of responsibility to live a Jewish life in the future" (Partnership for Service, 2001). In our study, students from all age groups positively recalled experiences with community service, active learning exercises, and semi-structured social time. These positive reflections stand in sharp contrast to their typical

reflections on their synagogue school experiences, which consistently focused on feelings of disappointment, boredom, and frustration.

It became clear throughout the research process that American synagogue schools must undergo a paradigm shift. Today's students are aware of, and are therefore resistant to, sub-standard teaching and recycled curricular materials. And, while students may be too tired at the end of a long day to communicate this to their teachers, they are communicating this with their feet as they walk out of synagogue schools just after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, never to return. The overwhelming majority of students in the study made it clear that their choice not to stay in synagogue school (either an impending or historical choice) was precipitated by the feeling that there was/is nothing compelling to keep them there. This stood in sharp contrast to students who chose to stay in synagogue school after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah because their programs, teachers, and/or educational directors created environments in which they felt energized and engaged socially, intellectually, and in terms of social action, and in which they felt personally connected and supported. This contrast speaks directly to the need for the professional development of educators through training in which the teachers are engaged as whole people and inspired to teach and connect with students around powerful Jewish concepts and values. It also speaks to the need for development of sequenced and innovative curricula and enhanced programming that provides multiple gateways for Jewish youth to learn about and express their Judaism. Further, this contrast makes clear that there is a dire need for more accountability within the synagogue school system, as well as for focused, supportive, and ongoing professional and leadership development for teachers and their educational directors.

Finding #2: Teacher Training and Curriculum Development Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn: The Need for Quality Control

“Do Hebrew School teachers ever even learn how to teach?” –8th grader

“The basics are enough, I mean we already know them. Why can't we have classes about things we don't know instead of the same old thing every year?” –9th grader

As indicated above, the vast majority of students from all age groups reported that their teachers did not involve them in the classroom or give them the opportunity to explore or express their opinions and questions about Jewish issues. Rather, students reported that their teachers tended to follow teachers' manuals from outdated textbooks and/or that they seemed to simply “do whatever was easiest for them to

do,” such as “teaching off the top of their heads” rather than working with planned, meaningful, sequential materials that build on students’ prior knowledge and experiences in synagogue school. Furthermore, students pointed to the fact that many of their teachers lack pedagogical and management skills, as well as a sufficient Judaic knowledge base. These students repeatedly voiced frustration at feeling “forced” to sit in classrooms with teachers who themselves seemed disengaged and who lacked inspiration, expertise, pedagogical skills, and effective classroom management strategies. The contrast between students who reported negative feelings and experiences and those who reported that their synagogue school experiences were largely positive, was dramatic and pointed repeatedly to the power of creative, student-centered, and engaging teaching that was implemented by knowledgeable teachers who were passionate about the subject matter.

The high school-aged participants reported that they would have been more likely to remain in the Jewish educational system beyond their Bar/Bat Mitzvah if the curricula had been personally meaningful, relevant to their secular lives, sequential, developmentally appropriate, student-centered, based on active learning models, and taught by teachers who are able to engage students. Many of the high school-aged participants reported that their synagogue school experience did not contribute to positive feelings about their Jewishness, nor did it give them the background necessary to lead a meaningful Jewish life. One young woman, for example, noted that she “didn’t even learn how to run a Jewish home.” The majority of high school-aged participants reported that their main reason for leaving formal Jewish education was that their synagogue school experience leading up to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah was not “meaningful,” “valuable,” or “enjoyable.”

Conversely, students (both pre- and post-B’nai Mitzvah) reported that when they had engaging and knowledgeable teachers who gave them the opportunity to think critically about various issues, they enjoyed synagogue school and valued their learning. The teachers who engaged their students with exciting material and inspired pedagogy were respected, adored, and viewed as mentors. Not surprisingly, it was the students who had teachers showing this kind of commitment and skill who typically wished to (and in many cases did) return to synagogue school after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and who voiced more of an understanding about the importance of receiving a Jewish education.

What was striking about the majority of the students’ responses to questions about their learning experiences was that there were only a few cases in which students unilaterally “bashed” their teachers and schooling experiences. Rather, the pattern was that students communicated that since they “are [t]here already anyway” they felt

frustrated that the time was not made more interesting and engaging and that genuine learning was not happening. Most of the students who participated in the study noted that they expected to go to synagogue school and did not challenge that underlying assumption. However, they did question the quality, value, and meaning of their synagogue school experiences. Many students from all age groups said that they liked their teachers, but often, these teachers lacked the ability to teach the subject matter in ways that were interesting and often lacked the skills necessary to control the classroom. These students typically communicated that it seemed odd that their teachers did not have these skills since their “regular” school teachers did.

The overwhelming consistency of these findings points most directly to the need for the recruitment of quality teachers and the necessary training to ensure high quality, cutting-edge instruction in our synagogue schools. This will be further discussed in the Implications section of this report.

Finding #3: Diversifying Curriculum, Instruction and Programming for Jewish Youth “One Size Does Not Fit All”

As stated in the Introduction, diversity was sought with respect to the participants’ age, gender, geographical region, movement affiliation, and nature of their Jewish involvement (or non-involvement), with a focused attempt to include non-affiliated students from a range of backgrounds and regions. It became strikingly clear after engaging with students across the entire region that students from different demographic areas have varying needs in terms of pedagogy and programming. While approximately 90 percent of the participants voiced that they wanted more out of their synagogue school experiences, there were some important qualitative differences among students. For example, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tended to communicate more interest in participating in programs such as ski trips and coffee houses and had no financial concerns about doing so, whereas their counterparts from less financially secure families asked questions and showed concern about funding and transportation for such events. Additionally, students from middle and working class families seemed more interested in developing school-based programs related to building technology skills and refining future career goals (e.g., resume building and learning computer skills), whereas their counterparts from synagogues with a higher socioeconomic base communicated that these areas were extensively covered at home and in their schools. There were also, not surprisingly, differences across gender and age. The girls tended to be more interested in the social and ritual aspects of synagogue school and the boys in sports and action-related

activities. In addition, age played a major role in what students expected from synagogue school. For example, older students often voiced the desire to meet and interact with Jewish peers from other schools and to engage in active debate about critical social issues and regions as a part of their synagogue school experiences, whereas the younger students did not communicate such interests. Our research of successful post-B'nai Mitzvah programs shows that institutions with high rates of adolescent retention integrate Jewish values and programs with social time and secular activities in creative ways that meet students' needs, both as Jews and as individuals living in a secular society. Therefore, the differences in students' desires and needs vis-a-vis programming through their synagogue schools prove important for thinking about creating informal programming, as well as for rethinking formal Jewish education curricula and programming given its current lack of appeal.

These differences in the desires and needs that students expressed speak to the fact that synagogue schools need to not only improve the content and style of instruction, but also to consider developmental, socioeconomic, gender, and regional differences as they plan to make positive changes in synagogue school education and programming. They point directly to the need to think critically, progressively, and inclusively about curriculum, instruction, and programming for Jewish youth so that students' desires, such as coffee houses and gaining technology skills, become integrated into educational programming both pre- and post-B'nai Mitzvah. This will be further explored in the Implications section of this report.

Finding #4: Parental Roles In Post B'nai Mitzvah Retention "It Takes a Village to Raise a Family"

"My Dad always tells me how bad he was in Hebrew School and it's so funny. He said he thinks it's a waste of time, that I could be playing ball or doing something else."—7th grader

"I mean, my Mom and Step-Dad don't know the answers when I ask them for help with my homework or projects. I have so much homework that I can't go and find that stuff too." —8th grader

It comes as no surprise that parents' attitudes, both positive and negative, toward Jewish education have a direct impact on their children's level of interest and willingness to participate in Jewish social and educational spheres (Saxe, et al., 2001). For example, when parents viewed synagogue school as a rite of passage to be endured

in order to reach a Bar or Bat Mitzvah rather than as an opportunity for Jewish learning and growth for their children and families as a whole, so did their children. In contrast, when parents valued Jewish education and actively participated in the Jewish community themselves, their children were more likely to value Jewish learning and continue their own Jewish education post Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Both the youths' and their parents' responses supported the widely accepted notion that parents' beliefs about their children's Jewish education has much to do with their own sense of priority about Jewish education. Many youth reported that they received either tacit or explicit messages from their parents that they viewed their child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah as little more than an historic rite of passage. For example, one student stated "I'm doing it 'cause my Mom Mom and Pop Pop would be mad at my Mom if I didn't." Many students said that they had no intention of pursuing anything Jewish-related after the day passed. As one student admitted, "The day I read my Haftorah, I'm outta here!" In contrast, the students who reported that they wanted to continue with their Jewish education generally noted that either: (a) their parents insisted and placed great importance on their continuing Jewish education; and/or (b) their parents were themselves involved in the synagogue and some form of Jewish learning and practice. Likewise, of the parents interviewed, those whose children continued with their Jewish education post B'nai Mitzvah were clearly themselves committed to Jewish learning and/or community involvement, whereas parents whose children were not involved tended to communicate their own reluctance or lack of a sense of connection to their synagogues and their own Jewish learning.

It became clear that when parents took synagogue school seriously, so did their children. The correlation between parent and child attitudes toward Jewish education was powerful in its consistency and points toward important implications for drawing families into the educational process of pre-B'nai Mitzvah education, as well as the need for ongoing and meaningful outreach from Jewish institutions and the Jewish community at large to parents and families. Further, it speaks to the need for training in family outreach and education for teachers and educational directors, so that they are aware of the need for family involvement and able to proactively and consistently address this need. This will be further discussed in the Implications section of this report.

Finding #5: The Collective Abandonment of Jewish Youth "Out of Sight, Out of Mind"

The majority of youth who left synagogue school after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah reported a lack of outreach from the Jewish community after their departure. This

finding addresses an issue which has been outside the purview of Jewish educational contexts, both formal and informal: namely, what happens to those youth (and families) who have left formal Jewish educational contexts after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. These youth stated that there was no outreach whatsoever from Jewish leaders or peers after they left their synagogue schools and/or youth groups and communicated varying levels of disappointment about their lack of connection to their synagogue school and Jewish community more generally.

For these youth, who drop out of synagogue school just after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and leave the formal Jewish education system of their synagogue, there is no longer a solid or consistent connection to Jewish life. Many of these students communicated that they would be interested in attending informal Jewish events, and even possibly school-based events or innovative school programs, but that they were not contacted by anyone after their first year of leaving the school. A significant number of students noted that outreach might have made a difference in their decision to return to synagogue school. For example, one student responded to our researcher's phone inquiry with excitement and immediately asked how he could get involved in Jewish programming. He stated "Wow, I would really like to be involved; no one calls me anymore." This finding speaks to the need for outreach in innovative ways given young peoples' high-tech, fast-paced lives. It also underscores the decentralized nature of Jewish communal life in America.

VIII. Implications of the Study

The findings of this research suggest a number of possible directions to pursue in addressing the critical issue of retaining young people in the Jewish community beyond their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The recommendations that follow are the outgrowth of our research findings. While much of what we have discovered can be generalized beyond our regional context, we urge regional research on this topic so that the inquiry and resulting actions are sophisticated in terms of their sensitivity to community differences. These recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to engender active dialogue about how to remedy the current crisis in Jewish involvement among Jewish youth and their families.

Implication #1: Systemic Revision of the Jewish Educational System: Beyond Turf Wars

Students' critiques of their Jewish educational experiences, which cross over a variety of formal and informal educational institutions, speak to the need for institutional integration of youth curricula, teaching staff, and programming, as well as a systems approach for adolescent programming across institutions. Such a shift would require the formation and implementation of a system of communication across formal and informal educators, so that the Jewish education and outreach system is unified, continuous, and interdependent. Creating an interactive system across institutions would contribute to less "reinventing the wheel" programming, as well as to a seamless experience across youth's educational experiences, both formal and informal. Facilitating this paradigm shift will require a reenvisioning of the Jewish educational system across movements and venues, as well as serious reconsideration of how Jewish programming for youth is conceptualized (i.e., intra- and inter-institutional restructuring toward a collaborative model).

Implication #2: The Need for Intensive Teacher Training and Curriculum Development

Students' reports about the poor quality of their synagogue school experiences speak to the need for a systemic focus on teacher training and professional development for teachers and educational directors toward the goal of making the curriculum and instruction sequential, student-centered, and responsive to students'

needs. As students reported with striking consistency, Jewish education is typically passive and frontal and must become more active and interactive, so that the learning is meaningful and teachers involve and engage their students in the learning process. Students must feel that they are being engaged in meaningful dialogue and activities, such as community service, both inside and outside of the classroom. Students also reported that they want to spend semi-structured time with peers yet do not just want to "sit around anymore." Teachers must learn how to incorporate active learning strategies and activities into their teaching. This can only happen when the teachers' knowledge base is enhanced, so that they have serious, in-depth, meaningful lessons to offer.

Implication #3: Jewish Education Needs to Shift

- Jewish education needs clear goals that relate directly to the needs, wants, and demands of youths' lives and that directly relate to Jewish educators' thoughtful reflections on their goals for students. There is a need to clarify this concept for and with educators so that the educational experience is dynamic and meaningful (and "cool").
- Jewish education needs to integrate successful strategies and pedagogical models from both formal and informal education since Jewish educators cannot teach the cognitive without the affective and social aspects of Judaism.
- Synagogue schools need to promote the positive aspects of Jewish learning and Jewish living by engaging students and their families in a creative, new approach to Jewish education.
- Synagogue schools, and the synagogues that house them, must shift their organizational infrastructure so that: (1) education becomes central to synagogue functioning; (2) rabbis and synagogue leaders become integrated into the process of teaching and learning; and (3) teachers are provided with institutionally structured ways of providing regular input and engaging in direct partnerships with educational staff (e.g., educational director, cantor, rabbi) for developing, evaluating, and facilitating programs.
- There needs to be an elevated system of student accountability so that students receive the message that their Jewish learning is important. The implementation of a grading system that parallels secular school grading structures would help to demonstrate that teachers and parents care about student performance and that they take Jewish education seriously.
- The suggested improvements in the synagogue schools must be applied to post-B'nai Mitzvah contexts, as well as to pre B'nai Mitzvah contexts. Though the youth participants stated that they are turned off by synagogue school pre B'nai Mitzvah, we learned that many post B'nai systems need major revisions as well. Post B'nai Mitzvah programs cannot simply resemble pre-B'nai Mitzvah synagogue school. The culture must be different, reflecting the different and

considerably more sophisticated needs of older youth. Teachers and youth leaders need specific training in the areas of relating to and planning curricula for adolescents.

Implication #4: The Need for Parental Education and Involvement

- Parents' investment in their children's Jewish education typically lasts until their child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In order to make a significant change in this pervasive attitude, Jewish educators must create programs within an entire system that: (1) attract and engage parents in learning and living Jewishly from pre-school through high school graduation in new and innovative ways; (2) seek ongoing parental buy-in; and (3) model valuing Jewish education for its own sake, not simply a means to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. This will require long-range planning, comprehensive programming, and systemic change.
- Since parents often focus on their own less-than-ideal synagogue school experiences and then pass on that negativity to their children, synagogue schools and Jewish organizations must replace their perceptions of synagogue school/Jewish educators with contemporary, resonant images that appeal to today's Jewish families. To this end, there needs to be an experiential component to synagogue school. Jewish educators also need to better integrate Jewish education into people's lives. This will help parents realize that Jewish education can become embedded in their daily lives, and will foster a sense that Jewish education is integral to Jewish life and identity. In this area, the Jewish community as a whole must work to undo the devaluation of leading a Jewish life and of obtaining Jewish education by promoting a positive, appealing, and meaningful sense of Jewish life.
- Jewish educators and rabbis must serve as active mentors and advisers to parents and families, helping them create a "Jewish family strategic plan."
- Jewish educational institutions need to provide a variety of entrees into the Jewish world for families, creating a continuum on which they can move back and forth in their level of involvement over time.

Implication #5: A Call to Stop Abandoning our Jewish Youth

There needs to be a system of accountability within the Jewish community as a whole so that students and families who opt out of the system do not ultimately feel too alienated to return. This must be thought through collaboratively and creatively. Institutions should collectively hire outreach workers to contact and engage youth and families who leave the formal Jewish educational system and its essential youth groups.

IX. Conclusion: A Call for Action Research in the Study of Jewish Youth

The findings of this study speak to the need for systemic accountability and professional development across Jewish educational contexts. Specifically, our data point to the need for synagogue schools to better meet the needs of their constituencies: youth and their families. In addition to improving programming for post B'nai Mitzvah youth and their families, the seeds for valuing Jewish learning must be sowed well before that time. This has both local and national implications, and we urge other centralized institutions to engage in action research in this domain; research that crosses over movements, specific venues, and demographic areas, so that all Jewish institutions can come together to better serve Jewish youth and ensure the future of the Jewish people.

It is important to note that one of most significant findings came as a result of engaging in action research. We began this research as a response to a generous offer of funding for post B'nai Mitzvah programming from the Lasko Charitable Fund. Together, we decided that rather than simply creating new programming, we should structure a formal, action-oriented inquiry into what the youth themselves wanted and valued. This inquiry became the preliminary step to creating an implementation plan for post B'nai Mitzvah retention and engagement. The information gleaned through this research process has proven essential as a guide to the formation of both community-based youth initiatives and initiatives geared toward intensive training for teachers and leadership development for educational directors. Together, we developed a research plan for engaging in data collection across the entire Philadelphia region, and explored in depth the needs, concerns, and desires of a diverse range of local youth. The research process included gaining feedback from a broad spectrum of professionals and parents as well. As we learned more, the number of informants grew to include a sufficient representation from a diverse range of geographic regions, movements, age groups, and levels of Jewish involvement. For future research in this area, we recommend an

in-depth exploration of camping and youth group experiences, which have been reported to be successful in terms of youth engagement and retention, to determine what aspects of their success can be further enhanced and incorporated into the synagogue school system.

This model of research, in which the funders are involved in the research process and in which an interdisciplinary advisory committee helped to provide critical feedback with respect to all aspects of the research process, yielded a quality of data and analysis that far exceeded our original expectations. This research study was structured as a self-conscious pursuit of multiple perspectives toward the end of institutional change and systemic reform. The collaborative and action-oriented nature of this research resulted in a particularly focused commitment to a community-wide agenda dealing with significant issues that will affect the future of Jewish youth and the Jewish community as a whole.

Selected Bibliography

- Elias, M.J., and Kress, J.S., (1997). "Action-Research-Based Transformation of After School Religious School Education: A Case Study Approach." *In Meeting the Needs of Jewish Adolescents: Successes in the Field... Emerging Trends*. Presentation at the Jewish Educators Assembly. Rye: NY.
- Horowitz, B. (2000). "Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity." A Report to the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal. UJA-Federation of New York. New York: NY.
- Kadushin, C., Kelner, S., Saxe, L. (2000). "Being a Jewish Teenager in America: Trying to Make It." Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. Boston: MA.
- Keller, C. and Margolis, D.J., (Eds.) (1995). "...Al Pi Darko... In Their Own Way." The Proceedings from a Policy/Program Conference on The Jewish Adolescent in North America. Boston Commission on Jewish Continuity, Bureau of Jewish Education. Boston: MA.
- Kosmin, B.A., and Keysar, A. (1999). *"Four Up": The High School Years*. Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, The Jewish Theological Seminary. New York: NY.
- JESNA. (2000). *Agenda: Jewish Education: New Approaches to Teen Issues*. Issue #13, Summer 2000. New York: NY.
- Munitz-Gruberger, R. (2001). "Keeping The Faith: How to Avoid the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Dropout Blues." *Women's League Outlook*, Vol. 72, No 1, Fall 2001.
- Partnership for Service Survey. (2001). "Exploring the Potential to Expand Volunteer Opportunities for Young Jewish Adults." Jewish Life Network and Partnership for Service. New York: NY.
- Sales, A.L. (1996). *Jewish Youth Databook: Research on Adolescence and Its Implications for Jewish Teen Programs*. Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. Boston: MA.
- Saxe, L., Kelner, S., Kadushin, C. and Brodsky, A. (2001). "Jewish Adolescents: American Teenagers Trying to 'Make It'." Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. Boston: MA.

Wertheimer, J., (Ed). (1995-1996). "Jewish Identity and Religious Commitment." The North American Study of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members. Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, The Jewish Theological Seminary. New York: NY.

Woocher, J. (1992). "The Future of Supplementary School Education." Lecture Delivered at The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education. Philadelphia, PA.

For additional copies of this publication, please contact ACAJE:
info@acaje.org or 215.635.8940

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education
7607 Old York Road
Melrose Park, PA 19027

Phone: 215.635.8940
Fax: 215.635.8946
E-mail: info@acaje.org
Website: www.acaje.org