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Foregrounding the Family: An Ethnography of How Families Make Decisions About Hebrew School

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Abstract
Families play a critical role in shaping children's orientation to Judaism, and decisions about Jewish education are made *within* the family unit. However, in most studies of Jewish education, individual students or parents serve as the unit of analysis, with families being omitted or relegated to the background. In this paper, I foreground the family through an ethnographic study to illustrate the complex negotiations that occur between family members about involvement in Hebrew school post b'nai mitzvah. By illustrating the dynamic interplay between family members, I show the internal and external struggles that family members experience as they negotiate their Jewish commitments, and the potential unintended consequences that might arise from such negotiations. I describe how negotiations about Jewish education can have potentially deleterious effects on family members' relationships, and how parenting philosophy and parenting style may shape negotiations about Hebrew school. My central goal in this paper is to advance a methodological argument about the value of taking a family systems perspective and using an ethnographic approach to understand families' decisions about Hebrew school and Jewish commitments more broadly.

Keywords Family systems theory · Ethnography · Jewish education · Bat/Bar Mitzvah · Hebrew school

In this study, I advance a methodological argument about the value of taking a family systems perspective and using an ethnographic approach to understand families' decisions about Hebrew school and Jewish commitments more broadly. Families play a critical role in shaping children's orientation to Judaism, including their involvement in Jewish education (Cohen and Eisen 2000; Kadushin et al. 2000; Pomson and Schnoor 2008; Wertheimer 2007). Examining families is crucial because decisions about Jewish education are made *within* the family unit (Prell

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2007). However, in most studies of Jewish education, individual students or parents serve as the unit of analysis, with families being omitted or relegated to the background (Pomson and Schnoor 2018). To address this gap, I foreground the family through ethnography to illustrate the complex negotiations between family members about Hebrew school.[1] Since synagogues don't mandate Hebrew school attendance after a child becomes a bar/bat mitzvah, examining how families make decisions about their child's continued involvement highlights how family members' perspectives coalesce and collide. By looking *within* the family unit, I illustrate the conflicts that family members experience when negotiating their child's involvement in Hebrew school and Jewish commitments more broadly. Foregrounding the family helps me identify two issues that do not surface when families are omitted or relegated to the background. First, I find that negotiations about Hebrew school can have potentially deleterious effects on the family system, including strained marital and parent-child relationships. Second, I find that decisions around Hebrew school may actually reflect parenting styles rather than the extent to which parents value Jewish education.

Hebrew school enrollment has received much scholarly attention because of the significant enrollment decline that occurs after seventh grade. If a seventh-grade class has 14 children, typically about nine will return for eighth grade and only two will still be attending by twelfth grade (Wertheimer 2008). Existing studies, particularly before the turn of the century, focused on students (Press 1985), classrooms (Heilman 1992), synagogue-schools (Schoem 1979), congregations (Reimer 1997), and the broader system of congregational education (Aron 2011; Cuban 1995; Lynn-sachs 2011; Schoenfeld 1987). Wertheimer et al. (2009) summed up decades of research by pointing to a series of challenges that Hebrew schools experience, including high teacher turnover, small budgets, turf battles between synagogues, limited opportunities to achieve economies of scale, and apathy from youth and parents who don't see Hebrew school as important since grades don't matter.

Recognizing that parents play a significant role in children's decision to attend Hebrew school, scholars in the early 2000s began focusing on parents' perspectives. For example, Keysar et al. (2000) found that parents played a crucial role in socializing children into the Jewish community because parents are the ones making the educational choices for their children. Kadushin et al. (2000) followed up on the Keysar et al. (2000) study by surveying 1,300 Jewish adolescents and conducting 20-minute phone interviews with one parent (69% of the time it was the mother). They found that the strongest predictor of subsequent enrollment in Jewish congregational schooling (aside from a student's age) was parental encouragement and insistence. According to the researchers, parents' willingness to encourage

[1] Hebrew school refers to a synagogue-based program that occurs outside of formal school. Some refer to Hebrew school as religious school, congregational school, supplementary school, or complementary school. Most parents and children in this study used the term "religious school," probably because that is what the synagogue used to refer to its program. However, in this paper, I tend to use the term Hebrew school since the term "religious school" connotes a formal school that is religious in nature. When the term "religious school" appears in a quote, I do not change it from its original usage by an interviewee.

attendance reflected their attitudes towards Jewish education and the extent to which there was consensus among the parents and children about the value of Jewish education:

> Parents, it appears, view a certain amount of post-bar/bat mitzvah Jewish schooling as reasonable… At some point, however, parents apparently make the decision that their children have fulfilled the requirement, or that their maturing children are capable of making the decision on their own… One conclusion that can be drawn is that value consensus among parents and their children is an important factor related to encouraging continued participation in Jewish education. (2000: 61–62)

The Kadushin et al. (2000) study was significant because it pointed to parental decision-making as the critical factor determining children's Hebrew school education. Ravitch (2002) followed up on the Kadushin et al. study by conducting a survey of 800 youth, their parents, and Jewish community professionals to understand what facilitates youth engagement in the Jewish community after the bar/bat mitzvah. She found that students were more likely to continue their Hebrew school education if either of their parents placed great importance on their children's Jewish education or if their parents themselves were involved in the synagogue or other forms of Jewish learning/practice so that they could model the behavior they expected of their children.

Building on the emerging focus on families and their educational choices, Wertheimer (2007) edited a volume entitled *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice*, in which multiple chapters were devoted to studying both parents' perspectives (Cohen and Kelner 2007; Fishman 2007; Kress 2007; Pomson 2007; Prell 2007). In one chapter, Prell (2007) made a significant move to account for household dynamics by conducting 45-minute interviews with mothers and fathers separately.[2] In doing so, she found that parents' decisions about their children's Jewish education are shaped by a myriad of features (e.g., gender roles) and reflect a host of beliefs about themselves as citizens, Jews, family members, and professionals. Kress (2007) interviewed 34 sets of parents to understand parents' expectations around Hebrew school and the bar/bat mitzvah. He found that parental opinions are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes self-contradictory.[3] Finally, Fishman (2007) conducted interviews and focus groups with 81 teenagers and 20 parents, uniquely considering the perspectives of children and parents simultaneously. She found that parents are, indeed, influential in their children's perceptions of Jewish education and engagement. Many teens reported that their parents had forced them to continue, and that, after a year or two, they had grudgingly or graciously come to enjoy the experience. Fishman also found that negative parental attitudes were just as influential as positive attitudes—teenagers quickly picked up on their parents' negative or ambivalent

[2] In the case of divorced parents, Prell only interviewed one parent.

[3] In slightly more than half of families, only one parent had agreed to be interviewed. Regardless of whether one or both parents were interviewed, Kress reported trends "for parents as a whole".

attitudes, which influenced their own attitudes about Jewish education and their decision to stay in Hebrew school. Finally, Fishman noted that parents who stopped encouraging Jewish education when children voiced complaints were likely acting out of their own ambivalence towards Jewish education.

Although the Wertheimer (2007) volume helped bring families to the forefront of the conversation about Jewish education, scholars and practitioners still lack an understanding of the impact of the family system—the connection between family members, and how family members' perspectives coalesce and collide. Family systems theory suggests that a family is a set of separate relationships that are all connected. A systems perspective examines the way components of a system interact with one another to form a whole. The lack of attention to the family system is not just a problem in social scientific studies of Jews, but is also a problem in the general literature on religion and the family. Many studies rely on the self-report of one family member and few studies are based on direct observation of family interactions (Mahoney 2010).

Failing to consider the dynamic interplay that occurs within families leads scholars to offer incomplete explanations of Jewish educational engagement, with prevailing narratives that suggest parents have a lot of leverage over their children and that the process of requiring children to attend Hebrew school is simple. One recent and innovative book, Pomson and Schnoor's *Jewish Family* (2018), has helped to fill this gap by using family systems theory to explore how families' Jewish lives develop. In analyzing families, Pomson and Schnoor move away from looking at family members as separate parts and argue for a systems perspective that focuses on the interdependence of all the parts. The family systems perspective is a significant shift because it moves away from the idea of individuals as "sovereign selves" (Cohen and Eisen 2000). With the family systems theory in mind, I follow Pomson and Schnoor's call to "reclaim the family as a unit of analysis in the study of contemporary Jewry" in a "new interdisciplinary field within which to conduct the study of Jewish lives" (p. 155). Thus, I extend Pomson and Schnoor's work by examining how family members interact with one another and how they make sense of each other's perspectives about Hebrew school. This is an important departure from other studies of Hebrew school education that consider children and parents independent of their family context.

This study also departs from existing literature by taking an ethnographic perspective. Existing studies on Hebrew school often rely on surveys to quantify the problem and understand its prevalence. While helpful and important, quantitative survey methods are notoriously poor at revealing the mechanisms that underlie phenomena. Even in studies with an interview component, the interviews tend to be narrow and only consider the perspective of one parent (usually the mother). By lumping parents into one unit and assuming they share the same attitude towards Jewish education, researchers have skewed the data towards the mothers' perspectives. This study considers the complexity of parental perspectives—recognizing that they might contradict—and accounts for the interaction between parents and children.

The Current Study

The data in this article come from an in-depth study of three families who all belonged to the same Conservative synagogue in Northern California. Each family had a child who attended seventh grade at the local public school and attended the synagogue's seventh grade Hebrew school class. In addition, each child was preparing to become a bar/bat mitzvah during the study period. I chose to consider seventh grade students because this is the age at which enrollment in Hebrew school begins to substantially decrease, and these students' families were at the cusp of deciding whether to continue in Hebrew school after the child's bar/bat mitzvah. I chose these three families because the Hebrew School director considered them to be typical members in terms of their demographics and level of engagement in the synagogue, and because the family structure and demographics of these three families reflected broader trends of American Jews. All three families were of high socioeconomic status and were in a heterosexual marriage in which both parents were Jewish (in one family, the mother had converted to Judaism prior to the marriage; the others were Jewish since birth). In terms of family structure, two of the families had two children, and one family had one child. In one of the families, the child had dyslexia, and in another family, the child was on the autism spectrum but participated in the general education curriculum in school. All names and small details about the families have been changed to protect their privacy.

Similar to Pomson and Schnoor (2018), this study occurred in real-time rather than being retrospective. Interviewing and observing families in real-time helped ensure a level of data consistency and accuracy that is not possible when subjects are asked to reflect and report on their lives retrospectively (for a detailed discussion about real-time versus retrospective design, see Pomson and Schnoor (2018, 13–17)). I collected data between October 2014 and April 2015. During this time, I spent 20 hours interviewing parents and children before and after the bar/bat mitzvah.[4] In the first round of interviews, I conducted separate interviews with each of the parents. In the second round of interviews, I conducted a joint interview with parents. I always interviewed each child separately from his/her parents. Most of the interviews occurred in the families' homes, except for the second interview with the child (there were three in total), which occurred in a private space at the synagogue. I also spent 12 hours observing children in their Hebrew school classes, and 30 hours observing children while they worked with their bar/bat mitzvah tutors, met with rabbis to write their bar/bat mitzvah speech,[5] and rehearsed for their bar/

[4] I also conducted photo elicitation interviews with two of the families, which uses visual images to elicit comments. The goal is to record how subjects respond to the images, attributing their social and personal meanings and values. I found that these photo elicitation interviews did not help me better understand the family's experience at Hebrew school, so I did not continue with the third family. I also provided each family with an audio recorder and asked them to record any conversations they had about going to Hebrew school or preparing for the bar/bat mitzvah. However, the families were inconsistent in using the audio recorders, so I did not use the data.

[5] I tried to attend every meeting that the family or child had with the rabbi, but occasionally, our schedules did not align. On those occasions, I gave the rabbi an audio recorder and asked him/her to record the session. The family consented to this in advance.

bat mitzvah. I also observed each family's b'nai mitzvah ceremony and celebration. I audio recorded all interviews, meetings with rabbis, and rehearsals[6] and had them transcribed by a professional transcriber. By observing children and parents in multiple settings, I was able to triangulate what I heard during interviews.[7] Since this paper is focused on the family, I draw primarily from my interviews with parents and children, though my assessments of the children's attitude towards Hebrew school is informed by my observations of them during Hebrew school class, tutoring sessions, meetings with clergy, and rehearsals.

While a real-time ethnographic study of three families is limited in its generalizability, it is valuable because it enables us to understand family processes and the dynamic interplay between family members in unique ways. Thus, the significance of these data lies in their richness rather than in their quantity. My methods are those of theory development, not testing, and the findings should be viewed in that light. Knowledge on how families experience tensions in this decision-making process is also more likely to be useful to family therapists and front-line practitioners (Valach et al. 2002).

Findings

The Miller Family: Sarah and her parents, Judy and Bruce

Sarah was really looking forward to becoming a bat mitzvah. The most exciting aspect was the party she helped plan, and, more importantly, the end of Hebrew school. Sarah had been attending her synagogue's Hebrew school for about six hours each week since she was in first grade. Hebrew school was partly the synagogue's policy, but it was also something that Sarah's mother required. However, Sarah found Hebrew school to be irrelevant for her life and utterly boring. Sarah imagined herself as a "helium balloon," tied down to Hebrew school by her mother's force. Sarah assumed that once she became a bat mitzvah and the synagogue lost its leverage to make her attend Hebrew school, she could "float away" without being restrained. In her mind, she would stop attending immediately, without finishing her seventh grade year. Sarah's parents, however, had a different vision of how

[6] I did not audio record individual bar/bat mitzvah tutoring sessions because it seemed to make the tutor uncomfortable.

[7] This research required a high degree of interaction between myself and the individuals and situations being examined, as well as a significant level of intimacy. Parents treated me very warmly when I was in their homes, often offering me food and drinks. Families seemed comfortable with my involvement in their lives, which I attribute to the following factors: (1) Parents felt they could relate to me because I am white, Jewish, and also a parent; (2) Parents seemed to appreciate the notion of research. The parents were generally very giving with their time. One family was reticent at first because of the large time commitment, but they became very engaged in the research process after our first interview; they even noted that the interviews felt therapeutic and insisted that they were happy to keep talking even after our official interview time was over. The children also seemed comfortable and honest with me. Two of them opened up easily and were very chatty during interviews; the third child was terser, although this may have been her regular demeanor.

engaged they wanted their daughter to be in Hebrew school. This difference was not just between the parents and Sarah, but among the parents. The following tense conversation ensued a few weeks after Sarah's bat mitzvah, when I asked Sarah, her mom, Judy, and her dad, Bruce, what kinds of weekly activities Sarah was engaged in outside of school.

> Bruce: Tuesday was religious school.
> Judy: No, it still is religious school.
> Sarah: No, it was. I say it was.
> Judy: This is an ongoing conversation (telling me).
> Bruce: You'll have to go a few more times this school year.
> Judy: She made a commitment to finish this year (telling me).
> Sarah: I never did. You made the commitment (telling her mom).
> Bruce: Your mom made the commitment, but you have to go.
> Sarah: Mom made up the idea that I said that I wanted to go.
> Judy: No. I just told you we made a commitment to go through this year to religious school. Just because you had your bat mitzvah in January doesn't mean you have to stop going to religious school. You're still part of the b'nai mitzvah class

To understand each family member's perspective about Hebrew school, it is helpful to understand their context. Sarah's mom, Judy, grew up in New York with a "pretty classic American-Jewish upbringing," which she describes as celebrating all the holidays and not buying pork. Her parents were quite involved in the Jewish community, serving on boards of Jewish organizations and their temple. Judy was unwaveringly committed to sending her daughter to Hebrew school. She placed a high value on Hebrew school because she believed it would cultivate Sarah's sense of Jewishness: "It's important that Sarah knows that she's Jewish… At some point, people search for an identity, and as her parents, I want to make sure that she knows what her identity is." Judy was most interested in Sarah developing a sense of belonging to the Jewish community and learning the history of the Jewish people. And, for Judy, seeing her daughter become a bat mitzvah was non-negotiable: "I knew when I got pregnant that this year (2015) there was going to be a bat mitzvah. That [Sarah would become a bat mitzvah] was something that I had written in our will if something happened to us." Judy was committed to her daughter becoming a bat mitzvah because she saw it as a key marker of being Jewish:

> If you ever read any Wiki biographies, those of them who say they are Jewish have a bar mitzvah. It really signifies that you *really are* Jewish as opposed to just a label that you're Jewish. And I want her [my daughter] to have that strong sense of identity.

For Judy, Hebrew school wasn't about practical skills or theological musings, but about symbolic meaning. This aligned with her own preference for Jewish engagement, which was focused on home and family-based rituals rather than synagogue attendance. She explained, "I don't need to sit there for three hours and say 'God is good. God is great,' a million different ways." Rather, she preferred to celebrate Jewish holidays at home with her family, which she believed

was the best way to uphold the Jewish tradition she grew up with. Although Judy despised synagogue services herself, she had no qualms about Sarah learning the Shabbat prayers because she believed it would help her daughter feel a sense of belonging in other Jewish communities in the future: "Let her have that religious school experience and learn the songs. Wherever she goes in the world, she fits in as a Jew. And that's part of a parent's responsibilities is making sure that their child knows who they are and what there is." Furthermore, Judy saw Hebrew school attendance as something she has control over until her daughter becomes a bat mitzvah.

> I always told her, up until the age of 13, that is not your decision, this is what we do. You're going to be bat mitzvah'd, you're going to be part of the Synagogue, you're going to attend these classes. And after seventh grade, now it's your decision how you want to be part of the Jewish community.

Sarah's father, Bruce, grew up in Russia and moved to the U.S. when he was twelve years old. Bruce didn't share his wife's commitment to Sarah attending Hebrew school: "I'm perfectly okay with [Sarah] not being involved," he said. His central objection is that he doesn't see how his daughter can apply what she learned in Hebrew school to her everyday life. "Math and English are something we use every day," he explains, "but the religious piece is not part of our everyday life… We don't live in Israel, and our family does not go to temple a lot. There is no immediate practical use for knowing how to read Hebrew or practical use for knowing these prayers." He also believed the Hebrew school curriculum places too much emphasis on historical facts and figures, which makes it hard for young students to relate to the material:

> For most of what they're learning, there isn't like a historical context for them. They haven't lived long enough. It does provide a foundation, but it doesn't really have meaning. It's like reciting dates of wars. On this date, such and such happened. On this date, such happened. They don't really have a sense of how that relates to daily life.

Bruce also felt uneasy about his daughter's bat mitzvah. While he saw the value of upholding a longstanding Jewish tradition, he didn't support his daughter working towards something she found meaningless. He explained, "I don't want her to suffer. If she's going to have good positive thoughts about being Jewish, then this should not be a torture. And I can see for her, she's memorizing a bunch of psalms that mean nothing to her." He did, however, value her becoming a bat mitzvah because it taught his daughter to "stand up and lead" and because she would get recognized for working hard.

Bruce's views towards his daughter's Jewish education aligned with his own views towards Judaism, which he attributes to his upbringing in Russia where he experienced anti-Semitism. To this day, he feels uncomfortable with outward signs of Judaism, such as wearing a kippah or Star of David necklace in public. Describing himself as a secular Jew, Bruce explained why going to synagogue did not resonate for him:

> I'm an engineer. I don't have the aspirations of eternal life…I don't feel the need [to go to Synagogue], I don't see the value of going to a place with other people of like background sitting there or saying things to try to believe something that I don't believe in. As I said, I'm secular. I don't have faith.

Because he didn't believe in God, Bruce didn't see the point of going to synagogue, nor did he see value in observing Jewish rituals, such as lighting Shabbat candles. He wasn't worried that his daughter would lose her connection to Judaism if she stopped Hebrew school—he was more worried that Hebrew school might alienate her from Judaism altogether.

While the individual interviews showed me that the parents had different viewpoints, it was only during the joint interview that I was able to detect that their disagreement caused tension. A few weeks after Sarah's bat mitzvah, I asked her parents to reflect on the experience. Sarah's mom, Judy, began by talking about being exhausted from making one thousand cookies for the Kiddush, and then described the feeling of happiness from what she thought was her "vision of the perfect bat mitzvah." The parents went back and forth describing how their daughter's nervousness came through in her unusually high energy, and how she had so much adrenaline that she got sick right after the bat mitzvah and skipped a week of school. However, after about ten minutes, the interview dynamics changed drastically as the parents expressed different perspectives about who the bat mitzvah party was for:

> Judy: I thought that was a fantastic experience for her. I loved it. I loved how we did the party. The kids had a great time. I think the adults had a good time. It was exactly what I envisioned.
> Bruce: It was your party. It was your party a lot more than it was Sarah's party.
> Me: How so?
> Bruce: Judy arranged it, Judy did all the guests, Judy did all the organization, Judy chose what was going to happen, Judy chose who was going to do what, Judy chose who was bringing food, what food was going to be done. So it was really her party more than it was Sarah's party.
> Me: Do you think it should have been more Sarah's party?
> Bruce: I don't have an opinion on that.
> Judy: You want to stay married?
> Me: [laughs] Maybe I should have interviewed you separately.
> Bruce: No, if this is what you wanted to do [plan the bat mitzvah party], you do it, but you do it for yourself. Don't do it claiming you're doing it for Sarah.
> Judy: I disagree. Or, yes, that's your opinion and you're entitled to it. I disagree. We had two parties going. We had the adult and the kid party, and Sarah spent a lot of time and energy deciding everything the kids were going to do.

What ensued over the next fifteen minutes was a heated discussion between the parents about family values, their commitment to Hebrew school, and their orientation to Judaism more broadly. When Judy heard Bruce say there was no practical use for knowing prayers or knowing Hebrew, she turned to me in disagreement and told me that she was more "traditional" when it came to Judaism whereas she saw Bruce

as "secular." Looking quizzically at her, Bruce asked her what she meant by "traditional," at which point she exasperatedly listed all the ways in which she viewed her Jewish upbringing as legitimate, such as celebrating holidays and being highly involved in her synagogue. At one point in the conversation, Judy referenced the fact that Bruce had a Christmas tree in his childhood home, which to her was a sure sign of secularism. The following dialogue illustrates their argument about their Jewish upbringing and commitments:

> Judy: *(Telling me)* My parents were very involved in the Jewish community. I was raised in a conservative home. Very conservative–traditional, conservative, Russian-Jewish background. So, there was a set of values that I was raised with, that really you were not raised with.
> Bruce: Here we go *(rolling his eyes)*. There was a set of traditions. That was a set of rituals and practices. I wouldn't call that a set of values.
> Judy: Yes, there was a set of traditions and rituals I was raised with. Yes, yes. Okay, you're right. When it comes to values, we're very similar, but rituals and traditions that I was raised with that your family really wasn't very strongly raised with.
> Bruce: I've never seen you practice those rituals and traditions except around Sarah's bat mitzvah time. So that's what surprised me about that statement.
> Judy: *(Telling me)* I was raised much stronger than I live. But we always celebrate Rosh Hashanah, we always celebrate Yom Kippur, we always celebrate Passover.
> Bruce: Yes, but we never go to temple.

This is just one illustration of how, despite both parents being Jewish, they disagree about the authenticity of each other's Judaism and disagree on the value of Jewish engagement. Judy and Bruce's religious misalignment itself is not particularly problematic as each person can choose how to engage with Judaism on his/her own without bothering or offending the other person. However, as joint decisions about child-rearing arise, tensions ensuing from the parents' religious misalignment bubble to the surface. And as these tensions emerge, the child gets wedged into the middle of the debate.

Sarah recognized that her parents had opposing views and described this discrepancy during her pre-bat mitzvah meeting with the rabbi when he asked her why she was having a bat mitzvah: "I'm being forced to by my mom. She wants me to know I'm Jewish." The rabbi then asked her how her dad felt about the bat mitzvah: "My dad wants me not to [have a bat mitzvah] because there's so much that I'll have to do and it will just mess with my English—my dyslexia." Knowing that her father was not fully on-board demotivated Sarah even further. In one of our interviews, I asked Sarah whether she felt like both of her parents cared that she go to Hebrew school:

> Me: Do both of your parents—do you feel like they both care that you go to Hebrew school?
> Sarah: My mom definitely. My dad no. My dad is like, "Oh, yeah, you probably shouldn't. My mother says you have to go. You're going."
> Me: Does that affect how you think about it?

Sarah: Yeah.
Me: Yeah. Why? How so?
Sarah: Because I hate it. Probably if my dad was all a lot more into it, I'd probably go more often and I'd hate it even more. But, it's life.

Sarah understood that she and her dad were on the same page about Hebrew school being unimportant and she felt he was on her side. She told me that occasionally on Saturdays, her dad let her skip Hebrew school to go food shopping with him. Sarah appreciated that her dad was more cognizant of the extra challenges that she faced being dyslexic and trying to read Hebrew. Her dad's attitude was that it was okay for her to do the minimum, while her mom kept trying to "force" her to add additional blessings and verses to her part of the Shabbat service. Thus, the Hebrew school debate appeared to fracture relations between Sarah and her mom while simultaneously strengthening relations between Sarah and her dad.

The case of the Miller family demonstrates why it's important to look past surface level attitudes towards Jewish education. If Sarah's mom had completed a survey about her attitudes towards Hebrew school, their family would probably appear highly committed to their daughter's Jewish education and identity—the kind of family that helps stem the Hebrew school dropout crisis. However, if her father were filling out the same survey, their family would probably appear disengaged and apathetic towards Jewish education. A deeper look at this family reveals that the parents are not just in disagreement, but that there is an overt argument in the family about Hebrew school and Jewish commitments more broadly that would be difficult to capture using the data collection methods employed in previous studies. The case of the Miller family also begins to illustrate the tense debates that families have about Hebrew school, and the strain that these debates put on the parental relationships with one another, and with their child.

The Lerner Family: Rebecca and her parents, Jennifer and David

Rebecca was remarkably aloof in Hebrew school classes and bat mitzvah preparation sessions with her tutor. During class, she was usually doodling hearts and flowers and only spoke if the teacher called on her. Her responses were so curt that the teacher joked about them to the class. Given her negative demeanor, I was surprised to learn that Rebecca planned to keep attending Hebrew school after her bat mitzvah: "[My parents] are using my swimming lessons as hostage so I kind of have to go," she told me. Rebecca's approach to getting through each session of Hebrew school was to sit quietly and avoid being called on. Although her parents told her she could switch to another form of Jewish education, like a Jewish camp, youth group, or another Hebrew school, she would rather stay at her current Hebrew school because she had figured out how to get by without exerting much effort:

Rebecca: After the first two years of being in Hebrew school [the teacher] completely gave up on trying to make me participate. Like, completely. I could just sit there and stare into space and she wouldn't call on me or try to make me answer

any questions, which was just kind of nice, because I could completely blank out. Samuel [my current teacher] still hasn't done that yet, but he probably will soon.
Me: Do you want him to give up?
Rebecca: Yes. So I can just go back to staring into space, instead of staring into space and then having to do something when he calls on me, because my other Hebrew school teachers always warned, "Don't call on Rebecca, because she's not going to do anything."

In interviewing Rebecca's parents, I learned that, unlike the Millers, they were *both* steadfast in their commitment to Hebrew school and were aligned in their decision to take away Rebecca's swimming lessons – her most favorite activity—if she stopped Hebrew school. If these parents were completing a survey about their attitudes towards Hebrew school, they would both show up as being highly committed to their daughter's Jewish education and would be celebrated for their insistence that she attend—they would look like a family that "cares deeply" about Jewish education. But a deeper look at this family revealed that the parents had mixed emotions about having to exert so much force to keep their daughter attending, and they felt hypocritical about not modeling what they expect of her. In this family, there was less outward arguing about Hebrew school than with the Millers, and the complexity of the negotiation about Hebrew school manifested itself in subtler—yet also potentially deleterious—ways.

To understand this family's decisions about Hebrew school, it is helpful to know about their background. Rebecca's father, David, is a secular Israeli who moved to the United States for college, where he met Rebecca's mother, Jennifer. Jennifer converted to Judaism before she married David. Unlike the Millers, David and Jennifer were completely aligned in their commitment to sending Rebecca to Hebrew school: "David and I are totally on the same page… we feel like identity is not something we should just be generic about and then when the kids turn 18, say, 'Okay, now you choose an identity.' It's something that either they grow up with—that you kind of steep in like tea—or you don't have it at all. So that's why before we got married, we decided we want our kids to have that benefit (of being raised Jewish)." At one point, Jennifer remembered Rebecca trying to get out of going to Hebrew school, but Rebecca's parents saw it as integral to being Jewish. "Look, are you Jewish? Then you have to go to Hebrew school. That's how it is." They were so committed to having her attend that they threatened to take away Rebecca's swimming lessons if she quit Hebrew school.

But their commitment to Hebrew school was not without significant inner struggle. At the root of this struggle was their fear of sending a bad message to Rebecca and their sense of acting hypocritically because they aren't "walking the walk." Neither parent enjoyed going to services and wished they could feel more attracted to services so they could be better role models: "Frankly I'm not really sure how much the Hebrew school education is actually aligned with what we're looking for. And I do feel kind of bad that on Saturday morning we drop her [off] at Hebrew school and then pick her up. I kind of feel like I'm not really modeling what I'm sending her to," Jennifer explained. Meanwhile, David wrestled with the fact that his own secular attitudes didn't align with what his daughter was being taught at Hebrew school:

> Without the religion ritual being part of the family's everyday life, it's really hard to make this stuff relevant… that's where this whole thing doesn't work very well… If you come from a religious household where the family goes to shul every weekend and it is part of the ritual of the family, that may be a positive experience for kids who do that because it's just part of life. But for the Jews who tend to be more secular, Hebrew school doesn't serve them well. I think if you ask Rebecca, she'd probably be overall negative about it, which is really sad for me.

David struggled to figure out how to instill a sense of Jewishness in his child in a way that felt authentic. Living in the U.S. led him to realize how hard it was to be a secular Jew when Judaism wasn't "in the air and water" like it was in Israel: "This is a great country because it's really diverse but our kids are not going to have a strong identity of being Jewish if we don't actually, actively, affirmatively put them in an environment that would nurture that." Despite their ambivalence towards Hebrew school, Rebecca's parents insisted that she attend because they feared she would lose her connection to Judaism if she did not go. Although this seems like an irrational decision, the fear of assimilation plays a key role in compelling parents like the Lerners to send their children to Hebrew school.

Interviews with the Lerners also revealed that parenting philosophy and parenting style may affect how Hebrew school negotiations play out in families. The Lerners don't share the Millers' view that after the bat mitzvah, their child could make their own choice about Hebrew school. In fact, the mere idea of negotiating with their daughter about activities like Hebrew school was an adjustment for them because they grew up being more submissive to their parents' rules. As Jennifer recalls,

> It's a very different model [than how we grew up] where they disagree with us, they ask us why this and why not that and often, we actually listen to what they have to say. And Rebecca in particular, a lot of times she has a reasonable counter-proposal and we would say "Okay, let's try this and see how it works out, and if it doesn't work out, you have to do what I say." It's a very different model- we never did that with our parents.

The case of the Lerner family illustrates how parenting philosophy and parenting style may shape negotiations about Hebrew school, which I discuss further below.

The Weinberg Family: Jonathan and his parents, Talia and Brian

Unlike Sarah and Rebecca, Jonathan attended Hebrew school regularly, often raised his hand when the teacher asked a question, and diligently completed the tasks his bar mitzvah tutor assigned. He even chose to take three months off from his soccer team to have more time to prepare for his bar mitzvah. He told me that he tried to keep Shabbat and enjoyed going to Shabbat services with his mom. When I saw Jonathan at Shabbat services, I noticed that he was intently reading the prayers while most of his peers were playing outside. He even complained that the synagogue was not sufficiently beautiful for God:

> There's nothing here… It's a very, very small place. There's no greenery. It's just not beautiful. This is a House of God… I don't know if He's mad or anything, but it doesn't look like a very good house. But hopefully, our voices and our prayer will make up for it.

Jonathan's enthusiasm resembled that of his mother, Talia. Talia grew up in New York and described her parents as being ambivalent towards Judaism. As an adult, she found her way back to Judaism and has since become highly involved, even working as a part-time Jewish educator at the synagogue. Talia is highly involved in her children's schoolwork and in helping her older son prepare for his bar mitzvah. She even showed me a folder where she has color coded and marked up his bar mitzvah materials. Talia is almost giddy when she tells me how much she loves going to synagogue and how excited she is that her older son, Jonathan, likes to accompany her: "Now Jonathan and I, we're committed. We love Judaism. Love it. So, you know, we're doing all this together. Like I put together all these packets for him, every single piece of what's he's going to do for his bar mitzvah, and we practice together…" Talia puts Jewish education at the top of her priority list, saying that she rates it "a 1000 on a scale of 1-10." She wishes she could send her children to a full time Jewish day school but doesn't think her family can afford it.

Jonathan's dad, Brian, is less enthusiastic about being involved in the synagogue, but he is supportive of his kids' Hebrew school education. Having grown up in Reform and Conservative synagogues, he described himself now as an atheist. He says the synagogue liturgy feels meaningless to him, and he has no desire to go to synagogue. Given this description, you could imagine my surprise when Brian told me he was practicing to read from the Torah for his son's bar mitzvah. He explained that he loved the Torah service: "The way everybody is gathered around the table holding the Torah… the way the Torah experts correct people as they go… I wanted to be a premier guy in the Torah service for Jonathan's bar mitzvah," he told me. In fact, he believed that he was carrying on a long-standing tradition of acknowledging his child's entry into the adult Jewish community and that being Jewish and becoming a bar mitzvah went hand-in-hand:

> I identify strongly as culturally Jewish… And so, I just believe that bar mitzvah is part of that, right? … You send your kids to Hebrew school and they get bar mitzvah-ed. It's just what you do. It's what I did. It's what all my nieces and nephews did. It's what my cousins' kids all did. It's just done.

Given Brian and Talia's commitment to Jewish education, I was surprised that their younger son, Sam, had stopped attending Hebrew school after 5th grade. As I learned, this was an incredibly difficult decision for Talia because no Hebrew school meant no bar mitzvah: "This is why I was grieving—he got Yitro, the Ten Commandments. Can you imagine him at his bar mitzvah being able to read the Ten Commandments from the Torah?" Talia lamented. How did a mother who "walks the walk" when it comes to role modeling Jewish engagement herself and cared so deeply about her Jewish commitments come to let her child drop out of Hebrew school? As with the Lerners and Milers, her decisions seemed to reflect her parenting philosophy: "I don't believe in forcing my children to do things… Sam

complained so much about religious school and even cried. It wasn't just over the course of a few days, but six months," Talia explained. Furthermore, she worried that forcing her son to go to Hebrew school would turn him away from Judaism altogether. But these are not easy choices for parents—Talia was waiting till the last possible minute to notify the synagogue about Sam's plan for the bar mitzvah so they wouldn't give the date away, just in case Sam changed his mind. In the Weinberg family, parental encouragement, positive role-modeling, and the parents' commitment to Jewish education were not enough to make Hebrew school appealing to their children.

Discussion

By taking a family systems perspective to examine the negotiations that take place around Hebrew school, and the tenor of these negotiations, we can begin to understand the extent to which family members align in their Jewish commitments. We can also observe fault lines that are not apparent when analyses center the individual and relegate families to the background. Based on the Millers, Lerners, and Weinbergs, we learn that there is a fair amount of discrepancy in the perspectives of family members—at times between parents, and at times between parents and children. In the case of the Miller family, there is an overt conflict between Sarah and her mom, as well as between her mom and dad, Judy and Bruce. In the case of the Lerner family where there was no overt conflict, Rebecca was still resentful that her parents threatened to take away her swimming lessons if she stopped Hebrew school. Her strategy was to be as passive in class as possible so that teachers would stop paying attention to her. In the Weinberg family, Jonathan and his younger brother Sam had wildly different experiences in Hebrew school, with Sam dropping out in fifth grade while Jonathan took three months off from his soccer team to focus on preparing for his bar mitzvah.

Negotiations about Jewish education such as the ones highlighted above might have deleterious effects on family members' relationships with one another. Previous research shows that when parents and their children agree about religion, they report better intergenerational relationships and greater family solidarity at various stages in the life course (Krok 2018; Myers 2004; Pearce and Axinn 1998). Meanwhile, religious discrepancies between parents and their children can negatively influence their relationship. Regnerus and Burdette (2006) found that when religion became more salient for adolescents, there was also an improvement in family relations. Meanwhile, Stokes and Regnerus (2009) found that parents who care about religion appear to be frustrated with their children who do not care about religion, which creates an environment with both opportunities for conflict and for inscribing ''normal" conflict with religious meaning. They also find that the greater the magnitude of the discord, the more intense the negative sentiment from child to parent. It is more harmful for parents and their children to have significantly differing opinions on the salience of religion (i.e., the importance an individual affords religion) than for them to have differing religious service attendance habits or even separate religious affiliations (Pearce and Axinn 1998).

Interviews with all three families also revealed that parenting philosophy and parenting style may shape negotiations about Hebrew school. In all three families, at least one parent discussed the idea of "forcing" children to attend when they complained, and how much agency they were willing to give their child in making decisions about Hebrew school. Talia Weinberg, whose younger son left Hebrew school in fifth grade, didn't believe in forcing her children to do things. Meanwhile, Judy Miller thought it was appropriate to require her daughter, Sarah, to attend until she turned 13, at which point she was old enough to decide what her involvement in the Jewish community would look like. Meanwhile, David and Jennifer Lerner saw the decision about Hebrew school as being primarily in their purview, regardless of their daughter's age. By offering Rebecca the opportunity to switch Hebrew schools or consider Jewish summer camp, her parents gave her the choice about what *kind* of Jewish education to get, but not *whether* she would get a Jewish education. The extent to which parents gave their children autonomy extended to other extracurricular activities as well. In the Weinberg family, for example, Rebecca was required to play a musical instrument, and her parents prioritized activities that involved learning languages and politics. Thus, decisions about Hebrew school are not simply about how much parents value Jewish education as previous literature suggests—they are also about parenting style.

Until now, we have known little about whether there is negotiation between the parents, and between the parents and the child, and what that negotiation might look like when it comes to a child's Jewish education and commitments. Prior studies have often considered the role of individuals in making these decisions and have suggested that parents who care about Jewish education can simply encourage or force their child to attend Hebrew school. This study clarifies that the choice to engage in Jewish educational opportunities is much more complex. These three families complicate the existing narrative by showcasing the inner and external struggles that come with negotiating about Hebrew school with one another. Taking a family systems perspective, we can see that negotiations create conflict between the parents and between the parents and children, and that these negotiations may result in unintended consequences. This may include strained marital and parent-child relationships, as well as disenfranchisement from Jewish institutions altogether. Pomson and Schnoor (2018) write, "The home is where the plurality of Jews today experience Jewish life, and homes comprise more than just a collection of individuals… in systems, such as the family and the family home, the sum is greater than the total of the parts" (p. 156). In line with Pomson and Schnoor, I urge scholars to focus on the family as the unit of analysis rather than uncoupling individuals from the family system in which they are embedded. I argue that taking a family systems perspective and using an ethnographic approach can yield important insights about Jewish education and Jewish lives more broadly. This study is intended to be a starting point for scholars to consider how negotiations around Jewish education might carry unintended consequences, and how decisions around Jewish education might reflect parenting styles and family dynamics rather than the extent to which parents value Jewish education.

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