Design Principles for 21st Century Jewish Education

An excerpt from the Lippman Kanfer Institute Working Paper, Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st Century

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The new environment in which Jewish education operates in the 21st century demands a new set of design principles for Jewish education itself. These principles do not aim to alter education's purposes or eliminate its traditional content. Jewish education will and should continue to focus on shaping identity, instilling literacy, inspiring commitment, and forging community. Jewish texts, values, history, traditions, and the knowledge and skills needed to appreciate these and actualize them in one's life, will continue to be the "stuff" of which Jewish learning is made.

But how identity is shaped, literacy instilled, commitment inspired, and community forged must change, and the meaning of these concepts themselves re-thought in light of how life is lived and how effective learning takes place today. We can neither teach nor organize the educational process as a whole as we have in the past.

The design principles that we propose are built around three key concepts:

1. Empowering the learner as an active agent in fashioning his/her own learning experience.
2. The centrality of relationships and the social experience of learning as dynamic forces that shape an evolving identity and build commitment and community in a fragmented world.
3. Jewish learning as "life-centered," addressing the totality of our aspirations, concerns, and experiences.
4. The Learner as Active Agent

Redesigning Jewish education for the new century will require that we place the active learner at the center of our thinking and practice as a full partner in shaping her/his learning experience.

Placing the learner at the center represents a "Copernican shift" for a system that is used to approaching issues primarily from the vantage point of providers, not consumers. Deliberations on how Jewish education should be conceptualized, designed and delivered that begin from our conventional starting points — programs and institutional settings, content to be taught, or even visions of "the educated Jew" — assume, tacitly, or explicitly, that the learner is the "object" of our educational efforts. Such an assumption is, however, increasingly problematic. Beginning with the learner — her/his needs, desires, and capacities — necessarily reframes a host of critical questions in ways that open up and may even demand new answers. This is not merely a tactical change or a pedagogical stance. It calls for rethinking what we do and how we do it from the bottom up.

There are at least four corollary requisites that flow from the "Copernican shift" of placing learners at the core of our thinking.

1. Understanding, listening to, and trusting those whom we seek to engage. Jewish education needs to be far more "market sensitive" than it traditionally has been. The best way to do this is through actively seeking the opinions of current and potential consumers and customers about what they are seeking in both content and form and why. Underlying the engagement with learners must be a basic trust that a) the choices they make are thoughtful and intended to help them develop a more meaningful relationship to Jewish life; and b) the process of Jewish learning, if well implemented, will in fact produce a deeper relationship over time.
2. Involving learners as co-producers of their learning experiences. This attitude of trust needs to be extended to the learning process itself. Educators and institutions must be prepared to

share control and invite learners to help design and implement the experiences they participate in. The involvement of learners in shaping their educational experiences will produce more authentic, powerful learning. Adopting this paradigm does not mean abandoning responsibility for creating frameworks within which learning can take place. But, it does mean that these frameworks need to be outgrowths of dialogue and conversation, not imposed a priori. And, the frameworks need to be flexible and diverse. One size simply does not fit all today.

3. Delivering quality and accessibility. Today's learners have high expectations. They seek, and will respond to, quality in every sphere of their lives. Jewish education can ill-afford to be seen as an arena where mediocrity prevails. Experience with demanding, but high quality learning programs for adults demonstrates that individuals respect their seriousness in both teaching and content. Day schools, camping, and other educational arenas are similarly seeing that the ability to deliver "excellence" matters. At the same time, learners also seek experiences that are accessible — that fit their schedules, lifestyles, and other commitments. Keeping the learner at the center of our focus means re-thinking when, where, and how educational opportunities are made available so as to maximize the likelihood that those who wish to can in fact take advantage of them.
4. Actively helping to guide and facilitate learners in what will hopefully be a lifelong journey. Giving power to learners to shape their own learning does not mean abandoning them to their own devices. Rather, it opens the door for educators and institutions to assume a new role and responsibility: serving as educational guides and facilitators. Negotiating the Jewish educational landscape, sifting through options, finding appropriate settings and teachers, identifying potential next steps on one's educational journey, is not easy today. We can make it more so by providing the kind of personal attention and support that a good concierge or personal trainer does. This role of "educational stewardship" assumes special importance when we recognize that the impact of educational experiences is cumulative: one (quality) experience is good; many are even better. Creating an educational system that operates to encourage synergies and smooth handoffs (what has been called "linking the silos") will enable learners to pursue personal pathways that at the same time greatly enhance the payoff for the Jewish community on its investment in each individual program or institution.

The Power of Relationships and the Social Experience of Learning

Jewish education should be individualized, but not individualistic. As important as it is to listen to the voices of learners and to help them design personally meaningful and satisfying educational journeys, neither Jewish values nor sound learning theory allows us to imagine that a serious Jewish identity or enduring Jewish commitment can be fashioned in isolation from other learners — or from teachers. Traditional Jewish learning is inherently social and relational, and so, too, must be 21st century Jewish learning.

Human beings naturally seek connections with others. Contemporary life is filled with centrifugal forces that constrain or erode these connections: the pace of life itself, distrust of large institutions, the ability to satisfy one's basic needs without direct personal relationships to others, ease of mobility, technologies that allow us to construct highly personalized worlds. Education is being reshaped by these same forces, which make possible — but not desirable — modes of learning that are almost solipsistic. However to fulfill the purposes of Jewish education it is vital that we fashion learning experiences that draw on and nurture the yearning for connectedness. In fact, we know that such experiences are both natural and powerful. As much as we want to be in control of our own lives, we do not want to live those lives alone.

This holds true all the more in the realm of education. Even in an age of technological wizardry where self-guided learning is as easy as a mouse click, personal relationships remain almost invariably at the core of our most memorable and impactful learning experiences. Jewish tradition sees the relationship of teacher and student as not only instrumentally important, but sacred. Contemporary experience argues for the power of what Heschel called "text people," individuals who embody in their person the knowledge and values they seek to transmit. Whether it is

teachers in a classroom, counselors in camp, guides on a trip, or parents at home, access to individuals with whom learners can forge intimate relationships is critical to creating a context within which personally compelling learning can take place. And, as Jewish tradition also recognizes, sometimes our most powerful teachers are our peers, a lesson that, again, social science theory and contemporary experience only reinforce.

The proposition that relationships are at the core of effective education holds true in every era. But, in the contemporary world, achieving such relationships between teachers and students places special burdens on educators. We need educators who can work with 21st century learners, who can serve as partners and guides for them, and who can create compelling experiences that will help individuals learn what they want to know and simultaneously discover what they did not even know that they wanted.

Beyond this, Jewish education must create opportunities for active learners to engage with others, to become immersed in social contexts where they can experience personal meaning in and through connectedness and community. This is important both from a sociological standpoint — in order to tap into the power of what Peter Berger called “plausibility structures” to shape and anchor personal meaning-making — and an ideological (or theological) one. For Judaism, community is not merely a means to facilitate individual fulfillment; it is a vehicle for perfecting the world. Jewish education needs to foster learning communities that are genuinely dialogical (active, intense, yet diverse and open) and that link individuals to other learners across time and space.

This will not happen automatically simply by placing learners alongside one another. Community happens when individuals are involved in shared processes of encounter and exploration. Achieving a deep sense of connectedness is not about submerging the individual self in the group, but about involving learners in a common task or experience in which each individual is important, but none can sustain the experience or complete the task on his/her own. This can happen in a prayer service, a *Talmud hevruta*, a canoe-trip into the wilderness, a Jewish arts festival with teens from around the country, a two-week “vacation” repairing damaged homes in northern Israel or southern Louisiana, or a multi-player game on the Internet. From such experiences will come a renewed appreciation of the importance of community as a vehicle through which individuals grow and become more fully themselves (as Martin Buber taught more than 80 years ago). In an era that is to a dismaying extent commitment- and community-phobic (seeing in these constraints on the self), Jewish education can offer a counterpoint — if it focuses on creating experiences of genuine connectedness, not the pseudo-connectedness that is too often experienced in institutional life of all sorts today.

There is, then, no contradiction between calling for a Copernican shift that places the learner at the center of educational thinking and practice and seeking expanded opportunities to enmesh learners in relationships, social experiences and networks that catalyze the growth and development of both identity and community. A viable and dynamic vision for contemporary Jewish education will embrace both.

“Life-Centered” Jewish Education

Nearly a century ago, Franz Rosenzweig argued that we need a “new Jewish learning,” one that “no longer starts from the *Torah* and leads into life, but the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or pretends to know nothing, back to the *Torah*.”[1]

Rosenzweig’s call for a Jewish learning designed to engage those who do not begin with an a priori commitment to the value of Jewish knowledge and Jewish living is, if anything, more relevant today than it was when first articulated.

Life-centered Jewish education means several things:

1. First, it means that learning should be relevant to the lives of students. This does not mean a

superficial quest for what is *au courant*. Rather, it asks that the content of Jewish education grow out of, reflect, and respond to authentic questions, aspirations and life experiences of the learners. Life-centered Jewish education will avoid spending large amounts of time trying to answer questions that no one is asking, at the same time as it ensures that genuine concerns — what is really on people's (including children's) minds — are being addressed. Curricula that begin and end in the past, that present Jewish life as something largely confined to specific times or special places (like synagogues), or that teach skills whose relevance in the "real world" is unclear, position Jewish learning as something external to the individual, disconnected from large segments of his/her experience, and ultimately of doubtful import or interest. We have all seen too often the effect of this type of Jewish education.

2. Second, life-centered Jewish education should deal with the whole person and the full set of human concerns, not just the "Jewish" part. Much Jewish educational rhetoric today focuses on how Jewish education can make Jews "more Jewish." But, the real goal of Jewish education should be to make us more human, more like "images of God," since this is Judaism's purpose. Jewish identity is a means, not an end in itself. Rosenzweig's new Jewish learning had as its aim to "not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism." To forge this connection between the entirety of our lives and Jewish tradition will require that we broaden the scope of Jewish learning to incorporate issues and dimensions of human experience — personal growth and social justice, science and cultural creation — that may initially be seen as outside the boundaries of Jewish education's concerns. But, they are clearly not outside of Judaism's concerns or the historic experience of the people who have lived and shaped Judaism. And thus, they must be part of life-centered Jewish learning.
3. Finally, life-centered Jewish education must be grounded in lived experience. Judaism is not a "subject" to be studied; it is a way of life to be lived. Textual learning must be grounded in and accompanied by experiences that bring the content of the text to life. Nearly every aspect of Jewish learning lends itself to this approach with a little effort — the study of Jewish values, rituals, history, current events. This includes the study of Torah itself, which is clearly a primary and powerful Jewish experience. However, such study cannot be pursued only academically; it must be both engaging and intellectually and spiritually stimulating. Understanding that all learning must be "experiential" in this sense can help to break down the increasingly unhelpful distinction between "formal" and "informal" education.

Jewish tradition itself offers a paradigm for the kind of learning that we should aspire to provide: the Passover *seder*. The *seder* uses immediate experience to stimulate provocative questions; it provides multiple access points in real time for learners of different ages and temperaments; it brings people together in a learning process that is inter-generational and collaborative; it transmits a unique story and value that people can relate to diverse dimensions of our lives, both personal and social; it is open and adaptable; and it offers a profound understanding of the human experience and its purposes that is both challenging and exhilarating. Would that all Jewish education were so designed, so effective, and so enduring!

Conclusion

These design principles for 21st century education are by no means new, but they are radical. Many of these principles are deeply embedded within the fabric of Jewish thought, and some even in Jewish educational practice over the centuries. Nonetheless, they do not characterize the normative practice of Jewish education today, and were they put into practice widely and consistently, they would dramatically change the face of Jewish education as we know it.

And, such change is needed. Only a Jewish education that empowers learners as active agents shaping their own educational journeys, that fosters relationships and connections in a world at once fragmented and homogenized, and that addresses the full scope of our lives will be effective in engaging a generation of students — children and adults — who are both demanding and searching. Such an education will be able to absorb technology without being distorted by it,

accommodate choice without abandoning its integrity, and offer multiple options for diverse learners without collapsing into anarchy. This is the kind of education we will need in order to thrive in the 21st century.

JESNA's Lippman Kanfer Institute is an action-oriented think tank for innovation in Jewish learning and engagement. The Institute's mission is to keep Jewish education relevant and effective in a changing world. The Institute's initial Working Paper, entitled Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21st Century, *was published in May 2007. This article is excerpted from that Working Paper, which is available in its entirety at www.jesna.org.*

Endnotes:

1. Rosenzweig, Franz. "On Jewish Learning," in Nahum N. Glatzer, ed., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought.* New York: Schocken Books, 1953, p. 231.

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