

AVI CHAI's Next (and last) Ten Years

by admin on November 1st, 2010

The following remarks were delivered by AVI CHAI North America's Executive Director, Yossi Prager, at the Assembly.

Welcome to you all; thank you for joining us at the expense of the very few minutes of free time the PEJE organizers built into the Assembly program. My brief talk is both an update on AVI CHAI and an invitation to help us and one another answer three broad questions that I will get to.

The PEJE Assembly always feels to me like a giant celebration – 1100 people from across the continent deeply committed to day school education coming together to gain inspiration, ideas and new friends. In that spirit, and as a day school parent as well as foundation professional, I want to thank you for your dedication to our children and the Jewish future. You here make day schools worth investing in, worth sending children to and worth the collective attention of the larger Jewish community.

We have always known that the hard work of Jewish education is done by and within schools, not at the foundation offices. More recently, we have been the beneficiary of huge amounts of time and excellent thinking from professionals and lay people outside the foundation. We had three working groups that incorporated many experts from the field, including from schools. Hundreds of school professionals responded to surveys. As we sought to test ideas with the field, over 70 day school heads joined in focus groups. To paraphrase Rebbe Akiva about his wife Rachel, “*Shalenu v'shalehem, shelachem.*” Our accomplishments are your accomplishments.

As AVI CHAI has been planning toward its spenddown in 2020, people have naturally asked many questions about our plans. Let me start by sharing our articulation for why AVI CHAI is so invested in day schools and summer camps. We would be grateful for your reaction to this formulation: does it resonate with you? Do you think it will resonate with others outside the day school community? Here goes:

We believe that the intensive and immersive Jewish education offered in Jewish day schools and summer camps provides the foundation for an energizing nucleus of young people who will lead the Jewish people forward in the 21st Century. The recent study by Jack Wertheimer – you may have heard him present it here – of Jewish leaders under the age of 40 found that 40% of the young leaders of non-establishment organizations are day school graduates. Given that the overwhelming majority of the sample was from non-Orthodox sectors, where day school enrollment continues to be the exception rather than the rule, the large percentage of day school graduates in this leadership pool is extraordinary. We are confident that further studies of many different aspects of Jewish involvement and leadership will show that the energizing nucleus of the next generation emerges disproportionately from day schools and summer camps. That's the formulation. Let us know whether it soars or sinks.

As AVI CHAI's Trustees and staff have begun to define our goals for the next nine years, we see it more as a time for new beginnings than the beginning of the end. We certainly plan to work hard to build capacity at the partners of our largest and most mission-central programs that benefit day schools. We hope to help them to both adapt to the 21st Century digital age and develop a sustainable means for the continuity of the programs we helped to initiate. Beyond the current programs, we look at the foundation's task over the next nine years as working with others to address three pillars of the sustainability of the Jewish content and character of day schools: solid financial footing, able day school leadership and a vibrant and networked field of mutually supporting institutions committed to the Judaic mission of day school education.

In terms of day school finance, which is a new area for AVI CHAI, you have, I hope, learned at other sessions at the Assembly about two new national partnerships on school-specific but community-based programs: with PEJE, to stimulate school endowment growth and with Yeshiva University to help schools use comparative data and coaching to reduce costs and increase revenues. We are also working to find financial partners who will join with us and others to form undertake a major public policy effort to increase government funding for day schools in New York and New Jersey, which have the majority of all day school students. We know that these three efforts are not likely sufficient to solve the affordability/viability challenge, and we would be delighted to collaborate with other funders to develop additional initiatives to help ensure that day schools remain vital institutions.

Day school leadership is a field in which AVI CHAI has invested for many years. We see our future work in fostering the growth of current and new programs that will ensure that more schools are headed by effective and Jewishly-inspiring leaders.

This brings me to the third goal of helping to build a day school "field." Much more can be done to enable teachers and school leadership to be better networked and to link scholars and practitioners in the common purpose of providing an evidence base for Jewish education decisions. In recent years, both academic institutions and day school networks have turned their attention or increased their capacity to benefit individual schools and the day school field. We hope to nurture the efforts of these groups. In this spirit, we have been so gratified by the fast-growing collaboration among the day school networks, PEJE, Yeshiva University and others. We at AVI CHAI are inspired by this new effort to see and advance the day school field in a unified way.

In thinking about a day school field, we also recognize the need for fostering innovation. Most immediate, we believe, is the question of how intensive and immersive Jewish education translates and adapts into the 21st Century digital world. One question on our minds is how day schools might evolve beyond their current format to take full advantage of online learning opportunities in general and Jewish studies. We invite other funders and interested people to join us in the thinking.

The goals I have just laid out are too ambitious for one foundation to accomplish alone, especially on AVI CHAI North America's day school budget, which is \$16 million/year. If only Bill Gates could be inspired to care about day schools! Achieving the ambitious goals I outlined

will require partnership with other funders to develop new initiatives and a greater spirit of collaboration in which the initiative is shared by the field and AVI CHAI.

So as I come to a close, I want to ask and invite you to help us and each other consider three issues that are currently receiving focused attention at AVI CHAI:

- What's the best way for schools to engage day school alumni, both to extend the impact of their years of education and to draw on alumni as potential funders?
- How can we all encourage the ongoing development of a sufficient supply of effective and Jewishly-inspiring day school leaders?
- How can the field accelerate the journey of day schools into the digital age?

We invite you to do two things. First, there are five other AVI CHAI staff members, Rachel Abrahams, Joel Einleger Deena Fuchs, Susan Kardos and Leah Meir, and one AVI CHAI Trustee, Lauren Merkin, in this room. As they raise their hands, you can identify their location in the room. Please engage them with your questions and thoughts. Second, we have put the three questions I raised onto a blog. The postcards around the room provide the [address for the blog](#). I hope that you will share your ideas with us and each other, so that the conversation, building comment upon comment, will once again provide us at AVI CHAI and the field with the guidance needed to continue to progress.

I want to close with a medrash whose source I do not know, but which I learned from Lauren Merkin. The Medrash reports that when the Almighty first created birds they had no wings, and after the animals were created, the birds were easy prey for larger, stronger animals. They complained to Gd, who responded by putting these appendages on their backs. Unaware of their potential, the birds found that the appendages only weighed them down, slowing their escape from their predators. They complained to Gd again – “You have only made it worse.” This time the Almighty gently showed them how to spread their wings and use them to fly. The birds then recognized that the wings freed them, rather than encumbered them.

At times, we may feel that the dual curriculum of a Jewish day school is an encumbrance that adds to the pressure on day school leaders, teachers and budgets. Let us remember that it is the dual curriculum, coupled with the experiential education and role modeling, that will shape the energizing nucleus of a new generation of Jews who have the values, commitments, motivation and skills to lead the Jewish People intellectually, spiritually, communally and politically in the 21st Century. The ambition is great, and working together we can reach it.

Thank you all for coming. We look forward to many productive years of working together.