

The "Small" Day School Moniker Is Outdated

By Lynn Raviv

Many believe that small Jewish day schools are not strong enough players supporting the goal of Jewish continuity. This paradigm needs to shift. Small day schools are dynamic and are critical players in strengthening Jewish identity and developing Jewish literacy which enables Jewish continuity.

What is the difference between what a Jewish day school student learns in a larger Jewish school and a smaller school? In our small schools, we offer our students an environment where they are fully immersed, positioning them to connect with Jewish texts and artifacts of Jewish civilization, gain a strong grounding in the Hebrew language, and engage with values and beliefs that our Torah teachers. Our curricular programs are no different from the ones of larger Jewish day schools.

Mainly, the issue is the label,

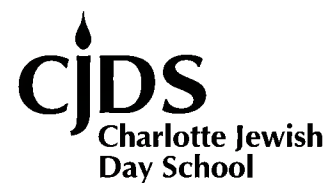
"small." This is an inaccurate description for nothing we do is truly small. In the RAVSAK Jewish community day school network, comprising 130 schools throughout North America, approximately one-third have enrollments of fewer than 100 students. The value consideration should not be in number of students enrolled each year. Instead, consider how many years the school has been in existence and, in those years, how many students have had the benefit of their Jewish day school program.

I will use the N.E. Miles Jewish Day School in Birmingham as an example. We have been in existence for 41 years. In those 41 years, we have educated almost 1,000 students in K-8. If those 1,000 students had remained in Birmingham, married and raised a family, our 1,200 Jewish family community would be much greater and we would, under current thinking, have a large Jewish day school.

But that is not the case. Instead, many of these alumni live in other communities, mainly in the large metropolitan areas, where they are strongly impacting Jewish life. We have educated a great number of students who have made extraordinary contributions to Jewish life, not only in the United States, but all over the world. We are not the staid school that many think because we are small. We are a dynamic community seeding other communities. Our alumni can be counted among those who feel deeply about the continuity of our people and who are making a difference in Jewish life today.

How do I know this? We, along with other schools, have tracked alumni and know what they are doing. Research corroborates our findings; data from a study conducted by Steven M. Cohen concluded that "40% of young leaders in their 20s and 30s involved in the non-establishment sector of Jewish startups and 38 percent of those working in the establishment sector (synagogues, Federations, long-standing Jewish organizations) had received a day school education."

Are small schools not participants in this extraordinary pursuit? We are all in this important holy work together, small and large Jewish day schools. I know that it does not matter that a day school alum matriculated in a



small or large school, because the outcome is what is important. Our alumni go into the world to strengthen Jewish life alongside other day school alums.

Jewish day schools in small communities face tremendous obstacles to stay viable. We have a smaller base from which to recruit students. We have a smaller donor base. Hiring experienced and exceptional faculty, especially Judaic and Hebrew instructors, is always difficult.

But what would a small Jewish community look like without its day school? What kind of rabbinic presence would we be able to maintain? What will happen to our synagogues without strong rabbinical support? What will happen to the Jewish population of our small cities?

Our Federation gets a number of calls from individuals who are considering interviewing in Birmingham for a career move and many ask if we have a Jewish Day School. Without our Jewish day school, the Jewish population of Birmingham would dwindle and over the years, our numbers would clip well below 5,000. This has happened in other areas in the South.

Can the Jewish people afford such a demographic change? If the large metropolitan areas are the only places that Jewish people live, and so many smaller communities no longer have a Jewish presence, I shudder to think what might happen. If a large percentage of Americans have never met a Jewish person, what might that lead to? Anti-Semitism is not a dying disease.

There is a strong case to be made for schools in small communities, as the role we play is far from "small" in our importance to the future of our people. We continue to provide a robust secular and Jewish studies program, dedicated to preparing Jewish leaders of the next generation. And we are vital to sustaining Jewish communities around the country, helping to ensure that undersized Jewish populations do not cease to exist but rather continue to contribute to communities big and small. ✪

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