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MORE THAN ONE PATH TO JUDAISM

By Avram Mandell

Innovation, variation, outside-the-box, creativity, online learning, private *B'nai Mitzvah* ceremonies, summer camp programming, family programming, blogs, emails, tweets, Facebook, social networking . . . ahhhhh!!! There is so much talk about how to reach our families and how to make Judaism exciting and engaging for our children. All of this could make your head explode. It could make you feel like you're constantly behind the eight ball. I guarantee you that if I charged \$1300 for a pill that would be taken only once a year so that your child wouldn't have to go to Religious School, but they'd have all of the Hebrew and Jewish knowledge they'd need for that year. . . I would have a line out my door and around the block.

As Jewish educators, I do not believe it is our job to make Judaism easier for our families.

It's not easy to be Jewish, it's actually hard work. . . but that's not such an appealing message to our families, is it? Most of us work for institutions setup to cater to the masses, but it is our jobs as educators to help families customize their experience, both as individuals and as a family, for their own unique Jewish journeys. As Jewish educators, is it our role to help facilitate Jewish living for each of the families and individuals we have the privilege of helping to guide. It's not enough to have a great lesson plan on *Sukkot* with singing, life-size paper *ushpizin*, and fruit dangling from our classroom ceilings if our families are not celebrating *Sukkot* at home. We need to remember that each family is unique, so we can help our families with options.

As Jewish educators, we provide opportunities and share possibilities. While some families may connect to the idea of *Sukkot* by having a potluck lunch while other parents from the class help them build a *sukkah*, other families might choose to take a trip to the farmers' market to buy locally grown food and have an outdoor meal. As a Jewish educator, I not only want to inform my students and families about the riches our tradition has to offer, but I also want to empower them to take ownership of their Judaism.

The main challenge I see with Jewish education is time. The time it takes to help each individual student and the time it takes to help each individual family connect with their religion, their God, and their community. As educators, we need to be willing to go the extra mile to listen to our families, to take them out for coffee, to call them at home, and, at the very least, to send them e-mail to connect with them.

The other big challenge we have as educators is that of our guilt-laden religion. It is hard to do our job because people are turned off by their feelings of guilt or lack of knowledge and, therefore, they simply give up. In Judaism, there is ALWAYS someone who knows more and there is always some who does more. If we compare ourselves to someone else in terms of observance or practice, even if this is a mythical someone else and not an actual someone else, we will see that we are lacking.

In Judaism, there is the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, beautifying the *mitzvah*. It's not enough that we're doing a *mitzvah*; we could always go one more step beyond. How daunting is this to the person who isn't even doing the *mitzvah* in the first place? As educators, we have a role to play in ridding Judaism of the guilt, which is not an easy task. We need to have our families feel that they have choices about their practice and observance and that it is great when they find a path that works for them. This doesn't mean we don't encourage, promote, and cheerlead just as hard, but, rather, that we do it in a way that gets rid of the guilt.

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I have come to these views on Jewish education over a long period of time. I grew up in the Reform Movement. My family always was very involved in our synagogue. We observed *Shabbat* on a weekly basis and celebrated all of the major holidays either at synagogue or in the home. I went to a university with a small Jewish population, struggled to create community, and fought for my right to have a guitar at the services at the Hillel. Eventually, I found my way to HUC college weekend seminars and then to Hebrew Union College for graduate school. I've been a Director of Education for nine years in two separate institutions. I use my degree in marketing; my skills as a listener and empathizer; my knowledge of psychology (the family business); and my experiences as an active participant in NATE, LimmudLA, BJE-LA; and my involvement in standup and improvisational comedy to help me reach the families of my synagogue.

I think we can reach each individual family and show our families there that there are many ways to practice Judaism and many paths to God. As I heard someone once teach, Moses went up and down Mt. Sinai many times and each time he went up, he walked a different way. This teaches us that there is always more than one path to take when trying to encounter God and more than one path to take on the journey of life.

I have been heavily influenced by my experience with LimmudLA and the wide variety of Jews I have met there, from a Workman Circle Jew to a Karlin-Stoliner rebbe. I also have been strongly influenced by being a member of Ikar, a post-denomination congregation in Los Angeles. I feel that these experiences have helped me explore my Judaism and reaffirm my mission to help others explore theirs.

Avram Mandell has been the Director of Education at Leo Baeck Temple since 2004. He holds a Masters degree in Jewish Education from HUC-JIR Rhea Hirsch School of Education. Prior to his tenure at Leo Baeck Temple, he worked in San Antonio at Temple Beth-El and at the URJ's Greene Family Camp and Camp Harlam. Avram currently serves on the board of the North American Temple Educators. Additionally, he was the first recipient of the URJ "Technology Award" for creating a radio station at his synagogue, and has a chapter entitled "Funny Man," in the book Still Small Voice: Reflections On Being A Jewish Man, Michael Holzman, ed. URJ Press, 2007.

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