

Rabbi Erin Hirsh - Statement of Purpose

(Written in support of nomination for a Covenant Award for Excellence in Jewish Education, 2015.)

I think of “complementary Jewish education” as the central riddle of my life. Even as a child, I continuously assessed my Hebrew school experience. Why did the content seem so irrelevant? Did it really have to happen on Sundays? Why weren’t the teachers stronger? What was the point? As a student and a parent, as a teacher, an education director, a rabbi, a movement consultant and curriculum writer, and now as the creator and director of a collection of national programs designed to propel complementary Jewish education forward, I have continuously pondered the conundrum of nurturing positive Jewish identities grounded in meaningful Jewish learning in very part-time programs.

I have been distressed to watch many central agencies simply delete support for complementary Jewish education from their mission statements in the last ten years. In my estimation, several hundred thousand American Jews still choose synagogue- and community-based Jewish schools as the primary venue for their family’s Jewish education and engagement each year. Abandoning efforts to improve complementary Jewish education is no more an option to me than telling all those families that I don’t mind if they completely assimilate and leave the Jewish community. Compared to many of my counterparts in Jewish education and the rabbinate – I have an unusual confidence in the ability of weekly children’s educational programs to nurture Jewish families. I have seen too many “aha” moments in the eyes of students, parents, lay leaders and colleagues to downplay the opportunities that weekly Jewish programs afford us. I regret that few people proclaim their love of Hebrew school in the way so many speak of their Jewish camps. At the same time, I know how many of my colleagues who direct those camps are themselves products of synagogue schools. I don’t even believe that the schools have failed so much as that the American Jewish community they were designed to support has changed at a rate that outpaced our ability to reimagine and reframe synagogue-based programs.

Like anyone who ponders a single riddle for a long time, I have become comfortable engaging with some degree of paradox. From my vantage point as a rabbi and Jewish educator, I might at times dwell

on the difficulty of cultivating Jewishly-literate and positively-identified children in schools that meet just a few hours each week. However, as a Hebrew school alum who became a rabbi and the mom of a school-age daughter whose Jewish identity is well-supported by our synagogue's weekly program, I am regularly reminded of how impactful those hours can be. While in some ways I see myself as a champion of complementary Jewish education, I also have had to acknowledge and confront perennial challenges – be they inconvenient meeting times or competing time commitments, weak curriculum or untrained faculty – so that I can design programs that effectively surmount them.

Instead of finding these issues discouraging, I approach them as creative opportunities. Listening to education directors lament the large percentage of teens who were leaving synagogue teen programs in favor of more immersive Jewish experiences prompted me to imagine *TEL*, a program that brought teens from ten congregations together for fall and spring retreats at a camp while providing a project-based curriculum for them to explore in between. A survey of supplementary school teachers in Philadelphia that failed to identify any convenient times or locations for professional learning workshops became the inspiration for *NEXT*, a program featuring online courses for those teachers. The courses' accessibility to teachers throughout North America, in turn, made it possible for me to offer a wide range of concurrent courses for teachers with different backgrounds and skills.

I see myself as having two primary responsibilities as I nurture this field of Jewish education. On one hand, I work to make existing Jewish educational and engagement programs meaningful for our current students and their parents. At the same time, I am also laying the foundations of Jewish learning opportunities for the next generation. I want the teens who participate in Gratz' Jewish Community High School to find the experience rewarding today, but also to be primed to participate in Jewish communal life in the decades to follow. Teachers who participate in my courses today will teach this week's lessons more effectively. I also hope they will see themselves as part of a cadre of Jewish learners who can contribute to future incarnations of complementary Jewish education.

Three years ago, I was invited to co-lead an extensive communal process with the vague goal of “invigorating supplementary Jewish education in Greater Philadelphia.” We created a Youth Summit on complementary Jewish education where 100 5th – 12th graders from 25 synagogues participated in a series of creative activities. At a subsequent Adult Summit, parents, professionals and communal lay leaders studied what we had gleaned from the youth. My collaborators and I ultimately secured enough communal support and funding for eight synagogues to pilot *Havayah*, an experiential 5th grade communal program that is more engaging than anything the synagogues could have created independently. The experience epitomized how I understand my role as a leader in complementary Jewish education. I convened stakeholders, assessed resources and obstacles, imagined a model that elevated existing programs while paving the way of future innovation, built communal support and now supervise the implementation of the pilot.

In my work, I sometimes feel more like I am uncovering a path than forging one. This is because I do not have a precise destination in mind yet. The pace of change in the American Jewish community and in complementary Jewish education itself has been so fast that I have only been able to catch glimpses of what is beyond the horizon. I think of myself as part of a communal caravan rather than undertaking a solo quest; no single individual will determine the destination. What I know with certainty is that I will be easy to spot along the way, high on my camel, enthusiastically urging the American Jewish community to propel part-time weekly learning programs forward boldly and intentionally.