

WHAT IS INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION?

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By examining activities usually regarded as examples of informal education and determining their common characteristics, a definition of informal Jewish education can be developed. The rigid distinction between formal and informal Jewish education is artificial and harmful and should be discarded. Both forms of education transmit knowledge and strengthen Jewish identity. Similarly, informal Jewish education and Jewish communal service are complementary activities.

THE PROBLEM

Contemporary Jewry is excited about informal Jewish education. Although such education is not new, it has become much more prominent recently. Increasing numbers of adults, young people, and families are participating in creative Jewish educational activities within the context of Jewish Community Centers, short-term retreats, national conferences, adult learning programs, and Jewishly oriented travel to Israel and Eastern Europe. Central agencies of Jewish education and of Jewish communal service have begun to devote much attention to informal Jewish educational services. The most prominent example of this trend is the centrality that informal Jewish education has assumed in the Jewish Community Center movement in the past decade. This process, colloquially known as "maximizing," is described in the report, *Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness* (1985). Informal Jewish education has come to be regarded as one of the great new frontiers of pre-21st century Jewish education (Chazan, 1988; Reisman, 1990).

The excitement about informal education is an extremely positive development. At the same time, there is much confusion as to what the concept of informal Jewish education actually means. Many people use this term, but there have been few attempts to analyze its meaning; hence, the precise nature of this activity remains

unclear (Chazan, 1982; Paulston, 1973; Simkins, 1977).

THE TASK

The aim of this article is to explain the meaning of informal Jewish education through the use of an analytic method called generic-type analysis, which has proven very helpful in the clarification of educational terms (Soltis, 1978). There are six parts to this discussion:

1. a survey of activities commonly understood as informal Jewish education
2. a summary of the characteristics that these diverse activities seem to have in common, i.e., the generic qualities of the phenomenon called informal Jewish education
3. the presentation of a definition of informal Jewish education
4. a discussion of the relationship between informal and formal Jewish education
5. a discussion of the difference between informal Jewish education and Jewish communal service
6. why informal Jewish education is right for the 21st century

A LOOK AT EXAMPLES OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

The term "informal Jewish education" is popularly used to refer to an extensive list of apparently diverse activities that include

camping, synagogue and Zionist youth movements, communal youth organizations, trips to Israel and other places, Jewish Community Centers, adult Jewish education, Jewish family education, *havurot*, and conference and retreat centers (Reisman, 1990). What characteristics make these diverse activities all examples of informal Jewish education?

Camping encompasses leisure-time programs—usually occurring in vacation periods and making use of outdoor settings—that include sports, arts, music, cultural, and group activities (Isaacson, 1970). Camp programs take place either in residential settings in which young people eat, sleep, and play together for a sustained period of time or in day settings in which they come to the camp in the morning and return to their homes in the afternoon.

A distinction is usually made between private, profit-oriented, individually owned camps that cater to Jewish clientele and whose main purpose is recreation for the camper and profit for the owner, and camps that are sponsored by Jewish organizations and that are aimed at providing a combination of fun, Jewish education, and culture, e.g., Camps Swig (Reform movement), Starlight (B'nai B'rith), Ramah (Conservative movement).

Youth movements refer to out-of-school frameworks organized by an ideological Jewish movement (usually religious or Zionist) in which young people voluntarily participate in cultural, educational, and social activities within a peer group context. Such programs are usually conducted in homes, JCCs, or synagogues, and they are led by individuals (called advisors, youth workers, or *madrachim*) who are either of a somewhat similar age cohort as the participants or are adults who are easily accessible to young people. Youth movement activities are likely to reflect the ideals, values, and ideologies that are basic to the parent movement.

Youth organizations are similar to youth movements in several ways; they are voluntary, are held after school, and are very

much peer-participatory. However, in contrast to youth movements, youth organizations are usually less ideologically oriented and are more likely to focus on the provision of worthwhile social frameworks in which young Jews can meet and socialize with each other.

Trips refer to organized group travel sponsored by Jewish educational or cultural agencies aimed at bringing people to places of Jewish interest in order to focus on Jewish contents, themes, and sites (Bouganim, 1988; Turner, 1974). The most prominent venue of Jewish travel is Israel, although this category also includes trips to Eastern and Western Europe and across North America (Cohen, 1986; Hochstein, 1986). Such trips usually have well-organized itineraries and are led by individuals with expertise both in travel and in Jewish history and culture.

The Jewish Community Center as a provider of informal Jewish education refers to a host of diverse Jewishly oriented activities—music, study, theatre, adult learning, holiday celebrations, Israel programs, preschool programs, and sociability—conducted within the framework of multipurpose communal institutions called JCCs (Chazan, 1990; Maximizing, 1984; Reisman, 1990). The multifunctional nature of the Center enables the introduction of diverse Jewish topics in a variety of settings in an organic and nonimposing fashion: attractive Jewish art exhibits in the halls of the Center, productions of Jewish interest in the theatre, preholiday workshops for parents of preschool children, weekly adult study at lunchtime or in the evening, a board trip to Israel, and staff study programs. The vision of Jewish education in Centers implies the creative use of the entire agency and its total staff as vehicles for Jewish education.

Adult Jewish education has become an increasingly popular form of informal Jewish education.¹ Adult Jewish education

1. The inclusion of adult education in the category of informal education has its roots in educational

refers to various formats of study of Judaism in synagogues, Centers, federations, retreats, *havurot*, and other organizations in which adults freely choose to participate. Although this study often looks like a formal school (with teachers, books, homework, and sometimes even desks arranged in rows), it generally does not involve grades, tests, or degrees.

Havurot and family life education refer to an approach to Jewish education aimed at intergenerational Jewish education within the family context. In such settings, families, peers, and friends share a diversity of Jewish experiences together—study, prayer, observance of holidays and Shabbat, socializing, and sharing personal joys and sorrows. Young people and adults grow Jewishly by studying, experiencing, and sharing with each other.

WHAT DO THESE EXAMPLES HAVE IN COMMON?

Let us look at these examples as a whole in order to extract some of the characteristics that seem to be common to most or all of them.

First, the decision to participate in these activities is voluntary. One chooses to go to an adult education program, to take a trip to Israel, or to send one's child to the JCC. It is true that the choice to participate in these settings is not always voluntary for children, and parents sometimes "force" their children to participate in informal programs. In such cases, parents will probably try to help their children come to think that the choice is their own or is for their own "good." (Children are forced to go to Bar Mitzvah classes because "it's something you have to do"; they are "urged" to

go to camp because "it'll be good for you" or because "you'll like it.")

Second, the activities described as informal Jewish education are not accompanied by grades that lead to advanced degrees, a profession, or socioeconomic advancement. There is evaluation in informal educational settings, but its purpose is to help improve skills and abilities now, rather than to judge an individual's worth or to determine one's long-term future. Evaluation in informal education is concerned with feedback for today, rather than prediction about tomorrow.

This suggests a third characteristic: informal Jewish education seems to be intrinsically rather than instrumentally oriented. Informal Jewish education does not prepare its participants for something in the future, such as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a profession, or one's future status in society. A good adult study program is aimed at helping its participants better understand the meaning of Judaism now. A *havurah* Shabbat is aimed at enjoying Shabbat together now. Obviously, there is a hope that these activities will deepen the ongoing and subsequent connection of the participant with Jewish life. At the same time, the orientation of summer camping, the synagogue youth group, and the JCC basketball league is that children have enjoyable experiences in Jewish contexts now.

The fourth quality that seems to be common to various informal Jewish educational activities is that they take place in settings that are highly interactive and participatory. Adult Jewish learning programs are characterized by a great degree of learner involvement and teacher-student interaction (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1984). Camp settings afford opportunities for everyone to be involved in some kind of activity. Good youth leaders are individuals who are accessible to all members of the group and who know how to reach out to individuals who seem inactive or withdrawn. Informal Jewish education invites everyone to participate and to become active.

developments in Third World countries in preindependence and independence periods. In previous decades, the term "informal education" was typically connected with the literature of comparative education, rural development, technical education, and adult illiteracy (Brembeck & Thompson, 1973; Coombs & Ahmed, 1974).

The fifth characteristic of these activities is that they seem to have some kind of plan, program, and direction; that is, informal Jewish education has a "curriculum" (Tanner & Tanner, 1975). Although the term "curriculum" has been used almost exclusively in formal educational settings, it has important implications for informal education as well. Zionist youth groups present programs on the history of Zionist ideology; adult classes follow a course of study about Jewish history, literature, or thought; camps have programs about Shabbat; trips have itineraries; *havurot* have retreats with carefully developed schedules; JCCs have a calendar of Jewish activities. Informal Jewish education is not without form or content; it encompasses programs that include Jewish contents that are regarded as worthy of transmission.

However, curricula of informal Jewish education are different from school-based curricula in several ways. For one, they generally are not called "curricula," probably because that term implies a degree of regimentation that is not part of informal settings. Too, the curricula of informal education are likely to be locally developed; they are not established by outside school boards, departments of education, or testing agencies. Informal educational curricula are likely to be highly participatory in planning and implementation. Youth groups choose activities and programs according to their own interests (there may be program guides from the national agency, but these ultimately are only suggestions). Camp programs are planned by the camp director together with camp staff. Finally, the curricula of informal education are very flexible; they can change or be adapted very quickly to new situations and needs.

A sixth dimension of informal education is that there is usually an aura of fun and relaxation associated with it. Camp is fun. One learns a lot on trips—but there are also lots of good times. Adult classes involve study, as well as meeting friends, relaxing over coffee and cake, and telling stories

about one's children and grandchildren. The oxygen in the room of informal Jewish education seems light, airy, and pleasant.

The seventh dimension of informal education is that the professionals who effect it seem to look and act differently than other kinds of educators.

Informal Jewish educators are not called "teachers." In cases where they are "teachers," such as in adult education classes, they may well be called by their first rather than family name.

Informal educators usually dress in a way that more closely identifies them with—rather than distinguishes them from—their charges. Teen workers and camp counselors are more likely to wear sneakers and jeans than business attire; JCC executives have a wardrobe of both fine suits and quality leisure wear.

Informal Jewish educators are likely to spend a good deal of time asking questions and listening to answers. They are not driven by the need to "cover material" or to complete a course. They have programs that they want to see happen, but they realize that small talk and socializing are also part of their business. Informal education seems to imply an open, relaxed, participatory pedagogic style.

The last characteristic of informal Jewish education is that it seems to place great emphasis on the group in the process of education. In camp one is part of a bunk, a unit, or a division. The committed youth group is a community of like-minded members. The *havurah* is a group of people who share and experience together. The teen trip to Israel enables young people to share experiences with other like-minded peers. Many of the forms of informal Jewish education have a significant collective dimension.

A DEFINITION OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

This article has presented some prominent examples of activities usually regarded as informal Jewish education and has isolated

some of the characteristics that seem to be common to most or all of these examples. Now it is possible to combine these characteristics into a generic definition for the term "informal Jewish education."

Informal Jewish education refers to an approach to Jewish education, the objective of which is to enable people to participate—usually with others—in a diverse series of Jewish life experiences for the inherent value in them. It is aimed at affecting Jewish attitudes and experiences of a person in the present, with the hope that these patterns will continue in the future. It is shaped by some set of Jewish beliefs, values, and behaviors that are deemed desirable, and it implies planning and structuring of settings in order to enable internalization of these beliefs, values, and behaviors. It is an activity that is freely chosen by a person (or his or her proxy) and that is very dependent on that person's active involvement and positive motivation. It is not effected in any special place, but may happen in a variety of settings and venues. It implies a "teaching" style that is highly interactive and that invites a high degree of participation and self-learning by the "student."

INFORMAL AND FORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Informal Jewish education is usually juxtaposed with formal Jewish education. Formal Jewish education, which is popularly associated with schools,² has a long and glorious history in the annals of our people, dating back to biblical and talmudic times (Maller, 1949). Throughout the ages, the Jewish community has devoted much

energy to the establishment and maintenance of a rich network of schools. Contemporary Jewry is no exception, and a large and diverse system of schools exists throughout the Jewish world. There is little doubt that the perpetuation of Jewish literacy and peoplehood has been intimately linked with formal Jewish education.

However, schools were not and are not the only context in which Jewish education and Jewish literacy develop. There are a host of informal settings in which Jewish knowledge and values can also be transmitted. Indeed, throughout the history of the Jewish people, formal education was always accompanied by a powerful informal educational system (Goldman, 1975; Matzner-Bekerman, 1984).

Contemporary American Jewish organizational life has generally made a sharp distinction between formal Jewish education and informal Jewish education. In the 1930s when the foundations of 20th-century American Jewish education and social work were emerging, there was an attempt to develop an approach that integrated these two worlds, but it did not materialize (Dushkin, 1975). The popular wisdom is that Jewish schooling is responsible for teaching the basic building-blocks of Jewish literacy and knowledge and that informal Jewish education focuses on Jewish sociability and identification (London and Chazan, 1990). These two worlds have usually been treated as separate and distinct, resulting in a rigid institutional division of labor between those responsible for Jewish schooling (synagogues, bureaus of Jewish education, and schools) and those responsible for informal Jewish education (Centers, youth groups, and sometimes federations). The two worlds have not always communicated well with each other. In fact, they often have expressed a good degree of mutual misunderstanding and suspicion.

This separation is artificial and harmful on several accounts, and I propose that it is time to reconceptualize our thinking on this score.

2. Although the terms "schooling" and "formal education" are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. Schooling is an organizational term that refers to things that happen in institutions called schools. Formal education refers to an educational approach often associated with a systematic, hierarchical, often academic, future-oriented, and well-controlled system of teaching and learning (Paulston, 1973).

Schools are extremely important agencies for transmitting knowledge. However, they are not only places where literacy is developed; they also are very intimately connected with socialization and identity formation (Dreeben, 1968).

Nowhere is this point made clearer than in the classical yeshiva. The yeshiva was a school in which knowledge was transmitted. However, there were no grades, there was much individualized learning, learning was closely related to experiencing, and the rabbi served as both teacher and overall religious mentor and model (Heimreich, 1982). This "school" taught Jewish books and knowledge—and it also socialized young people to Jewish values, behaviors, and lifestyle.

Conversely, informal Jewish educational settings are places that both affect Jewish identity *and* transmit Jewish knowledge. An informal educational genre, such as an Israel trip, is very much about identity formation and socialization. However, it can also result in a significant increase in the Jewish knowledge base of young people. A successful Shabbat retreat affects one's sense of Jewish association and linkage; it also helps a person learn more about the meaning and practices of Shabbat in Jewish tradition.

It is dysfunctional for us to continue to regard informal Jewish education and formal Jewish education as warring bodies. Rather, they should be seen as alternative educational approaches to the overall goal of the development of knowledgeable and committed Jews. Each has its own methodology and value and is useful for different people at different times.

An understanding of the complementary nature of these two phenomena might help correct some corruptions that characterize contemporary Jewish education and Jewish communal service.

Everyone agrees that teachers in Jewish schools need to be very well-versed Jewishly. However, they also should be trained to make effective use of informal educational techniques in their work. There is no rea-

son why classes in a school cannot be as interactive, participatory, and interesting as activities in informal settings.

Everyone knows that informal Jewish educators need to know how to work with people. However, they also should be Jewishly well-versed and literate. Their informal Jewish educational work could be significantly enriched by a sound Jewish knowledge base.

The rigid distinction between formal and informal Jewish education has led to the belief that Jewish education is the exclusive turf of certain agencies. In contrast, the holistic notion that I am suggesting implies that Jewish education is *everybody's* business.³ It means that Jewish education should be seen as encompassing all spheres of Jewish communal life: synagogues, Centers, youth groups, Israel trips, Shabbat retreat centers, and federation activities. The time has come to turn the entire turf of Jewish communal life into the playing-field of Jewish education.

INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION AND OTHER FRAMEWORKS THAT "EDUCATE" US JEWISHLY

The Jewishness of people is influenced by many forces—and not all of them are schools, camps, or youth groups. Our home and family life is a profound source of Jewish influence. Peer groups and neigh-

3. Communal responsibility for Jewish education has been a central motif of Jewish educational history since the origins of organized Jewish education in the time of Shimon ben Shatach and Joshua ben Gamla in the first century BCE. "R. Joshua ben Gamla decreed that primary schools should be set up throughout the provinces, even in the small towns and that children should be sent to school at the age of six or seven" (*Baba Bathra*, 21a); "Resh Lakish said in the name of R. Judah the Nasi: I have a tradition from my ancestors that any town that has no school will eventually be destroyed. Rabina said that the tradition was that the town should be placed under a ban until a school was provided (*Sabbath*, 119b); "We make a rule that in all cities and in all communities each one shall be required to provide for the study of Torah" (Abraham Benveniste, *Takkanab*, 16b; Maller, 1949).

borhoods affect our Jewish lives. World events in general—and Jewish events in particular—shape our Jewish perspectives. Advertising—both Jewish and general—has a great impact on what we eat and drink and where we go. It is therefore not surprising that many factors outside of schooling and informal educational frameworks are seen to “educate” people Jewishly.

However, there is a difference between what is implied by the term “Jewish education”—both formal and informal—and other very powerful forms of Jewish influence. Jewish education, both formal and informal, has three general characteristics (Chazan, 1978; Peters, 1966; Scheffler, 1973).

1. intentionality
2. respect for the autonomy and dignity of the learner
3. worthwhile activities

Jewish education implies some *conscious intent* or desire to affect the Jewish character of people—the way they think, feel, and behave. It also assumes the existence of some Jewish contents, values, and activities that it regards as worthwhile or good and that it proposes to teach. Finally, the idea of Jewish education should include a belief in the right of people to ultimately judge and choose on their own; Jewish education should imply helping people make their own decisions.

This generic notion of education explains why such influential forces as advertising or world events are categorically not the same as informal Jewish education. Jewish advertising has intent, but its intent is to sell products (bagels, travel, books) and to make money, and not to shape our character. Moreover, it is not at all concerned with our dignity and autonomy, but rather with doing whatever it can to sell its products. World events—at the United Nations, in Iraq, Lebanon, or Israel—surely affect our thoughts and decisions greatly. Yet, they do not have “intentions.” They are

not people who think, but rather are processes that occur.

The use of the term “Jewish education” sharpens the difference between nonintentional activities that affect Jews and intentional activities based on value choices that it is hoped will have an impact. It heightens our responsibility as educators to initiate conscious efforts to educate.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION AND JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

Informal Jewish education is a conscious activity aimed at enabling Jews to come in contact with some Jewish values, contents, and experiences that are regarded as worthwhile. In that sense it is very much shaped by a specific body of Jewish values, contents, and experiences; that is, informal Jewish education must have some philosophy of Judaism. Although informal Jewish education is not bound to any one exclusive philosophy of Judaism, it must have some philosophic underpinnings concerning a corpus of Jewish experiences and values that it regards as valuable and that it is trying to “teach” (Dubin, 1990).

What is unique to informal Jewish education is that it teaches these values and experiences in a way that is very interactive and that it is committed to a teaching process rooted in the learner. In that sense, informal education utilizes many skills and practices that are basic to Jewish communal service.

As the same time, informal Jewish education is not the same as Jewish communal service. The former uses many of the people-centered approaches of the latter, but informal education remains part of the family of education in that its purpose is to suggest, introduce, and confront a learner with some worthwhile contents, values, and ideas that are central to Judaism (Rosenak, 1978).

Jewish communal service begins with the needs of individual Jews and the Jewish

people. It believes that the needs of Jews as individuals—social, cultural, recreational, mental health—are important and should be addressed. It also believes that the welfare of the Jewish people as a whole—immigration, family life, child care—is important and should be served. It is guided by Jewish values (*klal Yisrael*, human dignity, the primacy of family, Jewish survival), and its focus is Jews, Jewishness, and the Jewish people.⁴

These two forms of conscious Jewish influence are not contradictory. Informal Jewish education comes to teach—it is hoped in an open and humane way—about the world view and value system of Judaism. Jewish communal service comes to embody the world view and value system of Judaism by responding—in an open and humane way—to the needs of Jews and the Jewish community. These are complementary activities, and there is both rhyme and reason for these activities to co-exist and to cooperate. Those who work in these *two* fields “surely labor in the vineyards of the Lord.”

INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION: A PHILOSOPHY OF JEWISH EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Ultimately, informal Jewish education is an approach or a philosophy of Jewish education that reflects

- a certain view of how people learn—by being actively involved
- where people learn—everywhere
- what they should learn—Jewish experiences, contents, and values
- who should teach them—educators who are skilled at helping people grow on their own

4. Michael Rosenak (1978) makes a useful distinction between these terms: *Judaism*—an ideology or system of values and beliefs; *Jews*—individuals or members of an historical group known as the Jewish people; and *Jewishness*—a state of consciousness or feeling about being part of that people.

Informal Jewish education has caught the attention of late 20th century Jewish life because it is a philosophy appropriate for our times.

Our age is an era of growing longevity and free time, which will only increase in the next century. We live longer, and we have the leisure to do many diverse things in our lifetimes. Such an era is conducive to a philosophy of Jewish education that regards the entire life cycle as the focus of Jewish education.

Our age is also a time of great mobility and movement. The distances between Tel Aviv, Lauderdale Lakes, and Kiev have dramatically shrunk, and Jews travel all over the globe. Such an age is well suited to a Jewish educational philosophy that regards the whole world as its campus.

Our age is a time in which the diverse nature of Jewish civilization has become a central theme. Such an era welcomes an educational approach characterized by multidimensional and multimedia teaching methodologies.

Finally, our age—probably like every age in the history of humankind—is a time in which Jews are searching for some meaning in their lives. This is an era that warmly greets an educational approach that reaches out to each of us as unique human beings and helps grapple with the search for answers.

The 21st century may well be the age of informal Jewish education.

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