

Informal Education and Jewish Identity Development

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For the past few years we've seen a lot of emphasis in both the Jewish press and Jewish communal policy on the importance of Jewish education as a way of influencing or ensuring Jewish identity and Jewish continuity. Certainly I believe that Jewish education plays a crucial role. However, much of what we hear is not about Jewish *education* in its fullest sense – it's about *schooling*, and especially day schools.

There has been a blossoming of Jewish day schools around the country and that is a welcome communal development. But what is sometimes lost in the current climate is the very important impact and potential of what has come to be called informal Jewish education, especially its role in the Jewish identity development of American Jews who do not attend day schools.

Recent research supports the important role of Jewish education separate from formal schooling. Informal Jewish educational experiences such as summer camps, youth groups, Israel trips, and involvements in Jewish college programs among others, play an exceedingly important role in the Jewish development of Jewish individuals. We need to keep reminding the Jewish community that Jewish education is much bigger than Jewish schooling.

What role do “involuntary” and “voluntary” Jewish experiences play in the development of Jewish identity in adulthood? Although we typically differentiate Jewish educational experiences by calling them *formal* and *informal*, for the purposes of thinking about Jewish identity formation, I would like to redirect our attention to the issue of motivation. *Involuntary* experiences are those experiences a child has because of the circumstances of his or her background, *before the child has any say* in the matter. For example, parents make decisions about children's schooling and camp. And they create the emotional climate in the home (especially around holiday celebrations). The *voluntary* experiences are those that a person *chooses* to undertake. These typically begin in adolescence and continue through adulthood. Teenagers choose to attend camp, to belong to a youth group, to go on a Jewish teen trip, to partake of Jewish college experiences. During adolescence and early adulthood, a child's parents cease to be the primary decision-makers about their child's Jewish experiences. During this period a teenager's own motivation comes to play a central role in how or whether to be Jewishly involved.

I prefer to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary experiences rather than formal versus informal because it focuses our attention to the core issue of Jewish identity development. The involuntary experiences can be viewed as

what a person inherits by virtue of his or her upbringing, while the voluntary experiences represent the series of choices that a person makes with regard to Jewishness. The question of inheritance and desire lies at the heart of our challenges as American Jews today. Each of us needs to integrate both sorts of experiences in order to discover a Jewishness of our own.

Connections and Journeys, a recent UJA-sponsored study I directed, examines the relationship between these two Jewish educational experiences (voluntary and involuntary) and the current Jewish connection and engagement of American Jewish adults born between 1946 and 1976. Two broad swaths of people were included: those who had been raised in intensive Jewish settings (typically, but not exclusively Orthodox) and those with a less intensively Jewish upbringing.

The pattern of Jewish education and socialization was quite different for these two groups. Those from more intensive Jewish backgrounds were more strongly influenced *earlier* in their lives. They typically came from families where the parents were deeply committed to Jewish life and conveyed this at home, in their educational choices (day school), and in their communal and synagogue involvement. This early training (involuntary) seems to have been the main factor shaping their Jewishness in adulthood. Later “voluntary” experiences (like youth groups, trips to Israel, and college activities) had less influence, because these people were already very involved in Jewish life; these later experiences did not create much “added value” over and beyond what had already been encouraged by day school (which in this population often continued through high school). We could call this the “Early and Often Approach.”

In contrast, the adults who came from less intensively Jewish backgrounds were most strongly influenced by *later*, “voluntary” experiences during their adolescence and early adulthood, including: being involved in Jewish youth groups, Jewish studies and Hillel-like activities in college, or having a significantly positive relationship or experience being Jewish.

What I learned through this study is that there is no one way to raise a Jew. We tend to think that people who get their Jewishness “early and often” (and, let us add, healthily – without emotional trauma) are already on the road to internalized Jewish identity. But it is important to understand that just because people miss out on intensive Jewish exposure early in their lives does not mean that they will not have such experiences during adolescence and adulthood. In fact, what appears to have the greatest impact is the voluntary experience.

Jewish identity development involves a process of exposure – internalizing and ultimately reflecting on both the early involuntary experiences that happen to a

child and become part of one's inheritance (or baggage), and what a person acquires later out of desire. In terms of identity development, both experiences are important – what we are given and what we ultimately choose. The mystery of Jewish identity formation is that we don't know for any given person, if and when desire will kick in. The best strategy, then, is to create a set of opportunities that maximize *both* sets of experiences.

Bethamie Horowitz is the author of Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity, published by the UJA-Federation of New York (2000). Reprinted with permission from Sh'ma (www.shma.com) May 2001.