

## “Taking a Journey While Staying at Home”: The Subtle Shifts in a Jewish Professional Trajectory

Each year, since the start of the Jim Joseph Foundation Professional Development Initiative, our team has conducted one-on-one “clinical” interviews with participants in each of the 10 participating programs. As we have written previously, this strand of our work has provided an opportunity to observe in unusually intense fashion the extent to which participants in professional development experiences grow as learners and as professionals, and how, in turn, their learning and growth see expression in their workplaces and their lives.

As was the case last year, the interview script was designed to remind interviewees about what they had previously said and invite them to reflect on the extent to which their thinking and professional lives had changed since the last conversation. At the same time, thanks to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this year’s interviews provided an opportunity to explore the extent to which our interviewees’ work as Jewish educators had been impacted by forces we could barely have imagined when we started this project.

In the first year, we completed 30 interviews in total, including three participants from each of the 10 programs. This year—in our third round of interviews—we managed to interview 26 people, a robust rate of sample retention. As in the past, the interviews typically lasted 45-to-60 minutes. Complicating matters in methodological terms, some of the interviewees were still participating in the same program they were in when we first interviewed them (at this time just those in the JCCA Sheva program), while others had completed their PDI program more than a year previously, and in one case (M<sup>2</sup>) more than two years ago.

### Distinguishing Professional Growth from Professional Advancement

As we noted in previous years, when we started this work, we somewhat expected that people would embark on a professional journey in which their PDI program experience would either jump-start or at least add fuel to an upward professional trajectory. As the years have gone by, we have seen that the reality is more complex or at least more subtle. In-depth qualitative interviews help shine a light on nuances that can easily be overlooked.

To start with, these professional development experiences have not in large part been about professional advancement. Only two programs—HUC’s Executive MA and JCCA’s Sheva program—articulate their goals as cultivating field leaders or institutional leaders. Implicitly, these two programs are positioned as providing a springboard to more elevated professional positions, and they seem to have recruited people interested in such outcomes. In this respect, these programs seem to be outliers.

*From the time that I started the course, my title changed—I was the director of youth and education, now I have a broader portfolio including adult education. I got more leadership skills, it helped me identify my*

*professional voice so that I can articulate my vision better and navigate working with leadership in a more professional way. —HUC*

*I went to my first retreat a week before I just started this job as a director. So, my whole growth in this position is aligned with my growth at Sheva. I had lots of ideas and no experience. I accepted the position partly contingent to being a part of Sheva, because I didn't have any professional experience for this role. The program has been invaluable. My success is due to Sheva. —Sheva*

Alumni of other programs may have advanced too, but their career moves were not preordained or even planned a long time in advance. Overall, about a third of those we interviewed (10 people) have transitioned to new roles, typically in the same organization and occasionally elsewhere. Those who have advanced in this way don't talk about their professional development programs as having *propelled* these changes. They're more likely to depict their programs as having *enabled* the change, especially when the change may not have been planned or might have been precipitated by other factors, such as COVID-19, for example.

*I was not looking for a new job. I was happy teaching full time at the synagogue prior to this, I saw the job posting [for Director of Congregational Learning] and it was just so in line with where I wanted to go eventually, but I didn't expect it to happen so quickly. It's a rare opportunity and I decided to try. ... It's a big job, but it made me feel I can do it because of what I learned at SVARA. —SVARA*

*My official title is the teen division director, overseeing the teen department, but because of COVID I'm wearing multiple hats. I oversaw the day camp over the summer, I'm overseeing "all day at the J" for the kids who are learning virtually. Also serving at a leadership capacity in one of our locations. I'm in these roles because of COVID, but I also have the skill set to do these things. I hope to advance in this area, I had a conversation with our leadership to find a new role for me to grow into to cover the gaps. It's not yet finalized. —Gen Now*

*I was not 100% happy where I was at the Federation. Too much responsibility too quickly without an exit strategy or support from the leadership. ... It happened to be that by accident I fell into this development position [at a congregation]. The Fellowship helped encourage me make the change in recognizing there are a lot of opportunities to make a difference without being stuck in a workplace that's not positive. Change happens so slowly at the Federation and I had no hope for it to change. The fellowship helped me appreciate and understand my own value and gave me additional confidence in what I can accomplish." —Next Gen*

People report having benefited, often profoundly, from these professional development experiences (as will be seen below), but that is not the same as professionally advancing. An alum of HUC's EMA captures well how professional growth does not have to mean moving out or up from wherever you started. As this interviewee beautifully expresses it, it can involve taking a journey while staying at home:

*I used to have a dilemma in my professional life: should I stay as a classroom teacher which I like, or should I look for a promotion into administrative role? ... The program taught me that I need to find what works for me and not what the expectation of others is. Within every role I can find a way to make an impact on the community that's important to me. If I like [local community] and I feel good here, I shouldn't be looking for something else. I need to find a way to grow within the place I'm in. So I decided to stay here as a teacher and found a way to push for this title [Director of Jewish Life and Learning],*

*where I can find things I want to do to make a different impact, beyond the students, but also with other teachers and parents. ... I found a journey while staying home. —HUC*

When people have not changed positions at all—which is just under half of the sample—they talk about an expansion in the content of their roles as compared with when they started the program. They describe doing their work differently, with more sophistication and with an expanded skill set. They have not been standing still, but their job responsibilities are more or less what they were before.

*I'm doing the same thing differently, I'm changing my classroom. There's also a piece of reflection of practice, time to think about pedagogy—I find it exciting. I need to be reminded to pay attention to not just the content, but also the process. How do we engage the learner, create space and independence for them? —SVARA*

These patterns help sharpen a conception of professional development as about growing where one is, seeing things differently, and being empowered. Professional development refreshes and renews, but it is not typically experienced as an upheaval in one's work life.

By the same token, professional development also does not provide an inoculation when “life happens” and blows a career off-course. Five members of the interview sample are no longer working in what one might characterize as the broader field of Jewish education. They were knocked off track by a mix of factors: ill-health, childbirth, marriage, relocation and—most unexpected—a global pandemic. (Interestingly, only one member of the interview sample seems to be currently out of work due to the pandemic.) Their professional development experiences have not inhibited the impact of these life events.

*I retired last year from teaching because of the health issues. I'm a rabbi and was head of Jewish life at a day school for several years. I retired 1.5 years ago, I've been doing some writing, teaching adults at synagogues, and teaching two courses at the day school. I got a health issue when I was at the program. —Yiddish Book Center*

*The 4HQ experience does not seem very relevant right now. I'm focused on growing my private practice, on my career, on my relationship. Life has thrown me some curveballs, and that experience is not a priority right now. If I was still in New York and things were as they were, it would have been a different answer. —Makom 4HQ*

*I've been furloughed from [organization] since June. I get updates from them on a monthly basis. My role was educating, training, and hiring Birthright staff. There are no trips now. ... Right now I just need to get a job, I'm not thinking about growth at this point. ... I'm not looking for a job in this field. I'm done with this for now. It's because of growth potential and salary. It's hard to work for this salary and do things you want to do in life (buy house, have kids, go on vacation). I can't justify staying in the field. —iCenter*

Just as the programs have not generally propelled their participants to higher status plateaus within their fields, so they have not ensured that everyone is able to remain on the plateau they had previously reached. Their special contribution is of a different kind.

## Personal and Professional Growth Revisited

This absorption of professional development into a subtly evolving life experience is echoed in a further way. In our earlier cycles of interviews, we probed the differences participants experienced between personal growth and professional growth. They perceived these dynamics to be distinct but related, especially at the end of the first year: one process touched on who the person was and the other on what they were capable of doing in the workplace. Back in Year One, interviewees articulated how they had signed up with programs looking to build their professional skills and how they had then been surprised by the extent to which their learning was freighted with personal significance.

Two years later, while in conceptual terms the distinction between personal growth and professional growth still resonates with most of the interviewees, many found it difficult to view these processes separately, at least in terms of how they have touched their lives. Their professional growth has not only enhanced their skillset and their capacity to do their work, but it has also changed how they think of themselves and of how they think of the contribution they can make to the Jewish community. At the same time, their personal growth impacts how they view their work, their own know-how, and their sense of what professional skills they still need to learn. A SVARA participant presumed that this fusion was unique to that program:

*SVARA's method is all about how learning a rigorous methodology is facilitating a spiritual growth, presence, and other personal growth. It's really hard to separate. As I grow in these hard skills, I definitely increase in confidence. Professional skills are the frame or the path to personal growth. But personal growth is actually the point. Professional skills feed the personal growth pieces in this case. That's unique to SVARA I think. A part of this pedagogy is reflection. —SVARA*

We're inclined to conclude that this experience has actually been quite widespread. The following reflections capture two different dynamics, or at least two processes that began at different starting points (one personal, one professional), even while they seem to have ended up in more or less the same place.

*In order to grow professionally, you have to understand yourself personally. How you bring your personal into your professional life. Knowing yourself, your strengths and limitations, what you can share and choose not to share, where you're willing to take risks—it makes work more exciting and transformative. It's vulnerability. I was tested in the program in that regard. Because of that you learn the benefits of opening up more. For a while I'd say it was more of a personal growth, but now I look back and I see how I grew professionally. —M<sup>2</sup>*

*I'd say I was focused on the professional skills and it's still a priority in terms of what I gained and the value of the experience. But ... exposure to new ideas and new approaches to Israel was key. ... Professionally, the experience solidified that this is an area of interest and growth for me. I have been involved in multiple conversations [around potential jobs] where my learnings have been a positive part and made me attractive to those organizations. I understand the issues from educational standpoint. I'm more marketable and I'm more of a leader in the community. Personally, it made me feel more connected to this work and to Israel. —iCenter*

## Networks – Where the Personal and Professional Come Together

In practical terms, the fusion of the personal and the professional was most palpable when interviewees reflected on the networks and relationships they gained through the programs. Some highlighted the professional dimensions of these networks (having access to a sounding board, opinions, feedback, and additional opportunities). Others pointed to personal outcomes (friendships made, emotional support, and the exchange of advice). Generally, the longer the program’s length, the stronger its personal outcomes, with participants having observed and accompanied one another through any number of life changes, in real time. The pandemic did prove something of an equalizer in this respect, though, with personal support proving valuable to alumni however long their original interaction. During a period of so much disruption and confusion, communities and relationships built up within the programs proved to be a grounding constant and a source of stability.

*Probably the network of colleagues and professionals I met [was the most significant gain]. Colleagues in difficult moments (especially in the last 6 months) allow for so much in terms of support—we’ve continued to meet regularly as a cohort. I organized the first 6 months of those meetings and I know that the group really appreciated them. I now passed it on to someone else. There’s a value in maintaining the relationships, digging into the practice and dialogue about what it means to be a relational educator. —M<sup>2</sup>*

*It’s the connection with the group—we bonded instantly. They tried to front load the program so we had a lot of in-person time and that was smart. Over time with the circumstances some of us got married, had kids, had to leave the program. ... But those relationships stayed and we are all still connected. It’s a sense of support, I’m part of this wider network, it’s gratifying. We’re not just colleagues, but friends. —Sheva*

Again, the following reflection from a SVARA alum might seem like an outlier. We suspect that this feeling of affinity around a shared personal or professional identity is actually quite widely shared, especially when as a Jewish educator, one can often be isolated or excluded. Forging relationships with a broader community is a special gift that comes from joining a cohort of peers.

*The affinity component [is important] too, with it being queer normative. I didn’t know how joyful it could be. I never get to be in spaces like that outside of SVARA especially with others. It’s healing. Community is very meaningful. It’s THE community I’m connected to primarily. It pushes me to think about the connection between Talmud and the world. It’s grounding. —SVARA*

And the following comment from a Sheva participant demonstrates that the cohort experience is not just about feeling good about oneself (a personal growth outcome); it has professional consequences too. “It’s practically limitless,” as one interviewee put it in a fortunate choice of words, for, as we will see, in many ways, these programs have been most powerful when they are most *practical*.

*Children learn how to play and build relationship—and that’s critical throughout the life. I can try and figure it out myself, but I now have connections with people who have already done it or are also looking for a solution. And I have this support now beyond the program. It’s practically limitless. I’m more confident in my own work because of the cohort. —Sheva*