

JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS AS JEWISH ENVIRONMENT CENTERS

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The educational effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers can be maximized by applying the principles of environment education. These principles hold that the purpose of the JCC environment is to enable Jewishness to be heard, seen, smelled, tasted, and touched before, during, and after participating in the programs of the Center. By engaging all the senses, Center education compounds its effect by becoming synesthetic.

Since the 1984 *Report of the Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers* was issued, the contribution of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) to the family of institutions focusing on heightening Jewish consciousness has received considerable attention. A helpful progress report on the subject by Bernard Reisman, "Social Change and Response: Assessing Efforts to Maximize Jewish Education Effectiveness in Jewish Community Centers in North America" was published separately by the Jewish Welfare Board in 1989. Reisman found, as Ronald Leibow noted in his introduction to the study, that

A higher level of Jewish educational effectiveness is correlated with . . . more Jewish programming, a Jewish specialist on the staff, a lay Jewish education committee responsible for developing guidelines, a Jewish educational component in staff development, and criteria for board membership that include Jewish commitment and knowledge (Reisman, 1989).

Barry Chazan addressed the issue of maximizing Jewish educational effectiveness in two articles that appeared in this *Journal*, including "What is Informal Jewish Education" (Chazan, 1991) and "A Jewish Educational Philosophy for Jewish Community Centers" (Chazan, 1987), as did David Dubin in his article, "Jewish Education in the Jewish Community Center" (Dubin, 1984). These studies brought to

bear much of the pertinent classical Jewish sources and secondary literature on the function of the JCC as a vehicle of informal Jewish education.

The next step in increasing the Jewish educational effectiveness of the JCC is to enable it to serve as a center of environment education. For the JCC to become such a center, both its physical environment and its physical culture facilities need to be mined for their educational value. This article explores how those objectives can be achieved.

EXPANDED CONCEPT OF MITZVAH

Jewish tradition has long recognized the value of a variety of educational approaches. A rabbinic view on the relationship between physical culture and Jewish education can be gleaned from a story of a talmudic master and his disciples on broadening the concept of mitzvah.

Once when Hillel was taking leave of his students, they asked him: "Master, whither are you going?" He replied, "To do a mitzvah."

They said, "What might that be?" He replied, "To take a bath."

They said, "Is that a mitzvah?" He replied, "Yes, if in the theaters and circuses the images of the king must be kept clean by the man to whom they have been entrusted, how much more so it is a duty of one to care for the body, since humanity has been created in the divine image and likeness" (*Leviticus Rabbah* 34:3).

Hillel and his students represent two classical perspectives on the role of Jewish education. The position of the students limits the concept of mitzvah to the study of Torah and compliance with its precepts. The position of their teacher Hillel advocates an understanding of mitzvah that includes all that enhances the divine image of the human, even bathing.

Hillel can therefore be seen as the father of the idea that extends the meaning of mitzvah beyond the life of the spirit. He held that care of the body is included in care of the divine image. It follows that bathing, exercising, and maintenance of bodily vigor can be deemed religious acts.

These differences with regard to incorporating physical culture into the educational process are matched by the various attitudes to incorporating the everyday environment into the educational process. The difference in perspective is reflected in the various ways our ancestors responded to the greatest tragedy of ancient Judaism—the destruction of the Temple and the exile of much of Jewry from ancient Israel.

Some lamented that, with the Temple in ruins, Judaism must constrict itself to the “four ells of Jewish law,” limiting itself to the so-called religious domains of life. Others countered that, since razing the Temple walls released the sacred from its physical confines, thereby liberating its concentrated holiness to be diffused throughout the world, all of life was to be viewed through a vision of sanctification.

The advocates of constriction saw a Temple-less Judaism as a handicapped religion able to sustain only a holding operation until the rebuilding of the Temple. The advocates of expansion, however, saw the destruction of the Temple as an opportunity to break the stranglehold of the physical Temple on the sacred in the popular imagination. They argued for bringing more and more aspects of life under the umbrella of temple-like holiness so that life could sparkle with flashes of the spiritual temple. To bring this about, they reinterpreted aspects of daily life and

created new rites to reinforce temple-consciousness. For example, they constructed rituals for making the dinner table the replacement of the temple altar, thereby endowing the home with a sense of holiness. To underscore the sanctity of family life, they viewed marital love as a fitting residence for the divine presence, as the Temple once was. They even dared to envision courtrooms as places where judges could become partners with God by making truthful decisions, thereby illustrating that just conflict resolution is a divine task.

The most far-reaching program sought to focus people's vision on seeing the world as a divine temple. This program conceived of the concentrated holiness in the Holy of Holies as similar to the concentrated scent in a bottle of perfume. The destruction of the Temple was like shattering a bottle of perfume. As the released perfume from the bottle scents a room, so, they argued, the released holiness from the Temple permeates the world.

For the expansionists, the world comes into view as a temple through the recitation of blessings. For them, the “open Sesame” formula to the gates of the world-wide Temple was the beginning of every blessing that states, “Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Sovereign of the world . . .” Through reciting this triadic expression, one becomes aware first of God (“You”), then community (“our”), and finally all humanity (“the world”). The three stages may be charted in the following manner:

1. “Blessed are You”—from self to God
2. “O Lord our God”—from self to community
3. “Sovereign of the world”—from self to humanity

Through all three elements, the blessing forges a link between the self and the divine, the Jewish people, and all mankind. By extending divine sovereignty from the self to the community to the whole world, the world-wide spiritual temple becomes palpable.

The expansionists asserted that 100 blessings are needed for the spiritual structure of reality to become visible. If 100 sockets were required to hold the ancient tabernacle together, then it stands to reason that a similar number is required to construct the spiritual sanctuary of the world. Since there is always the fear that for any single individual the temple could fade from consciousness, constant maintenance by each person was required. Thus, a dosage of 100 blessings was recommended to meet the minimum daily requirements.

There are a host of blessings for aesthetic events, sensual experiences, and moments of memorable significance. Such blessings take note of good smells, tastes, rising up and lying down, the intake of food, the imbibing of drink, and even the elimination of waste. They celebrate the spectacle of lightning, falling stars, majestic mountains, and stretches of wilderness. The roar of thunder has its praise; the sight of the sea and rainbow its response. Beautiful animals, possibly beautiful people, are reasons for reciting a blessing, as are new moons, new clothing, new houses, and newly blossomed trees.

Blessings may be grouped according to the five senses.

1. **Hearing**—the Shema said, the shofar blown, the Megillah read, thunder booming, or good and bad news
2. **Seeing**—trees blossoming, lightning storms, natural wonders, a person of wisdom, a ruler, or even a long-lost friend
3. **Smelling**—savory spices
4. **Tasting**—food and drink
5. **Touching/feeling**—putting on a new suit, shaking a *lulav*, laying tefillin, putting on a tallit, affixing a mezuzah, washing the hands, lighting candles, eliminating bodily waste, recuperating, or initiating conjugal love

It is this expansionist vision of Jewish life that underlies the effort to make JCCs Jewish environment centers. Hillel's under-

standing of mitzvah can be applied to enhance the Jewish ambience of JCCs. Following the lead of the ancient rabbis, environment education proponents believe that the full range of institutions in Jewish life can share in the aura of the ancient Temple.

ENVIRONMENT EDUCATION

Much has been written on the cognitive dynamics of Jewish learning, as well as on the group dynamics of Jewish life, but the environment dynamics of socialization into Jewish living has received little attention.

Environment education differs from structured cognitive learning in aim, target, and context. Whereas structured learning aims at providing the why of Judaism, environment education aims at the what and how. Whereas structured learning targets the mind, environment education works on luring the eyes, perking the ears, twitching the nose, salivating the palate, and moving the limbs. Whereas the former's primary context is houses of study, the latter takes place in houses of doing.

The mitzvah of *lulav* and *etrog* on the holiday of Sukkot provides an excellent example of the type of sensory integration that is involved in environment education. The *lulav*—bound with the myrtles and willows—and the *etrog* are held in hand, the body moves as they are shaken, and the feet encircle the synagogue altar while reciting prayers from the ancient Temple. In the process, the stately *lulav* strikes the eye, whiffs of the *etrog* arouse the nose, and their shaking bristles the ears. Some say the *etrog* stands for the heart, the *lulav* for the spine, the willows for the lips, and the myrtles for the eyes. In any event, in the end, the *etrog* is squeezed into a jam, the *lulav* is pressed into mural decor, the myrtles are pulverized into fragrance for the post-Shabbat *havdalah* ceremony, and the willows are pounded on the floor. This enlistment of hands, back, feet, mind, mouth, eyes, ears, nose, and palate, along with evocative historical memories, makes

this mitzvah an example of Jewish kinesis at its best.

In addition to the formal dimension of Jewish education with its offerings of language, Bible, law, history, literature, and philosophy, environment education illustrates how our tongues can be spiced with Jewish expressions, our eyes enthralled by biblical visions, our ears attuned to the rhythms of Jewish life, our hearts touched by the meaning of Jewish history, and our minds nourished with knowledge. A sense-catching Jewish ambience is the key to environment education. By employing multiple channels of transmission, multimedia approaches forge the keys that unlock Jewish awareness on both the affective and cognitive fronts. Through simultaneous stimulation of the gamut of sensory channels, Jewish education can become synesthetic, with sounds evoking sights and smells evoking tastes.

The JCC provides an excellent setting for environment education. Its large membership drawn from all segments of the Jewish community, its family orientation, and the regular and frequent usage by even the minimally affiliated make it ideal for such an approach. This wide range of users includes those of limited attention span and with little intention of learning—precisely the audience of commercial television advertising. Seeking to educate its mass audience that has frequent exposure, albeit with a limited attention span, and without the aura of education, television emphasizes subliminal reinforcement. Viewers absorb so much of the television message and jingles precisely because they are unaware of being educated. Since culture is being transmitted naturally, the frequent defenses against being instructed remain dormant. Think of how many Jews have caught themselves humming a Christmas carol in December just by being exposed to it while passing through aurally and visually attractive places.

Effective advertising works by grabbing one's attention, holding it tight, and letting

it go. And then repeating and repeating and repeating its message. The secret of subliminal suggestion is repetition. Repetitive messages are the mother of learning.

Environment education aims to meet the educational needs of an environment characterized by frequent exposure and limited attention, not in terms of lectures or even primarily in terms of interactive exchanges, but rather in terms of 30- to 60-second bytes of info reaching members on their way from the entrance to the gym, pool, or other activities.

Successful environment education engages the senses by flooding them with redundant messages. The more senses mobilized, the greater the impact. Jewishness should be heard, seen, smelled, tasted, and touched before, during, and after participating in the programs of the JCC. Since environment education is characterized as oral, aural, visual, tactile, and olfactory, the result will be more Jewish experiences savored as aromatic, delectable, gustatory, scrumptious, succulent, and even that indescribably delicious Yiddish epithet, *geschmack*.

Here are some ways in which the JCC environment could appeal to the senses:

- **Hear**—background Jewish music beamed into the lobby and physical education facilities and changed according to the approaching holiday, Jewish music and Hebrew counting for aerobic classes, shofar blowing at the closing of each day of the Hebrew month of Elul to announce the upcoming High Holidays, periodic 1-minute news summaries of Jewish interest or Jewish music played when the telephone is put on hold
- **See**—displays of ceremonial objects, murals of Jewish art, portraits of famous people in Jewish history, visuals of the Jewish term of the week, charts of each month in Jewish history, designs of Jewish holograms, signs with Hebrew words, along with a videocassette recorder set up in the hall or lobby with summaries of current events, Super Sunday trigger

films, and how-to movies on holidays and Jewish practice

- **Smell and taste**—Shabbat challot and flowers; Rosh Hashanah apples and honey; Sukkot *lulav* and *etrog*; Chanukah latkes and jelly doughnuts; Tu B'Shvat carob (*bokser*), dates, figs, pomegranates, grapes, olives, and of course Jaffa oranges; Purim hamentaschen; Pesach matzoh and charoset; Yom Ha'Atsma'ut pita and felafel; Shavuot blintzes and greenery; and Tisha B'Av eggs and ashes
- **Touch**—play computer and Nintendo-type games on holiday activities with quizzes on Jewish literacy, shake a *lulav* and *etrog*, wear a yellow star for Yom Hashoah, do *prayerobics*, and contribute to a tzedekah box placed next to the holiday food offerings
- **Walk**—through a Sukkah, a Holocaust exhibit, a model Temple, an exhibit of Torahs, the topography of Israel, and a Jewish memory lane according to the events of the month

These examples of sensory involvement show how well environment education can

supplement the methods of formal and informal education, enabling JCCs to make their distinctive contribution to the formation of living Jewish communities.

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