The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education

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Abstract

This monograph explores the meaning of informal Jewish education and examines its significance for contemporary Jewish life. It argues that informal Jewish education is not confined to a place or a methodology but rather is a well-defined philosophy of how people should be educated, what the goals of Jewish education are, and what its contents should be. Eight characteristics are established as defining informal Jewish education: a focus on the learner, a concern for Jewish experience; a curriculum of experiences, interactivity, group process, a culture of education, an engaged mood, and a holistic Jewish educator. Similarities and differences between informal education and Jewish schooling, Jewish communal service, therapy, and Jewish life are discussed, as are informal Jewish education's advantages and limitations. The monograph urges recognition of the seminal contribution informal Jewish education can make–along with schooling and other forms of Jewish education–to the advancement of twenty-first-century Jewish life.

A New Era of Education

The great challenge of education is to examine existing paradigms and dream of new ones. In recent decades, traditional notions about where and how people learn have been re-examined, and new (and sometimes unlikely) milieus and modes are emerging as contexts for education. Today people are learning in bookstores, video stores, museums, and cyberspace; at summer camps, retreats, and theme parks; and the term "edu-tainment" has even been coined to refer to entertainment that educates. The new settings join the traditional venues of education—elementary schools, secondary schools, and universities—as vibrant partners in the process of education, and sometimes they even challenge traditional hegemonies.[1]

Many of these new modes of education have been collectively denoted "informal education." Informal education in our day is a worldwide growth industry. An extensive literature describes youth movements, community centers, adult learning, and other vehicles for informal education across the globe, in Eastern Europe, Africa, England, and Latin America, as well as in the United States and Canada.[2] Once

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[1] D. Rushkoff, *Playing the Future: What We Can Learn From Digital Kids* (New York: HarperCollins 1996).

[2] www.infed.org.

regarded as "supplementary" or "extra-curricular," this kind of education is assuming an expanding new centrality in contemporary life.

Informal education has been a factor in Jewish life for many decades. The network of camps, youth movements, and community centers is sizable.[3] In recent years informal Jewish education has seen impressive developments encompassing research, university courses, articles, training programs, increased funding, and heightened lay interest, in addition to a plethora of practical programs.[4] The Jewish world is showing great interest in the possibilities offered by informal education. We may well be in an era of the emergence of informal education as a seminal force in Jewish life.

The Origins of Informal Jewish Education

Informal Jewish education is usually juxtaposed with formal Jewish education. This is actually a fairly recent development in the history of education; the linguistic distinction did not exist in former times in either Jewish or general culture. Jewish education has a long and glorious history dating back to biblical and talmudic times. Throughout the ages, the Jewish community has devoted much energy to the establishment and maintenance of a rich educational network.[5] There is little doubt of the link between a strong commitment to education and perpetuation of Jewish literacy, lifestyle, and peoplehood.

However, schools were not the only contexts in which Jewish education took place. With a host of other settings exemplifying Jewishness, formal schooling was always accompanied by a powerful parallel (or "informal") system. It included the neighborhood, the home, communal agencies, and the synagogue; celebrations and holidays, group experiences, mentors, and the daily and yearly calendar.[6] There was synergy and consistency between diverse collections of agencies, all of which educated from a shared perspective.

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[3] Bernard Reisman, *Informal Jewish Education in the United States,* report for the Mandel Commission (New York: Mandel Foundation, 1991).

[4] www.brandeis.edu/ije.

[5] Julius Maller, *The Role of Education in Jewish History,"* in *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*, ed. Louis Finklestein (New York: Harper and Row, 1949); David Gordis, "Towards a Rabbinic Philosophy of Education," in *Exploring the Talmud,* ed. Haim Dimitrovsky (New York: Ktav, 1976).

[6] Israel Goldman, *Life-Long Learning Among Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1975); Shoshanna Matzner-Bekerman, *The Jewish Child: Halakhic Perspectives* (New York: Ktav, 1984).

The term "informal education" entered the educational lexicon as a result of the bifurcation of education in modern societies. These societies created distinct state-run institutions called "schools" with a particular focus on: (1) intellectual learning; (2) progression on a hierarchical educational ladder; (3) transmission of cognitive knowledge from adult to child; and (4) addressing the socio-economic needs of societies.[7] These public schools became associated with "curriculum," "teachers," and "grades," and all other aspects of education were increasingly regarded as "extra-curricular," "supplementary" or "informal" education.[8]

Much of twentieth-century Jewish education was shaped by general education, and unfortunately it repeated this mistaken dichotomy of "formal" versus "informal", ultimately treating them as separate and distinct domains. These two worlds developed independently throughout the century, did not always communicate well with each other, and often operated with mutual misunderstanding and suspicion.[9]

The history of Jewish life throughout the ages, as well as the contemporary Jewish experience, convincingly suggests that informal Jewish education is a serious and legitimate partner in the larger Jewish educational enterprise and that it has the potential to be a powerful complement to Jewish schooling in enriching personal Jewish lifestyle and deepening collective Jewish identity. In this monograph we shall examine the meaning and promise of informal Jewish education for enhancing Jewish life.

Defining Informal Education

The current "greening" of informal education raises the question: "What is it?" The most common answer—that informal education is education outside of schools—is convenient but not very useful. First, since a lot of what happens within schools is informal education—for example, sports, debating societies, language clubs, and yearbook—the distinction is not precise. Second, defining informal education in this negative way does not help us to understand what it *is*. In order to be able to really understand informal education and use it effectively, we need to understand precisely what it is and how it works.

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[7] Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); Joel Spring, *A Primer on Libertarian Education* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975).

[8] Spring, *A Primer on Libertarian Education*; Robert Dreeben, *On What is Learned in Schools* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1966).

[9] Alexander Dushkin, *Living Bridges* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1985).

In fact, there have been surprisingly few attempts to carefully and patiently delineate the nature of informal Jewish education. Descriptions of informal educational programs abound, but efforts to confront informal Jewish education on an abstract and conceptual level are rare. That is our task in this monograph: to define and analyze the concept. By looking at some prominent contemporary examples of informal Jewish education—among them, Jewish youth movements and organizations, camps ands retreats, Jewish family education, Internet sites, and pre-schools—we shall identify eight generic characteristics that define informal Jewish education as an individual-centered and highly interactive educational approach focused on learning through experience, with knowledgeable and committed educators who use group process and a "curriculum" of Jewish ideas and values to create a holistic educational culture. Some of the eight characteristics are common to both general and Jewish informal education. The value-based curriculum and the complexity of the educator's role, however, are unique to the latter. As we will see, many attributes of informal Jewish education are also found in schools, in Jewish communal service, in various forms of therapy, and in life itself.

Naming a few of the Jewish and non-Jewish figures whose ideas have contributed to informal Jewish education will help us appreciate the wide-ranging influences upon this approach to learning. A survey of common misperceptions about informal Jewish education rounds out our examination, enabling us to evaluate its promises for twenty-first century Jewish life and its limitations.

Some Examples of Informal Jewish Education

A look at some examples of informal Jewish education provides a clue as to what is truly at the core of this phenomenon.

In *Jewish youth movements and organizations*, young Jews voluntarily participate in cultural, educational, ideological and social activities within a peer group context. (Youth movements encompass both ideological and associational dimensions, whereas youth organizations focus more on the latter.) The power of the peer group and culture is a striking dimension of youth movements and organizations. Many young people enjoy being together and "hanging out" with friends in their youth groups. Youth movement and organizations are often led by charismatic and engaging "counselors" close in age to the participants. These leaders have the ability to excite

and inspire their younger charges, and there is often a great sense of identification with them. Youth movements frequently address topics that are immediate and of interest to young people. The participants are excited about attending weekly meetings, going away for weekends, and spending summers together with friends and colleagues from the "movement" or the "club." The whole experience of taking part in these youth activities carries an aura of enthusiasm and fun.

Jewish *camps ands retreats* are educational settings where Jews spend blocks of time with peers in a diverse range of activities, including education, sports, recreation, social pastimes, and Jewish living.[10] Camps and retreats are particularly effective in creating an intense Jewish milieu. The Hebrew-speaking summer camp makes Hebrew language and culture come alive twenty-four hours a day. The weekend "Shabbaton" affords a full experiencing of Shabbat—preparation, *kabbalat Shabbat,* Shabbat meals, singing *zmirot,* study, singing and dancing, and *havdalah*—that many young people have never before encountered. Camps and retreats are effective at developing a sense of "togetherness" and group loyalty. The bunk or camp as a whole often becomes a closely-knit community that is united by shared songs, experiences, activities, and memories.

In camps all elements of the schedule—waking up, sports, nature, evenings, meals, free time—can be co-opted for educational purposes. Every moment in camp or at the retreat is potentially a time for education, and the overall setting is a "classroom" and "campus" for learning. Finally, the experience of going to camp or to a retreat has, like the youth movement, an aura of great engagement and fun about it.

Jewish Community Centers are multipurpose institutions established to provide a diversity of recreational, cultural, social, athletic, and Jewish and general educational activities for a broad cross-section of Jews. In recent decades they have proven to be a new kind of Jewish neighborhood. Jews of all ages pass through the JCC's halls and it is one of the few places where Jews of all kinds meet together. It is a center of diverse kinds of Jewish and general activities: pre-school teachers sing Hebrew songs, staff members study Jewish history; *challot* are baked on Friday morning, parents and children swim together, fathers and mothers work out and play basketball. "Jewish

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[10] Jena Josselit, *A Worthy Use of Summer: Jewish Summer Camps 1900–1950"* (www.nmajh.org/exhibitions/summercamp, 1994).

oxygen flows in this place and it is breathed by millions of Jews who enter its doors."[11]

JCCs lack a curriculum in the sense of a fixed set of subjects or books, but they do have a broad menu of Jewish programs, activities, learning, and observances. Jewish activities happen at JCCs in a way and in a constellation that differs from traditional school models. JCC staff includes highly skilled professionals with "people skills" who increasingly are also knowledgeable and committed Jews.[12] Many JCCs have full-time educators who, in addition to teaching, also "hang out" in the health club and the gym as well as in the study room or library. As is true of all the other forms of informal Jewish education, it's engaging and fun to go to the JCC.

Adult learning refers to voluntary frameworks established to enable adult Jews to enrich their Jewish knowledge and acquire Jewish skills in warm and non-threatening settings. *Jewish family education* refers to educational programs developed for entire families with the purpose of strengthening Jewish family life and co-opting the families into the education of the young.[13] These two kinds of informal education seem closer to traditional educational models in that there are more likely to be teachers and texts. But the teachers are very interactive and learner-centered, presenting the texts in ways that relate to the lives and life settings of the participants. Beyond being knowledgeable, the teachers are skilled at making adults—and young people—feel comfortable about Jewish learning. The learning has nothing to do with grades or advancement on a hierarchical ladder. Those who gather to learn become more than a class, and very often in the case of adult learning they are transformed into a "family-like" group.[14]

Jewish travel refers to organized educational journeys that take young people and adults to places of Jewish interest throughout the world. This kind of education involves directly experiencing sites, events, and people. The trip to Prague or Venice provides an experience of Jewish and general culture coexisting. To travel to Poland is to experience the height of Jewish creativity and the depth of human depravity.

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[11] Barry Chazan, *What is Jewish Education in JCCs?* (Jerusalem: Jewish Community Centers Association, 1996).

[12] Barry Chazan and Steven Cohen, *Assessing the Jewish Educational Effectiveness of JCCs: The 1994 Study* (New York: Jewish Community Centers Association, 1994).

[13] Janice Alper, ed., *LEARNING TOGETHER: A Source Book on Jewish Family Education* (Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1987).

[14] Betsy Katz and Jonathan Murvis (1997). *Israel and Adult Jewish Education.* Jerusalem: Keren Karev, Jewish Agency Department of Education, Mifgashim Centre.

Traveling to Israel is about seeing, feeling, and touching the Jewish past, present, and future. There is defined subject matter in this kind of education and a great deal of cognitive learning takes place, but it happens through seeing, visiting, touching, and participating, rather than through lectures or "looking in from without." Experiential and informative, travel often creates a sense of community and it is usually regarded as great fun.

Also sometimes cited as examples of informal Jewish education are *museums,* the *Internet*,[15] *synagogue centers*,[16] and *preschools*.[17] Some analysts of the modern *day school* suggest that these might be better seen as total Jewish "cultures"—formal and informal—rather than as schools in the narrow sense.[18] These additional examples underscore qualities that were prominent in the kinds of education we saw above: the importance of the learner, the role of the group, involvement, the total setting, and the fun and excitement of the experience.

The Defining Characteristics of Informal Jewish Education

The examples we have seen suggest eight formal attributes that characterize informal Jewish education. The uniqueness of informal Jewish education lies in the configuration and synergy of these eight characteristics.

1. Person-Centered Jewish Education

The central focus of informal education is the individual and his/her growth. Underlying this focus is the belief that human beings are not simply empty vessels waiting to be filled, as John Locke's "impression model" of teaching would suggest,[19] but rather, the individual is an active dynamic organism who grows and is shaped through his/her own active engagement in learning. Hence, this kind of education places primacy on the person's own involvement and progress. He/she is considered an active partner in the educational dynamic. Educationally, this implies what is often called "a child-centered pedagogy" in the context of young learners, with a focus on

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[15] Rushkoff, *Playing the Future.*
[16] David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue Center" in Jewish History* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1999).
[17] Lillian Weber, *The English Infant School and Informal Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: The Center for Urban Education, 1971).
[18] Barry Chazan, *Jewish Identity and Education in Melbourne* (Jerusalem: Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1979).
[19] Israel Scheffler, "Philosophical Models of Teaching," in *Harvard Education Review* 35 (1965).

personal interests, listening as much as telling, starting with questions, identifying interests, and collaborating rather than coercing.[20]

In terms of informal Jewish education, the person-centered principle means helping each individual grow and find meaning as a Jew. The emphasis is on personal Jewish development rather than the transmission of Jewish culture, and the individual is actively engaged in his/her own journey of Jewish growth.

The preoccupation with the person in informal Jewish education also implies concern with affecting the learner's *total* being. While selected activities may focus on a specific Jewish skill or Jewish topic (such as learning to speak Hebrew or build a *sukkah*), the ultimate aim of informal Jewish education is building the person's overall Jewish character. Thus, informal Jewish education does not see "Jewish growth" as exclusively intellectual but rather as a synthesis of aesthetic, affective, moral, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions.

2. The Centrality of Experience

Informal Jewish education is rooted in a belief that the experience is central to the individual's Jewish development. The notion of experience in education derives from the idea that participating in an event or a moment through the senses and the body enables one to understand a concept, fact or belief in a direct and unmediated way. Experience in education refers to learning that happens through participation in events or through other direct action, or by direct observation or hearing. John Dewey expanded upon this idea by suggesting that people are active centers of impulse rather than passive vessels and they learn best when they are actively rather than passively engaged in experiencing an idea or an event. Such experiencing is rooted in the interaction of the idea or event with the person's life and with a continuum of ideas that enables the experience to contribute to ongoing personal growth.[21]

The focus on experience results in a pedagogy that attempts to create settings which enable values to be experienced personally and events to be experienced in real time and in genuine venues, rather than their being described to the learner. Over the years

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[20] Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1997).
[21] J. Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

this notion of experiencing has become closely identified with "experiential education," often seen as the "calling card" of informal education.[22]

In terms of informal Jewish education, learning occurs through enabling people to undergo key Jewish experiences and values. For example, an experiential approach to Shabbat focuses on enabling people to experience Shabbat in real time—buying flowers Friday afternoon, lighting candles at sunset, hearing *kiddush* before the meal, and eating *hallah.* This approach does not deny the value of learning *about* Shabbat in classes and from texts but it does suggest that cognitive learning about an experience cannot replace the real thing.

It is important to note that the experience of study, the learning of ideas, if done well, is in itself an experience and one that can be very powerful. The unmediated confrontation with text, either individually or via *havruta* or a class with an exceptional teacher, are powerful examples of the central Jewish value of *talmud torah.* Thus, the emphasis on experience is not a rejection of the experience of study; rather, it is a refocusing on the active engagement of a person with all his/her senses so that the learning comes from within rather than being imposed from without.

Jewish education lends itself particularly well to the experiential approach because so many of the concepts that we wish to teach, such as Shabbat, holidays, and daily blessings, are rooted in actual experiences. The moral system of Judaism—honoring parents, helping the needy, social justice—is rooted in deeds. The cultural life of Judaism—songs, food, and holidays—is rooted in meals, singing, ritual objects and specific celebrations. Israel in Jewish life is not an abstract concept but a real place that can visited, touched, walked, and smelled. Jewish education is extremely well suited to giving experience primacy. And informal Jewish education is the branch of Jewish education, which highlights that primacy.

3. A Curriculum of Jewish Experiences and Values

Curriculum has been generally seen as characteristic of formal rather than informal education and understood in terms of set courses of studies, with lists of subjects to be covered, books to read, ideas to be learned, and tests to be given. However, the more generic concept of curriculum as an overall blueprint or plan of action is very much part of informal Jewish education. While it is both flexible and closely related to the

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[22] Reisman, *Informal Jewish Education in the United States*.

lives and significant moments of the learners, this curriculum is rooted in a well-defined body of Jewish experiences and values.

In contemporary Jewish life there is a diversity of views regarding the core experiences and values of Jewish tradition or culture. Religious approaches are likely to emphasize prayer, study, holidays, and rituals. Ethnic approaches are likely to emphasize Hebrew, holidays, music, and customs. National approaches are likely to emphasize the Land of Israel, travel to Israel, Hebrew, and Jewish history. Because of this diversity, it is difficult to arrive at one agreed-upon core curriculum for teaching experiences and values. However, there are some Jewish experiences that seem to be shared by the majority of informal Jewish educational systems: (1) Jewish holiday and calendar experiences; (2) Jewish lifecycle experiences; (3) studying Jewish texts; (4) Jewish cultural and peoplehood experiences; and (5) acting upon Jewish values. Most forms of Jewish informal education throughout the world—whether in the Deportivo in Mexico City, at a NFTY retreat in Skokie, or at a Counterpoint Seminar in Melbourne, to cite just a few examples—program around such themes as the Passover seder, Shabbat candles, *tikkun olam,* and *tzedaka,* and rallies for Israel or Jews in need.

A central dimension of informal Jewish education's curriculum is its flexibility and dynamism. The methods of teaching "core contents" and the sequence in which they are taught are open to change and adjustment. These core experiences and values may be "taught" in a variety of ways, depending upon time, place, and the individual pace of each learner.

4. An Interactive Process

Ultimately the unfolding of the curriculum is determined by the interaction of people with each other and with core experiences. Informal Jewish education is rooted in the belief that the active interchange between students and between students and educators is a critical dimension of Jewish learning. Interaction refers to a reciprocal effect or influence between two or more people. The behavior of one, it is assumed, acts as a stimulus for the behavior of the other. People learn and grow through active social interaction, which stimulates ideas, causes us to think and rethink views, and helps us to re-conceptualize our beliefs and ideologies. The active dialogue back and

forth with others is not simply pedagogically useful; it is, in a more basic sense, a pivotal factor in shaping our ideas, beliefs, and behaviors.[23]

The principle of interactivity implies pedagogy of asking questions, stimulating discussions, and engaging the learner. To stimulate interactivity, educators must create an environment, which invites learners to listen to each other and to react with dignity and decency.[24] The pedagogy of informal Jewish education is rooted in techniques that enfranchise openness, encourage engagement, instigate creative dialectic, and insure comfort of diversity and disagreement. For example, students may be asked what they think; how great rabbis of the past might have reacted; what the Jewish contents means for their lives; and what they agree or disagree with.

Informal Jewish education is as concerned with igniting the dialogic with the learner as it is with transmitting the culture. Informal Jewish educators cannot really complete their work unless there is a dynamic interactive process between student and educator, student and student, student and text, and student and Tradition. Neither ingenuous nor instrumental, this interaction is an inherent element of informal Jewish education's theory of learning.

5. The Group Experience

In informal education, the group is an integral component of the learning experience. As Emile Durkheim and G.H, Mead argued, groups are *a priori* forces that shape human life,[25] rather than technical structures that are superimposed upon us. The groups of which we are part shape our minds, language, and selves in very central ways. Therefore, teaching groups is not simply about transmitting knowledge to all the individuals gathered in one room, but rather is very much about the dynamic role of the collective in expressing and reinforcing values that are part of the culture of the society that created the group. Groups are not simply aggregates of people learning

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[23] Martin Buber, "Teaching and the Deed," in *Israel and the World* (New York: Schocken, 1948); Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).
[24] S. Haroutinian-Gordon, *Turning the Soul: Teaching Through Conversation in the High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); N. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).
[25] Emile Durkheim, *Education and Sociology* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957); G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

individually in parallel fashion; they are social networks that teach ideas and values through the essence of the group process.

Thus, the adult Jewish learning class is not simply a classroom of individuals expanding their Jewish knowledge; it is a dynamic community of like-minded adults sharing knowledge, experiences, pain, joys, and common moments. The skilled informal adult Jewish educator does not just teach Jewish history or holidays; he/she also shapes a community that exemplifies the Jewish value of *kehilla.* The group is central in informal Jewish education in that the key values of *klal yisrael* (the totality of Israel), *am yisrael* (Jewish people), *kehillat kodesh* (holy community), *and tikkun olam* (improving the world) are experienced through its very existence.

Some have seen Jewish associationalism as a limited or even problematic kind of Judaism and Jewish education.[26] Reservations about an identity that is exclusively tribal or associational are understandable, but there is also great power to a positive collective communal Jewish consciousness, as evidenced by Jewish involvement in the movement for Soviet Jewry and the Civil Rights movement in the United States, as well as Jewish support for Israel over the years.[27] Informal Jewish education attempts to harness that power.

6. The "Culture" of Jewish Education

Informal Jewish education is rooted in the belief that education is ultimately about "creating culture" rather than transmitting knowledge. This form of education attains its goals most effectively by treating the entire educational setting as a comprehensive culture. "Culture" here refers to the totality of components that make up educational contexts: architecture, styles of dress, codes and norms of behavior, seating patterns, physical and aesthetic decor, norms of human interaction, language patterns, and many others.[28] According to the theory of cultural psychology, it is the total cultural milieu that teaches, by presenting, creating, and reinforcing values, ideas, experiences, norms, and ultimately a worldview. Hence, informal Jewish education emphasizes the

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[26] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, *The Jew Within* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
[27] Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
[28] Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

importance of orchestrating settings to reflect and model the values and behaviors deemed important.

Informal Jewish education focuses on all aspects of an environment in order to educate for Jewishness. It does not emphasize only cognitive or discursive content, but also the many diverse aspects of the setting as a whole: what the room looks like; what food is served and how; what happens at recess; how staff members interact with each other. With such an approach, logistical and organizational considerations are neither incidental nor secondary to the educational program; they are themselves inherently educational issues. On the Israel trip, for example, it is the educator and not the bus driver or innkeeper who should determine routes and room allocation. The dinner menu on the first night of a Jewish summer camp is as much an issue for the camp educator as it is for the business manager or dietitian. The latter are rightly focused on finance or nutrition, while the former, zeroing in on the transition of the campers and possible "newness panic," seeks to create a warm Jewish home atmosphere. Issues of food, travel, bedtime and waking up, personal hygiene, and economics are core issues of education and mental health and not of logistics and administration.[29]

The notion of an "educational culture" also implies that education is not limited to specific locales such as classrooms or school buildings; it can occur anywhere. As we learn in the most concise and most powerful text on informal Jewish education ever written, Jewish education takes place "when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy vi: 4–9).

The notion of a culture of education also suggests that no one agency has a monopoly on Jewish education. Such a culture can be created wherever Jews are found: in community centers, Jewish family service offices, and sports clubs; at retreats and conferences; during meals and bus rides. Some of these places may well be ideal venues for Jewish education because they are real settings where Jewish experiences can be lived out. The task of the educator is to shape all settings so that they may serve the larger educational vision.

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[29] Bruno Bettelheim, *Love is Not Enough* (New York: Collier Books, 1950); Fritz Redl and David Wineman, *The Aggressive Child* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

7. An Education That Engages

Informal Jewish education intensely engages and even co-opts participants and makes them feel positive about being involved.[30] Because of its focus on the individual and on issues that are real to him/her, informal Jewish education is often described as "fun," "joyful," or "enjoyable." This should not be taken as a sign of frivolity or lack of seriousness. As Erikson and others have taught us, identity is in part a sense of positive feelings about a group or a frame of reference; and positive feelings about a Jewish experience play an important role in the development of Jewish identity. Indeed, there are those who say that we need such experiences because Jewish identity development is so often complicated by a plethora of negative associations. Research on informal Jewish education points to the high degree of participant satisfaction as compared with other spheres of Jewish life.[31]

In this context, informal Jewish education may be compared to play and sports.[32] The literature on play and sports emphasizes the involvement and engagement of the learner; the joy in the moment; the immediacy of it all; the positive memory, and the warm associations. What seems mundane may be sublime: Bart Giamatti, the late Renaissance scholar and commissioner of North American baseball, describes an end-of-season baseball game as a life event reminiscent of *Erev* Rosh Hashanah—the beginning of the new year for Jews ("In the seventh, the Yankees lead off with two singles from Chambliss and White…I am going to board a plane in a mere five minutes and my heroes and I, after a long spring and summer and hectic fall are going home… I now remember it is Rosh Hashanah, and I recall that renewal has rhythms as old as decline").[33] One small game is an echo of eternity and paradise.

8. Informal Jewish Education's Holistic Educator

The informal Jewish educator is a total educational personality who educates by words, deeds, and by shaping a culture of Jewish values and experiences. He/she is a

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[30] Van Clive Morris, *Existentialism in Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
[31] Chazan, *Jewish Identity and Education in Melbourne*; Len Saxe et al., *A Mega-Experiment in Jewish Education: The Impact of birthright israel* (Waltham, Mass.: The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2002).
[32] Saralea Chazan, *Profiles of Play* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002); A. Bartlett Giamatti, *A Great and Glorious Game* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998); Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
[33] Giamatti, *A Great and Glorious Game,* pp. 32-33.

person-centered educator whose focus is on learners and whose goal is their personal growth.

The informal Jewish educator is a shaper of Jewish experiences. His/her role in this context is to create opportunities for those experiences and to facilitate the learner's entry into the moments. The informal Jewish educator promotes interaction and interchange. One of his/her major tasks is to create an environment that enables this interactivity to flourish. This requires proficiency in the skills of asking questions, listening, and activating the engagement of others.

The informal Jewish educator is a creator of community and *kehilla:* he/she shapes the aggregate into a group and utilizes the group setting to teach such core Jewish values as *klal Yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood)*, kvod haadam (*the dignity of all people)*, shutfut goral* (shared destiny)*,* and *shivyon* (equality). Informal Jewish educators are creators of culture; they are sensitive to all the elements specific to the educational setting so that these will reflect values and experiences they wish to convey. The task in this instance is to make every decision—big or little—an educational decision.

Informal Jewish educators must be able to engage those with whom they work and make their learning experience enjoyable. The stimulation of positive associations is part of the informal Jewish educator's work.

Finally, the informal Jewish educator needs to be an educated and committed Jew. This educator must be knowledgeable since one of the values he/she comes to teach is *talmud torah*—Jewish knowledge. He/she must be committed to these values since teaching commitment to the Jewish people, to Jewish life, and Jewish values is at the heart of the enterprise. Commitment can only be learned if one sees examples of it up close.

Informal Jewish Education Defined

Having identified these eight characteristics, we can spell out a definition of informal Jewish education:

Informal Jewish education is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens through the individual's actively experiencing a diversity of Jewish moments and values that are regarded as worthwhile. It works by creating venues, by developing a total educational culture, and by co-opting the social context. It is based on a curriculum of Jewish values and experiences that is presented in a dynamic and flexible manner. As an activity, it does not call for any one venue but may happen in a

variety of settings. It evokes pleasurable feelings and memories. It requires Jewishly literate educators with a "teaching" style that is highly interactive and participatory, who are willing to make maximal use of self and personal lifestyle in their educational work.

What is Unique About Informal Jewish Education

1. The Synergy of the Eight Characteristics

Informal Jewish education is not defined by any one of its eight characteristics. Each of these characteristics is also a component of other kinds of education and other professions that involve working with people. The coming together of the eight characteristics in the new construct called informal Jewish education is the key to understanding the concept. By way of analogy: Chicken soup on Friday night requires not only the combination of water, vegetables, and chicken, but also the presence of candles, *challah*, dusk, and a loving family to become part of the Shabbat experience. Likewise, a person-centered approach, an emphasis on Jewish experience; a curriculum of experiences and values, interactivity, group process, a culture of education, an engaged mood, and a holistic Jewish educator are all required to add up to informal Jewish education.

Ultimately, informal Jewish education is a philosophy of Jewish education. It is a theory or philosophy about educating people that emphasizes choice, high degrees of interactivity, a flexible conception of content or subject matter, accessible "teachers," and much group process. Informal Jewish education implies not a place but a worldview about how people learn, what is important to learn, and how we should teach. To begin to really talk about informal Jewish education is to confront the big and basic questions of education.

2. Informal Education and Informal Jewish Education

Jewish and general informal education shares six of the defining characteristics: both are person-centered, experience-oriented, and interactive, and both promote learning and experiencing community, a culture of education, and content that engages. Nonetheless, informal Jewish education is a *sui generis*, a unique category of its own. It differs from general informal education in two major respects: its curriculum of experiences and values and its holistic educator.

The first difference has to do with the goal of curriculum in Jewish as opposed to general informal education. Informal Jewish education is inherently about affecting the lifestyle and identity of Jews. All forms of informal Jewish education are ultimately education for Jewish character or lifestyle. It is true that there are specific examples of informal Jewish education that seem to be about well-defined topics, rather than about identity. The adult learning class on "The Rhythm of Jewish Life" helps participants acquire knowledge about the Jewish calendar. The trip to Poland enables a better understanding of the role of the Holocaust in Jewish life. But in both cases, the larger, overall goal is Jewish character or identity education.

In general informal education, on the other hand, a class or workshop is about learning a skill or improving one's skills. It might also be about recreation and use of free time. But it is not about ultimate identity or about character education. In informal Jewish education the specific Jewish experiences (holidays, visits to Jewish sites, the Israel trip) that make up the "curriculum" are really about a curriculum of Jewishness *in toto*, whereas in general informal education the specific experiences and skills (sports, ceramics, music, learning about other cultures) that make up the curriculum are the ends in themselves.

The second difference has to do with divergent conceptions of the role of the informal educator. Educators in informal Jewish education are inherently shapers of Jewish experience and role models of Jewish lifestyle. They need to be skilled in the facts of the Jewish calendar or the history of Polish Jewry, but ultimately their unique mission is to set up Jewish experiences and affect Jewish identity. If an educator's sole role is giving a good lecture about the Polish *kehilla* in the nineteenth century, he/she is called a "visiting lecturer." A person whose sole task is to take a group through the streets of Prague or Krakow is a tour guide. Only if the mission is to affect the total Jewish being of the traveler is the guide an "informal Jewish educator."

In general informal education, the good educator is focused on helping to develop skills and not on shaping identity or group loyalties. The ceramics teacher is expected to be proficient at teaching others how to use a kiln and make attractive bowls. Success in helping them improve is the measure of his/her effectiveness, and not his/her character or influence on the learner's overall identity. The swimming teacher might be a person of character and might also contribute to affecting children's self-confidence and their attitudes toward their bodies. But ultimately a parent engages the swimming teacher to teach a child to swim and not to shape character. Indeed,

sometimes we quite explicitly want such educators to focus on their specific tasks and not go into other areas, which are not their bailiwick. Math educators don't have to be triangles to do their job; informal Jewish educators do have to be some kind of Jewish role models in order to be effective.

Where Informal Jewish Education Differs

Our analysis of informal Jewish education helps us to clearly see that it is not confined to a place even though it does seem to happen in certain venues such as camps, youth movements or retreats. Many of its methods characterize social work, therapy, and even good school classes or seminars. At the same time, it is true that certain methodologies such as group process, dialogue, and experiencing are very central to the practice of informal Jewish education. Let us take a closer look at informal Jewish education and (1) schools; (2) Jewish communal service; (3) therapy; and (4) life itself.

1. Informal Jewish Education and Jewish Schools

As we have seen, the most common comparison is between informal Jewish education and that which takes place in Jewish schools. In fact, we have been suggesting that there are important similarities: Both are rooted in some overall Jewish vision or ideology. Both have a program or a "curriculum" that guides their work. Both are populated by people whose role is to "shape," "teach," or "guide" and others who are in the setting to learn and grow. Both happen in specific social and cultural contexts and are conducted by some public or private agency. Both are concerned for the Jewish future.

At the same time, there are also clear sociological differences. Generally, contemporary schooling—Jewish and general—has become associated with the task of transmitting knowledge.[34] It also has important socialization and acculturation objectives, but the transmission of knowledge remains a central focus. This knowledge is usually categorized in terms of a curriculum or course of study, which becomes the definitive "map" of what should be taught. These contents have usually been seen in cognitive terms and they are often linked to the idea of a core intellectual

[34] E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

"canon," a culture or society's body of basic texts. The central personalities in schools are generally "teachers," whose roles are multiple but certainly linked to transmitting knowledge. Much of general schooling is geared to progressing on a hierarchical ladder of educational achievement, which means advancing to the next rung of schooling and ultimately to a profession. Jewish schools too must be effective in advancing their charges on this ladder. Schooling over the years has very much become linked to a system of sanctions rooted in grades and outside evaluative measurements.[35]

Informal Jewish education, as we have seen, emphasizes experiences, the role of the learner, and the educator as shaper of environment, group process, and interaction. It is undoubtedly true that many contemporary Jewish schools also value these attributes, and in that sense Jewish schools and informal Jewish education are often close relatives rather than opposing forces. Jewish schools have played and will continue to play a central role in the education of the individual and the advancement of societies; informal Jewish education proposes acting as a viable and vibrant partner in that process.

2. Informal Jewish Education and Jewish Communal Service

Informal education is sometimes equated with Jewish communal service. In training programs, journals, and professional development, these two spheres often are aligned, and it is worthwhile to examine their relationship.

Informal Jewish education shares the concerns of Jewish communal service and social work for the needs of the Jewish people and Jewish communal life. In addition, informal Jewish education and Jewish communal service also share the grounding in group dynamics and group process, and focus on the person. Both of these approaches are rooted in the helping professions and in the rich social science tradition of individual psychology, social psychology, organizational theory, the clinical process, and group relations.

However, informal Jewish education and Jewish communal service are not exactly the same. The former is an overt form of Jewish education in its concern with presenting individuals at various stages of their lives with a Jewish educational vision

[35] Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve.*

that will be meaningful for them. With its main task the Jewish growth of the learner, informal Jewish education is centrally concerned with Jewish experiences, Jewish lifestyle, and Jewish worldview. Jewish communal service responds to the various needs of Jews and the Jewish community—social, cultural, recreational, welfare. It comes to help Jews wherever they are and it aims to advance Jewish communal improvement. It is not contradictory to the goals of informal Jewish education but it is not exactly its equivalent.

3. Informal Jewish Education and Therapy

Informal Jewish education is influenced by presuppositions that underlie certain major approaches to therapy in the past century. These approaches share with informal Jewish education the concern with the individual and the individual's needs as the "client." Both therapy and informal Jewish education require the engagement of the individual in order to do their work. Both are committed to words and to dialectic as a central technique for engaging clients and for enabling them to grow.

There are, however, major differences. Therapy is ultimately very much about healing and "fixing" people: "Psychotherapy aims, in general, to reduce or eliminate distress and disability that are a consequence of the neurotic person's reaction against himself. In short it aims simply to repair."[36] While it can also be said to help people grow, its tasks are adaptive and rehabilitative. It does not replace education, but very often it is an adjustment to and antidote for education! Informal Jewish education is overtly about educating, building, and helping to give shape to a Jewish way. It is not about healing or repairing (although it sometimes does that), but about creating and unfolding.

The major difference is ultimately related to worldview. Therapy comes to help individuals find their way and it generally does not propose or promulgate any one worldview. It is ultimately a technique to help a person to better function and make choices. Informal Jewish education shares therapy's commitment to individual choice, but it also speaks in the name of Jewish values and lifestyles that it regards as desirable. It is not just a technique; it is also content-based, ultimately rooted in a worldview that is Jewish. It may be diverse and it certainly does not come to impose

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[36] David Shapiro, *The Psychotherapy of Neurotic Character* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 116.

the worldview, but it does represent a belief that there are values and behaviors that are integral to the Jewish perspective and are good and valuable.

4. Informal Jewish Education and Life

It is appealing to say, "All of Jewish life is informal Jewish education." Informal Jewish education, like life itself, encompasses diverse Jewish experiences in a variety of settings. However, while we do learn many things from Jewish life, there is a critical distinction. Jewish life is a complex pattern of personalities, events, and processes over which no one person or force has definitive control. General events, the economy, world forces, and other religions and cultures all shape Jewish life, as do the dynamics of Jewish organizations, Jewish leaders, and Jewish communities. Jewish life as a whole is not something that can fix goals and outcomes or build a curriculum of experiences. It does "educate" in the sense that it has an impact upon us, but it doesn't have the ability to choose this. (Some use the terms "non-formal education" and "informal education" to distinguish between the overall educational influences of life and conscious efforts to educate via informal approaches).[37] The events of Jewish life—like all of life—are the outcome of a multitude of historical, political, and sociological forces over which we do not have total control.
In contra-distinction, informal Jewish education deliberately selects Jewish experiences with the conscious intent of affecting the learner. Jewish life is a haphazard flow of events, the outcome of a multitude of historical, political, and sociological forces; informal Jewish education is a conscious effort to shape what Jewish life is. Jewish education chooses to be.

The Sources of Informal Jewish Education

Informal Jewish education is an eclectic theory that is informed by several diverse sources. The development of the literature of this field is still at an early age and will require time and a willingness to roam wide and far in Jewish texts and in history, world literature, philosophy, and the social sciences. We are at the very beginning of the journey.

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[37] *International Encyclopedia of Education,* 1994; T. Simkins, *Non-Formal Education and Development* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

One important source for understanding informal Jewish education is the history and texts of Jewish tradition. The great texts of our civilization, along with the social history of Jewish life throughout the ages and across continents, reveal much about basic educational approaches and practices in Jewish communal and religious life. Important resources include: biblical and talmudic texts, the history of Jewish education and community in Eretz Israel and in Babylonia, the academies of the great rabbis, the classical yeshiva, the *kehilla* of nineteenth-century Poland, Jewish camping and youth movements in the twentieth century, and the thinking of such diverse personalities as Rabbi Akiva, the Salanter Rebbe, Martin Buber, and Janus Korzack.
General intellectual and educational thought is a second seminal force for understanding informal Jewish education and includes the ideas of such figures as: Socrates, St. Augustine, Maria Montessori, Sigmund Freud; John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Bruno Bettleheim, Paolo Freire, Michel Foucault, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Oliver Sacks. While most of them did not write about "informal education" per se, their thinking about education, knowing, learning, and context are critical for the shaping of the theory of informal education.
The contemporary social sciences and education, including popular culture and postmodern literary and cultural theory have much to teach us about informal education, as they reflect new currents in how people learn, think, and come to know. This world includes cultural psychology, literature, art, music, advertising, marketing, sports, museums, and fashion.
Finally, there is much to learn from serious research and from case studies of prominent forms of contemporary informal education in the Jewish world and the world at large. The practice of informal education is blossoming and is worthy of serious and diverse modes of research and analysis.
Together these sources will become the basis of a serious academic approach to the study of informal Jewish education.

In Defense of Informal Jewish Education

Over the years a host of reservations about informal Jewish education have been raised. In this section I shall attempt to address some of these and provide answers to my interlocutors.

"Informal Jewish education has no Jewish content or curriculum."

Informal Jewish education's content is a body of Jewish experiences, values, and behaviors that its proponents wish to present and help learners internalize. Informal Jewish education comes to enable a person to confront and internalize basic dimensions of being Jewish by experiencing them. It is true that this content is not the same as a body of facts and ideas about Judaism organized according to theoretical categories or presented in books. These contents are not limited to bodies of knowledge or texts but rather encompass the internalization of Jewish knowledge, facts, and values into a personal life style

There is an informal Jewish educational curriculum and it is well defined and explicit, but the dynamics of its teaching are not carved in stone. The curriculum of informal Jewish education doesn't look like *school* curricula with lists of themes, dates, facts, and generalizations, and specific lesson plans for the day. It is more likely to be organized around key value concepts, kinds of experiences, and moments in time, and it is much more flexible and adaptive in nature.

"Informal Jewish education neglects the Jewish canon."

The "canon" is a popular contemporary term referring to a compendium of basic texts regarded as the core of Jewish culture and civilization. This canon is typically held to include: Bible, Talmud, commentaries, Midrash, rabbinic literature, *siddur*, and other texts that are assumed to comprise the core of Jewish learning. Teaching the canon is central not only to Jewish education but to Jewish life and continuity and must be incorporated into any comprehensive Jewish program of learning. Teaching the canon requires knowledgeable and talented teachers and structured settings. Informal Jewish education is informed and shaped by the canon and reflects its best principles; however, its ultimate task is not the transmission of the canon per se but rather the canon's underlying values and ideas. While informal Jewish education may not specifically teach the texts of the canon, it is inherently shaped by it. And, as we saw, the traditional texts are certainly a part of informal Jewish education's own eclectic "canon."

Studying texts surely is serious and one of the cornerstones of Jewish education. But other Jewish experiences also can be serious, in the sense of life shaping life. The study of great Jewish books should be treated very seriously, but so should the experiencing of Shabbat, visiting the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, or strolling through

the hills of the Galilee on a spring day. Informal Jewish education is not a replacement for the canon but rather makes its ideas and teachings come alive.

"**Informal Jewish education is 'touchy-feely.'"**

It is true that informal Jewish education is concerned with attitudes, feelings, and choices, but that does not mean that it is unconcerned with substantive teaching of Judaism. Adult learning programs, camp programs, and Israel trips help students become more knowledgeable about Judaism although their ultimate goal is knowledge, which leads to action and lifestyle. Affect is clearly an important part of identity and of Jewish life, and neglect of this fact in Jewish education is often lamented by the unattached. The emphasis on affect and behavior is not a rejection of intellect and understanding. Indeed, informal education may be about correcting the bifurcation between affect and intellect and restoring the organic harmony between deeds, intellect, and emotion.

"Informal Jewish education is simply having fun."

Informal Jewish education isn't only fun, but fortunately for Jewish life it certainly does seem to be enjoyable! Calling informal Jewish education "fun" is significant because this says that there are kinds of Jewish experience and education, which can engage and ignite people. But it is also education, and when done properly it can advance Jewish understanding and living. We should not be afraid or skeptical of things that are fun—we should jump at the educational opportunity they present. Informal Jewish education is playing in the sense of deep involvement in a comprehensive activity that completely engages the learner. Many studies tell us how central play can be in child therapy,[38] in the cultural life of a society,[39] and in personal relationships. Erikson looked to toys as a key to understanding young people, and, as we noted, Giamatti compared baseball in the lives of Americans to Rosh Hashanah. Informal Jewish education is not playing in the sense of being irrelevant and casual—it is play in the sense of engaging and energizing.

"Informal Jewish educators are not serious professionals."

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[38] S. Chazan, *Profiles of Play.*
[39] Giamatti, *A Great and Glorious Game.*

Informal Jewish education in fact calls for extremely serious educators and training! To be a truly professional informal Jewish educator one needs Judaic knowledge; a Jewish lifestyle; a knack for group dynamics; the ability to be inter-active and to listen; the ability to engage others; and the ability to impart ideas and values twenty-four hours day, seven days a week. One has to be accomplished in many areas—encompassing both content and method, Jewish and general—often demonstrating proficiency over and above that required of teachers. Thus, the training and work of informal Jewish educators is very challenging, to the extent that some regard it as a "mission impossible."

It is indeed a difficult and challenging profession, but the work can be done. The theory is based on real life, real experiences, and real people. There are masters of this work out there accomplishing this kind of education and many readers of this treatise have been affected by them. Some readers are these educators. The fact that something is complicated does not mean it is impossible.

"Informal Jewish education is simply another way to say 'good education.'"

"Informal education" is not simply a synonym for "good education." It is a term that exists in common language and a phenomenon that exists in contemporary educational practice in countries throughout the world. I have attempted to show that there are formal dimensions, which define this phenomenon and distinguish it from other kinds of education. Moreover, all informal education is not *mutandis mutandi* "good education"; there can be good informal education or mediocre informal education or bad informal education. In contemporary educational parlance and practice, the term "informal education" is a formal category that describes an idea and a form of education.

The Promise and Limitations of Informal Jewish Education

What is the promise of informal Jewish education? This kind of education is uniquely equipped to introduce people of all ages to some of the great experiences and moments of Jewish life. Its focus on the person and its emphasis on actually participating in significant moments offer great promise for affecting individuals and the Jewish community very powerfully. It offers great promise for affecting Jewish

feeling and behavior. It can deepen some Jewish skills very well—for example, speaking Hebrew or reading Torah or building a *sukkah*—because in informal Jewish education one learns by doing. It is very effective in helping individuals advance on their personal journeys and growth, as a plethora of voices from summer camps, Israeli trips, and other kind of informal education attest.[40]

Informal Jewish education may be less effective for systematic Jewish text learning, for a systematic expansion of Jewish literacy, and for the meta-analysis of Jewish ideas. In that sense it is less effective in the overall goal of imparting Jewish culture, an important objective for the Jewish people as a whole. Informal Jewish education's strength is not in guaranteeing transmission of the Jewish canon and cultural legacy, which is so important for Jewish survival. Informal Jewish education is not anti-intellectual, but it does not make the cognitive and the intellectual its sole or even main preoccupation. It does seem fair to say that schooling has several potential advantages in enabling systematic Jewish learning.

Finally, because informal Jewish education is so focused on the individual and his/her personal journey and choice, it cannot guarantee collective cultural outcomes. The hope is that the learners will choose a Jewish path, but they may or they may not. Ultimately, the bottom line is that the learning that occurs in informal Jewish education and that which occurs in formal Jewish education are both critical and they should work in tandem. We cannot afford a Jewish education that is only formal, just as we cannot afford a Jewish education that is only informal. We should look forward to the day when these two kinds of education work side by side, hand in hand, and interchangeably, to touch the young and old learner alike, and from all sides.

Conclusion : Informal Education and Jewish Life in the Postmodern Era

The bifurcation of education into formal and informal is in many ways artificial, and in terms of Jewish education, inefficient and even harmful. While we begin the twenty-first century with formal and informal Jewish education, this state of affairs is not irreversible. In the decades, years, and century ahead we may yet suceed at restoring the organic unity that once was. We should work hard to correct the notion that informal and formal Jewish education are separate entities. In fact, they should be

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[40] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within.*

seen as partners in the overall goal of developing knowledgeable and committed Jews. Each has much to learn from the other: Formal Jewish education can learn to be more person-centered and participatory and informal Jewish education can learn to be more literate and rigorous. We should be talking about "the de-formalization of the formal" and "re-formalization of the informal" rather than opposing philosophies. The time has come to unite these two critical worlds.

Informal Jewish education, as an approach that maintains that people learn by being actively involved, is a good fit with the diversity, mobility, and longevity that characterize the twenty-first century Jewish world. With its emphasis on experience and values, informal Jewish education seems uniquely equipped to help people on that most important of human endeavors—the search for personal meaning. The twenty-first century warmly welcomes an education that reaches out to each of us as unique human beings and helps us grapple with the search for answers to life's big questions. The days of informal education being "supplementary" or "extra-curricular" are over. Informal Jewish education is ready to assume a major new educational role in twenty-first-century Jewish life.

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A Response to Barry Chazan: The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education

Joseph Reimer

Barry Chazan has taken the lead over the past decade in articulating a coherent definition of the domain of informal Jewish education. For this effort he is to be applauded; too few scholars have joined this effort. But we should be clear on what Chazan is and is not attempting. As the title of his work indicates, Chazan is articulating a philosophy of informal Jewish education. He is not cataloguing this field in all its diverse manifestations. Nor is he drawing boundaries between this and other educational domains. He is responding to a very important question: What *should* characterize those educational activities that we call informal Jewish education?

I view the proposed "defining characteristics of informal Jewish education" as standing at the heart of his argument. Chazan writes that these "constitute the defining characteristics of informal Jewish education." I believe he is not making an empirical statement, but a normative one: this is what *ought* to be the case with informal Jewish education. He is actually talking about "best practice" rather than common practice. For in truth empirical research on common practice has just begun.

I was first tempted to look at all eight defining characteristics and raise questions about Chazan's choices and formulations. I believe that analysis needs to be done. But I have chosen the narrower path of focusing on a single characteristic – "the centrality of experience" – and exploring its meaning in greater depth. I firmly agree that it belongs on this list. But I also believe its definition is far more complex than Chazan can cover in this short paper. I will dig a bit deeper into what we mean by saying that "experience" is central to the practice of informal Jewish education.

Back to Dewey: Experience and Education

As Chazan acknowledges no contemporary thinker on the role of experience in education can begin without referring to John Dewey. Dewey gave us the primary vocabulary for undertaking this inquiry. For the sake of simplicity I will not quote Dewey, but will make a series of points that derive primarily from his work. These points explore what we mean by saying that "experience" forms a basis for Jewish learning within the context of informal Jewish educational programs.

Not everything that happens to us is "an experience."

So much that happens to us passes by barely registering. This is as true in Jewish contexts as elsewhere. How often we virtually sleep through this prayer service or that class. There are even programs in informal education that hardly a participant can remember a week later. Simply because a program calls for its participants to walk through the woods and take in the sights does not mean that they have done so. An "experience" -in the sense in which Dewey and Chazan mean the term- is a rather special moment in which a person *actively and mindfully* takes in what is happening and records it in memory.

Experience counts for little without narration and interpretation.

I can actively witness a breathtaking sunset and appreciate its striking beauty. But if I then go home, say nothing about what I saw and turn on my television, I am likely to lose access to my experience. What keeps an experience alive is our fumbling attempt to capture that experience in some narration. We turn to our partners and share what we saw. We talk about it to someone who was not there. We record it in a journal or letter. In some way what happened has to be turned into a narrative (even as told to oneself in thought) to remain with us. Otherwise that sunset will merge with many other sights and lose its distinctive place in my memory.

Every narration is also an interpretation. If I tell my friend that I just saw the most beautiful sunset, I have added the description "most beautiful" to what I saw. But that addition is part of my experience. *For my experience is not what I saw, but how I interpret what I saw*. If I tell my friend that I just read a most gripping novel, I hope he will ask me about the novel. If he does, I am more likely to describe my experience of reading the novel rather than a more objective review of the novel. For we love sharing our experience with all the interpretative trappings. It is the interpretations that make this event our personal experience. Without that interpretation, the experience is not quite ours.

Not all experiences are educative.

I am an avid Celtics fan. This season when for the first time in over a decade the Celtics were winning, I found myself watching the games with great interest. I read about the games both before and after their occurrence. I talked about the games with my friends. I was elated at the Celtics' victories and saddened by their eventual elimination. I had an active and mindful experience as a Celtics fan; but did I learn anything from my experience? Was this involvement as a fan an educative experience?

That question can be debated, but I think we have to admit that not every engrossing experience is educative. Dewey is of the strong opinion that experiences can be *miseducative*. They can lead nowhere; or worse, lead in the wrong direction. Take the corporate executives who discovered that their company could overstate its earnings and get away with the lack of truth. That experience led them to repeat that pattern until the amount of misstatement grew to a billion dollars. Dewey would argue that pattern is not limited to a few executives but applies to most of us when we stray from what we know is right but experience getting away with it. We learn from these experiences, but the wrong lessons.

An experience like following the Celtics can lead nowhere and still be pleasant and relaxing. Perhaps what makes following sports relaxing is that we do not need to learn from the experience. It just is. But Dewey distinguishes relaxation from education. To

be educative an experience needs to lead somewhere positive. We need to learn from it and follow it up with other experiences that will expand our horizons. If watching the Celtics leads me to be more curious about what makes for good teamwork and how the players have improved their teamwork, I may be on the road towards an educative experience.

4. *Not all experiences are easy to interpret*.

I am walking down the street and suddenly a stranger bumps into me. Instead of apologizing, he curses at me and tells me to watch where I am going. He is a man of color. This experience stings and stays with me. What am I to make of this experience? How do I interpret what happened? What am I to learn from it?

Many experiences are emotionally evocative, but cognitively and morally confusing. The stranger's bumping into and cursing at me is something that happened to me. But I turn it into my experience by holding onto and interpreting it. Telling my wife about it, I might say something strange and disturbing happened, and leave it at that. But I might say this man of color assaulted me. Then I would be fitting this event into a category of experiences that I collect about his group and skating on the edges of prejudice.

Parents often notice that when a young child falls there is a moment of silence before she reacts. Psychologists tell us the child may be looking around to read the cues on how to react. A worried parental look cues the child to cry. So it is with events that happen to us. We look to others to make sense of the event and help us construct its interpretation. Those others are co-creating our experience through a shared interpretive frame. The parental concern confirms for the child that falling hurts.

One way we educate is through these conversations about direct and indirect experiences.
Informal educational contexts allow for – indeed often call for – such conversations. We sometimes call these opportunities "teachable moments." If experience is not simply what happened, but what we make of what happened, then whoever helps

construct the narrative interpretation is educating. This activity is not teaching or even modeling. It is the more basic educational work of helping to provide an interpretive lens through which one views the social world.

Educators educate through designing contexts in which participants may have certain special experiences.

When I am hiking on a beautiful trail, I say two prayers of thanks. The first is to the Creator for the natural world and the second is to those anonymous informal educators who set up this trail. Indeed I know no text for the second prayer. Yet it seems clear that had those trail setters not done their excellent work, I could not be having this quality experience.

I view much of the work of informal education as being like setting up the trails for hiking. If the trail is properly set up, hikers will safely reach destinations and see sights they would never arrive at on their own. They will do so in a reasonable period of time and without exhausting or endangering themselves. They will record the sights with their cameras and share stories of the hikes with their peers. They may even experience a new closeness to the Creator. At the hike's end they will congratulate themselves for their efforts and are unlikely to appreciate all the educational work that went into setting up the context for their having these experiences. But much good educational work is invisible.

I focus on the trail setters to emphasize that *educators do not provide people with experiences; they provide contexts in which participants may have certain experiences.*
If we recall that from Dewey's perspective an experience is that which an individual, in a social context, constructs for him or herself, then experiences cannot be transmitted directly from educator to participant. However gifted an educator may be and however wonderful the programs presented, individual participants will construct a multiple of experiences from any one educational event. There is no direct translation of educational effort into individual experience. There are many experiences of a single hike.

But by focusing on the role of the trail setter, I do not wish to neglect the role of the nature counselor who accompanies the group on their hike. This informal educator does not simply plan the hike, but also interacts with group and helps interpret what they experience along the way. He may have a more direct influence than the trail setter. Certainly all that we said about interpreting events supports that possibility. Good informal education involves carefully setting up the context and being present to interact with participants before, during and after the educational event.

Yet, I wish to emphasize that the educator does not usually provide *the* interpretation of these experiences. The educator usually provides an interpretation, a strand or two of commentary from which the narratives of these experiences will be constructed. Interpreting experiences is often a dynamic process that collects many perspectives and weaves from these a narrative that may be revised many times after the events have transpired.

6. The experience does not necessarily end when the event or program is over.

In assessing whether an experience is educative Dewey asks the following question: Does this particular experience lead the learner to other experiences that will expand her knowledge and understanding of this domain? If I had a wonderful hike, will that experience lead me to further explorations of nature, greater understanding of the natural world, deeper appreciation of the beauty of the cosmos, and/or additional activities with these kinds of educational programs? In a Jewish context, will a wonderful hike deepen my relationship with the Creator and whet my appetite to seek other deep connections between my Jewish roots and my personal experience?

In asking this question Dewey does not view human experiences as isolated events, but as forming a potentially connected network of learning opportunities. In his not identifying the individual's experience with the educators' program, Dewey reminds

us that the experience need not and should not end with the original event. Ideally what I experience on this hike will spur me to keep this experience alive in my mind and heart and seek other experiences that link to this one.

Informal Jewish educators can become too focused on the single program they are planning. No matter how rich the program may be and how many wonderful experiences the participants may have in that context, the most significant educational question is about follow-up. What comes next? How do these experiences build towards the next set of Jewish experiences? What tools are provided for the participants to keep their learning alive?

Conclusion

All these points can be summarized in these simple statements for informal Jewish educators.

Do not confuse the program with the experiences.
Your primary task is to set a challenging, but safe trail.
But stick around for the meaningful conversations.
And for learning's sake, don't forget the follow-up.