

COMMUNITY AND MEANING

by Jill D. Eisen

Jewish education is about community and meaning. It should be imaginative, interactive, exciting, meaningful, and spiritual for both adults and students. It is through real life experiences and intimate interactions during learning, praying, and volunteering that adults and students develop strong Jewish identities and powerful ties to Judaism, congregation, clergy, community, and Israel.

In his book, *Taking Hold of Torah*,¹ Arnold M. Eisen, now chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, explains that by gaining emancipation from the ghettos and participating fully in American society and culture, Jewish communities paid the price. Along with our highly-valued modernity, enlightenment, social acceptance, and political liberties came the consequence that Jews could choose whether, as well as how, to be Jewish. Like Mr. Eisen, I believe that Jewish Americans are returning to Judaism because it offers precisely what they have lost, thanks to the freedoms and choices conferred by modernity: "integral community and meaning profound enough to live by."² Therefore, it is our responsibility as Jewish educators to fashion a community that helps Jews live by Jewish values while they fully participate in American society.

I believe that Jewish education is a journey and we must capture the imagination of our students every time we are in their midst. It is the educator's role to be welcoming and engaging. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, "What we need more than anything else is not more text books but text people. It is the personality of the teacher that the pupils read; the text they will never forget." A teacher must embolden students in critical thinking in order to guide them into developing their own unique perspective of Judaism that will grow and alter as they experience life.

The Talmud says "A person only learns where his (her) heart is connected."³ Rabbi Bradley Artson suggested that "a cluster of ideas motivates a person's allegiance to a synagogue." Rabbi Mark Loeb z"l took this idea a step further and taught me that people continually return to a community because they feel valued, important, and heard. Family educators, Ron Wolfson and Joel Lurie Grishaver agreed and explained that the first step in Jewish education is to be open and welcoming and the second is to create a safe environment where learning can proceed and flourish. Rabbi Steven Schwartz and Rabbi Dana Saroken have shown me how to place meaning and community into every action and every word spoken. Community and meaning are the essence of Jewish education.

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I also believe that Jewish experiences do not have to be housed only in a congregation. In today's busy lifestyle where both parents work fulltime jobs, homework is abundant, and extracurricular activities are important, Jewish education often takes a backseat. Convenience and flexibility matter to families. This is why I was part of a team that developed a form of *chavurah* that combined the flexibility of a weekday home school and a Sunday class in the synagogue. It includes once a month *Shabbat* dinners in the families' homes, a retreat, parent education with the clergy, and once-a-month *Shabbat* morning services. We also developed "Hebrew Schools in Your Neighborhood," which are satellite schools designed to meet the needs of the families. These programs are for Jewish and interfaith families. The teachers use multi-sensory, hands-on, and interactive personalized experiences that empower them to explore, discuss and create their own Judaic ideals.

Life and the people that surround me are great teachers and motivators. It is my desire to "pay it forward" by being a teacher and a source of inspiration to my faculty and school families. Maya Angelo said, "People will forget what you say. People will forget what you do. But people will remember how you make them feel."⁴ Students, parents, faculty, and staff all should feel that they are a part of something greater than themselves, feel that they belong, and feel they make a difference. When you create a community such as this, there is nothing you can not accomplish and learn. What a great role model this Jewish community makes for the world.

ENDNOTES:

1. Arnold Eisen. *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America (The Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Jewish Studies)*. Indiana University Press, 2000.
2. Ibid.
3. *Avodah Zarah* 19a.
4. As quoted in Bob Kelly. *Worth Repeating: More Than 5,000 Classic and Contemporary Quotes*. Kregel Academic & Professional, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003.

Jill Eisen's Jewish education passion came as an epiphany at Gamla, an ancient city in Israel; she was meant to teach families the wonders of Judaism. Since then she earned two Masters, started Chavurot and a satellite Hebrew School and empowered families to explore what it means to be Jewish. She is the Assistant Principal in a congregation religious school.

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