

The Jewish Experiential Leadership Institute: Demonstrating the Positive Impact of Online Learning in Jewish Leadership Development

By: Elana MacGilpin and Mark S. Young

Imagine meaningful text study, *chevruta* (group) learning, community building, strengthening leadership skills, and professional mentoring, all from the comfort of your own home or office workstation.

For both of us – Elana is a Fellow and Mark is an instructor – the [Jewish Experiential Leadership Institute \(JELI\)](#), has cultivated this environment. The program is a journey of professional growth, made possible with access to easy-to-use and multi-functional online educational technology. We have seen its effectiveness in strengthening Jewish educational leadership and building a community of like-minded, passionate Jewish professionals.

JELI is a partnership between [The Davidson School of Jewish Education at JTS](#) and [JCC Association](#), supported with generous funding by the Jim Joseph Foundation. It aims to enhance the leadership skills of professionals in JCCs throughout North America through multiple modes of Jewish experiential learning. An essential aspect of our model is building a cohort of these professionals that meaningfully and regularly engages in interactive learning and discussion. For example, we have studied *Pirkei Avot* better to understand the concepts of *sharing* leadership; we studied the *story of creation* to examine our connection between Torah and *program evaluation*. Fellows are located throughout Canada and the US, from Atlanta to Vancouver, Long Beach to Boston. However, through today's technology, the 18 Fellows are able to meet monthly with educators located in New York to study.

From the instructors' perspective, it has been an enjoyable challenge to design 90-minute monthly webinars so that the learning is as rich and interactive as possible. From the Fellows' perspective, the online learning opportunities have proven to be an easy and accessible way to learn, connect and grow professionally. Several strategies have helped make this forum an effective learning environment, and several lessons have been learned.

1. The interactive webinars (using WebEx), which include audio, readings, phone conversations as well as webcam video (allowing Fellows to see each other) make the experience "live"—and this yields a very different feeling from most of the training webinars with which Fellows were familiar. Thus, Fellows feel connected with everyone on the webinar, even though they are hundreds or thousands of miles apart. They learn from experts in Jewish education, along with a cohort of like-minded JCC professionals. This helps increase participation and captures the group's conceptual learning. For Elana, ongoing Jewish learning had not been a part of professional development. Now the webinars enhance the Fellows' work on a daily basis; this opportunity was a key factor in Elana's decision to apply to JELI.
2. Before each webinar, Fellows study a reading and post their analysis of it in the JELI dedicated Google-Site. This has been an easy venue to use to learn from the other Fellows' reactions to the reading and how the reading relates to their JCC, community and work. The pre-assignment posts also enable Fellows to prepare appropriately and set the frame for the webinar discussion.

3. Each webinar starts or ends with a mixer—either a poll question that is instantaneously tallied or a communal whiteboard on which to write. The webinar platform enables Fellows to “graffiti” responses or reactions to text and discussion on the communal whiteboard. This further strengthens the unique online community.
4. One Fellow prepares and delivers a *d’var Torah* for each webinar. This empowers each Fellow to practice weaving ideas and take-aways from Jewish learning with the development of their own personal leadership skills in a safe, stress free environment. Elana delivered her first *d’var torah* during one of the webinars while working from home. This was her first attempt at weaving learning from studying Torah into her practical work at the JCC; she had prepared with her JELI mentor in advance and was hopeful that the presentation would resonate with the other Fellows. After finishing the *d’var Torah*, other Fellows sent notes saying “congrats” and “well done” in the chat function. Elana found that both the assignment and the real-time feedback from peers were incredibly rewarding.
5. Instructors have learned to limit “presentation” of content to a ten- minute introduction through either a piece of text, a video or a story from Jewish history. The group of 18 then splits into *chevruta*, pairs or small groups. In their small groups, Fellows are able to communicate via the chat function online or conference call, while still logged in to the webinar. There is much more active involvement when people work in pairs to analyze the content and connect its relevance with their professional roles and environments. The cohort then reconvenes to share highlights from each group discussion. This has proven to be among the most engaging components of our online learning.

Of course, not all goals can be achieved online. Our webinar platform has its glitches and limitations, and communicating through a computer does not replace our in-person conferences, learning retreats, or field trips. In fact, the components of JELI that have had the strongest impact have been our three in-person learning retreats. That said, the online element enables JELI to create and maintain the momentum of a learning cohort, leveraging our in-person interactions to their full potential. Such a cohort is created only by regular contact. The webinars provide Fellows with a real opportunity to bring the learning immediately to their work since, five minutes after they log off, they are back in work mode in their work environment.

JELI’s online learning has helped us achieve something special in Jewish education: Jewish educators from across North America have become one micro-learning community. Text study and Jewish learning from exceptional facilitators and scholars are now easily accessible. We are able to reinforce Jewish learning and professional development every few weeks, not just once or twice a year. JELI has allowed both Fellow and instructor to grow personally, professionally, Jewishly, in our hearts, our minds, online.

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