Building Gateways to Jewish Life and Community
A Report on Boston's Jewish Family Educator Initiative

A Publication of
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2000.1
Foreword

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We are proud that Boston’s Commission on Jewish Continuity designed one of the country’s pioneering initiatives to enhance Jewish families’ involvement in Jewish learning, living and celebration. This report demonstrates that we have accomplished a great deal towards our goal and our vision—and that there is much more work to be done.

Sh'arim/Gateways to Jewish Living: The Family Educator Initiative, provided new personnel and programmatic resources to enable synagogues, community centers and day schools to bring parents not just to the doors but into their institutions to become effective partners in the education of their children. Beyond that, it started a vison-driven educational process of engaging adults in their own search for Jewish meaning. We now see that Sh’arim laid the foundation for vast changes in the Boston Jewish community. Jewish education, once primarily for children, now attracts Jews of all ages. Learning congregations and communities have become a central force in the adult Jew’s journey towards Jewish literacy and in the family’s increased participation in Jewish activity and Jewish life.

This assessment of Sh’arim’s progress over the last seven years reveals several outstanding examples of substantive change in the quality of our community’s Jewish life:

* More families are attending synagogue services regularly and are engaged in Jewish educational activities.

* Families are taking a more active interest in their own and their children’s Jewish development.

* Parents and children are engaging together in a greater variety of Jewish and general activities, creating a positive set of values and experiences linked to their Jewish identity.

And, perhaps most extraordinary,

* An overwhelming majority of Jewish parents want more involvement in Jewish life.

Sh’arim has created a new cadre of Jewish educational professionals—full-time Jewish family educators. Family educators have established themselves in the Jewish communal world as professionals who care about the development of individual Jewish families and the vibrancy of their communities. Their work is being recognized and appreciated by their institutions, with increased stature, responsibilities, and compensation. They set a standard for all Jewish educators in their commitment to ongoing professional growth and development and they serve as attractive role models for today’s Jewish families. In their institutions, which took risks to support their pioneering efforts, the Family Educators serve as integrative forces, skillfully creating holistic Jewish environments.
SH'ARIM—Building Gateways to Jewish Life and Community
A Report on Boston’s Jewish Family Educator Initiative

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables i
Key Findings ii
Introduction 1
Chapter 1: History of Sh’arim 3
Chapter 2: Sh’arim Research 6
Chapter 3: Sh’arim’s Educators 8
Chapter 4: Families in Sh’arim Congregations 12
Chapter 5: Parents’ Views of Jewish Family Education 21
Chapter 6: Sh’arim at Seven 25
Chapter 7: The Future of Sh’arim 30
Appendix A: Tables 38
Appendix B: Sh’arim Parent Survey (Method and Response Rate) 41
KEY FINDINGS

This study tracks the development of Sh'arim, the Jewish Family Educator Initiative sponsored by the Commission on Jewish Continuity. The research is based on bi-annual reports completed by the family education teams in 11 synagogues; surveys completed in 1995 by 2nd and 5th grade parents and in 1998 by 2nd, 5th and 8th grade parents; exploratory focus groups with 5th grade parents; and focus groups with the congregations' family educators, rabbis and directors of education.

* Jewish family education has become an accepted part of the congregations. In most of the congregations, family education now has an active lay committee, representation on the synagogue board of directors and strong board support. As the Commission's contribution to the family educators' salaries has declined over the years, boards have voted not only to assume the difference but also to add sizeable increases.

* The family educator's role in the congregation has taken hold and, in some places, has expanded. Family educators are now expected to design and implement more programs, work with more staff members and involve themselves more frequently with other arms of their congregations. The linkage between the religious school and family education has been re-examined, and each congregation has arrived at its own definition of family education's primary target audience. Some of the family educators now report to rabbis or vice presidents of education, in addition to or instead of the education directors or school principals.

* Family education is part of an enhanced climate of learning in the synagogues. Family education has provided an increased number of educational opportunities within congregations, offering an average of 25 family education programs a year. The great majority of parents in the Sh'arim study participate in the congregations' family education programs, a marked increase from three years earlier. For over a third of these parents, these programs were their only source of formal Jewish education that year. An equal number rate family education as "very important" in bringing them into the congregation and involving them in its activities. Whatever their level of participation in Jewish education, two-thirds of the parents want more. Only about one-third are engaged at the level they want to be.
INTRODUCTION

Research and evaluation have been an integral component of Sh'arim from its inception. The Commission on Jewish Continuity is dedicated not only to establishing family education within the community's institutions but also to tracking its growth, development and impact. The Sh'arim research has been ongoing and multi-faceted, gathering data from the family educators, rabbis, professional staff, lay leaders and parents. This report presents findings from the beginning of Sh'arim through 1998. It summarizes what we have learned about synagogue family education and about the families targeted by this initiative. The report offers the community an opportunity to reflect on the Jewish Family Educator Initiative—its accomplishments, shortcomings and challenges, as well as its future potential.

Over the past decade, Jewish family education has evolved as an educational approach.¹ It has taken on a variety of forms in diverse institutions. In Boston and throughout the country, its most prominent setting has been within congregations in conjunction with synagogue schooling.² Although Sh'arim also operates in day schools and Jewish community centers, this report focuses solely on the congregational setting.

Family education intends to reverse the “gas station” model of Jewish education in which parents drive their children to the synagogue to be “filled up” with Judaism. It regards the family unit as the learner and the parents as important partners in their children’s Jewish education. It assumes that the family educator will create conditions under which the whole family will acquire Jewish knowledge, skills, values and a love of Judaism. It further assumes that the families who take part in these opportunities will translate these educational experiences into greater engagement in Jewish life.


CHAPTER 1
HISTORY OF SH’ARIM

Sh’arim, the Jewish Family Educator Initiative, aims to support a traditional Jewish model of education—preparing parents to be the transmitters of Jewish knowledge to their children and, with them, the creators of Jewish family life.

The mitzvah in the first paragraph of the Shma, “v’shinantam l’vnehkha”—that you must teach the laws and values to your children—is a core tenet of Jewish life. This tenet was undermined in the modern period by the disappearance of traditional Jewish neighborhoods that organically conveyed Jewish culture and by the rise in the number of Jews who felt insecure in their Jewish knowledge or uncomfortable in Jewish settings. As parents were unable to convey to their children the practice and meaning of Judaism, the Jewish “supplemental” school assumed this responsibility. But without the active support of parents, what the children learned in school had little relevance or impact; it could not readily take root.

Jewish educators soon recognized that religious school education alone could not create vigorous Jewish life in the community. They were concerned with parents’ limited support of their goals and wanted parents to be active partners in the education of the children. A similar trend was occurring in American education. In the 1970s, public schools began efforts to involve parents in school and classroom activities and to motivate them to read and work with their children at home. Educational research validated these efforts, conclusively showing that parental involvement was a critical factor in the educational success of children.

In 1989 the Commission on Jewish Continuity convened to address the future of the Greater Boston Jewish community. The Commission decided that one of its foci would be to strengthen the Jewish family. Seeing synagogues as “gateway” institutions for Jewish life set a new course for Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) and other federations. CJP charged the Commission with forging a special partnership with synagogues in support of Jewish education.

At this time, some Jewish educators and institutions were already offering programs specifically geared to parents and families. Combined Jewish Philanthropies’ Task Force on Supplemental Education supported these programs with grants that, over five years, reached a cumulative total of $256,000. Jewish family education was taking hold: Nationally known leaders in the field were working at local congregations, schools, and the Bureau of Jewish Education; and federation leaders were becoming vocal proponents of the approach. The scene was set for the Commission’s first project, Sh’arim—the Jewish Family Educator Initiative.

4 A more detailed discussion of the motivations involved in the creation and growth of supplemental religious schools can be found in Wertheimer, American Jewish Year Book 1999, 3-115.

5 The Commission on Jewish Continuity is a joint project of Combined Jewish Philanthropies and its agencies, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Council of Orthodox Synagogues and the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

theory and practice of family education, human development, family systems, organizational change and behavior, needs assessment and evaluation.

**Consultation:** Educational consultants from the Bureau of Jewish Education help the family education team at each Sh'arim site develop and implement the community's vision for family education. The teams receive assistance in defining goals, assessing needs and developing plans for family education. Consultation services are available prior to and throughout an institution's involvement in Sh'arim.

**Support:** The Bureau of Jewish Education coordinates a Jewish Family Educator Network. The Network meets several times throughout the year and provides family educators an opportunity to share program ideas, discuss professional issues, reflect on their own growth and learn together. Recently, veteran family educators, as part of their own professional development, have become mentors to those new to Sh'arim.

**Research:** Ongoing research and evaluation help sites examine progress towards their goals and provide the larger community with an understanding of family education and its role in the community.

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### SH'ARIM TIMELINE 1985-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>CJP Task Force on Supplemental Jewish Education established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Task Force Report recommending expansion of schools' involvement in family education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Beginning of CJP direct grants for Family Education, implemented by the Bureau of Jewish Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-92</td>
<td>$256,000 in family education grants to schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Commission on Jewish Continuity convened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Publication of <em>What We Have Learned: The Projects of CJP's Supplemental School Task Force, 1987-92</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Sh'arim/Gateways to Jewish Living: The Family Educator Initiative begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>First year of Sh'arim–8 sites; certification program begins at Hebrew College; Bureau of Jewish Education begins consultation to sites and research and evaluation of the initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>Jewish Family Educator Network established by the Bureau of Jewish Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>First administration of Sh'arim Parent Survey to establish baseline information about families and sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>14 Sh'arim sites: 11 congregations, one day school and two Jewish community centers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>Second administration of Sh'arim Parent Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-00</td>
<td>17 Sh'arim sites: 14 congregations, one day school and two Jewish community centers; <em>Sh'arim: Building Gateways to Jewish Life and Community, A Report on Boston's Jewish Family Educator Initiative, presented to the community</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Mid-Year and End-of-Year Site Reports: Since 1994–95, family education teams at each of the congregations have filed bi-annual reports with the Commission and the Bureau of Jewish Education. These provide information about programs, participation, budget, allocation of the professional’s time, and governance structures related to family education, as well as emergent issues and insights. Information from these reports has been shared with the community and the sites on a regular basis.

Parent Survey: In fall 1995, a questionnaire was given to every congregant family with a child in 2nd or 5th grade. Three years later, a follow-up questionnaire was given to every family with a child in 2nd, 5th or 8th grade. These questionnaires asked about parent-child activities at the synagogue, in the home and in the community. Questionnaires were quantitative but also had space for respondents to write comments. They were designed to allow for comparisons by denomination, child’s grade and parent’s Jewish educational background. After each survey, participating congregations received a report detailing overall findings, as well as results from their particular site.

Focus Groups with Congregation Professionals: In spring 1999, two focus groups were conducted with congregation professionals—one with the family educators and one with rabbis and education directors. These roundtable discussions focused on the goals of family education, its impact on the congregations and their families, its evolution over the past few years and its likely future direction.

Parent Focus Groups: In spring 1999, two exploratory focus groups were held with 5th grade parents. Twenty-one parents from the 11 Sh'arim congregations came together to discuss their families’ Jewish lives and their reactions to family education.

Partners in Research

The Sh'arim research enlisted assistance from around the community. Many professionals and lay leaders helped frame the study, gather information, reflect on the meaning of results and put findings to work.

The Research Advisory Committee helped create the overall design of the Sh'arim study. This committee was comprised of experts in evaluation research from area colleges and universities, the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts, denominational movements, the Bureau of Jewish Education and the Commission.

Family Educators in each of the participating congregations provided ongoing information about their work; participated in discussions, focus groups and feedback meetings; suggested items for the Parent Survey; fielded the Parent Survey; and helped to interpret results.

Lay Research Coordinators within congregations assisted with the administration of the Parent Survey.

Family Education Teams contributed to the congregations’ mid-year and end-of-year reports and helped administer the Sh'arim Parent Survey.

Parents filled out surveys, attended focus groups and offered insights into the struggles and joys they encounter in creating Jewish family life.
Initiative), *Me’ah*\(^10\), special needs and so on. And they collaborate with other arms of their synagogues to develop an overall educational vision.

**Expanding Educational Activities**

Since much of the Jewish family educators’ time is devoted to programming, it is not surprising to find that family education has, indeed, provided an increased number of educational opportunities within congregations. *Sh’arim* congregations currently offer an average of 25 family education programs a year. These are of various types—text study, hands-on community service, “spiritual journeying” and a host of other entrées into Jewish life.

Community building is a stated goal of almost half of all of the programs offered. The next largest percentage of programs concern topics generally associated with the synagogue (i.e., rituals, Torah and prayer). The remainder are a smorgasbord of learning opportunities—holidays, bar/t mitzvah training, Hebrew language and literature courses, parent-child communication and sessions on Jewish life or Israel (*Table 1*). Congregation monitoring forms indicate that program content and formats change from year to year. For example, in the past year, one family educator added in-depth discussion sessions on Torah and theology to a schedule filled with holiday “how-to” programs; another moved to small study groups to meet the demand for beginning-level holiday learning.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>PRINCIPAL FOCUS OF FAMILY EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN 1998–99</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Goal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torah and Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabbat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tzedakah</em> and <em>Mitzvot</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Child Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar/t Mitzvah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebrew</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\)Based on a total of 254 programs offered by *Sh’arim* congregations in 1998–99. Numbers do not total 100%, as a single program may serve multiple learning goals.

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\(^10\) *Me’ah* is an adult Jewish learning program of Hebrew College and the Commission on Jewish Continuity, made possible with funding from Combined Jewish Philanthropies.
Changes in the Jewish Family Educator’s Job

In recent years, four major changes have occurred in the family educator position:

**Changes in Personnel:** All but four of the congregations in the Sh’arim study have had turnover in their family educator positions since 1993. Most of the current family educators have been on the job three years or less.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY EDUCATORS’ YEARS IN CURRENT POSITION</th>
<th>1st or 2nd</th>
<th>4 congregations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>3 congregations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th–6th</td>
<td>4 congregations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reporting Relationships:** The original designers assumed that Jewish family education would be an arm of the religious school. In the first years of Sh’arim, all of the family educators reported to the education director in their congregations, and they worked primarily with school families. Today each congregation has its own definition of who should be served by family education. One site aims 85% of its programs at school families. Another aims only 37% of its programs at the school and divides the rest almost evenly between all members and specific types of non-school families. As responsibilities shift and expand so do reporting relationships and accountability. Today four of the family educators report to rabbis or vice presidents of education in addition to or instead of education directors or school principals.

**Salaries:** In 1994–95 the average Sh’arim family educator salary (including benefits) was $34,000. In 1998–99 the average salary was $42,000—an increase of 24% in a four-year period (Figure 3). The Commission’s contribution to the family educators’ salaries has decreased as the initiative has grown, and the congregations have commensurately assumed the difference and added sizeable increases. Some synagogues have added benefits as well as increased spending on professional development for their family educators.

**Figure 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY EDUCATOR AVERAGE SALARY PLUS BENEFITS (1994-99)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$34,000</td>
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</table>

**Responsibilities:** Although the position differs from synagogue to synagogue (with regard to reporting structures, targets, goals, job descriptions and remuneration), almost all the family educators agree that their roles have changed in some ways since the inception of the initiative. They are expected to design and implement more programs, work with more staff members and involve themselves more frequently with other arms of their congregations.

“Our congregation is beginning to demand increasingly more sophisticated and in-depth programming around family education and they’re really starting to feel that they want more and different sorts of things than they have been getting...”

*Sh’arim* director of education
Jewish Practices
The vast majority of parents in the *Sh'arim* study (89%) say that it is very important to them to observe the Jewish holidays. Indeed, virtually all of them attend High Holiday services, participate in Passover sedarim and light Hanukkah candles (*Figure 4*).

![Figure 4: Jewish Practices](image)

Parents of younger and older children are equally likely to engage in these Jewish practices. The only exception is Purim, which is significantly less likely to be celebrated when the child is in 8th grade.\(^\text{11}\)

\[^{11}\text{Only 63}\%\text{ of the 8th grade families attended a Purim celebration compared to over 80}\%\text{ of 2nd and 5th grade families (p<.001).}\]
Virtually all of the parents say that it is highly likely that their child will celebrate his/her bar/bat mitzvah. However, only half this number believe it quite likely that this same child will continue his or her Jewish education through high school. This pattern is similar for all grades: There are no statistically significant differences by grade with regard to the likelihood of continuing Jewish education through high school, traveling to Israel on a teen experience or preferring a college with strong Jewish life. In other words, as early as 2nd grade we can see a foreshadowing of the post-bar/bat mitzvah dropout phenomenon (Figure 7).

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**Figure 7**

**POSSIBILITIES FOR CHILDREN’S JEWISH FUTURE**

% Very or Extremely Important

- Will have a bar/bat mitzvah celebration: 97%
- Will continue his/her Jewish education through high school: 49%
- Will travel to Israel on a teen Israel experience: 52%
- Will want to attend a college with a substantial Jewish population and activities: 33%

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12 Of the eleven Sh’arim congregations, only one has a youth group for 1st grade; eight have youth groups for 4th graders.
Parents' Jewish Values

The survey asked parents how much they value each of 15 different aspects of Judaism and Jewish life. Their responses reveal the preeminent importance placed on transmitting a love of Judaism to their children and observing the Jewish holidays (Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARENTS' JEWISH VALUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Very or Extremely Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmitting a love of Judaism to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing the Jewish holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having children socialize with other Jewish children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a public stand against anti-Semitism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping informed about Jewish or Israel-related current events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making social connections with other Jews in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donating money to Jewish causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing Shabbat in a special way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking part in Jewish study and learning more about Judaism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring the spiritual side of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a connection to Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing volunteer work as a member of the Jewish community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being conversant or literate in Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a leader in the congregation or in the Jewish community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"I feel I am a committed Jew, observant in my own way. I feel strongly that my children feel the Jewishness that my husband and I feel, be continually connected to the Jewish community, feel the link to their history and choose Jewish life partners.”

*Sh’arim Parent Survey respondent*
Parents' Relationship to Judaism and to the Congregation

Practically all of the parents in the study say that being Jewish is very important in their lives (91%) and the great majority wish their engagement in Jewish life were higher (67%).

Figure 10
FEELINGS ABOUT CURRENT PRACTICE OF JUDAISM

Parents were also asked about their relationship to the congregation—the extent to which they feel at home in the congregation and the extent to which they feel part of a community. Their responses show that the sense of comfort is much greater than the sense of community. Indeed, one in four parents (24%) appear untouched by the efforts to build a sense of community within the synagogue (Figure 11).

Figure 11
PARENTS' INTEGRATION INTO THE CONGREGATION

To what extent...

Do you feel comfortable and at home in this congregation?

Do you feel part of the community formed by this congregation?

“It's hard to become a part of our community if you work full-time. It's hard to come to services if you don't feel part of the community.”

Sh'arim Parent Survey respondent
CHAPTER 5
PARENTS’ VIEWS OF JEWISH FAMILY EDUCATION

The first part of this chapter presents data from the Sh’arim Parent Survey on participation in Jewish family education. The second part, based on focus groups with 5th grade parents, presents the parents’ assessment of the congregations’ family education program.

Parents’ Participation
The great majority of survey respondents (80%) participate in the congregations’ family education programs. For over a third of these parents, these programs were their only source of formal Jewish education that year. An equal number rated family education as “very important” in bringing them into the congregation and involving them in its activities. In a list of 11 synagogue functions that might serve as entry points for parents, family education received the fourth highest rating—as important as religious services in engaging parents in the life of the congregation.

Increases in participation in family education programs between 1995 and 1998 suggest that family education has expanded its reach and/or its appeal. In 1995, 73% of the 5th grade families attended family education programs; in 1998, the participation of 5th grade families in these same congregations had risen to 87%. Similar increases are seen in the comparison of 2nd grade families.

Although more parents were involved, the number of hours they devoted to family education remained essentially unchanged from 1995 to 1998—an average of six to ten hours over the course of the year. Family education appears to be serving more people, but not necessarily in more extensive ways. This is commensurate with the fact that the majority of family education programs are one-time events.

Fifth grade parents are the greatest consumers of family education. Compared with 2nd and 8th grade parents, they have significantly higher rates of participation, and they spend significantly more hours in family education programs. This is not surprising given the menu of family education offerings. On average, 15% of the family education programs are geared toward children in kindergarten through grade 2; 28% are for children in grades 3 through 6; and 10% are designated for the bat mitzvah class. These numbers parallel participation rates reported by families.

Those Who Take Advantage of Family Education vs. Those Who Do Not
It has been posited that Jewish family education is primarily for parents with limited Jewish backgrounds or for those in interfaith marriages. The survey data, however, do not support this view. People in inmarried families (both partners Jewish) and those in interfaith families (one partner not Jewish) are equally likely to take advantage of the classes and activities offered by family education. Parents who had a bat mitzvah or Jewish confirmation growing up and those who did not are also equally likely to take advantage of these offerings.
Parents' Assessment of Family Education

In focus groups parents spoke highly of the general purpose and accomplishments of family education, but they both praised and criticized specific programs.

On the one hand...

The focus groups suggest that family education serves parents in a variety of ways—providing basic, remedial and more advanced education. A mother who describes herself as Jewishly "clueless" says that, before family education, she never felt comfortable attending synagogue classes or activities. "I never felt that I had had the proper background to really participate, to know what people were talking about. I was just going to sit there kind of stupid, like I didn’t know what to say..." Family education for this woman was a "godsend." A second parent finds the parallel education offered in her congregation an effective reminder of Jewish knowledge she possessed in high school but subsequently forgot. And a third, a Jewishly-educated parent comfortable with her home practices, talks about the "wonderful ideas" that she gets from other participants in family programs and the support she feels for her family’s home observance.

Jewish family education not only provides formal instruction but also creates experiences. A father in an interfaith marriage speaks appreciatively of the family education programs that helped him put Jewish values into practice with his child, while a mother describes the Sunday family education program as a reflective time for herself, without specific educational goals.

In addition to the formal learning and informal experiences that occur in the family education programs, parents cite the following benefits:

* Jewish family education helps parents understand what their children are doing in religious school.

  "The fact that all of a sudden I could find out what my kid was doing every Sunday...has been one of my attractions to the program."

* It involves the parents in their children's education.

  "My kid loves to have me with her at any time, so that's great. I'm going on Sundays with her, or I'm reading some of her Sunday school readings with her before she goes. Now I'm involved in her Sunday school homework in addition to her regular homework."

* It offers a hands-on Judaism through value-based activities.

  "It's lovely to go to temple, and it's great to study Torah, but for me Judaism is really about giving of yourself and doing for others. The fact that the temple incorporates this into a family activity that we all do together, I think puts some real meaning into it."

"Family education allows me to learn more about Judaism at a time in my life when I cannot participate in adult education because of small children at home. It also allows me to share with my children the experience of learning about our religion and to feel part of a community of Jews who have similar interests in learning. I cannot emphasize enough how important this program is to me and my family."

Sh'arim Parent Survey respondent

"I've enjoyed Sunday morning. There are often speakers or discussion going on while the kids are in Hebrew school...it's wonderful. I drop my youngest off and I sort of wander over and get my coffee. And my feeling is—whatever they're doing, that's great. It's like a free space in my life where I can sit and think about something."

Participant in 5th grade parent focus group
CHAPTER 6

SH'ARIM AT SEVEN

This chapter describes the institutionalization of Sh'arim within the synagogues and changes in families’ engagement in Jewish life and in their relationship to the synagogue. The description of congregational change is based on data from the bi-annual reports filed by each of the Sh’arim sites. The discussion of family change is based on longitudinal data from the 1995 Parent Survey of 2nd and 5th grade parents and the 1998 Parent Survey of 2nd, 5th and 8th grade families.

In its first seven years, Sh’arim has had measurable impact on Jewish family education as a professional specialization and on the congregations’ educational mission and offerings. Although it has done much to engage families in Jewish education and increase participation in some aspects of Jewish life, there is little evidence, to date, that the initiative has had widespread impact on the Jewish quality of families’ lives at home or outside the congregation. Sh’arim is fundamentally an institution-based engine for change. It is thus not surprising that most of the change we see is rooted in the synagogue.

**Congregational Change**

Jewish family education has become an accepted part of Sh’arim congregations. When Sh’arim began, the Commission on Jewish Continuity wanted to insure lay support and involvement. It therefore required each site to create a lay/professional team that would work together to create the congregation’s vision and forge its approaches for family education. Some congregations have developed structures that integrate lay and professional leadership more successfully than others. Some have been more inclusive of members’ diverse interests than others have. Despite notable variation across congregations, most of the teams have evolved into committees and most congregations now include family education chairs on their boards of directors.

Sh’arim, along with other Commission initiatives, has provided an impetus for synagogues to integrate the various dimensions of their educational programming. Three of the 11 congregations now have umbrella education committees that seek a unified vision for Jewish learning.

**Changes in Families**

Most aspects of Jewish family life measured by the Sh’arim Parent Survey show little or no change from 1995 to 1998. There are no increases in Jewish activities carried out by parents alone or with their children, and there are no increases in family holiday observances. There is, however, significant change in two pillars of Jewish life: study and worship. As well, a substantial number of survey respondents say that their attachment to Judaism and commitment to living a Jewish life grew over the past three years.
Increased Participation in Jewish Study

Comparisons of 2nd and 5th grade families in 1995 and 1998 show significant increases in participation in both family education and adult education programs (Figure 13).

![Participation in Education Programs by Year](image)

The greatest change is in the participation of the 5th grade families. In 1995, 73% of the survey respondents with children in 5th grade said they participated in family education programs. In 1998, that percentage was 87%, a significant increase. Since grade is held constant in this analysis, the increase in participation suggests either that more educational opportunities are available, that attendance has been made mandatory, that programs are more attractive or, for some other reason, parents are taking greater advantage of the Jewish education their congregation offers them. The increase may be due to different combinations of factors in each congregation.

Increased Attendance at Worship Services

A significant increase in the frequency of attendance at synagogue religious services emerges in every comparison (Figure 14). Focusing on 2nd grade families, for example, we see that in 1995 only 14% attended services regularly. Three years later almost half of these same parents, with children now in 5th grade, have become regular participants. The increase in attendance at services between 2nd and 5th grade may be part of the developmental process of families with children in the religious school.
Table 2
FEELINGS ABOUT THE CONGREGATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel comfortable in the congregation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all/a little</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very much</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel part of congregation community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all/a little</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very much</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One might expect the greatest increases in these feelings to occur between 5th and 8th grades, as families go through the transition of the bar/bat mitzvah. These years, however, are not the critical ones. The increase occurs solely between the 2nd and 5th grades. In 1995, 32% of the 2nd grade parents said they “very much” felt part of the community formed by the congregation; three years later, when their children were in 5th grade, 38% said so. Feelings of comfort show a similar increase in this cohort, again suggesting that the early years represent a fertile period in a family’s Jewish life.

The challenge of building community appears particularly acute when we consider that close to half of all of the programs offered by the Sh’arim educators are explicitly intended to build community, and most of the others probably have building community as an implicit goal. Despite these efforts, there has been little change in parents’ sense of community. It may be that people are as involved as they want or that they identify with subcommunities within the synagogue and not with the institution overall. Congregations need to know a great deal more about how their families define community, where they find community in their lives, whether they long for more, and what type of relationship they want to have with the congregation. An effective response awaits a deeper exploration of the issues.

“Spiritually, Judaism is very important to my husband and me; we want our children to experience Judaism as the foundation of their lives. But we don’t center our lives on the synagogue.”
Sh’arim Parent Survey respondent

“I would love to have more Judaism in my life but have never felt welcome in my temple.”
Sh’arim Parent Survey respondent

“Feeling a part of the community and comfortable in the temple are very different. I feel a part of the community but do not feel that the temple is my ‘spiritual’ home away from home.”
Sh’arim Parent Survey respondent
The Programming Challenge

Synagogues now have members who participated in the first years of family education and then went on to take adult education classes, including Me'ah, and become serious Jewish learners. Family education has served to interest many people in Jewish learning and make them “think about their own education and look at themselves as part of a community of learners.” As people achieve higher levels of Jewish learning, however, they will increasingly demand more of the synagogue—and the synagogue must be prepared to respond. In order for family education to maximize its impact on families, it will need to address these four aspects of the programming challenge: the demand for high quality programs, the need for innovation and for multi-level programming and the challenge of the bar/bat mitzvah families.

Demand for high quality programs. Experienced Jewish learners who have taken family and adult education courses in the synagogue want more sophisticated programs with higher quality and greater depth and breadth. One director of education noted that five years ago “people were thrilled with family education but today parents say, ‘I know all of this. I’ve been to Hebrew school already. I want to do more things. I want to do different things. I want to do more in-depth types of things than we’ve been doing.’”

Call for innovation. Family education programming must respond to parents with multiple children in the religious school. Because much of family education has been tied in with the religious school curriculum, some parents are required to go through the same program with each of their children. “How do we keep them involved and engaged?” asked a director of education. “How do we keep them feeling that it’s new and fresh for them? That’s a challenge for us as professionals—to continually make the program evolve, at least for the adults.”

Need for multi-level programming. Family education must respond to the needs of parents at different levels in their Jewish education. Some parents have completed various Jewish education programs and are now ready for “graduate-level courses.” Other parents are new to the system and need more basic courses. Family education needs to develop multi-level programs that will engage parents at both ends of this spectrum.

The challenge of the bar/bat mitzvah families: Data from the Sh’arim study indicate that certain aspects of the synagogue lose some of their power to draw in parents as their children move from 5th to 8th grade, passing through the bar/bat mitzvah year. These include the religious school, holiday celebrations, social activities, volunterism and family education. While attendance at worship services increases over these years in a family’s life, the importance of observing Shabbat declines. As well, the data suggest that the bar/bat mitzvah year does not deeply affect most parents’ connection to the congregation. Indeed, Sh’arim data suggest that parents are less moved by the celebration of the bar/bat mitzvah than by enrolling their children in 1st grade in the religious school. Some of the rabbis are concerned that the bar/bat mitzvah families are “processed and not transformed spiritually.” They believe, however, that family education has an important role to play in ameliorating this situation.

“I think that family education is a fantastic and important component of the religious school experience for my children. I’ve seen the concept and practice of family education mature and improve in recent years here and expect it to continue. One challenge will be how to maintain a family’s interest during middle school years—beyond bar/bat mitzvah issues.”
Sh’arim Parent Survey respondent

“Even though you’ve got, hopefully, a pool of families for whom family education and studying is an ongoing thing, you also need to figure out how to integrate the families who come into that later. At the same time you are offering deeper study opportunities for veterans, every so often you still may need to go back and do the basic, lay the groundwork.”
Sh’arim family educator
The Organizational Challenge

*Sh’arim* synagogues face the critical organizational challenge of fitting family education into the ongoing life of the congregation.

**Relationship to the religious school:** The focus of family education partially depends on where it is placed in the synagogue’s organization chart. Opinions vary: Some rabbis and educators believe family education should primarily be a grade-based program within the religious school. They argue that families with young children are critical to the life energy of the congregation. As one rabbi noted, “I really think that the target population is families with young children. That’s why people come to the synagogue, let’s face it. If you want to transform your community, that’s the group you have to go to.”

Moreover, practical experience shows that when programs are offered to the general congregation, attendance can be low. When programs tie in with the school’s curriculum and specifically target the parents, attendance increases considerably. One synagogue moved family education too quickly from the school into the wider congregation. “We had our family educator doing incredible things for everybody,” says the director of education, “but we were bypassing the school as the core consumer.” Recognizing the need for both a targeted and a global family education program, this congregation has returned to the school families as family education’s core constituency.

Others argue for moving beyond the school and grade-based programming to “find points for our family educator and family education to touch people in different sorts of ways.” Rather than lock step with the children’s education, these rabbis and educators try to view family education from the perspective of each family and determine what would make a difference in their Jewish lives. They say that grade-based programming sends the wrong message to parents. As one rabbi stated: “The danger with any exclusively grade-based programming is that it allows families to live their Jewish lives through the synagogue. They come in and they do a program and they leave and they’re done. To me, that’s not the goal of family education or any Jewish education.” At the current stage of *Sh’arim’s* evolution, the challenge for each synagogue is finding the optimal balance among school-focused, congregation-focused and home-focused family education.

**Integration:** In its initial phases, Jewish family education needed to be separate from other arms of the synagogue in order to establish itself as an accepted program with its own professional educator and lay committee. This separation may have helped family education take hold, but it also contributed to the existing compartmentalization within the synagogue. As one director of education observed: “There’s the school. There’s family education. There’s adult education. There’s Me’ah. We have consultants to family education. We have consultants to youth. No one has sat down and said, ‘Let’s consult to the whole institution, the lay and professionals, and bring them together and help really build a team.’ I think that’s the next step.”
Although it has done much to engage families in Jewish education and increase participation in some aspects of Jewish life, there is little evidence, to date, that Sh'arim has had widespread impact on families' Jewish lives at home and in the community. Research findings suggest that the biggest boost to Jewish family life comes in the early years, when parents first register their children for religious school. The data further suggest that the religious school experience does little to raise the likelihood of children continuing their Jewish education beyond bar/ bat mitzvah.

* Working together, Sh'arim professionals, lay leaders and consultants should explore new strategies for enhancing the impact of family education on home practices and for strengthening connections between the synagogue, school and home. These strategies should cover the span of children's religious education—a Head Start program to build on the intensity of the early years and set families on a path of Jewish growth, programs and services to strengthen all the grades in the religious school, efforts to increase links among educational opportunities for children (classes, camping, youth group, Israel trips, etc.), innovations to maximize the potential of the bar/bat mitzvah year and a new impetus to engage post bar/bat mitzvah families.

In order to develop relevant programs and services, the synagogues must understand the educational and developmental needs of their families, the reality of Jewish family life and the dynamics and feelings within the family that support Jewish life or resist it.

* The family educators should explore what congregants know and what they lack in terms of Judaic knowledge. Since intake interviews, originally part of the Sh'arim model, have not been done, they should conduct interviews and focus groups to learn more about the Jewish lives and aspirations of the congregations' families. For example, when people say they do not have as much Judaism in their lives as they would like, what do they mean? And what are the obstacles that keep them from having more? Such needs assessment requires high-level interpersonal and technical skills. The community should support this effort with advanced training, technical assistance or a needs assessment service.

Close to half of all the programs offered by the family educators are explicitly intended to build community. Despite these efforts, the Sh'arim study found little evidence of change in parents' sense of community in their congregations.

* Congregations should begin a public conversation about the meaning of community and their vision of the kind of community they wish to create. This exploration should include parents' and children's honest assessment of what has facilitated and what has hindered their connection to the congregation. As well, Sh'arim should conduct observational studies of family education programs to see how they are implemented and to recommend adjustments that might help them better serve the goal of community building.
Action Research

The community has placed greater demands for research and evaluation on Sh’arim and the family educators than on any other program or professionals in the Greater Boston Jewish educational system. These demands were not always welcomed by the congregations, where research is largely an unsupported activity. They did, however, produce useful data that led to changes in Sh’arim’s operation (specifically in the training, education and support of the family educators). Such action research, which creates a continuous loop between program implementation and evaluation, helps practitioners and lay leaders reflect on their progress and modify their efforts where necessary.

* Family educators should be encouraged to approach their work with a greater spirit of experimentation, to try out new program designs and new ways of delivering Jewish education. These might include family schools, family networks, individual learning plans, retreats, Israel trips and other cutting-edge approaches to educating families. These efforts should be studied carefully and the resulting information used for program development and improvement. As well, the results of these educational experiments should be shared widely so that the whole field of Jewish education can be inspired by and learn from the work of the Sh’arim educators.

* Sh’arim should continue to study the ongoing evolution of Jewish family education in Greater Boston. In its first seven years, Sh’arim institutionalized family education in the synagogues. It now stands poised to achieve breakthroughs in family education and in the creation of transformative experiences for families and congregations. Tracking this next phase of Sh’arim is essential to understanding how family education confronts the challenges it faces and how it assumes its role in the current renaissance of Jewish learning.

There is much to be learned from the Sh’arim study: It teaches us to be more reasonable in our expectations of what a single professional can accomplish. It shows us that an institutional initiative is more likely to affect what people do inside that institution than what they do at home or elsewhere. And it helps us understand that strong outcomes may occur only with powerful interventions. Family education may not, as yet, have been implemented in strong enough doses to have a significant impact on Jewish family life. Ultimately, no one initiative can be the panacea that “transforms” the Jewish community, its institutions and its families. Transformation is likely to occur only when many initiatives work in concert. The true value of Jewish family education will be found in the synergy it creates with the many other efforts underway within the synagogues and throughout the Greater Boston community.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment to Judaism and commitment to living a Jewish life more than it was three years ago</th>
<th>0 hours</th>
<th>1-5 hours during the year</th>
<th>6-10 hours during the year</th>
<th>11 or more hours during the year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>54%**</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jewish study highly important in respondent’s life</th>
<th>23%</th>
<th>39%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%***</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Torah study and adult education very important in involving respondent in the congregation</th>
<th>9%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>28%</th>
<th>31%***</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family education very important in involving respondent in the congregation</th>
<th>15%</th>
<th>25%</th>
<th>37%</th>
<th>56%***</th>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attend adult education programs in the congregation</th>
<th>23%</th>
<th>44%</th>
<th>62%</th>
<th>69%***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feel very comfortable in the congregation and very much part of the community</th>
<th>38%</th>
<th>44%</th>
<th>55%</th>
<th>66%***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

** p<.005  *** p<.001
APPENDIX B

Sh’arim Parent Survey

Method
The 1995 survey was given to all parents with a child in 2nd or 5th grade. We chose these grades believing they would yield important time-series information as we tracked families from their early years of Jewish education through the bar/bat mitzvah year. Three years later, when their children were in 5th and 8th grades respectively, we surveyed these parents again. Also included in the 1998 survey were parents with children in 2nd grade that year.

The family educators, along with their lay research coordinators, were responsible for assembling a list of all families with children in the target grades and getting questionnaires into the parents’ hands. Where possible, they administered the survey on-site, using registration, back-to-school nights or other parent meetings as an opportunity to field the survey. Where on-site administration was not possible, they mailed surveys to families along with a return envelope. The family educators were encouraged to follow up with families—with notices, letters and telephone calls—to assure the highest response rate possible.

Response Rate
In 1995 eight congregations took part in the Sh’arim study. The overall response rate was just over two-thirds (68%). There were, however, noticeable differences across congregations from a low of 49% to a high of 98%. This range in response rates signals differences in how the survey was administered, the amount of follow-up done to increase the response rate and the attitude of congregations toward the study.

Three years later, eleven congregations took part in the study. The response rate in 1998 was 60%, and again there was a substantial range among congregations. Part of the decline in the response rate is caused by the 8th grade parents. Only half of those who were contacted filled out a survey. Congregations appear to have greater difficulty locating and engaging parents once their children are post-bar/bat mitzvah.

Because of the response rate and some changes in the congregational population, it cannot be assumed that families represented in the 1998 survey are necessarily the same as those in the 1995 survey.

Table B1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population: No. of Families</th>
<th>Sample: No. Responding</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2nd, 5th gr.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1252</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2nd, 5th, 8th gr.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Commission on Jewish Continuity
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This research was funded with a grant from Combined Jewish Philanthropies

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The Commission on Jewish Continuity is a joint project of Combined Jewish Philanthropies and its agencies, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Council of Orthodox Synagogues and the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.