THE JEWISH EDUCATOR

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DREAMS,
JOURNEYS &
THE FUTURE
OF JEWISH EDUCATION

NewCAJE
Re-Imagining Jewish Education for the 21st Century
DREAMS, JOURNEYS, and the FUTURE of JEWISH EDUCATION

In NewCAJE’s inaugural online journal, we explore the dreams and aspirations, as well as the reality, of Jewish education and Jewish educators in North America from the mid-twentieth century through the present in essays offered by educators with significant tenure in the field, those who have been in the field a number of years, and novices just beginning their careers.

The key component to these visions of the Jewish future is the education of our children, reiterated many times in Torah (Deuteronomy 6 and 11) and in our daily Shema prayers.

THE JEWISH EDUCATOR, Volume 1, Issue 1

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DREAMS
WHY SHOULD OUR STUDENTS WANT TO BE JEWISH IN AMERICA TODAY?

by Tamara Beliak

Two years ago, this issue crystallized for me in the “eternal classroom,” my family’s Pesach seder. One uncle in his 50’s was talking about how much it had meant for him to travel to Poland and how much it strengthened his Judaism. His daughter, a senior in high school, was unimpressed and countered that if anti-Semitism was the main reason to be Jewish, she wanted out. As a teacher of Jewish History, this predicament is something I struggle with.

In America today, we all choose whether or not to be Jewish and we choose the form of Judaism we wish to keep. As educators, we pretend to keep this choice a secret while cheerleading and eventually begging our students to choose "us," to choose Judaism. Jewish History is one way in which schools try to strengthen Jewish identity. In the proverbial Jewish History class teachers approach the subject as an answer to the question of why be Jewish. That is the narrative of Jewish History that begins immediately prior to the Holocaust and the destruction of the European Judaism and then culminates with the miracle of Jewish statehood and a new-found safety in the land of Israel.

While this history tale does frame the way some see their Judaism, for others it is an anachronism. I grew up in an America where I have rarely experienced or seen anti-Semitism. While there have been some individuals in the last few years who have killed Jews in JCCs or in the Holocaust Memorial Museum simply for being Jews, these episodes are far and few between, and the reaction of most of my non-Jewish American friends and the media has been to condemn those actions. There is anti-Semitism in some other parts of the world, but fear of anti-Semitism is not enough of a reason to identify Jewishly. Fear of anti-Semitism is a negative emotion and does not inspire long-term allegiance to Judaism.

One might expect that the second half of the traditional identity class would succeed much better. The State of Israel exists with its avowed purpose of protecting Jews worldwide and being our refuge. Young Americans are happy that Jews of France and other countries have a place to flee, if necessary. However, in Israel, many Jews are killed simply for being Jewish. There are bus bombings and the unconventional armies of Hamas and Hezbollah out to destroy the Jewish State. Israel doesn’t look safe, if I watch the news.

Another approach might focus on the liberal democratic nature of Israel that some hope might foster pride in the State of Israel as a moral agent in a corrupt Middle East. But the media often puts Israel on the defensive. More importantly, unlike America where “Church and State” are separate, in Israel they are not. Most of our students are not Orthodox and, were they to go to Israel for an American-style Conservative or Reform Bat Mitzvah, they would soon find themselves barred from celebrating at the Western Wall, though a male would be invited to celebrate his coming-of-age at the very same location. They might become aware of other problems relating to the lack of separation of Shul and State in Israel and even discussions of “Who is a Jew” that periodically are raised in the Knesset. Some of these proposals would invalidate the Jewish identity of many of our young pupils.

We need a different approach to Jewish identity, which should not be focused on “back then” or “over there.” Maybe we should focus more on American Jewish History, for those who love to look at history. But, for most, I think focusing on the plurality of religious customs and the importance of building community should be central.
Having a community that allows people to celebrate in times of joy and heal or mourn in times of need is a longer-lasting message that can work regardless of a child’s affiliation. Holidays, which sometimes are summarized jokingly as “they tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat,” could be redefined as “a community that celebrates together and wrestles with issues together prevails”. “Choosing His Religion,” an article by Erin Blakely about choosing a religion for her child born in an interfaith marriage, cemented my belief in needing an alternative identity-building method. That identity must focus on the importance of consistently bringing the Jewish community together for celebration. Blakely describes how an interfaith couple, neither of whom were close to their own tradition as an adult, chose the religion for their child based on whose central memories of childhood had more of a culturally religious bent. The Jewish faith did not “win” in that family.

In order to help families choose Judaism, I would focus on family education. As a day school educator, family education means inviting parents to programs where they can learn some of the same texts that their children are studying. It also means creating classroom celebrations for the whole family that are joyous and inspiring, with lots of song, food, learning, and dance so that the programs tap into each of the children’s the five senses. Within the classroom, the teacher needs to encourage the students to care about each classmate by being a role-model, calling students when they are missing or sick, making shiva calls when a grandparent or, God forbid, parent passes on, and, of course, celebrating the achievements of the individuals and communities. A Judaism based on community, celebration, and even sometimes mourning is a Judaism that is focused on the “here and now” of a person’s life, rather than using an imperfect Israeli political system or guilt as a motivator.

I don’t have all of the answers. However, as a person at the beginning of my career in Jewish education, I feel I have some good, basic questions and a kernel to help some people “choose Judaism” out of pride not pain.

Endnotes:

Tamara Beliak is a second generation Jewish educator originally from Los Angeles. She has been teaching in middle school in non-denominational and Conservative Jewish day schools in the NY area for the last eight years. She is also ABD in the Azrieli Graduate School of Education at Yeshiva University. tbeliak@yahoo.com
**JUDAISM AS A SPIRITUAL PATH**

by Zvi Bellin

We were 40 GLBTQ Jews gathered together for an alternative Shabbat morning prayer service. As co-facilitator of the service, I was faced with a significant issue. The Torah scroll that had been reserved for our group was torn, and thus was considered pasul (unfit for ritual use). My co-leader and I discussed several viable options to proceed with the Torah service and decided that we could use the "broken" Torah as a focal point for a healing service that we offered before we read from a Chumash (Torah text book).

The community gathered around the marred scroll, wrapped in its shroud and tied with a ribbon as a sign of its ill condition. We placed our hands on the scroll and on each other. I offered the intention that just as we are in need of healing, the Torah also can be in need of healing. Perhaps the Divine, too, needs healing through us. I shared one final thought before we began a relevant chant. There are parts of us that become broken because of the Torah and healing is needed around these as well.

Judaism only became meaningful to me when I was able to see it as a spiritual path. I was raised on a Jewish foundation of rules that my family did not follow and so its relevance was unidentifiable. While in college, I sought a way to understand this complex reality with all of its joys and difficulties. I decided that before I looked into Buddhism or Taoism, whose practice of meditation really interested me, I would give my core religion one more authentic try. With the help of a spectrum of Jewish teachers, I learned that Judaism is a sustainable practice of moment-to-moment awareness cultivation and a ceaseless primer for inner growth. Though I was born Jewish, I had to choose Judaism as my religious and spiritual path.

These two personal narratives reflect my stance and interests around the progress of Jewish education today. The two major points that I would like to emphasize are as follows:

1. Jewish education should be made relevant to people’s lives by leaning into the struggle and challenges of integrating tradition with modern life.
2. Jewish education should be coupled with practice for more joyous and balanced living.

Torah can heal us and hurt us. Both of these dynamics need to be acknowledged, especially for those of us who sometimes feel like outsiders. To struggle with Torah, or as Rabbi Arthur Waskow often states, “to be a God wrestler,” is a process that claims the relationship that one’s personal story is a direct extension of Biblical and Rabbinic literature. Through my research into personal meaning, I have come to understand that in order for something to be seen as meaningful, it must reflect our being back to us. In other words, a worldly encounter is deemed meaningful when it is taken as a reminder that one exists. The meaningful experience allows us to shout “Hineni! Here I am!” When we allow people to explore the pain that is bound up in Torah, their stories become infused into the text and, in turn, the text remains a living relevant document.

Judaism is a complete system with amazing practices for preparing us to deal with life’s joys and sorrows. Daily prayer and meditation, blessings for food, and visiting the ill and bereaved allow one access to stay in touch with the world that is going around him or her. From personal experience and research literature, I have learned that spiritual and religious practice is associated with increased feelings of acceptance, gratitude, and mental well-being.
You are encouraged to share this article with colleagues. We ask only that you let people know that this article originally appeared in NewCAJE’s inaugural online Jewish Educator. Other articles on this topic may be found on the NewCAJE website, www.newcaje.org.

Though there is a concept that one should not learn Torah for one’s own benefit (the highest form of Torah study is lishma – for its own sake), I advocate for making Judaism work for you, especially for the purposes of holistic (body-heart-mind-spirit) well-being. Thus, Jewish educators also can be seen as transmitters of valuable tools and practices that can help their students cope with struggles and challenges, and celebrate their joys and accomplishment.

My dream for being a Jewish educator is to ground the intellectual pursuit of study in the process of helping people live more authentic and supported lives. There is so much to learn from the breadth of Torah, which goes all the way from the stories of Adam and Eve to the hostage situation of Gilad Shalit.

We can learn by entering into the ways in which we are welcomed by and pushed away from the living text of our tradition. We can learn by allowing Jewish education to connect us to ourselves, our communities, and our ever-changing understandings of the Divine.

Zvi Bellin, Ph.D. recently joined Moishe House as the Director of Jewish Education. A transplant from the Washington, D.C. area to Berkeley, CA, Zvi comes with a mixed background in Jewish education, psycho-spiritual counseling and guidance, and retreat and community facilitation. He has learned Torah at both Israel and U.S. based institutions including Darchei Noam, Simchat Shlomo, and Elat Chayyim. Zvi earned a Ph.D. in Pastoral Counseling and an M.A. in Counseling and Guidance. He is a Registered Yoga Teacher with the Yoga Alliance. He has worked as a therapist in a number of mental health settings, and has interned as a Psychiatric Chaplain. Zvi also works for Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture and Spirituality. His website is www.meaningthroughbeing.com.  
zvi@moishehouse.org
THE BEATING HEART OF JEWISH EDUCATION

by Heidi Rabinowitz Estrin

If you are lucky, your institution has its own library. I don’t mean a bookshelf in a corner, filled with random donated volumes. I mean a full-service circulating library, staffed by a librarian who supports your curriculum. That is my wish for you — that you have access to a library like the one I am privileged to run at Congregation B’nai Israel in Boca Raton.

My journey to becoming a Jewish educator began in the public library. After graduating from the University of Pittsburgh with a Master’s of Library Science, I threw myself enthusiastically into the role of Youth Services Librarian. I worked in an enormous regional library so new that it wasn’t even open yet when they hired me (I helped stock the shelves) and in a tiny neighborhood library planning its centennial celebration (I got us an Andrew Carnegie re-enactor grant). But I found my real home when I became the school librarian in a Reform synagogue, serving the children of the preschool and supplemental religious school.

I’m not a classroom teacher, but boy, do I teach. I teach letter and pattern recognition, story structure, and all those other pre-reading skills so important in the preschool years. I teach the little ones and the big ones about Jewish concepts, traditions, and holidays, at whatever level they can handle. I introduce stories and songs that sneak learning into children’s minds while they are having fun. Perhaps most importantly, I help the students enjoy their time at school, planting that very Jewish seed of Talmud Torah, love of learning.

There is a problem in the field of Jewish education that may not be visible to you, but, to me, it’s a tremendous, glaring obstacle. That problem is a general lack of understanding about the important role that libraries, and, more importantly, librarians themselves can and should play in Jewish education.

What can a good librarian do for your school? By offering a great mix of story times, lessons, books, music, videos, and even online activities, your librarian will:

- Create excitement about learning among your students.
- Reinforce the curriculum being taught in the classroom.
- Go beyond the curriculum with extension activities and pleasure reading.

Study after study shows that schools with well-developed library programs average higher reading scores among their students. Common sense tells us that children who have fun reading will love reading; children who love reading will love learning; and children who love learning will become successful, well-rounded, upstanding members of the Jewish community.

My goal in Jewish education is the same as the goal of this essay: to help people remember why they love libraries (because after all, who doesn’t love libraries?) and to get our communities excited about using and supporting their own libraries. To accomplish this goal, I’ve gone beyond the four walls of my own library, creating a podcast (The Book of Life) about Jewish reading and culture, blogging with our preschoolers during computer lab time, getting involved with the Association of Jewish Libraries and their Sydney Taylor Book Award for Jewish children’s literature and also with the PJ Library program that offers free books to Jewish families.

All of these projects have the same message at their heart. Read, read, mein kind. Use your
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library. Rely on your librarian. For we are the People of the Book, and the library is the beating heart of our very Jewish love of learning.

Heidi Rabinowitz Estrin is the Library Director and Computer Specialist at Congregation B’nai Israel of Boca Raton and the Vice President/President Elect of the Association of Jewish Libraries. She hosts The Book of Life podcast at www.bookoflifepodcast.com. heidi@cbiboca.org
A TOUCH OF LOVE IN THE CURRICULUM

by Celeste Kessler

Middle grades were my favorites when teaching Sunday School teaching. One cold, cloudy day (in California, we have those on occasion, in February), it was nearing noon, the end of sessions on Valentine's Day, and a shy, sweet little girl surreptitiously handed me a greeting card.

"Here," she said, "this is for you." Something told me not to open it publicly, but as the children were heading out the door with great zeal, I did glance at it quickly. It was a Valentine greeting. Paula then looked at my expression, probably wondering how I’d react to this non-Jewish symbol. I didn’t have to think long, but said, “Thank you, so much.”

We had been studying Jewish religious symbols earlier in the year and we both knew that a valentine was not appropriate in a Temple building. But Paula’s sweet face was pleased at my response. "It's OK to share something that has a happy, sincere feeling to it," I said. She skipped along to go to her carpool, looked back at me, and waved.

Once in a while we have to allow a touch of love in our curriculum. I thought and never forgot that greeting. It was the only valentine I ever got in 20 years of teaching in a Sunday School.

Celeste Kessler holds a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Illinois and attended Chicago Teachers College for one year. She joined the staff of Temple Emanuel in Grand Rapids, MI, after enrolling her children in the supplemental school and noting the need for more teachers. She followed her grown sons and their families to California, and taught for 20 years at Temple Beth El in Salinas, where she later served as the Administrator of the Sunday School. She has attended Jewish educational workshops and regional meetings, but feels the best learning experience was at CAJE. celestekessler@yahoo.com
WORKING COLLABORATIVELY TO PROVIDE JEWISH IDENTITY

by Helene Kornsgold

From the time I was five years old through graduate school, I have always studied at a Jewish school. Living life as a Jew was just what I did. I studied about Judaism at school and practiced Judaism at home. I grew up with a love of and deep appreciation for Judaism and what it meant to be a Jew. It was not until I was older that I realized others did not live the same way as I did. Now I know better!

Becoming a Jewish educator was not the original path I chose to pursue on a professional level. As a college student, I always enjoyed tutoring students for their B’nai Mitzvah, but never considered this a career. I lived a Jewish life and I did not have any desire to work as a professional Jew. After a few years of exploring different professional fields of interest, it became clear to me that I did want to be a professional Jew.

Working occupies a large amount of a person’s time and, therefore, one needs to enjoy the work he or she engages in on a daily basis (at least to some degree). Regardless of the type of work I pursued, somehow, I always came back to working in the Jewish world. After realizing I did want to work in this sphere, my next big decision was to decide where I wanted to work and in what capacity.

At first, this was a difficult question to answer. However, the more I was exposed to different work options, the clearer it became to me I wanted to focus on Jewish education. As a Jewish educator, there are two areas in which I am interested in and wish to focus as I drive forward my career: I want both children and adults to enjoy learning about Judaism.

I want them to yearn for learning more about their heritage and to experience the joys that living a Jewish life adds to one’s life. Judaism is full of meaningful rituals that can further add to the richness of one’s life. My experience as a teacher has confirmed my innate feeling that a one-to-one relationship is the best way to reach individuals. Often this connection fosters an openness to learning new things, and, in turn, people become more curious about Judaism. The more people learn, the more they develop an increased desire to add more meaning to life.

I have prepared many students for their B’nai Mitzvah and have witnessed first-hand positive changes in their attitude toward this day. At first they dread the time and effort necessary to prepare for the big day. Over time, they became extremely excited waiting for the day to approach. I don’t mean to flatter myself by any means, but being involved in their preparation has further solidified my opinion that nothing beats a personal and meaningful relationship between people.

I have seen parents become more interested in and excited by the day because they have a greater understanding of the meaning and significance of becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. I am saddened when I see a family who does not understand nor care about the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience. It is a missed opportunity! It is another child who might have been turned onto Judaism, who, instead, continues to detest Religious School and counts down to the last day he/she is required to attend.

As an educator, I want to work with colleagues to create different ways to reach as many people as possible. We need to create programs and schools that students want to attend and that families actually believe can provide people with a strong Jewish identity. None of us can do this alone!
We need to work with each other. We need to share our experiences, our ideas, our work, our lesson plans, etc.… with one another. We cannot continue to keep our great programs a secret so others cannot replicate our work.

This type of hoarding reminds me of a person who will not share recipes with other people. If someone compliments you and wants to make the same recipe as you, shouldn’t you be flattered? Are we in such need of accolades that we fear others being able to replicate our baking or teaching the same successful lessons as we taught? If so, then there is no possibility of forming a solid group of Jewish educators who work together for the greater good of Jewish education and in turn, the Jewish people.

We have a big challenge ahead of us! It is a challenge I believe is worth the effort. The potential outcomes will be incredible. Not working together to face these challenges is unthinkable. Not doing so suggests a lack of concern regarding the future of the Jewish people. If one truly cares, then one will work collaboratively with other like-minded people to step up to the plate and re define the current state of Jewish education. Together we can make it happen!!! Let’s not waste anymore time simply re-inventing the wheel.

Rabbi Helene Kornsgold grew up in Philadelphia. For her undergraduate studies she attended the double degree program between Barnard College and The Jewish Theological Seminary. After a few years out in the working world, she returned to study at JTS. In 2006 she received Rabbinic Ordination and a Master's in Jewish Education. Rabbi Kornsgold served as the rabbi-in-residence at The Rabbi Jacob Pressman Academy in Los Angeles for three years. Currently, she is the Religious School Principal at Temple Ramat Zion in Northridge, CA. She is also the rabbinic field worker for KOACH, Conservative Judaism's College Outreach Program. She works with college-age students and aims to provide them with the opportunity to maintain and develop connections to Conservative Judaism.

Rabbi Kornsgold lives in Los Angeles where she is active in a number of organizations. She is a member of Temple Beth Am, PicoEgal, and IKAR. She is involved in planning programs for LimmudLA and has also taught at the annual conference for the past two years. Rabbi Kornsgold is also a member of The Board of Rabbis of Southern California, The Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, and the Jewish Educator’s Assembly.

rabbikornsgold@gmail.com
WHAT JEWISH EDUCATION OUGHT TO BE

by Chaya Oliver

I have been working within the realm of Jewish education for the past eleven years. I started out as a substitute teacher and a teacher’s aide. I have taught students in every grade from Kindergarten through 12. I even developed curriculum for a community-wide high school program. Nevertheless, it wasn’t until this past year that I truly began to see myself as a professional Jewish educator. Up until last year, working in Jewish education was mostly a way to make a bit of extra money to help get me through school – first, a four year undergraduate degree, and then five years of rabbinical school.

So what changed? I was ordained and I started applying for full-time rabbinic positions. As I went through the job search process, I realized that the jobs that I was most passionate about – the ones that I could really see myself succeeding in – all were rabbi/educator positions. All of those positions, however, were ultimately filled by rabbinical candidates with Masters in Education. So, there I was, a freshly minted rabbi without a job.

I sat back and thought about the next step in my journey. I reached the conclusion that if I really wanted to be a Jewish educator – if I wanted to do justice to my future students, teachers, and community members — I should probably stay in school for another year (the thought of which, after nine years of post-high school education, made me shudder) and get my MAEd.

Looking back on this past year, all I can say is that choosing to stay in school to get my MAEd was one of the best decisions of my life. Yes, I did get offered a full-time position as a Director of Education. And I realize now how unprepared I was to take on such a position before I earned my MAEd. I knew next to nothing about administration, teacher observation, curriculum development, navigating boards and committees — the list just goes on and on.

Also, throughout my MAEd courses I began to explore the many challenges facing Jewish education in North America today. By acknowledging and grappling with these challenges, I began to develop my own vision of what Jewish education ought to be.

1. **Jewish Learning Should Be Lifelong**— and the Jewish community should help make it so. Jewish education should be more about pathways, less about individual programs. Jewish educators know the experiences that should pave this pathway — from a Jewishly-rich early childhood education to ongoing adult Jewish learning. We even know quite well how to deliver many of these experiences. But we don’t make it easy to take this journey. We fragment and compartmentalize Jewish education instead of weaving and integrating it. Institutions hoard learners or abandon them, rather than “handing them off” to others when they are ready for their journey’s next stage.

So, it’s time for a Copernican shift that will put the consumer of Jewish learning at the center. Every educational institution should see itself not only as a provider, but also as a steward, responsible not just for teaching, but also for guiding its learners along the path of their journey.

2. **Jewish Education Should Be About Things That Really Matter.** Decades ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel warned against undermining the impact of Jewish education by trivializing its content and message. The Jewish education we offer should be both relevant and profound. It should focus on what contemporary curriculum specialists call “big ideas of enduring value” — the core understandings (which Judaism has in abundance) that give shape and meaning to the details through which they are expressed.
Jewish education certainly should teach facts and skills. But its ultimate aim should be less the transmission of knowledge than the transformation of lives. As Franz Rosenzweig advised, it will begin with the learner, lead her into Torah, and then back out into life. It will begin with the learner's real needs, real situation, real questions. It will be "personal" in the fullest sense: addressing individuals in their uniqueness and engaging the whole person, not merely some portion labeled "Jewish."

3. Jewish Education Should Help Build Vibrant Jewish Community.

Jewish learning is in its essence a collective enterprise. So, the Jewish education I envision should be as much about building a dynamic Jewish community as it should be about mastering texts or learning traditions. It should be both experiential and consequential. Na'asah v'nishma – "we will do, and we will attend" -- with the "doing," the "attending," and the "we" all inextricably intertwined. Jewish education should be active and engaged, inspiring and guiding Jews in their quest to be a kehillah kedoshah – a sacred community with a world-transforming mission.

Jewish education should seek out opportunities to strengthen the connections among Jews, not to divide them into smaller, self-contained enclaves. Martin Buber wrote that every true community needs a purposive center. Community is created by the radii that connect each point to that center, thereby defining a circumference that is connected as well. Our center is Torah. As we connect more deeply to it, we will connect more strongly to one another. We surely will debate what Torah demands, but we will again recognize that it is precisely this debate that defines our commonality.

Rabbi Chaya Oliver was ordained from the Ziegelr School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University and received her MAEd from the Fingerhut School of Education, also at the American Jewish University. She has held many positions within the field of Jewish education over the past eleven years, including supplemental school teacher (K-12), adult education teacher, youth group assistant, camp counselor, curriculum developer, and administrator. This year she is excited to begin her post-graduate school career as the new Director of Education at Congregation B’nai Zion in El Paso, TX.

bzeducation@gmail.com
THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING NON-PROFESSIONAL JEWISH EDUCATORS

by Miles L. Roger

The current world of Jewish education is very different from that of twenty years ago. We are no longer living in a Jewish world where the Jewish educator at our local synagogue or Federation agency is the one with the answers. No longer are we dependent on catalogs from Israel or New York to provide us with materials for our classrooms. Our ties with Israel are not to create a Jewish state, but to maintain a strong one. This is no longer your parent’s world of Jewish education.

While the world of Jewish education has changed, I do not believe that my goal as a Jewish educator is any different from the goals of my predecessors. The core of my mission as a Jewish educator is v’shinantam, teaching diligently. It is only when we teach Judaism diligently to our students that they are able to understand the rich heritage that is being given to them. However, the world that we now live in requires us to bring Judaism into our students’ daily lives. This means finding what makes the world “Jewish” wherever we can.

The world of Jewish education now needs to be relevant to both the student and the teacher. My goal of teaching Judaism diligently will not only help ensure the next generation of knowledgeable Jews, but also will create the next generation of Jewish educators. In Indianapolis, for example, there are approximately twice as many part-time Jewish educators as full-time educators in kindergarten through 12th grade programs. That means for every full-time Jewish educator, Indianapolis needs to find two people to teach on Sunday mornings. Without teachers who find Jewish education a meaningful avocation, the future of Judaism is bleak.

But we need more than just warm bodies to fulfill our classroom needs. We need part-time Jewish educators who are just as committed and knowledgeable about Judaism as their full-time counterparts. If the teacher does not have a passion for Judaism, then why should the student?

While my former students probably will not remember every detail of what I taught them about Judaism, I know they saw someone who is excited about being Jewish. They walked away with a sense of what it means to be a Jew and they can feel good about being Jewish. There always will be masterful educators to lead our educational institutions and provide wonderful resources for our classroom. Full-time Jewish educators always will be well-trained, but we need to find and engage non-professional teachers to teach the majority of our students.

My path to working in Jewish education can serve as an example of how engaging our part-time educators can benefit the world of Jewish education. I graduated from a top-ranked business school with a bachelor’s degree in organizational management and worked in the financial industry for three years. Having applied to and been denied admission to rabbinical school, I was almost positive that the business world would be my professional home. But when push came to shove, it was the few hours each week I spent in religious school classrooms that gave me the greatest joy.

Shortly before I made the transition to working in Jewish education, I was denied a promotion at my then current job. Fate was speaking to me loud and clear. Even if I ended up not thriving in the world of Jewish education, trying it out at least would answer a question that was constantly running through my mind about working in the Jewish community.
Having served as Program Director for nearly 18 months now, I realized that my two worlds are not mutually exclusive. Many of the tools I learned in business school are helpful when working in the administrative world of Jewish education. I am not a one-trick show. My skills and abilities in finance, organizational theory, and marketing are essential to ensuring that the BJE runs quality programs. Further, these skills have made it possible to complete the many tasks required of my job.

In my current role, I am not just a Jewish educator, I also am a technology coordinator, facilities manager, librarian, fundraiser, marketer, and the list can go on. (In fact, as I am writing this, I am helping create a student database utilizing the Microsoft Access skills I learned in business school.)

The skills I bring to the world of Jewish education can be seen as an example for the benefits of engaging non-professional Jewish educators in our community. Our institutions need people who understand marketing, technology, facility management, etc. These are vital roles in any organization. If we engage part-time Jewish educators and make them feel welcome in our community, they will support these necessary roles in our institutions. Just as it is important to have quality teachers in our classrooms, we need administrative staff who are equally committed to our cause.

*Miles Roger has served as Program Director for the Bureau of Jewish Education in Indianapolis, IN, since 2009. A 2005 graduate of Indiana Univ., Miles has been teaching in religious schools since 1998, focusing on Middle and High School curriculum. mroger@bjeindy.org*
THE ISRAEL CONNECTION

by Alex Schindler

Diogenes Laertius, the biographer of Greek philosophers, was in as good a place as anyone to recognize that “The foundation of any state is the education of its youth.” He was, after all, the historian of multiple traditions, one who described the achievements of Athens and of Sparta as well as the intellectual foundations undergirding them. His dictum thus should be taken to heart by we who inherit the traditions of Moses and of Maimonides, of Hezekiah and of Herzl, of Jerusalem and of Athens. Modern Israel, after all, has been described (originally by Saul Bellow) as a place that captures Jewish (and gentile) admiration for succeeding in the traditions of both Athens and Sparta.

I am a twenty-year-old undergraduate and for as long as I have cared about being Jewish, whether that has meant a religious, national, or ethnic identity, I have felt a connection to the Jewish State. As the geographic center of the Jewish faith, it serves to bind and orient to each other all who say “Next Year in Jerusalem,” whether we in fact live in Sydney, Seattle or my own Syrian-Jewish community of Brooklyn.

This connection grew into a more conscious kinship during my year of study in Israel. I began to read more, about the politics of Israel and about the tensions that exist within Israeli society and filter down to us abroad, with or without our awareness. My own religious growth led me to appreciate the enormous benefits I had received from my own teachers, in the Yeshivah of Flatbush and at Eretz HaTzvi, and I came to care more than anything else about the state of our Jewish educational system. It hit me that we who live at the intersection of past and future must ensure that our past is transmitted to our future, in keeping with generations of tradition.

I began to read more about Jewish education, in journals like Ten Da’at or on the Lookstein Center’s “Lookjed” forum. It was profoundly moving for me to understand the resources, human and economic, that go into Jewish pedagogy. It takes a village, and then some. And so I realized that reading wasn’t enough—I had to get involved.

The area in which I felt most prepared to get involved was Israel education. My passion for Israel—not just as an ideal, but also as a real place with problems to solve and real achievements in which to take pride—got me involved, at first, in hasbara on campus. But this was insufficient. Israel programming on campuses consists of one of two things, as the director of Faces of Israel (more on that later) has pointed out to me: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or falafel. There always seems to be a focus either on the uglier side of politics, which fails to capture anything about Israel’s internal vibrancy, or on the most superficial aspects of Israeli culture (if falafel can be called especially Israeli).

This troubles me. There is far more to Israel than Operation Cast Lead and pita bread. That sort of programming has a place, but does it really build lasting, meaningful connections to the Jewish State? It seems to me that learning about the social issues that confront Israelis today would go a long way toward making American Jews realize that Israel is a real place, with problems (and solutions) worth engaging and discussing. This is especially true because, sometimes, these problems impact or mirror our own, whether as Jews or as citizens of a democracy (or, more commonly, as both).

I became Program Manager of Faces of Israel last year. What began as the director’s senior project at Johns Hopkins turned into a full-blown educational program, presented at dozens upon dozens of Hillels, JCCs, synagogues, and temples across America. I, an undergraduate myself, saw the program at Hunter
College and found a new calling. The content, focusing on the nature of the Jewish State, Jewish identity and connectivity, pluralism within our community, and the clash of synagogue and State, was both compelling and relevant. I was sold.

This subject asserts its relevance every day. Just recently, we in America, turning our eyes toward Zion, saw huge ultra-Orthodox demonstrations in Jerusalem protesting an Israeli Supreme Court decision integrating Sephardic girls into a Hasidic school in Israel—a mark of the growing secular-religious divide. How does an educator contextualize that for American Jewish students? Are ultra-Orthodox Israelis racist? Is the Israeli Supreme Court meddling, wrongly, in religious affairs? Were those protestors fighting for civil rights, or against them? Was this “Brown vs. Board of Ed” or judicial activism of the most provocative sort, widening a social divide between religious and secular?

The answers to these questions or similar ones are complex and involved, requiring careful thought about the nature of a Jewish and democratic state. My goal as a new educator will be to raise awareness of these questions, with a twofold benefit. Firstly, just asking questions connects students to Israeli society, as they wrestle with the sort of political dilemmas that really have pertinence. The average Israeli will be affected by the Rabbinate’s complete control of marriage and divorce far more than any flotilla discussed in hasbara programming. Secondly, these questions cut to the core of Israeli, and sometimes Jewish, identity. Who is a Jew? Is Israel a “State of the Jews” or a “Jewish State”? What role should halakha play in a Jewish State?

The opportunity to participate in the NewCAJE conference is a tremendous one for me. To exchange ideas with seasoned (and other budding) educators, while sharing my own knowledge on a frequently overlooked topic, will mean a lot to me as I take my first steps—simultaneous with my own education—along the road to becoming a fellow educator. May I merit to contribute to the foundations of the Jewish State by educating Diaspora Jews about an issue sometimes hidden from their sight.

Alex Schindler is an undergraduate at Hunter College (class of ’12) and an alumnus of the Yeshivah of Flatbush and Yeshiva Eretz HaTzvi in Jerusalem. He is the Program Manager of Faces of Israel, an educational program dealing with matters of religion and state in the State of Israel.

alex@facesthemovie.com
QUEERING JUDAISM

by Joanna Ware

My parents joined a synagogue when I was eight years old, at my behest. When I began expressing a need for spiritual and religious community, they attempted to channel my desires in the direction of religious communities more palatable to my father’s anti-authoritarian, agnostic, fundamentally scientific worldview. Though halachically Jewish, I also am the child of two agnostic scientists from different faith backgrounds, which has meant a complicated relationship with religion in my family. We sat in on Quaker meetings, attended Unitarian Services, even toured the meditation grounds of the Self Realization Fellowship, but none of them quite grabbed my interest. When we left erev Shabbat services at the local synagogue, though, something had stuck in my head and my gut, and we joined the next week.

It has taken me years to understand why the Jewish community felt so right, as a child, and I don’t know that I will ever have that answer in full, but I have remained deeply connected to Judaism because of one important Jewish value. Judaism not only offers space for, but also is dependent upon and informed by centuries of willingness to engage, challenge, trouble, and wrestle with our traditions, values, teachings, and practices. It is this expectation of engagement, rather than tacit acceptance, that most excites me about Jewish education. It is also within that invitation for engagement that I see a valuable space for queering the text.

“To queer,” as a verb, means more than introducing the voices of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer Jews to the dialogue. A queer lens troubles and challenges the basic assumptions of our traditions -- not in an effort to discredit or dismiss, but in the steps of Jacob, in a spirit of rising to the challenge and wrestling with that which matters most. Queering Judaism means listening to the insights and perspectives informed by a view from the margins, underbelly, and sidelines of Jewish community. It means taking a cue from Isaiah, and being willing to name the possibility and vision of redemption, even when unpopular or atypical. Judaism, through a queer lens, is about the recognition that insight, depth, and brilliance often come from unexpected places, and that our discourse, texts, traditions, and learning are strengthened by a diversity of voices, perspectives, and positions in dialogue together.

I remain firmly convinced that Judaism has space within it for the multitude of voices and interpretations in our communities. But it is incumbent upon Jewish educators to create that space when it is not self-evident. Transgender or gender-variant Jews may believe that there is no space for them within a Jewish community of differentiated and demarcated roles for men and women. Until, perhaps, a Jewish educator shares with them the tractate of Talmud identifying Abraham and Sarah as tumtumim, of indeterminate gender. That queering of the story of the progenitors of the Jewish people expands and challenges the straight, typically-gendered picture often painted of the Jewish community. If we can remember that Abraham’s chosenness is in direct correlation with his difference, that Avram Ha-ivri can mean Abraham the Hebrew, or Abraham who crossed over, Abraham who is different, and take note of the celebration of his difference, we can create space for difference in our communities today.

In order to ensure that Jews of every stripe – gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, gender variant and trans, of color, differently-abled, Sephardic and Mizrahi, of interfaith families, adopted, by choice, and others with differences that set them apart from the norm – are not only welcomed, but also celebrated as integral to the strength of our communities, Jewish educators must center the
perspectives and textual interpretations from the margins. We must queer our Judaism, for the sake of its strength, vibrancy, and lasting relevance.

Joanna Ware graduated from Antioch College in 2008 with a BA in Gender Studies, Middle East Studies, and Politics. Her previous experience includes education policy advocacy, Jewish youth work, anti-violence and anti-sexism education, and natural building. As Keshet’s Lead Organizer and Training Coordinator, Joanna brings a deep commitment to intentional community creation, building and maintaining safe, healthy, accessible spaces for those diverse communities, and the Jewish obligation to pursue justice.

joanna@keshetonline.org
FINDING THE DIVINE

by Leah Wolff-Pellingra

Every person finds the Divine in his or her own way. Each of us must struggle and strive to find our path. Truly, we are Israel: the ones who wrestle with God.

As a cantorial soloist and educator, it is my privilege and joy to share my path with others. I invite my students to question and to seek answers by showing them that I do the same. I work to give them tools that they can use throughout their lives. Their journeys to their own relationships with God do not end when they leave our schools. They will do as we do, finding their own paths throughout their lives. When we create joyful Jewish memories, when we give our students permission to question and to “wrestle” while they are young. We give them the strength to find their own way.

I have been teaching in Religious Schools for 16 years. That is to say, I began when I was 13 years old. I was my father’s aide in his music classroom. He had been the songleader for CNYFTY (Central New York Federation of Temple Youth), and those songs became the music of my childhood. I attended Eisner Camp and Kutz Camp, and those songs became the music of my heart. At the age of 16, I began to teach the music class on my own and continued to do so through my college years. I attended the University at Albany, led the Reform minyan on campus during my time there, and graduated with a degree in Vocal Performance and Jewish Studies.

I now belong to, sing at, and teach in the congregation where both my father and grandmother served as music teachers, where both my parents and my husband and I were married, and where my daughters were named: Congregation Gates of Heaven in Schenectady, NY. My grandparents are refugees from the Shoah, and it is a powerful thing to be raising our daughters in a place where their family has roots. Additionally, I work as a cantorial soloist at B’nai Sholom Reform Congregation in Albany, NY, and I serve as High Holy Day Cantorial Associate and Repertoire Consultant at Congregation Berith Sholom in Troy, NY. I live the pieced-together working life of a Jewish professional and I am proud to be doing what I love.

It is unfortunate that more young parents with young children are not involved in synagogue life. Too often, entry into synagogue life is based entirely on entry of a family’s children into Religious School. The financial strain of membership, and the time restrictions involved in being the parents of small children, put participation in a congregation beyond the reach of many. At Congregation Gates of Heaven, we are working to build programming that will bring young families into our congregation. Our Bonim L’Atid leadership program integrates young families into the synagogue by building community and social ties, while instilling the idea of synagogue affiliation as a vital part of Jewish life. Our weekly Bagels and Blocks playgroup has grown into a Women’s Torah study. We look at the weekly parasha from a mother’s perspective, while our preschoolers wreak havoc and our smallest ones nurse and rest in our arms.

As we begin this NewCAJE conference, I am not yet 30 years old. I am at the beginning of my own path into Judaism and connection to the Divine, and I am enjoying the journey. It is my hope to somehow make a difference in my small corner of the world. I believe that the future of Jewish education begins when we give our students permission to seek their own answers. We are Am Yisrael, and, as a people, it’s our duty and our privilege to wrestle with the Divine. Thank you for the opportunity to come and learn with you.
Leah Wolff-Pellingra is a cantorial soloist and teacher, it is has been her privilege and joy to share this path with others. Leah has been teaching in religious schools for 16 years. She has spent the last eight serving as Cantorial Soloist, Choir Director, and teacher of Hebrew, Music and school-wide tefillah at Cong. Gates of Heaven in Schenectady, NY. She also serves as High Holy Day Cantorial Associate and Repertoire Consultant at Cong. Berith Sholom in Troy, NY, and as a Cantorial Soloist at B'nai Sholom Reform Cong. in Albany, NY. She is the recipient of the Douglas Malcolm Hastings Award for Musical Excellence from the University at Albany, from which she holds a degree in Vocal Performance and Judaic Studies.

l.wolff.pellingra@gmail.com
IMPACTING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH MUSIC

by Emily Aronoff

I want to teach, create, and share music that is developmentally appropriate and accessible for young children, while remaining educational and enjoyable for their families.

I believe wholeheartedly in the power of informal education and utilize music as my tool of choice. I love to work with young children and their families because I believe that creating terrific experiences for families in these formative years lays a foundation for a lifelong love of Jewish learning. These positive associations with Judaism can be powerful tool in our efforts to retain students in our schools and youth programs.

I grew up in at URJ synagogue Temple Kol Emeth in Marietta, GA; spent my early summers at URJ Camp Coleman in Cleveland, GA; and my high school years involved in NFTY and at URJ Kutz Academy. Each of these experiences provided memories of enjoying not only Judaism and learning, but also social and creative experiences. Music was a common denominator in each of these experiences.

I began to learn how to play guitar and songlead at age 14, and had a paying gig by 15. I was a NFTY songleader and realized quickly that leading my peers in music was a skill that I enjoyed, found meaningful, and excelled in. At a very young age, I knew that I wanted my career to be in Jewish music education. My journey to become the Jewish educator I am today has been incredibly well supported by teachers, mentors, clergy, and co-workers. I have dedicated myself academically, spiritually, personally, professionally, and musically to Judaism.

I dreamed of being a “Jewish Rock Star,” but as I grew up, went to school, and started working, I realized that I did not need the “Rock Star” part of the title of which I initially dreamed. I earned a B.A. in Jewish Studies and I am currently pursuing a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction with a Specialization in Music.

Once I began working with a variety of communities and age groups, I realized that my talent and passion is specific to young children and their families. By focusing on working with Early Childhood programs, I not only enjoy my work immensely every day, but I also am able to provide a service for communities that is difficult for many to find. I have been working at the JCC of the Greater Palm Beaches for four years as a Music Educator and also work at four local temples regularly, teaching early childhood classes, coordinating special programs for Jewish Holy Days, and leading the music for Tot Shabbat and tefillah programs for children. I recently have written and recorded an album of Shabbat music for young children and their families and look forward to its release so that I can share my music with a larger Jewish community.

The biggest struggle I encounter in my field is simply a lack of talented, passionate people who choose to make music education a career priority. I constantly seek out professionals who share my work, I go to HavaNashira (the annual songleading and music workshop of OSRUI & URJ), participate in online networking, and consciously seek out all of the Jewish early childhood music that I can find. There are not that many individuals who are pursuing the same career, and I can’t imagine why. There are certainly excellent, talented people focusing their work on Jewish music for young children -- but not nearly enough to touch all of the early childhood programs that need them.

I also find it concerning that of the terrific Jewish music educators I know, the vast majority of them are at least 20 years my senior. It is an honor to learn from and work with them, but I wonder what that will mean 30 years from now, when those educators are no longer working.
My goal morphed from being a Jewish Rock Star to becoming a Jewish educator able to make an impact on my community by teaching, learning, and celebrating Judaism with music. Today, my mission is to educate and empower children and their families through music, and I feel honored that I am able to accomplish this in my daily work.

Emily Rose Aronoff has been singing and celebrating her entire life. Emily was first introduced to HavaNashira, the Jewish Musician’s Conference held at URJ camp OSRUI every year, in 2003, which has had a profound influence on Emily’s career. She is currently pursuing a Masters Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Music. Emily has been working and gigging as a Jewish musician for 10 years. Her debut album is due out in late fall 2010, and she is incredibly excited to share her music with the world. She lives in Delray Beach, FL with her sweet, adorable pitbull, Mocha.

emilyrosearonoff@gmail.com
EXTENDING COMMUNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

by Mara Berde

"Why would a Jewish educator spend a year in Rwanda? Are there Jews in Rwanda?" This was a common response when I announced that I’d be spending a year volunteering in Rwanda after completing my Master’s degree in Jewish Education. While there are no Jewish Rwandans, the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village is modeled after youth villages in Israel – another country that faced an orphan problem after the Jewish people were ravaged by genocide – and imbues its youth with the values of community, respect, integrity, learning, and support of one another.

I find the connection between Rwandans and the Jewish people compelling; both groups survived genocide and have worked to rebuild their lives, their country, and their culture. This connection is one of the main reasons why I feel a responsibility to help repair Rwanda by volunteering at Agahozo-Shalom. However, as I applied to serve as a volunteer in the Jewish Service Corps of the JDC, I struggled with the decision between volunteering in a Jewish community abroad and coming to Rwanda. Both my background and my future lie in Jewish education and communal service, and I wondered if my skills could be put to use in Rwanda, or if they would be put to better use in a Jewish community?

As I weighed my different options, I thought about the Jewish values I am most committed to transmitting to others and where I could most successfully accomplish that. The values at the top of my list are Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), Kehillah (community), Achrayut (responsibility), and Dugma Ishit (role modeling). These are the core values that inform my life as a Jew, and, regardless of where I was placed as a Jewish Service Corps volunteer, I wanted to be able to live in a place where these values are important. The Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village turned out to be perfect; even in a country where there are no Jews, these values exist. I witness them each day at the village – as the students engage in Tikkun Olam, help each other with homework, play sports, and share about their days during Family Time.

At Agahozo-Shalom, we are not just a community, but also a family; the teens live in families of 16 and have a House Mother and Counselor who stay with them during their four years in the village. The values that I strive to educate about in the Jewish community – at camps, synagogues, and in youth groups – are the reality in Rwanda at Agahozo-Shalom. Even though the population served is not Jewish, the work we are doing certainly is.

Throughout my Jewish education, I was taught numerous times about the idea of kol yisrael arevim ze l’zeh – all of Israel is responsible for one another (Talmud Bavli, Shavuot 39a). To me, this is a statement of Jewish Peoplehood, meaning that Jews worldwide have not only the responsibility of caring for one another, (and not just in times of crisis), but also of providing one another with ongoing support in working towards creating a global Jewish community, regardless of cultural or denominational affiliation. It means that, as a Jewish educator, I strive to educate others about the power of embracing diversity inside and outside of our communities and that this idea should expand beyond our small community to the worldwide Jewish community.

However, I also struggle with this passage of Talmud because I believe that the notions of community and responsibility can (and should) extend beyond the Jewish people. We have a responsibility – as human beings – to care for people outside the Jewish community, to provide the same support for any people in need as we would for any group of Jews in need.
BRIDGING TWO WORLDS

The Jewish Service Corps of the JDC and the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village have afforded me the opportunity to bridge the worlds of serving a non-sectarian community and remaining immersed in a Jewish community. There are 10 Jewish Service Corps volunteers serving in Rwanda – enough to create an egalitarian minyan, daven, and say Kaddish together. We gather to welcome the Shabbat each week and eat challah that we’ve baked earlier in the day. Additionally, we’re part of a network of 10 other Jewish Service Corps volunteers who are serving in Jewish communities worldwide, from Izmir, Turkey, to Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, to Minsk, Belarus. On a recent conference call, we discussed our personal Jewish identities and Jewish practice, grappling with questions such as how to maintain your Jewish identity while working to facilitate meaningful Jewish experiences for others. Or, for those of us in Rwanda, how to maintain your desired Jewish practice and Jewish identity while working in a non-sectarian environment. We shared our thoughts about how the experience of volunteering abroad has impacted us and engaged in thought-provoking conversations about our Jewish identities and practices.

The opportunity to engage in professional development and share our personal Jewish journeys with the other Jewish Service Corps fellows has been invaluable to me. It is something that I will refer back to when I return to the U.S. and continue working within the Jewish community. This reflection on our Jewish lives is something that is crucial for all Jewish educators to take part in; so often, we focus on our learners and enabling them to find meaning in Jewish experiences while forgetting about our own needs.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to serve at Agahozo-Shalom as a Jewish Service Corps volunteer. This year of service has not been a “year off,” but, rather, a year where I gained skills and experience that will better prepare me for my future working in the Jewish community. Each and every day in Rwanda I learn something new – techniques to help students with English, tidbits about Rwandan culture, or tools for working with different people. This year also has inspired me and reinforced my commitment to working as a Jewish educator; the same Jewish values that I was raised on are values that exist in the Rwanda and around the world. I look forward to the opportunity to share these values and my experience in Rwanda with the Jewish communities that I will serve in the future.

Mara Berde graduated from the Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at JTS in May 2009 and will be serving in Rwanda until December 2010. You can follow her at http://freeberde.wordpress.com. For more information about the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village, visit: www.agahozo-shalom.org. Mara.berde@gmail.com
Tell what you were doing at 10:00 this morning. I dreaded ice-breakers in general, but this one in particular was a nightmare. It was bad enough that at every Friday night Shabbat dinner the first line of conversation with anyone — whether someone new or a regular in the havurah — would be about our professions. Weren’t we supposed to refrain from work on Shabbat? Nonetheless, we went around in a circle, each sharing a glimpse into his or her life. After several people mentioned their patients or promotions, their successful legal cases or loving family, it was my turn. At 10:00 that morning, I had sold a $35,000 diamond ring at Tiffany & Co. I really wanted to make up something like I was working with homeless families on a mural for the public library or I was signing a contract to be a tap dancer for a South American cruise company. But, if I had lied, I may not have become a Jewish educator.

After the “oohs” and “ahhs” of Tiffany talk, the next woman shared that she had witnessed a beautiful Torah dedication earlier that morning — a new congregation was receiving its first sefer Torah. Someone asked her, “How much does a Torah cost?” “I think it was $35,000,” she replied. That number hit me in the gut. On the same day, at the same time, in the same city, for the same amount — one person decided to spend his money on a ring and another invested in the past, present, and future of the Jewish people. I realized at that moment that if I wanted to express myself authentically, then I needed to do something with my life that was worth far more than all the rubies in the world. But what profession would I be suited for that would have such a value? Searching for an answer to this $35,000 question, I came across the JESNA website (Jewish Educational Services of North America). With a click on the door icon for DeLeT: Day school Leadership through Teaching, I went from a brilliant Tiffany showroom to a different kind of light-filled room — a classroom of sparkling children.

One morning — perhaps it was 10:00 — I was encouraging a student to read a certain book before seeing a version of it in an upcoming movie. He shrugged and apologized, “Sorry, if I read the book, it just ruins the movie for me.” This exemplifies a major challenge I carry as a Jewish educator. How do I make being Jewish engaging and valuable in a time when there are so many distractions?

To borrow a phrase from Socrates, my job now is not to turn over sparkling merchandise, but to “turn the soul” of a child. Movies can be transformational. There is no doubt about that. And gemstones are exquisite products of humankind’s ability to bring forth beauty from nature. However, the glitz and glamour of our society holds nothing to the stunning complexity of our tradition. I don’t want to stop a child from seeing the movie version of a book, but I can encourage interaction with the written text, if not before, then at least after. In fact, I might propose that our lives are the movie versions of the Torah. Ideally, we are constantly going back and forth between engaging the written text and watching how these stories are played out in our lives. This is what I hope to do with children.

In parashat Pinchas, the transferring of authority from Moses to Joshua with his two hands invites us to ask ourselves this question: How do we use the hands we were given in this world? Now, there’s a better question for an ice-breaker.
Sapphira Fein walked through the teaching door during the DeLeT pilot year and has been an educator at Pressman Academy in Los Angeles since 2002. After several years as a Grade 4 General Studies teacher, she became the Librarian/Literacy Specialist and now teaches and learns with students in Pre-K through Grade 8. Sapphira has a bachelor’s degree in Religion from Vassar College and a Master’s degree in Education from American Jewish University. When she’s not teaching, she is playing the violin or running the streets of Santa Monica with her husband, author Seth Edgardo.

sapphiraf@aol.com
MY LIFE AS A TEACHER - YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

by Yehudis Fishman

Like the famous role in Mr. Holland’s Opus, teaching for me was often an afterthought. On one hand, living as a welfare child in the slums of Roxbury, the Judaic teachers at Maimonides School in Boston during the 40’s and 50’s were both my heroes and my saviors from an otherwise humdrum life. But so were the literary and mythic figures that captured my imagination in classic literature. So, as my graduation drew near, being a teacher was too ordinary a profession for a dreamy, somewhat introverted Jewish girl. But, as the saying goes, “A mench tracht un Gott lacht,” or its contemporary counterpart, “Life happens when you’re making other plans.”

As a newlywed all of eighteen years old, I found myself in the role of a teacher’s assistant, playing with blocks long after my kindergarten class went on to other activities. From there, it was a short leap to teaching Mishlei, the Book of Proverbs, to a class of girls about a year younger than I was at the time. Much to my own surprise, I succeeded fairly well and was labeled a teacher long before I made a willing choice to adopt that profession.

What kept me there for almost half a century was the realization that I had a long-lasting impact on children -- and later adults -- that continued over a lifetime, and, in some cases, from my theological vantage point, even beyond.

A few examples. I once taught a latchkey boy who was much older than the other children in my favorite class, the second grade. At first, he was a problem child I was forced to take in. Later, however, we both grew on each other, to the point where he became my helper. On Chanukah that year, he even gave me a gift of an incomplete puzzle -- his favorite, he told me shyly -- wrapped in newspaper. Then, on erev Pesach, I came to school and saw the newspaper headlines, “Nine year old and his younger brother die in a house fire.” My first reaction was to quit on the spot, but, after a little more thought, it dawned on me that from a religious perspective, I may have been the most important person in his short life.

A similar story. Many years later, I taught a first grade girl who died of cancer. Gathering up all the courage I could muster, I went to visit her in the hospital about a week before she passed away. I stood there trembling, no words coming to me. Instead, she offered me solace! “Morah Yehudis,” she began, “don’t be afraid for me. I’m going straight to heaven. And you’re the one who taught me how to pray to God.”

Of course, it was not only those rare moments that made it all worthwhile. I once taught Torah subjects to the same class of girls through the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. By the third year, both the girls and I were so psychically connected that we rarely had to finish our sentences.

Now in my sixties, I still teach the little ones. And like the fledgling kindergarten teacher I became back in the decade of the sixties, I can fire up my imagination and engage theirs. Their teachers in higher grades have repeated to me what they are told: “We heard that Midrash already; Morah Yehudis told it to us years ago.”

It’s hard to say who through these fifty years has grown more: me or my students. As I continue teaching, I find myself receiving much more than I am giving. In the beginning, when the focus was on my benefits, I felt I would have to wait forever to see any positive results from my efforts. But, as I age, the rewards feel much more immediate. Perhaps, like Mr. Holland, I have learned to appreciate what I give, rather than what I receive. Of course, it helps to get letters and e-mails -- and nowadays even Facebook
comments -- from former students, some of whom are already grandparents, who tell me how significantly I affected their lives.

In the end, I think that’s what it’s all about: changing the world for good, one person at a time. I tell people that if we want to see enduring commitments, we can learn from the negative impact of terrorist children’s’ education that we need to put more passion into education,. The Lubavitcher Rebbe once wrote a teacher who was feeling isolated and lonely that she should think about how the fruits of their labors continue to grow and flourish and dynamically impact the world. Those thoughts do and will sustain me for as long as I live -- and hopefully beyond.

Yehudis Fishman has been teaching Torah and Chassidic writings for over forty years to students of all ages and backgrounds, both on the East Coast and the Midwest. She has been a director of several Jewish organizations in Santa Fe and Colorado. Her articles and poetry on a wide variety of Jewish topics have been printed in many publications, and also are available online. She currently resides in Boulder, Colorado, where she is known as ‘Morah at Large.’

sorayehu@earthlink.net
FORTY YEARS IN THE OASIS

by Ed Frankel

Mom thought I was crazy, some forty years back, when I followed in Dad’s footsteps and began my career as a Jewish educator.

I had no long-term goals when I started. I really had little idea what I was doing. I had yet to receive any training and could not distinguish between methods and goals, skills and knowledge sets. Back then, as I strove to bring in a little gelt, I operated on pure instinct as I pushed my sluggish students to read more rapidly, to think less, and just do it. Did I have any sense back then that decoding was strictly a skill? Naah! Still, the gut instinct was borne out by the research I discovered when my career blossomed and as I advanced from Jewish educator to becoming a fully-trained educator who specialized in Judaism.

I moved on in life and discovered that as much as I liked teaching, I thrived as a principal. I began dreaming of a Judaism in which mitzvah observance became more broadly valued than particularistic, denominational philosophies. Then, as now, I sense that with a higher expectation and acceptance for mitzvah observance, there could be more that unites the many streams of modern Jewish life.

Film strips, 8-tracks, and video cassettes gave way to mp3s, DVDs, and CDs. All were widely popular. Despite all the hoot and holler, none was ever more than a tool to effectively transmit our heritage, nor should they have been. We replaced projectors and pull-down movie screens with computers, monitors, and smart screens -- and yet confusion continues. Energy needs to be devoted to promulgating Jewish heritage, its lore, and its literature. But no matter what the media, tools cannot be confused with substance. We must strive to create ספרי יודעי, textual experts, not projectionists.

I spent mornings in schools, evenings with youth groups, and summers at Ramah camps. Each had its place. I recognize that our kids live among a broad constellation of influences. To be successful, educators had to mix informal with formal and make inroads into the very fiber of our students’ beings. I am not alone. The effort has paid off. There are more and more family programs, Shabbat dinners and kallot, effective junior congregations, and other techniques drawn from the informal world. Intergenerational programs also are more frequent. Potentially troublesome, there is also more pressure now than ever for class time to be fun. Readers ought not misunderstand, fun is important! My teacher, Shlomo Haramati, taught אני נהנה בלי נאה (there is no motivation without pleasure/benefit). Still, we must still remember that fun and motivation are means, not ends.

More now than ever before, I know that our traditional texts (e.g., Tanach, Midrash, Halakhah, Talmud, and more) can stand up to great scrutiny to be interpreted effectively/sensibly for all ages. At the same time, I am perturbed when we read too much into texts. There is a difference between Tanach and Midrash, text and commentary. Students and teachers must know that Midrash is interpretation, a layer added to the holy texts that we see as basic, and itself is the foundation for even more layers. Sadly, I have found that sometimes those layers have been equated to core texts. It is scary. It leads to Jewish practice and belief that in some circles is dangerously more and more dogmatic. I am thoroughly convinced that a believing Jew can remain intellectually honest. We need to cherish and protect our great literature. It is the backbone of Yiddishkeit.
When I began this journey, everyone agreed (כל ישראל ערבים זהב) (all Jews are mutually responsible for each other). When we knocked on doors for the Israel Emergency Fund during the frightening days of the Six Day War, the centrality of the modern Jewish State was unquestioned. We may not have agreed with Israel’s government, but only in private did we dare oppose her. Today, Jews need be reminded, it seems, that Israel has been as a safe haven for our people since it declared its independence in 5708 (1948). We need to press for greater support of Israel as our homeland. We can and will differ with her policies, but we need to balance our feelings with an appreciation of her place in our lives and in the life of the world as a whole. Hillel’s lessons for the individual apply equally to the community at large. If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? If we are for ourselves alone, what are we? If not now, when?

How do and did we reach that lofty result? Constantly relating lessons and values of the past to realities of today helps students examine their world through Jewish eyes. Current events, even the most mundane, are opportunities to rehash and bolster concepts of תנין (Bible) and תורה פפה (Oral Tradition). Similarly, although in many schools Israel is a subject to be explored, in the programs I wrote, teachers related to Israel: the Land, the People, the State, to all subjects and topics whenever possible. Studying Israel permeated the entire curriculum.

I know and have done things that I could not have imagined when I entered the field. Personal experience in every milieu shows that remarkable ends can be attained in any well run school/program. Day schools are noteworthy as they allow more time for serious study and allow more daily occasions to live our Jewish values, and, yet, in many they cannot fulfill some of the opportunities at hand in a solid synagogue school. While the entire Jewish community should continue to help day schools flourish, it cannot dismiss supplementary / complementary / afternoon / community / synagogue schools as a lost cause. After all, whether we graduate our children from day schools or complementary schools or even Charter Hebrew schools, are we not now more than ever devoted to sending our students along paths of lifelong learning?

Jargon changes regularly, yet improvements we seek in our schools are similar to those that educators have sought for generations. Successes by far outweigh claims of despair for the frailty of Jewish education. Birthright, Meah, Pardes, Melton Mini Schools, Etgar programs, Wexner grants, Limmud, NewCAJE, day school growth, complementary school retrenchment, Jewish Studies at university after university, and so many other ventures attest that Jewish education is stronger than ever, and still improving.

I believe in a fruitful future for Jewish education. Why? I cannot imagine a world without Jews and Judaism. יזקיע אל ישראל (the Eternal of Israel will not lie). I have fervent faith in our people’s future.

Edwin R. Frankel is a lifelong Jewish educational leader. He was most recently the ritual director of Congregation Agudas Achim in Columbus, OH. He continues to reside in Columbus where he works as an educational consultant through Thrive Jewishly, a new organization meeting several Columbus area Jewish needs.
efrankel@agudasachim.org
IDENTIFYING THE MISSION

by Darren Kleinberg

As an educator in a pluralistic, community high school, I have never been committed to students graduating as Conservative, Reform, or Orthodox Jews. A student’s standard of observance never has been the measuring stick. My goal always has been to graduate students who, regardless of their particular affiliation (or lack thereof) – take their Judaism seriously.

By “taking Judaism seriously” I mean that students graduate from high school with an understanding that, if they are only willing to inquire, Judaism can meaningfully inform any aspect of their lives.

The result of a successful Jewish high school experience will be that students will choose to inquire, that students will be interested in what Judaism has to say. Whether students ultimately choose to act in accordance with a given Jewish standard or value is not what is at issue. Rather, it is the fact that they are willing to let Judaism into their process of decision-making and thus into their lives.

But this is only half of the picture.

For Jewish education to truly succeed, there must be a relationship between student and subject that is not just uni-directional. Judaism cannot just be seen as a dispenser of good advice. Just as we hope that students will come to an understanding that Judaism has something to offer them, it also is a goal that they understand that they have something of value to offer back to Judaism. Students must come to the realization that they are the next layer in an ever-evolving tradition that will be uniquely enhanced by their particular insight or contribution.

In trying to envision how to successfully achieve this mission, I looked to my own Jewish learning experiences for lessons. In my own career as a student there were three essential lessons I learned that informed my vision.

The first was the importance of surrounding a subject. Surrounding a subject means making a subject come alive by opening multiple entry points for different types of learners to access it.

I recall my final years in high school at the Jewish Free School in London, England, where I studied Physics with Mr. Pinto. In addition to the necessary Grade 11 and 12 Physics curriculum, he would surround the material with content that intersected with it. For example, when studying Thomas Young’s Double-slit Experiment, we also studied Thomas Young the person – who he was, when he lived, and (as I recall) the fact that he was one of the first people to try and decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs. In employing this very simple method of surrounding a subject, Mr. Pinto was able to take material that otherwise may have appeared dry-as-dust and instead make it come alive.

As educators, we need to include, on the level of content, material that broadens the scope of the particular topic that is being studied so as to invite students with different interests into the learning – to create multiple entry points for them.

A second lesson I learned is that to understand a subject properly it must be set in context.

Upon graduating from high school, I took a “gap-year” to study in Israel. I remember arriving with virtually no background in Jewish learning; my experience during the first two years was painstaking and arduous.
It included breaking my teeth on Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew, and Aramaic and struggling to understand Talmudic logic.

Three years after leaving Israel, I enrolled in rabbinical school in New York City. It was there that I was exposed to a method of learning previously unknown to me. In attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the material at hand, we would study its Biblical origins (where applicable), its development through the period of the Talmud, the Rishonim (the early authorities in Jewish law who lived from about the 11th century to the 15th century), the Codes, and the responsa literature all the way up to contemporary applications.

By studying Jewish law from a historical perspective and taking into account the evolution of a given law as well as the particular historical influences that may have informed one or another legal decision, we treated the law in context.

By contrast, my prior yeshiva experience in Israel did not include any attempt to place a given text in context. It was simply assumed, mistakenly I believe, that the information was of ultimate importance (due to its place in the canon of Jewish religious literature) and that it was able to “stand alone.”

And so the second lesson I learned that is that a fuller and deeper understanding of a subject demands that it be set in context. Preparing our Judaic Studies curricula with a mind to the importance of context will ensure a student’s depth of learning and critical understanding of “how we got here” that will replace the kind of broad and shallow learning so often found in our classrooms.

The difference in methodology exemplified by my yeshiva experiences taught me a third and final lesson about what is needed to inform a successful Jewish high school experience.

A crucial distinction between my two yeshiva experiences and their different approaches to studying Jewish texts is the ability and willingness to reflect on the role of history in the unfolding of Jewish life and thought.

What my experience in Israel failed to convey to me was that, just as the world has changed throughout history, so, too, Judaism has changed, and continues to change. By the end of four years of rabbinical school, I had an acute sense that Jewish law, Jewish thought, and Jewish life all have experienced tremendous change.

Only an understanding that all of Judaism has evolved and changed over time will empower and reassure our students that they, too, can be a part of the process of change within Judaism.

These three lessons have informed my curriculum writing and my classroom instruction (although they are pedagogical in their own right) and, as such, have opened pathways for students to open themselves up to what Judaism has to offer them and to what they, in return, have to offer Judaism.

Rabbi Darren Kleinberg has written and implemented a successful four-year Jewish Studies high school curriculum at a Jewish community day school in the Southwest. He is currently a Ph.D. student working on issues related to pluralism in the American Jewish community.

rabb@kidma.org.
TORAH LISHMA

by Shira Lowenstein

In *Pirkei Avot* 6:1 (*Ethics of the Fathers*), we learn that a person who learns purely for the sake of learning will merit many things. The *mishnah* goes on to tell us how important this concept is: a person who learns for no merit will have abundant auxiliary rewards. As a teacher, I firmly believe in learning for no outward reward. How do I get my students to embrace this idea? How can I teach them to love learning just for the love of it? How can I show them the importance of their education, without sounding didactic and phony?

As a day school teacher who has worked with many middle school students, I try and get my students to understand that learning is important. I don't want them to learn so that they are admitted to a particular high school, or to memorize facts to get a good grade on a test. I want my students to learn for the sake of learning. Middle schoolers don’t always see the value in this. They are goal-driven, consequence-driven, and often want to give the least amount of effort for the greatest amount of reward.

As their teacher, I have struggled with the idea of how to get them to see that learning is a never-ending process filled with small rewards that often are more subtle than they would like to see. Then it occurred to me that I need to be more transparent with my students about my own teaching practice.

As an educator, I am constantly trying to learn more about my own teaching. I want to become a better practitioner and also improve my content knowledge. I love what I do, and I want to learn more. I always am trying to gain new ideas and am constantly asking questions. I learn along with my colleagues in *chevrutot* and in small learning groups. This is exactly what I want my students to do. It seems natural that I need to make them see that part of my adult life consists of daily learning.

When my colleagues come into my class to ask questions, I began to make it a point to tell my students that we were trying to problem-solve together. I taped a *chevruta* session that I had with another teacher and showed the video to my students. We then looked at the tape and took apart what I did well as a *chevruta* learner and what I could improve upon. I asked the students to try some of the strategies that I had used when they were learning together in *chevruta*. When my intern and I plan a lesson together, we often sit in a very public location and explain to our students exactly why it takes so long to plan for next week. When I tape my class to watch at a later time, I first lead a discussion with my students about what I would do with the footage and how I would use it to further my own learning.

Did this change the behavior of my students? Was the middle school suddenly transformed into an environment where students don’t care about grades or competition? Let’s not kid ourselves. Middle schoolers are at a developmental stage where they want to see rewards for their actions. They care about the approval of their peers and live for immediate gratification. I would say, however, that the students learned that my passion for learning is useful in my real life. They really believe me when I say “I don’t care about grades.” They know that I am a learner and will always be. They can see that the skill of learning has inherent value and does not only apply to grades and tests.
Perhaps someday they, too, will embrace their own learning. Until then, they will know that I am definitely one adult in their lives who loves to learn, who firmly believes that learning itself is enjoyable. My students know that I will continue to learn even when I don’t get a grade, and, when they are ready I am here to learn with them.

That same line in *Pirke Avot* notes that when my student finally realizes the value of learning for no apparent gain, then “the entire world is worthwhile for him/her alone.”

Shira Loewenstein has been a Jewish educator for the past six years. She has worked at the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School in Norwood, MA, for five of those years. She is a graduate of the DeLeT Program at Brandeis University and currently works as a Clinical Educator for the DeLeT program at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, CA. She lives in Berkeley, CA, with her husband and two children.

sl1159@alum.barnard.edu
THE FUTURE

NewCAJE
Re-Imagining Jewish Education for the 21st Century
BLENDING LEARNING, WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGY, AND JEWISH EDUCATION

by Paul A. Flexner and Richard D. Solomon

The Internet is omnipresent. It is in the homes in which we reside, the places where we dine, and even has infiltrated devices such as the watch, the phone, the calendar, and the address book that originally were designed for a singular purpose. In addition, the Internet, also termed Web 1.0, which was first created to serve as a powerful search engine, has morphed into Web 2.0, a collection of software tools for information sharing, data analysis, collaborative writing, knowledge construction, and dissemination. This transformation in technology from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 has significant implications for teaching and learning. These new Internet tools provide a new platform through which instructors and learners can explore their topics, ideas, and insights online without being in a physical classroom. What are we to make of these changes? How can we harness the power of Web 2.0 to enhance Jewish education?

In developing our thinking related to the interface between the new technologies and Jewish education, we have explored four key questions:

1) What is online learning?
2) What is blended learning and how is it similar to and different from face-to-face learning in a traditional classroom?
3) What does research tell us about the effects of blended instruction on teaching and learning?
4) Can blended learning enhance Jewish education?

1. What is online learning?

Online learning or e-learning is instruction delivered on a computer via the Internet. With the development of new Web 2.0 technologies, students and teachers can now
(a) Collaboratively create documents, spreadsheets, and presentations both synchronously and asynchronously.
(b) Make photo montages of their pictures and images.
(c) Upload their Power Point presentations and their movies.
(d) Hold webconferences in real time on the Internet.

There appears to be no end in sight to the creation of new tools for instruction, learning, and teacher professional development. For a fuller view of some of the newest web tools available to educators, we have compiled a short description and samples of how each tool may be utilized in a Jewish educational setting. These can be viewed at: http://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=0AVHRiMW9xDtZYGRycHJnaGZfODZjdzd0czIkMg&hl=en

2. What is blended learning and how is it similar to and different from face-to-face learning in a traditional classroom?

Blended learning refers to the combination of traditional face-to-face instruction in a real classroom with online instruction. Thus, blended or hybrid learning is similar to face-to-face instruction in that it incorporates traditional real time classroom teaching. The difference is that
blended learning adds the application of web technology in and outside of the traditional classroom. For example, in a blended learning instructional environment, a teacher might use a SmartBoard or computer to access information on the Web, and teach his or her students how to use the synchronous and asynchronous tools while participating in the real or virtual class.

One of the innovations finding a niche in the educational world is Blended Online Learning (BOL), which focuses on instruction that occurs in its entirety outside of the traditional classroom. With BOL, all instruction is online, with both real time (i.e., synchronous) face-to-face teaching and learning in a virtual world through web-conferencing, Skype and other tools, and the use of asynchronous tools (i.e., not real time) such as e-mail, wikis, and Google Docs. Although it is possible to design a course utilizing web tools only, most courses have adopted one of the learning management systems such as Moodle or Blackboard that already include or provide easy access to the web tools.

3. What does research tell us about the effects of blended learning on teaching and learning?

With blended learning a relatively new phenomenon, especially in the education world, little formal research has been completed. That which has been reported provides preliminary indications on the efficacy of blended instruction on student learning and other variables.

In 2009, the United States Department of Education’s report, “Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning” (Jones et al., 2009) provided a meta-analysis of research published from 1996 to July 2008 in which the USDE analyzed more than 1,100 empirical studies of online learning in both K-12 and post secondary education. The study revealed that online courses are at least as strong as learning in traditional settings and even may have the advantage in terms of improving student achievement.

According to Hrastinski (2008), students who use synchronous e-learning tools such as videoconferencing and instant messaging create social bonds and a support structure for planning tasks, doing group work, and fostering classroom community. Hrastinski also noted that asynchronous learning may stimulate higher levels of creative and critical thinking.

In a related finding, McBrien and Jones (2009) found that students who do not generally participate in classroom discussions in a traditional classroom are more likely to express their thoughts online. This finding coincides with the seminal research of M.B. Rowe (1986) that positively correlated higher rates of classroom participation with increased “wait time,” the time the teacher gives a student to reflect before answering a question.

Finally, in a blended learning classroom the role of the teacher is transformed from knowledge transmitter to learning facilitator. Within this new online learning environment the teacher now is tasked to empower students to locate, construct, and disseminate knowledge through applying the web tools found on the Internet.

4. How can blended learning enhance Jewish education?

Web 2.0 opens up many new options for the Jewish community to enhance the quality of learning at all levels of the system. In the K-12 system, students who are increasingly familiar with Web 2.0 tools are searching for opportunities to expand their learning in ever greater numbers in a wide range of areas. As Jewish educators become more familiar with the technology, more courses that appeal to this population will be offered. Schools, both day and
Congregational/communal, with their limited faculties, will be able to expand their offerings to meet the interests and demands of their students by accepting the new online format for academic credit. Initially, this will be most common at the high school level, but should move to the middle school and even upper elementary levels over time.

However, online asynchronous courses are only the beginning. Web 2.0 provides options for the students to connect with each other in blended online formats in virtual classrooms around the world. These new communities of learners will connect students in distant communities in ways that were once limited to pen pal relationships. With Web 2.0, the faculty will be able to monitor conversations and provide individualized encouragement and guidance to their students throughout the course.

This transition to the new Web 2.0 technology will take place in two very distinct ways. For digital natives, those who have grown up with the Internet, this will be a natural and evolving process. However, for the digital immigrants, or those who have come to the Internet as adults, serious professional development will be required to introduce the new methods and tools that are available. Whether through local programs that bring the faculty together in a room filled with computers or by engaging the teachers in online courses, Jewish schools and communities will need to invest in the professional and personal growth of the teachers.

Conclusion

Blended learning is either a combination of face-to-face classroom teaching with an online component or a mix of both asynchronous and synchronous instruction taking place entirely online, also termed blended online learning. We are suggesting that blended instruction will enhance the quality of the Jewish learning experience for both K-12 students and post-secondary learners whether as students, faculty members, or adult learners. With the rapid expansion of Internet tools, the opportunity to create a new and expanding environment for Jewish learning has arrived. It is important for Jewish educators to bring learning to every interested member of the community who seeks to expand his or her knowledge and understanding of Judaism.

We are suggesting that blended learning and blended online learning will enhance Jewish education by:

1) Facilitating higher levels of student thinking and achievement.
2) Enabling students to construct and disseminate knowledge.
3) Empowering quiet students to participate more actively in classroom discussions.
4) Transforming the traditional classroom into a community of global learners.
5) Providing the teacher with new ways to disseminate knowledge, facilitate learning, and evaluate student on-task behavior.

In conclusion, our suggestions are based on our investigation of the preliminary research on blended learning and the new web technologies now available to the educational community and the Jewish educational establishment. We suggest that rigorous research be conducted in real and virtual classrooms and professional development settings to determine if blended learning in either format will enhance Jewish education and teacher training. Furthermore, we strongly suggest that Jewish educators be trained extensively in the proper use of the Web 2.0 technologies. It is only when we can test our assumptions in the real world that we will fully understand the power of Web 2.0 technology that has become such a central component of our lives in the 21st century.
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References


Paul A. Flexner is an assistant professor of education at Georgia State University where he is exploring new ways to conduct online courses that engage students more actively in the learning process. He is the co-editor of What We NOW Know about Jewish Education, which received a National Jewish Book Award in 2009. In his spare time, Paul is the bartender at Limmud Fest, serves on the Board of Limmud Atlanta + SE, and drives his MG Midget and MGA Coupe on the streets and avenues of Atlanta and the surrounding countryside. paf20@columbia.edu

After retiring as coordinator of PDS schools at the University of Maryland at College, Richard Solomon turned his professional focus to Jewish education. Toward that end, he and his wife, Elaine, have written Toolbox for Teachers and Mentors: Moving Madrichim to Mentor Teachers and Beyond. Richard has a blog on mentoring Jewish students and teachers, and is the creator of a Jewish educators’ social network – http://www.integrating-technology.com/index.php?option=com_community&view=groups&task=viewgroup&groupid=6&Itemid=16 --
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whose focus is to integrate web technology into Jewish education and teacher training. Richard also offers online courses on Judaic instruction and mentoring at http://jewish-education.org/

rdsolomonphd@gmail.com
21ST CENTURY JEWISH EDUCATION: BUILDING A DREAM OUT OF EMPOWERING REALITY

By Yechiel Hoffman

Building Bridges
My Jewish and personal journey passes across bridges linking the various worlds I have belonged to personally, spiritually, professionally, and educationally. I journeyed from a Chabad Yeshiva upbringing to become a modern orthodox activist. I migrated from film school to orthodox smicha (Rabbinic ordination). I passed through an education fellowship at a Reform college to a doctorate program in Jewish Educational Leadership at a joint program at a pluralistic Jewish college and a secular university. Each of these bridges enhances my pluralistic approach to Jewish learning and living, as well as my embrace of media and technology as tools to encounter life and social relationships and as a means to challenge and accept my traditional observance. Through my journeys of reflection, I discovered that the engine that drives me down the windy road is my will and desire to empower myself to empower others, whether it be young filmmakers, Jewish teens, or disenfranchised Jews. As an educator, I seek ways to empower not only my students directly, but also their families and communities.

The State of Jewish Education
Jewish education must grapple with the vast differences between 20th Century and 21st Century models of education (see links to video and chart). Modern Jewish education adopted the industrial factory model of education, developed for the market-driven needs of employers in the industrial age. From this framework, Jewish education built its goals, organizational structures, and pedagogy. This model emphasizes product over process, a teacher-centered approach to learning, and a focus on accumulating and memorizing knowledge – all of which lead to a passive learning experience. For schools following this model, the curriculum and learning render the educational experience meaningless for students.

In utilizing an industrial model of education, Jewish education borrowed two underlying goals of school: transmitting knowledge (cultural, religious, spiritual, and historical) and socializing students to a specific way of behaving within a society or community. Because of great threats to Jewish survival, both existential and real, Jewish education focused on socialization as a means of continuing the culture, religion, and even the population itself. With an emphasis on education for acculturation, Jewish education initiated both young and adult Jews into the texts, traditions, and lifecycles of Rabbinic Judaism, emphasizing religious life over a cultural model. Dr. Marc Silverman outlines in his article, “The End of Jewish Education,” that Jews of the 21st Century “want the world” and seek out a Jewish life that goes beyond compartmentalization. In emphasizing a text-centered learning experience, students with less literacy skills or interest become alienated from Jewish learning and Judaism.

Jewish education organizes itself upon hierarchal structures, which legitimize power and control over shared learning experiences. This leads to a socialization of students whose participation in Judaism orients around a membership model, under someone else’s authority, rather than an authorship model, where each individual has ownership over his or her experiences and output. As Jewish education fights assimilation, it loses the battle to each individual’s pursuit of a “sovereign self,” one unwilling to bend to his/her desires and interests. Without cultivating a learning experience that presents real life relevance for Judaism, students will opt out of Jewish learning and living.
A Plan of Action
To truly reinvigorate and innovate Jewish education, we must depart from socialization and knowledge-acquisition as primary goals and refocus our energies on empowering Jews with the tools and skills to become active agents in their own Jewish learning and living. We need to cultivate a Jewish Sovereign Self who operates as a self-determining individual, and who opts into Jewish tribal groups based on interests. When creating schools, learning experience and curriculum, we must address each student’s needs and interests, by inviting the student into the conversation through the process of creation. We must provide a sense of worth as a Jew within an attractive liberal society, as it relates to religious, cultural, and national identities. We must be open to secular models to embrace and support those who do not believe or wish to engage in Judaism as a religion. We still must frame Jewish learning and texts as primary sources, but use them as a means for action and inspiration.

To center the learning on the student, we must generate life-centered learning, where all learning integrates with the student’s personal experiences and interests. We must orient our learning on the process of discovery and inquiry, and not on culmination and completion and the awarding of a certificate or diploma. To do so will require a relinquishing of control, as Jewish education must trust the learner to make mistakes and find his or her own path, serving only as a facilitator and guide for the student’s learning.

Creating this model requires what Dr. Jack Wertheimer calls “linking the silos.” Beyond seeing to it that Jewish youth engage in multiple positive learning experiences, in a variety of settings, we also must ensure that each setting has the support, resources, and will to learn from each other. While camps, complementary schools, and day schools may serve different populations and objectives, their goals should be the same. We need a blending of the formal and non-formal experiences in order to actualize empowered youth. In the face of a shrinking Jewish population and in order to ensure Jewish youth opt into Jewish education, we must grow niche schooling to meet the needs and interests of students. We need to consider Jewish arts and technology high schools. We must investigate further the impact of Hebrew language charters schools. With a tuition crisis that will not be resolved easily, we must develop orthodox complementary schools.

A great change is coming. As we bridge the gap between secular and religious, formal and non-formal, socialization and empowerment, we must remember that change happens over time and only with the right support. We must identify and connect people who want to make changes. We must provide these change agents with the theoretical frameworks and practical skills to generate change. By providing philanthropic and institutional support to change agents, we empower the leaders in Jewish education to build a Jewish education for the 21st Century that will empower others to make change for themselves.

Endnotes:
1. Video link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiD1UqLPpOg
2. Chart link: http://www.21stcenturyschools.com/20th_vs_21st_Century_Classroom.htm
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Yechiel Hoffman serves as a Jewish Studies and Non-Formal Educator at Milken Community High School in Los Angeles. Having earned smicha through Pirche Shoshanim, Yechiel received educational training through the DeLeT Fellowship at HUC and currently is studying for a Doctorate in Education in Jewish Educational Leadership at Northeastern University and Hebrew College. Yechiel seeks opportunities to empower Jews to empower themselves through learning, community, and activism, through his work with LimmudLA, NewCAJE, and other organizations. spottingu@aol.com
A DREAM FOR NEWCAJE

by Leora Koller-Fox

At my last job, I was laid off when the grant money ran out. I worked at a school where the principal only hired “yes” men because he didn't trust educators.

I have seen mismanagement of money and mistreatment of educators my whole life. And at the end of the day, we take it because we love the students and find meaning in the work. I'm done with that. If you want a raise, ask for it. If you want supervision, find a mentor. If you want to work less than 100 hours a week, go home at the end of the workday. If we want respect, we need to DEMAND it from everybody around us.

Yes, we deserve salaries we can live on and full medical benefits. Yes, we deserve professional development, paid for by our employer. Yes, we are extremely talented and creative people but we can't do our jobs with four dollars in an old coat closet -- another stellar professional experience I had. The question I want to pose to the Jewish community as a whole is: Do you value your children and want them to get the best Jewish education possible? If the answer is no, then end of discussion (and for that matter, this field). If the answer is yes, emphatically, totally, and absolutely YES, then pay us fairly for our work, give us the resources we need, and show us the respect we deserve.

CAJE has been in my life forever. It is my older sibling, my summer vacation, and the place where I thought, yeah, I want to do this when I grow up. My hope for NewCAJE is that it be everything CAJE was and so much more. I hope the conference becomes a place where we share new and exciting ideas, discuss difficult issues, and take a break in our busy lives to get the professional and Jewish nourishment that helps us become better educators and better people.

My dream for the coalition is that it be strong for us in numbers when we feel powerless as individuals, and a powerful voice when we feel we are being silenced. To be honest, I don’t know if I still want to do this when I grow up. How much more can or should I take? But, I do love the kids and I do find meaning in the work.

And on top of all of that, there are so many unanswered questions that I feel passion about answering: What is Tzedakah and what is the best way to do it and to motivate our students to do it? How do we support Israel when its government does something we don’t support? How do we get the best teachers teaching the best lessons to all our students, regardless of their learning styles, financial status, or the make-up of their family? What is pluralism and how do we do it well?

These and other questions drive me, meaningful experiences with students enrich me, and I hope NewCAJE will be the foundation for my future.

Leora Koller-Fox holds a BA from Brandeis University. She has worked with all age groups, from preschool to college, in a variety of settings and cities. This past year, Leora served as Associate Coordinator for Community Service at NewCAJE’s host site, Gann Academy, in Waltham, MA. In the future, Leora hopes to help NewCAJE influence positive change in the Jewish education world and beyond.

leorakf@gmail.com
MAKING JEWISH EDUCATION RELEVANT
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY STUDENT

by Scott Mandel

The biggest problem facing Jewish education today is the issue of relevancy. More than ever before, we are facing an entire generation of American Jewish students who see little relevance in their Jewish education. Long past are the days where children were sent to Hebrew School because of grandparent pressure. Today, more than any other time in our history, children who have no desire to attend supplemental school can easily convince their parents to drop the idea. As a result, if Jewish education is not relevant to their lives, supplemental school enrollment falls by the wayside.

One basic answer to this problem is making a paradigm shift in our conception of Jewish school curricula. Currently, the feeling, more often than not, is to cover the entire scope of Jewish curricula before Bar/Bat Mitzvah age, since the students are expected to drop out at that point. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students find little relevancy in the curricula, and there is little to no motivation to continue their Jewish education past the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year — if they even stay enrolled until then.

As radical as this may sound, I have for years promoted that we should be aligning our Jewish curricula to the general education curricula that students experience every day. This will create a cultural awareness within our students of the Jewish presence throughout world, and American, history. This type of cultural pride is found in numerous other ethnic groups as their cultural heritage is studied within all Social Studies/History textbooks of the past few decades. By paralleling Jewish curricula to the ideas and concepts that the students experience daily in their general education, they can more readily see the relevance of Jewish culture in their American heritage. As a result, this integration of cultural experiences can become a positive motivational tool in their identification as American Jews.

However, a basic mindset needs to be overcome in order for this change to occur — the concept that “there is specific curricular information that must be covered within the supplementary school curricula before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year, since the students will be gone after that time.” This proposed shift in focus does not include eliminating the Hebrew and tefillah study that is necessary for a successful Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience. Rather, I’m talking about a transformation in what I refer to as the “Jewish Social Studies ” — the non-religious or language — elements of the Jewish curricula.

CURRICULAR ALIGNMENT
Here is a very rough example of this proposed new curricular alignment (please note that this information is very basic, and there is some topic deviation from state to state that needs to be taken into account):

3RD GRADE GENERAL EDUCATION TOPICS: The local city — its history and institutions.
3RD GRADE JEWISH EDUCATION TOPICS: Jerusalem and other Israeli cities. The history and institutions of the local city including community role models.

4TH GRADE GENERAL EDUCATION TOPICS: State history.
4TH GRADE JEWISH EDUCATION TOPICS: History of the modern State of Israel. The history and institutions of the students’ state, including Jewish role models throughout its history.
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5TH GRADE GENERAL EDUCATION TOPICS: Early American history from colonization through the Civil War.
5TH GRADE JEWISH EDUCATION TOPICS: American Jewish history paralleling the same period, including important Jewish personalities throughout history.

6TH GRADE GENERAL EDUCATION TOPICS: Ancient civilizations from the beginning of time through the Roman Empire.
6TH GRADE JEWISH EDUCATION TOPICS: Biblical history paralleling the same periods.

7TH GRADE GENERAL EDUCATION TOPICS: Medieval history from the fall of the Roman Empire through early modern times (17th century).
7TH GRADE JEWISH EDUCATION TOPICS: Medieval Jewish history paralleling the same period, including major Jewish philosophers.

Although this is obviously a very sketchy summation, you can readily see the core concept. Every Jewish curricular supervisor should have copies of the general education social studies texts used by the students and establish regular contact with the basic pacing plan of the material. When 5th grade students learn about George Washington in their general studies, they should be learning about Haym Solomon in their supplementary school Jewish studies. When 6th grade students study the city-state of Ur in their unit on Mesopotamia, they should be also learning about Abraham and his abandonment of this elaborate culture in Lech Lecha. When 12th century history is being taught to the 7th grade student, Maimonides should be taught at the same time by the Hebrew School teacher.

REALIZING THE RELEVANCE OF OUR HERITAGE

Only by aligning the two curricula — secular and Jewish — will our current generation of students begin to comprehend and internalize the importance of the Jewish cultural experience throughout history. By integrating their educational experiences, they will begin to realize the relevance of our heritage in both their education and future lives in America. Ultimately, by discovering this relevance of Jewish education in their lives, by not being disillusioned by their Jewish supplementary school curricula, there is a highly increased chance that they would continue their studies beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah into both a community high school/confirmation program, and possibly into Jewish Studies courses at the university level.

Throughout our history, Jewish teachers have changed and adapted Jewish education to make it relevant for the students of that time. It’s imperative that we continue that tradition in making Jewish education relevant for American Jewish students in the most secular period of our history to date.

Scott Mandel holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction from the University of Southern California, as well as an MA.Ed. and MAT from the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. He has worked in both Jewish and secular education for almost 40 years. The author of eleven books in teacher education (Jewish and secular), Scott has been a teacher, administrator, consultant, and teacher trainer.

mandel@pacificnet.net.
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.
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.
AMandell@leobaectemple.org
INCLUSION BY DESIGN, NOT BY DEFAULT

by Fran Pearlman

In 1981 I began my administrative career in Jewish education in a part-time position. The responsibilities were described as hiring, training, and supervising staff; creating programs; and writing curriculum. Nothing was shared about the students in terms of learning styles or preferences, and certainly the words “inclusion” or “special needs” were never mentioned. At that time, special education was a separate entity in the secular world and certainly in the Jewish education world. There were separate classrooms with specifically trained and experienced faculty who, theoretically, met the needs of those students who were classified as “special edu.”

Almost thirty years later, Jewish education across denominational lines finds itself facing the challenge of inclusion, modification, adaptation, and a vast, new lexicon of educational terms. To date, Jewish education has advanced only baby steps toward the inclusion of all students. The time has come to confront this need and move from being Jewish educational institutions of inclusion by default to ones of inclusion by design. The time has arrived to formally address the challenge of inclusion by providing our educational leadership with the proper training and knowledge in order to welcome all students into their schools. Jewish educational leaders need to be both educated and welcoming; to be both cognitively aware of the needs of all students and able to expend the emotional investment to invite all students into a warm and inclusive community.

Where does the transformation need to take place? The first place is in the formal training of our educational leaders. Just as innovative and up-to-the-minute pedagogy, with its strategies and philosophies, are a necessary and integral part of the education of these future leaders, special education experience and training also is an essential component. Providing the terminology, definitions, strategies, and approaches of special education and how it can be adapted to Jewish educational settings is critical. Tools and practice in communicating with parents of special needs students also is essential for the development of a successful inclusionary school. Educating these leaders about the difference between a self-contained classroom and inclusion, the benefits of each, and when each is necessary or preferred are other aspects of this education.

The second level of education needs to be directed towards the entire faculty. Statistically, 4-5% of every classroom consists of students with some special needs, diagnosed or undiagnosed. Sometimes we know who these students are and sometimes we do not, however, teaching to reach all students and to the multiple skills and intelligences in the average classroom is a charge to each and every Jewish teacher. It is up to the Jewish school and its educational leader to provide appropriate and regular guidance and education in how teaching to all can maximize the learning of all.

The demand for successful inclusion is not new to Judaism. The mandate for inclusion is steeped in Jewish tradition. Within the bounds of Jewish law, rulings specifically are articulated regarding the disabled in Jewish ritual law. Leviticus 19:14 specifically prohibits cursing the deaf or putting a stumbling block before the blind. Rather than ignoring those with disabilities, the body of Jewish law specifically addresses those who are blind, deaf and/or mute. While these categories of disabilities certainly are not exhaustive and do not address the scope of the disabilities found in our society today, it is a beginning, based on what was known then.
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We are well past the beginning of fulfilling the mitzvah of inclusion. It is time that we are proactive and assertive in both our philosophy and in our actions as we move towards Jewish educational institutions of inclusion by design.

Fran Pearlman is the Director of Education at Oceanside Jewish Center, NY, and serves as a consultant for MatanKids, which provides consultation and direct service in the area of special education in Jewish educational settings. Fran@matankids.org
I suppose you could say that I began my career as a Jewish educator as the smarty-pants kid in Hebrew school, correcting classmates’ Hebrew reading. I began my career as a good Jewish educator much later, in high school as a teacher’s aide; during college as a religious school teacher; and in the years since, at summer camps, youth groups, and Israel trips. Now with Masters in Informal Jewish Education from the Davidson School at JTS, a year running a small congregational Hebrew School, and a new job as the Associate Director of Prozdor in Newton, MA, I like to think my skills as an educator have come a long way.

My vision for Jewish education has remained remarkably similar through this whole journey. I want it to be good. That's all. It's pretty simple. Jewish students need to have good education that leaves them wanting more, and that leaves them feeling connected to their Judaism in whatever way they wish to express that. Oh, yes, and this good education needs to be accessible to every Jewish child, regardless of background, economic status, or learning ability.

Critics would read that last paragraph and argue for spectacular programming, high level Hebrew learning, community building, identity formation, and idea cultivation. They might say that Jewish education should be family-based, that it should be rooted in the principles of experiential education, or that we need more of an edge to capture the young teens. And they're not wrong. But first, at the basic level, our educational offerings need to be good. We need to have a good, solid product to be selling – and at the moment, far too few educators have that. What we do have right now are lots of people who agree that while Jewish education should be good, they don’t know how to get us there.

We know what works – immersive communal and experiential learning. And we know what doesn’t work – oppressive frontal learning. For years, we have been saying that Hebrew schools don't work, and so we’ve been putting our money and energy into alternative programs and initiatives like the Teva Learning Center, Bible Raps, Storah Telling, and Birthright Israel. All of these are great programs that I would recommend whole-heartedly. But none of them replaces the traditional Hebrew school model. And supplementing that model with these one-off experiences does not change our schools or our educators in the ways that they need to be transformed.

We need to value (and pay accordingly) our religious school teachers in a way that demonstrates the importance of their job. All too often they are the only exposure to Judaism our students have. Many of our teachers are students themselves, struggling to pay the bills, forced to take a low-paying job for which they have neither the right kind of energy nor training. Others have made teaching in religious schools their profession for decades, but have yet to take a professional development course.

Our children deserve something better. They deserve a lifetime of Birthright Israel and Storah Tellings. They deserve stellar educators who are compensated for their great work. We need to provide professional development opportunities for everyone who works as a Jewish educator. It is our responsibility to provide our teachers with the skills necessary to educate all of our children, even the more challenging ones.

I feel almost silly submitting this essay to NewCAJE. Surely there are hundreds of better, broader, more detailed visions being submitted. But the problem remains – there are too many programs and schools that are barely meeting their substandard expectations. Before we need new programs, we need to
devote time and energy into fixing the ones that we’ve got. The synagogue school model is not dead, but it is in the ICU, and it is dependent on us to nurse it back to health.

Rabbi Rachel Silverman is the associate director of Prozdor and the director of Makor, both based out of Hebrew College in Newton, MA. Rachel was ordained from JTS in the spring of 2010 and graduated with her Masters in Jewish Education in 2009. She is perhaps best known for her t-shirts, ‘real men marry rabbis,’ which are now on display in the National Museum of American Jewish History.

rsilverman@hebrewcollege.edu