

## Rosh Hashanah 2017 Day 2: **Why Shabbat School Not Sunday School?**

The old-timers are holding court around their usual table at Kiddush. One says, “Oy!” another says “Oy vey!” a third says, “Oy veyz mir!” – the fourth complains, “Hey! I thought we agreed *not* to talk about our children this morning!”

Well, this morning we *are* going to talk about our children. I want to talk about this joke and why I think few of our children “get it” and what we are going to do about that this year at Agudas Achim.

There are at least two parts to the challenge of getting this joke: Vocabulary and culture. To understand the joke, the audience needs to have some Jewish background and experience, for which book learning may be a poor substitute. The term “kiddush” comes from a Hebrew root which means “holy,” or “sacred,” and is used to refer to the ritual sanctification of Shabbat or a Jewish holiday over a cup of wine. If you’ve learned that much in school, you’ve learned a lot; but not enough, and not the right sense of the word to understand the joke. “Kiddush” in the joke doesn’t refer to a ritual blessing over a cup of wine, but to a communal gathering with food and beverage at the conclusion of Shabbat or holiday services. That’s not an aspect of the word one is likely to encounter in book-learning. If you look up “Kiddush” in a Hebrew-English dictionary, you’ll find something about sanctification, not “lunch.” Even hearing *about* Kiddush is not the same as seeing and *being part* of kiddush.

The remaining specialized vocabulary in the joke, “oy,” “oy vey,” and so on is, of course, Yiddish. Most Jewish Day Schools and Congregational religious schools teach Hebrew, and the terminology that this joke relies upon, though distinctively Jewish, is unlikely to be in the lesson plan in these formal educational settings. It is probable that our schools have more to teach than there is time to learn, and that terms like “oy” and “veh” are simply not important enough to make the formal curriculum, but I don’t think that’s the real reason our kids don’t understand the joke.

The principle obstacle in getting the joke is not the unfamiliar vocabulary. Without an understanding of the cultural context of the joke, it won’t make sense no matter how much we expand our vocabulary lists. Christian kids go to Sunday school on Sunday because that’s when their Christian community gathers. Our Jewish community gathers on Saturday; Shabbat. To truly master “oy,” one must hear it in a variety of situations and from the mouths of a variety of speakers; one must encounter this and other artifacts of Jewish culture in their natural habitat. In the context of the Agudas Achim community, that means on Shabbat.

To truly get the joke, one must have a feel for the stereotypes about Jewish seniors and their alleged outsized, and therefore inevitably frustrated, expectations for their offspring. Let’s be clear: Getting the joke is not the same as endorsing its stereotyping.

My point is not about whether the joke is funny or accurate; it's about whether one has the cultural literacy to understand it. The declarative "oy" conveys a particular angst. It is a laconic extension of the speaker's very nature, is a gem of Jewish culture, and one in danger of extinction. "Oy" has been a robust component of the Jewish lexicon since the Talmudic period almost 2000 years ago. Don't let it die out in 21<sup>st</sup> century Columbus.  
*Oy!*

And it isn't just "oy." Or "chutzpah." It is also what "latkes" are or that a Jewish star is called a "*mogan dav'd*," or what it means to be a "*mensch*." It is certainly not only about whether the kids should learn common Yiddish terms. I'm talking about when a kid walks by the sanctuary and the *huppah* has been set up, does he or she know that means there will soon be a wedding? Can they sense that *Aleinu* signals the conclusion of a service? Do they know we call our communal worship "services"? Do they know why some folks come mainly for Yizkor, whereas others deliberately leave the room? Leading prayers for a community may not be the same as taking an assigned part in a classroom under the watchful eye of the teacher. Prayer leaders before a diverse and unruly congregation don't have the luxury of a guaranteed tune for *Adon Olam* - they are forced to figure out which one they want to try and how to make it work.

Jewish cultural literacy is unlikely to come from even years of faithful weekday or Sunday school attendance alone. Our people gather on Shabbat morning. That means Shabbat morning is when our kids may experience what it means to be a part of a Jewish community.

None of this is to denigrate learning by the books. There are many things important to learn about that either cannot or should not be experienced. For these subjects, the cognitive distance afforded by reading or hearing about them as opposed to trying them out may be a necessity or a moral imperative. Book learning has served the Jewish people, in particular, admirably well. We, after all, are the "people of the book." To have our culture reflected, organized and preserved in books is a wonderful thing. For some subjects, the theory is enough. For others, we need the practice. For the latter, if we don't do, we never internalize.

Yesterday, I talked about my kayak building experience. Learning to build a boat is an example of a skill for which experiential learning is essential. I didn't learn to build a kayak by reading about it but by trying to build it. As the great rabbi Aristotle said, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." According to the boat building instructor, back in the old days a builder's resume was his tool box. The supervisor doing the hiring would say, "Show me your tools." The job applicant would show the quality and range of his toolkit. If the tools appeared well used and well cared for, and appropriate for the job, the builder could expect to get the job.

Being Jewish is also “building something.” It is developing a spiritual practice, it is participating in Jewish community. What will the Jewish resumes of our kids look like? How will they learn to acquire the Jewish tools in their toolkits of life-skills? It won’t be enough for them to learn about the tools in a book, or in a lesson from a teacher. They will have to see and do. They need to see and do what it means to lead services and to prepare kiddush. They need to experience coping with adults other than their parents, grandparents, and teachers in order to learn what it means to be accountable to a community. Most importantly, they need to learn that they matter, that their presence and participation is part of what makes a congregation a community.

If the participation of children in our Agudas Achim Jewish community is to be real, it will of necessity be consequential. Synagogues are not kid’s spaces by default. The “no shushing” rule we instituted a few years ago is a step, but is by no means sufficient. Making kids a part of our religious community means making them a part of our religious experience, and that takes planning and requires deference. “Deference” means making adjustments and accommodations.

Spaces outside the family are typically uni-generational, not multi-generational. Schools are set up for children; offices are set up for adults. Dressing up to show respect for being in a dignified place is a sensitivity that some kids aren’t yet ready for. Some adults aren’t either. It doesn’t matter. What matters is our being resolute that resistance to ties and dresses never be allowed to become an obstacle to embracing our heritage. If a kid wears her soccer uniform to shul, *Baruch HaShem!* -it’s outstanding that she’s making time in her busy schedule for meeting her people; the Jewish People.

The design of our building segregates children to classrooms far down the hallway and up a flight of stairs. Bringing those children into our sanctuary in an educationally deliberative way requires agility. Teachers have to figure out how to get kids in and out of services at appropriate times, which will vary according to child-readiness and to the nature of the particular service. Service leaders will have to accept the restraints of time limits, and exercise forbearance in the face of distraction. Children often have a different threshold from adults as to what counts as “noisy.” Adults may be able to sit still far longer than some children. Issues abound: When does a situation call for informing a parent about their child’s behavior? When does a situation become a safety issue or emergency which make speaking directly to the child the best option? Who makes decisions in the Kiddush buffet line? -The child, the parent, the synagogue volunteer? Adults learning to manage with children who are not their own; children learning, in a non-hierarchical setting, to manage relationships and cultivate life-long memories with adults other than their parents; this doesn’t happen at camp, school, or soccer. This happens at shul.

The Midrash posits that at Mt. Sinai, God was hesitant to entrust the Torah to the Jewish People without some sort of guarantee that we would honor it faithfully. According to the midrash, our ancestors offered the patriarchs, the matriarchs and the prophets of Israel to serve as our pledge. God rejected every offer until we said, “Our children shall be our pledge.” This, God accepted. It is on *zechut banim*, the merit of our children, that God vouchsafed us his holy Torah. Children by nature are prone to awe and wonderment; they are instinctively spiritual. Rather than feeling inconvenienced or even irritated by their somewhat awkward intrusion into our austere, holy place, we might consider why it is holy to begin with. God isn’t counting on us to keep the faith. God is counting on us to bring in our children.