

Jewish Education in the 21st Century

By Paul A. Flexner

Recently, a group of senior Jewish educators were engaged in a heated discussion about the burning issues of Jewish education in America. Some spoke about the lack of real commitment from many of the parents, others about the need for creativity and imagination, a few suggested that there was a severe lack of quality among the teachers and professional leaders. But, as the conversation delved deeper into the issues, agreement was reached that these were only superficial compared to the need for a consistent, community-wide vision for the role of the Jewish educational enterprise as a whole. Even within this group of knowledgeable and experienced educators, there were immense differences of opinion about the end game or outcome of the Jewish educational experience. Some spoke about knowledge and understanding, while others focused on engagement with the tradition; some spoke about the need to create a new generation of active and involved Jewish adults and others added the need for lifelong learning and doing. But all agreed that the system of Jewish education as it exists at the beginning of the 21st century only partially fulfills their dream for a dynamic Jewish community actively engaged in translating the Jewish values and ideals both to future generations of Jews and to the broader American community within which we live.

This vignette never took place in real time. Instead, it is the result of an internal dialogue that has been running through my mind over for years. And I am not alone. Many of the leading and emerging experts in Jewish education are challenging themselves as well with similar questions. We are, as the saying goes, a community blessed with great minds, creative thinkers, and deeply committed people who constantly strive to build a strong and vital Jewish community for all of our children and grandchildren.

By reflecting on the ongoing dialogue among these thinkers, I want to initiate a broader and deeper discussion that crosses all lines of the Jewish community. The issues in Jewish education are multifaceted, complicated, and highly complex. They cross every line. They reflect the different movements, the different philosophies of education, the different perspectives on Judaism. But despite all of these differences, there is a high level of agreement that starts with an understanding that what we are doing today is not good enough; that we can do better if only we put our talents to better use; that we have the resources, both human and capital; and that the Jewish people will, as a community, find the right tools and motivation to create a better system.

At the core of my analysis is the very simple concept that the Jewish community is highly diverse. It begins with a structure built on the concept that every institution is an independent, autonomous organization. They may have an association with other similar institutions through one or more national structures, but when it comes to making important decisions about its vision, the goals and values that it subscribes to or the implementation strategies that it will follow, each organization is responsible only to itself and its leadership. This is what makes the Jewish community unique; it is also one of its biggest challenges.

Out of this diversity arise three critical issues that appear over and over in the literature. Each has significant merit on its own. Each represents a key factor that underlies the system as a whole. But, when taken together, they weave a foundation upon which the entire enterprise of Jewish education is framed. The issues are:

1. Building Community
2. Creating a Systems Approach
3. Having the Right Personnel

In examining each, keep in mind that the whole of the system is far greater than its individual components. But it is the components that make it possible to understand and address the issues that are at the heart of providing a quality product, in this case an education that leads to a lifetime commitment and involvement with the Jewish people, however one defines these terms.

Building Community

The Jewish people have long been known for their sense of humor. The jokes start with a single Jew needing two congregations – the one he attends and the one he never sets foot in. In many ways, this is typical of the Jewish community as a whole. We have long divided ourselves into small groups that are connected by family structure, neighborhood alliances, or particular philosophies, to name only a few. However, over the last half century, many of these natural divisions have melted away as life in America has been transformed from small neighborhoods centered on ethnic groups to the suburban sprawl of the modern city. By virtue of our general acceptance into the fabric of American life, many new opportunities have opened for living arrangements and the redesign of our institutional frameworks. The result is that we no longer have the natural connections that linked us to one another in the past.

This changing reality is reflected by the life of the typical member of the Jewish community who has fewer and fewer Jewish friends, no longer lives in close proximity to other Jews or close relatives, has a greater likelihood of finding a non-Jewish partner, and, in general, is less and less engaged with Judaism and the Jewish community. This new reality poses one of the great challenges to every Jewish institution: the ability to create community among its members. It all begins with the smallest unit, the family, which may be tight and close when the children are young, but splits in multiple directions as the children grow. This is as true within the institutions themselves as it is for the family members within the general society. Whereas activities and programming were once designed to bring families together as clusters, today each individual picks and chooses where to become involved and most institutions, especially within the Jewish community, plan for individuals to interact with other like-minded and similarly-aged individuals, and not in family groupings.

We see this most clearly within our teen community where the pressures to interface with their peers crosses all lines of activity, both within the Jewish community and within their educational and social circles outside of the Jewish environment. We offer both formal and informal activities to build deeper connections with their Jewish peers, but these are always in conflict with the pressures to be involved elsewhere. In our open society, the choices that our teens make are often to seek their connections on the wider stage. This is driven by the pressures to build a strong resume designed to gain admission to the finest universities, a pressure that comes naturally to a Jewish community that has long placed the highest value on education and learning.

On the other hand, our institutions (synagogues, JCCs, Federations, and others) continue to struggle with discovering new ways to build their communities and constituencies. The natural systems that were their foundation from the 1930s to the 1980s no longer meet the needs of people in the age of Google and Web 2.0. New venues that bring small groups together around common interests instead of within the large complexes of the modern organization may be one of the answers. Utilizing the new technologies and building on the nascent interests in spirituality and seeking greater understanding of the self, the institutions need to discover new ways to build connections and build community around Jewish themes. This will require a new way of thinking, planning, and organization; a new way of reaching the individuals as individuals and within their family units; and the creation of a Jewish way of life that reflects the life patterns of today's Jewish community.

The challenge for the 21st century is to discover new ways to create community for Jews to connect with other Jews, to provide support for each other, and to strengthen the Jewish people. Until and unless the Jewish community is able to build these connections, the drifting away that has been a growing pattern will continue.

Creating a Systems Approach

“Linking the silos” became the phrase of the moment when Jack Wertheimer published his monograph in 2005. With this one document, the Jewish community woke up to what many had been saying for years. The individual pods of Jewish life and Jewish education were not achieving success. Children and families were buying into Jewish life as consumers by purchasing those pieces that had appeal to them at the moment. And, when they tired of that piece or they had completed that portion of their education, they moved on to something new. This is as true of parents buying an early childhood Jewish experience as it is for adults who attend a semester or yearlong study seminar. Once it is over and they have received the benefit of the program, they move on to something new, which may or may not be a continuation of a Jewish learning experience.

We all know the shortcomings of the current system. Some reference the three times in a child's life when he or she is likely to drop out – after the early childhood program, after *bar/bat mitzvah*, and after college. The reality is that it is significantly harder to bring people back once they have left than to maintain their involvement once they are in. But, despite our knowledge of this reality, few communities or institutions have seriously invested in a solid systems approach to Jewish engagement. There are a few models, but they do not represent a clear direction for the community. The language is clear, we can talk the talk; but the reality is also present, we are yet to walk the walk.

Whether it is in a synagogue, the JCC, or the Federation, the individual pods remain separate and distinct from each other. This is as true of the connections between the early childhood programs and the formal educational programs in day schools and congregations as it is for the informal aspects of Jewish life, such as camping and youth movements. We continue to operate within the disparate areas of activity, with little cooperation and much competition.

This is not news! Since the early 1990s when systems thinking became the rage of the business world, isolated groups of Jewish leaders have experimented with new models. A few found limited success and became the model for others. But, with all of the talk and experimentation, there is little to show that the systems themselves are beginning to change.

Jewish life in America, today and tomorrow, is intricately connected to our institutions. If we believe, and I do, that there is a future for the Jewish community, then it is incumbent upon our leaders to guide us in the transition from the current dysfunctional system to a highly connected, well-organized system of organizations that talk to each other, plan with each other, and coordinate the transitions for every member of the community as he or she moves from one stage of life to the next. The American Jewish community is capable of creating a new and vibrant Jewish life.

Having the Right Personnel

Jewish organizational life is a people business. For over 3000 years, we have looked to the people for our leaders and thinkers. We have long recognized those whose insights and abilities will set the path for others to follow. In the 20th century, America's Jews demonstrated their appreciation of their best leaders with honors and awards, with compensation, and with a level of respect unmatched in much of American life. But not everyone is one of our “best” leaders; not everyone received the recognition that serving the Jewish people so richly deserves. In fact, many of those who devote significant years of their lives to serving the community, either as paid staff or as volunteers, receive little to show that the community values their service.

Jewish education, not unlike the education community in general, is a prime example. Research continually indicates that many people who lead our programs and guide our students are among the least prepared and least compensated individuals within the community. They perform their duties to the best of their abilities out of a love for Judaism and a love for the Jewish people.

Their devotion and commitment is a model for all; and, yet, remuneration and respect are frequently missing.

But it is not just the teachers and educators who fall into this category. Those who serve in a volunteer role also receive little in exchange for their efforts. They operate, often in their first volunteer leadership role, with little guidance or understanding of their responsibilities. Although highly educated in the worlds of science and the humanities, many have little understanding of what a vision for Jewish education should look like. Their passion is unmatched by an understanding or knowledge of the product that they are deeply committed to creating and supporting. Their ability to make the important decisions about the future of the Jewish people is limited by their own lack of background. Their need to learn, to be mentored and guided, and to develop an understanding of the educational process is critical to creating the NEW communities for the future and to building SYSTEMS that will serve the Jewish people for generations to come.

The message is clear. Those who are actively engaged in every pursuit of Jewish education -- from classroom teachers, youth workers and camp counselors to the directors of the schools and programs, to the rabbis, and to the diverse population of volunteer leaders -- require extensive learning opportunities themselves in Judaica, educational practice and theory, and systems thinking. If we as a community believe that our learners, children and adults, deserve only the best, then it is incumbent upon the community to use its resources to recruit and prepare the best to serve, at all levels, as our professional and volunteer leaders. And once they have been recruited and prepared, we need to mentor and nurture them as they develop the skills appropriate for their roles and treat them with the respect and trust that they so richly deserve. This is what makes us who we are as Jews and this is what the Jewish community must commit itself to if we expect to build a quality Jewish community for the future.

Looking Forward

These critical issues, when taken separately, reflect the current state of the field. Each has its positives and negatives; each has been around for decades. Without sounding trite, we often say that there is nothing new under the sun or that what goes around comes around. In our case, both remain as true today as in the past. But the *hiddush* is the clarity of the message, the understanding that Jewish education as we know it must find new ways for preparing the next generation. Through a process of weaving these themes into a multifaceted approach designed to address the issues of Jewish education and the Jewish community, we will move a step closer to achieving our goals.

Are we capable of utilizing our tremendous community resources to create real change in a system that is the heart and soul of the Jewish people? Are we capable of building communities that operate as synergistic systems where each of the individual components is connected to those that surround them; where the people who have committed themselves to the enterprise have the tools to create the most exciting learning opportunities; where the various visions of Jewish education and Jewish life interweave with each other to create a strong fabric that holds the community together, despite our differences?

This is the challenge before the American Jewish community. This is the challenge that the community planners, the philanthropists, the volunteer leaders, the academics, the rabbis, and the educators must continually struggle with as they design the new face of the Jewish people. For it is only through the combined efforts of all that we will create a Jewish educational system to meet the new and exciting challenges of the 21st century.

May we all go from strength to strength.

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