

My story might have ended there – it is possible that eventually I would have put Josh out of my mind, focusing instead on all of the children who were able to share in my home away from home. Four months later, though, I happened to stumble upon a teacher who worked in Josh’s Jewish day school. When I eagerly asked how he was doing, the teacher informed me that Josh was asked to leave the school – they were simply unable to accommodate Josh’s special needs.

One month later, with clear vision and newfound determination, I applied to graduate schools in special education and social work and eventually received masters’ degrees in both. I spent my years in school refining my vision for what would become MATAN: The Gift of Jewish Learning for Every Child. I spent time as a classroom teacher, in both secular and Jewish day schools, in both special and regular education. Even in the regular education classrooms, I gravitated towards the children who were struggling, the children who could not adapt to how I taught but rather for whom I needed to adapt my teaching. And I watched as one committed family after another was forced to remove

their child from Jewish day school so they could get the services they needed.

That’s the challenge of this field. How is it possible that we can pick and choose who deserves to receive a Jewish education? Who can possibly determine that “teaching the Torah diligently to our children” includes only typical learners? How can it be that Jewish education has reached the top of so many funding priorities and yet 10-15% of children don’t currently stand a chance at being beneficiaries?

That’s the challenge, and the reason why I and so many incredible colleagues I have in this field we call Jewish Special Education, are not willing to give up. We have devoted our lives to these children who cannot adapt to the traditional methods of Jewish education. In order for all children to be included in the notion of *klal yisrael*, the world of Jewish education must adapt to meet their needs.

Meredith Englander Polsky is the Co-founder/Director of Programs and Operations at MATAN, www.matankids.org.

Family Education Who Will Teach the Families?

RON WOLFSON

The emergence of Jewish family education as a field has been a welcome one. Stimulated by the call for “Jewish continuity” as a result of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and fueled in part by the work of the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life of the University of Judaism, Jewish family education programming took root in Jewish educational settings throughout North America during the decade of the 90’s. Creative models of reaching and teaching Jewish families were developed and implemented in schools, synagogues, centers, and camps.

Who are these people, the Jewish family educators? Mirroring the broad reach of the work itself, these professionals come from many disciplines. They are classroom teachers, principals, counselors and therapists, community organizers, rabbis, social workers, and librarians. To be successful, they must have strong Judaic content, understand family systems, and be creative teachers who can

relate to both children and adults – simultaneously.

How do they acquire the skills to be effective Jewish family educators? Some students in the graduate programs preparing Jewish educators take a course or seminar in Jewish family education, if one is offered. Some pick up ideas at conferences. At the Whizin Institute, we have welcomed more than 1,000 participants. This is a good start, but hardly enough to meet the long-term goal of providing Jewish family educators in all of our educational settings. I am optimistic that the field of Jewish family education will continue to expand as we empower more families to create a Jewish home that is a *mikdash m’at*, a small sacred sanctuary for our ever-frenzied parents and children. The Jewish future demands nothing less.

Dr. Ron Wolfson serves as Vice President, Fingerhut Assistant Professor of Education, and Director of the Whizin Center for the Jewish Future of the University of Judaism.

Jewish Family Education – Enriching Jewish Journeys

LISA SOBLE SIEGMANN

As I sit here thinking about what I should write about Jewish Family Education, I look at my desk. Oy! Such a mess! Or is it? Ideas for projects just beginning.... or projects that are near completion. A note that 10,000 family camp brochures will arrive this week...a flyer on the “Shalom Baby” Mom-Tot Hanukkah program that is happening two days from now with 70+ babies scheduled to arrive.... A deadline to re-vamp a Jewish book reading club for families is in the works with over 150 books to be read...and on and on...there is so much here. And I realize, THAT is why I am here. There is so much here.

It was no surprise that I chose to dedicate my life to work in the Jewish community, just ask my parents. I’ve been “doing Jewish” all of my life. You know the story. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. Two brothers, and I, along with my sister were lovingly “brainwashed” from an early age that family was the most important thing. I was in USY and went to our Jewish residential camp (Camp Wise), which was my second home. In college, I was part of the Hillel leadership and took Jewish studies classes. When I wasn’t ready for the blue interview suit quite yet after graduating, I went on Otzma.

When I came back from the year in Israel, I knew this Jewish *neshama* in me was getting pretty serious. I wanted to make a difference in the Jewish world. I didn’t quite care what I did, I just wanted to be involved Jewishly. When I started looking for a job, I heard about an area of Jewish communal service called Jewish Family Education. For Columbus, Ohio, this position was new, and part-time. I thought, Wow, how cool it would be to work with educators, rabbis and entire family units. How amazing would it be to light a spark, and to move a family on their own Jewish journey. How wonderful would it be to give parents the tools to be the primary Jewish educator of their Jewish children! What a job – what an adventure!

One of the first things in my new position of Director of Jewish Family Education was to attend the CAJE conference. You see, I wasn’t a Jewish Family Educator when I started the job – and I didn’t miraculously

become one over night. Most of us aren’t trained when we begin, though we are hopefully quick learners. Dedication and commitment is key, and there is a tremendous amount of support in the field.

At CAJE, I had the chance to meet some of the top professionals in the field. Extraordinary mentors like Harlene Appelman, Barbara Wachs, (z”l), Marilyn Vincent and Joan Kaye. Soon after CAJE, I attended the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life at the University of Judaism. Five days of training on Jewish Family Education! The opportunity to network with 100+ colleagues and top educators – those listed above, plus outstanding people like Dr. Ron Wolfson and Joel Lurie Grishaver. I was in heaven! Since my start in Jewish family education, I have learned with and been mentored by all of these professionals. It is a gift to be able to contact them with a thought, a question, a challenge. They are there to help, give guidance, and groom the next generation of professionals.

I’ve been working in this rich field for a decade. I’ve had the opportunity to study, learn and be mentored by the best of the best in this field. I have been moved to cheer and to tears by families who have found inspiration and a new found love for their Judaism. I wanted to make a difference, and I believe that in Jewish Family Education, I have been able to do that. There is so much here. This is only the beginning of the story. This is definitely not, “the end.”

Lisa Soble Siegmann is the Associate Director of Jewish Experiences For Families (JEFF) and Informal Education for the Alliance of Jewish Education, a part of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit.