

## Dimensions of Excellence:

# Criteria for Evaluating Jewish Educational Resources

by Leah Schaer and Ronni Sims

*This article is based on a handout that the authors prepared for the CAJE 30 Pre-Conference session offered by the Teacher Resource Center Network, in collaboration with the Congregational Schools Network.*

Jewish educational resources may be defined as those elements that provide the basis for learning activities, programs, and curricula, in any Jewish educational environment. Resources may be hard copy (tangible), electronic, or human. As they plan their lessons, units, and curricula, Jewish educators are continually engaged in the process of discovering, evaluating, selecting, and acquiring resources to advance such educational objectives as:

- ♦ Meeting a spectrum of student learning needs.
- ♦ Making lessons as meaningful and as memorable as possible.
- ♦ Instilling a commitment to lifelong Jewish learning and observance.

There is a wealth of Jewish educational resources available! Professional development conferences such as the CAJE Conferences, Judaic and secular bookstores, catalogues, and websites are all venues for resource “shopping.” In addition, travelers to Israel from local communities may be willing to bring back resources with a special flavor of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Whatever the source, the following outline suggests criteria that may be used to determine whether or not a specific Jewish educational resource is an excellent choice when examined with regard to six areas or “dimensions”: Consonance (agreement or harmony), Community of Users, Curriculum, Collaboration, Technical Concerns, and Cost. Not all of the criteria will apply to every situation or educational setting. Several criteria represent opposite, but equally, valid approaches. However, the criteria do provide a structured basis for selecting excellent resources and justifying specific resource acquisitions.

*Consonance* -- An excellent resource:

- ♦ Reflects the Jewish values and traditions of the setting where it will be used.
- ♦ Advances the goals/vision of the educational institution where it will be used.
- ♦ Is appropriate in terms of student demographics.
- ♦ Is applicable to a broad population of users.
- ♦ Is applicable to a specific population of users.

*Community of Users* -- An excellent resource:

- ♦ Is commensurate with teacher/facilitator skills and background.
- ♦ Promotes teacher competence, effectiveness, and efficiency.
- ♦ Can be successfully “marketed” to students and teachers.

*Curriculum* -- An excellent resource:

- ♦ Supports/reinforces existing programs and curricula.
- ♦ Integrates well with existing programs and curricula.
- ♦ Adds a new or improved dimension to existing programs and curricula.
- ♦ Provides a basis for desired changes in curriculum.

- ♦ Builds on and reinforces prior learning.
- ♦ Fosters quality questioning.
- ♦ Provides information and learning activities for short, self-contained lessons.
- ♦ Provides information and learning activities for extensive, in-depth units of study.
- ♦ Facilitates the recycling and re-working of older materials.
- ♦ Replaces useful, but worn or outdated, resources.
- ♦ Lends itself to evaluation and assessment during and after use/application.

*Collaboration* -- An excellent resource:

- ♦ Stimulates collaboration/communication among Jewish educators, institutions, students.
- ♦ Promotes outreach to and awareness of the wider community.
- ♦ Adds needed services for an institution or community.

*Technical Concerns* -- An excellent resource:

- ♦ Works with available technology.
- ♦ Encourages wider use of current technology.
- ♦ Enhances technological capabilities.

*Cost* -- An excellent resource:

- ♦ Is cost effective for immediate acquisition.
- ♦ Has the potential to receive funding.

As these groups of criteria are defined and applied in specific Jewish educational settings, they may lead to consideration of broader issues such as the development of a religious school “vision,” or the need for a greater understanding of the characteristics and needs of the families served by the religious institution (student demographics), or budget adjustments to provide funding for excellent resources selected.

Resource discovery, evaluation, selection, and acquisition is a dynamic, ever-evolving process that energizes the educational environment, updates and upgrades the materials on which learning activities are based, and transforms visions of excellence in Jewish education into enduring reality for students, teachers, and the community.

*Leah Schaer was a member of the Mazkirut for CAJE 30, where she co-chaired Family Programming for the Conference. Currently, she is Co-chair of the CAJE Teacher Resource Center Network. Leah has worked in Jewish education for 30 years as a teacher and also served as director of education for over six years while residing in Albuquerque, NM, until recently moving to Ft. Collins, CO.*

*Ronni Sims has held a variety of leadership positions within CAJE, including serving as Co-chair of the CAJE 20 Educational Resource Center, Co-chair of the Leadership Kallah, and Co-chair of CAJE 29. She currently co-chairs the Teacher Resource Center Network and chairs the Curriculum Bank. Ronni has presented at past CAJE Conferences and lives in Albuquerque, NM, where she develops resource programs for the Albuquerque Jewish Education Alliance.*

*LSchaer@comcast.net  
ronnisims@msn.com*