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Eco-Jewish Education – How to Make It Effective

by Gabe Goldman

The year 1992 saw the beginning of Jewish environmental and eco-Jewish education with the publication of Dan Fink's and Ellen Bernstein's *Let the Earth Teach You Torah*.¹ Since then, the teaching of Jewish ecological traditions has spread throughout school curricula. Schools also have initiated school greening projects, multi-day camping and canoe trips, and weekend retreats at natural retreat settings. Global warming and *bal tashchit* have become as much a part of our students' vocabulary as *Torah* and *tefilah*. And indications are that more and more schools will be following this trend. Now that mainstream America has "gone green," it is almost expected for Jewish educators to include Jewish environmental studies in their curricula. Precisely for this reason, it is crucial at this point to step back and examine how best to make Jewish ecological and nature education an effective part of Jewish education.

Analysis of the Range of Jewish Ecological Studies

When asked why ecological studies are part of their school curriculum, teachers and school directors give four common responses:

- a) We have a teacher or school director who is passionate about environmentalism and initiated a course.
- b) Ecology is part of Jewish tradition.
- c) Environmental problems are a significant social issue.
- d) Environmentalism is a topic relevant to our students.

Passionate Environmentalist on Staff:

Prior to 2006, schools were motivated to add ecological studies to their curricula primarily by environmentally conscious teachers or school directors. Most often, these courses were added in grades 6 – 10 and focused on understanding the state of the environment.

Part of Jewish Tradition:

Over the past three years, schools have been motivated to add ecological studies because they view these studies as an inherent part of Jewish tradition. As many of the articles in this journal demonstrate, our tradition addresses use of natural resources, treatment of animals, care of land, "greening" of cities, and issues of air and water pollution. These curricula focus on specific Jewish ecological traditions (e.g., *bal tashchit*) and their sources in Jewish text.

Significant Social Issue:

Just as Jewish education over the decades has included curricula about Civil Rights, Vietnam, and Darfur, so, too, it now includes curricula that address an issue that affects all of life on our planet. These “socially conscious” curricula are a “voice” for social injustices – be they against people or against nature.

Relevant Topic to Students:

Over the years, relevant topics have ranged from gay lifestyle issues to professional Jewish sports figures to rap music. Educators have long understood that students are more willing, and better able, to learn about that which interests them. Courses employing this rationale frequently address such issues as “eco-Kashrut,” vegetarianism, and animal testing.

While each of these variations on the theme of eco-Judaism has its pedagogical strengths, each also has its weaknesses. For example, in schools that have on their staff a passionate environmentalist who initiates a Jewish environmental course or program, the instructor’s own enthusiasm often goes a long way in making the course/program successful. A downside, however, is that if/when this instructor leaves the school (and all of us know the woes of faculty turnover rate in Jewish education), the course or program usually fails or becomes defunct.

A benefit of the “relevancy” model, of course, is that the more a subject matters to students, the more likely it is to appeal to them. Ironically, however, because of the current vogue of environmentalism, a downside to this variation of eco-Judaism is that students find their studies repetitive. As one student put it, “All my teachers are making environmentalism a theme of their class — English, art, even gym!” Students often voice the complaint, for example, that they have been “taught exactly the same information about *bal tashchit* every year since sixth grade.”

And beyond the particular limitations of any one of the above-outlined approaches to Jewish environmental studies, we face always the fundamental imperative of engaging our students and fostering in them a love of and commitment to learning. The mere act of teaching does not, as we know, ensure that an equivalent amount of learning is taking place. At least as important as what we teach is how we teach.

For this reason, I recently challenged my graduate students in the Experiential Education program at the Fingerhut School of Education (American Jewish University) to conduct a study of the elements of experiential education and their effect upon student engagement and learning. Started in 2005, the Experiential Education program offers its academic studies through hands-on experiences and real-life challenges. For example, students learn about the connection between Judaism and nature while tent camping for four days. Part of this learning takes place over text around a campfire. Part of the learning comes from direct experiences such as hiking, foraging for wild edibles or even when collecting firewood. Now in its third year of operation, the Experiential Education program is attracting students from across North America.

The Four Elements of Experiential Education

The two-year study (2005-2007) included Jewish day and religious schools (grades pre-K through high school), Jewish summer camps, outdoor education programs, museum programs, and congregation/family retreat weekends. Observations ranged in duration from a few hours to several weeks. Research techniques included timed observations of student engagement; tracking of student- vs. teacher-initiated questions; observation of teacher and student interactions; notation of the degree to which students had the opportunity to interact with each other; and analysis of the extent to which each class or program accomplished its goals. The study also included follow-up interviews with a select number of students, teachers, and school directors.

What my students and I discovered is that teachers employing one or more of the four elements of effective education (see below) — whether these teachers were conducting classes indoors or providing outdoor programs — were far more successful in engaging students in active learning than their counterparts (those using conventional teaching techniques). The more elements of experiential education that were employed, the greater the number of students engaged and the greater the degree of their engagement (e.g., students asked more on-target questions, demonstrated fewer discipline problems, and were disappointed when class ended). In fact, we did not observe any serious discipline disruptions (i.e., requiring teacher intervention) in classes/programs employing all four elements of experiential education.

The four elements of experiential education that we identified involve students' relationship to their learning experience, specifically to:

- Each other.
- Their teacher.
- Their curriculum.
- Their physical setting.

Relationship to Each Other

The best classes we observed were those in which the students felt that they were part of a community. Likewise, participants in youth groups and in groups that traveled to Israel, as well as campers in all types of Jewish summer camps, reported that the degree to which they valued their experience was in direct proportion to the degree to which they felt a positive relationship with the other members of their group. In examining the dynamics of these positive group experiences, we realized that successful groups were actually what we call school or class communities.

However, there are very few “natural” classroom communities. Just being in a classroom with others does not make that population of students a community. Rather, the schools and programs we observed with the best examples of community were those that intentionally created opportunities for students to experience each other

outside of the classroom settings; opportunities to share their individual skills and interests; and, most importantly, opportunities to teach and to learn from each other.

Teacher–Student Relationship

We also discovered that the most successful classes and programs were the ones in which students and teachers expressed a particular kind of relationship to each other. The most effective teachers, formal or informal, were the ones who demonstrated the highest degree of respect for their students. These teachers never ridiculed their students, used sarcasm or expressed cynicism toward their students. Teachers demonstrated their respect in positive ways ranging from addressing students as “Mr.” and “Ms.” to thanking them for conducting themselves well rather than just taking such conduct for granted.

In turn, the students in these classes expressed feelings of trust for their teachers. In fact, it became clear to us that the more challenging or “dangerous” (whether physically, intellectually or emotionally) an experience was perceived by students to be, the greater the level of trust they needed to have in their teachers. For example, unless they truly trust their teachers, students asked to keep journals do not share what is most important — their own insights into who they are.

Student Relationship to Curriculum

A Jewish high school history teacher’s comments during a post-class interview summarizes the lack of relationship most students have to their curriculum: “We decide what our students will learn, how they will learn it, why they’re learning it, how much time they need to learn it, and how they are going to demonstrate what they learned. And then we wonder why they can’t relate to their studies.” The best classes we observed were ones in which students previously had been invited to be part of a curriculum “negotiation” process. As described by teachers, this process begins to take place at the start of school and, in some cases, prior to the start of classes through e-mail correspondence, with teachers discussing with students what the range of their studies could be and inviting students to share their particular interests and passions.

It is not uncommon for students to express few interests at the beginning of the process, but their involvement invariably increases within a short time. In these co-decision-making classes and programs, participants help determine what parts of their studies will occupy more or less time, help construct test formats and grading systems, and help decide which resources to use. We found that the more choice offered to students, in formal and informal settings, the more likely they were to engage in the learning experience.

Student Relationship to Physical Setting

One of the most fascinating findings of the study was the degree to which the physical setting affects students’ learning. The most acute examples of this were found in early childhood classes and in outdoor education programs. Early childhood educators typically alter their classrooms — they include pictures, plants, animals, decorative walls, reading areas, and so forth. As grade level increases, however, the degree to

which classrooms are altered to bring about desired experiences decreases. By fifth grade, fewer than 5% of the classes we observed had more than a single poster on their walls.

Outdoor Jewish educators attributed much of their success to the multi-sensory experience of the outdoors. Nevertheless, we did observe camp and outdoor Jewish education programs that were ineffective in engaging participants. The two most common reasons for this were:

- a) Failure of educators to establish in participants the necessary level of trust.
- b) Failure of educators to make the natural setting a part of the experience (i.e., the outdoor setting was used as a mere “backdrop” to the educational experience and this most often resulted in students being distracted by nature’s wonders).

What Works?

Following are some approaches to Jewish ecological/environmental education that incorporate the four elements of experiential education discussed above.

Jewish experiential and nature education (JENE) programs

Since first appearing in 1994, these programs have spread across all arenas of formal and informal Jewish education. JENE programs provide ways for students to learn Jewish values through interactive experiences with nature. These experiences may take place outdoors or inside. JENE programs frequently focus on the role of nature in Jewish life (in prayers, Biblical stories, holiday celebrations, etc.) and on natural “lessons” to be learned from the environment. These programs include everything from indoor gardening to picking apples for *Rosh Hashanah* or taking *Shabbat* nature walks and are effective with students of all ages and from all types of Jewish backgrounds.

Jewish ecological courses that frame environmental problems as social problems and add a significant service learning or community service element

Older teens and college students experiencing the combination of academic study with hands-on learning describe these courses as the “best they have ever had.”

Community service projects include working in community gardens, cleaning trash from public parks and waterways, planting trees in urban areas, and so forth. When the community service is followed by discussion about the experience, students succeed in learning more than just the subject they are studying. They learn about themselves and their classmates in ways that are otherwise impossible.

Garden programs

These are proving highly successful in all types of Jewish educational settings, from day schools to summer camps. Gardening is being used as a medium for teaching about ancient Jewish agricultural laws, about the seven special types of plants (*shivat haminim*), about feeding those in need, about the partnership between people and God, about faith, about the value of organic produce, about *bal tashchit* through composting, and about the synergistic power of people working as a community toward a common

purpose. A recent evolution of Jewish garden programs is to contribute the garden produce to a local agency responsible for helping people meet their food needs.

Mix and Match

An example of an educational program that combines all three of the above-described approaches to experiential eco-Jewish education is currently being developed by The Service Learning Department of the American Jewish University, in partnership with Azusa Pacific University (a Protestant university in the Los Angeles area). Called "Helping Hands Gardens" (HHG), the program will train university students in basic organic gardening skills and then provide these students the opportunity to guide the development and care of gardens to be located at Hillels, Campus Ministries, community synagogues and churches, public and private schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and even in family backyards.

Summary and Conclusions

Whether teaching about Jewish history, Jewish holidays, or eco-Judaism, we have a far better chance of engaging students in active learning that leads to changes in their attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and skill levels if we attend to developing our students' relationships to each other, to their teachers, to their curriculum, and to their learning environment. Common sense tells us that student engagement is an *a priori* condition for any educational experiences to be meaningful. And it is only by making our students' educational experiences meaningful that we can hope to achieve our ultimate goal of enabling them to discover for themselves the value of Judaism in their lives.

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Endnotes:

1. Bernstein, Ellen and Dan Fink. *Let the Earth Teach You Torah*. Philadelphia, PA: Shomrei Adamah, 1992.