

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

In this conversation, Arnee Winshall, JESNA board member and co-chair of the Jewish Education Leadership Summit, moderated a conversation between two prominent Jewish educators, Cheryl Finkel, director of De'ah at PEJE, and Joseph Reimer, professor at Brandeis University and director of its Institute for Informal Jewish Education. They explored the wide range of issues of recruitment and retention. Drawing on their personal experiences from the fields of formal and informal Jewish education, Joe and Cheryl share successes, frustrations and dreams of how to confront challenges of educator recruitment and retention.

Personal Reflections From the Field

AW: I wanted to start by asking you to reflect on your own personal experiences. What strategies you have used in the past for educator recruitment and retention?

JR: You know, the stories that appeal to me the most are those of mid-career people who are personally committed to their Judaism but who have other careers. I find it very exciting when they find themselves at a point in their lives when two things happen.

One is that their own Jewish learning or Jewish commitment – or in some cases lay leadership – triggers something for them that overwhelms their previous commitment to their other profession, and two, the commitment to the other profession is often beginning to fray. The role that I have been privileged to play is that sort of a “personal bridge,” offering encouragement, support, and making possible a transition in a person’s life from being a lay Jew to being a professional educator. This is the recruitment story of someone who brings to our field a half-life of richness and a whole basketful of professional skills, which are going to be used almost immediately to the best advantage.

I have even more experience on the retention side. I would say what is the most rewarding for me in these cases is to be able to offer professional development experiences to young people who are three to five years into their careers, when the initial romance is beginning to fade, when the initial position is beginning to get a little tight around the edges, and when they are wondering if there is room for growth within Jewish education. I have found that the right kind of professional development that combines mentoring with intellectual excitement, as well as group networking can really make an

enormous difference. I think that’s an exquisitely important point, that hasn’t gotten enough emphasis in the literature.

CF: I think that because there are so few people who train for Jewish education, my sense has always been one of relentless promotion and enticement.

When I am talking to someone of almost any age who seems like they might possibly be able to find a place in Jewish education, I find myself saying, “Well, have you considered Jewish education?” And it’s like a refrain that never goes out of one’s head, it’s a continuous promotion. It feels necessary to constantly do it.

In terms of my own school, the carrot I had to offer was professional development. So I would say to people (and I would try make it sound irresistible), “Jewish education is a wonderful outlet for passion – for Jewish passion – and also, if you come to my school, you are going to have a wonderful career, because we have continuous education for all of us.” Then I’d go into the *schpiel*: “We set annual goals. I do, everyone does. And we assess how we are doing during the year. We try to have staff development that is generic, but we also try to have an individual professional development plan that will address your particular interests.” Now how could you resist that?

The other thing to do is to hang around places where you find young people! Scoping out bright young people and getting them into internships, and luring them into the environment!

Regarding the professional development piece, Joe identified the three key elements: mentoring, intellectual stimulation and networking.

JR: Cheryl is demonstrating a key point. If your educational leadership is not geared to making their place of education a place of constant growth for the staff as well as for the students or campers, you're not going to get the added bonus of retention or recruitment that Cheryl's talking about.

CF: True! Even though you almost take it for granted.

JR: And it may be true in some places, but it is not true in too many other places.

AW: I want to look at that next, because you are talking here about creating a context of lifelong learning and being a role model and participant in that, as both a recruitment and a retention tool – and probably also related to the issue of the quality of the education offered.

I am wondering if you believe that some of the current efforts, for example PEJE's focus on professional development, or Me'ah's focus on adult education and lifelong learning, will change the landscape? Do you think there will be an impact going forward?

JR: I don't think it's the investment alone that's going to do it. Let's take your last example. It doesn't matter if it's adult education at Me'ah or the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, or any of the other very fine efforts in adult education across the country. By themselves they are not going to produce more Jewish educators, if there aren't people, people like Cheryl, who have that in mind as a goal. Indeed this may be something that needs to be talked about.

We are at a disadvantage *vis a vis* other faith communities because we have such a heavy reliance on professionals. I train professionals, so I am not decrying that reliance. It's just simply that perhaps one of the unintended consequences of drawing a thick line between lay educators and professional educators is that we unintentionally discourage people from crossing the line. We create situations in which, I think, lay people who are excited about their Jewish learning have a hard time seeing themselves as Jewish educators. We haven't spent enough time bridging that. The camp counselor is a wonderful model but we haven't thought about it this way. The camp counselor is in fact a bridge from the lay category of being a camper into the professional category of being an educator. Of course, we don't scare the kids off by telling them they are going to be educators, but in

effect that's really what we do. So I am wondering if we could not be inventive. I am thinking of Isa Aron's work on lay educators – in thinking about bridge positions – positions in which we ask lay people who are excited about their Jewish learning, in effect, unofficially to become professional educators for other lay people or for younger people. You get a lot more of this in other faith communities than in Judaism, and that's a real missed opportunity.

CF: We have a concept of what a Jewish educator is, and it certainly includes mastery of a lot of information, and text and tradition – and we are such an old tradition that there is a lot of stuff in there that could be mastered.

I remember, when I wanted to throw my hat into the work of being a day school administrator, I knew I was not qualified. I remember asking my teacher, "What do I need to know that I don't know," and it took us two hours to make the list of what I needed to study and read – and then there were the issues of practice, like "how do you say Hallel on Hanukkah?" I guess a lot of it has to do with trusting people to be appropriate representatives of the tradition.

JR: The problem with the term "true Jewish educator" is that it doesn't allow for degrees of development. A true Jewish educator is something you aspire to be all your life, and hope to get there, but with the understanding that there are stages. We can view people who are not there yet as being on a journey – on the way. It's a developmental view.

CF: But there is a standard. There's a moment when you know you have enough familiarity, a moment when you feel authentic. And what is that? How do you know when you have that? What is "enough?"

JR: That raises a very important question I think we have to address, which is the question of barriers. The question is, a very difficult question, but not unique to Jews. It is faced, for example, in the area of affirmative action. How do you simultaneously lower the barriers for admission while supporting ongoing growth, so that you do not lower the standards of excellence? I am not sure I have engaged enough in thinking about this question, but it seems crucial.

CF: I think those of us who don't live in Boston and NY have certainly hired Jewish studies teachers who have necessitated "taking down barriers." In those cases, we

are really hiring pre-service people. They may be teachers, or they may be Hebrew speakers or may be Judaically knowledgeable but not Hebrew speakers. They are often people whom we consider having big gaps, but we take them in and we try to take the place of a university and train them on the job in Jewish practice and Jewish commitment, and we try to excite them and create a new sense of Jewish identity, in some cases, depending on which gap we are trying to address.

JR: And does it work?

CF: It can work with mentoring and with local opportunity for additional study. In the last three years, there were twelve teachers who came in as secular Israelis in a Solomon Schechter school. I would say that seven or eight of them have totally transformed to true Jewish educators – they joined synagogues, you can't believe the work they are doing, teaching adults, all sorts of things...so it's possible. But it's the kind of thing that a school takes on because in a way it's superhuman, even if it's not an appropriate task for a school.

JR: Necessity is the mother of all inventions.

AW: So then you have a gap when the quality doesn't exist, because you have that learning curve – when the educational leadership of a school can't do what they want to do.

CF: That's right, because until they transform they are in the classroom with your third grader, saying things you wish they weren't saying and presenting a model you wish they wouldn't choose. And they are also at a different professional level than their general studies partners, which is in itself a terrible message. I am painting a little bit of the dark side of this.

AW: Some people think we are at the point of a renaissance, but you are both saying more has to happen before we can have a vision of excellence in Jewish education.

CF: It can be done, but it needs more support and inventiveness. The urgency does create quite dramatic efforts, and maybe that is not always a bad thing.

JR: And we have to capture the success stories.

Here is an example that I think is really interesting and not well known: over the past years, the Jewish agency has done a fabulous job in recruiting young Israeli

shlichim to work in our Jewish camps, and the numbers are up, spread widely across the North American continent. It's a very long cultural stretch for an Israeli, secular or religious, to fit him or herself into a Jewish summer camp. They have no such experience in their own lives. If they are secular, then most of our camps have an odd religion; and if they are orthodox, then outside our orthodox camps it is also odd to them. It's an interesting example because when it began a few years ago, it drew a number of complaints from camp people here that these people aren't properly prepared. In response, the Jewish Agency kept working at better preparation in two senses:

On the one hand, better preparation in Israel, better preparation and better recruitment.

Number two, and crucially, more involvement by the camp directors themselves in recruitment and training of these Israelis, so that, in a sense the situation taught the directors that they had to be more immediately involved in the question of socializing these Israelis into the role of the Jewish educator in camp. That is always a difficult task, but I think it has had a side benefit. It not only recruited an extra 1,200 to 1,500 educators into camps that might have otherwise hired gentile staff, but also made the whole question of staff preparation more abundantly open and available on the camp director's list of priorities, because if you have to do it for Israelis, then you have to do it for everyone. And it makes this whole question of who is in your camp and what are you responsible to do with them once they arrive in terms of on the job training all the more pressing. I think it's an interesting model of coordination on many different levels, international, national, movement, camp-wide, and it might be a precedent in other acts of largesse in terms of recruitment and training.

CF: In talking about synergy – I am thinking about what a distance learning program with the Siegal College in Cleveland has done for Atlanta and Milwaukee. In communities with wonderful schools of education or Jewish higher learning, which produce students who can go into schools in Jewish settings, there are all kinds of very nice collaborations between the colleges and the schools. But in communities that don't have institutions of Jewish higher learning, this distance program which is a national effort, has made some amazing things possible – a school and a community can get a certain level of pre-service and in-service training that isn't available other-

wise. And it can now be available even in small communities. Atlanta's program is also available to Birmingham, and those three or four people are getting the same exposure to great teachers. That is a synergy and a capability that just didn't exist. It being used well, and could be used even better. Admittedly, it's expensive – it's cheaper to get a secular master's degree from a state university for practically nothing. So here's a case where the local or national community has an opportunity to help.

Israeli's are a tremendous resource, and having someone on staff who is bicultural, who can help do recruitment, go to Israel and look at who might work is also really important.

There may be are a lot of people who don't seem like they will be able to move into this environment, but they can with the proper support.

AW: In our school we find that we have to get better at identifying who can go across cultures, and we find it takes six months with support and a bi-cultural environment for them to feel comfortable and confident.

CF: We discovered that one way to address the “divide” between Israeli teachers and the culture of the school is with help from the parents. We plan a whole sequence of activities when the new teacher arrives in the summer to allow the whole school community to take part in welcoming the teacher. That way, for at least some parents and children, this is a person who has been in your home, shared Shabbat dinner with you and is on your side. We found that this broke down a lot of barriers and stereotypes and assisted in their professional acculturation, in addition to the mentoring.

AW: If you were to characterize a problem of Jewish educator recruitment and retention – is it a problem of quantity or quality – or is it the wrong question?

JR: It's a question of how the two interact. Whether it's a school or a camp, you must have coverage. Now this is something that is not discussed very much, but in camps before the *shlichim* intervention, the number of non-Jewish staff being hired on the educational side was growing, to my mind in alarming proportions. How could you deliver the Jewish message if a growing percentage of your staff were not Jewish? How would they have a feel for this Jewish mission in camp?

CF: This happens in our schools as well.

JR: Exactly. It can happen on the secular side of the ledger as well. You have to have coverage by law and by reason. Which means, you can't get away from numbers especially as we hope to grow our institution's numbers and attract more students rather than less. The question of quantity leads to the question of quality.

My sense is you can get bodies, but to interest quality people to come and stay in this field will require interesting institutional leadership, lay and professional, in the challenge. One of the things we haven't taken into account is that our parent bodies are chock full of very talented parents who probably have a lot of insight into some of the organizational problems that we face. I have rarely seen schools successfully call upon their parent bodies to serve in this capacity – as professional lay consultants to the schools on these knotty questions of recruitment and retention. Again, these questions are not unique to Jewish education. They are endemic to so many professions where you don't have high prestige or high compensation. I wonder what we can learn from other professions, and if there aren't professionals in our midst who have wrestled with this question and who have a lot to add to the conversation. I am sorry we always seem to have the conversation just among ourselves, and don't find a way to broaden out and take in this other input.

CF: We can learn from other professions, as Joe said, that are low status, low pay. For example, my family lives in Asheville, North Carolina. There are a lot of new nurses in the community because they had a terrible shortage and they began recruiting around the country, raised the salary and increased benefits for them. Is there some magic information we don't have outside of those tools? Maybe benefits might be useful.

To me, the real problem is that Jewish education is a profession that's not sexy for a young Jewish person. Our young Jewish people come from the highest socioeconomic bracket, get the fanciest educations, and if we could appeal even to a small percentage of them, I don't think we'd have worries about quality. It's a highly educated and highly talented population – if we could just get them. It's an issue of balance because it goes right to the bottom line of every communal organization budget. Most of our non-profit Jewish organizations allocate 80% or more of their operational budget to salary. So in schools, you are spending 80% of your money on people – and then you have light bulbs and paper clips and a

few little programs here and there. The minute you open your mouth to say double the salary – which I think we need to do, then you’ve got the tuition to double, and that’s a terrible burden. That equation by itself is disastrous.

On the other hand, that’s what it would take to make a change. I believe that it would make a huge difference, and many of the issues of quality we deal with, in terms of our leadership and developing curriculum would not exist. We would be working at a whole different level if we had a respectable profession.

AW: Are you equating low status with low pay?

CF: Yes. This is America. A high status profession gets high pay. Except for maybe journalism and professors.

AW: Is there a way to achieve high status without doubling pay?

CF: If there was a way to make Jewish educators to feel like college professors, if we could somehow convince people that this was a different profession from everybody else’s “school teaching.” But I haven’t been able to think of a way to do it.

JR: I think there are number of aspects here, salary is one aspect, benefits is another. Second, in informal and formal education we haven’t been particularly creative about this question of a career ladder. Part of the problem with teaching is that without a career ladder you are not adequately rewarded for advancement, good work, merit, inventiveness, all the things that in another profession would move you up the ladder. In informal education there simply isn’t a ladder, and that’s a huge problem. It’s very hard to convince somebody who is even willing to live on a lower salary that he or she has a predictable career in Jewish education. I think we can’t talk about retention without talking about career ladders, unless we talk about interesting ways of involving people progressively in their careers. So, for example, universities need clinical faculty. It’s not so farfetched to imagine that our master teachers might on some level participate as clinical professors in graduate programs of Jewish education. I would love to see a more expansive grant given to your many institutions of higher education to experiment with this, and give life to the question of how could we involve the best of teachers, or our camp directors, and others, in a kind of professorship.

CF: That’s a fruitful model, and I love it.

AW: If the check was on the table, what would be the next things you would do with it? What would you pursue to address issues of recruitment and retention?

CF: I would double the salaries – and then ask more of the people who receive them. I would ask them to become clinical professors and work year-round. They should have access to all of the opportunities and resources that would make schools and camps and all Jewish educational settings truly excellent for their learners. That would result in tremendous experimentation in programming. Curriculum would look very different if people could work all year and be paid for it. You might even see the synergies between formal and informal education that we talk about but rarely see. I would want to start with the learner – what do the learners need and how do we become best at serving their needs. There would be opportunities to continue to learn from research and do action research and have career paths that are much more demanding and more flexible.

JR: I think we have a tremendous bifurcation in the Jewish community between the resources available in our universities.

I think a program like DeLeT or a program like Me’ah begins to address in very creative ways what happens if a Jewish community gets serious about deploying its professional resources, be they university or be they professional, in other ways, to really begin to solve some of these problems. I would love to see communities come forward with ambitious pilot projects, to make our schools and programs really vibrant for our kids and for our teachers. I would love to know there would be funders who would actively support that kind of experimentation, that kind of bridge building. I think that we will only succeed if we creatively use the resources we already have – because those resources have built our investments. Only if we plow those investments back into Jewish education will this problem be touched.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- What successful strategies have you or your community used to recruit and retain Jewish educators? How might those strategies be expanded or enhanced?
- What do you think of the strategies suggested by the discussants? Would they work in your community or setting?
- The discussants see a very close relationship between professional development and recruitment and retention of Jewish educators. How do you see the relationship between recruitment, retention and professional development?
- What do you see as the obstacles and facilitators to creating career ladders and lattices in Jewish education?
- If you were to characterize problem of Jewish educator recruitment and retention – is it a problem of quantity or quality – or is it the wrong question?
- The discussants present their ideas of how to address the issues of recruitment and retention, if money were no object. If the check was on the table, what would be the next things you would do with it? What would you pursue to address issues of recruitment and retention