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**An Exploration of Independent  
Jewish “Enrichment” Programs  
in Metropolitan Chicago**

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By Leslie Rosen Stern, MA, MSW



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Jewish United Fund/  
Jewish Federation  
OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO

Dear Reader,

The Community Foundation for Jewish Education of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago (CFJE) is pleased to present our second report in our series “CFJE Reports” regarding research on issues of local interest to Chicago’s Jewish education professionals and stake holders that have not been examined in depth on the local level in the past. This second report examines five local independent Jewish enrichment models of Jewish education that are not formally affiliated with legacy Jewish institutions such as synagogues and Jewish Community Centers. It details challenges being articulated by families today in engaging their children in Jewish education and the educational opportunities the educators behind these programs see to meet them. The report attempts to present an overarching frame of understanding for an expanding local trend of independent Jewish educational start-ups that can help us better understand how to support and gauge innovation in Jewish education in our community.

It is CFJE’s hope that by engaging in research that provides insight and context to local Jewish educational issues, we will be able to facilitate the provision of Jewish education to the local community more effectively and from a better informed and more transparent position. CFJE owes its thanks to Leslie Rosen Stern of Meeting Your Mission who studied these programs as they were underway and gleaned important conclusions from her discussions with the program founders, stakeholders and parents. It is our hope that her work will not only inform our local education community about this current trend, but provide some informational context to our larger community about it as well. Special appreciation goes to the leaders, educators, stakeholders and parents who spoke with Leslie candidly and directly about their unique programs and the overarching question of innovation in Jewish education.

L’Shalom,

Rabbi Scott Aaron, Ph.D.

*Executive Director,*

*Community Foundation for Jewish Education  
of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago*

## CONTEXT/INTRODUCTION:

The objective of this research project was to acquire first hand facts to help the Community Foundation for Jewish Education contextualize “Jewish Enrichment” within the current eco-system of Jewish education in Metropolitan Chicago.

For the purposes of this study, “Jewish Enrichment” is defined as programs that encompass some aspect of supplementary Jewish education, that are offered to the Jewish community at large but not formally affiliated with, or a subsidiary of a synagogue or other Jewish communal institution. The assessment has taken the form of personal interviews, conversations, program observations and meetings with leadership, parents, participants, educators and staff with goals of answering broad questions like:

- What Does Jewish Enrichment Look Like in Chicago?
- Are The Current Models In Chicago Replicable?
- What Are The Trends And Needs In the Area of Jewish Enrichment, Both Locally and Nationally?

Several individuals were generous with their time, sharing openly about their hopes, needs and expectations of Jewish education. A sampling of families and key leadership from each program were engaged in the exploration, with founding families and parent leadership providing key visions. More than twenty interviews were conducted to uncover some of the unique traits and qualities of these programs. A special thank you is extended to Rabbi Scott Aaron for his consultation and support of this investigation. A list of enrichment programs explored and visited is included at the end of the report.

## BACKGROUND TRENDS AND CONCERNS:

On October 1, 2013, the Pew Research Center released a report, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews*. As Uriel Heilman aptly described, in his review of the Pew Report, “the study landed like a boulder in a small pond.”<sup>1</sup>

### Several of the report’s findings leapt out in particular:

- **71% of non-Orthodox Jews were marrying non-Jews**
- **Less than one-third of the Jews surveyed belong to a synagogue**

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<sup>1</sup> Uriel Heilman, “Much Ado About Pew,” *B’nai Brith Magazine*, Spring 2014, p. 14.

- **One out of every five Jews who intermarry are raising their children Jewish.**

The survey results were devastating to anyone concerned about the vitality of the American Jewish community. The results show increases in the rate of intermarriage *and* decreases in the number of families affiliated with a synagogue or with strong connections to Jewish life. Leaders in the field of Jewish education and enrichment chimed in about what could be done to counteract these trends. Jennie Starr, Founder and Director of Tarbuton, an Israeli Cultural Center in San Diego, California, was vocal about the need to be more inclusive.

If we don't engage the next generation they may do nothing to engage in Jewish life and that can't be ok. We are told that Jewish programs do not support modern lifestyles, challenges, needs or interests. We need to listen and create desirable programs, and lower the barriers to entry, as flexibility, convenience and affordability may well be the key to inspiring modern Jewish journeys. If we create the building blocks, Jews today may form their larger Jewish identity as a result of these very tailored and specific ingredients.<sup>2</sup>

Across North America, programs are being developed that address convenience and affordability. Nitzan Network is a system of programs committed to these ideals. There are nearly twelve programs including two included in this research, with connections to the network. Nitzan network was catalyzed by a small number of emerging Jewish education/enrichment programs in North America looking for a community of practice and support. The initial launch of the network was funded by the generous support of The Covenant Foundation and is being led by the Edah program in Berkeley, California. The purpose of these programs was to focus on the "renewal of" the after school Jewish learning experience.

## **TRENDING IN CHICAGOLAND:**

In Chicago, Jewish United Fund / Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago reports that intermarriage has grown, from 30 percent in 2000 to 37 percent in 2010, but the proportion of children in interfaith families who are being reared as exclusively Jewish has jumped to 49 percent, up from 38 percent in 2000. "The fact that one in two local interfaith families is choosing to rear their children as Jewish has profound significance for the Jewish future," said Peter Friedman, (then) Federation executive vice president.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jennie Starr, "Modern Jewish Journeys & Cultural Programs that are Affordable, Convenient and Flexible," eJewish Philanthropy, November 26, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hasse, *Chicago's Jewish Community is Growing, Committed, and Connected*. Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago

Chicagoland families may be intermarrying, but they are finding ways to remain connected to Jewish life, and making commitments to raise Jewish children.

Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago has been investing heavily in programs to engage young families. Incentive efforts like “JUF Right Start” offer families subsidies toward preschool tuition at a number of participating Jewish preschools. This financial support has encouraged many non-Orthodox families to begin their child/childrens’ education in a Jewish setting.

JUF Right Start incentives provide a platform to further engage and connect families with programs that share similar missions. *PJ Library* and *Sifriyat Pyjama* (Hebrew Storytime) initiatives are reaching families and “turning them on” to Jewish life. Families are expressing deep interest in programs that explore Hebrew language and Jewish literacy, offer tools for ritual engagement at home, and programs that provide a comfortable match for them at their age and stage of life. Many of the ‘enrichment programs’ included in this research offered such programming to address these families’ needs.

Even as families are enrolling in Jewish preschool programs, participating in PJ Library family events and programs around the Chicagoland area, parents express that they are still not interested in the traditional offerings of synagogues and synagogue-based programming and education.

***“I’m not interested in synagogue membership, religious school or Jewish day school. My husband isn’t Jewish. We just want something for our family that feels special -- Jewish values based -- and gives us tools to help us raise our children with a good Jewish identity.” (Parent)***

***“My wife isn’t Jewish, but we are choosing to raise our children Jewish. Synagogue services do not fit our family, nor does the traditional Hebrew school choice. We want a middle-way, something that fits our lifestyle, and where “Lucy” can make friends who come from homes just like hers.” (Parent)***

Although this research is not rooted in the detailed statistics of family choices, parents who were interviewed for this report openly shared their reasons for choosing their programs. Consistently, themes emerged to support the idea that non-Orthodox parents are increasingly less likely to choose traditional synagogue-based models for engagement and affiliation if they or their spouse are not Jewish.

## **KEY FACTORS IMPACTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS:**

Jewish “Enrichment” programs, and new visions for Jewish education, play a significant part in “disruptive innovation” a term coined by Clayton M. Christensen. This term describes the innovation that disrupts an existing market and value network, namely of Jewish education, and effectively creates a new one.

Synagogue-based and denominational-centric supplemental religious schools have specific models of education that are uniquely tied to their denominations educational goals. In addition, many of these schools and their programs are linked with synagogue membership and bar/bat mitzvah pre-requisites for education. Understanding that these schools have specific economic models helps us understand how they fit in the Jewish educational “eco-system.”

### **Families and School Participation > Membership/Dues > Clergy / Building / Bar or Bat Mitzvah**

Fees and financial stability are value factors being disturbed in the marketplace. In a more robust and reliable economy with more pervasive job security, the basic synagogue membership and fee structure (model) may be effective. Today, families are pushing back and rebelling against onerous financial obligations as automatic additions to a religious education.

Several key factors impact the creation and development of centers of Jewish enrichment:

- **Outward investment in the diversity and acceptance of various family units**
- **Location with close proximity to home, and easy transportation access and offerings**
- **Focus on Jewish literacy and Hebrew language, less on Jewish prayer**
- **Parent-Child engagement is simultaneous (not only drop off)**
- **Preference for a-la-carte registrations (paying for only program/services desired)**
- **Program fees are seen as valuable investment by participants/families**

By eliminating synagogue membership fees from the conversation, enrichment

centers can customize their fees to offer a significantly reduced cost.

***“Why do synagogues have to bundle the fees for membership and religious school together? We prefer having a choice for membership and a choice for where we send our children for education and child care.” (Parent)***

***“Structures are no longer a requirement for the community in the ways they once were. We don’t need (or want) the burden of a building fund, it seems that many congregations are stuck in old models and haven’t been able to embrace innovation fully.” (Parent)***

As we witness families moving away from making commitments to synagogue fees, membership and building funds due to their own family financial security changes, we see innovations in Jewish education rising up to serve the needs of the market. Jewish “enrichment” programs are lowering the boundaries of access to Jewish literacy and Hebrew language immersion and allowing families to customize their financial investments.

## **TRADITIONAL MODELS OF SUPPLEMENTAL JEWISH EDUCATION PRESENT CHALLENGES: CHALLENGES PAVE THE WAY FOR OPPORTUNITIES IN JEWISH EDUCATION.**

### **A CHALLENGE OF THE AGE/STAGE PROVIDES DIRECTION:**

**Challenge 1:** Parents describe that a void in Jewish education exists in the space where preschool education ends and elementary and bar/bat mitzvah “supplemental school” begins at grade 3. This void is especially unsettling for families that are not able or willing to choose Jewish day school education full time.

Families report Jewish preschool is a warm, wonderful beginning for their children. Children are immersed in Hebrew blessings and song, holiday ritual and education, and the joy of Shabbat preparation. Parents express delight in learning alongside their children, using the materials provided by school to engage their children and bring the ritual and conversation home. These parents shared their desire to continue to build on the depth of the Jewish education going forward. Many current supplemental Jewish educational programs for ages 5-7, children in grades K-2<sup>nd</sup>, occur one time per week, most often on Sunday, and conflict with family desire to plan other social outings as a family. Families report Sunday commitments conflict with working parent desires to be with their children when they are not working. In addition, the cost of a synagogue membership is not presently a priority to these families.

***“I wanted my daughter to have her own Haggadah at our Seder this year. In the one day a week of religious school there was never enough time for her to get fully immersed in the story, nor the opportunity to create something substantial and useful like a Haggadah. We want her to have more.” (Parent)***

**Challenge 2:** After 4 years of Jewish preschool engagement, families share a desire to continue on their Jewish trajectory. They express a desire to be part of a community that is social, with families at the same stage of life, and share meaningful Jewish, age appropriate content. Unfortunately, these parents express disappointment at not finding current offerings that meet their needs.

One parent asked her son’s Jewish preschool director why they don’t offer more programming for non day school families (for enrichment) . The Jewish preschool’s reply is that they can’t focus energy on programming to “to fill in the gap” (for the 1/2 day kindergarten day) when children graduate from their programs at age 5. Program leaders cite that classroom materials become less age-appropriate, supervision needs change, and the physical size of children and classroom equipment needs are no longer suitably matched for each other.

**Opportunity:** The middle way is what parents describe as an afterschool program that addresses the needs of working parents who need childcare/ aftercare, but also takes advantage of this time/space to immerse children in Hebrew Language and Jewish literacy. Parents express interest in the same kind of resources, education, and take-home supplies they received from their children in preschool.

## **AFTER CARE NEEDS AND TRANSPORTATION:**

**Challenge 1:** Many children of working parents require after care during the hours of 3-6pm.

Traditional religious school programs, beginning at 4:30pm pose transportation challenges for full time working parents. As such, parents make decisions not to participate when transportation is not available, or adds substantially to the cost. In the suburbs, parents express difficulty with prioritizing supplemental religious school programming due to transportation challenges.

**Challenge 2:** Non dayschool families along the Lake Cook Corridor in the north west suburbs (many of whom have graduates from premier Jewish preschool programs with strong Hebrew language components) are looking for additional Hebrew language and Jewish immersion experiences for their 5, 6, 7 and 8 year olds. Currently many of the public kindergarten programs run only 1/2 day – in Deerfield, Highland Park, and Glenview.

Parents express an interest in filling the day with Jewish programming since children are not in full day school programs. Kindergarten is limited to a 2.5 hour school day in some communities.

There is a need for both childcare and interest in Jewish enrichment. *Starland, Jewish Council for Youth Services, and Tamarac* currently offer “after care and enrichment programs” – and fill the gaps many parents are seeking to cover for their children who are enrolled in 1/2 day kindergarten programs. These programs charge \$2500 to \$5000 and are quite popular, servicing Jewish and non-Jewish families, supporting the 11:30am to 3pm time fillers. Transportation and busing options make these highly sought after opportunities for families.

**Opportunity:** Families in need of after care can merge their after care needs with Jewish education needs, and turn the after-care challenge into an opportunity. Parents value time in after care with Jewish education because they need quality childcare coverage. Playtime is “Jewish time” when children sing and play ‘Jewishly’ in an organic learning environment. Childcare is valued in a more significant way because happy, engaging and meaningful Jewish learning is taking place. Families can opt-in to program selections with or without synagogue membership. A-la-carte decisions regarding child care are critical to families, especially those working to stretch their dollars.

### **REASONABLE COST/ VALUABLE INVESTMENT:**

**Challenge:** Jewish day school education tuition has slowly become out of reach for many. In addition, with increasing numbers of days off from school for teacher in-service, and many half days for “erev” holiday dismissal, working parents report additional expenses for coverage on days when children are off from school. This added expense has become a hardship for families even to those who strongly value Jewish education, they cannot justify the investment/expense.

**Opportunity:** There is a desire for a “third option” in Jewish education for families who cannot or do not send their children to Jewish day school, but for whom traditional Hebrew School does not feel is substantial enough at one or two days per week. Jewish enrichment opportunities meet families’ interests in Jewish literacy and Hebrew learning as the programs focus on Hebrew language immersion, integrating Hebrew into transition times, scheduled activities, snack and playtime. Program offerings range from 2-5 days per week, including additional times for family engagement.

### **DESIRE FOR DIVERSITY:**

**Challenge:** Chicago families seek more access and acceptance with regard to their “diversity” (LGBTQ parents, single parents, inter-faith, intermarried or adoptive parents), and a balance on “how to be Jewish in America,”

craving a middle road in Jewish education, somewhere between the offerings of day school and traditional supplemental religious schools.

- Living in the city of Chicago, parents choose Jewish day school because the city itself provides access and engagement with a city life that is full of diversity.
- Conversely, suburban life is filled with Jewish kids in close-knit neighborhoods, and families often choose public school to fill their need for access to diversity.

The same is a pattern for many young families regarding summer programs. Jewish day school families choose park district programs to gain access to diverse groups of campers and non-day school families choose Jewish day and residential camps to gain access to more “sameness” in building Jewish identity.

**Opportunity:** Jewish programs have an opportunity to embrace and build on the concept of diversity as a critical feature in building community. Enrichment programs are successfully reaching previously unaffiliated and intermarried families, and helping families find new communities, ways to affiliate, and educate a new generation of young Jews.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The enrichment offerings surveyed within the Jewish educational community are seizing the opportunity to provide quality Jewish education that is fundamentally more affordable to more people, and by default, more accessible, in more ways than just separating synagogue membership fees from the commitment to school/program enrollment. Innovative models are able to meet the needs of families through customized approaches to engagement based on the necessities and interests of young adults and families.

During the research, several programs were observed that offer high quality Jewish enrichment. They all have several features in common:

**Ethos:** Public acceptance in and support of diversity, with a commitment to non-standard families;

**Building Community:** Creating a social and communal connection for individuals and families.

**Location:** Close to home, convenient transportation access, and options for non-parental transportation.

**Focus:** Jewish literacy and Hebrew language ; Jewish education that is engaging and accessible.

**Philosophy:** Parent and child involvement; Increasing investment in family learning opportunities.

**Affiliation:** No formal affiliation required nor mandated by fees. Opt-in memberships.

Happily for those interested in Jewish enrichment in Chicagoland, there are several programs that provide intensive and easy access to Jewish engagement.

These approaches to Jewish enrichment reconfigure how the community cultivates Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people, ability to access Jewish texts and resources, and build a child's sense of Jewish self in connection to his/her family and community.

### **WRAP UP NOTES / RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Core conversations with program leadership regarding resource support revealed these shared needs:

- **Staff and Professional development:** Financial resources are needed to support staff participation in specialty conferences on child development with a focus on acquiring skills and access to best practices as they relate to child development and growth, achievement, and the development of Jewish identity.  
Financial resources are needed for professional development to support unique program and curricular needs, to bring in curricular experts, or paying for outside workshops on specific topics.
- **Social Work Support:** There is an additional need for support and training on site for teachers (and youth leaders) with regard to child social and emotional development with special attention given to address support for children with special needs and/or IEP or service plans.

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### **Additional After School Jewish Enrichment Programs Operating in North America as of Spring, 2015**

- [Downtown Jewish Playschool.](#) Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- [Edah.](#) Berkeley, California
- [Kesher.](#) Cambridge, Massachusetts
- [Jewish Kids Groups.](#) Atlanta, Georgia
- [MoEd.](#) Washington, D.C. Metro Area
- [Sulam.](#) Brookline, Massachusetts
- [Tarbuton.](#) San Diego, California
- [Kids Connection.](#) Washington Heights, NY

## **ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS HIGHLIGHTED AND RESEARCHED DURING SPRING, 2015 FOR THIS REPORT**



**Bayit Afterschool** is a new afterschool learning community based in Evanston, helping families build Jewish identity and Hebrew literacy. Children ages PK to 4<sup>th</sup> grade attend 2-5 days of the week. Children participate in age-appropriate innovative curriculum, which focuses on experiential Jewish learning through the arts, nature and sports. Hebrew is interspersed through conversation, songs and games.

### **BAYIT NORTH : NEW OPPORTUNITIES ON THE HORIZON**



**HEBREW PLAY FOR BABIES (ages 0-2)** is a fun and engaging program that exposes families to the joys of Hebrew as well as to Israeli culture. Each week focuses on a new theme through lively Hebrew music, books, and activities. The class is conducted all in Hebrew; Sponsored by JBaby Chicago. Meets 1 hour weekly in Evanston

### **CHUG IVRIT: HEBREW PLAY (ages 5-8) 6 wk pioneer program; Tues/Thu 90 min.**

Children will learn Hebrew in a natural and engaging setting, through games, music, art and food, students will be immersed in interactive play and will develop a comfort with hearing and speaking Hebrew. The curriculum includes Responsive Classroom techniques, innovative game-based learning, and 'Hebrew Through Movement.



*Jewish Enrichment Center*  
Hyde Park

**Jewish Enrichment Center** is an innovative Jewish center for afterschool and Sunday enrichment in Hyde Park, Chicago, and partners with children in long-term, project-based Jewish exploration, in a warm, Hebrew- and text-rich environment. The Jewish Enrichment Center

nurtures in Jewish children and families desire for Jewish knowledge, enthusiasm for exploration, confidence in expression of ideas, and joy in being Jewish. Children develop a strong foundation in Jewish literacy and grow in understanding of themselves as Jewish members of the human community. Infants through Grade 4, growing one grade each year.



**Mishkan** is a spiritual community in Chicago that meets for soulful musical prayer and learning, in homes and spaces all around the city, from synagogues to yoga studios. At the center of its core values is radical accessibility, the concept that any person regardless of background is welcome and invited to find meaning, inspiration and community. Mishkan welcomes individuals from across the spectrum of the community. **Mini Mishkan**, is a space for families to explore Jewish spirituality through music, story-telling, prayer and play.



**Moadon Kol Chadash** is an informal center for Jewish learning, emphasizing team teaching and hands-on learning through Hebrew language and Jewish and Israeli culture-based educational programs. **Moadon Enrichment courses** include conversational Hebrew immersion, “Language Soup” (cooking in Hebrew), Israeli folk and modern dance, creative Israeli art, Israeli music, and hands-on Bar or Bat Mitzvah preparation for grades five through eight.

**Gan Gani** is an all-Hebrew language preschool program in which children engage in pretend play, music, art and song. Hebrew language exposure, as well as Jewish cultural immersion, promotes a familiarity with both language and concepts. **Gan Gani Alumni Enrichment** is a total Hebrew language (conversation) immersion program - a direct continuity for graduates of Gan Gani. Students continue to speak, read and write in Hebrew, and use the language in a variety of ways as they grow.

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