

RE-DESIGNING JEWISH EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (I)

Part One: The case for change

The last twenty-five years have seen dramatic political, economic, social and cultural changes affecting virtually every dimension of North American Jewish life. Jewish education has responded to these changes only partially and unsystematically. A more far-reaching effort is now required to re-design Jewish education to keep it relevant and effective in the twenty first century.

A. Jewish education's achievements

On the one hand, Jewish education has much to feel good about. According to the National Jewish Population Study of 2000-2001, Jewish children today receive more full-time Jewish schooling than did their parents' generation, with 29% attending day school or yeshiva (as compared to 12% of Jewish adults who attended Jewish day school or yeshiva), 24% attending a Jewish school that meets more than once a week, and 25% attending a Jewish school that meets weekly. 21% of Jewish children receive no Jewish education, as compared to 27% of Jewish adults who received no Jewish education. Among those who have been to college, proportionally more young Jews have taken a Jewish studies course.

Jewish education can point to several signal achievements over the course of the 20th century:

a) The modernization and Americanization of Jewish education. In many instances, Jewish education has literally been lifted out of dark basements into well-lit modern classrooms. Content, teaching methods, materials, environment have all vastly improved over the course of a century, to the point where most observers agree that, qualitatively and on the whole, Jewish education in America is better today than it has ever been before.

b) The persistence of Jewish schooling as a Jewish norm. The fact that more than seventy percent of all Jewish children receive some form of Jewish schooling today is itself a signal achievement, given the fact that such participation is not only entirely voluntary, but likely to cost the family thousands, if not tens of thousands, of dollars.

c) The re-emergence of intensive, all-day Jewish schooling. If there is one dimension of 21st century American Jewish education that is most improbable from an historical standpoint, it is surely the growth of Jewish day schools. Though the reasons for this growth are complex and not all benign, and though the quality of the education available is inconsistent, the fact that approximately 200,000 Jewish young people are studying in all-day Jewish schools of diverse ideological bents today cannot be considered as

anything other than a triumph for Jewish education.

d) The creation of a culture of experiential Jewish education: camps, youth movements, Israel programs. American Jews did not stop with creating (or continuing) Jewish schools. During the 20th century they also built a number of additional, in some cases historically unprecedented, educational institutions, formats, and programs. What is more, these have often proven to be strikingly effective.

e) The move beyond children: family education and adult Jewish learning. In recent decades especially, American Jewish education has begun to broaden its reach. Family education has become almost normative as a complement to the schooling of young children. After many decades of decline, serious adult Jewish learning appears to be expanding again in America today, and not only among traditional Jews. The growth of Jewish studies in the university has also exposed large numbers of young adults to sophisticated study of Jewish material and themes.

f) Improvements in the profession. These include: better compensation and benefits; graduate degrees as the norm for professional educators; increased communal commitment to professional development; and growth of higher education programs for Jewish educators.

g) The increased involvement and support of foundations, philanthropists, and federations. These play a key role not only in providing financial resources, but as sources of ideas and engines of positive change.

B. Why innovation and redesign are needed

1. Persistent challenges

At the same time, 21st century Jewish education continues to confront persistent challenges, many of which are legacies from its past and others of which reflect rapidly changing conditions in the present:

- a) Unclear (and often unrealistic) goals
- b) A continuing pediatric focus centered around the Bar and Bat Mitzvah
- c) Fragmentation of educational efforts, making smooth handoffs, synergies and multiplier effects difficult to achieve
- d) Limited time allocations for Jewish learning, in terms of hours per week, weeks during the year, and years during the lifetime
- e) A shortage of quality personnel in every type of educational setting at every level
- f) The isolation of Jewish education from “real living” — too much Jewish education still takes place in “bubbles” detached from the settings in which it is ostensibly located, the larger Jewish and general communities whose activity it is supposed to inform, and the real life concerns and experiences of its students
- g) The difficulty in promoting genuine, open interchange among Jews with differing ideological perspectives
- h) A "digital divide" between generations that slows Jewish education's adaptation to the new technological era characterized by learning in small chunks, multi-tasking,

distributed learning and new uses of technology like gaming, simulations, and learning objects.

i) A pattern of investment in innovation that emphasizes programmatic support, but not the building of organizational capacity that can develop, sustain, and improve innovation beyond the life of a particular program

2. The changing landscape of North American and Jewish life

The past quarter century has seen dramatic changes in the world and in the situation of North American Jewry. These changes encompass nearly every aspect of our existence, from geo-politics to religious life to technology to popular culture. We have seen the phenomenon of *choice* become the dominant defining characteristic of post-modern Jewish existence, and with it a flowering of diversity and a crossing and blurring of boundaries unprecedented in Jewish history. The experiences of Jews born during this period are dramatically different from those of the baby-boomers who today guide Jewish institutions – including Jewish education.

The generation born after 1980 knows a world in which

- Ø Cable, satellite, cell phones and the internet make instant global communication ubiquitous;
- Ø “Mass customization” gives consumers power to get what they want, where and when they want it;
- Ø Institutions cannot expect loyalty, but must prove themselves again and again;
- Ø More than half of all new “Jewish” households also include a non-Jew;
- Ø Both secularism and religious fundamentalism claim large spaces in our national culture;
- Ø Jews enjoy unfettered access to wealth and power;
- Ø Everyone eats bagels (and drinks lattes);
- Ø Women serve alongside men as religious leaders;
- Ø Israel is sometimes seen as both a troubled “occupier” and a hi-tech power;
- Ø High-level Jewish studies may be pursued at nearly every elite college and university;
- Ø The web makes a vast virtual library of Jewish learning accessible to anyone;
- Ø “Jewishness” is continually being reinvented in dozens of traditional and new ways.

These changes must be accounted for in any serious consideration of Jewish education’s future direction. They are critical for understanding who today’s and tomorrow’s learners are and what they seek; for defining the content of what we teach and when, where, how, and by whom it is taught; and for elaborating the connection between Jewish education, the Jewish community, and the wider world.

3. The limitations of current models and approaches

Jewish education has hardly been oblivious to these changes, but it has had a difficult time responding to them on the scale required to make it a vibrant, pervasive, positive force in the lives of large numbers of contemporary Jews. The positive statistics about participation emanating from the National Jewish Population Survey mask the fact that a

growing number of nominal Jews are staying outside of the formal educational system altogether. Teens continue to “drop out” of Jewish education in large numbers before they graduate from high school and many do not find their way back (if they ever do) until they are raising families themselves – which a majority will do with non-Jewish partners.

On the programmatic and institutional level, efforts at change have produced individual examples of renewal and success, but hardly a dramatic transformation of the overall landscape. For example, several initiatives around the continent have made an effort to transform congregational education and the religious school – still the largest component of the Jewish educational system – and to create new learning models. Yet the majority of part-time education programs have not been transformed, but rather have essentially the same educational structure as they did half a century ago (though often with fewer hours).

When we look beyond individual programs and institutions, we discover an even more debilitating limitation. As a recent publication points out, “the current challenge in the field of Jewish education is to build cooperation across institutional lines and thereby enable learners to benefit from mutually reinforcing experiences and to help families negotiate their way through the rich array of educational options created over the past decade and longer.” (*Linking the Silos, Avi Chai Foundation, page 2*) So what is needed is not only more choices, but a fundamental change in the way that the options that do exist are made available and accessible.

4. The limits of incremental improvement: confronting deep structures and embedded cultures

Jewish education is full of innovations: new programs; new educational resources; new techniques and models; new modes of delivery, such as the web. These innovations provide us with both glimpses of what could and should be on a larger scale and “existence proofs” that different ways of designing and implementing Jewish education are possible, and that they work.

However, the scale, scope, and rate at which change is taking place is simply not sufficient to keep pace with the changes in the larger environment and in the population that Jewish education seeks to attract, engage, and influence. Too many programs, institutions, and communities remain largely unaffected by the islands of innovation and success, continuing to operate in conventional ways with commensurately limited results.

Nor can scattered innovation and incremental improvement alone address some of the deep structural and cultural challenges that beset Jewish education today: institutions that operate in relative isolation; under-developed systems for sharing learnings; a predominant focus in discussions on the situation of “providers,” rather than “consumers”; an unwillingness to recognize that we cannot deliver a consistently excellent product while treating educators as marginal figures. These issues demand a more radical, ambitious approach that seeks both to understand and overturn fundamental limiting assumptions in our practice today and to extend innovation and change

throughout the educational system as the norm, rather than the exception.

C. A two-pronged strategy for change: exploitation and exploration

Complexity theory teaches that maximizing any system's viability and vitality is rarely an either/or proposition. Change must be pursued along multiple fronts simultaneously, some small-scale and close to home – what complexity theory calls “exploitation” – and some bold and far-reaching – what is characterized as “exploration.”

Michael Fullan, one of today's leading change architects in the field of general education, argues that the work of education reform requires that we embrace this type of complex change on multiple levels (See the three volumes in his trilogy, *Change Forces*). We believe the same holds true for Jewish education. Even as we work to make incremental improvements within existing frameworks, we need as well to rethink the nature of those frameworks themselves, to imagine better ways of deploying and complementing them, to experiment with new models and approaches, and to re-design the system as a whole so that it can more successfully achieve its ultimate objective: inspiring large numbers of Jews to live Jewish lives of meaning and purpose.

RE-DESIGNING JEWISH EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (II)

Part Two: A New Vision

The new environment for Jewish education in the twenty-first century demands a new vision of what Jewish education should be -- how it should be designed and how it should be delivered. This vision is not primarily about purposes or content. Jewish education will and should remain a vehicle for shaping identity, instilling literacy, inspiring commitment, and forging community. Jewish texts, values, history, traditions, and the knowledge and skills needed to appreciate these and actualize them in one's life, will continue to be the "stuff" of which Jewish learning is made.

But *how* identity is shaped, literacy instilled, commitment inspired, and community forged *must* change, and the meaning of these concepts themselves re-thought in light of how life is lived and how effective learning takes place today. We can neither teach as we have in the past nor organize the educational process as a whole as we have done.

The new vision for Jewish education builds on many elements from Jewish education's past, but it also breaks with that past in the central place it accords to two concepts:

1) the learner as an active agent in fashioning his / her own learning experience.

2) the social experience of learning as the dynamic force that both shapes an evolving identity and builds commitment and community in a fragmented world.

A. "Learner-Driven" Education: The Learner As Active Agent

The key to re-designing Jewish education for the new century is placing the active "learner" at the core of our thinking and practice.

Placing the learner at the center represents a "Copernican shift" for a system that is used to approaching issues primarily from the vantage point of providers, not consumers. When we begin deliberations on how Jewish education should be conceptualized, designed and delivered from more conventional starting points - e.g., programs and institutional settings, content to be taught, even visions of "the educated Jew" - the conversation is often constrained and skewed in ways that limit our ability to look beyond what currently exists. By starting with learners and their needs and desires, we have a much better chance of seeing the broad range of possibilities and challenges that Jewish education faces today.

There are three dimensions to this "Copernican shift":

1. Understanding, listening to, and trusting those whom we seek to engage.

Jewish education needs to be far more "market sensitive" than it traditionally has been. The best way to do this is through actively seeking the opinions of current and potential consumers and customers about what they are seeking in both content and form and why. Underlying the engagement with learners must be a basic trust that a) the choices they make are thoughtful and intended to help them develop a more meaningful relationship to Jewish life; and b) the process of Jewish learning, if well implemented, will in fact produce a deeper relationship over time.

2. Involving learners (and their families, where relevant) as co-producers of their learning experiences.

This attitude of trust needs to be extended to the learning process itself. Educators and institutions must be prepared to give up some of their control and invite learners to help design and implement the experiences they participate in. The involvement of learners in shaping their educational experiences will produce more authentic, powerful learning.

3. Actively helping to guide and facilitate learners in what will hopefully be a lifelong journey.

Giving power to learners to shape their own learning does not mean abandoning them to their own devices. Rather, it opens the door for educators and institutions to assume a new role and responsibility: serving as educational guides and facilitators. Negotiating the Jewish educational landscape, sifting through options, finding appropriate settings and teachers, identifying potential next steps on one's educational journey, is not easy

today. We can make it more so by providing the kind of personal attention and support that a good concierge or personal trainer does.

Recognizing the centrality of the learner and her/his experience is not new in Jewish thinking about education:

- Proverbs (22:6) tells us to: “Educate a child according to her/his way,” which has frequently been interpreted to mean “according to his / her own unique nature,” i.e., the need to individualize the learning experience.
- The Talmud (Avodah Zara 19a) teaches: “A person does not learn Torah except from a place that one's heart desires,” which is interpreted as meaning that the learner must be able to choose the topic and even the teacher.
- In the 20th century, Franz Rosenzweig argued that we need a “new Jewish learning,” one which “no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but the other way round.”

However, this focus is often lost today in our (understandable but limiting) anxiety to transmit what is seen as vital content and to ensure Jewish continuity.

The three elements of a genuinely “learner-centered” and “learner-driven” Jewish education are inter-related.

If we respect and trust our prospective learners, we will allow them to be active participants in shaping the learning experiences they engage in so that they will be personally meaningful and relevant. The more satisfying the experiences, the more likely it is that they will seek out more such experiences. And the more that they see that we do respect and trust them, the more likely they will be in turn to accept guidance and assistance in staking out a pathway of ongoing learning.

Adopting the paradigm of “learner-driven” education does not mean abandoning responsibility for creating frameworks (structures and contents) within which learning can take place. But, it does mean that these frameworks need to be outgrowths of dialogue and conversation, not imposed *a priori*. And, the frameworks need to be flexible and diverse. “One size fits one” is a chastening contemporary reality, and a challenge to the creativity of educators and institutions.

B. The Social Experience of Learning

"Learner-driven" Jewish education should be individualized, but not individualistic. As important as it is to listen to the voice of the learners and to help them design personally meaningful and satisfying educational journeys, neither Jewish values nor sound learning theory allows us to imagine that a serious Jewish identity or enduring Jewish commitment can be fashioned in isolation from other learners -- or from teachers.

Traditional Jewish learning is inherently social, and so too must twenty-first century Jewish learning be.

Human beings naturally seek meaning in their lives and to experience efficacy in those areas of living that matter to them -- career, family, avocations. They also seek connections with others. Contemporary life is filled with centrifugal forces that constrain or erode these connections: the pace of life itself, distrust of large institutions, the ability to satisfy one's basic needs without direct personal relationships to others (how many farmers are we likely to know?), ease of mobility, technologies that allow us to construct highly personalized worlds -- Ipods, DVRs. Education is being reshaped by these same forces, which make possible -- but not desirable -- modes of learning that are almost solipsistic. However to fulfill the purposes of Jewish education it is vital that we fashion learning experiences that draw on and nurture the yearning for connectedness. In fact, we know that such experiences are both natural and powerful. People self-organize into networks and clusters to share experiences and ideas, to affirm their identities as unique individuals to and with others, and to seek from others confirmation, support, and guidance. As much as we want to be in control of our own lives, we do not want to live those lives alone.

Jewish education must create opportunities for active learners to engage with others, to become immersed in social contexts where they can experience personal meaning in and through connectedness and community. This will not happen automatically simply by placing learners alongside one another in conventional settings (schools, synagogues, even camps). More is needed than mere propinquity. Nor can this happen only in formal settings -- it is by now evident that networking in cyberspace can create dynamic connections across spatial boundaries. Community happens when individuals are involved in shared processes of encounter and exploration. Achieving a deep sense of connectedness is not about submerging the individual self in the group (as intoxicating as that experience can sometimes be), but about involving learners in a common task or experience in which each individual is important, but none can sustain the experience or complete the task on his / her own. This can happen in a prayer service, a Talmud hevruta, a canoe-trip into the wilderness, a Jewish arts festival with teens from around the country, a two-week "vacation" repairing damaged homes in northern Israel or southern Louisiana, or a multi-player game on the internet. All of these will be integral parts of twenty-first century Jewish education. From such experiences will come a renewed appreciation of the importance of community as a vehicle through which individuals grow and become more fully themselves (as Martin Buber taught more than eighty years ago). In an era that is to a dismaying extent commitment- and community-phobic (seeing in these constraints on the self), Jewish education can offer a counterpoint -- if it focuses on creating experiences of genuine connectedness, not the pseudo-connectedness that is too often experienced in institutional life of all sorts today.

There is, then, no contradiction between calling for a Copernican shift that places the learner at the center of educational thinking and practice and seeking expanded opportunities to enmesh learners in social experiences and networks that catalyze the growth and development of both identity and community. A viable and dynamic vision

for contemporary Jewish education will embrace both, and will find almost invariably that pursuing a genuinely "learner-driven" education leads to a new appreciation of what is needed to construct truly transformative social environments and experiences, and vice versa..

C. Implications for Educational Practice

This vision of "learner-driven" Jewish education can be extrapolated into a set of guidelines for how the education itself is designed and delivered. These would include:

1. *Learning must be tied organically to living.*

A) **Learning should be experiential.** Judaism is not a "subject" to be studied; it is a way of life to be lived. Textual learning should be grounded in and accompanied by experiences that bring the content of the text to life. Nearly every aspect of Jewish learning lends itself to this approach with a little effort - the study of Jewish values, rituals, history, current events. This includes the study of Torah itself, which is clearly a primary and powerful Jewish experience. However, such study cannot be pursued only academically; it must be both engaging and intellectually and spiritually stimulating. Understanding that all learning must be "experiential" in this sense can help to break down the increasingly unhelpful distinction between "formal" and "informal" education.

B) **Learning should be relevant to the lives of students.** This does not mean a superficial quest for what is *au courant*. Rather, it means heeding Rosenzweig's call to "not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism." The content of Jewish education should grow out of and reflect the widest possible range of authentic concerns, questions, and life experiences of the learners. This means both avoiding spending large amounts of time trying to answer questions that no one is asking, and ensuring that genuine concerns - what is really on people's (including children's) minds - are responded to.

C) **Learning should be about big, enduring ideas.** Current curricular thinking emphasizes that learning is inevitably selective and that determining what is truly important to learn is vital to meaningful and memorable learning. Jewish education needs to focus on helping learners make life-shaping choices, and these will not come out of learning a string of random facts. Details are critical, but only if they are connected in some way to big themes that illuminate important spheres of life. E.g., teaching holidays as sets of customs and observances or history as a succession of events misses the opportunity to engage learners in exploring what is *really* important about these and why they are worth remembering and incorporating in their lives.

D) **Learning should build connections and community.** As noted above, though we live in an age dominated by individual choice, human beings have not lost the desire to

be connected, both to other humans and to larger purposes that help give their lives significance and direction. It remains true as well that social contexts are powerful determinants of attitudes and behaviors. Jewish education needs to provide such contexts and connections through its organization of the learning process itself (how, when, where, and with whom it is conducted) as well as through the content it seeks to transmit. The goal should be to create learning communities that are genuinely dialogical (active, intense, yet diverse and open) and that link individuals to other learners across time and space.

The Seder is a Jewish model for this kind of learning. Like the Seder, Jewish education should be generated by authentic questions that grow out of current experience, provide multiple access points in real time, bring people together, be inter-generational and collaborative, transmit a unique story and value that people can connect to, offer a deeper understanding of the human experience, and be open and adaptable.

2. The scope of Jewish education must be expanded.

A) The venues and settings for Jewish education should be expanded. It is by now a truism that Jewish education is far more than just Jewish schooling (important as schooling is). Many Jewish institutions that heretofore had little to do with Jewish education (e.g., JCCs, social justice programs, social service agencies) now infuse Jewish learning into their activities. But, the Jewish community can go even further in broadening the number and range of venues and modes in which Jewish learning takes place. Every venue in which important life activities take place - including those that are not specifically “Jewish” - is potentially a setting for Jewish learning. These include workplaces, public settings, and (pre-eminently) the home. Technology can also vastly expand access to Jewish learning, especially among those disinclined to participate in traditional venues.

B) Modes of Jewish learning should be broadened. Jews may be “the people of the book,” but textual learning is not the only type of learning that should be validated as “Jewish.” We recognize today the diversity of learning styles and the existence of “multiple intelligences.” Jewish education must embrace this diversity, making greater use of the arts, kinetic activity, and multi-media technologies. This broadening of the modes of learning will both expand Jewish education's reach (one TV program can reach the equivalent of hundreds of classrooms) and its credibility (by being seen to “speak a contemporary idiom”).

C) Expanding the scope of Jewish education must be accompanied by strengthening the connections among and pathways through its multiple settings and modes. Realizing the full potential of a wider educational canvas requires that we make it easier for learners to access the many options that will be available and to move smoothly from experience to experience across institutional boundaries. Wertheimer et al speak of “linking the silos.” From a learner-centered perspective, we can think in terms of “fostering synergies and smooth handoffs” so that Jewish education is experienced as a whole (journey) greater than the sum of its parts.

3. *We must nurture educators who can reach and engage today's learners.*

A) **We must recruit and retain the “right” people.** In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins emphasizes the importance to any successful enterprise of “getting the right people on the bus.” Learner-centered Jewish education requires educators who are both comfortable and skilled in being guides (not authorities), in working in multiple learning modes, and in engaging diverse learners at many points along their educational journeys. It will require focused efforts and the investment of additional resources to attract individuals with these capabilities to the field of Jewish education and to keep them in the field.

B) **Educators' professionalism must be respected and supported.** Central to retaining the right people is building a culture in Jewish education that treats educators as professionals (whether they work full-time or not). This involves both expectations and supports. High standards and rewards for meeting them (both financial and “psychic”) must go together. Above all, Jewish educators need to receive support for pursuing excellence in the form of exemplary working conditions, access to high quality professional development, recognition, and the value placed on learning in the community as a whole.

C) **We must empower educators to be innovators.** Taking full advantage of educators of this caliber requires more than just respect for their professionalism. Educators must be encouraged and given the resources to innovate and experiment in finding ever-more effective ways of facilitating powerful learning experiences. Front-line educators in particular are often expected to be “implementers,” not “designers.” But, this dichotomy needs to be transcended. Learner-centered education must be flexible and adaptable, and this in turn requires educators who are both responsive and creative, and who are allowed to exercise these talents by stretching the boundaries of current practice.

D) **We must foster opportunities for collaboration among educators.** Many of the most creative, engaging, effective Jewish educational programs and resources have been the products of collaborative efforts among educators from different institutions and different types of settings. We must work to create opportunities (structured and unstructured, formal and informal) for this type of collaboration to occur. The internet and other digital communication technologies render this task easier than ever.

D. Setting the Stage for Continuing Change

Creating a culture of innovation. Beyond the introduction and diffusion of specific innovations in design and practice that reflect the “learner-centered” paradigm laid out above, Jewish education must develop the capacity to generate and integrate innovation on an on-going basis. No system in today's world can remain vibrant and vital without

this capacity to adapt and transform itself continuously. This capacity will grow out of a “culture of conversation” in which reflective discussion and deliberation about educational issues, models, approaches, and outcomes is regular, widespread and involves “consumers” as well as “producers.” Jewish education must also develop the mechanisms and capabilities that allow effective innovations to spread rapidly and not (as they too often do today) to remain as isolated islands of success on an otherwise slow-to-change landscape.

RE-DESIGNING JEWISH EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (III)

Part Three: Envisioning the Future – Three Families’ Jewish Education Journeys

To illustrate our vision of customer-centric, learner-driven and continuous Jewish education, this section will trace the educational “journeys” of three Jewish families in one community. These soon-to-be parents meet in a “Jewish Lamaze” class sponsored jointly by the hospital where it is held and the local Jewish Federation. The class is co-taught by a certified childbirth instructor, who leads the parents in breathing techniques and visualizations, and a Jewish Community Educator, who talks with the future parents about Jewish traditions and customs surrounding childbirth, baby naming, and infancy. In the class are:

- Karen and Jeff: A couple in a “Jewish mixed marriage,” as Karen was raised with quite a bit more Jewish education and observance than Jeff was. They are seeking a Jewish path that falls somewhere in the middle and feels comfortable to both of them.
- Susan: A Jewish single mother by choice, Susan is seeking a warm and close Jewish community that can provide her with the support and fellowship she will need while raising her child by herself.
- Gary and Michael: A gay, intermarried couple adopting a girl from China (who attend the class for the Jewish education, not the childbirth training), they are seeking an inclusive Jewish community that welcomes non-traditional families.

Some of the educational models described in the families’ narratives are already known to exist in various institutions and organizations (which will be identified through footnotes/hyperlinks; see also the section on this wiki listing examples of “Noteworthy Programs” that embody the principles outlined in this paper). Others may well exist, but have not yet received attention outside of their local community. Still others, at this point, exist only in our visions of the future. These portraits represent plausible best case

scenarios, envisioning the possible paths of motivated families in a community with bounteous resources devoted to Jewish education.

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Karen and Jeff

Within a few weeks of giving birth to their son, Noah, Karen and Jeff receive a phone call from Rachel, a Central Agency for Jewish Education employee who introduces herself as a “Jewish family coach” – a resource and source of information about Jewish life in their community. At Rachel’s suggestion, Karen signs up for a new parents’ support group at a local synagogue, where every Tuesday afternoon Karen shares parenting stories, tips and challenges with other, mostly Jewish moms (and an occasional dad). Although the group officially lasts only a few months, the members continue to meet socially for months afterwards, and Karen and Jeff form a few friendships with other couples that last for years.

Through the synagogue group, Karen and Jeff learn about the various Jewish early childhood education options available to them in their community. Karen returns to work when Noah is six months old, and they enroll him in Gan Yeladim, a full-time Jewish day care/pre-school program for infants through Pre-Kindergarten. Gan, as it’s commonly called, is known to be a superior early childhood program by every measure. Because it’s partially subsidized by the Federation, it can provide its teachers with good salaries and full benefits, and thus attracts the highest quality early childhood educators (and with stronger Jewish backgrounds than is typical for the field). The program is fun, stimulating, and rich with Jewish content and activities. Noah thrives there, and Karen and Jeff, who make time to participate in the monthly Jewish family education programs, feel like they are part of a community. When they pick up Noah on Friday afternoons, they can also take home a challah and ready-made Shabbat meal – courtesy of the school’s arrangement with a local Kosher market – a boon for a busy family. Noah’s little sister, Emma, three years younger, happily joins him at Gan.

With the ready-made community at Gan, Karen and Jeff feel little need to join a synagogue during their children’s early years, particularly since they disagree about what kind of synagogue to join. However, once Noah starts Kindergarten, they realize how important it is to them that he, and Emma after him, continue their Jewish education. Although they valued the daily Jewish education Noah received as a preschooler, they don’t want quite the level of Jewish intensity – or the high tuition bills – of a day school, particularly with an excellent local public elementary school. Fortunately, they have another option: Beyachad, a community-wide Jewish afterschool program, which they

hear of when Beyachad's director comes to meet with the parents in Noah's pre-school class.[1] Three days a week, Noah takes a bus directly from his school to the Beyachad building, where he enjoys three hours of play, snack, and Hebrew and Judaic instruction (which blends formal and informal education). For Karen and Jeff, Beyachad meets a multitude of needs: for quality Jewish education, reliable after-school care, and a non-denominational Jewish community in which they both feel at home. Like about half of Beyachad's families, they decide not to join a synagogue, taking advantage instead of Beyachad's holiday celebrations and opportunities for adult and family education.

In the summers, Noah has an array of day camp options which combine informal, fun Jewish learning with specialized topics – nature, sports, computers, arts, etc. In the first few years, Noah samples a number of programs for a few weeks each. By sixth grade, he knows that he is most drawn to music and arts, and he spends his summers exploring this interest through various programs, some integrating Jewish content and some secular. Emma, by contrast, lives for sports and computers. She spends her summers at a Maccabia camp and taking computer courses at the JCC. With her tech savvy, Emma introduces her family to the myriad of Jewish learning options on-line. She and Noah soon begin to help shape the family's holiday celebrations with commentaries from myjewishlearning.com, new rituals from ritualwell.org, and provocative blog entries from jewschool.com. Karen and Jeff, meanwhile, find that with their busy schedules, on-line courses and hevruta offer a way to continue their own Jewish learning that is both meaningful and manageable.

In high school, Noah and Emma take advantage of a Jewish afterschool program located in the school building, through a partnership between the school and a consortium of local synagogues, offering "tracks" focused on service learning, Hebrew immersion, text study, arts, etc.[2] During the summers, Noah continues to immerse himself in music and drama. He spends the summer after 9th grade at a secular arts camp, the next summer at BIMA, a Jewish arts institute in the Berkshire Mountains (near Tanglewood and Shakespeare and Company), his 11th grade summer on an arts-focused Israel Experience trip, and the summer before college interning at a local community theatre. Emma, combining her interest in technology with a growing dedication to social action, spends her first two summers working for a Jewish women's shelter as a technology intern, and her second summers on service programs for teens through the American Jewish Society for Service and the American Jewish World Service. She decides to spend a year volunteering in Israel before joining Noah as a college student in Massachusetts, she at MIT and he at Emerson College.

Upon their graduation from high school, Rachel (the "Jewish coach" who has stayed in touch with the family all these years) notifies the Hillel directors of Emerson and MIT that Noah and Emma will be coming, so they can be welcomed immediately upon arriving on campus. Over the next six years, Karen and Jeff follow their children's college experiences by e-mail, which, while dominated by theater and computer science, also include stimulating Judaic studies courses, spirited celebrations of Shabbat and holidays, and meaningful opportunities to continue to explore their Jewish identities through text study and social action (Emma becomes the editor of MIT's first Jewish

Social Action journal). Karen and Jeff, meanwhile, fill their newly free hours by enrolling in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, beginning a course of adult Jewish learning which will last the rest of their lives.

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Susan

As a single mom, one of Susan's priorities from the moment her son, Sam, is born is to find the support structures that can help her as she navigates the challenges of parenthood on her own. She starts by trying a synagogue-based support group, but often finds that she's often just too exhausted and overwhelmed to make it out of the house in time to get there. Her "coach" at the Federation suggests some on-line Jewish parenting listservs and message boards, and Susan finds them to be a much needed lifeline. At any hour of the day or night, she can log in to find an immediate virtual community. She even learns that some of her e-mail pen pals live in her city, and begins to meet them for regular coffees and playdates.

Once she returns to work, Susan enrolls Sam at the employer-sponsored day care in her office building. Because the community offers numerous Jewish early childhood activities on the weekends geared to working parents – Jewish versions of "Mommy and me," Gymborree, music classes, and story time held at synagogues, the JCC, libraries, and indoor play gyms – Sam can enjoy fun Jewish experiences from his infancy, and Susan can connect to other Jewish parents. Susan also continues to immerse herself in her on-line community, and even starts her own blog detailing her experiences as a single Jewish mom.

By the time Sam turns four, Susan is ready for a more intensive community for herself and more substantive Jewish education for her son. On the advice of one of the "Jewish Gymboree" instructors, she checks out Hevrat Shalom, a nearby Reform congregation that strives to integrate "religious school" and "family education." At Hevrat Shalom, families are divided geographically into chavurot of about ten households that include children of mixed ages. Each chavurah works with an educational guide (who is a full-time employee of the synagogue) as they engage in study of both a core curriculum shared by the whole congregation, and additional subjects chosen by the chavurah members. Susan and Sam's chavurah meets in members' homes twice a month for study and socializing, and with the whole congregation twice a month at the synagogue for Shabbat celebration and a potluck meal.[3] Starting in second grade, Sam also goes to the synagogue one afternoon a week for Hebrew instruction, followed by informal "chuggim" in Jewish art, music, cooking, computers, etc.

Susan and Sam love Hevrat Shalom, and feel that their chavura is truly an extended family. They almost never eat Shabbat dinner or Holiday meals alone – every Friday night brings at least one, often multiple invitations. When Susan has the occasional crises that arise in every working parent’s life (the late meeting, the sick child on the day of the big presentation), she knows that she can call any member of her chavura to ask for help.

Unlike many synagogue religious schools, Hevrat Shalom’s Jewish education doesn’t end (or significantly diminish) after Bar/Bat Mitzvah, although teen participation does wane somewhat as other social activity increases. As most of the children in Susan and Sam’s chavura move into adolescence, the nature of the group’s study changes, becoming less “family” education and more adult education (with the teens treated as equals in learning.) In addition to his Jewish learning with the chavurah, Sam decides that he would like to intensify his Hebrew education, with the goal of spending a year in Israel during college. The chavura’s educational guide suggests that he attend a community-wide Hebrew “magnet” afterschool program at another synagogue, where he studies Hebrew twice a week.

By college application time, Sam has decided to major in Judaic Studies. He chooses the joint program of the University of Southern California and Hebrew Union College, attracted by the rich Judaic Studies offerings of the two schools, and the promise of four years of great weather. During his undergraduate and graduate years (in HUC’s Jewish Communal Service program), Sam samples L.A.’s rich Jewish scene for young adults: Makor, which sponsors Shabbat dinners and other group events for 20- and 30-somethings, a community Beit Midrash for young adults, and a steady stream of Jewish music events, poetry readings, and literary salons.

Although Susan wishes her son weren’t quite so far away, the close Jewish communities she has created for herself, both real and virtual, help make her nest feel a bit less empty. Already in her late fifties when Sam leaves for college, Susan begins to explore Jewish opportunities for “mature adults” in her area. She particularly enjoys a program, sponsored by the JCC, that integrates Jewish learning with volunteer work in the community. As Susan becomes more and more immersed in Jewish learning and service, she eventually decides at age sixty-one to embark upon a new career. After studying for three years in a distance learning program that combines web courses, video conferencing, and face-to-face seminars, and mentoring from a “master teacher” in her community, Susan receives a Masters in Jewish Education and becomes a Community Jewish Educator.

Gary and Michael

Upon first glimpsing their adopted daughter, Olivia, Gary and Michael immediately recite the Shechiyanu blessing, which they learned for the first time at their “Jewish Lamaze” class. Gary decides to be a stay at home parent while Olivia is young. He contacts the JCC professional who co-taught the course (along with the certified

childbirth instructor), to find out what activities are available for him to take Olivia to during the weekdays. She recommends the same Jewish early childhood activities that Susan and Sam enjoyed, which all have weekday as well as weekend schedules. She also helps Gary sign up for “PJ Library Plus,” a national program that provides Jewish-content books and music to families with children through age five, and connects families in the same community through playgroups, holiday celebrations, and museum outings.[4]

Haven’t not been raised Jewish, Gary finds himself absorbing as much Jewish content as Olivia from the activities and materials. Even though Gary is usually the only father in attendance at these programs, he finds that shared Jewish interests help him create connections to the community of moms. Michael, who works long hours during the week, takes part by accompanying Olivia to activities on the weekend, and reading her “PJ Library” bedtime story to her every night. All three enjoy spending family time watching Jewish children’s TV programs, available “on-demand” through a local access cable channel in their community.

When Olivia enters Kindergarden (at a private Montessori school), Gary and Michael start thinking about how to continue her Jewish education and their Jewish connections. Their challenge is that, as a gay, interfaith couple with an adopted daughter from China, they want to be part of a community that not only tolerates, but actively welcomes non-traditional Jewish families. Their internet research and tips from other parents leads them to Kehillat Keshet, a Reconstructionist congregation about forty-five minutes from their home. Because many Kehillat Keshet members live a significant distance from the synagogue and from each other, the education program combines twice-monthly programming at the synagogue with an extensive and sophisticated “home schooling” system. Gary and Michael teach Olivia during the week in the evenings, using both print materials provided by the religious school, and online resources that they select themselves to follow their interests, with guidance from the education director.[5] On Sundays at the Kehillat Keshet building, Olivia learns together with her age group, while Gary and Michael join the other parents for adult Jewish learning programs. On the Sundays that they are not in the synagogue, the family goes online to learn together with Olivia’s classmates and their families, using web chats and instant messaging for online hevrutas and group discussions.

During the summers, Olivia, who loves the outdoors, attends day and overnight camps that specialize in nature and environmental education. Every August the family spends a week at a Jewish Family Retreat Center, where Kehillat Keshet’s rabbi is one of the retreat leaders. The retreat, held in a beautiful mountain setting, offers outdoor activities for Olivia, recreation and relaxation for Gary and Michael, and Jewish connection, celebration, and informal learning for the whole family. They see many of the same families year after year (some of whom are other Kehillat Keshet families) and think of the retreat center as a home away from home. When the center begins offering wintertime “Shabbat and ski” retreats during Olivia’s school vacations, they try to attend one every year as well.

When Olivia reaches the 6th and final grade of her Montessori school, David and

Michael must find another educational option for her. Not satisfied with the public schools in their city neighborhood, they investigate private schools, and find themselves intrigued by their community day school's progressive general and Jewish education. They are a bit nervous, however, about whether Olivia would be able to catch up with her classmates in Hebrew and Judaic subjects. When they meet with the Head of School, she assures them that the school program is designed to welcome and quickly mainstream students coming from public and secular private schools, and that Olivia will have many classmates who are also entering the school in 7th grade. Indeed, Olivia finds she is able to catch up to her classmates within the year, and thrives at the school, finding many ways to integrate her passion for the environment with the school's general and Judaic studies curriculum. She also starts a small club for students of color, and soon becomes a student leader in Ayecha, a national organization promoting Jewish diversity. Gary and Michael find the school's parent community to be friendly and welcoming, if perhaps not quite as diverse as they might like. Kehillat Keshet continues to provide their closest Jewish friends and ties. They continue to travel to the synagogue for adult education and Shabbat services, and to use the home-school resources to enrich their family celebrations. When Olivia leaves for college at the University of Colorado, after a summer working as a guide for The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, she promises that she will set aside time every week for on-line hevruta study with her dads.

Conclusion

These narratives present a possible future of Jewish education that is rich and varied enough to attract every Jewish family. While not every promising idea or possibility can be included here, those described above were chosen to illustrate the central themes of our vision for 21st Century Jewish education. The educational options and opportunities that we envision:

- Meet families real needs – educational, spiritual and practical
 - Are experiential and enjoyable, blending formal and informal
 - Build connections and community, often across generations
 - Are both guided by professionals, and shaped by the interests of the learner
 - Go beyond the walls of the synagogue and the day school, taking place in public schools, libraries, retreat centers, community institutions, and homes
 - Take full advantage of the power and potential of technology, especially the internet
 - Are part of a continuous educational system in which professionals anticipate what families educational needs and desires will be in the next stage of their lives, and provide the knowledge and connections they need to fulfill them seamlessly.
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[1] Based on the Kesher Community After School Hebrew School program in Cambridge and Newton Massachusetts

[2] Inspired by Baltimore's Inspiration Express, a Jewish afterschool club for elementary school students

[3] This idea was shared by Rabbi Misha Zinkow of Temple Israel in Columbus, OH, as his vision of the ideal religious education program.

[4] An expansion of the current "PJ Library" program, sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

[5] Inspired by the home school program at Congregation Oseh Shalom in Laurel, Maryland.