Ten Practical Reflection Activities and Exercises For Jewish Experiential Learning

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“What exactly is repentance or teshuvah? Repentance involves forsaking sins and removing such thoughts from one’s way of thinking and resolving firmly never to do it again, as it is written, ‘Let the wicked man forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let them return to the Lord. (Yishayahu 55:7).’

Maimonides on the Laws of Repentance in Mishneh Torah- Hilchot Teshuva Halacha, 2:2

Although Maimonides expressed the importance of reflection in repentance (teshuvah) during the Days of Awe, Yamin Noraim, the major secular theoretical roots for reflection can be found in the work of John Dewey (1933) and David A. Kolb (1984). Accordingly, it was John Dewey who asserted “…we do not learn from experience…we learn from reflecting on experience.” Moreover, it was David A. Kolb who first described the four stage cycle of experiential learning which emphasizes time for reflection (stage two below). Kolb’s four stage cycle for experiential learning is below.

• Stage One: Concrete Experience. The learner experiences the original event.
• Stage Two: Reflective Observation: The learner cogitates on the meaning of the original experience.
• Stage Three: Abstract Conceptualization: The learner gains a more sophisticated understanding of the meaning of the original experience which, in turn, informs the next stage in the cycle, active experimentation.
• Stage Four: Active Experimentation: Given an enhanced and more nuanced understanding of the experience through abstract conceptualization, the learner tries different ways to re-create or actively experiment with the original learning experience. These active experimentations, in turn, lead to new concrete experiences.

In addition to the theoretical work on reflection from Dewey and Kolb, there is significant research supporting the efficacy of reflection or “think time’ for both learning and professional development.

For example, studies by Rowe (1972), Casteel and Stahl (1973), Tobin (1987), and others demonstrate a positive correlation between providing
learners with reflection time and these outcomes:

- The enhanced length and correctness of student responses to questions posed by the teacher or another student
- An increase in the number of learners responding to a question
- A reduction in the number of learners who pass or don’t answer a question
- Improved academic achievement

**Holy Time and Space**

Before we share specific reflection activities that can be incorporated into Jewish formal (i.e., religious school classroom, lecture hall, adult education class at the synagogue, etc.) and informal settings (i.e., camp, group activity location, trip to Israel or other important Jewish sites), let’s discuss two important Jewish constructs, holy time (zman kadosh) and holy space (makom kadosh).

As a people, we distinguish ourselves by establishing both holy time (zman kadosh) and holy space (makom kadosh) through the following activities:

- Daily prayers (i.e., upon awaking in the morning, before and after meals, etc.)
- Weekly blessings (i.e., lighting the Shabbat candles, lighting the Havdalah candle, smelling the spices, etc.)
- Seasonal prayers (i.e., lighting candles for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, etc.)
- Celebrating the cyclical events in our lives (i.e., brit milah, Bnai Mitzvah, kiddushin, etc.)
- Experiencing the precious moments of living (e.g., reciting the Sheheheyanu prayer at the Kotel)
- Supporting those who need healing (i.e., saying the Mishabeirach prayer)
- Honoring those we have lost (i.e., reciting the Kaddish prayer)

These Jewish prayers, blessings, meditations, and reflections transform that which is secular and profane (i.e., time and space) into something that is sacred and holy. These prayers, blessings, meditations, and reflections are not relegated nor conducted solely within the synagogue’s sanctuary or the Jewish classroom. In fact, these acts of sanctification take place in the home, at camp, on local Jewish field trips, and during excursions to Israel.

As Jewish educators, camp counselors, youth group leaders, and tour guides, we can embed these acts of sanctification into both our formal and informal learning settings. In addition to these prayers and blessings below, you will find a list and description of reflection activities that educators can implement before, during or at the end of an experiential learning event inside or outside of your classroom.

**Note:** When we use the term “group leader,” we are referring to a Jewish youth leader, a camp counselor in charge of a bunk with an assistant counselor, unit head, assistant head counselor, head counselor, camp director, tour guide, docent or any other person occupying a position of leadership in an informal Jewish setting.

### 1. Sentence completions

The educator states or records a sentence fragment such as: (reflection at the beginning of the activity) From this experience I hope to...; (reflection during the activity) Right now I am thinking or feeling...; (reflection at
Two things I learned from today’s experience are...

2. Think-Pair-Share

The educator asks the participants to think about some aspect of what they are about to do, what they are doing or what they have just experienced.

Example: When I say the word “*tzedakah*,” what does that mean to you?

Participants are given time to reflect on the question posed and perhaps record their thoughts on the topic.

The educator places the learners into reflection pairs in which they discuss their individual thoughts. At a designated time determined by the educator, each participant can share with the group:

- What he or she was thinking
- What his or her reflection partner was thinking
- A synthesis of what the reflection partners were thinking
- A new thought
- The opportunity to say “I pass on this question.”

3. Community Round Robin

Each member of the experiential learning community is given think time, perhaps 30 seconds, to reflect upon some topic determined by the teacher, group leader or member of the group; each person is given an opportunity to share a thought with the members of the experiential learning community. If members have a similar thought, they can say it in their own words.

4. Discussion Whip

The educator of the experiential group invites selected members of the learning community to share their thoughts or feelings in a few words. Accordingly, the educator might say, “as I point to you, tell us in a few sentences what you are thinking or feeling right now.”

5. You’re the Leader

The educator of an experiential group poses a question to the learning community. After allowing for some “think time” for group reflection, the educator selects one member of the learning community to share his or her thoughts. After stating his/her reflections, that person selects the next person to speak. Participants always have the right to pass or not share their thoughts.

6. Discussion Ball

The educator poses a question to the learning community. After providing for some “think time,” the group leader invites participants who wish to share their thoughts to raise their hands. The educator tosses a discussion ball (i.e., nerf ball, koosh ball, balloon ball, etc.) to one of the participants who wants to voice his or her reflections on the topic. After sharing his or her thoughts, the speaker selects the next person to talk by stating the name of the person and gently tossing the discussion ball to him or her.
7. The Numbers Procedure

The educator poses a question to the experiential learning community. After providing for some “think time,” the educator invites participants who wish to share their thoughts to raise their hands. The educator gives each participant who wants to speak a number, saying, for example, “You’re number one, you’re number two, you are number three, etc.” These numbers determine the order for speaking to the members of the group.

8. Reflection Pairs, Triads or Quads

Before, during or at the end of an experiential learning event, the educator creates thinking or reflection pairs, triads or quads to engage in reflection time.

9. Dyadic Encounter

Dyadic Encounter is a specific paired reflection activity that follows these steps.

1. The educator places learners into reflection dyads (groups of two). Alternative: group members may select their own reflection partners.

2. Reflection dyads determine who completes sentence #1 first. Let us call you A and your reflection partner B. Let us assume that your partner, B, wants to go first. Remember, however, that B or A may pass at any time during the paired reflection activity.

3. B verbally completes the first sentence.

4. A may probe B or completes sentence 1. B may probe A’s statement.

5. A completes sentence 2.

6. B may probe A or complete sentence 2.

7. The procedure continues until the dyad completes the nine unfinished sentences or the educator ends the activity.

8. If you want to modify the activity, start with any number or make up your own sentence starters such as
   a. My name is...
   b. I live...
   c. At the present time, I serve as...
   d. The reason I am here is...
   e. To me experiential learning means...
   f. The mission of our school or organization is...
   g. One thing I hope to do with our school or organization is...
   h. One day I hope to...
10. Hidden Agenda Exercise
A Relationship Activity Designed to Help a Group Surface its Hidden Agenda Items

1. The educator explains that some members of the group may have hidden agenda items that are important to them and that are not being addressed. If these hidden agenda items are not surfaced and resolved, they can undermine the cohesion and productivity of the group. The educator then invites each member to record a concern on a piece of paper without including his or her name.

NOTE: Group members are not required to record a concern, but must write something on the paper (e.g., I pass) to protect the anonymity of those who would be sharing their concerns with the members of the class/group.

2. The educator collects all the members’ papers and places them in a paper bag or hat.

3. The educator selects one of the written concerns from the paper bag, reads it to herself, and, if she judges the concern to be appropriate for group discussion, she then reads it to the group.

NOTE: Assuming the educator is responsible for justifying what takes place in a group, she has the right to decide which concerns to air with the group.

4. After reading the concern, the educator facilitates a problem-solving process which includes these steps:
   a. Determining the nature, intensity and pervasiveness of the problem
   b. Generating alternatives
   c. Selecting the most practical and effective alternative(s)
   d. Implementing a strategy to address the problem
   e. Monitoring the strategy
   f. Modifying and evaluating the strategy

Summary and Conclusion

There is no question that experiential activities or events such as visiting Israel, attending a Jewish sleep-away camp, or building and living in a sukkah can have a profound effect upon the learner. In this article, we have argued that by embedding certain reflection activities (e.g., sentence completions or think-pair-share, etc.) within the event, we can significantly enhance that Jewish experience. Why is this so? When we give our students and ourselves that precious time for personal and group reflection and the sharing of those insights, we learn more about our Jewish selves. By including shared reflections within our Jewish experiential activities, we enable our students and ourselves to connect to Klal Yisroel.
Bibliography


