Building a Community Starts at Birth
Opinion

Mark Rosen | Fri. Dec 29, 2006

Jewish life begins at birth, not when pre-teen children start preparations for their bar or bat mitzvah. Yet families with young children are largely uninvolved in Jewish life.

If Jewish communities were to conduct outreach to parents when they have a baby or adopt, such efforts might lead to earlier involvement and long-term engagement. The problem is that these very families are the most difficult group for Jewish communities to find and reach.

Many of these families are invisible to local Jewish institutions, and are often new to the communities in which they live. Most do not belong to synagogues, nor are they drawn to traditional Jewish institutions, which they find irrelevant to their needs. Few are interested in Jewish learning.

They have limited time for outside activities, since their energies are consumed by their babies and toddlers. And when they do attend a Jewish event, childcare is rarely available.

Despite these challenges to Jewish engagement, a new study from the Cohen Center for Modern Studies at Brandeis University suggests that families with young children can indeed be reached when Jewish institutions use the right approaches. The key is targeted programming, focused on their needs and concerns as new parents.

To gain an understanding of families as well as community outreach efforts, we interviewed expecting and new parents, Jewish professionals and experts on parenting and child development around the country. Our recently published report describes a number of promising models from communities that appear to be successful at reaching the unengaged.

In San Diego, to provide one illustration, the United Jewish Federation and the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center work together to connect with new parents through their “Shalom Baby” program, one of about 30 such programs in the country. Parents who have just had a baby or adopted a child are welcomed by peer volunteers who come to their homes and deliver professionally arranged gift baskets. Volunteers encourage new mothers to join Jewish playgroups, where they connect with other mothers and receive informal exposure to Jewish traditions, sometimes for the very first time.

The results are impressive. The JCC found that over three-quarters of the families reached through this program plan to either join a synagogue or send their child to a Jewish preschool. More research is needed to see whether these families follow through on their intentions and actually join or enroll.

Programs like this one incorporate a simple but essential component of engagement — helping parents to make Jewish friends. New parents place a high priority on meeting other parents who are experiencing the same joys and challenges. They are more likely to participate in Jewish programs when they can make new social connections, and they are more likely to be receptive to learning about Judaism when they learn about it from their peers.

These social networks have other positive influences. In focus groups, we found that for those intermarried couples who deliberated about whether to raise their children as Jews, having Jewish friends appeared to be one of the primary factors that tipped the scales in a Jewish direction. We also found that
social networks had a strong impact on whether parents decided to enroll their child in a Jewish or non-Jewish preschool.

While peer relationships may help to establish tentative connections with the Jewish community, there needs to be something more to sustain and deepen these connections. Meaningful encounters with program leaders who take a personal interest in parents are important, so that parents receive encouragement and guidance to continue their Jewish explorations. It is clear that rabbis, educators, social workers and others who express genuine interest in these parents and devote time to them can play a highly influential role in their lives and in their children’s futures.

While programs for parents are offered by a variety of different Jewish organizations in communities — federations, JCCs, synagogues and Jewish family services are the most common — collaboration is the exception rather than the rule. In the communities we visited that had the most successful programs, Jewish organizations coordinated their efforts.

This is because everyone needs to work together to find the elusive parents. Communities with effective outreach locate the unengaged by creating a comprehensive baby-finding infrastructure. Parents, volunteers and Jewish professionals from all of the Jewish organizations in the area constitute a community-wide referral network, serving as the community’s eyes and ears.

Physicians, real estate agents and others who have contact with new parents are enlisted as well. Once parents have been identified through this network, more than 95% respond positively when contacted by phone, even those who have had little or no previous involvement with the organized Jewish community.

It is not sufficient, however, for a volunteer to show up after the initial phone call with a pretty basket and a friendly hello. Follow-up is equally important or the gift is nothing more than a nice gesture with no long-term impact. Communities need to offer a variety of creative programs taught by engaging leaders to attract parents and keep them involved.

One place where programs of this type thrive is in Seattle at the Stroum JCC Parenting Center. There, parents have the opportunity to join support groups, choose from a variety of infant and toddler activities, participate in a “Tot Shabbat” service, or attend an annual baby fair. While the JCC takes care of their children, parents can attend talks by scientists, physicians and authors, all of whom are national experts in parenting and child development. Hundreds attend.

A national initiative to help each community develop and expand programs that find and engage parents has considerable potential. While programs for youth receive most of the current funding and attention, parents transmit Jewish identity and make the decisions about who will be enrolled in youth programs. Preschools, congregational schools, day schools, JCCs, summer camps and synagogues would all benefit if there were an influx of new faces generated by community-wide efforts to build relationships with unengaged parents.

By fostering heart-to-heart connections with Jewish and intermarried couples in each community when they become parents, we can start to create a different Jewish future, one baby at a time.

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