Introduction

Data from the National Jewish Population Survey continues to show that more Jewish families are becoming less connected to the Jewish community.\(^1\) Jewish education is one of the best ways to ensure Jewish continuity, but a major unanswered question is whether parents who do not start out connected to the community will choose to educate their children Jewishly.

While this situation is cause for concern, it also presents the community with an opportunity. If the Jewish community reaches out to young Jewish couples when they have a child, there is potentially a 3-5 year window for influencing their future educational choices and the Jewish identity of their children.

To gain a better understanding of Jewish parents and to reach out to them effectively, it is necessary to seek answers to several key questions:

- How is the current generation of new Jewish parents planning to raise their children?
- How do they feel about Judaism and the Jewish community?
- What is the community currently doing for them?

This paper describes research conducted in 2004 by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University to answer these questions. It concludes with recommendations for the Jewish community arising from the research findings.

**Description of the Research**

*Focus Groups*

To learn about parents' attitudes toward Judaism and their educational plans for their children, a total of 11 focus groups were conducted in five cities: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Seattle. Approximately one hundred parents participated. Participants consisted of non-Orthodox couples and single parents, both in-married and inter-married, who were expecting or who had at least one child age 0-3. Focus groups were organized and hosted by couples in each community who agreed to hold the groups in their homes and recruit their friends and acquaintances. Emphasis was placed on recruiting those who were not strongly connected to the community. The vast majority of participants had had at least some Jewish education while growing up, but only about a third were currently members of a synagogue.

*Phone Surveys*

To learn about community-based programs for new Jewish parents, several hundred Jewish communal professionals in more than 50 North American communities with a Jewish population of 20,000 or greater were contacted by telephone. Calls were made to the four major agencies in each community most likely to sponsor programs for new parents: Federations, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Family Services, and Jewish Boards of Education. Although it was impractical to contact every synagogue in each community.

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2 This research was supported by the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation as part of the planning process for the Newborn Gift program. The author wishes to thank Naomi Bar-Yam and Lucy Lorin for their assistance.
community, calls were made to specific congregations when relevant programs were identified. Interviews were also conducted with some of the regional offices of the Reform, Conservative, and Ḥabad movements to learn about programming conducted under their auspices.

**Summary: Focus Group Findings Regarding Parents**

**Child-Raising**

Almost all of the in-married parents expressed pride in being Jewish and wanted their children to have a Jewish identity, but most acknowledged that they did not know how to foster that within their children. Most of these parents did not practice Judaism in their home and did not have sufficient knowledge to teach their children about the tradition. Parents were mixed about whether they were planning to provide their children with a formal Jewish education. Their inclination appeared to be related to their own positive or negative experiences with Jewish education growing up. Many of the intermarried parents had not yet decided on the religion in which their child would be raised.

**Connections to the Community**

Most parents were receptive to the idea of being contacted by their local Jewish community and wanted to be connected. However, they had not yet made an effort to connect or had not found a suitable place. Synagogues were generally viewed as being too expensive and parents did not feel comfortable coming to services with very young children. Parents were receptive to adult Jewish education, especially when it was targeted for their particular needs and childcare was made available.

**The Influence of Peers**

Peers were found to be especially influential, since:

- parents want to connect socially with other parents
- parents seek help with parenting from their peers
• peers can provide a non-threatening introduction to Judaism and the Jewish community
• parents are more likely to attend Jewish events with a friend than alone
• peers influence the choice of a preschool

Preschool Choice

Preschool represents parents’ first opportunity to make a Jewish educational choice. Parents based their choice of a preschool primarily on school quality and location. Most parents were unwilling to consider a preschool unless it had a good reputation and was less than a 15 minute drive from home. Parents often relied on recommendations from friends when choosing a preschool. Jewish sponsorship, while appreciated, was a secondary consideration, as was cost. In several communities, parents expressed a great deal of concern about the availability of preschool openings and were worried that their child would not be able to get into preschools that were in high demand.

Summary: Phone Survey of Community-Based Programs for New Jewish Parents

Overview

Jewish agencies and organizations in communities across North America have developed an assortment of offerings for new Jewish parents. Program titles, content, format, and sponsors vary widely. Most of the programs generally fall into one of four categories:

• Prenatal education programs
• Shalom Baby gift basket programs
• Developmental and parenting education programs
• JCC parenting centers

Programs are primarily social in their orientation. They give parents a chance to meet, connect, share experiences, form play groups and carpools, or find a good pediatrician. When needs assessments are conducted both formally and informally, institutions report that first and foremost families are looking for ways to connect with other Jewish families.

**Prenatal Education Programs**

There are three programs of this type run in multiple communities for expectant parents. The challenge faced by all three programs is finding a large enough group of parents who are expecting at the same time.

- *LaMazel Tov* is a six-session program offered primarily in the West that is held in synagogues, hospitals, and through *Shalom Baby* programs. In these courses, a rabbi or Jewish educator teaches about Jewish ritual and traditions surrounding childbirth, and a certified childbirth educator or nurse provides medical information.

- *In the Beginning* is a regional, synagogue-based program in Northern California consisting of a train the trainer program for individuals who will run *Baby is a Blessing*, a three-session course for expectant couples.

- *Jewish Baby University* is a six-session program offered in Denver and Phoenix that is jointly taught by a rabbi and a childbirth educator. The program includes six hours of Judaic instruction and also covers such practical matters as techniques for pain management, medical interventions, hospital procedures, birthing options, care of the newborn, breast and bottle feeding, and selecting a pediatrician.

**Shalom Baby Gift Basket Programs**

Approximately 25 communities conduct programs that provide a gift basket to new Jewish parents when they have a baby. Gift baskets are usually funded and distributed by the local Federation or Jewish
Community Center under the name *Shalom Baby*, although *Shalom Baby* programs are not necessarily limited to gift baskets and often include other programming. Program directors are usually Federation or Jewish Community Center (JCC) employees. Baskets range in value from $75-100 and are always free to the recipients.

Baskets are sent to both affiliated and unaffiliated Jews. Generally, expectant parents, relatives, or synagogues notify coordinators of a new birth and request a basket. Most gift basket programs have websites with information about how to arrange for a basket. A few communities conduct extensive publicity and advertise the program at synagogues, doctors’ offices, kosher establishments, Jewish organizations, and in both local Jewish and secular newspapers.

Doctors and hospitals are viewed as being in the best position to publicize the program to those who are not in contact with the Jewish community. Some *Shalom Baby* programs have networked with hospital chaplains and visit the new parents there. Communities have mixed success at achieving cooperation from the medical community.

Baskets generally include: information on local Jewish resources; information related to the baby’s developmental issues; a gift such as a bib, bag, or Jewish board book; and information on Jewish rituals and/or parenting. Most baskets include coupons donated by local Jewish organizations. These offer discounts on Jewish preschool or daycare, JCC membership, or an adult education class. Some program directors solicit additional donations enabling the community to include ritual objects like candlesticks, grape juice, or Jewish prayer books. Baskets may also include books on Jewish parenting and information about local day schools.
Most of the work is done by volunteers who help solicit donations for the baskets, put the baskets together, and deliver them. Volunteers sometimes go beyond just delivering the basket and spend time with the new parents at home. In several communities, home visit programs by trained volunteers extend for a considerable length of time. These visits prove critical when mothers are new to the area and have little or no support system. Some communities view the initial contact as a way of engaging parents in additional programming and volunteers take an active role in connecting mothers to local rabbis and resources.

Overall, the majority of programs reach only a small percentage of the Jewish parents in the community. Programs are most successful when there are home visits by trained volunteers, when the medical community is involved, and when there is follow-up.

*Developmental and Parenting Education Programs*

Many *Shalom Baby* programs offer educational classes for parents once they have received a gift basket. Other classes are offered without an initial gift basket, such as those sponsored by Jewish Family Services. Topics and titles vary widely – programs have such descriptive titles as *Mother Matters, Miracles and Mayhem: The Realities of Motherhood, Baby Safe, Boot Camp for Jewish Dads, Arts and Tots,* and *Bagels, Blocks, and Beyond.* Programming is generally a mixture of classes and events with Jewish content, and classes addressing the parents’ or baby’s developmental needs. Classes vary considerably with respect to Jewish content – some have little or none while others have a strong Jewish orientation. The degree of Jewish content depends upon the receptivity of the target audience, the backgrounds of those teaching the program, the sponsoring agency, and the funding available.

Some programs start out being similar to the educational programs described above, but include children and evolve into playgroups. Such programs are generally sponsored by Jewish Community Centers or
Jewish Family Services. Once the formal sessions end, parents often arrange amongst themselves to continue to meet as a playgroup. These groups can continue for years.

**JCC Parenting Centers**

Parenting centers are physical facilities with appropriately designed space and a resource library. They are located in JCCs and often work in partnership with Jewish Family Services. Needs assessments indicate that mothers often feel isolated at home and need to go somewhere to get out of the house. Parenting centers offer mothers a destination where they can drop in anytime to meet other mothers, get emotional support, and attend educational programs, playgroups, and discussion groups. Books and information on community resources are also available. Memberships are affordable and can be purchased independently of JCC membership. Parenting centers appear to be an especially successful model and are growing rapidly in JCCs across the country. Facilities range from one room to a much larger space.

**Success Factors**

Although virtually all communities offer at least one of the programs described above, rarely do communities have a set of coordinated programs across agencies. Only a few communities have a community-wide vision. More typically, individual agencies offer programs to fulfill their specific mission, and a single agency takes the lead in a particular community. Which agency this turns out to be differs depending upon the nature of the Jewish organizations in the community. Communities with the most successful programming have the following common features:

- A community-wide vision
- Passionate community leadership
- Inter-agency cooperation
- A strong, highly involved JCC
- Early childhood expertise
- Designated funding

**Recommendations for Communities**

*Find the Parents*

A priority for every community is to identify and contact all Jewish couples who are having a baby, especially those who are not presently connected to the community. The research data indicates that many couples are receptive to these contacts and welcome them. Currently, there are only about five communities making a concerted effort to do this through well-designed gift basket programs with trained volunteers. Other communities with gift basket programs do not engage in the same degree of effort to find Jewish couples.

The medical community is an especially effective way to reach parents. Everyone goes to an obstetrician and pediatrician, and a great deal of time is spent waiting in doctors’ reception rooms. The community should engage in efforts to cultivate relationships with medical professionals in order to publicize such programs to couples who would not otherwise be reached.

*Connect Parents with Peers*

Since peers are perhaps the most significant influence on parents’ choices, communities should create more opportunities for Jewish parents to meet and socialize with other Jewish parents who are already connected to the community. Parents with leadership potential should be identified and receive training. Parents who are not currently connected to the community are much more likely to become receptive to adult Jewish education and Jewish education for their children if their friends are Jewish and involved with the Jewish community.
Use Financial Resources Strategically

There are three areas that would benefit from additional funding:

- Funds should be allocated to provide tuition subsidies for Jewish preschool
- Funds should be allocated for synagogue memberships and synagogue childcare
- Funds should be allocated to strengthen and support JCC parenting centers

Utilize the Internet

Almost all parents use the Internet to communicate and obtain information. The Internet can be utilized to connect local parents with each other and to provide information about programs, local resources, and Jewish tradition.

Create a National Office

Currently, there is no central address for new parent programs. A national office could:

- Serve as a resource
- Foster communication and coordination across communities
- Identify, learn from, and replicate the best programs around the country
- Offer conferences, training, and newsletters for Jewish communal professionals
- Generate funding

Seize the Opportunity

There are approximately 60,000 Jewish births in the United States annually, but relatively few are being welcomed by the Jewish community. No one in the community appears to be taking responsibility for this group, and this stage of the Jewish life cycle has been largely ignored. Even though there are a number of effective, inexpensive programs for this group, they are not widely known nor are they widely used. These parents are often interested in providing a Jewish identity for their children, but cannot do so
themselves and are not reaching out to the community. It is incumbent upon the community to reach out to these parents, since such efforts have a great deal of potential to influence the Jewish identities and education of the next generation.