

THE GOLDEN AGE OF RELIGIOUS SCHOOL EDUCATION

The challenges of Jewish education are largely the same as they were more than a century ago, when the first generations of American Jews began attending supplementary schools. Forced by these challenges to be inventive and resourceful, the best educators integrated innovative approaches and cutting-edge practices. And yet, because we are in an era of unprecedented collaboration, I believe we are now in a “Golden Age” for religious schools.

American Jews in the 19th century often employed private tutors (such as a rabbi or a scholar) to provide private or small-group classes for their children’s (that is to say, their sons’) Jewish education.¹ Sunday School initially was developed for families, including immigrant families, that could not afford to pay both synagogue dues and the tuition for a private tutor. By the second half of the 19th century, the majority of Reform congregations in the United States ran “Sabbath Schools” that met on Saturday afternoons, Sunday mornings or both. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, Sunday schools were attended most often by the children of increasingly affluent synagogue members.² And, by the late 1960s, “parents relied mainly or almost entirely on the religious school for the Jewish upbringing of their children.”³

Even today, many schools are, unfortunately, dull places where students spend their days memorizing facts about ancient texts and historical events. Yet, even a century ago, a spirit of experimentation and creativity characterized the best supplementary schools.

They incorporated drama, music, games and self-paced Hebrew instruction. These programs sought to teach practical skills for leading an engaged Jewish life, to build community among the students and to provide educational experiences for the entire family. As an example, the Jewish Home Institute, established by Hemdah Miller and active throughout the mid-to-late 1920s, developed a series of home-based learning materials, including recipes, stories, craft projects (accompanied by such supplies as modeling clay and cutouts), and phonograph records supplemented with sheet music. One enduring legacy is the song *My Dreidl*, which remains among the most popular Chanukah songs to this day⁴—performed even by Cantor Mo Glazman and our choir this past December.



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Even a century ago, such programs honored the diverse interests and backgrounds of students and their families. They provided both the means and motivation to create thoughtful, caring members of intergenerational and international Jewish communities. **Yet, if there ever has been a “Golden Age” for synagogue education, it is right now.** A pervasive spirit of cooperation imbues the work of supplementary Jewish education. I see among my fellow educators a sense of shared endeavor and mutual responsibility for the education of the next generation. We are witnessing a blossoming of innovation and collaboration and, consequently, an improvement in the quality of religious schools throughout the nation. Temple Emanu-El is at the center of many of these initiatives, and this is no surprise: As one of the first Reform congregations in the country, we have enormous experience pioneering approaches and sharing our wisdom and resources with others.

Over the past 10 years, Emanu-El has hosted three “Hebrew Technology Round Tables,” day-long conferences for educators to share best practices for and obstacles to the implementation of online learning. Through these candid conversations, we were able to develop and successfully implement our **Hebrew Enrichment Program**, through which our teachers provide weekly, one-on-one tutoring sessions over the Internet (included as part of school tuition). Each year, more than two dozen of our students participate in this program.

In the summer of 2016, we brought together the leadership from 10 congregational schools that have adapted our **Tefilah** (Worship) curriculum. Each school varies the specific methods it employs to fit the needs of its institution, but all share an approach that prioritizes close examination of the words of the Hebrew prayers and robust discussion of students’ interpretations of those words. We continue to

support each other through an active Facebook discussion group where we raise questions and share ideas for specific lessons.

Our Seventh Grade **Mitzvah Corps** and Eighth Grade **Tzedek League** have been publicized widely as models for

service learning in a Jewish setting. These programs teach Jewish values through direct action and groupwide reflection. Our **Tribes** program, run by our teens for students in Third Grade through Fifth Grade on Sunday mornings, has set the standard for engaging young adults as Jewish role models and for building friendships that extend beyond the walls of the school.

Over this past winter break, on a ski slope in Colorado, one parent in our school observed her son chatting with an older kid she didn’t recognize. When asked how they knew each other, the boy answered, “We’re on the same Tribe at Sunday School.”

Our Religious School is seen as a paradigm for providing flexible scheduling while maintaining the utmost expectations for participation. Because we know our students are as busy as any other New Yorker, they may attend our school either on Sunday mornings or Monday afternoons, and they may switch back and forth as needed. Outside of school hours, we host activities ranging from a

Student Council that decides which

organizations will be the beneficiaries of our school *tzedakah* collection to pajama parties for our youngest students, to international travel programs for our teens. We recognize and celebrate our students’ achievements for this “extra” participation by awarding Religious School with Honors.

The time commitment and energy demanded to prepare activities that are engaging, instructive and fun cannot be overstated. Our faculty (both adult and teen) undergo rigorous training and evaluation, and they hold each other accountable to high standards of excellence. Perhaps it is for

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these reasons that many of our teachers return each year—some of them now teaching the children of students from their classes during the 1960s and 1970s.

We also play a critical role in training the next generation of educational leadership: I personally teach a mandatory, year-long graduate course in education for all students enrolled in the rabbinical and cantorial programs at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (including three members of Emanu-El’s religious school faculty). And, in partnership with HUC-JIR, I also teach a one-semester version of this course here at Emanu-El for religious school teachers from seven congregations (including another three of our own faculty).

Reform Jewish leaders, and the educational leaders of its best supplementary schools, always have predicated our efforts on simultaneously respecting and challenging established ways of doing things. We call ourselves the “Department of Lifelong Learning” because we know that Jewish education doesn’t start and stop with your time in a religious school.

No matter what your age, I hope you will challenge yourself to try something new or to recommit to keeping Jewish traditions alive. In the coming weeks, we would be delighted to see you at our **Purim Shpiel and Carnival** on **March 4**, our **Elsie Adler Holocaust Memorial Program** on **April 8 and 9**, or our Confirmation Ceremony as part of the **Congregational Shavuot Services** on **May 20**. Come help us meet the challenge of building an intergenerational community among our family of families.



1. Richman, Julia. (1900). “The Jewish Sunday School Movement in the United States.” Abrahams, Israel and Claude Goldsmid Montefiore., eds. *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. Vol. 12. No. 48, July 1900. 563-601. New York: MacMillan Company, 573-592.

2. Kaplan, Mordecai M. and Bernard Cronson. (1949). “Report of Committee on Jewish Education of The Kehillah (Jewish Community) Presented at its First Annual Convention, New York, February 27, 1910.” *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 20, No. 3:113-116. Network for Research in Jewish Education.

3. Sklare, Marshall, Joseph Greenblum and Benjamin B. Ringer. (1969). *Not Quite at Home: How an American Jewish Community Lives With Itself and Its Neighbors*. New York: Institute of Human Relations Press

4. Krasner, Jonathan B. (2011). *The Benderly Boys & American Jewish Education*. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press. 95, 231-235, 245.

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SERVICE NOTES

Shabbat Services

Friday Evening

Organ Recital at 5:45 PM

Service begins at 6:00 PM

- Fifth Avenue Sanctuary

Saturday Morning

Organ Recital at 10:15 AM

Service Begins at 10:30 AM

- Fifth Avenue Sanctuary

Broadcast of Services

All Sabbath and most holiday services are broadcast on our livestream channels:

- www.emanuelnyc.org/broadcast
- www.facebook.com/emanuelnyc

Daily Sunset Services

Sunday—Thursday at 5:30 PM

- Marvin and Elisabeth Cassel
Community House, One East 65th Street

Weekly Torah Study

Our Sabbath morning group meets each Saturday, before our worship service, from 9:15 AM to 10:15 AM.

For the hearing impaired

A hearing loop is installed in the Fifth Avenue Sanctuary and the Beth-El Chapel; switch aid to T-coil. Headsets or neck loops also are available.