

Why Do Synagogues Need Preschool?

by Alexa Cohen, Bonim Preschool Director

Recently one of my colleagues at a Reform synagogue that shall remain nameless asked for some help answering a question that seems to “rear its ugly head every single year” from the Board of Directors: “Why do we need a preschool?”

Her first thoughts brought her to the obvious reasons of connecting families early to each other and to our temple community, to help them form a strong Jewish individual and family identity, to nurture the relationship with our clergy, to participate in events, to become active in the community, and to further educate their own families—but what else? This director posed the question to the rest of the early childhood education/Reform Judaism community.

How would we answer? Some responses appear below:

“How about because the community is commanded to educate its children in the Torah? Now, I am not a Torah scholar, but that’s what I learned growing up and continue to hear from clergy.”

“And how about education is the key to Jewish survival. Wow, what a question!!”

“How about: the young families and their children are the future leaders of our congregation, if we nurture them. Otherwise if we miss the entry point into our synagogues, rarely do we get the chance to reach out again. Young families need us as their entry point.”

“I also think that there’s another important value. In our area, the Jewish community is spread out, there’s no “Jewish neighborhood.” We always have non-Jewish families in our program (about 15%), even children of clergy of other faiths, and thus I think that it has helped us build an excellent reputation within the greater community. It is not only the Jewish community that we serve, but the whole community, by demonstrating the need to value children and families in our society. Our early childhood programs can exemplify a very necessary value (and maybe indirectly combat anti-Semitism.... or plain ignorance).”

“I think the idea of using Mark Rosen’s research is a great one. I heard him present some of his research last summer and basically this is what I got out of it: When parents have young children, it is a window of opportunity—a small one. This is the time that their lives are changing, and they are open and looking to make connections with other people with young children. They will go somewhere, and often they will go to the place that gets them first and that is where they will stay. If an interfaith family calls a church and a synagogue and the church responds before the synagogue, they’ll go to the church.

Where I live, it does not have to be an interfaith family. When the JCC closed the preschool, most of the families, including Jewish ones, went to a nearby church.”

“Ron Wolfson’s book “Relational Judaism” could be helpful. He writes that we need to move away from transactional Judaism. We have to start realizing that getting Jewish families involved with other Jews is good for the Jewish people. Even if they don’t join Jewish organizations at this time, they might later.”

“Also, not in a Jewish framework but in an early childhood and economic framework, James Heckman may be helpful. He is a Nobel Prize–winning economist who says that if we want to get the country out of debt we need to invest in early childhood education. Great stuff.”

I feel very lucky to have the support of the B’nai Israel Board of Directors as well as the staff here for our preschool. As our school grows, so does their commitment to provide high-quality Jewish early childhood education. From the maintenance staff, who keep our school safe and clean, to the clergy, who enrich the children with Jewish knowledge through stories and songs, to the education and administrative staff, who make room for all our varied programming throughout the building, the ECEC is proud to be an important part of the B’nai Israel family.