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## **Education Everywhere**

Here's the idea: we need a better understanding how people learn to be Jewish. Let me be clear here: being Jewish, as I understand it runs the gamut from secular socialism to religious devotion and everything in between. Learning to be Jewish means developing a relationship with elements of Jewish cultural, religious, ethnic, or political traditions. It refers to a process that encompasses more than textual study and attends to more than merely the cultivation of a personal Jewish identity. Focusing on how people learn to be Jewish means emphasizing the ways in which people actually learn, rather than what many believe they ought to be taught.

Taking this approach to the work of the Jim Joseph Foundation means expanding its educational vision beyond schooling or camping, organized travel or other structured experiences that have been designed to deliver a particular set of content goals or experiences. This approach goes beyond breaking down the barrier between "formal" and "informal" education, and hopefully, it avoids the mischaracterizations associated with "experiential" learning (I'm pretty sure that reading a book is an "experience," too). Instead, I hope, such a shift in focus can begin to inform the work of those invested in Jewish education to better account for the myriad ways in which people encounter, assimilate, produce and share Jewish knowledge, experience, and meaning.

As a foundation, however, you can't just give your money anywhere and you would probably like to see some measure of accountability for the gifts that you give. Yet, the ways and places in which people learn to be Jewish are multiplying. Gone are the days of JCC's and synagogues as the only Jewish games in town. Now, film festivals, book clubs and concerts punctuate people's cultural calendars. For news, people peruse Tablet Magazine or Haaretz, the latter translated into English online. Those interested in creating their own Jewish ritual experiences or learning a bit of traditional text can choose from any number of sites ranging from MyJewishLearning.com to Chabad.org. Consumers encounter Jewish characters nearly everywhere in popular culture, and they find Jewish themes in everything from reality television to films like *A Serious Man* to the rapidly swelling shelves of new fiction. People might click on links posted by friends to facebook or twitter, and they might send their kids to the local synagogue for preschool or participate in an Alternative Spring Break.

The long and short of it is this: people are learning everywhere. Education is pervasive. Learning is pervasive. As Buddhism teaches, "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear," and American Jews are nothing if not good students, encountering teachers everywhere, not just between the hours of 8:15 and 3:00 or between 9:00 and 12:00 on Sundays. People do not stop learning when they close their books or when the bell rings to signal the end of the school day. For most people, that's when learning begins, even when they do not think they are doing so. Education is everywhere, so what is a foundation committed to supporting education to do?

### **The Landscape of Education**

Jewish education, obviously, overlaps significantly with American education generally and both are experiencing moments of extraordinary upheaval. The emergence of "school choice" and charter schools have called into question the historical public-private divide with respect to funding, administration and curriculum. The rising costs of four year colleges, both public and private, have

led people to reconsider the value of that once unquestioned investment. Companies like Coursera and Udacity are forcing institutions of higher learning to reconsider how they deliver course content to their students and who their students are. Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, the internet and mobile technologies have profoundly altered the relationship of people to information, empowering people to access, share, and create it no matter where they are or whatever else they happen to be doing.

These changes are forcing people from across the educational spectrum to reconsider what they do, whom they serve, who should pay for their services, what they are worth, how to facilitate the transmission of knowledge, information, and culture, and to what ends. These changes are also shaping the culture, structure and content of Jewish education, as schools, camps, travel programs, museums, communities, and cultural festivals have all begun to explore alternatives to their traditional venues. Camps use facebook to connect alumni, museums develop complex web portals to engage visitors before, after, and instead of in-person visits, film festivals stream movies online, and webcasts, podcasts and articles continue to proliferate. If anyone anywhere has a curiosity about Judaism or Jews, they can access information from a variety of sources almost instantly.

Technology has not only expanded the availability of information, it has turned us all into ever-ready learners, where curiosity's itch can be scratched with the peck of a few fingers on a keyboard or a screen. If I want to learn to tie tzitzit or how to do kaparot, I can find instructional videos on YouTube. If I want to hear any portion of the Torah, chanted according to almost any traditional nusah, I can hear samples online. Want to build a sukkah? Wondering about traditional meals from across the Jewish world? Want to read Israeli newspapers in Hebrew? Wondering about the relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic? The information is just a tap and a swipe away.

Powerful as this might be, this "question and answer" kind of learning represents only the thinnest kind of educational experience. It is "learner centered" to be sure, but it reduces education to a process of absorbing information rather than accounting for the many other ways in which people learn -- discursively, kinesthetically, affectively, socially. Education is a far more complex, subtle, and sophisticated process, and for all of the talk of "online education," it continues to look like a thin version of offline education, with instructional videos instead of lectures, chat rooms instead of discussion sections, and multiple-choice exams instead of essays. Yet, the availability of education everywhere is forcing changes to educational efforts in every sector, and the stakes are high.

For Jewish education, the stakes are even higher, not because Jewish schools are threatened by Massive Online Open Classes (they're not), or because facebook is threatening to replace summer camp reunions (it's not), or because people think Jewish education is too expensive (it might be, but cost is not deterring large numbers of people. Yet.) Instead, the ready availability of information amplifies what has been true for a long time: Jewish educational endeavors have long emphasized socialization and acculturation over the transmission or accumulation of information. There is no Jewish SAT, no Hebrew school final exam, no Bar exam or board certification or merit badge for being Jewish. Nor should there be. So, at a moment in which anyone, anytime can access information about Jewish life, then what happens to those people and institutions committed to education? What happens to teachers, schools, foundations and policy-makers when a smartphone has so much to teach anyone who is ready to learn?

## **Jewish Education Everywhere**

Recognizing that education is everywhere means acknowledging that structured educational environments neither have a monopoly on nor present the best venues for learning. They remain important sites for the construction of social ties, for cultivating affinities, for reveling in the “collective effervescence” of community. Sure, these are powerful spaces for learning, but they are only a few nodes in a complex network of learning moments that include family meals, conversations with peer groups, and the consumption or creation of media, to name a few.

The availability of information has the potential to connect these nodes more vibrantly, fostering greater, faster and denser exchanges between them. This means that the boundaries that define Jewish educational experiences and the communal commitments they attempt to engender will always be porous. Learners of all ages continually reach both into and out of Jewish experiences, carrying their MP3 collections, their non-Jewish friends and family members, their secular ambitions, political commitments, and senses of humor with them. This is not new, but within the context of education everywhere, it is happening more quickly and with greater activity than previously.

How people manage to move between communities, commitments and cultures is, of course, something that is learned too. It is a skill that people use, practice, and develop -- not just as children or young adults, but over the course of their entire lives. They assimilate new information and develop new strategies for negotiating their ever-evolving world views amidst shifting constellations of social relationships. But nobody teaches how to do that. Jewish educational efforts might explain congruencies between American and Jewish values (for example), but they rarely teach how to navigate between them. To learn that, people are largely on their own.

When we recognize that education is everywhere, we have to reckon with what people learn, how they learn it, and where and why and who is doing the learning, too. This more expansive view of Jewish education everywhere includes museums and magazines in addition to schools and camps. It tries to account for YouTube and The Jewish Catalog, Wikipedia and the Talmud, not because the former will replace the latter, but because it supplements the latter and, most importantly, people are already using them in that way. If we can better understand how people learn to be Jewish rather than how some people think other people ought to be taught to be Jewish, those of us involved and invested in Jewish education might be better able to address the needs of our learners as members of our Jewish communities.

Education everywhere means that people are learning all of the time, in a world of porous and flexible boundaries. They have easy access to information and often, it arrives in bite-sized nuggets, tailored to a particular context, question, or need. Educational settings are increasingly penetrated by outside voices, and everyday experiences are infused with educational opportunities. Understanding the specifically Jewish themes that thread through education everywhere might help shift the focus of those invested in Jewish education away from Jewish education in isolation and toward the many registers in which people learn to be Jewish.