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## CIJE Education Seminar

As you know, at our next meeting, on December 16, Dr. Alisa Rubin Kurshan, executive director of the Jewish Continuity Commission of UJA/Federation of New York, will discuss her dissertation, "Vocation and Avocation: A Case Study of the Relationship between Jewish Professionals and Volunteer Leaders in Jewish Education."

Attached are selected excerpts that focus on the professionalization of the governance structure of a Jewish day school and the questions it raises: What does it mean to generate commitment, allegiance and community in a voluntary setting? How is the nature of Jewish volunteerism unique? And what are the policy implications for Jewish communal planners?

If you have not already responded, please do so immediately at:   Phone: (212) 532-2360, x11  
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Looking forward to seeing you.

Excerpts from

**“Vocation and Avocation: A Case Study of the  
Relationship between Jewish Professionals and  
Volunteer Leaders in Jewish Education”**

by

**Dr. Alisa Rubin Kurshan**

**CIJE Education Seminar**

December 16, 1997

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

It is a brilliant, sunny, and breezy autumn day, and the chill in the air is invigorating. The excitement is almost palpable. Cars must park several blocks away as several hundred people pour into the sparkling new building. Parents and guests admire the bright, primary color window frames in this building that was once a warehouse. This 55,000 square foot fully carpeted and air-conditioned facility is the new home of the fourth through eighth grades of the Masoret Day School. Conveniently close to the lower school, located just 6/10 of a mile walk through a wooded path and a three mile drive, this facility is a dream come true.

With several common areas for T'filah and class meetings, spacious lockers for all students, computer labs, resource rooms, an impressive new gymnasium, and large, bright classrooms, this building has the potential to generate a new excitement for learning that most educators can only dream of providing. Moving from an old building in poor condition which it leased from the city, the Masoret Day School community is filled with pride as it gathers together today to dedicate its new and permanent home.

Board members, community and civic leaders, past presidents, alumni, parents



and teachers are in attendance at this gala afternoon affair. This is a milestone in the history of the Masoret Day School, putting many in a reflective mood. Many of the highlights of the early history of the school are recalled by the speakers at the dedication. The challenges that the school faced in becoming an established institution - hiring a full time head of school, achieving fiscal solvency, finding a permanent site - are alluded to by one of the co-chairs of the event. Many in the room are privately recounting some of their own personal memories of the early years of the school.

This event is the culmination of years of hard work on the part of the board, the development office, the chairs and leaders of the capital campaign, and the head of school of Masoret. People are wishing one another Mazal Tov; the elegant food, and beautiful plants and flowers which decorate the lobby and hallways add to the festive atmosphere. One current board member is asked her schedule for the week so that a meeting can be set with several people to work on school issues, and she responds: "This is one day that I did not bring my calendar. Somehow, it felt wrong to bring it with me today. It feels as though it is Yontif today!"

Yet coupled with a feeling of accomplishment and festivity is the clear sense of acknowledgment that this is only one, albeit significant, step in a long process of improving the Masoret Day School. The successful completion of this new building is the result of a long and arduous process which began more than five years ago.

"Improving the educational facilities" was one of six major goals set forth in the long-range plan of 1991. It is the process of working toward these goals of the

long-range plan that I have been witnessing up close and studying from afar as I have observed, monitored and interviewed members of Masoret for the past six months.

This is a research project which stemmed from my interest in the relationship between the lead Jewish professional and the volunteer leadership of a particular school community but which quickly broadened into a study of the governance structure of the school. As my understanding of the culture of Masoret grew, I came to appreciate that the volunteer leader- professional relationship is viewed by both the head of school and the volunteer leadership as only one critical factor amidst a broader institutional concern for governance.

Both the volunteers and professional leaders in the school are seeking strategies to improve their relationship in order to help the school realize its potential. The entire governance structure has been changing during the last five years and therefore, to study the nature of the relationship between the professionals and the volunteers is to witness an instance of institutional change. This is a story which actually begins in 1990.

## ANTECEDENTS TO THE LONG-RANGE PLAN

Most of the people from the Masoret Day School agree that the current school is in vast measure a reflection of the changes which began with the engagement of an



outside consultant in 1990 to conduct an institutional assessment. Both the head of school and the president also agree that the nature of their current relationship continues to be a result of the reverberations of the 1990 assessment done by the consultant, William Seeley. It is important to try to appreciate what type of setting this outside consultant encountered when he first walked into Masoret.

The school was almost thirty years old at the time, and it was a large and thriving institution. It enjoyed a reputation as a quality Jewish day school with a nationally renowned head of school. Dr. Solomon Levy, the current head of school, had served in this capacity since 1978, and under his stewardship the school had grown from 196 students in one building to 466 students situated on two campuses, each with a campus principal who reported to Dr. Solomon Levy. Eleven years later, Dr. Levy enjoyed popular support and was rightly proud of the school's many accomplishments.

Nevertheless, during the 1989-1990 academic year, Dr. Levy and several of the board members and parents began to ponder about the next stage in the school's development. The school was not specifically seeking more students, but rather was looking for ways to improve the quality of education that its current students were receiving. The question people were asking aloud that year reflected a question that had been building privately for several years: What does a school do to improve when it no longer seeks to grow in numbers?

Solomon Levy describes a gnawing sensation that he was experiencing during

that year. He worried that the reputation that the school enjoyed might be undeserved and that the quality of teaching was uneven. He was unhappy with the way decisions were being reached in the school, and he was concerned about complacency. Ever committed to self-improvement, it makes sense that Levy would worry that the school should not simply be satisfied with the success it had achieved so far.

Although he could not yet articulate precisely what change was needed, Levy felt that the school needed help to progress to a new stage in its development. There were several key members of the community who took their children out of the school during that time because they felt that the educational quality was suffering. There were teachers who did not belong in the school because of their poor skills and/or lack of commitment to values and practices of Conservative Judaism, and there was clearly a concern about the failure of the school to retain students in the transition to the middle grades and from one building to the other.

It was at this point of the school's history that Levy heard from a colleague about the excellent job William Seeley had done in another Jewish day school of similar size in helping the school to recognize the challenges it faced and to develop a long-range plan for the future. Seeley, an educational consultant, was hired by the school in 1990.

Today the head of school readily admits that he could not have predicted how wide-ranging the ramifications of the consultant's report and subsequent recommendations would be. "Much of what I am dealing with today on a regular basis



in terms of defining my role vis- a- vis the faculty, the president, the board, the committees and the community at large, is a direct outgrowth of the William Seeley report." In fact, Seeley's report has become such a part of the ethos of the institution that several present and former board members breezily refer to his recommendations and the lessons that he taught the school as "Seeleyisms."

Seeley spent three days in the Masoret Day School in May 1990 after reading what one board member described as, "a huge amount of stuff, eight inches high of paper." Seeley encountered a school in which he found many strengths. He outlined them carefully and noted that the school was at a turning point in its history: "Masoret rightly relishes the first calm in its history and it finds itself in new territory." But he also noted that there were areas in need of improvement.

Its very success has placed it in competition with the area's finest independent and public schools— and has attracted a far broader and in some ways different constituency. Yet in definition of mission, refinement of program, security and appropriateness of facilities, and adequacy of governing structures, Masoret has yet to show necessary and corresponding growth. To move into adulthood from its hard-won adolescence will require hard work. Although the school has the luxury of a long term relationship with its head of school, the governance structure is in tremendous need of improvement.

It is these issues of governance structure and the process of change that bear directly on the research question of the volunteer leader- professional relationship. The board of directors was an unwieldy size. Forty people generally attended the monthly board meetings, but there were more than one-hundred people who were officially

members of the board. Additionally, board meetings were open, which meant that anyone could attend and raise any issue of importance to him/her. There was an acute lack of focus and severe discontinuity at these meetings and the board functioned largely as a "rubber stamp" in the decision-making process to the executive committee. This executive committee met on a regular basis to discuss the confidential matters of the school and to reach many of the critical decisions that determined the course of the school. With eighteen people on the executive committee, Seeley suggested that even it was too large "to handle especially sensitive and confidential matters."

He also concluded that the head of school's time was inordinately spent on "administrivia" and that he needed time to focus more closely on the students, the faculty, and the program. Seeley's descriptions of the governance structure of the school as a "parent co-op" and of the head of school as "running around swatting flies" spurred everyone to consider new ways of managing the day-to-day operations of the Masoret Day School. Perhaps ironic for a school almost thirty years old, buried in his lengthy written report was Seeley's contention: "Right now the school is without a single nerve center; it is not yet an adult."

Several past presidents describe the pre-Seeley early years with Dr. Levy as the head of school as a time when Dr. Levy was a "key member of the team, a team player." One past president indicated that during the board meetings, Levy would generally "act like an equal member of the team." His strength was (and is) as a



consensus builder and a community builder.

As Levy describes himself, "I wanted people to be happy and to feel connected to the school. I was more of a team player than an educational leader. Perhaps it was my youth, my inexperience, or maybe simply my personality." A clear picture emerges of the president and the head of school putting their heads together to solve problems. The line between the head of school's job description and the president's was very blurred. "It was cozy and supportive," explained one past board member. "I handled the teacher negotiations, not because I thought Solomon was incapable, but he didn't seem interested. After all, he is a Rabbi, not an MBA; so I just helped out and did my part."

When it came to the budget process, Solomon was very involved on the committee level, but did not play a visible role in the process on the board level. In fact, one board member developed the strategy for the board to vote their "choice points" in order to reach agreement. This meant prioritizing items in the budget according to a preference while all along understanding that voting "a" higher on the list than "b" might eliminate "b" from the budget. One former president lamented, "I always wanted Dr. Levy to articulate his choice points first. I believe that the budget reflects the mission of the school and no one should be able to articulate that better than the head of school."

As is common in all Jewish day schools, the board at Masoret was comprised almost exclusively of parents of students. The head of school did little to cultivate



people to express allegiance to the school outside of the board, or to build a constituency of community leaders, Jewish professionals, parents, or even teachers who felt a personal allegiance to him.

Yet it was more than the governance structure, the decision making process and the head of school's relationships that were in question during the institutional assessment. In truth, the "gnawing feeling" that the head of school describes today was also due to less-than-excellent education taking place within the classroom. The explosive growth of the school in the early eighties caught the school breathless. The administrative structure did not keep pace with the new needs of the school. Very few teacher evaluations were conducted. The head of school was evaluated only twice in sixteen years. Teachers who did not reflect the mission of the school were hired, and many people began to wonder about the quality of education which their children were receiving.

In addition, as the numbers increased, the range of both the student and parent bodies grew more diverse. It became evident that the original mission of the Masoret Day School might not be entirely clear to everyone involved in the school. One volunteer leader, who was president of the parents' association during that period of explosive growth, recounted her feelings during that time:

It was a really exciting and at the same time scary period of growth for the school. On the one hand, you had people who were choosing to send their children to our school over some of the best private schools in the area. That certainly made us feel good that they thought of us as better than Stevens Academy, for instance. But at the

same time, it would worry some of us "old-timers." Was this good for our school that kids who could be happy at Stevens were choosing Masoret? How will they change the culture of our school? Will Jewish values become more diffuse? Can we feel confident that birthday parties will be kasher? It was around that time that we started the parents' association adult education classes. Consciously or not, we were trying to find ways to teach the parent body about Judaism to help connect them to what we were really about. I wish this had been going on for the teachers as well. They needed it too.

But it was Seeley's coinage of the phrase "parent co-op" to describe the nature of the school that became the catch-phrase of all that was unwieldy and unmanageable in the school. One parent and former board member strenuously objects to Seeley's depiction of the school as a "parent co-op." She argues:

The term conjures up images of meddlesome parents and that is totally unfair. Parents were involved in lots of things in the school- because the school couldn't afford to pay for anyone to do these things like transportation, helping out in the office, etc. If parents were involved in areas they should not have been, no one told us to get out. There was a vacuum left by the administration and we parents and board members who cared deeply about the school stepped in. But we were never discouraged from doing so. Seeley's report gives parents a bad rap and I think unfairly so!

Interestingly enough, however, William Seeley's concern about the parent co-op model was not new to the school; only the label was. Almost everyone invokes the Seeleyism, "The school was being run like a parent co-op" as the beginning of the change towards professionalism and role clarity in the volunteer-professional



relationship, yet attempts to change this model actually preceded his analysis of the school by more than eight years. This original attempt at change in 1982 seems to have been a foreshadowing of the events that ensued following the William Seeley report. Although it took a great deal of time and a thorough deliberative process, the board (following the long-range study of 1990) ultimately followed a very similar course of action to that which the educational policy committee instituted in 1982.

There was always an education committee in the school. Its function was to oversee the educational program of the school. It is considered a committee of the board of trustees. This large committee consisted exclusively of parents and, as in the board meetings, the meetings were always open. As early as 1981, only three years after Dr. Levy's arrival at the school, he and the chair of the education committee sought the support of the president of the school to change the nature and structure of the education committee. The president unilaterally changed the committee to reflect the concerns expressed. The committee was downsized from approximately twenty-five members to ten members (which included the head and two teachers), its meetings were closed, and the education committee shifted the focus from discussing the operations and curriculum choices to setting policy for the school and reviewing the curriculum. It was at that time that the committee changed its name from the education committee to the educational policy committee (EPC).

According to the head of school, the productivity of the committee dramatically improved, and shortly thereafter, the committee began a process of self-study in



preparation for the Independent School accreditation visit. As a reflection of the change in approach and increased level of seriousness with which committee members approached their newly constituted committee, the head of school and a member of the self-study committee pointed out that the self-study was even chaired by two volunteer committee members rather than by the head of school of the school.

Although all the volunteer members of the educational policy committee were parents, the change in name and structure forced a new outlook on the role of the committee in general, and on their respective roles as individual committee members. One committee member expressed it well:

I was still a parent of a fourth grade student, and I didn't care any less about the quality of her education, but I learned that I was not sitting in the room as a parent. I was on the EPC as a volunteer leader who had to consider the best interests of the school as a whole. I surely was not always successful, but I was conscious of it thereafter.

As one of its first tasks as a newly reconstituted committee, the EPC produced a document which articulated five goals for itself. This document reflected the desire for the committee to move away from micro-managing the school in partnership with the head of school to independent policy making.

It is interesting to note that although the change in the title of the committee endures, the role of the EPC as a policy-making body blurred once again in the 80's. The EPC could not singlehandedly re-create the norms of the total school community. The culture of the board of trustees and the school in general was too powerful for the

EPC's changes to be long lasting. Some argue that the board's operational style made the goal of the EPC impossible to sustain. One member of both the EPC and the board during the early and mid- 1980's reflected on the school governance structure at that time:

It was almost silly. I would be sitting at an EPC meeting and an issue such as why the students in the fifth grade seemed to be having so many problems in math would be raised by a parent. Then the chair would try to explain that it wasn't really the proper place to discuss it, and then the EPC member [who voiced the concern] would say that it was already discussed at the board of trustees meeting!!

In truth, William Seeley sounded a warning cry in 1990 to the school's administrative leadership that it had better clean up its act. It also poured cold water on the board, warning that the school did not reflect a professional operation. He did not specifically address the issue of the relationship between the volunteer leadership and the head of school at Masoret, but the implications of his findings would take the school down a path that would soon bring the issue to the fore.





## SHARED VISION

There are three different levels on which the status of shared vision must be explored: the relationship between the head of school and the president, between the head of school and the board, and between the board (including the head of school) and the parent body. The president and the head of school have an excellent working relationship. Although their styles are quite different, their strengths complement one another's quite well.



Larry Artzen, the current president of Masoret, is a committed Conservative Jew. A product of Camp Ramah, he is a regular Torah reader in his Shabbat morning service and chose to live in this community, in part, because of Masoret. One parent in the school who prays with Larry suggested:

I have no idea if Larry is a good president of Masoret or not. The truth is, he is not a big money man or even a big fund raiser. I think the school has missed the boat with him because the best thing about Larry is his goodness. He should be interviewed in our newsletter—his family featured and photographed. All of his kids have gone to Masoret and his wife works for a Jewish organization. They are your model Conservative Jewish family, and they represent the best in us. That he is our president says more about what we stand for and what we value than anything else. He could serve as a role model to all potential presidents and leaders in our school.

Artzen's involvement with the school began many years ago when he was asked to join the board at a time "when everybody belonged to the board". He sat at board meetings and realized very quickly that there were some serious unresolved issues about the structure of the school. He became involved in a committee to look at the financial organization of the school, and after the committee did much research and issued some recommendations, the executive committee (which at that time assumed the role that the board plays at present) rejected the plan.

Artzen claims he learned from this experience that there was a culture in the school that was resistant to change. He also argued that "there is something wrong with a process when a committee gets so far in a study that it makes recommendations

only to have them totally rejected.” He learned a great deal about process and he decided to learn more about the culture of the institution. He was soon asked to serve in several leadership capacities.

As chair of the educational policy committee at the beginning of the downsized board, Artzen was passionately committed to the new governance structure. He made it his mission to use the EPC as the venue to teach about the need to change the structure and responsibilities of the volunteer roles. That meant clearly defining the educational policy committee as a sounding board for the policies of the school and the head of school as fully responsible for the daily management of the school.

He argued that the new governance structure had to be understood as more than just a downsizing of the board; it also had to be understood as a change in roles for everybody. The role of the members of the EPC was clearly distinguished from that of the professional staff. Committee members were slowly educated about the differences between policy-making and management decision-making. As Artzen describes it, it was and still is a slow learning process, and there have been several disappointments along the way. Nevertheless, over the course of a retreat, the EPC developed action plans to try to establish educational priorities for the school.

Artzen admits that he worked alone and not sufficiently in collaboration with the head of school to educate the committee. “I was ahead of the curve on this one, and devoting the time that I should have to engage Levy in the process was hard.” Artzen has not made the same error a second time. As president, he tries to keep the



exchange with Levy as fluid as possible in order to remain focused on their shared vision for Masoret.

Although there is never really enough time, he claims he makes more time than he would have dreamed possible. His vision for the school is to institutionalize a change in culture, so that process is respected and accountability of the professionals makes the need to keep volunteer leaders out of operations relatively simple.

Artzen even goes a step further than anyone else in the school when it comes to defining roles. He argues that the head should be developing all the policies of the school and defining the educational program in the school. The EPC, the board, and all other committees should act as sounding boards and ratifiers, but subcommittees should not be generating policy decisions. He wants the head to stand out alone as the policy formulator, the educational leader and the visionary for the school. Ostensibly, Artzen rejects the prescriptive advice offered in the non-profit literature that maintains that "the greatest sinner is the president who far too often gives over responsibility to the executive director" (O'Connell 1976). He is probably most aligned with Drahmman's definition of the Catholic School principal: "the principal is the leader of the board, initiator of educational policy, the teacher of the board, the motivator of the board to inspire and challenge board members to growth in the sense of the mission" (Drahmann 1989).

In shepherding the change process carefully built by his immediate predecessor, Artzen appears to be the extremist among the rest of the leadership of the school. His



vision assumes a great deal of leadership strength on the part of the principals and head of school. The head of school is trying hard to catch up to a president who desperately wants Levy in front leading the way through this change process.

Since this is Artzen's last year as president, it is unclear if his vision of the appropriate governance structure will be achieved. As he readily admits, the school has not yet reached his goal, and the change he desires is a long way from being institutionalized. Some board members vehemently disagree with this vision and assume it will never be realized. Several admit privately that his vision goes too far and will not serve the institution well since it is too restrictive of the volunteer leadership. Others are not as sure, but realize that his term of office is shortly coming to an end and do not believe that "his" vision has become the "common" vision. Most of the board members seem to accept a more pragmatic, ambiguous model of leadership.

Not one to use any words cavalierly, Artzen is deliberate when he describes his relationship with Dr. Levy as a partnership. He argues that once an institution engages someone to be the head, the volunteer leaders have a responsibility to form a "critical partnership" with that individual by engaging in "critical conversations and defining conversations to help facilitate the process of growth."

In that spirit, the two leaders speak in one voice at meetings and are very supportive of one another. There is no backstabbing or pettiness in their relationship. Regarding the mission of the school to improve the quality of education for every

student, the two share a similar vision for the future.

In the area of process and job delineation, however, the two stand apart. They do not disagree with one another, but are at different points in the process of change. Artzen seeks greater leadership, direction and initiative from the head of school. Levy claims that he is personally committed to the change process as he understands it. Yet, it appears that he is still trying to catch his breath and is unsure what next steps he should initiate to move the process of change forward.







## Chapter 3

### COMMITMENT

#### RECRUITMENT OF VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

The volunteer leadership of the school, as represented by both the current roster of the board of trustees as well as the list of past presidents and past leaders associated with the school is an impressive group of individuals who command the respect and high regard of many in the broader Jewish community. Masoret's stature in the local community was not easily attained. In the early years, battles for funding, space and stability tapped the energies of a few remarkably capable, dedicated and generous individuals. Without their commitment to Jewish education and their faith in the Masoret Day School to provide quality Jewish education, this school would not have survived. The reality today is quite different. The involvement of volunteer leaders in the Masoret Day School remains strong, and a more diverse group of individuals than in the past leads the school. Masoret has worked hard to cultivate new leaders who have been previously involved in the community Jewish federation, the local Jewish community center, and different local synagogues.

In previous years, when board meetings were a chaotic exchange of suggestions, complaints, and decision making, the board did not attract or seek leaders

outside the parent body. For the most part, trustees were parents of current students within the school. After the recommendation of Seeley to broaden the board to include "past-parents, alumni, and members of the broader community", and the recommendations of the ad hoc committee on governance that "fifteen of the trustees should be current parents, three trustees should not be current parents, at least one trustee should be an alumnus," significant changes were made to the composition of the board to reflect those recommendations. Printed agendas and a more professional tone to the board meetings contributed to the board feeling better about itself. In the words of a past board member, "the board is now a bonafide governing body and not a circus."

The head of school explains that the board of trustees had to "aim high to improve the quality of its board meetings before it could attract big names in the Jewish community." Today the board boasts some of the top names in Jewish communal life in the area. Even more striking is the fact that several presidents have remained very much involved in the school in leadership capacities. For the most part, the presidency has not been used by them as a "stepping stone" to bigger and more visible positions in the Jewish community. The immediate past president has assumed the position as co-chair of the committee on trustees; and the chair of the just completed capital campaign served as the chair of the long range plan immediately after his presidency.

As part of the responsibilities of serving on the board, each member of the



board of trustees must serve on at least one committee of the school. There has been a concerted effort to move the deliberations and brainstorming sessions out of the board meetings and into the committee sessions. This results in time-consuming meetings several nights a month for board members. The time that these individuals give to the school is a reflection of their commitment to the school.

In addition, the process of selecting people to serve on the board of trustees or even a committee of the school has radically changed in the past few years. One former board member described the process:

In the old days, all you had to say was, 'I want to get involved' and poof! You were on the board. Then, after the downsizing, it was who you knew. If you were friends with the head of school, you were in. But now, the school is really trying to clean up its act.

The school now formally asks that all parents who are interested in serving the school on any level respond in writing by a certain date. The vice president for committees reads through all of the forms and schedules interviews with each person to ascertain the individual's areas of expertise, commitment to the school, appreciation of the mission of the school, and leadership potential. The board has recently formed a human resource development committee to create a database for volunteers and a process for nurturing potential leadership. It is seeking to help board members become "successful trustees," and to track the development of these designated "potential leaders" within the school committee structure.

As of December 1995, twenty-five individuals asked to be assigned to a

committee; twenty had been assigned within four months. This strategy fosters a sense of seriousness regarding leadership appointments in the school. According to the vice president:

It also lessens the chances that people with hidden agendas or who are too small minded or selfish to see the big picture or those who are very ambivalent about the mission of the school get into positions of power.

On the other hand, the process can also be construed as controlling, alienating and judgmental. One very thoughtful former board member who often asks difficult questions and plays the role of the contrarian comments bluntly:

What are we so afraid of? So, maybe someone who isn't a "perfect fit" for the school will assume a seat on the board. So what? Maybe we will all learn from that person at the same time that he/she will learn from us? And why are we so elitist? It is not good for the school to alienate so many eager volunteers. Truth is, there have been so many people that we have kept out of the board because the head of school warned us that the person was not "leadership material" and then after a few years when we would be desperate for new faces we would put those very same people on and they have proved time and again to be wonderful workers and great assets to the school. I really wish we could open the process up a little more.

In truth, the decade of the 1990's has been an exciting time to be involved in the Masoret Day School. The success of the capital campaign and the completion of the new building have given the school an excellent reputation as a successful enterprise in the Jewish community. There has been a greater opportunity to attract



potential donors and board members to a school with a clear vision, long-term plan of action, and plans for a new building.

With the completion of the building and the attendant publicity, the effect has been energizing and exciting for the volunteer leaders of the school. One board member commented to me at the dedication of the new building: "We are as glamorous as the [Jewish] federation now. Look around: Big names, big contributions, state of the art facility— we've made it!"

While the 1990's is an excellent time to be involved in the Masoret Day School in particular, it is also true that it is an excellent time, on a more general level, to be involved in Jewish education. The renewed focus on Jewish education as a result of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study on the part of Jewish communal planners has resulted in more status for Jewish educational institutions.

School leaders are involved because they care deeply about the school and believe they can make a difference in improving the quality of Jewish life. As one board member without children in the school told me, "We need to offer a compelling solution to the Jewish continuity crisis." One past president summed up the attitudes of several individuals whom I interviewed when she explained:

I have been involved with this school for a long time. My friends in the [Jewish] federation always used to tease me that I was slumming when I was going to Masoret events. I sense a big a change recently. One woman asked me how I have known for so long, even before the experts did, that intensive Jewish education is the best thing for the Jews. And this woman is not dumb! She was wearing her Lion of Judah pin [indicating that she had given over

\$5,000 to her federation] and she counseled me in a low voice, lest she be accused of being a traitor or something that it is time to start a Masoret Day School Lion of Judah pin. "People would wear it proudly, you will see! After what they heard at the GA [General Assembly—annual meeting of all volunteer and professional leaders of federations nationwide] about how important Jewish education is, trust me, they will give money and wear the pin!"

#### COMMITMENT OF VOLUNTEER LEADERS

There are many reasons that attract people to support an institution. Energy of individuals is galvanized by many different needs and motives. Time, money and expertise that the volunteer leaders have given to this school are all evidence of intense commitment to the school and its mission. Obviously, motives for involvement are not simple to chart, but two themes emerge as dominant.

The most common theme which emerges in the responses of the board members is that the school is a source of Jewish community for them. They rely on the school to enable them to unite with other Jews in a common purpose. Even though they are involved and feel connected to a synagogue—indeed, most board members belong to a synagogue or minyan<sup>6</sup> — they nevertheless invoke Masoret Day School as their primary address for Jewish community.

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For a while I considered the possibility that the large percentage of board members who are not members of a conventional synagogue, but rather, a havurah type minyan, might heighten the needs of those individuals to find a sense of community in Masoret. In fact, there is not a large difference between their behaviors and attitudes and the behavior and attitudes of those who do belong to traditional synagogue communities.



A second theme which is expressed in many different forms is that of Jewish identity. "This school is my way of feeling good about being Jewish." "When I am sitting in a board meeting, I see my father in his Jewish day school meetings, and I feel a sense of Jewish continuity." "This is my contribution to the Jewish continuity movement. I can give money to funding agencies that will decide that Jewish education is important, or I can give money directly to one Jewish educational setting that is doing it well."

Solomon Levy's tenure as the head of school for more than seventeen years affords him the luxury of first-hand reflection on the growth of the commitment of many to the school. He comments that he is forever awed by the deep engagement of the volunteer leaders with whom he has worked. "The styles of some of the presidents may not have been my favorite, but the sincere desire to give their all to this place is humbling to witness." One teacher commented upon the parents' association leaders in particular, "They are in the building all the time helping to make the students' experience better and to make their learning more enjoyable. I may be here all day too, but remember, I get paid to be here; they do not." One recent facilitator of the annual board retreat exclaimed:

Really, it is quite absurd to expect these busy people to give up a Motzaei Shabbat and a full Sunday as it was for the long-range retreats or a five in the afternoon till midnight evening retreat as it was scheduled most recently, just to reflect on how they are performing as board members! You have to be pretty committed to doing well by the school to give so much time to it. After all what do they get out of this?

Surely there are those who seek positions of leadership in the school to exercise power, gain social status, or as one current member of the board described herself to me, "I love to be in the center of the action and to be in the know." But these motivations do not detract from the more selfless commitment to the well-being and progress of the school of most of the school's volunteers.







## BOARD STRUCTURE AS A VENUE TO EXPRESS COMMITMENT

It is clear that the volunteer leadership in the school has a deep sense of commitment. A remaining question is whether they feel that the current board structure provides them with satisfactory means of expressing this commitment. There are indications that it does not. One long-time trustee suggested:

The more professional the meetings are, and by professional I mean set agendas, allotted times for each agenda item clearly marked, controlled atmosphere, no food (often)... the more tedious it feels and the less fun and energizing the process is. I really used to love to come to board meetings to argue for what I believed in—even if it temporarily lost me friends. But now, it all feels so sanitized and cut and dry. Vote yes or no—committee worked long and hard on this don't dissect it, be sure you can recite the difference between policy and operations on command, respect the process and you will have a place in the world to come.

Members of the committee on trustees realize the need to make the process a satisfying one for the board members. They realize that if board members do not gain satisfaction from their involvement, they will not continue to volunteer their time. This is a dilemma that is very hard to resolve. As one board member summed up the conundrum succinctly, "I don't want to be just a rubber stamp, but on the other hand,

I am happy and think it is better policy that the administrators and the head of school in particular are doing the work that board members used to do." One vice president addressed this dilemma forthrightly:

There is a wide gap between micro-managing and feeling useless. Sometimes I think it should be very easy to find that perfect divide. There are times we have hit it and other times I know we have missed. We just have to keep working at it so everyone will want to stay involved.

Given the financial expectations (in addition to the time commitment) of board members, the composition of the board cannot possibly represent the full spectrum of commitment that exists among the parent body. It is assumed that if you take a seat on the board, you will devote much time, and, in most cases, donate money to the school. Perhaps it is testimony to the tenacity of the development staff, but it is impressive that seventy-eight percent of the parent body made a contribution to the capital campaign. That statistic notwithstanding, the board does not represent the broad range of financial commitment which is found among the parent body.

#### COMMITMENT OF PARENT BODY TO SCHOOL

It has been of growing importance to the board in recent years that it be in touch with the broad range of commitment among the parent body of the school. In the absence of open board meetings which served as a forum (albeit inefficient, some argue) for parents to express their concerns about the quality of instruction and the future of the school, there has been a great need to provide new opportunities for the



board to listen and hear the thoughts of the larger community.

The annual EPC open forum has been one such channel as have the regularly written communications from both the president and the head of school to the parents. The very thick weekly flyer, The Masoretic Text, is replete with varied announcements: news about work being accomplished by various committees, and even condolence and Mazal Tov notices .

Nevertheless, the concerns of the parent body are instructive when we monitor commitment because they reveal a great deal about the need of each constituent group to express commitment to the institution. To the extent that the focus of the board's attention in the last few years has been on raising sufficient funds to complete the new building, there are many who wonder aloud if there is still room for other expressions of non-financial commitments to the school through the board. Now that the school has been downsized, there are parents who question what they have to do to prove their desire to contribute their expertise and knowledge to the school.

Some parents have found the classroom to be an excellent venue to volunteer their time and express their commitment to the school and to quality instruction. They volunteer in the classrooms of those teachers who express interest in having volunteers. Some help students with specific projects; others come in to help with Hebrew reading on a regular basis. One parent described the experience to me in the following manner: "The more time I spend in the class— and I wish I had more time to offer— the more I admire the dedication and talent of my daughter's teacher.

Besides, in the process, I am learning plenty!"

Administrators and board members alike argue that the parents' association is the perfect forum for parents to volunteer their time in support of the school. Yet there are many parents who are seeking different opportunities for involvement. Perhaps a past president of the P.A. spoke for many when she said adamantly, "I'd like to tell the entire administration: Don't assume that we just cut bagels and pour coffee. We do so much more than that!" One woman, who served on the board for several years and who is now no longer on the board, lamented that "contributing time to the school is less fun and less rewarding than in previous years— in part because time is undervalued. I would never be offered a seat on the board anymore. I am not rich enough."

These feelings of disenfranchisement are natural outgrowths of not being in the center of the school's decision making structure. Yet, the complaints take on greater significance when heard against the backdrop of a statement made more than once by the head of school, and by one administrator, and even two board members: "The parents just care too much."

This comment reflects a defensive view of governance that certain constituent groups need to be marginalized to protect the efficiency of the school's decision making process. It is certainly easier not to deal with parents who are concerned only with their own child's progress, or who do not understand the totality of the institution's needs or the school curriculum. Nevertheless, it is dangerous to ostracize



people who represent the widest base of support for the school. Exclusion of certain constituencies can erode the commitment of a segment of the primary clients of an elementary school— the parent population.

In sum, the commitment to The Masoret Day School on the part of the volunteer leadership and the professional leadership is exceedingly strong. The task of channeling the commitment of the broader constituencies of Masoret remains a formidable challenge.

