

The Value of Distinctive and Public Recognition by Amy Amiel

When I think of the challenge we face today of recruiting additional talented teachers into the field of Jewish education and more quality professionals into positions of Jewish communal leadership, I feel thoroughly overwhelmed. For recruitment is not, in itself, a solution. With it comes the responsibility of appropriate and ongoing teacher training and professional development. The responsibility of improving the benefits and rewards of the field. The responsibility of identifying and guiding teachers and other professionals along multiple career pathways across time, geography, and advancement level. In Jewish education, recruitment comes with the added responsibility of advocating for increased, respectable, and commensurate remuneration. The recruitment and retention of our current and future generation of Jewish educators and communal leaders is a daunting task and one for which, unfortunately, there is no panacea.

As JESNA President Jonathan Woocher suggests, our best strategy for this particular problem is to "start making change anywhere and everywhere." We must simultaneously try a host of grassroots and national efforts that begin to transform the reality of personnel in this vocation. At JESNA, we are now spearheading a number of efforts to identify, nurture, and place new recruits. Projects such as the Lainer Israel Interns, DeLeT and the Jewish Educator Corps are some initiatives attracting increasing attention (and increasing numbers of recruits!).

Another of JESNA's initiatives in this area is one I am fortunate to direct. It is a three-year-old Jewish educator recognition initiative known as "The Grinspoon-Steinhardt Awards for Excellence in Jewish Education." A national award designed to recognize K-12 teachers in local communities, the idea was initially conceived of and funded by the visionary philanthropist Harold Grinspoon of Springfield, MA. The Awards encourage community leadership in Central Agencies for Jewish Education and Federations across North America to identify up to two classroom teachers annually (from day or supplemental schools) with outstanding commitment to and talent in Jewish education. In the third year of the program, the Awards and Mr. Grinspoon were joined by mega-donor Michael Steinhardt, whose interest in teacher recruitment, professional development, and retention made the partnership a solid match. Honored teachers receive a \$2500 award (a portion of which is designated for professional development), national recognition, and an all-expenses-paid trip to the annual meeting of the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities. It is possible that in the future the Awards program may consider adding a component offering a professional development seminar in Israel and expanding the Awards to include recognition of early childhood educators.

The Goals of the Awards

The goals of the Awards? They are twofold: One is to honor teachers in a meaningful, public and distinctive way; some 95 have been so honored as of June 2002. In doing so, we set an example and a standard for the recognition of local Jewish educators. We create a sense of kavod for Award recipients through the substantial cash gift, placement of local advertisements recognizing each teacher by name, and in-person, professional recognition at the General Assembly. The GA experience includes professional development workshops and a recognition ceremony for the educators. It further exposes them to a group of national lay and professional leadership, as well as to local leadership from communities beyond their own who truly support change in this field and the efforts it will take to get there. Conversely, at the central, annual gathering of world Jewish

field and the efforts it will take to get there. Conversely, at the central, annual gathering of world Jewish leadership, this leadership is treated to a reception, featuring classroom Jewish educators as Award recipients! Along with the Covenant Awards ceremony and luncheon, this reception sends a message to the GA body: Jewish educators are an important, distinguished group of professionals, worthy of our attention, dollars, and time.

The Award's second goal is loftier: to change the culture of teacher recognition, recruitment and retention. If we will succeed in this endeavor, it will be together, through a partnership of efforts by national agencies such as JESNA, local agencies for Jewish education, federations, and funders like Messrs. Grinspoon and Steinhardt. We will need to continue to develop initiatives that reach young people, mid-career people, and current educators where they are, and we will need to establish serious ongoing support for these teachers' professional growth and development. Such initiatives must be coupled with determined and visible advocacy for Jewish education as an honorable, and even prestigious, career. Through the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Awards, we are working with local communities to write and run feature articles about their teachers of excellence in both Jewish and secular newspapers, federation, and synagogue and school bulletins. We are making shidduchim between local philanthropists interested in underwriting the cost of the Award (\$1000, which is matched by \$1500 from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and Jewish Life Network) and local agency sponsors. These are but two examples of the projects we must undertake in our Jewish education hasbara (explanation) campaign to achieve this cultural shift.

The Advantages of Distinction-Creating Incentives

To date, 27 communities participate in the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Awards. Is yours participating? Our research indicates the reason often is reluctance to recognize one teacher of excellence among many. Is community leadership reluctant to give appropriate kavod to teachers? Perhaps so, when it entails recognition through cash from communal or philanthropic dollars. But, more likely, communal leadership is seeking a "safe" way to recognize all deserving teachers at the same time. In fact, while a growing number of communities are organizing teacher recognition ceremonies, they are doing so with no "top prize" to which an educator can aspire. And, while community recognition dinners and receptions in honor of all local Jewish educators are probably important to local educators and should be encouraged, recognition without distinction is a strategy unlikely to yield results with an impact greater than the status quo. Recognizing all teachers at the same level may make everyone feel appreciated, but no one feel distinguished. What will the teachers look forward to next year?

Instead, I advocate for community establishment of local recognition awards, alongside participation in the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Awards and other distinction-creating incentives as steps in a process of increasing kavod for teachers. Distinctions such as Grinspoon-Steinhardt, and the approach of honoring a handful of teachers among many worthy candidates, should serve as centerpieces of sophisticated local recognition ceremonies. If done with sensitivity, they will bring honor not only to the top awardees, but also to all Jewish educators in the community. Next year, another educator in the room will win the Award, reveling in its kavod. Who knows? Such competition might inspire a stronger determination to succeed, or even an enhanced commitment to the classroom and to the field. Minimally, such awards are making some very impressive classroom Jewish educators feel valued at long last by their communities -- and by people outside of their communities.

Jewish educators are not, in most cases, looking for fame and glory. They seek recognition in a professional, public, and meaningful manner from the leadership of their own communities. They yearn to hear praise from school administrators, community leadership, former students, and colleagues. They furthermore deserve to have such praise affirmed and emphasized through material goods (cash awards, trips to Israel and quality recognition ceremonies -- all strategies currently employed by local communities). Is this not the way we honor our leaders in secular fields? Is it not the way in which we honor the lay leadership of the Jewish community? Why are we reluctant to recognize teachers in a way that might engender a bit of local competition? The argument could be made that teachers not selected for an Award will feel disgruntled or passed over by local officials. It can be said as well that there are political ramifications for leadership identifying a teacher of excellence from one school and not another. In communities where "top honor" awards are given out, and care is taken to ensure fair decision making processes and equal distribution of top honor prizes over time, there is no indication that such political ramifications have any significant effect.

Affecting the Lay Leaders As Well As the Teachers

The Grinspoon -Steinhardt Awards will not make the challenge of teacher retention disappear. Ultimately, they will directly affect the careers of only a handful of Jewish educators in North America. But, hopefully, they will equally affect the local lay and professional teams selecting those Award recipients, as well as inspiring other (potential) Jewish educators, to feel enthusiastic about working in a profession where honor is bestowed. Our hope is that we are contributing to this cultural shift in the Jewish community; perhaps the Awards will serve as an incentive to younger educators. Will they inspire them to dream about possibilities in Jewish education, help them aspire to the next step in their career, identify for them local role models in past recipients?

Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua taught, "Let the...awe you feel for your teacher be as great as your fear of Heaven." (Pirkei Avot 4:12)

We have moved from a culture that, in Talmudic times, deeply respected the teachers of its children, but now has lost its way. Today, we must move away from a culture in which it is acceptable to recognize all teachers with a token gift and a letter of appreciation. We must move towards a culture in which recognition is distinctive, public, and offered as one of many growth opportunities in a continuum of Jewish educator development.