



## A Shul's Commitment to Its Children

Joel M. Tessler

Jewish day school education is reaching more children than ever before. A well-respected rabbi recently suggested that there are more young people studying Torah now than at any time in Jewish history. Nonetheless, we are losing Jewish children in record numbers, and studies indicate an American Jewish community in decline. While day schools are serving a growing part of the community, a multifaceted approach to reaching children and their families is necessary.

Beth Sholom is the only Orthodox shul in the Silver Spring area to maintain its Talmud Torah, and the only congregational school whose students are not required to be members of the synagogue in order to study at the school. For many years the school of seventy students has run at a large deficit; the congregation subsidizes the education of all children, not just members.

All this is done because we acknowledge that most Jewish children will not attend a day school. We are committed to every child and family who wants to learn about a traditional Jewish lifestyle, and we back it up by a financial commitment and an open policy of enrollment.

We tell our parents and children that a supplementary education of six hours a week cannot compare, nor compete, with a full-time day school education. We encourage parents and families to choose a more intensive Jewish education. We explain that this school is only the beginning and education re-

quires a partnership between the school, shul, and family.

While some children leave our school and transfer to one of the many day schools in the area, for the majority of children, being at our school is a great success. Therefore, we try to maximize the experience with study, music, and fun. Our teachers love being Jewish and doing mitzvot, which translates to the children. That intangible feeling can't be taught, but it is felt. Students play sports with their teachers and rabbis during class-breaks and are invited to their teachers' homes for Shabbat.

It is popular to attack the failings of the congregational school system. I certainly realize the shortcomings. But our school provides an opportunity to reach families who would not otherwise be reached. By not demanding membership in our synagogue, we encourage people to experience traditional Judaism through their children. Most families make our synagogue part of their religious experience, even if they never join. Unlike some shuls, we provide bar and bat mitzvah for our Talmud Torah children even if the family doesn't belong to the synagogue. Every door is a possible entrée to Judaism. This one, too, should remain open.

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## Small Communities Do Hebrew Schools

Leah Levi

Full 2001 was very busy for Congregation Emanuel in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The congregation helped friends and family of six Hebrew school graduates celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah. Each student chanted from the Torah and Haftarah, led *musaf*, and gave a *drash* about their Torah portion. This marked the culmination of seven years of studies in our historic shul, a congregation that shares the *nachas* of each family welcoming their child into the adult Jewish world.

Hebrew School is a central feature of shul life. The school meets three times a week, mostly in the

sanctuary of our 137-year-old building. One coordinator, nine teachers, and seven teenage assistants ensure that the seventy students learn what it means to be an egalitarian Conservative Jew. The expenses of running the school make up a quarter of the synagogue's overall budget, and the annual deficit is absorbed by members' dues and a grant from the local federation. Tight finances necessitate a shoestring budget.

The challenge of Hebrew School goes far beyond little money and no permanent classroom space. Beside the usual competition for a child's attention after