New Recipes for Jewish Diversity Education

by Judith Rosenbaum

It began as a *Sukkot* recipe – a pumpkin and chickpea soup that Batsheva watched her mother make in Morocco and, later, in Israel. When she brought it with her to America, that same recipe took on a new holiday tradition, melding Moroccan spices with the tastes of New England to become a Thanksgiving favorite in her Massachusetts home.

It's a simple story that contains within it significant lessons about immigration, holiday rituals, and cultural adaptation. And it's an evocative way to communicate the global diversity of the Jewish community.

Diversity is fast becoming a watchword in the Jewish community, in no small part due to the demographic changes in American Jewry brought about by intermarriage and transnational adoption, as well as the increasing value placed on pluralism and multiculturalism in American life. But Jewish diversity education is not simply a response to contemporary cultural trends; it is also a recognition of the rich and varied histories of Jewish communities that span the globe and reflect a range of colors, languages, ethnicities, and traditions.

Why Diversity?
In today's world, when so much competes for our students' attention and interest, we must draw on the breadth of Jewish history, tradition, and culture to increase our opportunities to engage people in what our heritage has to offer. The Jewish Women's Archive (JWA), a national, educational non-profit based in Brookline, MA, was founded to broaden our conception of history

to include the lives and accomplishments of American Jewish women. Without their stories, our understanding of Jewish life is incomplete. Only when we embrace the fullness of our heritage – the contributions of men *and* women – can we take full pride in the richness of our community. To that end, JWA has created educational resources that bring Jewish women's voices out of the archives and into dialogue with learners of all ages.

Attention to gender is obviously a key aspect of diversity education; without it, we miss the experiences of half of the population. But diversity should also include attention to ethnicity (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi traditions), race (6.5-10% of American Jews are Asian, Latino, or African-American), sexuality, geography (e.g. rural Jews), and, given the high rate of intermarriage, other family religious traditions.

Teaching Diversity

What does teaching about Jewish diversity look like? How can we explore these issues effectively in our classrooms? JWA's lesson plans on "Jewish Diversity and Innovation: A View from the Kitchen" (part of our online series "Go & Learn: Primary Documents and Lesson Plans" and available for free download at: http://www.jwa.org/teach/golearn/nov06/) offers one model. This resource explores Jewish diversity through the *Sukkot*/Thanksgiving recipe mentioned above, presenting lesson plans for use in educational programming with youth, adults, and families.

Teaching about diversity requires balancing notions of difference and of connection. Each of JWA's lesson plans moves from the global to the local, beginning with the "big picture" of Jewish diversity (e.g., introducing terms such as Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi and explaining the historical conditions that led to different Jewish ethnic groups) and then focusing more specifically on the students' own families and experiences. Recipes are an excellent framework for discussing both global and local aspects of Jewish diversity, because they reflect large trends of migration and cultural adaptation, as well as personal stories of family practice and traditions. Visuals, too – such as photographs and maps – are very helpful in making these concepts concrete, giving students images of different kinds of Jews and a physical representation of the widespread geography of Jewish life.

One challenge in teaching diversity is to point out the unspoken assumptions at work in our communities without unwittingly reinforcing them. For example, it is helpful to explain that American Jewish life often operates under a certain degree of Ashkenazi-centrism. Food culture, again, provides a useful illustration: bagels and lox and corned beef on rye may be considered fundamentally Jewish in American culture, but are hardly universal Jewish foods. We might explain that these assumptions grow out of the majority experience of American Jews, but we must be careful not to assume that our students' backgrounds reflect this majority. Discussing non-Ashkenazi culture as "unusual" or "exotic" only reifies these divisions. Instead, invite students to share their experiences, starting from an assumption that the classroom will contain a broad range of backgrounds and family traditions.

A key aspect of diversity education is exploding the idea of the "normal" and replacing it with the realization – often a relieving one, especially to young people – that there is no "normal," but rather a wide range of distinctive experiences. Ask students to describe what they imagine as the "normal" Jewish family, and then to discuss how their own families compare to this mythic ideal.

Traditional Jewish texts can also be integrated into this type of exploration. In the family education lesson plan, for example, the investigation of Jewish journeys through food begins with a text study of a passage from the book of Numbers that recounts the Israelites' complaints during their wanderings in the desert and their nostalgia for the food they ate in Egypt. This passage frames the discussion of Jewish migration and the role of food in creating a sense of home and comfort.

The Goal is Inclusion

Ultimately, diversity education is a project not only of abstract knowledge, but also of inclusion. Our goal is not just accuracy in portraying the variety and richness of Jewish heritage, but what this accuracy makes possible: a community that reflects the backgrounds and experiences of all of its members and thereby fosters a sense of belonging. We cannot afford to do otherwise.

Judith Rosenbaum is the Director of Education at the Jewish Women's Archive. Rosenbaum earned a BA summa cum laude in History from Yale University and received her PhD in American Civilization, with a specialty in women's history, from Brown University. She has taught women's studies and Jewish studies at Brown, Boston University, the Adult Learning Collaborative of Combined Jewish Philanthropies and Hebrew College, and Gann Academy: The New Jewish High School of Greater Boston. She is a former JWA Research Fellow.