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A Very Special Sunday School: Russian Jewish Community School



They study Hebrew, Jewish history and holiday traditions. So how is this Sunday school different from all other Sunday schools?

Turns out that, not only do the 40 youngsters enrolled in the Russian Jewish Community School learn in Russian, but they're typically the only children in generations to have the opportunity for a Jewish education.

The school, now in its seventh year at Temple B'nai Moshe in Brighton, is the gift of a Jewish community determined to give Russian-speaking families every opportunity to engage in Jewish life. In addition to parents' contributions, the school receives support from Combined Jewish Philanthropies, CJP's Brookline Brighton Jewish Community Fund, the Russian Jewish Community Foundation and private donors. In addition, new sources are being sought to keep it affordable for Russian families.

Now that the influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union has slowed, CJP needs to shift focus from financial assistance to community development, says Greg Zelfond, who chairs CJP's Services to the Russian Community Committee. "The Russian Jewish Community School in Brighton allows kids and their parents to be integrated faster into mainstream American Jewish life. It's a wonderful program.

"Learning about Judaism, they're able to grow into proud Jews," adds Vladimir Foygelman, President of MAKOR: Jewish Education and Cultural Center, the community program that administers the school. Indeed, these 3 to 10-year-olds learn about Jewish life as well as Russian literature. "With so little Judaism in Russia, this is their first opportunity to learn about their own heritage," he adds.

Such a program demands ingenuity since there aren't many Russian-Jewish textbooks available, says headmistress Marina Dvorkin. "But it's important for these parents that their children are steeped in both Judaism and Russian culture."

Indeed, Foygelman says the school impacts the whole family, reporting that many eventually join synagogues and some send their kids to day schools.

Henry and Ellen Katz of Brookline began to send their children to the school, beginning when Nathan – now 9 – was in kindergarten. "There was no Sunday school for us, we didn't have that experience and we cannot give our kids what we didn't have," says Ellen. But, as they help their sons with their homework, these parents say they're also learning about Jewish tradition. "I'm glad there's a program geared to families like us," she says. "Our kids actually like going to Sunday school."

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