

**Jim Joseph Foundation Retreat
Alan D. Hoffmann
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"**חִנְכֵן כְּלֹנֶגֶר עַל-פִּי דָּרְכׁוֹ גַם כִּי-זָקִינּוֹ לְאַיִסּוֹר מִשְׁנָה**" (**אֲשֶׁר כ"ב:ו'**)

**"Teach a child in his way when he is young,
and when he is older he will not depart from it"
(Proverbs 22:6)**

I. Background

The late Lawrence Cremin, eminent historian of education in America, wrote of education as the "transmission of culture across generations".¹ In that sense, Jewish Education, construed most widely, deals with the transmission of the accumulated and emerging culture of the Jewish people from one generation to the next. The question facing us is: How can we ensure that this occurs in a way that has the meaning, relevance, intensity, excitement and imagination to engage the younger generation of Jews in America and throughout the world? How can we do this in a way that will encourage these young Jews to engage with this culture, maybe reinterpret it and then pass it on to those who come after them?

No single foundation or educational enterprise can address these meta-issues single-handedly and the JJF has to decide how best to focus its resources so that at some point in the future – say, 10 years from now – it will be able to clearly identify some distinct and measurable impacts that JJF funding has made possible.

Articulating multi-year, strategic directions cannot but rest on an analysis of the contemporary Jewish condition and of the North American Jewish reality within the general worldwide trend lines. Of particular interest must be the Jewish consciousness of younger Jews, which JJF has arbitrarily defined as those under age twenty five. Contemporary sociologists have pointed to the processes of distancing from the collective and the search for personal meaning;² multiple identities, of which Jewishness is only one of many; declining denominational affiliation and the weakening of many of the core institutions of communal Jewish life. The literature is full of terms such as porousness, dispersal, detachment, religious individualism, secularism, voluntarism, autonomy, personalism and non-judgementalism.

It has been argued that "Generation Y" (people between the ages of 18-25 and, perhaps, beyond) is searching for Jewish meaning and community, but not within the framework of traditional institutions of Jewish life and community.³ More than 10 years ago in a lecture to the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, Jonathan Sarna intimated that the current institutions of Jewish life – created at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to the conditions of those times – may no longer be equipped to deal with emerging realities of American Jewish life.⁴ It has been further argued that a connection to a global Jewish people should be fostered, together with an emphasis on the potential of social justice to engage young Jews. Much has been written about the power of the arts and public culture to convey meaning, values and even convene episodic communities.⁵

Yet with all the light that has recently been shed on these emerging sociological realities, there are precious few recent examples of new educational interventions which

have sustained Judaism over time. One has a residual concern, maybe heretical, that many of the new "unlimited choices" offered to our young will lead to an unsustainable dilution of Judaism and Jewish life, so superficial and episodic that it will not be transmitted onwards to the next generation. At what stage, one asks, does "*Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, no Foam...*" *Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*, as a recent study of Generation Y is called, cease to be coffee?⁶

On the other hand, there is evidence that the traditional institutions of Jewish education – i.e. Jewish Day Schools, Summer Camps, Youth Groups, Hillel and Israel trips – can have considerable impact on the lives of young Jews. Their impact is significantly greater when these educational experiences are clustered together in a combination of formal and informal education, thereby creating mutually reinforcing educational experiences not only for the participants but also for their families.⁷ Special attention needs to be given to the Congregational School, which is the single most prevalent institution of Jewish education in America, while its outcomes are by and large singularly unimpressive. Within the walls of all these traditional institutions, however, by age 16 more than 50% of all young American Jews are getting no Jewish education at all.

II. Dilemmas

Thus, **the first dilemma which the JJF must confront is whether to direct its large but limited resources to intensifying the educational experiences of those young Jews who will surely enter some Jewish educational institution or rather to concentrate on innovative approaches to reaching those who are not engaged by the current institutions.** Were we to choose the first, if our goal is not only to be "helpful", but rather to produce distinct and measurable impact over time, should the JJF concentrate on raising the level and effectiveness of a particular institution within contemporary Jewish education? Which institution (day school, supplementary school, camp, university campus, youth group, etc.) cries out for such intervention? Were we to choose the second, how would we go about making effective choices?

The **second dilemma concerns the targets for JJF funding and intervention.** Our letter of invitation specifically mentions children ages 3 through young adults age 25, the traditional span of much of contemporary Jewish education. Many arguments could be advanced about which age and stage is "most critical" in the evolution of identity, in general, and Jewish identity, in particular. Although I am in favor of focus and narrowing the scope when policy is ultimately forged for the Foundation, I would like to argue for expanding our lens for the purpose of this discussion. Experience in the world of general education such as Headstart in the USA and Reggio Emilio in Italy indicate, I believe, that there is much to be gained from engaging with young parents about the Jewish future of their children as early as pre-birth. Young parents, particularly first-timers, are particularly open to reflecting upon which paths of nurturing they will engage their soon-to-be children. From Lamaze classes to Jewish mothering groups there is an opportunity, currently missed, to engage young Jewish parents on issues of values, choices and even literacy. Any Early Childhood initiative, I believe, has to start with parents and their children from birth through the first grade of school.

Similarly, I would stretch the upper limits of our age target to hover around the age and stage at which young Jews become parents themselves. "Reboot" and other initiatives with what is now being called "Generation Y", place considerable emphasis on the late

20's and early 30's both for Jewish membership and leadership. For the purposes of JJF policy-making, I therefore propose a cyclical approach that begins from conception and extends to becoming parents. (Needless to say, I am not seeking to exclude those young Jews who may never become Jewish parents).

A third dilemma for the JJF foundation relates to its role in assisting to provide the necessary pre-conditions for a system of Jewish education to flourish. Already fifteen years ago, the study, *A Time to Act*, noted that:

"While there is no guarantee that the medical profession will find the cure to all diseases, we know that without effective hospitals, well-trained doctors and systematic medical research, it is not possible to achieve any progress in health care. Similarly, without effective educational institutions, outstanding educators and the meaningful presentation of the great ideas of the Jewish tradition, it will not be possible to bring about a deepening involvement of Jews within Judaism."⁸

Beyond the investment in one or another major educational institution, there is a need to exponentially increase the number and quality of educators and particularly of educational leaders. There is an urgent need to carefully develop the content, the educational translations of the great ideas of the Jewish tradition, in a way that will be meaningful to young Jews and accessible to educators. Jewish education suffers from a dearth of serious research, particularly longitudinal research that demonstrates impact over time. I believe that the JJF must also engage actively with building these preconditions of Jewish educational "health."

III. A Three-Pronged Approach

The JJF does not enter a vacuum. In the past two decades, there have been some very significant philanthropic and communal multi-year interventions that have led to major change and improvement in Jewish Education in North America. The AVI CHAI Foundation's work in day school education is a model. A strategic alternative for JJF could be to simply identify those "best-available-practices" and join with them, thereby adding considerable muscle power to something which already "works". Another option is to become pioneers in an arena currently grossly underdeveloped or some combination of both.

I propose that the Foundation adopt a three-pronged strategy, attempting to respond to the dilemmas outlined above. For the purposes of this discussion, I am working on the assumption that \$20m annually would be divided equally into each of the following strategic directions:

1. Help Transform Current Institutions of Jewish Education

This requires careful consideration and research, but I would like to recommend that the JJF decide to invest, over the coming 10 years, in no more than 2 types of institutions, allocating \$70m to each, while leveraging significantly greater funding from other philanthropic and community sources nationwide.

Two appropriate candidates in my judgment are:

- **Jewish Journeys through Early Childhood Education:** I have already made part of the case above, and am convinced that a comprehensive, systematic and thoughtful set of interventions needs to be built for this domain. It is the very base of the demographic pyramid, providing access to young Jewish families and should start from Lamaze onwards. The approach cannot only be about creating excellent Jewish early childhood learning centers, but also involving the entire family in a Jewish Journey. One of the concrete measures of success should be a significant increase in registration for Jewish Day schools at the end of this process.⁹
- **Congregational Education** – Close to 3:4 of all young American Jews who receive any Jewish Education do so within the congregational schools of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. While there has been significant growth in the Day School movement, congregational education should not be ignored. I have deliberately not used the term congregational "schools" as a target for intervention, as I believe that we should borrow from the experience of the Experiment in Congregational Education and conceptualize children, parents, Rabbis and Educators as parts of a "Congregations of Learners."¹⁰

While neither of these are virgin territory, they have both suffered from underinvestment in strategic thinking, content development, building of the educational profession for that domain.

2. Generation Y (18-25 and maybe beyond?)

Philanthropy is the venture capital of any society. It should be used to explore and innovate, occasionally being ready to take risks which the organized community cannot allow itself to do. I would direct philanthropic resources to this 'black box' of Jewish life.

The "Generation Y" Agenda for JJF:

- We need to understand whether this generation is indeed "redefining faith in the iPod era".¹¹ What does such a claim really mean? What does this mean for Judaism? What is the minimal threshold of intensity that would ensure that this is serious and significant? What kind of programmed interventions could be used to test some of these claims? What kind of Rabbi, educator, leader, facilitator, media-mediator needs to be trained to create educational ventures for this population
- We need to seriously investigate the claim that Culture can be a "conveyor of meaning, informer of values, catalyst for conversation, and convener of an episodic community"¹² for many of these young Jews, for whom the current institutions and communities are not perceived of as relevant. Is a "Jewish Harry Potter" something to be sought after? Is Matisyahu, the rapper, a significant or merely ephemeral phenomenon, a new idiom or lightweight entertainment?
- Educational psychologists claim that the consciousness of this generation has been reshaped first by television and more recently the internet and other

electronic media. How does that research impact the way we think about 'transmitting' Jewish culture to this generation. What new tools and understandings have to be developed?

- In what ways can issues of integrating social justice in Jewish and general society be integrated into helping create new Jewish sub-communities for this generation?

I propose that the JJF systematically explore several of these interlinking and tantalizing issues with a view to commissioning initiatives (with other partners), which would create new models of engagement with this generation.

3. Systemic Change for Jewish Education

It is so much easier to save Jewish lives than Jewish life.¹³ There is a chronic lack of confidence in contemporary Jewish life in the ability of Jewish Education to make a 'real difference'. The dimensions of the task seem so intimidating, the investment and imagination required so daunting, that most of the vast contemporary pools of Jewish resources have shied away from engaging with the challenge. Thoughtful practitioners have, for years, been calling for a systemic rather than programmatic or institutional approach to promoting Jewish educational change.¹⁴ Yet there are still no 'existence proofs' that Jewish educational change, implemented systemically, could have a multiplier effect in Jewish life. Most recently, an AVI CHAI research report has called for "linking the silos,"¹⁵ arguing that multiple Jewish educational experiences need to be linked across institutional lines, thereby reinforcing educational experiences for learners and their families.

- **Systemic Change in One City**

I propose that the JJF allocate at least 1/3 of its annual resources to promote systemic Jewish educational change in **one city** in America, with a commitment to \$100m over 15 years. This will need be matched both locally and with "in kind" support by the foundation, movements, and organizations responsible for some of the current best practices in the field.

Adopting the approach of "linking silos," JJF will build a Jewish educational coalition in, say, San Francisco to act as a demonstration site for implementation of the very best of Jewish educational available practice across the entire community. Thus, the S.C.S. (Systemic Change Site) will include:

- A laboratory for the new Jim Joseph Early Childhood initiatives (see above) across the entire community, beginning with identifying all Jewish babies born in that city and working with parents to offer multiple Early Childhood options, while constantly upgrading the quality of Jewish content and personnel
- Community-wide initiatives in synagogue life, including innovative family education, building on the Congregational Educational experience nationwide (above)
- Expanding access to day school education across the community while investing in improving the quality of day schools

- Exponentially increasing the number of young people who have multiple summer camping experiences through the denominations, youth movements and JCC
- Building a new supplementary post-bar mitzvah framework for non day-school students, which harnesses the power of youth organizations and movements.
- High school or Birthright travel to Israel for 2:3 of all young Jews and MASA (5mths-10mths) for 1:3
- 'Birthright for Educators', ensuring that every Jewish educator in the city has had a personal Israel experience.
- Expansion of Hillel activities on campuses in area and experimentation on programming for Birthright, MASA graduates and others who will not walk into Hillel
- Multi-year longitudinal research tracking individuals, families and institutional outcomes, monitoring effectiveness
- Creation of a headquarters for incentivizing the horizontal and vertical linkages of the different silos of Jewish education both for parents and their children
- City-wide 'Coalition for Israel Engagement' to ensure that content relating to Israel is included in most of these initiatives.
- Experimentation with Generation Y, applying projects that have grown out of #2 above.
- Special attention to the educational needs of Russian-speaking émigré and Israeli families
- A carefully-designed spiral Tikkun Olam program encompassing both Jews and non-Jews to integrate social justice initiatives as an integral part of the systemic model.
- A program to create lay champions of Jewish education as a way to mobilize major ongoing community support for Jewish Education both during the 15-year period and when it comes to an end.

As time goes on, the JJF will publish an annual "State of the Union of Jewish Education" Report which will document the achievements of the Systemic Change Site, highlighting innovation, outcomes, silo-linking **and** Jewish identity outcomes of participants and families.

Eventually the JJF will create a mechanism to bring teams from across America and the Jewish world to seminars on the lessons learned and the "how-tos" gleaned from the SCS.

IV. On 'Israel' in Jewish Education in North America

Birthright has demonstrated fairly conclusively something which many have recognized for a long time: Israel has the power to galvanize the hearts and minds of young Jews, many of whom are very far from traditional Jewish education and community. The engagement with Israel uniquely triggers that aspect of the search for Jewish meaning which we have come recently to call Jewish **peoplehood**.

Reflected through Israel, young Jews discover for themselves a sense of Jewish history, a connection to past and present and to the uncommon variety of Jewish being and expression, not always pleasing. Through Israel's sovereignty, young Jews see the

mirror of the uniqueness of being a Jewish minority in a liberal democracy. In Israel the connections between God, Land and People begin to come together. So that in almost every aspect of Jewish education mentioned in this paper, Israel should be a component in building the fabric of stronger Jewish life in America.

Beyond Israeli Educators in US schools, camps and JCCs, and beyond Israel content in US educational institutions, an unmediated personal **experience** of Israel has the unique power to ignite the passion and exhilaration that are such important components of any voluntary system of Jewish education. Those who participate in shorter high school and Birthright programs and especially those who go on long term programs (5-10 months) offered under the umbrella of MASA are often transformed Jewishly. I see the experience and understanding of Israel woven through all three of the strategic directions articulated above.

I write barely 36 hours into the ceasefire in Lebanon, 33 days after hostilities began and Israel was catapulted into a war which exacted a terrible price for all sides. There is little that can highlight so starkly the different existential experiences of Generation Y in the US and their Israeli peers. Precisely at this time, however, Jewish education has to seek to build the two-way bridges of knowledge, compassion, mutual understanding, and a belief in a common Jewish destiny that are at the heart of any successful Jewish education.

Endnotes

¹ Cremin, Lawrence A. (1976). *Traditions of American education*. New York: Basic Books.

² Cohen, Steven M. and Eisen, Arnold M (2000). *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³ Greenberg, Anna. "Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam ... Jewish Community and Identity in a Time of Unlimited Choices." The full report is available at:

<http://www.rebooters.net/poll.html>

⁴ Sarna, Jonathan D (1995). *A Great Awakening: The Transformation that Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and its implications for Today*. New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education.

⁵ Greenberg, p. 33.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wertheimer, Jack et al (2005). *Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today*. New York: AVI CHAI Foundation. The notion of "silos" is explained by Wertheimer in the following manner:

"The field of Jewish education is currently based on a loosed, barely connected network of autonomous educating institutions. Each operates as a silo - a term employed by the information technology industry to characterize the uni-dimensional manner in which institutions and fields of knowledge operate in isolation, as vertically organized operations, divorced from constructive, horizontal interaction with others. The current challenge in the field of Jewish education is to **link the silos** (my emphasis: AH) to build cooperation across institutional lines and thereby enable learners to benefit from mutually reinforcing educational experiences and to help families negotiate their way through the rich array of educational options created over the past decade and longer."

⁸ *A Time to Act: The Report of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America* (1990). New York: University Press of America. pp. 73-74.

⁹ In a 2001 report on Jewish Early Childhood Education, Ilene Vogelstein writes:

"Our children are our guarantors. The Jewish early childhood educational experience is the least understood, most underrated and potentially most influential moment in a child and family's encounter with Jewish life and Jewish schooling. It is in the preschool that many young adults, now parents, reconnect with Judaism and where children learn their first Hebrew word, experience their first Shabbat and make their first matzah cover. The young child's Jewish identity, and that of their families, are formed, enhanced and in many cases transformed by a Jewish early educational experience.

Unfortunately, Jewish early childhood education is also the most neglected educational enterprise. Anecdotal information suggests there is a crisis in the Jewish early childhood profession. Educators and childcare workers are underpaid, poorly trained, have little Jewish education. According to the 1999 National Center for Education Statistics, 46% of three year olds are in some form of early childhood setting. Young children are spending between 20 and 30 hours a week in non parental childcare facilities. Early childhood educators with college degrees earn between \$7 and \$11 an hour while childcare workers earn between \$6 and \$8 an hour, according to the March 2000 Center for the Child Care Workforce report.

Statistics from a few Jewish community studies suggest the picture is worse

Data describing the early childhood field is scarce and incomplete. We know very little about the educators, the students, the families and the type and quality of Jewish early childhood institutions. What we do know comes from a 1994 study conducted by the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education which found that most Jewish teachers are committed, have limited training and minimal opportunities for professional development; 55% of preschool teachers received no Jewish education after the age of 13 and 11% of preschool teachers in non-Orthodox preschool are not Jewish. At this time we do not have strong professional Jewish early childhood associations, or a clearing house for early childhood resources and statistics, or a

national body advocating for Jewish early childhood education. Jewish children are spending 6-8 hours a day in nursery or childcare centers and non-Jewish teachers are attempting to transmit Jewish values to our children.

Jewish early childhood education is the first opportunity for every Jewish child to experience the wonders of the Jewish tradition. It is an opportunity for parents to reconnect to the Jewish community and to become oriented to Jewish family life experiences. It is the gateway into synagogue affiliation, Jewish schooling and community involvement. Jewish early childhood education has the potential to significantly impact every Jewish child and every Jewish family. It is time to pay attention to the guarantors; of our future and the individuals charged with their education and care."

¹⁰ Aron, Isa (2000). *Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a key to revitalizing Congregational life*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights.

¹¹ Greenberg, Anna. "OMG! How Generation Y is defining Faith in the iPod Era." The full report is available at <http://www.rebooters.net/poll.html>

¹² Greenberg, "Grande Soy...," p. 9.

¹³ I am indebted to Dr. Alisa Kurshan for this formulation.

¹⁴ *A Time to Act*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Wertheimer et al, 10.