



DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN JEWISH SCHOOLS IN NORTH AMERICA *

A report commissioned by the Initiative for Applied Research in Education

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* The Initiative for Applied Research in Education's Meeting the challenge of teachers' shortage expert team commissioned the scientific survey.

- The findings are in the author's own words and the conclusions reached are his own.
- Any mention or quote from the survey must be referenced in the following manner: Pomson, A. Dorfsman, M. I. and F. Glagovsky. (2009), Review of distance learning programs in Jewish Schools in the US, Meeting the challenge of teachers' shortage expert team.

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Abstract

The integration of technology into instruction is an ongoing process that has been taking place for a number of decades in Israel and around the world. Nonetheless, many studies point to the under-exploitation of technological facilities in teaching, both in academic institutions (Nachmias & Shemla, 2008; Parker, 2003) and in schools (Inbal-Shamir, 2007; Mioduser, Rochelle et al., 2000; Nachmias, 2002).

Around 250,000 students are studying in 850 Jewish day schools in North America. While these schools are to be found all over the continent, the vast majority – more than half the total number – are located in the Greater New York area.

In the framework of a survey of educational programs that use distance learning in Jewish education in schools in the United States and Canada, 35 umbrella organizations, 24 schools, 8 institutions/programs, and 3 private companies were surveyed.

The bulk of the survey was conducted via the internet and through a review of up-to-date material in the field. In addition, we conducted eight interviews with personnel in the field in the United States and Israel.

Following our survey, we have concluded that the field of distance learning in Jewish education in elementary and high schools in the United States is insufficiently developed.

This finding is surprising given the expansion of technological infrastructures in schools, expressed in the installation of ADSL connections in most schools, the acquisition of video-conferencing equipment, and the installation of smart-boards and other amenities that afford easy access to distance learning systems and facilitate their use.

Possible explanations for this incongruity include:

- Lack of awareness in schools of the potential and possible applications of these types of programs;
- Lack of available funding (not for equipment but for paying teachers who would teach from outside the classroom, as well as for teachers and senior instructors who would be involved in such programs in their classrooms);
- Lack of interest amongst adolescents in ‘distant teachers’;
- Adolescents’ impatience with technological glitches that might occur;
- Lack of suitable subject-matter and program suppliers for Jewish schools in the United States.

The conclusions drawn here are preliminary and are based primarily on information from the programs' websites and program personnel. They should therefore be related to with caution. The team of researchers collecting and analyzing the data in this survey had no preconceptions, and the review was conducted with the purpose of clarifying the situation in as objective a manner as possible. The survey therefore includes descriptions of existing programs, reference to programs that no longer exist, and the testimonies of personnel in the field.

Finally, we offer our conclusions and recommendations.

A. Introduction

The Technology-Based Jewish Education Unit of the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University was chosen to perform part of the overall survey of distance learning programs in the field of Jewish education in the USA.

The research team surveyed 35 institutions according to the following distribution:

- 24 schools
- 8 institutions/programs
- 3 private companies ¹

The bulk of our findings is based on an internet survey and a review of current materials in the field. In addition, we conducted eight interviews with personnel in the field in the USA and in Israel.

Following our intensive review, we selected four active programs to present in this study.

The preliminary conclusions of the research team include:

- With the exception of a handful of cases, there is currently no significant development of distance learning in the field of Jewish education in American schools.
- This phenomenon runs contrary to the expansion of technological infrastructure in schools, manifested in the installation of high-speed ADSL internet connections in the majority of schools, the acquisition in some schools of equipment for video-conference,² installation of "smart boards" and the like – all of which afford easy access to systems of distance learning and facilitate their use.
- From the evidence gathered it became clear that the lack of proper equipment does not necessarily lie behind the lack of development of distance learning programs. More plausible explanations for this situation include:
 - Lack of awareness in schools of the potential and possible applications of this type of programs.

¹ See detailed list in Appendix A

² In an interview with Rabbi Yitzhak Schwartz (DLS) he stated that only 50-60 schools out of 800 existing in the USA own video conferencing equipment, and only 5-6 of these use it systematically.

- Lack of suitable funding (not for equipment, but as payment for teachers teaching from outside the classroom, sometimes from abroad, as well as teachers or class supervisors taking part in the process and being present in classrooms during the lesson).
- Lack of interest amongst adolescences in "distant teachers".
- Lack of tolerance amongst adolescents for technical malfunctions that may occur.
- Lack of suppliers of appropriate subject-matter for Jewish schools in the USA.
- The research team expressed doubt as to the awareness amongst educational institutions of the potential of distance learning and the real need for it, even given the reality of a shortage of teachers – in particular in the more remote and isolated schools. This impression is based on the slow rate of expansion of these programs, and the limited success of existing programs.

The only program that appears to operate on a high level and quality is that of Chabad's online school, "Shluchim Online". The salient features of this program are:

- Genuine need for this type of program (it serves children of *shlichim* – emissaries stationed in isolated countries).
- User-friendly and effective technological system.
- Guaranteed funding.
- Attention to student needs (for example, including breaks and lunches)
- "Inclusive" program integrating academic, spiritual, and social aspects.
- Family involvement.

It would be worthwhile to conduct a deep and broad study of this program in order to learn and perhaps even adopt some of its components.

- In the final stages of the review we identified an additional program: [The Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School](#), a JTS ([Jewish Theological Seminary](#)) complementary school. We were particularly impressed by this program's unique technological infrastructure, [Second Life](#), that offers

participants an extraordinary experience and the potential for growth and creativity. We shall refer to it later in this document.

Following a description of existing programs as well as a brief reference to programs that no longer exist, we will present the review team's conclusions and recommendations for the future. The conclusions presented here are preliminary and are based primarily on information from the programs themselves and their personnel. More precise assessments could be made from a more in-depth study that follows the development of the actual distance education lessons

A.1 Theoretical Framework

The integration of technology into instruction is an ongoing process that has been taking place for several decades in Israel and around the world. Nonetheless, many studies point to the under-utilization of technology in instruction, in both academic institutions (Nachmias & Shamlal, 2008; Parker, 2003) and schools (Inbal-Shamir & Kelly, 2007; Rochelle et-al, 2000; Mioduser & Nachmias, 2002).

The Sloan Consortium, [Sloan-C](#), a consortium of individuals, institutions and organizations committed to quality online instruction in the USA, define an online course as one that has at least 80% "online" contents, and a "Blended Learning" course as one comprising 30% to 80% "online" contents (The Sloan Consortium, 2004).

This kind of instruction is supported by a technological-educational environment, a shell or virtual platform, with capabilities and possibilities as well as limitations. It provides facilities for the storage of contents, holding discussion groups, monitoring student participation, providing chores and exercises, operating online and offline (recorded) courses, grade management etc. There are various platforms that provide these services: [Blackboard](#) (currently one of the most common in the USA), [High Learn](#) (very common in Israeli Universities), [Web-CT](#) (one of the first of its kind, integrated with Blackboard), and [Moodle](#) (part of the "Open Source" world).

Recently, a different type of technological environment has been developed in the virtual world, starting with the appearance of [Second Life](#) as an alternative world to the real world. "Second Life" is a virtual world in which the participant creates an imaginary profile of himself that he may use for 'hanging out', shopping, selling, as well as learning.³

³ In the course of this review, we located a company called [Timeless Jerusalem](#) facilitating the Second Life environment for Jewish contents, as well as a school that is currently implementing it via ["Prozdor" school](#).

For this survey, we focus on distance learning programs in Jewish schools (preschools, elementary schools, high schools, and complementary schools) in the USA and Canada.

A.2 The Educational Context

Approximately 250,000 students attend the 850 Jewish day schools in North America. The schools, although dispersed across most of the continent are heavily concentrated in the Greater New York area where more than half are located (Schick, 2005). The day school system has three primary characteristics. First, it is not really a system: it is highly fragmented by denomination, location and size; 40% of schools enroll fewer than 100 students. Second, outside of a few jurisdictions in Canada, these are private institutions, funded through tuition fees that rarely cover operating costs. Third, although there has been significant growth in the community day school sector over the last decade, more than three-quarters of schools are orthodox in religious orientation, with over half of day school students coming from Haredi communities (Pomson, 2009).

These characteristics mean, first, that it is difficult to make generalizations about the system as a whole, and second that it is essentially impossible to effect change across the full range of schools (Wertheimer, 2008). Innovations that make sense for some sectors are ideologically, economically, or technically inappropriate in others; they may simply not be needed. The schools of *some* denominations in *some* regions find it desperately difficult to recruit good teachers, particularly when they lack the resources to offer attractive salaries. Other schools – especially the larger ones, in the largest cities, and from orthodox sectors - rarely find teacher recruitment a problem.

These are only some of the characteristics of the educational context in which our survey was executed.

B. General Considerations for Choosing a Program

Following an intensive survey executed primarily via the internet, we argue that the field of distance learning in Jewish education in elementary and high schools in the USA is not adequately developed.

Nowadays one may find isolated activities conducted via web-conference or video-conference focusing on one-time events such as holidays, singular encounters with students and/or various figures in Israel etc. We do not consider this activity to be "distance learning in Jewish education", however we see it as "some evidence of the potential of the field".

In light of all we have said above and taking into account the current situation, the general considerations for program selection are as follows (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2009):

1. **Stability:** The program is based on stable connections between core elements (society, organization and so forth) and a school or a network of schools.
2. **Structured program:** Based on a Jewish contents curriculum that can cover an entire content unit.
3. **Systematization:** Regular activities are scheduled into the program ahead of time and performed on a periodic basis (weekly activity, bi-weekly activity, monthly activity, and so forth).
4. **Evaluability:** A system is in place that monitors the program and supplements information on what is being done in order to continue the program and assess it.
5. **Continuity:** The program is not a part of a project scheduled to end for financial or other reasons, but rather those involved in it are preparing to operate it in the future.

Each program will be tested against these five considerations.

C. Existing Programs

C.1. "Israconnect" [DLS] [Distance Learning Solutions](#) ⁴

A. General Considerations for Choosing the Program

This is a private company whose activities are based on a video-conference system linking students in the USA and in Israel, or teachers located in Israel and teaching students in the USA.

- **Stability** – The connections on which the program is based seem to be stable.
- **Structured program** – The intention is to base the connections on a structured program, but we did not examine this. According to the evidence we received, stable programs have not yet taken shape.
- **Systematization** – There is insufficient data to measure this criterion.
- **Evaluability** – There is insufficient data to measure this criterion.

⁴ Source: Telephone interview with Rabbi Yitzhak Schwartz, Company owner, and information found on the website.

- **Continuity** – The operation of this program will continue in the coming years, given that this is a private initiative that sees the program has having educational as well as business potential.

B. Program Background

[Distance Learning Solutions](#) (DLS) is a private company owned by Rabbi Yitzhak Schwartz. The company's aim is to teach Hebrew and Jewish contents to students of Jewish schools in the USA.

At the early stages, in the 1970s, the teaching was conducted via computer software. In the past three to four years, the company began using video-conferencing in its work with the various schools.

[Israconnect](#) is a program that was build as a collaborative project of the DLS Company in the USA and the "Lookstein Center" in Israel. The purpose of the program is to link institutions and students in Israel and in the USA. The program website has Jewish content (Talmud, Jewish Law, studies about the Western Wall, holidays etc.).

C. Israconnect Program Description

The aim of the Israconnect program is to link schools in Israel with schools in the USA using video-conferencing. The sessions are intended to be based on common programs of Jewish content supplied by a wide range of content providers in both Israel and the USA.

An additional objective is to enable Jewish schools in the USA to integrate the video-conference as an effective tool for the various needs of the institution, using distance learning.

Technical and Organizational Aspects

In order to participate in the program, each school must be equipped with a video-conference system that costs \$3000-\$5000. In addition, joining this system requires a process of teacher training for the teachers that will use it in their classes, as well as constructing a curriculum appropriate for collaborative work with the institution in Israel.

D. Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

- The program is flexible and modifiable to the specific needs of each school.
- The program reinforces the bond with Israel, its institutions and students.
- Existing resources in Israel and in certain institutions in the USA may be utilized for institutions that need them in the USA.
- Many schools are already equipped with new technological systems, and the majority has high speed internet connections facilitating their participation in the program.
- The program is inexpensive and relatively easy to execute.⁵

Weaknesses:

- The schools are unaware of the advantages of the video-conference system.
- Schools that have invested in the equipment do not know how to use it fully.
- There is an insufficient number of suppliers able to provide appropriate Jewish contents to schools in the USA.
- A significant amount of money is required for equipping and initiating the project.
- The project involves ongoing expenses including the cost of broadcasting, in addition to the costs involved in time spent in planning and preparing the program to its smallest details.

E. In conclusion:

'Israconnect' is a private initiative designed to utilize video-conference technology in order to link institutions and students in the USA and in Israel, so as to deliver Jewish contents from institutions and organizations in Israel to schools in the USA.

⁵ In the opinion of the Company's owner.

At this point its achievements are extremely limited, and while one may not talk of "success", there is the "prospect for success".

C.2. "[Remote Teacher](#)"⁶

A. General Considerations for Choosing the Program

The "Remote Teacher" program is an initiative of the Avi-Chai Foundation and the Lookstein Center, that has been in operation for the past five years. In 2009, nine schools joined the project, and in 2010 the number will rise to twelve.

- **Stability** – This is a stable program supported by the Avi-Chai Foundation. The schools taking part in the program expressed their willingness to continue participating in it.
- **Structured program** – Each school constructs a curriculum for the coming year, although we did not examine this in detail.
- **Systematization** – Class schedules are set in a predetermined frequency.
- **Evaluability** – An evaluation of the program is being conducted by the Lookstein Center. We have not yet received the evaluation criteria.
- **Continuity** – The program is planned to continue and to expand gradually.

B. Program Background

The "[Remote Teacher](#)" program is, as said, an Avi-Chai Foundation initiative, operating in cooperation with the Lookstein Center since 2005.

Underlying the program is the idea of linking teachers in Israel and groups of students in Jewish schools in the USA, in both elementary and high schools, integral and complementary. The program is designed in particular for schools located in isolated and remote areas that have difficulty in hiring high quality teachers for Jewish Studies.⁷

⁶ Source: Interview with Chief Educational Technology Officer at the Avi-Chai Foundation, Mr. Eli Kannai; Interview with Mrs. Esther Feldman, the head of the program at the Lookstein Center; Notices and press releases in the Lookstein Center newsletter <http://www.lookstein.org/press/1005.htm>
<http://www.lookstein.org/newsletter/look8.pdf>

⁷ Appendix B has a list of schools participating or that have participated in the project since its inception in 2005. This list was provided by Mrs. Esther Feldman who heads of project at the Lookstein Center.

C. Program Description

"Remote Teacher" is a video-conference system in which teachers located in Israel teach students located in the USA. In addition to the teacher in Israel, there is also a responsible person present in the classroom during the lesson who does not play an active role, and at most hands out work materials to the students. The teachers in Israel teach the students in the classroom and, according to the evidence we gathered, the lessons are designed to be interactive and dynamic to a large extent (as opposed to the frontal lessons to which the students are accustomed). At the end of the activity, a summary is made and a presentation displayed. The length of the lessons varies, depending on the school (35-90 minutes).⁸

D. Technological and Organizational Aspects

Participation in the program requires that the school be equipped with a video-conference system. In addition, the school's cooperation in organization and content is required. First, there is need for a class supervisor to be present in the classroom during the course of the lesson. According to Mrs. Esther Feldman, it would be best if this were the class teacher, since the lesson enriches him as well and serves as part of his continuing education program. This person is also responsible for order and discipline in the classroom, as well as for the students' class work, since the lessons are not frontal but interactive and require a significant amount of work from the group.

In terms of content, the school must participate actively in the planning of activities and ensure that the program is relevant to each age group.

E. Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths:

- The program is flexible enough to be attuned to the needs of each school.
- The program reinforces the bond with Israel.
- Existing resources in Israel may be used to compensate for the shortage of appropriate manpower in the field of Jewish education in the USA.

⁸ Our information on the nature of the activities and lessons is from an interview with Mrs. Esther Feldman. We did not have the opportunity to view "live" lessons.

- Many schools are already equipped with new technological systems and the majority have a high-speed internet connection that facilitates their participation in the program.

Weaknesses:

- The schools are not aware of the advantages of the system, and do not know how to exploit it.
- A significant amount of money is required for equipping and initiating the project.
- The program requires highly active teaching methods from the teachers to which they are not normally accustomed.
- The project involves ongoing expenses, including the cost of broadcasting, in addition to the costs involved in time spent in planning and preparing the program to its smallest details, as well as the cost of two teachers per lesson.
- In the experience of implementing this program thus far, lessons via video-conference “appeal” less to high school students in comparison to elementary school students. According to the interviewee, the reason for this is the high school student’s expectation of a prolonged and intimate relationship with teachers, a relationship that is not realized with "remote teachers".

F. In Conclusion

This project has been in place for five years now, and in contrast to expectations there is no significant growth in the number of institutions participating in it. However, the head of the program at the Lookstein Center perceives this to be a significant project and she is encouraged by the growth that has taken place, even though the process is slower than anticipated. In discussing how to increase the use of technological tools for distance learning in schools in the USA, Mr. Eli Kannai, Avi-Chai’s Chief Educational Technology Officer raises the possibility of making (another) attempt at unsynchronized instruction,⁹ enhancing the use of various databases¹⁰ and providing scholarships for teachers in the USA who propose novel programs in the field.¹¹

⁹ In an interview with Mr. Eli Kannai.

¹⁰ See for example <http://www.chinuch.org/>, <http://www.lamed.blogspot.com/> and more

¹¹ For Avi-Chai Foundation scholarships, see <http://edtechexp.blogspot.com>

C.3. Shluchim Online School (Chabad) ¹²

A. General Considerations for Choosing the Program

"Shluchim Online" is not a conventional program for Jewish schools in the USA, but a program designed for a very specific population, both in the USA and around the world: The sons and daughters of the Chabad Organization's emissaries around the world.

Chabad is a "total organization" (Penshkin, 1986) providing total answers in all aspects of life. This pertains also in respect to the education and social environment of the emissaries' children living in remote locations, far from centers of Judaism. The overall solution it provides to this problem is "Shluchim Online".

- **Stability:** This is a highly stable program that is based on connections between teachers and children of emissaries around the world (including the USA) that is backed-up by an extremely solid system, both in terms of technology and of funding.
- **Structured program:** This is a structured program consisting of Jewish contents and activities such as praying, study of holy texts, participation in events, holidays, and so forth.
- **Systematization:** There seems to be fairly precise planning of timetables and contents delivered via online lessons on the website. Lessons take place daily, and the program itself has a regular school design.
- **Evaluability:** The website has no data regarding the evaluability of the program. There is an online system of exams and chores delivered via the program website.
- **Program Continuity:** To the best of our knowledge, this program is growing and expanding the world over. There is no indication that it is in danger of termination.

¹² Source: Interview with Mrs. Chavi Kastels, coordinator of Jewish education. The program website and a relevant article in Chabad News may be accessed at:

http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/592574/jewish/When-School-is-Just-a-Click-Away.htm

B. Program Background

"Shluchim Online" is a project of "The Education of Emissaries' Children" department, Chabad International Office of Resources in the USA.

The program's objective is to educate the children of Chabad emissaries around the world by providing lessons via video-conference, thereby also delivering Jewish experiences such as prayers, holidays and festivals, and more.

The website presents a number of sub-programs, such as: "After School Cheder" in which the children receive "Hasidic education" based on the conceptions and history of Chabad; "Homework", a program designed to assist children in need of help after school hours; and the "Homework Help Center" designed to help children with their homework, voluntarily provided by higher class students.

C. Program Description

The "Shluchim Online" school offers lessons via web-conference for four hours a day, Monday through Friday. The lessons are designed for preschoolers (age 4) and up to the eighth grade (age 13).

The children connect via computer and participate in the lessons of lecturers located in the main office of "Shluchim Online" in New York.

The number of students is restricted to 14 per class. All students hear the lesson and may also interact with the teachers and other students taking part in the lesson.

The curriculum parallels that of a regular Jewish school, and the program's website explains that strict attention is paid to maintaining the necessary breaks as well as allowing time for the children's meals in between online classes.

The program also offers complementary classes designed for students who need special assistance. These classes are open Monday-Thursday, 18:00-19:00 (Homework Helpers).

An additional class – 'After School' – operates on Sunday at 13:00-14:40 and on Wednesdays at 19:00-20:40, and provides Hasidic education classes.

All lessons take place on a [virtual platform](#). On the platform there is a basic division of the school into three areas: (A) America; (B) CIS, Europe and Israel; (C) Asia, Australia and Africa. In each region, boys and girls attend separate classes, and the classes are divided according to age grades.

The platform is very sharp graphically and attractive aesthetically. It affords direct access to the classes and study material, and contains professional level multimedia tutorials.

Although we did not have direct access to the classes and lessons (since registration is required), our impression of the platform is highly positive.

D. Technological and Organizational Aspects

As mentioned, the activities in the school are broken down into three areas: (A) America; (B) CIS, Europe and Israel; (C) Asia, Australia and Africa.

The "Shluchim Online" school is made up of two schools: "The Meyer & Lilian Nigri & Family School for Boys" and "The Shluchim Online School for Girls".

The virtual platform has four separate log-in portals: [For parents](#), [for teachers](#), [for boys](#), and [for girls](#).

In addition to the day school, the organization offers a "complementary" school for Hasidic studies, as well as a Homework Room for special teacher assistance for students, and Homework Helpers in which older students volunteer to assist younger ones.

Technically the platform appears fairly user-friendly. Technical support is also available but we do not have much information on it.

E. Strengths and Weaknesses

The program seems to be highly consolidated and operates well.

Strengths:

- The program meets the genuine needs of a secluded target audience. Through the distance learning system, the online school is expected to provide the children of emissaries and their families with education and a social environment, both of which are difficult to procure during their parents' missions, particularly as far as a religious and even orthodox population with very special needs is concerned.
- According to the data found on the website, the cost for participants is extremely low, thanks to significant built-in subsidies.

- The technological system is very user-friendly; the environment is well designed and attuned to the varying ages of students. We do not have sufficient information on its technical functioning, but in light of the ever increasing number of participants and according to testimonies available in the video clips on the website, it may be assumed to be in order.
- The program includes a wide range of Jewish studies in a variety of fields, as well as prayer, social and experiential events, and more. This is a virtual school that attempts to replace the regular school in all respects.

Weaknesses:

Since the information we have on this program is based primarily on its website, augmented by information from an interview with Mrs Chavi Kastel, Chabad's Hebrew Division officer, it is difficult to point to weaknesses.

- According to the website, the program places strong emphasis on parental involvement in their children's studies, and particularly on the establishment of a conducive environment at home (breaks, dinners and so on). The program relies to a significant degree on this involvement, yet there is no certainty as to parents' involvement and the help they may provide to the system.
- Although the environment is attractive and friendly, children may have difficulty performing tasks due to the need to be connected to the computer for so many hours.
- The program requires significant investment by the teachers. According to Mrs. Kastel, they need to work very hard in order to keep the child's attention at the computer for long hours every day.
- The parents are present during classes for a long duration of time and even take part in them. This puts pressure on the teachers who feel they always need to prepare "model lessons".
- The economic crisis has harmed the Chabad organization which might present a danger to the program.

F. In Conclusion

From the evidence we gathered this seems to be a consolidated and efficient program. As mentioned, the virtual school aims to play all the roles of a regular school, in all respects: educationally, spiritually-experientially, and socially. This, alongside the fact that the program does meet the clear needs of emissaries' families, greatly contributes to its development and success as a program of distance learning in the field of Jewish education.

C.4. [The Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School](#)'s Honors stream¹³

"Prozdor" is a complementary school program for Jewish education that is a part of the [William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education](#) of the JTS (Jewish Theological Seminary). It has a regular and an Honors stream. While the Honors stream is not yet an integral part of the school's studies, it provides a "supplement" for students who can study "online" or face-to-face and receive honors credit and an "Honors Diploma" from the institution.

"Honors" is thus an optional complementary stream in the program (or a sub-program) that currently does not reach a large number of students. We have included "Prozdor" in this report as it is an original program with, we believe, great potential for development.

A. General Considerations for Choosing the Program

- **Stability** – This is an optional complementary program. According to the school headmistress, Mrs. Bess Adler, only few students take part in it, those who are unable to attend in person at those locations in which the project takes place. In any event, the program has been in operation for four years, and in the last year went from using 'Blackboard' to using 'Second Life'.
- **Structured program** – The program is structured and based on a set curriculum and a stable infrastructure.
- **Systematization** – The program is systematic. Children logon on a set day, and there is homework, exercises etc.
- **Evaluability** – There is insufficient information to measure this criterion.
- **Continuity** – Program personnel seem to be satisfied with the program, alongside being aware of its limitations. The program is likely to continue.

B. Program Background

"Prozdor" is a complementary school program of the JTS. It is designed for students from seventh to twelfth grade, who spend four hours a week in the school. Students who want to supplement their schooling enter a special course called the "Honors

¹³ Source: Interview with Mrs. Bess Adler, headmistress of the school, the school's website and the company's website Timeless Jerusalem; [Second Life](#) website and [Timeless Jerusalem](#) website.

Stream". They go to school for one extra day or may alternatively choose online learning via [Timeless Jerusalem](#).

According to the school headmistress, the "Honors Stream" has been operating for four years, and receives exceptional students that choose to excel in Jewish Studies. Of all the possibilities offered the students, the online course is not the most popular. Students prefer to go to school and meet with other students. The course is suitable for special cases of students who live far from the school or those that prefer to work alone.

For the first three years, this program used "Blackboard"; since last year it has used "Second Life". The personnel involved are pleased with the change, particularly due to the originality of the tool.

C. Program Description

"Timeless Jerusalem" is a private company that opened a "virtual world" on the "Second Life" platform. The company website states: "Timeless Jerusalem's vision is to become the virtual world's center representing the city of hope"

The main mission of the company is *"to provide compelling content relating to Jerusalem's religious, spiritual, and cultural relevance for billions of people around the globe"*.¹⁴

The Second Life platform enables the creation of a virtual world in which the teacher and students participate online using profiles each created for him/herself. The Timeless Jerusalem website has a lesson about Genesis (Creation), Kenes (Sanhedrin) in Jerusalem, and suchlike.

The website also has notifications about the following courses that "Prozdor" has completed:

- Jerusalem in Psalms.
- Jerusalem: One City and Three Religions.

D. Technical and organizational Aspects

Technically, the online capabilities of the program are impressive. The Second Life platform provides a friendly, stable and creative base for the development of a distant learning program. According to the headmistress, Mrs. Bess Adler, there are no technical difficulties, or at least no significant difficulties.

¹⁴ From the website - <http://216.32.199.82/>.

Organizationally, we would like to add that in spite of the novelty, not many students have joined the program thus far, and that, according to Mrs. Adler, is primarily due to social considerations.

E. Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

- There is no doubt that the main strength of this program is in the novel platform and the potential for development and creativity that it affords.

Weaknesses:

- Contrary to expectation, the online segment of the program is not very popular among the students who still prefer a real rather than a virtual social environment.
- In addition, according to the headmistress, the online segment of the program demands a great deal of work and investment from the teacher, more than in a frontal program.

F. In Conclusion

Of all the programs examined, there is no doubt that this is the most original and innovative. Nonetheless it is not widespread or popular, and therefore we do not see it as a significant breakthrough in the field in schools in the USA.

Although the website states that approximately 40 institutions are planning to join the experience, currently we see only four schools that are using the Timeless Jerusalem environment:

- Wornick Jewish High School, Foster City, CA (Peoplehood program)
- Reali High School, Haifa, Israel (Peoplehood program)
- First Methodist Church Sunday School, Palo Alto, California (The Season of Epiphany curriculum)
- Prozdor Sunday School New York, NY (Virtual Jerusalem course)

D. Additional Programs:

In the course of our survey, we came across 35 institutions that claim to have an advanced level of integration of technology into instruction and even hint at distance learning programs, but when we examined them we found that these programs are not in operation. Of these, the following are worth mentioning:

D.1. Ort Schools

Testimony: Mrs. Nurit Sharon, Distance Learning Coordinator, Bramson ORT College.

An extended search of the ORT website brought to light many programs in the field of Jewish education, such as Jewish history, Hebrew literature, Bible and more, that were developed by the school's professional teams fully supported by ORT's Resources Center.

From an interview with Mrs. Nurit Sharon, Distance Learning Coordinator, we learned that ORT has not yet manage to establish a program of distance learning, due to a lack of resources and partners willing to enter this field.

D. 2. – Rav-Lev, Covenant Foundation Project

Rav-Lev was a Covenant Foundation project designed to allow students to learn texts and have efficient access to texts of Oral Law. We found several schools that took part in this project and received a report from one of its participants, Mr. Jeff Spitzer, who said that the project ended not due to lack of funding but the lack of manpower to run it.

After a brief survey it became clear that it was not a distance learning project per se, but a project that integrates technology into learning.¹⁵

D.3. Avi-Chai Foundation Scholarships

In 2006, the Avi-Chai Foundation offered scholarships to teachers who would develop projects that integrate technology and distance learning into their Jewish studies teaching.

The offer was publicized among teachers at schools who proposed a variety of projects in the field that can be seen in the [blog](#) set up for the presentation of these projects.

¹⁵ For more information see <http://www.jewishdallas.org/page.aspx?id=11644>

While this is an interesting initiative, most projects presented were not in the field of distance learning but focused on integrating technology into instruction.

From an interview with Mr. Eli Kannai, Avi-Chai's Chief Educational Technology Officer, we learned that the Foundation has not yet found an appropriate way to build a program of this kind for elementary/high school students in the USA.

D.4 E-teacher

This is a private Israeli company specializing in online language teaching, particularly the Hebrew language. This company has also developed different programs in Hebrew literature, classical Hebrew, and more. It also provides online assistance for high school students in Israel (for example in the municipality of Ra'anana) in preparation for the matriculation examinations.

The technological web-conference infrastructure was developed by the company itself and it works with impressive efficiency. On its website, the company presents Hebrew learning programs for students abroad, including those in the USA.

We interviewed Mrs. Pazit Bar-Hai, the Company's vice president, who explained that although the capability exists, the company currently does not operate distance learning programs for schools, but focuses on individual students, college students, adults and others.

E. School as an Example

In the course of our survey we encountered the [Jacobson Sinai Academy in Miami](#) and interviewed the coordinator of Jewish education, Mrs. Gabriela Rascovsky. This is a medium sized school that began to develop a program in the field of distance learning, but ceased this development for two reasons:

- A. Financial: The program was expensive due to the equipment it requires (according to Rascovsky, this program can be operated nowadays at no cost using "SKYPE"), and because of the double cost of two teacher per hour.
- B. Curriculum: The curriculum (received from the Leo Baeck school in Haifa) was not suited to the special needs of a Jewish school in the USA due to the level of the language as well as the level of the contents.¹⁶

Rascovsky reported that an attempt was made to run the program with another school, a Bnei Akiva school, in relation to the trip to Israel they operate each year.

¹⁶ According to the testimony of Mrs. Gabriela Rascovsky, school coordinator of Jewish education.

She received proposals from the Rabbi Yitzhak Schwartz and from 'Hebrew On Line'. The plan has not yet been realized.

The case of this Miami school can serve as an exemplar of the situation that exists in the educational system in the USA: This is a school that might have been "ideal" for the implementation of distance learning programs since it is not a large school, is fairly secluded and has a clear need for external resources. It is also a school in which the management demonstrates awareness (at least in the interview we held) of the potential of technology, and our interviewee had personally experienced this potential in the course of her distance learning Masters degree studies she recently completed.

Two difficulties remain for such a program in this school: The cost of the teachers and appropriate contents.

F. Conclusions

From this survey a few interesting albeit preliminary conclusions may be drawn that may serve as a basis for discussion and of a re-examination.

We begin with a surprising assertion: The field of distance learning is insufficiently developed in Jewish schools in the USA.

Possible explanations for this are:

- Lack of awareness of the need for distance learning.
- Lack of awareness of the potential of the tool.
- Reservations about an unfamiliar technological tool that may "fall".
- Lack of suitable content suppliers for Jewish schools abroad.
- Cost burden due to the need for "double" teaching hours and the purchase and maintenance of special equipment.

Among all of the programs we examined, in accordance with all the criteria we set for choosing a program, it seems that Chabad's program is the only one that is demonstratively successful. As said, there are some clear factors that explain, in our opinion, the program's level of success (despite the weaknesses mentioned above):

- The program meets the realistic needs of a secluded target audience.
- The program seems to have significant resources.
- The technological system is very user-friendly and well designed.
- The program is "total"; it includes Jewish studies, prayers, social and experiential events, and more.
- The program has significant support of the students' families.

It should be added that even in terms of a program like 'Timeless Jerusalem', which seems to be structured, technologically sound and creative, it is hard to state with any certainty that its success is guaranteed. Even the technological development that has penetrated educational institutions and Jewish education, as well as Jewish homes, does not guarantee a leap in the number of programs and users, at least as far as schools are concerned.

It should be mentioned that according to several testimonies we received, high school students expect to have a special relationship with the teacher and are not "excited" about technology. An example of this assertion is that the Timeless Jerusalem program is operating in only a small number of schools, among them the "Prozdor" program.

The success of a program depends on its relevance to the students as well as the level of need for it and the nature of the needs it is supposed to meet.

An interesting question is whether Chabad's online school model may be "imitated" and implemented for other target audiences in the education system in the USA, alongside other activities and contents. If this is possible, it would be important to examine how this program's level of success may be achieved in non-religious frameworks as well.

G. Recommendations:

A. In the field of research:

- As far as we are concerned, the work has just begun. We recommend dedicating additional resources to continuing and advancing the research.
- The successful model of Chabad's online school deserves deeper investigation and analysis in order to learn from its experience as well as to evaluate more

fully the strengths and weaknesses of the program. This research would be the basis for the construction of models that would suite other schools in the USA.

B. In the field of implementation:

- Continuing, expanding and deepening the "distant teachers" program, while searching intensively for interested schools and appropriate contents supplier.
- Constructing a new online school model in light of insights gained from researching Chabad's online school as well as other programs, including the virtual world constructed using 'Timeless Jerusalem' and 'Second Life'.

In summarizing this report, it should be stated that the Melton Centre team believes that we are only at the beginning of the road. During our month of research, we managed to "taste" several programs and technological systems that serve or attempt to meet certain needs of the Jewish education system in North America.

We began to study the reasons, constraints and conditions for the success of these systems. We learned their strengths and weaknesses. Yet this is only the beginning.

Among the recommendations presented, we strongly recommend continuing, broadening and deepening the research in order to provide to the community with the proper tools needed to develop this field and thus contribute to the strengthening of the system and its enrichment.

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