

## Supplementary Jewish education in Britain: Facts and issues of the cheder system

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### Abstract

Whilst the focus for the community in the last twenty years has been on putting enormous resources into developing the day school system in the UK, the result has been that the supplementary system has lagged behind in every sense. One reason for this deficiency of resourcing is that the community has been focusing their attention on the goal of having almost all Jewish children in Jewish day schools by 2020. A consultative research project has taken place to determine recommendations to take to the UJIA to invest in a strategy which addresses the needs of those children who attend supplementary Jewish schools and not Jewish day schools, as the locus for their Jewish education.

Stage One was comprised of desk research to determine the history, demography, and quantitative data related to the field of supplementary Jewish schooling in the UK.

Stage Two involved interviews with professionals and lay leaders throughout the different denominational sectors (Liberal, Reform, Masorti, and Orthodox). 14 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted over a four week period.

Stage Three put theory and research into practice. A series of group meetings attended by key professionals and stakeholders working in central agencies and synagogues in supplementary education across the community took place. The purpose of these meetings was to work towards recommendations for a strategy to re-energize the *cheder* system

in the UK. At present, one year later, such a strategy is already in place to address the outcomes of the research.

### A Historical Perspective

In Britain, Jewish education has been accessible since the readmittance of the Jews more than three hundred and fifty years ago (Romain, 1985). Continuously since that time, formal Jewish education has been provided by synagogue supplementary schools, as well as by Jewish day schools. Sociological and demographic considerations have, at different times since 1656, affected the proportion of Jewish children receiving supplementary Jewish education, as well as reflecting shifts in outlook concerning the relative emphasis being put on supplementary schools as opposed to day schools in Britain.

As early as 1851, Sir David Salomons, the first Ashkenazi president of the Board of Deputies, argued that Jewish education should take place in supplementary schools and not in the day schools, which were, for him, a barrier to acculturation and emancipation (Alderman, 1999). Integration into an English way of life was seen by the 100,000 Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe as the only way to move away from the poverty and squalor in which they were living. In addition, the children and grandchildren of the immigrants wanted desperately to be accepted as English men and women (Lipman, 1954).

It is, however, important to note that whilst integration with the host community was encouraged, assimilation was not. Pride in being Jewish and adherence to Jewish tradition and practice was unequivocally encouraged, and a developed system of Jewish education supplemented the secular studies taught to the increasing majority of Jewish children in non-denominational schools. This supplementary education took place in classes attached to synagogues and Board schools and was funded by Jewish philanthropists who provided funds for resources and staff. Pupils attended classes three to four evenings per week and were taught Hebrew and Jewish religious subjects.

By the end of the Second World War, the Jews of Britain constituted the only surviving intact Jewish community in Europe. The decade that followed was one in which more Jews lived in Britain than either before or since. It is estimated (Schmool & Cohen, 1998) that in 1950, the approximate Jewish population of Britain was 420,000, a far greater number than the 280,000 estimated today (JPR, 2003). Whilst around 80% of Jewish children in Britain received some form of Jewish

education in the 1950s and 60s, almost three quarters of that number attended supplementary schools. In addition, the number of hours for supplementary education was reduced dramatically in the post-war years, with most children no longer receiving Jewish education for three or four evenings a week, but for only two or three hours on a Sunday morning, mirroring the Sunday school pattern of the Christian churches. Infrequently, an additional session during the week was provided.

There were several reasons for this shift. Education was of prime importance to the generation of post-war parents. It was perceived as the best means of escaping from a lower economic level into the professional and business classes. An additional means of ensuring that escape was to be as assimilated as necessary in order to be able to take advantage of all that was on offer to aspiring families. For many, weekend mornings became the time for music and ballet and swimming and football, not synagogue, Jewish learning, and prayer. In addition, Jewish supplementary education competed with increasingly sophisticated social lives, all made possible because of growing proportions of disposable income (Miller, 2001). As the generations became more distant from the all-encompassing Jewish family lifestyles of the 1880s and 90s, assimilation became more prevalent than integration for the majority of the Jewish community. The supplementary schools were increasingly expected to provide a Jewish education that had come to have a decreasing connection to the lives of the pupils outside of their synagogue classes. The integrated lifestyle of the early years was replaced by a separation between religious and secular life for all but a small proportion of the Jewish school-age population of Britain who attended Jewish schools. To compound the difficulties, supplementary teaching was poorly paid, if at all, and undervalued. Teachers were for the most part untrained and often unable to provide interesting lessons in the makeshift or unsuitable accommodations in which they taught.

In 1971, the then Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, Lord Jakobovits, launched the Jewish Educational Development Trust (Sacks, 1994), which significantly raised the profile of Jewish education within the British Jewish community. Communal efforts at fund raising began to place more emphasis on projects dealing with Jewish education. In 1975, 20% of Jewish children received full-time Jewish education and nearly 30% received supplementary Jewish education.

In 1994, Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, wrote a powerful study of Jewish continuity (Sacks, 1994). Seriously concerned for the fate of Anglo-Jewry, Sacks issued a summons for

collective action to counteract the prevailing trend of assimilation and to build on Jakobovits' pleas made a generation earlier. It has long been known that the family has the strongest, most intense effect on individuals in their development (Swain, 1979; JPR, 1996). Sacks identified the fourth generation as a generation of Jews who had lived in the UK for many years and were so far removed from the traditions that their forefathers had brought with them, that they were unable to practice, and saw little relevance in, a full Jewish life. They consequently did not have the ability to transmit a rich sense of Jewish identity to their children. Jewish life and Jewish education had become secondary at every level to high achievement and status in secular life. Cultural pluralism has thus had a double effect on Jewish life. On the one hand, it has enabled Jewish people to live freely as committed Jews; on the other hand, it has also allowed them to easily lose all or most aspects of their Jewish identity (Schiff, 1966).

As the Jewish community has striven in the last two decades for a stronger sense of Jewish identification and continuity, more than enculturation needs to take place. Alexander, (1997) writes that this can only happen through education leading to a search for Jewish authenticity. It is only when that happens that meaningful Jewish continuity will be increased.

### **The Situation Today**

The majority of the strategies developing from both Jakobovits' and Sacks' works have focused on developing a day school Jewish education system in Britain. New schools have opened from the 1970s onwards, with the result that by 2006, almost 60%<sup>1</sup> of Jewish children in Britain were attending Jewish day schools, with a further 15 – 20% attending supplementary schools at any one time (Board of Deputies unpublished figures, 2006). The Jewish day school was seen as the answer to both the prevailing trend of assimilation as well as to providing a strong foundation of Jewish learning on a level not available in two or three hours a week of supplementary education.

Despite this resurgence of interest in day school education, the situation at the present time is that overall, throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> This figure refers to the whole community, including the strictly orthodox. It is estimated that 40% of the mainstream orthodox and non-orthodox children attend Jewish day schools.

community, there are still an estimated 7,000 or so children receiving their Jewish education from supplementary schools of one type or other (Board of Deputies data, 2006, see Appendix 2). This is as opposed to approximately 16,000 children receiving their education in the Jewish mainstream (central, orthodox, and pluralist) primary and secondary sectors (Jewish Schools' Commission Consultation Document, 2007). In the last ten years, the total number of supplementary schools has decreased from 141 to 118. This drop can be attributed to the increasing number of children attending Jewish day schools. Similarly, the total number of children receiving their Jewish education in supplementary schools has decreased; in the last ten years, numbers have fallen by one third. These figures only take account of supplementary education through synagogues. Those children being educated through private arrangements are unaccounted for, and whilst this is probably no more than 200-300 children throughout the country, these figures also do not take into account the Israeli Sunday school in London. The latest data from that school (Board of Deputies, 2003-4) suggests a further 250 pupils.

The focus of community attention has been to have almost all Jewish children in Jewish day schools by 2020. The reality, however, is that day school education is not an option for all Jewish children in Britain today, due one or more of the following:

- Status
- Geography
- Conviction
- Weak engagement

### **Status**

Children who are Jewish according to the Office of the Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue may choose to attend a Jewish school. Those children with issues of status, whether it is that their mother converted through one of the non-Orthodox movements or that they cannot find the paperwork to prove their *halachic* status, are not eligible for a place at any of our current Jewish secondary schools and only at three of our primary schools (unless other Jewish schools are undersubscribed, in which case they may be offered a place). For these children, the only formal Jewish education option is through supplementary education.

### **Geography**

Many children living in Britain do not live within reasonable travelling distance of a Jewish school. Even in Greater London, there are more than 20,000 Jewish people who do not live within 10 miles of a Jewish day school. Many cities with reasonable Jewish populations have no Jewish day school within one and a half hours of travel time. For these and many other children, the only formal Jewish education option is through supplementary education.

### **Conviction**

The pros and cons of sending a child to a Jewish day school is a hotly debated and current issue. Some Jewish families in Britain make a positive decision to send their children to non-denominational schools. Reasons for this range from a desire for Independent school education to concern for academic or social opportunities or the conviction that their children should mix with children from a diverse range of religious and cultural backgrounds. Such parents are not necessarily less committed to Jewish learning and education. Conversely, they are often very connected to the Jewish community and concerned to provide a good Jewish education for their children. But, for these children, the only formal Jewish education option is through supplementary education.

### **Weak engagement**

Cohen and Kahn-Harris (2004) constructed an index of Jewish engagement in which they estimated that 18-20% of British Jews have low engagement with Jewish practice and a further 40-60% have a moderate engagement. One of the questions asked to 1,437 Jewish parents whose children attended some form of Jewish education (*cheder*, nursery, or day school) was whether their child or children had attended or were currently attending Jewish day schools. 38% of those surveyed have not sent their children to Jewish day schools. For these children, the only formal Jewish education option is through supplementary education.

## The Current Structure of Supplementary Education in Britain

The majority of supplementary schools take place under the auspices of the synagogue, and their structure has not substantially changed in recent years. Most still only meet on Sunday mornings, although in the Progressive movements, an increasing number now meet on a Shabbat morning. In some synagogues, children also meet on one or even two after-school sessions in the week. As well as synagogue schools, there is a small, but growing number of private teaching arrangements made between one or more families and an independent teacher of their choice, usually meeting in someone's home for one session a week. Other initiatives include an Israeli supplementary school in North London and a secular *cheder* meeting in East London. In the United Synagogue, in some areas synagogues with small numbers of children attending *cheder* have combined forces to provide regional centres that utilize teachers and premises to cater to a larger number of pupils.

Almost all supplementary schools run along the lines of a traditional school. Children are divided into classes by age: in smaller schools these classes may be vertically grouped, in other words, have two or more year groups in one class. The morning is divided into lessons of up to an hour, separated by break time. Usually there is an assembly time at the beginning or end of the morning, containing *tefillah*, announcements, and contributions by teachers and children; sometimes these sessions are used as whole school teaching opportunities. One of the earliest themes to emerge during this research was concern as to what extent Jewish supplementary education should mirror a formal school setting.

Currently, there are no national curricula for any of the movements. The United Synagogue did develop a national curriculum, but now, although the infant curriculum is still in use, after the age of seven, children are taught according to the experience, skill, and interests of particular teachers. The *Bar Mitzvah* test is still in place, and is a necessary pre-requisite for all boys who wish to be *Bar Mitzvah* in the United Synagogue. In the Reform, Liberal, and Masorti movements, individual synagogues have written curricula, which are followed to a greater or lesser extent by individual teachers. In all *chedarim*, the content of the curriculum includes Hebrew reading, *chumash* and *tefillah*, festivals and *kashrut*, history and Israel, and values and ethics. The way the content is transmitted, the resources used, and the depth of teaching and learning in each of the subject areas vary from school to school and from movement to movement. There is debate within communities as to the purpose

of the curriculum. To what extent is the intention for the curriculum to instruct and impart knowledge? To what extent is it to enculturate (Aron 1987) and develop Jewish identity?

The most controversial area of teaching is, without doubt, Hebrew: should this be taught in an instrumental way, to enable the child to chant their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* portion or to be able to read prayer? Should Hebrew be taught with understanding so that the child has a working use of the language through translation of vocabulary and use of grammar? In addition, to what extent, if at all, is it the responsibility of the *cheder* to teach *Ivrit*, modern Hebrew? The one clear result is that in almost all supplementary schools, the standard of Hebrew reading, writing, speaking, and understanding is poor. Children receive a “boost” in preparation for *Bar/Bat mitzvah*, usually through individual teaching, but other than that, the possibility of learning much Hebrew in one taught lesson a week is low.

Expectations of parents are often low. Sometimes, for example, they are satisfied for their children to learn their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* requirements from transliterated sheets. Where parental expectations are high, parents then tend to be dissatisfied with the standard and quality of learning provided at the *cheder*. There is an ongoing debate as to what can be agreed upon as reasonable expectations of the *cheder*. Whatever the level of expectation, Head teachers agree that most parents do care about their children’s Jewish education. In three of the *chedarim* surveyed, alternative streams of *cheder* have emerged in recent years to address the needs of those families who want a “higher level” of teaching and learning.

Children usually start *cheder* when they are around five years old. Some *chedarim* run pre-*cheder* groups, either taking place on Sunday mornings or on Shabbat mornings during the synagogue service. In the *chedarim*, throughout the movements, the key “graduation point” is the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. In some Orthodox synagogues, the graduation point for girls is the *Bat Chayil*, at twelve years old. Preparation for both the *Bat Chayil* and the Orthodox *Bat Mitzvah* includes at least the learning required to deliver a *dvar torah* as well as the completion of a personal project. Preparation for *Bar Mitzvah* and non-Orthodox *Bat Mitzvah* includes varied amounts of reading from *Torah*, *Maftir*, and *Haftarah*, a *dvar torah*, and sometimes leading part of the synagogue service. The trend in the Liberal Movement for children not to become *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, and to continue to fifteen years of age with their Jewish education, culminating in a Confirmation ceremony, is no longer as

prevalent as it was in the 1960s and 70s. Now, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* usually does take place at 13 years of age in Liberal synagogues and children are then invited to continue their Jewish education, culminating in a graduation at fifteen or sixteen years of age.

In all the synagogue movements, there is a desire to keep children involved in formal Jewish education past the age of 13. Both the Agency for Jewish Education and the Leo Baeck College act as examination centres so that pupils can take national examinations in Jewish Studies from 14/15 years of age. In 2007, almost 200 pupils took national exams in Jewish Studies through two-year post-*Bnei Mitzvah* synagogue programmes. In one synagogue, 100% of *Bnei Mitzvah* pupils stayed on in the exam class, although in other synagogues this percentage was far smaller. The popularity of this program from the perspective of the parents and pupils is mainly due to the fact that it allows the child to gain an additional national examination. In the regions outside greater London, this facility is also offered through the synagogue. Other initiatives used to keep post-*Bnei Mitzvah* pupils involved in Jewish education include Shabbat youth services, programs of study, and links with youth initiatives in the synagogue and the youth movements, but these activities are hard to sustain. The most popular way of retaining interest in the teenage years, apart from the formal study, is to offer these young people training as teaching assistants and teachers. In smaller synagogues and areas of smaller Jewish populations, throughout the different movements, post-*Bnei Mitzvah* children are the only available option as teachers. Often, a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old is the main Jewish educational point of contact and role model for children in *cheder*. Some Head teachers strongly object to this teenage teacher model, because of the teenagers' lack of pedagogy and subject knowledge. Regional teenage centres cater for the post-*Bnei Mitzvah* education of some young people in the Masorti Movement and in some Orthodox areas. It is the informal sector, more than the formal sector, that caters to teenagers, however, through camps, tours, and local and national youth-related activities. At its peak (the Israel tour at age 16), the informal sector touches approximately 50% of all Jewish children, including both those who are at day and those at supplementary school. All other interventions reach a far smaller percentage of Jewish teenagers.

Most Head teachers of *chedarim* work only during the hours of the *cheder*, with sometimes two or three hours in addition paid per week for administration and organisation. The larger Reform, Liberal, and Masorti synagogues employ Head teachers or Directors of Education

who are employed at least half-time or more during the week. There are some rabbis who are also the Head teachers of the *cheder* at their synagogue. Teachers are often members of the synagogue, but not always. Israeli non-members of the synagogue are employed, particularly to teach Hebrew, in many non-orthodox *chedarim*. There are no official pay structures in any of the movements, and pay varies widely from synagogue to synagogue. In some cases, teachers are not paid; this tends to occur in *chedarim* where the teachers are members of the synagogue. In some synagogues, teaching assistants are also not paid.

Jewish educators and *cheder* teachers have very low status in the UK. This is reflected in the lack of hours of employment, the lack of pay and salary structure, and the lack of respect that they receive from the community. Experience suggests that Jewish educators in the United States and Canada enjoy a higher level of respect, reflected in their working conditions and benefits.

Almost all of the *chedarim* are supported by a degree of lay leadership structure. In some *chedarim*, there is an education committee made up of lay members of the community. In the best cases, this group includes one or more education professionals, although this is not always the case. In some settings, the rabbi sits on this group, but not in every case. In a number of synagogues, usually the smaller ones, a lay leader with responsibility for education sits on the main synagogue council or board, and no separate education committee exists. The role of lay leadership is to guide and support the Head teacher and teachers running the *cheder*. The level of intervention varies widely from synagogue to synagogue. In some cases, the lay leader(s) meet once or twice a year with the Head teacher, while in others the lay leader(s) play an active part on a week-by-week basis. Some lay leadership groups steer curriculum development with the Head teacher, others use their group as a vehicle for fund raising or organizing social activities. Sometimes, the Head teacher feels unsupported by, or has a poor relationship with, the lay leadership of the synagogue and this leads to frustration and inability to alter or improve aspects of the *cheder*. These variations are not specific to particular movements. The best examples of lay leadership involvement are where the lay leaders have confidence in the rabbi and/or Head teacher and become partners in the realization of their vision.

Parents are often recruited to lay leadership positions. In some of the larger synagogues, separate parent associations are formed. These generally have a limited life, depending on their leadership, but can also be valuable vehicles for fund raising and organising *cheder*-related

activities. Parents on the one hand see their role as peripheral – they drop and pick up the children – but on the other hand, the comment has been made several times that the *chedarim* do not communicate with them. A familiar cry is that when parents pick up their children and ask “what did you do at *cheder* this morning?” the children say “nothing,” or “I don’t know.” This does not mean, of course, that “nothing” is happening. However, better communication between parents and *cheder* professionals and lay leaders could certainly be developed. In addition, parents are still seen as consumers and not partners. Many parents still regard the primary purpose of *cheder* as preparation for *B’nei Mitzvah*. Whilst this narrow view and aim prevails, it is hard to promote creativity and innovation.

Synagogue *chedarim* are usually, but not always, funded by the synagogue, and one of the common complaints from those interviewed was that their *cheder* is under-resourced. There is insufficient money to buy good quality materials, to properly pay or train teachers, or to invest in curriculum development and new technology. The funding for the *cheder* is usually part of the general synagogue budget, although in some synagogues parents do pay separately to send their children to *cheder*. In certain synagogues a small levy is required of *cheder* parents to supplement synagogue funding, and parents who set up individual schemes for educating their children pay privately for this service.

There are two central agencies working with the *chedarim*: the Agency for Jewish Education (AJE), affiliated with the United Synagogue *chedarim*, and the Leo Baeck College (LBC), associated with the Liberal and Reform Movements and some Masorti *chedarim*. AJE states that there is presently very little centralization and very little support for *chedarim*, although the Director of AJE is currently conducting his own research into United Synagogue *cheder* provision; AJE does provide a central resource centre for teachers, occasional teacher training seminars, and a regular email newsletter with news and ideas for lessons (JED Mail). The LBC provides regular support and advice to all its *chedarim* on curriculum, resources, teaching, and policies. There are meetings of support groups for Head teachers as well as annual teacher education conferences and seminars in London and Manchester. A four-term teacher training programme takes place in London and at synagogue venues across the country, with two or three such courses happening at any one time. Sometimes, a synagogue would like to send all its teachers on these courses, but is limited by its lack of funds. The support and advisory services provided have been put in place to develop a sense of professionalism among Head teachers and their staff.

## Recent success stories

Within a system that appears to be poorly resourced and problematic in many ways, it is encouraging to be able to record that there have been, over the past few years, various initiatives which have had an impact in the quality of Jewish education in the *cheder* system. Some of these have been national or regional initiatives, whilst others have been focused on one specific community. A few examples of significant initiatives have been:

### Family Education

Pioneered by Harlene Appelman, Ron Woolfson, and Jo Kay in the 1980s in the USA, family education was designed to empower parents with the Jewish skills and knowledge to begin to transmit Judaism to the next generat (Appelman, 1998). In the late 1980s, several educators from across the Jewish community in Britain travelled to a Family Education Conference in Los Angeles, and with the help of the above-mentioned educators, became inspired to change the face of Jewish education in synagogue communities and *chedarim* across Britain. There were many pockets of success. Programmes flourished in Orthodox and Progressive *chedarim* and synagogues through the 1990s. Key to the success of those programmes was the fact that family education co-ordinators were employed by both the Progressive and Orthodox synagogues' central agencies. Coupled with this was the support from Appelman and others in the States. Together they made it financially possible for educators to attend the annual conference in Los Angeles every year, and they came to Britain as scholars-in-residence, where they inspired educators across the communities. Schein (2007) suggests that powerful forms of family education can only occur "if there is a guiding vision of the role of the family within the larger ecology of Jewish learning and living" (page 13). In the last five years in the UK, interest in family education has received less of a focus. Reasons may include lack of attendance in recent years at the annual family education conference due to withdrawal of funding, coupled with less financial support for employing family educators in the central agencies and in synagogues.

### Professionalization in the Liberal, Reform, and Masorti Communities

Teacher training programmes for *cheder* teachers have existed for many decades in all sectors of the community. In 1992, for the first time in Britain a Master's Degree in Jewish Education was launched.

Together with the Advanced Diploma in Professional Development in Jewish Education, which took its first cohort in 1998, these courses provided high-level qualifications for senior educators. As well as these courses, larger synagogues invested financially in the people running the *chedarim* and a cadre of full and part time Jewish education professionals has now grown across the larger non-Orthodox synagogues.

Some synagogues have a largely traditional morning program but enhance classroom learning with opportunities for residential trips in the UK and abroad. Various *chedarim* run residential *Shabbatonim* in centres in the UK, catering for groups of pupils or families. Several synagogues in the London area take pre- or post-*B'nei Mitzvah* groups to Israel for a week. Another group of synagogues takes its post-*B'nei Mitzvah* children to Amsterdam to learn about Jewish Europe. All these activities operate outside the normal structure of the *cheder* and are reliant on professionals within the synagogue to undertake the huge amount of work needed to make these events transpire with success.

One synagogue has over the past few years regularly run one-week seminars in Israel for *cheder* teachers. All of the Israel trips detailed in this paper take place under the auspices of the UJIA Israel Experience office.

Ways of changing the structure of the regular *cheder* morning have included various initiatives: some synagogues run traditional lessons for part of the morning and then introduce a variety of projects in vertical groups, and the children choose the ones in which to participate. This gives a more informal feel to the *cheder* structure, and whilst these one-off projects are received well by the pupils, they rely almost exclusively on the particular skills and willingness of individuals in the community. Other schools have changed their classes from Sundays to Shabbat. The rationale for this is firstly, for children to be able to participate in Shabbat services and related activities in the *shul*, and secondly, that some communities feel that families will not come to the synagogue on both days of the weekend and would rather focus attendance on Shabbat than on Sunday.

There is a growing recognition that *cheder* must be seen as part of the holistic Jewish education of a young person, which also includes youth club and youth movement, residential experiences, children's services, and more, as well as it being one aspect of lifelong provision on a person's personal Jewish journey. *Cheder* does not have to be a three-hour-a-week replication of school in order to fulfil that aim. The challenge is to find the best structure within which to fulfil those aims.

### **“Growing” the cheder**

Although in some areas, numbers in supplementary education are decreasing, there are individual examples of growth, both in and out of London. For example, in the last five years, one orthodox *cheder* on the South East coast has grown from 6 to 42 children, and one United Synagogue *cheder* in North London has grown from 3 to 58 pupils. Good communication, and above all, charismatic leaders, whether these are the synagogue rabbi, the Head teacher, the chair of education, or a combination of all these, seem to have been key to these growing schools. What these *chedarim* seem to do particularly well is generate a warm and accepting atmosphere, drawing in children and their parents who have previously been less motivated to be involved in Jewish education. What they find most challenging is developing curricula and providing sufficient appropriate teacher development to deliver curricula.

The larger *chedarim* in the United Synagogue within reasonable proximity to Jewish day schools tend to be in areas where parents are more affluent and decide to send their children to the independent school sector as opposed to the Jewish day schools. This is also reflected in the Masorti and Reform movements. The small proportion of children from the Liberal movement attending Jewish day schools does not affect numbers at *cheder* to a significant degree.

The impact of good practice can be seen in many of our *chedarim*. Whilst all these individual success stories are encouraging, the challenge for all of them is to be able to sustain these initiatives, evaluate them, and replicate them elsewhere. Often, as shown, success is due to the charisma, and hard work, of an individual spearheading an initiative. This is often the rabbi, but could also be the Head teacher or a lay leader. When that individual is no longer involved, it is often hard to continue to develop that initiative. An injection of funding can also lead to success. Again, the issue is how to sustain that success when additional funding is no longer available.

## **Challenges**

### **Demography**

The potentially changing profile of the membership in the synagogue affects the number of pupils in the *cheder*, in some cases to the point where its viability is in question. Typically, this occurs in old areas of the Jewish community – Bradford and Blackpool, to name but two – that suffer from Jewish population decline. There are still families with

young children in these communities, but not enough to run a school. In these areas, educators and lay leaders grapple with the problem of how to educate the remaining children in the synagogue. The focus is often on family and child-centred events on a regular basis, and often focused on the *Chagim*. But these communities feel isolated and often struggle with low levels of resourcing, motivation, and expertise.

Even in London, shifting demography has led to the demise of the *cheder* in some communities and the growth of the *cheder* in others. Sometimes opening a new synagogue in the area can shift populations. One very established Reform synagogue in Harrow has lost many of its younger members over the past fifteen years to a new Reform synagogue that has attracted younger residents in the area and developed a *cheder* of its own.

Several people interviewed also associated falling *cheder* enrollment with a growing degree of assimilation and out-marriage. This implies the need for good systems of outreach to be put in place, as well as the necessity of providing meaningful experiences for the least engaged and then building on these experiences.

## Gender

In the United Synagogue *chedarim* boys currently outnumber girls by approximately 4:3. The remaining girls may be attending private classes, but, according to the central agency (AJE), it is as likely that they receive no formal Jewish education. In the Reform and Liberal movements, which are egalitarian in nature, and in the Masorti Movement, gender is not a significant issue and roughly equal proportions of boys and girls attend *cheder* and become *bnei mitzvah*.

## Day schools

The growth of the day school system from approximately 25% of Jewish children to almost 60% of Jewish children in the last thirty years has affected the number of children enrolled in supplementary education. The effects of this on the synagogue are two-fold: firstly, the numbers in some of the *chedarim* have therefore dropped sharply, and secondly, those children who attend day schools may have little connection to a synagogue community. One *cheder* in North London has dropped in numbers from 250 in the 1980s to 110 in 2007. The Head teacher attributes the main reason for this to the development of new day schools in the area. A challenge to the synagogue community is how to integrate children and their families for whom the day school is the primary contact for Jewish life.

### **Rethinking the concept of cheder**

Over the past ten years, there have been various local initiatives to rethink the whole concept of supplementary education. Many of these were triggered by research in the USA in the 1980s and 90s done by Isa Aron, Susan Shevitz, and others (Weinberg & Aron, 2002). These researchers coined the phrase, “congregation of learners” (page 15), and whilst much of their focus was on encouraging and supporting exciting and innovative educational outcomes designed for congregation transformation, their energy also led congregations to question what they should be undertaking in relation to the children in the community. In the UK, individual communities and groups of communities have convened groups over the years to consider radically re-thinking supplementary education. Whilst some innovative ideas have emerged and been put into practice, it is clear that too often these initiatives have led nowhere, or at best lead to some tweaking of the known system.

### **Commitment and Resourcing**

The very fact that supplementary education is so part-time affects the commitment to it by parents and children. I have shown the historical factors that have impacted the structure of the supplementary school and resulted in the shrinking number of hours devoted to it from generation to generation. In turn, the small number of hours offered means that in terms of career opportunities, the supplementary system has very few substantial jobs. Most teachers in this system are employed for a few hours a week, consequently with poor pay and low status. As well as the small number of hours, three-quarters of all *chedarim* have fewer than 100 pupils, and more than half of all *chedarim* have less than 50 pupils. This limits the ability of schools in all aspects, from resourcing, to staffing, and to programming. Individual synagogues allocate limited and restricted financial resources to education, and stakeholders interviewed all stated that they feel there has been insufficient central funding from their synagogues or synagogue movements to support the *chedarim*. There has been a strong and often repeated desire to see more financial resources set aside from the Jewish community to develop the *cheder* system, so that it can improve qualitatively from the position in which it now finds itself.

### **An International Perspective**

In March 2007, Jack Wertheimer published a major report of supplementary education in the USA (Wertheimer, 2007). Whilst many

of the successes and challenges mirrored those which we face in the UK, there is a fundamental difference between the placing of supplementary education in the USA and the UK. According to Wertheimer, in the USA, “Supplementary schools continue to enrol the majority of students receiving a Jewish education” (page 3).

In the USA, even many lay and professional leaders who strongly prefer day schools as the optimal form of Jewish education recognize that for a considerable number of children, supplementary schools are the only option; secondly, central agencies of Jewish education have invested in supplementary education, particularly in teacher-training; thirdly, rabbinic training has focused more intensively on preparing rabbis as key educational thinkers and practitioners; and fourthly, there has been a change in how supplementary education is defined. Schools are valued not only for the skills they teach, but for the Jewish experiences they offer and the memories they create.

Wertheimer’s report does list persistent challenges to Jewish supplementary education, and these are very similar to those described above in the UK context. His research presents a far more optimistic view than others also writing about the American context, for example, Steinhardt (2007), who describes a “profound sense of disappointment” in current American supplementary education (page 3) The challenge to the British Jewish community is how to affect a turn-around of the present situation to create an impetus for change and development. We know that there have been approaches in all sectors of the community to address these concerns, and some of these have been explored in this paper. But in terms of overall and sustained impact in the Jewish community, these are not significant.

In Argentina, with a community of 210,000, a declining day school enrollment due to the economic crisis has forced the community to radically redevelop its supplementary system in the last seven years. According to its literature (Lomdim, 2004), key factors to success are highly motivated and experienced teachers, first-rate educational materials, and enthusiastic and supportive communities.

## Next Steps for the UK

The Argentina story is fascinating, because it shows remarkable success in the face of a critical situation. In the UK, we do not have an acute situation yet, but we do have a slowly sliding state of affairs fuelled by low motivation. How do we ensure that we address the needs

of the UK supplementary system in order to provide maximum impact on the development of Jewish education? The research for this paper has identified key areas of possible intervention, namely curriculum, resources and teacher training, and development. Before deciding on these specifics, synagogues need to take a more strategic, broader view, and answer Barry Shrage's question, which is: how do we help congregations transform themselves into "real communities of *Torah*, *Tzedek* and *Chesed* – learning, social justice and caring?" (Shrage, 2007, page 4).

Kahn and Harris (2004) suggest that despite the development of Jewish schools, the proposed Jewish Community Centre in London, and other cultural initiatives, the synagogue congregation provides the greatest opportunity for the development of community. What implications does this view have for the links and overlaps between informal and formal education, between learning opportunities for children and adults, and ultimately, for the continuity of a strongly identified and knowledgeable generations of Jews in the coming decades? We know that the Jewish community in the UK is shrinking. A proportion of that shrinkage can be attributed to lack of engagement, but also lack of inspiration through community education, leading to poor motivation to create a Jewish home in adult life. The synagogue, and dynamic education through the synagogue, is vital to ensuring that Jewish children become committed and involved Jewish adults.

We need to engage in experimentation, reflection, and research in order to be able to build a strategy which addresses the needs of the UK Jewish community and provides a rich and meaningful teaching and learning environment.

My research and this paper show that whilst it has been possible to provide a picture of the current situation regarding supplementary Jewish education in the UK at present, and to identify a range of important issues, there is no clear, one way forward in terms of a strategy for either the British Jewish community or the UJIA. One option, of course, is to do nothing – to celebrate the current successes and continue to work within our current constraints. If we do decide we want to do more, then a variety of options present themselves. None are necessarily exclusive and there is no hierarchy of "right" or "better" alternative ways forward.

### **Moving forward**

This project has been one of investigation, research, and evaluation. The underlying aim at the start of the project was that the resulting

report would lead to policy. The project was commissioned by the UJIA, the key umbrella Jewish educational charity in the UK responsible for funding and enabling Jewish education initiatives across the whole community – in schools, *chedarim*, and within informal education. The trustees and professionals of the UJIA have been able to affect the Jewish supplementary schools through the policy changes it has been able to make and with the financial support that it has been able to give as a result of this research.

At the end of Stage three of this study, the desired outcomes of intervention in *cheder* education have been agreed by the stakeholders as follows:

To raise the profile of *cheder* education in the UK;

To boost morale and motivation;

To enable synagogues to feel ownership of, and pride in, their *cheder*; and

To create a fundamental shift in how the UK Jewish community regards *cheder*, particularly in the wider context of learning communities.

A two-stage intervention has since been developed. Stage one took place in the summer of 2008, when a grant was allotted to each of the central agencies, providing training and resources for supplementary schools in the Orthodox and Progressive sectors. Each agency was invited to design and implement a project for their constituents that would kick-start the school year with a burst of energy, skills and resources. The projects that were developed were new and innovative, and addressed their constituents' needs well. Both agencies, as well as the Masorti Movement, were invited to submit proposals to energize the following school year (2009-10) and will repeat the process for the school year 2010-11.

Stage two was to move beyond the very short term projects of stage one to re-energize and work towards increased quality in the supplementary system. The desired outcomes were identified by the stakeholders as follows:

*To have encouraged innovation and creativity*

*To have begun the work towards a better trained staff team in cheder*

*To have boosted morale and motivation*

Every synagogue community was invited to submit a proposal for a project to the UJIA which would show innovation and creativity within Jewish and Israel educational programming in the *cheder*, include an element of staff training, and demonstrate a commitment to sharing

good practice with colleagues. A basic level of funding was assured for each project submitted that fulfilled the criteria and additional funding available for projects as needed. It was strongly felt that this “UJIA Challenge Fund,” as it has been named, would engage individual *chedarim* directly, rather than divert this funding back into the two central agencies.

We are currently at the stage where applications to the Challenge Fund are being received and processed. Each proposal that has been received to date does indeed show innovation and creativity. Funding will enable communities to run a *shabbaton* for staff, start a Jewish library book project for children, and employ an artist in residence for the year. These are merely three of the many good ideas received. The next stage of this initiative will be to monitor and evaluate these projects as they are developed in each *cheder* in terms of the research and interventions that have taken place in the past year.

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