

**How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions**  
20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

Religious  
Purposefulness  
in Leadership,  
Curriculum and  
Practice

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## Tefillah: Reverberations of School Culture

As the second period of the school day begins at 9:00 am one Tuesday morning, students in the middle school of the Perelman Jewish Day School (PJDS)<sup>1</sup> in Philadelphia gather in the auditorium for *tefillah*. Without prompting, they divide themselves quickly into small groups of 10–12 students. This is what the school calls its “*Kotel minyan*,” a loose approximation of the disparate ad hoc *minyanim* held concurrently and according to their own pace and style at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The post-*bar mitzvah* boys don *tefillin*; the girls do not. Soon a cacophony fills the room, as students in each *minyan* take turns leading an abbreviated *Shacharit* service. Each *minyan* decides which *tefillot* it will skip, but all include portions of the service that they have been taught are mandatory.

To an outside observer, the scene is striking in a number of ways. First, the various *minyanim* are entirely run by students who decide among themselves what they will include and omit based upon guidelines given to them by the head of Jewish studies: at a minimum, each group must recite the blessings from the *Pesukei De’zimra* and at least one selection from the Psalms; the core of the morning services, *Shma* and the *amidah* and some ancillary prayers, are also recited. Though half-a-dozen teachers are present, they act as prayer participants, rather than as leaders or monitors. The teachers, moreover, include some who are not Jewish studies personnel, but nonetheless they join one group or another.

The interactions of students during *tefillah* are also noteworthy: older boys aid younger ones to don and wrap *tefillin*. And when a student has difficulty reading the Hebrew prayer aloud, others patiently help out. As she struggled to recite a prayer in Hebrew, a student in one group was aided by her classmates and then showered with congratulatory encouragement for her effort.<sup>2</sup> Before all the students move on to their next class,

announcements are made and the students are told, “Good energy, good *kavannah*.”

The entire *davening* lasted no longer than 12–15 minutes, but it revealed much about the values and orientation of the school. *Tefillah* is scheduled in the second period to insure that students will not skip *davening* and arrive at school only in time for classes. Instead, the first period of the day beginning at 8:15 is a content class; the next period is devoted to *tefillah*. The message: daily prayer is as important a part of the school day as classes devoted to subject matter. Moreover, rather than assigning students where to *daven*, the school fosters a spirit of autonomy by allowing students to choose their own prayer group. It also provides the tools for students to decide what they will include and what they will omit by teaching them about the mandatory parts of the morning service and the optional parts, what one may skip if pressed for time and what is essential.

Through its teaching and efforts to create “a positive collaborative school climate,”<sup>3</sup> the Saligman Middle School (as it was formally called) offers students a form of empowerment consistent with the school’s overall educational philosophy, which encourages self-reliance and advocacy. What makes this so remarkable is that *tefillah* itself is **non-negotiable**. Everyone must participate and prayer is conducted daily (although, as we shall see, it is organized differently each day of the week). The school, then, walks a fine line between insisting on a student-oriented approach that encourages each pupil to be an active participant in shaping the communal life of the school and learning to advocate for oneself, with a firm insistence that some things are non-negotiable — e.g. daily prayer.

At Saligman, the perennial challenge of non-Orthodox education is addressed through the school’s simultaneous commitment to choice and autonomy coupled with an equally strong message that Judaism is a religion of obligations and commandments and therefore the school will draw lines in the sand, even if students are not raised that way at home. Saligman thereby models a form of Jewish religious purposefulness consistent with its commitments to the ideology of Conservative Judaism and the polarities that movement strives to hold in tension.

<sup>1</sup> The subject of this case study, the Saligman Middle School, merged with the middle school of the Barack Academy, a Community day school, 15 months after this case study was completed. The challenges Saligman addressed continue to be pertinent, and therefore the case study has been included in this project. We have retained the present tense of the original case study, despite the fact that the school no longer exists.

<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy too that despite the school being a Conservative day school with an egalitarian culture, the students arrange themselves in gender and grade segregated groupings. From the perspective of the school administration, this pattern reflects an age-appropriate social reticence of middle schoolers.

<sup>3</sup> Excerpt from “An Exemplary Jewish Middle School” Letter from Susan B. Friedman Principal to parents in September 2000.

## Vision-Driven Educators

The Saligman middle school is the result of a decision taken over a decade ago to build a program that would extend beyond the existing lower school. Suddenly an opportunity arose to think afresh about vision and goals and to hire staff and faculty members who were best suited to enact the school's mission. As the Head of School has put it: "We planned this school specifically to design the Jewish studies program, and we built around it." By seizing the opportunity to create a school *de novo* and by putting in place a leadership cadre that has worked cooperatively, the school has been able to create a unique culture that sets it apart even from its own lower school.

Three people have served as the key players in shaping the middle school's culture. One is Jay Leberman, Head of Perelman; the second is Susan Friedman, Principal of the middle school. And slightly more recently the third partner in this enterprise has been Shawn Simon-Hazani, Rabbi of the middle school and currently Head of Jewish studies.

Leberman modestly describes his role as hiring the right people and then stepping back. As the head of PJDS with three separate administrative teams, Leberman must divide his time. It is evident, though, that he has contributed powerfully to the Jewish ethos of the middle school by virtue of his personal commitments. Coming to Perelman with experience leading other Schechter schools, Leberman added a half hour to each school day for the middle school in order to provide an additional two and a half hours of Jewish studies per week. The balance of general studies to Jewish studies courses now stands at 60/40. His attachment to Israel has spurred him to raise special funds to make it possible for every 8<sup>th</sup> grader to participate in the culminating Israel trip, and he has taken a special interest in gathering students' reflections upon their return.

Leberman also has a strong commitment to Jewish textual study. In an era of declining enrollment and personnel cuts, he devoted his recent message to the parent body not to some hi-tech innovation or new math or science initiative, but to announce his enthusiastic embrace of a "new Rabbinics program." Noting with pride that the school has been involved in past years "in the articulation of research-based general studies

curricula," Leberman informed parents of the middle school's adoption of a skill-based and computer assisted program to study Talmud, *Gemara Berura*, that will further the school's goal "to develop within our students the interest, confidence and competence to engage in Torah study as a lifelong endeavor." Simultaneously, Leberman also decided to break with the *Ivrit b'Ivrit* style of study in the lower school and to permit discussions to be conducted in English during Jewish studies classes, a decision motivated by a concern that students would not be able to engage in thoughtful reflection about the material they are learning if the conversation is conducted in Hebrew. In short, Leberman has served as the primary promoter of religious behavior in the school, stressing *kasbrut*, requiring boys to wear a kippah, and consistently asking how the school ought to function in a Jewish fashion.

Leberman recruited Susan Friedman, a veteran PJDS elementary school teacher who was then acting Head of School at the local Orthodox day school, to develop a vision statement and plan for the Perelman middle school. With graduate degrees in education, administration and counseling psychology, Friedman viewed the challenge of "creating the school with Jay from nothing" as an opportunity of a lifetime. His charge to her was straightforward: "This is your chance to implement anything you have ever dreamed of in middle school. Whatever you have ever loved or hated in a school, this is your chance to do it."

The school culture Friedman sought to develop consisted of at least five salient elements, in her telling:

1. Holding children to high expectations and helping them to experience success. Assignments and assessments are deliberately designed to address multiple intelligences. Students may use any number of expressive arts to demonstrate learning and understanding. At the same time, the school, from its inception, has stressed writing skills across the entire curriculum and works deliberately on helping students navigate their way through texts. Additionally, the middle school instituted student participation in parent-teacher conferences to encourage students to take pride and ownership of their learning. More recently they have introduced portfolios as a vehicle for these conferences.

2. Empowering children, the school assigns them to sit on committees that develop school policies. Students have a say in how the school is run.<sup>4</sup> The principal says, “We adore these kids. We get our best ideas from them. They know this is real.”
3. Teaching students how to study, how to take notes, and how to create a study environment for themselves.
4. Nurturing in students an ability and self-confidence to advocate for themselves. On a school-wide level, this took the form recently of a request by students for the school to reconsider its ban on the chewing of gum. When it became clear that the school was primarily concerned about the mess chewing gum can make, students suggested an experimental trial period in which chewing gum would be allowed but only on the condition that it be disposed of carefully. As of this writing, the student-initiated experiment was still in force and meeting the administration’s guidelines. More significantly, advocacy extends to teaching students to speak up when something is amiss. One example cited by the school principal was of a student in the middle school who had learned via Facebook that a recent alumna was being bullied at her high school. Thanks to the intervention of the Saligman student, the parents of the bullied girl were contacted by Saligman to take steps to aid their daughter.
5. Building resilience in students by teaching them coping skills, frankly discussing how to work through emotionally challenging experiences and demonstrating to students that the school will be responsive to their needs if they make those needs known.

Susan Friedman is a passionate middle school educator and her ideas, which reverberate through the middle school faculty, are largely aligned with the recent position paper of the Association of Middle Level Educators. Reviewing this list, one notes its strong emphasis on building character and preparing students to assert themselves, to question and to lobby for change when necessary. On the surface, this approach would seem to stand in opposition to teaching students how to work within the guidelines of traditional Judaism. How, we might wonder,

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the school does not have a student government, because it wants to encourage all students to feel that they have a say.

does the school develop a different side of students, one that takes religious obligation seriously?

Here we come to the third partner in the triumvirate leading the school, Rabbi Shawn SimonHazani, who is in sync with the values approach developed by Susan Friedman.<sup>5</sup> Simon-Hazani joined the Saligman middle school in 2003, two years after it opened. Ordained at the Ziegler School of the University of Judaism (now renamed the American Jewish University) with a stint in the Jewish educators program at the Hebrew University, he was originally the school rabbi and currently runs the Jewish studies program. He explains that when he was hired, Jay Leberman told him to “bring life to the Jewish program of the school inside and outside of the classroom.” Rabbi Shawn is passionate about students finding meaning in their Jewish identity. He explains the variegated *tefillah* program as designed to give kids more of a sense of connection and meaning. Similarly, upon his arrival he shifted the Rabbinics curriculum to a thematic teaching approach that, while text-based, gives students an opportunity to grapple with personal meaning of developmentally relevant topics.

Rabbi Shawn is both a bridge and an active partner in applying the key school values in the Jewish studies setting and works to integrate the two, though not in the usual sense of integrating the general and Jewish studies curricula. In fact, though he periodically joins classes to offer the Jewish take — e.g. he discusses Jewish understandings of evolution in science classes — he does not see content integration as the primary goal. Rather, **integration for him is about reinforcing the core ethos of the school in all classes and programs.** “Integration is much more portable,” he observes. “Rarely does the subject topic carry forward. It is the skills, rather than the knowledge chunk students have learned” that they will remember and benefit from.

A key example: 8<sup>th</sup> graders prepare a major visual and oral presentation called Stand and Deliver, which serves as their final performance assessment before graduating from the middle school. The subject matter invariably is drawn from a general studies subject, but what Rabbi Shawn stresses explicitly to students is that in their Jewish studies classes they will develop

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<sup>5</sup> This is Susan Friedman’s own assessment of Rabbi SimonHazani.

skills that will help prepare them for their Stand and Deliver presentation. In Jewish studies courses, they can hone their skills as public speakers: offering presentations on Rabbinics and other aspects of Jewish studies is no different than what they do in their general studies classes. Thus already in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, he requires students to present to the entire class their findings about the values and texts undergirding Jewish approaches to *tzedakah*, philanthropy. They prepare by interviewing and engaging in other forms of research. And they are told explicitly: this experience will help you with future presentations, such as your Stand and Deliver project next year. Similarly, he makes clear to students that the reading skills and textual analysis skills they learn when approaching a biblical or Rabbinic text will prove useful in other settings. This, as he admits, is a way to keep students' attention focused during Jewish studies classes because they know that the analytical skills they develop will be crucial to them in the future. But it is also a way to convey the reverse — that Jewish studies classes are as intellectually challenging and stimulating as any other subject matter. Accordingly, his emphasis is not on *bekiut* (covering ground and transmitting material), but on skill building.

As a case in point, Rabbi Shawn cites a recent class devoted to an analysis of how to study *Mishnah* written by Rabbi Josh Kulp. Students were assigned the task of highlighting the key arguments and dissecting the article. They learned how to read a Mishnaic text, an experience in close reading that will help them in many other settings. In the same course, Rabbi Shawn identifies the portions of the Mishnaic text that each rabbinic commentator chose for analysis. The message: close reading is not only a skill we need in literature or history classes, but is necessary in every endeavor. And the close readers of rabbinic texts have much to teach us about this skill. The upshot, according to Rabbi Shawn, is that students develop an appreciation for their Jewish studies classes, as do their parents. Those classes are no longer regarded as the icing on the cake, a nice diversion of light Jewish froth, superimposed upon the real work of school, but an integral part of learning. One way this appreciation manifests itself is in the steep decline in requests the school receives for students to be released from Jewish studies classes so they can devote more time to the “important” material of general studies. “Jewish studies classes are seen as being as sophisticated as general studies,” he concludes.

We should note in this connection that this approach is entirely congruent with the outlook of Susan Friedman. Reflecting back on her previous experiences, she exclaims: “One of the things I despised at [my previous school] was that the general studies and Jewish studies staffs were completely separated. They were isolated from one another....My ideal dream (which I have not yet succeeded with) was for my teachers as much as possible to cross over general and Jewish studies. I do have some teachers that teach both subjects.” Rabbi Shawn has met her from the Jewish studies side by tying his work with students explicitly to their general studies work and assignments. Simply put, integration at the Saligman Middle School is enacted not through artificial linkages of content, but through a self-conscious effort to teach students that how they read, learn and study is the same regardless of the subject matter.

## The Curriculum Is an Expression of the School's Values

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Here is still another important lesson: The middle school, we have noted, places great stress on nurturing independence and resilience in its students. In his teaching about the holiday of Purim, Rabbi Shawn drives the point home. *Pesach*, he tells students, is all about what God has done for the Jewish people. God is the focus of the *Haggadah*. But the holiday of Purim offers an entirely different approach, one in which human agency is central. Esther and Mordechai are the heroes of the *Megillah*, while God hovers in the background. Rabbi Shawn asks students: “How does taking care of your own needs manifest itself in your life? What skills have others given you to cope with life? How are you building responsibility for your life? And what credit do you give to others?” These are the driving questions of a school heavily focused on building self-reliance. But he does not stop there, he also asks students to reflect on how much they also rely upon the help of others. “All the credit is not yours alone. We are in partnership with others, including with God. In some cases, like in the Purim story, I take the lead; in others, as in the Exodus from Egypt, God needs to take the lead role.” Here we see the intertwining of the school's goal for building resiliency and self-sufficiency, with a Jewish understanding of the limits of human agency and the role of others and of God in our lives.

It should be stressed that Rabbi Shawn's emphasis on learning skills and drawing out personal implications are hardly the sole features of the Jewish studies curriculum. The latter includes textual study, exposing students to biblical and Rabbinic material, as well as modern Jewish reflections. When holidays are on the horizon, 6<sup>th</sup> graders learn about the liturgy, 7<sup>th</sup> graders study texts in the *Shulchan Aruch* about rituals and observances associated with the holiday, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders discuss the theological underpinnings of the holiday, reading excerpts from a range of Jewish thinkers, both medieval philosophers and modern theologians. In the process, Rabbi Shawn also works into the curriculum some of the key goals and aspirations of the middle school.

In this context, we briefly return to *tefillah* for a telling example of how the school's values suffuse all areas of activity. We have already described the "*Kotel minyan*" which took place on a Tuesday. On Mondays and Thursdays, as well as *Rosh Hodesh*, students gather as a single unit, primarily to hear the Torah reading. On another day of the week, students engage in *tefillah* and also study the meaning and structure of the liturgy. And then once a week students have what is called Daven and Discuss. Here the school's valuing of student participation in decision-making has shaped this communal experience. When the Daven and Discuss program began, each of the three school administrators assumed responsibility on a rotating basis for leading discussions on a separate theme: Susan Friedman used her time to discuss adolescent developmental issues; Jay Leberman discussed Jews in the news; and Shawn SimonHazani led discussions about Jewish issues. In 2010, students lobbied for the opportunity to lead the sessions on their own, and the administration agreed. Since then, there is a long waitlist of students who have volunteered to lead the discussion. (We should note, though, that this freedom has also meant that only some student-led discussions revolve around Jewish themes, whereas most pertain to current events of a more general nature.)

## Religious Observance: Walking a Fine Line

Given its diverse student body, which includes some children of faculty at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and some Orthodox children, as well as a strong majority drawn from Conservative homes, the school walks a fine line in how it handles Jewish observance and belief. The school is clear in its adherence to the laws of *kashrut* and directly requests that when students make parties, the food served should only be kosher, even though *kashrut* standards differ among families, with many not observing Jewish dietary laws at all. Students bring their own lunch to school, and for many years students were only allowed to bring dairy meals for lunch, out of concern for *kashrut* standards. At the insistence of parents, meat days were recently introduced. In a perhaps unexpected turn of events, some students have asked the school administration to check whether the meat their parents have packed is kosher, and if not, for the school to help them speak with their parents about the importance of sending them to school only with kosher meats. When asked why students from homes that do not observe *kashrut* nonetheless take pains to insure that they only bring kosher food to school, Rabbi Shawn explains that they "feel the school has their back and they want to be respectful of the school's values, in turn."

The school is also not reticent to speak openly about the importance of Shabbat observance and fasting on fast days. On fast days that fall during the school year, students are polled on who is fasting to determine whether there is a *minyan* of fasters. When it comes to Shabbat observance, though, the school is far more prescriptive. Its policy for *Shabbatonim* and for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade trip to Israel is to ban the use of electricity and motorized travel. In fact, for years it virtually sought to lock students in to avoid the desecration of the Sabbath. This led to parent protests, and the school loosened its restrictions to the extent that parents are permitted to walk over to the school to pick their children up, but they are asked not to drive. Needless to say, these policies have elicited strong responses from some parents over the years, including protests against the insistence that boys have to don *tefillin* and outrage over the restrictions imposed on students on the Sabbath. The administration has stood its ground. In these areas, the school enforces strict policies.

## Firm Identity Does Not Require Flag Waving

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As the school has worked to attract more students from Modern Orthodox homes, it has encountered pushback of a different sort from parents who want to know why the school does not hew to a more traditionalist line. In response, the administration makes the case that Saligman is a school under Conservative auspices and it insists on teaching students about a range of possibilities. “Within the Conservative movement there are various viewpoints,” notes Rabbi Shawn. “I would never outright say the only way to be Jewish is to do x, y or z. The only place is school policy — *kashrut*, *tallit* and *tefillin*, and *kippot* for boys. I try to talk to the staff about everyone reinforcing this so I [Shawn] am not the *kippah* police.”

In its teaching of Bible, the school does not shy away from critical scholarship, another hallmark of Conservative Judaism. Aron Freidenreich, the Bible teacher, is clear about his goal to facilitate discussions about the “big issues:” Is the Torah true? If so, how so? How is the Torah different from other books? And what makes the Torah *kadosh* (holy)? To lead students to their own answers to these questions, he stresses different approaches to the text during each year of middle school; 6<sup>th</sup> graders learn the traditional Rabbinic commentators; 7<sup>th</sup> graders read the text for its literary and stylistic features; and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are exposed to traditional, literary and historical analyses. For example, in reading the Biblical creation narrative, students also learn about ancient Babylonian parallels. More generally, the Biblical text is placed within the ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu where it appeared.

To trace the development of student thinking, Freidenreich distributes a set of questions to 6<sup>th</sup> graders and then repeats the exercise with the same questions when students complete the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Students then compare their own answers from three years earlier and can track their own developing thought. The consistent message Freidenreich delivers is that no questions are out of bounds and that there are many different ways to approach the Torah: all are valid and of value.

This approach does not sit well with all parents, and periodically the school must defend its willingness to refer to

the “Genesis author” and its matter-of-fact teaching of the Documentary Hypothesis. Freidenreich contends that the method has a track record of success, as measured by many reports from parents about stimulating table conversation and, more important, feedback from alumni who express appreciation years later for having been provided with sophisticated tools that have stood them in good stead when they were faced with challenging college courses. And in a nod to the general tone the school strives to set, he notes that students appreciate being treated with respect at Perelman, a realization that enhances morale in the school.

Another remarkable feature of the school is its overt emphasis on “God Talk.” To take one example, 8<sup>th</sup> graders take a mini-course that explores diverse viewpoints on “the God of creation,” the “idea of a miracle,” and the persistence of evil. The latter topic, especially, touches students because it asks why bad things happen to good people. The approach to these subjects is open ended, rather than authoritative. As Rabbi Shawn puts it, “I can discuss these issues because I don’t know anything. I can talk about my ideas and my thoughts and conversations with people who have helped me. I have no authority on the subject whatsoever.” He therefore treats students to the broad array of Rabbinic thinking, very much including 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians.

Taken together, then, in its approach to religious observance and belief, Perelman has built a religious ethos squarely in the traditions of Conservative Judaism. It is also overtly attuned to developments in that movement, as when the Committee on Law and Standards issued its rulings on homosexuality, the school devoted time to discussing the **various** opinions. (And consistent with its emphasis on self-advocacy, the school has adopted the *Heneni* program developed at the Gann Academy, a pluralistic Jewish high school, for homosexual and lesbian students to “come out” within the school setting.) But the school does not trumpet its Conservative pedigree. Rabbi Shawn notes: “Our *kashrut* and Shabbat observance is from the Conservative movement. It is not necessary to fly the Conservative flag over everything we do. It gets in the way of presenting this as a legitimate way of Jewish living. I would much rather it be more organic.”

## The School's Mission is the Jewish Mission

Susan Friedman offers her own explanation of the school's Jewish mission: "We are a Conservative day school, and kids and parents know that, but we expose them not only to the Conservative ideas, and they know that because they are living for three years in a Conservative Jewish Day School, we must follow *kashrut*, we must have *tefillah* every day. But at the same time we expose them to the other branches of Judaism and to other religions so they can better understand their own. Ultimately what is critical to being a Jew is critical thinking and decision-making. So we let them know that this is part of their mission, to expose them to as much as we can, so that when they come out of this they will be on their way to determining ultimately inside their hearts and souls what their values will be."

Perelman's middle school, then, offers a model for how to build religious purposefulness in a school drawing from a broad spectrum of families. It is unabashed in its insistence on adhering to the values of the Conservative movement, even as it welcomes students from Modern Orthodox, Reconstructionist and non-affiliated homes. It stresses Jewish observance, but also allows for considerable leeway. It teaches traditional interpretations of biblical and Rabbinic texts, but also modern and contemporary ones.

In the short-term, the school seems to have a positive effect on the religious outlook of its students.

- The school's respect for individual needs and its efforts to offer individualized attention is reciprocated by students who, regardless of their home backgrounds, treat the *sancta* of the school protectively.
- Though not a focus of this case study, the school's emphasis on Israel and its year-long curriculum on Israel (a curriculum, we should note, that is open about Israeli failings, as well as loving about its many strengths), has yielded in the short-term highly engaged alumni.<sup>6</sup>
- Parents speak about the facility their children have gained with *tefillah*: how they know their way around the prayer

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<sup>6</sup> During our visit, two female high school seniors happened to be visiting the middle school. When we asked them about their memories of the middle school, they both identified the Israel trip as a turning point in their development as Jews.

book and are not intimidated about leading prayers. One Conservative rabbi reports that Perelman middle school students display a considerably greater fluency in Jewish prayer than most of their age peers.

An alumni survey consisting of current high school or college students has also yielded partial evidence of longer-term impacts. Ninety percent of middle school alumni describe their relationship with Judaism as "very connected." More than half have taken leadership roles since leaving Perelman in Israel programs and Jewish youth groups. And large majorities rated their preparation for leadership, critical thinking and community service as far superior to those of their non-Perelman peers.<sup>7</sup> The school can also cite specific students who so embraced the school's Jewish values that they insisted on converting the kitchen in their homes into kosher facilities, encouraged a non-Jewish parent to convert to Judaism and in at least one instance persuaded the family to move from a splendid home far from a synagogue to be in walking distance of a synagogue on Shabbat, even though it meant downsizing.

This is hardly to say that all is idyllic at the Perelman school. Since its founding, the school has had to contend with a parent body whose goals for their children have varied considerably: Some send their children to receive an intensive Jewish education; others want a private school education with some Jewish aspect; Israeli and Russian families want a Jewish peoplehood component and relatively little religious content; and still others send their children to Perelman mainly to avoid public school education. Among the current board members, none have chosen to send their children to the middle school. Working with parents with such diverse aspirations cannot be easy.

Also noteworthy is that the majority of students opt to enroll in public or non-sectarian private high schools, rather than continue with their intensive Jewish education. In recent years, 40 percent of students have gone on to the Jewish Community high school or a new Modern Orthodox high school. These proportions are hardly surprising for a Schechter school. (Perelman runs a once-a-week afterschool program for graduates who do not enroll in a Jewish day high school.)

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<sup>7</sup> Alumni Survey Highlights, January 2012. Mike Conner Associates.

Because the Perelman middle school has just completed its first decade, it is far too early to assess its long-term impact on students and their families. This case study has focused on the first decade, and especially on what we observed in the school. There is much to be admired in the strong team of educators the school has recruited and the thoughtful and sensitive culture developed at the school with its clear goals of nurturing self-reliant, proactive students, and its integration of these values with core commitments of traditional Judaism. Admittedly, the creation of this middle school a decade ago out of nothing offered an unparalleled opportunity to create something new and fresh. To their great credit, the school's administrators have remained flexible, allowing students to move the school

in new directions even as they have preserved core elements of the Jewish mission.

The model they have created provides much to consider as other day schools rethink the Jewish mission of their programs. One insight is particularly worthy of consideration. As Rabbi Shawn noted about the overall ethos of the school and how it has enhanced its Jewish mission, "The students feel the school has their back and they want to be respectful of the school's [Jewish] values, in turn." And in keeping with the student-centered philosophy of the school we close with this from a graduating 8<sup>th</sup> grader: "At this school where there are different ideas circulating — there is also a lot of argument and discussion — you get to solidify what you believe."

### Questions for Further Thought:

At Saligman, Religious Purposefulness is enacted primarily in three domains of school life: Leadership, curriculum and religious practice.

#### **Leadership:**

The case describes a leadership triad in which the combined visions of these educators and the collaboration and coordination among them work to create a cohesive approach to Jewish middle school education.

- a. Think about your own school's leadership team. What are the key values and commitments that motivate the school's leadership? How often are these ideas talked about openly? How congruent are they when it comes to the Jewish mission of the school?
- b. Each of the three Saligman leaders emphasizes slightly different ideas that they deem critical to Jewish education for middle school students. Which of their ideas are most appealing to you? What seems applicable in your own school setting? What would it take to support integration of these ideas?

#### **Curriculum:**

- a. At Saligman, integration of Jewish studies and general studies is more about skills that cross the curriculum rather than thematic units. Does your school strive for curricular integration? If so, why? How have you enacted it and to what effect? What possible new approaches do you see in the Saligman case that might be worth considering in your school?

*(continued...)*

## Questions for Further Thought *(continued)*

- b. Although a school firmly rooted in the Conservative movement, Saligman has offered diverse approaches to the study of Bible in keeping with their larger goals of instilling responsible and independent choice among students. To what extent does the content and pedagogy of your Jewish studies classes reflect your Jewish and educational ideology? How are you measuring the impact it has on your students while they are at your school and once they have graduated?

### Religious Observance

At Saligman, the '*Kotel minyan*' and Daven and Discuss each embody some of the critical elements of an intentionally designed school culture that combines Jewish elements with developmental targets for middle school students. What one program in your own school might you point to that similarly highlights the key elements of your own Jewish program?

- a. How successful is your school at embedding these elements in other parts of the program?
- b. Where do you fall short?

With a diverse student body, Saligman has been firm about some aspects of their Jewish program and flexible about others.

- a. What are the non-negotiables in your school that relate to the Jewish program?
- b. How do you communicate these to your students and their families?
- c. To what extent do you find yourselves asking the question: How do we stay true to our Jewish mission and continue to sustain our enrollment?

In your school, are the Jewish studies courses held to the same academic and developmental standards as general studies? Do students and parents regard them as having parity in importance, or is one valued more than the other?