



**THE DYNAMIC CONTEXT OF JEWISH EDUCATION TODAY:  
A SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES**

Lippman Kanfer Institute - April 25, 2006

To guide its inaugural project, “Redesigning Jewish Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” the Lippman Kanfer Institute established an Advisory Council made up of a diverse group of individuals active in Jewish life in a variety of settings. The members of the Advisory Council were interviewed by staff to elicit their views on three questions relating to the “Redesigning” project:

1. What in your view are the most consequential changes affecting the lives of Jews and Jewish life in North America over the past quarter century or so?
2. What are some of the specific implications of these changes for Jewish education?
3. If you could wave a magic wand and make one change in Jewish education tomorrow, what would it be?

The summaries that follow are based on 23 interviews completed by April 24.

**I. CHANGES AFFECTING THE LIVES OF JEWS AND JEWISH LIFE**

Respondents cited a large number of changes that have had an impact on Jewish life and the lives of Jews over the past twenty-five years. Although the changes identified covered many areas, several themes recurred in a significant number of the responses:

- 1) *The diversity in forms of Jewish identity and expression, and the emphasis on individual choice and search*

Respondents spoke of “expanded ways to express Jewishness,” including ways to educate oneself and grow Jewishly, and the acceptance of this diversity. They noted the incredible richness of

our lives of Jews, though not always in conventional terms and not always mediated by institutions, with multiple experiments and multiple items on the menu. In light of “the master change in Western life - the increasing control people have over their lives,” respondents noted the ascendancy of “do-it-yourself Judaism,” individualized and customized, and the atomization of Jewish identity. The emphasis on personal search and “journeys” makes Jewish life much less “we” oriented and challenges the concept of community.

2) *The thorough integration of Jews into American society and culture*

Respondents saw Jews today as fully integrated into the wider society and culture, crossing boundaries easily, with high mobility, access to positions of power and wealth, and total exposure to the larger culture, especially through mass media. Many respondents emphasized this as a positive development, marked by: greater comfort with expressions of Jewishness, even in the public realm (integration without assimilation); a “naturalness” to being Jewish and to learning about Jewishness; the infusion of Jewishness into American culture, and interest on the part of non-Jews in things Jewish. On the other hand, several respondents noted that the comfortable place that Jews enjoy in American society results in a diminished need to provide for ourselves and makes it less automatic that individuals will follow a Jewish path. The incentives to assimilate or to adopt minimalist modes of Jewish identification have grown as Jews can move easily in and out of a porous society.

3) *A growing consumer ethos*

Tied to the above two changes is the rise of a consumer ethos in Jewish life. As choice, e.g., becomes a more prominent theme in general education, there is a spill over into the Jewish world. More generally, the Jewish community is struggling to keep up with a consumer-oriented ethos. Because the quality of many Jewish religious and educational experiences is not high enough, many Jews never acquire the “taste” for being seriously Jewish.

4) *Changes in family life, including, but not limited to, intermarriage*

Many respondents spoke of changes in the patterns and dynamics of Jewish family life. Some

noted new family structures and configurations tied to delayed adulthood; larger numbers of singles; and mobility and the loss of extended families (even as the number of active generations grows). Others noted changes in the internal dynamics of families as parental roles change and “social” as well as physical distancing disperses individuals into personalized activity schedules and their own iPod and PDA-dominated worlds. It was noted that at least one positive dimension of this change is a strong interest among some families in developing or maintaining a Jewish identity and a greater concern about the quality of Jewish education that children are receiving.

Intermarriage was mentioned explicitly by several respondents, who noted not only its effects on identity and family life, but that it has brought different types of people into the Jewish “tent.” These individuals bring diverse backgrounds and sometimes speak a different “language” than we are accustomed to. Institutions still have not figured out how to respond.

5) *The pace of life and competing pressures*

One respondent stated that “everything is faster and everyone is busier,” and several others echoed this sentiment, noting competing demands for time, shorter attention spans, and an expectation of instantaneous responses. People are easily distracted and live fragmented lives, in which Jewish components occupy only small fractions.

6) *Technological changes*

Many respondents echoed the conventional wisdom that the technology revolution over the past quarter century has had broad and deep impact. We learn differently and use time differently. We can be instantly aware of events (both Jewish and general) taking place around the world. The internet is strengthening connections, but in new ways. The web has emerged as a primary and readily accessible source of information on almost everything. One respondent noted that in Jewish education, we have moved from an era where immigrants taught natives to one where *digital* immigrants are trying to teach today’s digital natives, part of a larger gap in mind set between older educators and their younger learners.

7) *The weakening of Jewish institutions*

Respondents also strongly endorsed the concept that Jewish institutions today are losing ground in their efforts to maintain the trust and loyalty of Jews. This is a phenomenon in the general world that is mirrored in the Jewish world as well. Respondents spoke of “huge gaps between the structure of the official community and people’s lives,” and resistance to engagement with what are perceived as tired institutions. Federations and synagogues were both seen as being part of this trend, with the rise of individual philanthropy and suspicion that “the community is only interested in my money” weakening the former, and the lack of overarching visions, the rise of non- or post-denominational Judaism, and the slow pace of change undermining the latter.

8) *Changing relationship to Israel*

Several respondents noted the change in the relationship of North American Jews to Israel. Young Jews in particular see a different Israel in the media than the one older Jews internalized. Israel is not the underdog; it is an occupier. Israel remains a powerful focal point of interest, but Jews do not know how to deal with it.

9) *The growing role for women in Jewish life*

A number of respondents made specific mention of the enfranchisement of women (and continuing limitations on this enfranchisement) as a major change in Jewish life. One tied this to an overall expansion in the pool of Jewish leadership, with greater diversity not only in gender, but in age and background as well.

10) *Expanding Jewish educational opportunities, but a generation of parents struggling to “catch up”*

Several respondents noted that Jewish education itself has undergone something of a renaissance, with more day schools (of all types), growing adult Jewish learning, more young people studying in Israel, Jewish studies in universities, and new portals (including, but not limited to the Internet) responding to a resurgence of interest in Jewish learning. At the same time, a number of respondents noted that today’s parents are themselves often the products of poor or limited Jewish education, and hence do not know how to teach their own children. On the positive side,

for some parents at least, the frustration with their own lack of Jewish education has led them to go out and learn. Respondents noted other changes within Jewish education, including a more “business-like” approach, changes spilling over from the general educational domain that will impact the teaching profession, and an increase in professional salaries at the top, but far less so on the front lines and in the middle ranks.

## II. PROMISING OPPORTUNITY AREAS FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

The interview respondents saw a variety of implications for Jewish education emanating from the changes outlined above. Many of these constitute areas of opportunity (as well as associated challenges) that can be grouped into four broad rubrics:

### 1) *Expand the scope of Jewish education*

Many respondents argued for the prime importance of taking an expansive view of what Jewish education is and where, when and how it is delivered. Several spoke of ensuring that education is not seen as limited to “schooling,” and especially to day schools, but without rejecting the importance and potential of either day schools specifically or schooling more generally. People need diverse access and “touch” points; Jewish education needs to take place where people are, in public libraries and private schools; arts and culture need to be seen as part of Jewish education; Jewish material needs to be mainstreamed strategically into the popular culture. Outreach needs greater emphasis in order to help those outside the center express themselves Jewishly. It was noted that this expansive understanding of Jewish education, and the proliferation of knowledge that is available, will place tremendous demands on educators and institutions. Existing structures will need to change, and new ones may be needed (and some old ones may need to be “sunsetting”). There is an existing infra-structure with resources, but only a portion of the creativity needed; and a “start-up” community that is creative and beginning to attract resources, but lacks infra-structure. Even mapping all of the options and bringing all the players to the table will be a challenge.

2) *Connect with learners as consumers and customers*

In addition to widening the canvas of Jewish education, many respondents saw the need for fundamental shifts in the way that the Jewish community thinks about and presents Jewish education in order to refocus it more productively on meeting the needs of today's educational consumers. These shifts in mind set have significant implications for Jewish education's content and methods as well. Several respondents spoke of the need to connect more effectively with Jewish education's "customers," to understand them and the environment they live in more deeply, and to do so without fear or judgmentalism. We need CRM (customer relations management) for all Jews across all life stages. In a competitive environment, we need to focus on the benefits that really matter to the learners, which may be different than those that the providers wish to focus on. We should recognize and embrace the potential for children and families to take greater control of their own Jewish education. By outsourcing Jewish education to institutions, we diminished dialogue and conversation. At the same time be more creative in communicating our values and the value added we can bring to their lives. The message needs to be one of hope, not fear. We need to build emotional connections to Jewish education as we would to a brand.

3) *Make Jewish education more experiential and more relevant*

A number of respondents focused on the importance of making Jewish education more experiential and more directly relevant to the lives of Jews. Jewish education needs to be about being Jews, doing Jewish, and creating Jewish lives, not teaching *about* Judaism as a subject. People need the tools to construct their Jewish selves. Providing immersive, engaging, and absorptive experiences are critical. Education should be values driven and related directly to the humanitarian values and moral imperatives of the day. "Create intersections of Jewish time, Jewish action, and Jewish values." Several respondents pointed to the specific importance of family-based education and education that brings students out into the Jewish community in active roles. Others emphasized the significance of building social contexts (e.g., Jewish friendships), even as we equip young people to bring their Jewishness into the larger environments in which they live.

At the same time, several respondents noted that content is important. Education cannot be simply about what feels good. There needs to be a base of knowledge for people to make informed choices.

4) *Recruit, develop, and support educators who can reach today's learners*

A number of respondents emphasized that educators -- their quality, charisma, and the support they receive -- have a profound impact on whether Jewish education succeeds or not in today's world. We need to find and attract charismatic educators, train them to work in non-didactic ways, as coaches, mentors, and facilitators, and provide working conditions that are stimulating and respectful. Those working on the front lines need something between abstract visions and "tips of the trade," a blending of passion and ideas, translated into practice. We need to overcome the distance between the conversations taking place on the ground and those in the "seats of power and knowledge."

*Other promising opportunity areas:* In addition to these major themes, respondents noted a variety of other implications, ranging from the need to rethink our capital investments in institutions and how they work together (are we trying to sustain too large an infra-structure?) to the potential for new ways of connecting young people to their counterparts in Israel through shared culture. Several noted the importance of negotiating a delicate line between embracing the individualism of today's culture and reaffirming Judaism's counter-cultural message of community and peoplehood.