

A Seamless Jewish Education Plan by Janet Schatten

What is the goal of Jewish education? Its goal is to give form, purpose, meaning, direction and depth to what may be regarded as one of the ideals of general education, namely, the fullest possible development of the individual. . . . The primary goal of Jewish education is to cultivate the soul, to enable the person to be alive to the challenge, to sense the demand. -Abraham Joshua Heschel

This paper explores who the “educated Jew” is in the 21st century. The goal of Jewish continuity is to increase the number of educated Jews. It suggests that the old ways - where survival of the institution is the goal - should be reevaluated. Ultimately, Jewish continuity is not about institutional survival, but it is about survival of each Jew.

The paper focuses on Atlanta, where the seams of each institution often run deep. We can no longer afford to vision in one dimension. The needs of each individual are too complex to limit the solutions to one institution. So, how do we translate a vision for Jewish education into a city-wide educational plan?

- What are the common elements in a definition of “an educated Jew” in the 21st century, regardless of the religious viewpoint?
- How do we translate a vision for Jewish education into educational practice as it relates to learners of all ages in a variety of settings ranging from early childhood through lifelong learning?

An Educated Jew

An educated Jew is one who has a clear understanding of his/her Jewish identity, because Judaism has been integrated into his/her thoughts and actions. Educated Jews understand that Judaism makes life more meaningful. They are committed to the survival of the Jewish people and want to continue to grow Jewishly.

No two educated Jews are the same. The Jewish journey of each individual looks different. Some will go to synagogue regularly. Some will study Torah text. Others will practice ritual at home and welcome family and friends at their Shabbat table. Some will keep kosher. Others will learn to speak Hebrew fluently. Some will take numerous trips to Israel or will participate in various study retreats. Some will have a detailed historical knowledge base of the persecuted Jewish people. Many will have a combination of experiences, understanding and practices that influence and impact their lives.

Each path - ritual, prayer, learning, and conversation - leads to greater understanding. There are many different criteria references to determine who is an educated Jew. At some Yeshivot, the standard requires educated Jews to be able to quote text as well as to study Talmud and to pray three times a day. At some afternoon schools, an educated Jew will be defined as one who can read Hebrew, say a few prayers, give a d’var Torah, and have a historical understanding of the Jewish people. Each institution crafts the criteria to match the ideologies and the missions that it upholds. While these groundings are rooted, the paths to get there are varied and personal. Some students become educated Jews because of the criteria that has been established by the institutions they attend. Others become educated Jews because they have tapped into their personal ideologies

and have drawn from many resources.

The educated Jew is one who participates in the search of meaning through the lens of Judaism. The Jewish journey of each individual looks different. Some will go to synagogue regularly. Some will study Torah text. Others will practice ritual at home and welcome family and friends at their Shabbat table. Some will keep kosher. Others will learn to speak Hebrew fluently. Some will take numerous trips to Israel or will participate in various study retreats. Some will have a detailed historical knowledge base of the persecuted Jewish people. Many will have a combination of experiences, understanding and practices that influence and impact their lives.

To me, it is not the criteria that define one as being an “educated Jew.” The educated Jew is one who is growing in his or her Judaism. Each opened door enlightens and challenges; one door may give insight to another. For example, maybe the person who reads the Jewish names on obituaries will get inspired by someone’s life of tzedakah and decide to emulate it. Perhaps a person’s passion for Israel will lead him/her to prayer. I believe that the educated Jew will eventually get a chance to explore what is behind many doors because an educated Jew is rarely satisfied with stagnation. The goal should be to offer and guide the Jewish population to the learning experiences that are available. The plan should not be limited to one avenue. The criteria for success should be personalized and allow for lifelong learning. Ultimately, a plan to increase Jewish learning should be the venue to increase the number of educated Jews. Educating Jews is the key to Jewish survival. The goal is to allow more Jews to become educated Jews.

A Survival Plan to Create more Educated Jews

A survival plan that taps into each individual American Jew would be as complex as the multitude to whom it would try to reach. It is as extensive as the complexity of each individual’s needs. No one arena is capable of meeting the needs of all the Jews. In all likelihood, it is a combined effort that is going to be the source of success for plan. The plan will need to look at existing structures as well as potential avenues for Jewish education. Ultimately, a unity of purpose - to scaffold each individual - will need to be established amongst all whom are involved in creating Jewish educational opportunities.

Imagine a seamless educational plan Many towns and surrounding cities have synagogues, Jewish community centers, camps, Jewish educational opportunities and programs for the needy. It is surprising, however, to see that they are fighting for the same funds and members instead of working collaboratively to meet the needs of more individuals. Imagine what could be if we shared platforms for reaching the needs so that more people could become educated Jews. For example, what would a seamless Jewish educational plan look like in Atlanta, Georgia?

The plan would take collaboration. The existing programs and institutions in Atlanta offer Jewish educational opportunities for a wide population. Imagine if representatives from each one met on regular bases to exchange thoughts on how they can contribute to educating Jews in their setting. A detailed exploration of the strength of these services that deeply affect the lives of so many individuals would be critical as a way of recognizing common threads that tie these groups into the big picture of Jewish Atlanta. The exchange of programming ideas, materials and human resources would enhance these services. Most importantly, the opportunity to create a seamless educational plan would be more likely.

The meetings and planning involved in the collaboration process would be worth it. A seamless plan builds on www.caje.org/learn/a_schatten.htm

the strengths of each institution and educator. By sharing resources, more individuals will have access to what is available. The seamless plan is worthwhile because it taps into the rhythm of today's Information Age where institutional walls are as global as the internet. The plan is concerned with the goal: to tap into the needs of the individuals in as many ways as possible. Imagine. . . .

A seamless plan recognizes that together we are better. In addition to meeting the educational needs of the individual, it might be more logistically practical to exchange members. Atlanta's traffic is one of the worst in the nation. Perhaps it would be more feasible for a particular preteen to attend the program to which he/she is in walking distance. Let's say, for example, that the preteen of a Reform congregation attended a NCSY (Orthodox) program. Whoa! Outrageous? Maybe not. A seamless plan allows for a variety of exposures for those who are interested. It is not a requirement. It is an option that might work for some individuals.

A seamless plan recognizes that resources need to be shared. Perhaps one organization does not have adult Hebrew classes. In a seamless plan, the adult would be sent to a place that had the teacher and course that is most appropriate for the learner. Imagine that the adult student was learning how to read Hebrew from a siddur. Perhaps the teacher would have the student bring in a siddur from his/her synagogue. The seams are cut in both directions.

A seamless plan recognizes that many of the transient Atlantans will not be living here for more than three years. The cost of belonging to organizations may be expensive for someone who is not staying for a long time. A seamless plan might allow for use of a "ticket" to get into many places. It would also guide the transient to other Jewish educational opportunities at the next move.

In The Atlanta Jewish Federation's The 1996 Jewish Population Study of Atlanta Summary Report, it was reported that 33% of those surveyed said they were "just Jews." That is a large number who do not affiliate with any particular movement. The seamless plan would allow for these Jews to be exposed to various grounding. Jewish educational opportunities at the Metro Atlanta Council for Conservative Judaism (MAJCC) exemplify ways of offering serious study that explores many viewpoints. Rabbis from each movement as well other religious leaders have a platform to teach about their ideas and practices. The student's own ideas and practices are challenged as he/she questions and thinks about what the teacher is saying. Thinking is critical for the educated Jew to grow. Thinking creates meaning.

Some of the "just Jewish" population does not connect with any Jewish oriented groups, institutions or organizations. Is it possible to touch their souls? Stephen Spielberg has managed to reach the hearts of many Jews through his movies such as Schindler's List and The Prince of Egypt. The media's impact as a venue for Jewish education should not be ignored. The religious television station in Atlanta has given Jewish educators a way, perhaps, to show the channel-surfing Jew how to light Shabbat candles or to hear the blowing of a shofar. Imagine if we had a show for preschoolers that taught basic Jewish values. Perhaps there would be a Jewish educational afternoon school show to boost the Jewish agenda. Imagine if educated Jews who were committed to educating others wrote more American movies. Already in Los Angeles there is an organization of Jewish actresses who are exploring how the media is portraying Jewish women. Perhaps this agenda could be brought to the limelight through the various actresses who perform on the Atlanta stages and screens.

All areas of the arts could be explored as a venue of reaching Jews. Musicians, dancers as well as artist have a

tremendous impact on reaching the soul. Many of these artists are seen at The Atlanta Jewish Festival, which is sponsored by the MAJCC and The Atlanta Jewish Federation. Imagine if these artists made a splash with their Jewish pieces in the secular arena - radio, exhibits, television, and stages. One of these venues might be the spark for the unaffiliated Jew.

The friends and family of the unaffiliated Jew are the best advocates for Jewish education. All Jewish educators should encourage all students to talk about their positive experiences in Jewish education to family and friends. Because Judaism is a religion that does not proselytize, we may get out of the habit of tooting our own horns. But we need to talk about the rewards of Judaism amongst ourselves. Imagine if an unaffiliated Jew came to a class with a friend who said that it was too good to miss. Or perhaps the unaffiliated Jew would read a good book that a relative read in the Jewish book club. This book could become the conversational piece that sparked the questions that had been dormant for many years. Most importantly, friends and family can advocate for Jewish education when they bring family and friends into their home to share in Jewish experiences. Jewish ritual, books, conversations and prayer in the home offer the most powerful messages to all who participate. In the backdrop of the home, Judaism is seen as a daily commitment that is there when you lie down and when you rise up. Those who are privileged to share Jewish experiences in the home are given insights that can be gained nowhere else. The Jewish home has the capacity to create the holy from the mundane.

Technology has entered the home. With the advances of technology, Jewish educational opportunities are growing in leaps and bounds. The rise of the Jewish internet and online resources has allowed an opportunity for all Jews - affiliated and unaffiliated - to get information. More classes than ever are open through the internet. Videoconferencing as well as video taping gives students options never before available. Jews in the small counties outside of Atlanta may even find these options to be more practical and attainable.

When the seams are cut, the opportunities are endless. It takes collaboration, which involves communication and planning. More meetings!? Yes, but we can not remain in our isolated territories. We must begin working together.

Atlanta has a way to go before it will be prepared to institute a comprehensive seamless plan. Now is the time to take beginning steps by having individual Jewish educators cutting the seams. For example, within an institution the informal educators may commit to communicating and planning with the formal educators. Maybe the youth director will work with the religious school director on ways to integrate the programs. A youth group's nature hike could be combined with a theological discussion of the uniqueness of God's creation. Or a synagogue's prayer service could be set in the woods. Some Jewish educators are already taking these steps. It is time for others to cut the seams.

Individual Jewish educators can cut the seams when they plan programs or educational opportunities with Jewish educators from other institutions. Seams are cut when Jewish leaders join together for common purposes as seen by the recent teach-in at a Synagogue where 1,800 people gathered together to learn. The lines are cut when Jewish educators from various institutes gather together within the networks provided to discuss issues and ideas. The seams are cut when teachers have platforms in educational settings such as Siegel College of Judaic Studies to think about best educational practices.

In due time, more doors will be open for more Jews to become educated in a variety of ways. Atlanta is moving in a positive direction. I am personally charged to do what I can as a Jewish educator to reach individuals on a personal level. Tooled with Torah, prayer, ritual, Israel, Jewish identity, Hebrew and commentary, I will try to tap into the soul of the individual. And, if I can't, I will surely try to find someone who can.

Summary: Principles of Planning

The goal of the seamless plan is to support and nourish Jewish life through Jewish education and experiences, which are the lifeline to Jewish continuity. The plan begins with four basic principles. Behind each principle is an assumption that in today's modern society we must cut the territorial seams of the Industrial Age and work collaboratively with each other. This seamless system of Jewish education assumes that no one institution can meet the needs of any individual much less a family or community. Institutions and individual educators need to work together to provide lifelong connections to learning and living Jewishly.

Principle #1 Each individual matters

The plan begins with the individual. Each individual is the key to Jewish continuity. Who are these individuals? They include those who are affiliated to Jewish institutions and those who are not. They include Jews who are in mixed marriages as well as those who identify themselves as Jews

Principle #2 Each need must be addressed

What are the needs of the individuals? Some factors that help identify needs include age or stage, learning styles, personal and family issues, interests, situations, and locations. In this plan, these needs would be identified and the individual would have choices of ways to meet their needs.

In the Information Age, choices must be given as often as possible. No longer bounded by the linear system of the Industrial Age, the modern American is use to and demands choices. Just look at the shelves on the supermarket and notice the amazing amount of choices for any one product (e.g., toothpaste flavors).

Principle #3 There are many authentic ways to connect to Judaism

What makes a person connect with Judaism? Some step into a study experience that transforms their thinking. Others feel that prayer is the way to feel connected to other Jews and to God. Some find that Israel provokes a passion for Judaism. For others, it is a sense of peoplehood that they identify with when they meet someone with a Jewish sounding last name. Some connect as they become aware of anti-Semitism that threatens their Jewish existence. In this plan, there is an awareness of what matters to the individual. These connections can become the doorway for learning about many aspects of Judaism. As one becomes more educated, more doors will open.

Principle #4 There are many Jewish educational platforms for experiences that help individuals grow Jewishly.

What educational platforms help a person grow Jewishly? The list includes informal (camps, youth organizations) and formal learning (early childhood programs, supplementary schools, and day schools), the arts (dance, music, fine arts), museums, media and technology, Israel, interfaith exchanges as well as institutes of learning (synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish scholar groups, volunteer organizations), and more.

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These four principles are a response to a society in the Information Age where individuality is honored, differentiated learning is highlighted, selectivity is abundant and one size does not fit all. Through collaboration, these principles can be applied to a plan that is systematic and seamless.