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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## ON SMALL BUSINESS

# Navigating a niche market: selling technology to synagogues

By [Mohana Ravindranath](#)

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Bethesda resident Andrew Rosen said his young daughter, like a lot of kids, was no fan of attending weekly religion classes. One morning he found her in tears, clinging to the dining-room table, refusing to go to the Hebrew school run by his local synagogue.

“My wife looked at me and said, ‘You need to fix this. I can’t keep dealing with this,’ ” Rosen said.

It was not an idle plea. Rosen has spent the past 15 years thinking about the ways technology can enhance education. In 1997 he co-founded Blackboard, a District company that makes software for online learning that is used by students and teachers at thousands of North American schools and universities. He went on to become the president and chief operating officer at Presidium, which provides distance-learning technology to universities, a company he sold in 2010.

Rosen decided his next act would be to start ShalomLearning, selling online courses and technology to synagogues.

He says his company fills a niche. Many synagogues “follow established and antiquated models that don’t resonate with the contemporary learner,” children who have access to computers and smartboards, he said. And many schools lack the resources to do something about it, because religious education programs tend to run on a shoestring.

ShalomLearning set out to change that by customizing and packaging existing technology for synagogues, building a curriculum that can accommodate various sects of Judaism.

Most Hebrew school classes offer content-based learning, Rosen said, focusing on history and facts. In contrast, ShalomLearning’s platform features seven month-long units, each tied to a particular value. December, for example, features a value called “gevurah,” meaning courage or inner-strength.

“Rather than teaching kids about Israeli history, we teach them about inner strength and courage and weave in facts as examples,” Rosen said.

Each unit lasts four weeks — the first involves group activities, followed by an instructor-led online video classroom, a self-directed learning project and a classroom session.

## A challenging market

A major challenge in dealing with faith-based organizations has been identifying key decisionmakers in each synagogue, said ShalomLearning co-founder Devin Schain.

“There’s the rabbi, the educator, the lay leaders — trying to get everybody on the same page takes time. When you have legacy institutional history and are trying to bring a new technology and a new perspective, there’s always going to be a challenge,” he said.

Entering the education market may be particularly challenging for a start-up, said Frank Ganis, partner at District-based education research firm the Gilfus Education Group. School bureaucracies can be difficult to navigate and untested concepts looked upon skeptically.

“Parents and teachers are looking for innovation, but one of their biggest concerns is: Will the company be around in one to two years if they’re a start-up?” Ganis said.

ShalomLearning chief executive Sarah Steinberg said the company plans to charge fees based on the number of users and hold down costs by relying on proven software.

“We’re not developing technology, we’re selecting best of breed, so our development costs are nonexistent,” Steinberg said.

The start-up’s goals are modest.

“Not every business needs to be a billion-dollar business,” Rosen said.

Rabbi William Rudolph, leader of Bethesda’s Congregation Beth El, is using ShalomLearning in a few small pilot classes at the synagogue, where Rosen and Schain are members.

More than 500 children attend Hebrew school there throughout the week, and about 50 are testing the program. Families generally pay about \$1,000 in tuition a year per child, and those participating in the pilot are charged 10 to 15 percent extra, he said.

He’s already seen that the online work takes some of the pressure off synagogue instructors.

“There’s less time in the classroom. To me, the real critical issue in Jewish informal education is how much the parents are involved, because no matter what they have kids do, if the kids don’t see them doing some learning themselves and being engaged in what the kids are, it’s not the same as regular school,” Rudolph said.

Bethesda resident Jayson Slotnick's 11-year-old son Nathan is in the pilot program.

At first, Slotnick said, the program required significant parental involvement as Nathan was learning to navigate the technology. But as he grew comfortable with it, Nathan said he appreciated the option.

With traditional classes, "You'd have to go on a weekday right after you get home from school, when you just want to chill out, relax and do whatever you want," he said.

Because of the program's flexibility — users can complete assignments any time during a given window — "you get to sort of do whatever you want over the weekend," Nathan Slotnick said.

He said the interactive nature of the program — sometimes using YouTube videos to illustrate a story — helps him remember the details better.

"You can see what the setting is, what happens, and how big the characters are, how they react," he said.

Jayson Slotnick said he's still deciding whether his other son, a third-grader, will participate in ShalomLearning on a more permanent basis. "It depends on his schedule, his friends," he said, adding, "The synagogue recognizes that not every educational system is for every child."



From left, chief executive Sarah Steinberg, vice president Jill Allenberg Stepak, co-founder Devin Schain and co-founder Andrew Rosen provide an online curriculum that can accommodate various sects of Judaism through their company, ShalomLearning. (Jeffrey MacMillan)