

Changing Jewish Communities

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Jewish Education in the Age of Google

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- *Technological changes in such domains as global telecommunications, the Internet, wireless technologies, and on-demand media have created a new environment for Jewish education. Information is plentiful and easy to access; consumers expect to get what they want, when and where they want it; learning is multisensory and multidimensional; and virtual communities complement real ones.*
- *Each of these developments has important implications for how Jewish education today is conceptualized, designed, and delivered. Yet there has been little systematic assessment of these implications.*
- *The success of Jewish education in the twenty-first century requires serious consideration of the wide range of changes affecting it. Education itself must change to meet the new challenges and seize the opportunities it faces.*

Type the words "Jewish education" into Google and one gets approximately 34,800,000 results. This amounts to about two and a half Web links for every Jew in the world. "Torah" is somewhat less popular, apparently, yielding only 7,020,000 hits. "God" does better with 176,000,000 results, though not as well as "Israel" with 250,000,000, a finding that is open to interpretation.

In one sense, this is nothing more than a curious exercise. Yet, in another, the ease with which the searches were conducted, the speed with which the results were received (less than a tenth of a second), the huge variety of listings to peruse under each heading, the time it would take (years) to pursue all of the links (and the fact that they would change again and again while doing so), and the reader's immediate comprehension of what the author is talking about, all tell much that is highly relevant to any effort to understand the

state of Jewish education today, its future, and the challenges it faces.

A World of Changes

The last quarter-century has seen the world change dramatically, for everyone, and perhaps even more so for Jews. The number, scope, and implications of these changes - geopolitical, sociocultural, economic, technological, and religious - far exceed what could be catalogued, much less fully assessed, in a short article. Consider just a few examples:

ÀIn 1981, the United States was locked in a Cold War with the "evil empire" of the atheistic Soviet Union and its bloc of vassal states, and Jews struggled to help fellow Jews trapped in the USSR escape to freedom. Today, the enemy is global terrorism fueled by religious, largely Islamic, extremism, while Jews celebrate the renewal of Jewish life in the FSU and Eastern Europe, even as Israel and Diaspora communities have been transformed by the millions of Jews (and non-Jews) who have migrated from the FSU over the past decades.

In 1981, baby-boomers were in their peak years of childrearing and the millions of Jews among them were enjoying the fruits of their and their parents' successful passage into the mainstream of American life. Today, Jewish baby-boomers' children are forming families of their own, families that include non-Jews, partners of the same gender, and children from diverse racial and religious backgrounds far more often than those of their parents.

Since 1981, America and its Jews have undergone a complex journey of simultaneous secularization and spiritual renewal. Individualism, multiculturalism, universalism, and neotribalism shape a generational culture among young Jews today that both celebrates and downplays difference, and that elevates personal choice and nonjudgmentalism to the summit of its value system.

Underlying or overarching the changes in politics, in social, cultural, and religious norms and mores is a quarter-century of technological change that only science fiction authors could have dreamed of. In 1981, personal computers had barely spread beyond groups of techno-hobbyists; today, they are ubiquitous and link billions of users around the globe via the Internet. Fewer than five thousand Americans had cellular phones in 1981 (they were available in only three cities); today, one can not only call anyone anywhere on phones smaller than one's hand, one can browse the Web, download one's email, listen to music, and watch television. In 1981, cable television had just reached the point where its first true nonbroadcast network, HBO, found it worthwhile to offer programming twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Today, cable and satellite bring hundreds of programming choices every minute of every day, and On Demand services and DVRs have placed people in virtually complete control of what they see and when they see it.

Amid such innovations and many others, Jewish education has hardly been static. It has responded primarily to two broad changes in American Jewish identity over this period. One was the perceived weakening of Jewish identification and of traditional forms of Jewish expression that came to be called the "crisis of Jewish continuity." The second was the simultaneous growth of a segment within the Jewish population that is open to and even actively seeking a more intensive relationship to their own Jewishness.

Strengths and Weaknesses in the Community

These two phenomena complemented one another and encouraged those guiding Jewish education to promote the expansion of intensive educational experiences as the key to strengthening Jewish identity. The results of this effort are apparent in the growth of Jewish day schools, in the drive to get more young people to Israel that has culminated in Birthright Israel, in increased investment in Jewish summer camping, and in the rapid spread of new programs like Melton, Meah, and Wexner that expose adults to ongoing, high-level Jewish learning.

At the same time, persistent voices have reminded the Jewish community that these intensive educational experiences still reach only a minority of Jews. Although the debate over how much effort and resources to put into "outreach," especially to intermarried families, has continued to agitate the community, nearly everyone agrees that initiatives to engage Jewish families early on and to try to reengage young adults on campus or postcollege must also be part of any viable "continuity" strategy. Hence, the expansion of Jewish early childhood education, the revitalization of Hillel, and the spread of Jewish studies, as well as the launching of various other endeavors targeted at Jews in their twenties and thirties and at interfaith families have also won attention and support from educational activists and funders.

The landscape of Jewish education clearly has changed over the past quarter-century, and for the better. But has it changed enough? There are disquieting as well as encouraging elements in the overall portrait of North American Jewish education today. Enrollment in part-time Jewish education is declining, and not all of the decrease can be attributed either to defections to day school or reduced cohort sizes.

A majority of teens continue to exit the educational system between bar/bat

mitzvah and high school graduation. And, though solid research is lacking, there is good reason to believe that the quality of Jewish education in nearly every setting, though improving, remains inconsistent; pockets of excellence coexisting with expanses of mediocrity.

Are these persisting weaknesses attributable to a failure to respond fully and appropriately to the changes of the past quarter-century? It is difficult to say. On the one hand, Jewish education has responded to some of the developments of the era by trying to incorporate new content into its curricula, whether relating to the role of women in Jewish life or the changing relationship to Israel. Yet, at the same time, most of what is taught today is similar to twenty-five years ago - updated and often improved, but essentially the same.

Technology and Education

Pedagogically, Jewish education has hardly ignored the technological revolution (as evident in those millions of Web links). Many forms of multimedia and distance learning are now available. Yet, again, the times, places, and ways in which Jewish education is delivered remain primarily those that were dominant twenty-five years ago. New technologies have been a gloss added to a system that remains fundamentally unchanged.

This inherent conservatism is not necessarily bad. An enterprise that is 3500 years old need not rush to redefine its fundamentals based on a quarter-century of not unambiguously positive change. Yet, there is an equal danger in assuming that the changes of the past twenty-five years can be accommodated without rethinking at least some of these fundamentals. Jewish education has spent insufficient time reflecting deeply, critically, and self-critically on the developments of the last quarter-century, at least some of which may present far more profound challenges and opportunities with respect to how Jewish education is designed and delivered than has been generally appreciated. Google is not just a handy search engine or a symbol for a new technological age. It is a signpost pointing toward new realities in how the world operates, in how knowledge is defined and delivered, and in how people live and control their lives.¹

Jewish education ignores these deeper changes at its peril. If, however, it can tap into the new sensibilities and habits of behavior that Google and its like both foster and feed upon, Jewish education may discover new ways to increase its impact and effectiveness.

What, then, are some of the most salient characteristics of the "age of Google,"

and what might they mean for Jewish education?

In the age of Google, information is plentiful and easy to access, though not necessarily easy to assess.

Great quantities of information are literally at our fingertips today. For both teachers and students, the ubiquity and ease of accessing hundreds or thousands of sources and resources on virtually any topic calls for a fundamental rethinking of how learning is designed and implemented. Learners are liberated from their dependence on a handful of textbooks or what teachers are able to tell them under the pressure of limited time. The democratization of learning that the ancient rabbis first promoted and that the printing press made imaginable, has now come to fruition in the age of the Internet and multimedia technology.

At the same time, however, the challenges of determining what information from what sources is truly reliable and worth knowing multiply as well. The call from educational theorists for transforming the teacher's role from that of the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side" preceded the age of Google. Now, though, this is no longer simply desirable; it is a necessity. The shift from defining teaching primarily as the transmission of content to viewing it as the facilitation of enthusiastic, adventurous, but responsible and discerning, self-guided learning is not easy to make pedagogically.

For Jewish education, it is perhaps equally challenging philosophically. Jews' tradition of learning places great value on accurately transmitting (and then elaborating on) the teachings of one's predecessors. This tradition need not be lost; indeed, DVDs and the Internet have made the canon of traditional texts available to today's students in manifold ways that were previously unthinkable. The processes and premises of learning and teaching, however, are also changing. Teachers will not hold a monopoly on determining what is worth knowing in a world where Amazon and Epinions encourage users to provide their own reviews to complement those of the "experts," and the former are often more trusted than the latter.

Can Jewish education adapt itself to a world where every student (and parent) has access to the equivalent of a university library in her or his bedroom or den? Can the possibilities be exploited and the programs and pedagogy be recrafted accordingly? These questions are beginning to be answered, but there is still more to be done before a confident affirmative response is possible.

In the age of Google (and Dell and Amazon), "customers" expect to be able to get what they want, when they want it, and at a good price.

If the industrial age was the era of mass production and consumption, the age of Google - the age of information - is the era of recustomization.² It is expected that producers and sellers will deliver the desired products when and where they are wanted, and that the purchase itself will be simple, efficient, and a bargain. In the commercial world, and increasingly in nonprofit settings as well, the provider who can deliver the best "customer experience" has the advantage.

This lesson is beginning to be learned in Jewish education, though it is still a long way to from putting the customer at the center of the educational experience. Part of the challenge is in the products offered, part in the modes of delivery. In both respects, despite the large number and variety of providers, Jewish education largely retains an approach of "Take what we give, when and where we offer it." Programs are packaged by the provider, with few options for the consumer to select the components or change the time and place of delivery. Most congregational schools offer similar curricula, and these are determined far less by what congregants want than by a top-down view of what their children need.

The ability to construct one's own educational experience by mixing and matching the offerings of many providers is severely constrained by a lack of information about what is available - a sharp contrast, for example, to going on Amazon and finding a list of customized suggestions for books to buy based on one's last order. It is also necessary to "join" many institutions in order to access their programs; while rewarding customer loyalty makes sense, requiring a pledge of loyalty in advance seems counterproductive.

The exceptions to these generalities prove the rule. Chabad, which emphasizes responding directly to what its customers want and asking for little initial commitment, is thriving as an educational provider for children, families, and adults. Youth groups are moving from membership-based models to more open frameworks for programming. Moreover, cultural events such as film festivals, concerts, plays, and exhibits are drawing crowds of Jews who may not be prepared to make extended commitments to institutions and programs.

Of course, the reality is far more complex than the picture sketched above. Institutions cannot survive on intermittent patrons, and the Jewish community cannot possibly offer every potential configuration of content, method, time, and location that prospective learners may seek. Customization in the

marketplace is driven by large volumes and vast databases that allow diverse customer needs to be met efficiently - but, as anyone who has dealt with unnavigable phone menus and interminable waiting times can testify, such customization should not be confused with true personal attention.

The marriage of marketing and education is inevitably problematic. Is good education nothing more than giving consumers what they want? Most educators, including Jewish ones, would insist that it is not. Education is about learning important things, and it requires effort and commitment. Although contents or methods cannot be imposed on unwilling recipients, turning Jewish education into nothing more than an exercise in customer satisfaction means abdicating a responsibility both to the learners and to the institutions and tradition the teachers represent.

That does not, however, justify underestimating the extent to which the learners are legitimately asking for more. Much more can be done to lower the barriers to Jewish educational experiences, and to provide guidance to those who are uncertain about what modes of learning are available to them and what they can expect from these opportunities. More differentiated contents can be provided, and a greater variety of options and opportunities to try them. The entire experience of Jewish education can be made more responsive both to what people are seeking and what educators seek to provide them. A Jewish education that is more customer-centric and customer-friendly is a necessity today; otherwise, the very people on whom hopes are pinned for the future will turn elsewhere.

In the age of Google (and Xboxes and iPods), learning is a multisensory, multidimensional experience.

In fall 2005, the hottest holiday shopping item was the Xbox 360 - Microsoft's latest effort to best Sony and other rivals in the arena of video game playing devices. The introduction of the Xbox was accompanied by a spate of articles in the popular media describing the video gaming culture that now includes millions of young and not so young people around the world. At the same time as purchasers began scrambling to get the Xboxes, one prominent educational periodical led its issue with an article on "Video Games and the Future of Learning" that claimed that such games "give a glimpse into how we might create new and more powerful ways to learn in schools, communities, and workplaces."³

Although the notion that video game parlors will replace classrooms any time soon is exaggerated, both the observations and the reasoning on which the article is based deserve to be taken seriously. Video games aside, the past

quarter-century has seen a revolution in learning theory that focuses on the diverse ways in which people use their multiple senses and multiple intelligences to comprehend the world. Although Jews are known as the People of the Book, learning no longer comes from the written word alone. Even without abandoning the study of traditional texts for interactive gaming where avatars play out complex scenarios in syn-worlds, Jewish education must adjust to a reality in which multisensory and experiential learning is becoming the norm.

Again, this process has to some extent already begun. The concept of "experiential" or "informal" education has entered the mainstream of Jewish educational thinking and practice. Interest has also grown in using the arts as a vehicle for serious Jewish learning (as in such projects as Avodah Arts or Storahelling). Jewish education is making increasingly sophisticated use of technology's ability to bridge time and space by enabling students to encounter in their classrooms and homes cultural artifacts, historical events, and personages that once could only be read about in textbooks or seen in museums.

Still, the larger challenge remains. In an era of constructivist learning, multiple intelligences, and diverse learning styles, can Jewish education keep pace with an educational environment that is rapidly generating new types of materials and new modes of teaching and learning? What has been achieved so far in this regard demonstrates the potential for redesigning Jewish education as an encompassing set of experiences of touching, seeing, hearing, feeling, making, and doing, as well as listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

This potential, however, is still far from fully realized. That will require a major investment not only in programs or materials, but in people. This is now underway in domains like camping and youth work where experiential education has long been the norm. But in other areas, such as the use of arts and technology, the work of preparing a generation of adept educators has barely begun.

Someday soon - if not already - children, and some adults, will be carrying devices that operate as cell phones, PDAs, MP3 players, PlayStations or XBoxes, Wifi internet devices, DVD players, and TV receivers all in one. Perhaps these devices will even emit preselected odors to accompany whatever one is seeing, hearing, or doing. Undoubtedly, children will be expecting the education they receive to be as rich, inviting, and diverse a sensory experience as the rest of their lives. Educators must be prepared to deliver.

In the age of Google (and instant messaging and Friendster), connections can be readily formed across multiple boundaries and "virtual" communities can complement and support "real" ones.

Anyone who has watched teenagers for any length of time - including observing them from the back of a classroom - knows that alongside whatever visible and purposeful activity is taking place, there is often a flow of silent communication. Whether it is instant messages (IM) from "buddies" popping up on the computer screen or text messages whipping back and forth on cell phones, distance and time are no longer barriers to immediate connection with whomever one wants, whenever one wants.

From a larger sociocultural standpoint, this immediacy of communication reinforces the emergence of networks as means of organizing human activity and relationships, both as a supplement to and a substitute for more formal types of organization. Such networks, both "virtual" and "real," not only strengthen existing ties but open connections that might otherwise never be made and foster new types of community among individuals otherwise unlikely to come into contact.

In a networked world of easy and immediate communication, the social dimensions of education can be dramatically expanded to encompass many more individuals. For Jewish education in particular this is a boon of enormous potential. As a group both relatively few in numbers and widely dispersed, Jews can make especially good use of the power of communication technology to create virtual connections and communities to complement face-to-face ones.

Such efforts are being made. In a bold move to reposition both itself and the entire domain of Jewish youth-group activity, BBYO[®] has launched a website called b-linked, billed as a "BBYO online community." The site is a Jewish version of Friendster, allowing teens to register their profiles and connect with other teens based on mutual interests rather than geography. It also includes various "portals" that allow teens to blog, get help with college admissions, post photos, find out about events in their area, and to connect with Israel and their "spiritual side."

B-linked follows on the efforts to build similar electronic connections for young-adult alumni of Birthright Israel through its website. Other recent innovative technology-based projects include efforts to connect Jews in North America with counterparts in Israel and other parts of the Jewish world. An example is a project called Bavli-Yerushalmi sponsored by an Israel-based organization called Kolot in which groups of Jews in North America and in Israel study

common texts and share their insights via email.

Yet, even these efforts constitute only small beginnings in taking advantage of the new networked world. Computers, cell phones, and wireless email and instant messaging are great tools. For Jewish education, however, networking is not ultimately about technology. It is about expanding Jewish conversations, creating a context in which Jewish individuals can find others with whom to carry on discussions that are personally meaningful and culturally generative. It is about building communities around discovered shared interests and using various modes of communication, both face- to- face and electronically mediated, to create and re-create connections, some temporary, some enduring.

The reemergence of informal "Jewish salons" in several communities over the last few years, the success of ventures like Reboot and Kol Dor that connect Jewish young-adults from diverse backgrounds, together with phenomena like b-linked and Birthright Israel, may be the harbingers of a new era of Jewish "networking." In such an era, Jewish education should be reimagining itself as a global enterprise for facilitating a myriad of Jewish connections and conversations using all means available. If this spirit of open and free-flowing discussion were to take root, perhaps instead of IM-ing their friends sitting in the next row about this weekend's party, students might IM friends in distant cities to share opinions about the latest events in Israel or ideas on how to interpret a particularly knotty piece of text. In such an environment, teachers might even forgive the occasional ringing cell phone.

In the age of Google (and Linux and Windows), good platforms can be even more powerful (and profitable) than good programs.

Since its debut as a search engine for the Web, Google has spawned a slew of spin-offs and extensions that allow users to search their own hard drives, look for articles in academic journals, read a customized version of the day's news, view satellite pictures of one's neighborhood, shop, and, it is promised, access the collections of some of the world's great libraries. Microsoft's Windows dominates the world of personal computer operating systems because thousands of programs - most not authored by Microsoft - run on this platform. Its chief rival today, Linux, goes further. As "open source" software, it has mobilized an army of programmers to continuously improve the platform itself in a self-sustaining, self-policing, collaborative effort that in turn makes possible an ever-expanding array of programs that many claim are better than anything that runs on Windows.

The lesson is that building a great platform, one that can expand and that

draws out the talents of others, is even better than creating a great program. This is a lesson that Jewish education would do well to heed. Too often, educational institutions think only about how to design and implement new and better programs. But if these institutions - for example, synagogues - saw themselves as platforms and sought success by attracting as many other talented programmers as possible to make use of their platform, the entire ecosystem of Jewish education might function dramatically differently, and far more effectively.

A successful platform does a few fundamental things very well and meshes seamlessly with other programs that do specific tasks far better than the platform itself could alone. A good platform makes it easier for programmers to write good programs, and good programs in turn make the platform far more valuable to its users. Jewish education by and large does not emulate this formula. Institutions try to do too much on their own - sometimes for fear of sharing and possibly losing their users, sometimes because they simply do not know what is or could be available. Creative individuals or groups with excellent programs have difficulty breaking into the marketplace. The result is wasted energy and resources, and a product that is not nearly as good as it could be.

How can Jewish education learn better how to build both strong platforms and dynamic programs? One possible answer is to use more of the free-enterprise model. Birthright Israel used what is in essence an "open sourcing" model, allowing a wide variety of program providers to develop specific trips (the programs) within a framework of well-codified, detailed standards (the platform) and then to compete in the marketplace for participants.

A second key is to take seriously the idea that Jewish education is, or could be, a true system in which the individual parts support one another and each contributes to the viability and vitality of the whole. Combining the concept of platforms with that of organizational networks, in which smaller, more flexible and adaptable organizations mesh their talents and do not try to do everything by themselves, is a spreading strategy for increasing both productivity and quality. In such a systemic approach, information about clients, critical success factors, and prior experiences ("source code") would be shared, not hoarded. Interfaces would be smooth; synagogues, camps, and Jewish Community Centers could work together to provide families with full-service, year-round educational experiences. "Bug fixes" and regular updates would ensure that the quality and usability of the product improved continuously.

A new focus on building strong platforms as well as programs would also mean investing seriously in those platforms for the long term. In the nonprofit world generally today, there is a growing awareness that it makes little sense to support endless streams of new programs without building the capacity of the institutions that must operate them to sustain themselves and to generate

successive generations of new initiatives.⁵

For Jewish education, this would mean ensuring that institutions like synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, camps, and day schools that should be the platforms for a continuing flow of creative programming have the wherewithal to carry out the basic, necessary tasks such as building close, enduring relationships with those who pass through their doors or gates. Investments in "infrastructure," whether for adequate staff or for systems of knowledge-sharing, are notoriously difficult to sell to many funders. Yet, if there are to be great platforms for great programs, such investments are vital, and the institutions themselves must become far more focused on what they do and far more open to bringing in others to add to their talent pools.

Conclusion

In important regards, Jewish education in the age of Google will need to look and work differently than it does today. The lessons drawn and proposals made here are hardly the only ones that could emanate from the changes over the past quarter-century. The emphasis here has been on technological changes and their social, cultural, and educational accompaniments; of course, other aspects of experience that affect Jewish education have changed as well.

What is critical for Jewish education is not one or another specific set of recommendations. Instead, it is that the world has changed, and Jewish education has not changed enough to keep pace. Being au courant or even "relevant" is not, of course, a goal in itself. As noted above, Jewish education, like all education, needs to incorporate a strong element of conservatism.

Just as important, however, is not to reject all new ideas and approaches as either faddish or disruptive. This is indeed the age of Google, and much more. It is an age that offers possibilities for realizing old visions that predecessors could never have dreamed of, but might well have grasped enthusiastically. The task, as Rav Kook argued nearly a century ago, is simple, yet endlessly challenging: to renew the old and sanctify the new. Jewish education deserves no less.

Notes

* This article will appear in the revised second edition of Paul Flexner and Roberta Goodman, eds., *What We Know about Jewish Education* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura), forthcoming in 2007.

1. A colleague suggested that "living in the age of Google means that SEARCHING is a legitimate, life-encompassing activity!" (personal communication from Renee Rubin Ross). Whether or not there is a correlation between the ease and ubiquity of computer searching and the apparent popularity of more existential and spiritual questing, the possible links between daily and religious habits and dispositions should not be dismissed.

2. The term often used today is "mass customization" - the use of sophisticated information technology to create personally tailored messaging and to give customers options to customize their purchases, within carefully prescribed limits, while preserving the efficiency of operation that true customization cannot achieve.

3. David Williamson Shaffer, Kurt R. Squire, Richard Halverson, and James P. Gee, "Video Games and the Future of Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (October 2005), 104-11.

4. Originally the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization.

5. Business guru Jim Collins draws the distinction between "time telling" - investing in a specific program - and "clock building" - "shaping a strong, self-sustaining organization that can prosper beyond any single programmatic idea or visionary leader." Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (Jim Collins, 2005), 24-25.

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