

FROM GOOD TO GREAT: HOW TO CREATE JEWISH LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE

STEVEN HUBERMAN, PH.D.

Director of Regions, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, New York

This review essay focuses on Professor Bernard Reisman's book, The New Jewish Experiential Book (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing, 2002). Joel Reisman is the co-author. I dedicate this essay to our rebbe, Professor Reisman, who served as Chair of the JCSA Publications Committee for two decades.

"Alone a Jew is nothing. But when he is with other Jews, he is a force. Because then automatically he inherits all the strengths and all the tears, all the despairs and all the joys of his ancestors. A Jew alone cannot be Jewish. A Jew can be Jewish only if he is part of a community."

Elie Wiesel

The UJA-Federation of New York and a range of other organizations recently funded the first-ever Israel Education Month. The aim was to celebrate our intimate connection to the land and people of Israel. As part of this effort, I served as a Scholar-in-Residence in a Long Island synagogue on the theme, "After September 11: Being Jewish and Loving Israel." We could not have predicted the response—hundreds of young people, parents, and mature adults joined us. At each event, the attendance grew.

Over Shabbat we had a remarkable experience. My goal was to positively transform how people felt about being Jewish and make them Israel activists. The successful techniques I used were from Bernard Reisman's book *The New Jewish Experiential Book*. They enabled me to impart Jewish values and build a sense of *Chevrah*—group cohesion. This article explains the rationale for Reisman's methodology and suggests how to create Jewish learning communities.

A founding father of informal Jewish education, Reisman wrote his first book on experiential education in 1978; it revolutionized Jewish learning. Experiential education

is a potent tool, engaging young people, communal leadership, and adults on a Jewish quest. Reisman's updated book provides a treasure chest of strategies to build Jewish identity. The strategies in the text substantially further our understanding in nine areas: (1) anti-semitism/Holocaust, (2) Israel and Israel-Diaspora relations, (3) family and life cycle, (4) community, (5) leadership, (6) personal and professional values, (7) religion and culture, (8) pluralism, and (9) Jewish identity.

JEWISH EDUCATION PRINCIPLES

"Learning is great, because learning leads to action."

Talmud Kiddushim 40b

"Imagination is more important than intelligence."

Albert Einstein

In 1916, John Dewey noted the relationship between experience and learning: "To learn from experience is to make a backward-and-forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes trying: an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things" (1964, p. 140). This is the underpinning of *experiential education*—education based on the experience of the learner.

The social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, con-

ducted experiments during the 1930s and 1940s on ways to change attitudes and behavior. Lewin demonstrated that the main ingredient in change was *directly* involving people themselves in the change process: "This result (change) occurs when the facts become really *their* facts (as against other people's facts). An individual will believe facts he himself has discovered, in the same way he believes in himself" (quoted in Morrow, 1967). This is best accomplished in a small group.

Jewish experiential education should utilize creative activities that relate the subject matter to the experiences and interests of the group participants. Increasingly, Jews are on a quest for a personal Jewish lifestyle. The right techniques nourish and expand people's interests. Through direct participation, they clarify and articulate how Jewish tradition is relevant for them. We thus create a Jewish learning community, a small group that encourages peer learning and emotional support.

Ideally, the small group should number about ten people. This is not always feasible. In my recent Long Island experience, I sought to use the techniques with 200 people at a time.

Among the keys to success are encouraging open and forthright participation, letting participants feel comfortable to risk saying what they truly feel, and getting to know people and referring to each other by name. Rabbi Ben Zoma observes in *Sayings of the Fathers*. "Who is wise? He who learns from every man" (4:1). In short, TRUST THE PROCESS.

The group leader is an expert facilitator, someone who is extremely knowledgeable in the subject area and is sensitive to those in the group. In the Harvard University Business School, they teach that successful business leaders must combine the two "c's"—be competent and care deeply about others. The maxim applies even more so to creating Jewish learning communities. It is not enough to know your area of responsibility; you have to be a *mentsch* as well.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Experiential activities are varied. They include the following:

- Rankings and priorities: forms or schedules that ask individual participants to determine preferences from an array of value or behavioral options
- Role playing: activities in which participants act out a structured or self-designed vignette
- Questionnaires and quizzes: instruments designed to explore and extend substantive knowledge
- Expressive activities using one of the artistic media (music, art, dance, drama) to create a mood or an experience
- Fantasy activities that encourage use of the imagination to provide new perspectives and insights
- External stimuli: use of objects, materials, or symbols to stimulate participant reactions

There are common threads in all of these activities. The participants generate data, discuss their reactions to the data, and consider their implications. A facilitator might, for example, stimulate discussion by asking persons to note their level of agreement or disagreement with several statements, as shown in Table 1.

Since most people derive greater satisfaction from being active rather than passive, they are eager to react to such trigger questions. The function of the leader is crucial. He or she needs to display enthusiasm and flexibility. Although the leader knows the desired outcome of the activity, mid-course corrections—changing content, activities, or the format—may need to be made.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once commented, "The teacher is the creator of the future of our people." Operationalizing Heschel's insight requires ground rules for useful Jewish content discussions. Reisman emphasizes that there are no short cuts to active listening. To maximize Jewish expe-

Table 1. Sample Experiential Activity One:
Questionnaire on Israel-Diaspora Relations

Please note your level of agreement on each item.

Key: SA = strongly agree; A = agree; U = uncertain; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree

1. ___ Identification with Israel is the single most important part of my Jewishness.
2. ___ The State of Israel makes me proud to be Jewish.
3. ___ Every Jew has a moral obligation to support Israel.
4. ___ One cannot really be a Jew in the full sense in the Diaspora.
5. ___ All Diaspora Jews should be encouraged to make aliyah.
6. ___ All Jews should consider themselves Zionists.
7. ___ I am a Jew first and an American second.
8. ___ Without Israel the American Jewish community would be much weaker; Israel is the key to meaning and cohesion in the American Jewish community.
9. ___ The first priority of American Jewish communal funds is to help Israel.
10. ___ Israel should receive undivided support from American Jews so that we appear united in the eyes of our enemies.
11. ___ We must strive to influence U.S. foreign policy to support Israel—even if we are criticized for it by non-Jews, the press, Arab countries, etc.
12. ___ Israel should receive undivided support from American Jews since we can assume that the policies of a Jewish state will be sound.
13. ___ After we send money to Israel, we have no right to control the allocation of those monies.
14. ___ We have no right to dictate policy to the Israeli government; for example, regarding administered territories.
15. ___ Israel is the center of world Jewry.

riential learning we are reminded to adhere to these key notions:

- Listen carefully to others. Try to really understand what they are saying and re-

spond to them, especially when their ideas differ from your own. Try to avoid building your own arguments in your head while others are talking.

- Think together about what you want to get out of your conversations.
- Respect the confidential nature of personal stories.
- Be open to changing your mind; this will help you really listen to others' views.
- When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for the common concerns beneath the surface. Above all, be civil.
- Value one another's experiences and think about how they have contributed to group members' thinking.
- Help develop one another's ideas. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions.

In addition to eliciting personal reactions to your Jewishness, experiential activities can help clarify a Jewish organization's future direction. I have used the "Leadership Ranking Sheet" (Table 2) to help a group of

Table 2. Sample Experiential Activity Two:
Jewish Organization Leadership Ranking Sheet

Below is a list of 10 attributes that are pertinent to the exercise of Jewish communal leadership. You are asked to determine their relative priority so as to produce a set of guidelines that might be used by the Jewish organizations in your community in choosing lay leaders for the community's social, civic, and religious organizations. Rank these items from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most important attribute, 2 next important, and so on.

- ___ Maturity
- ___ Jewish knowledge and commitment
- ___ Prestige in the non-Jewish community
- ___ Organizational know-how
- ___ Personal assertiveness
- ___ Wealth
- ___ Youth
- ___ Political connections
- ___ Intelligence
- ___ Prominence in Jewish organizational life

top officers determine their recruitment priorities. It is yet another illustration of how to create a spirited discussion leading toward consensus.

Before doing the more specialized activities as shown in Tables 1 and 2, it is important to create a sense of *chevrah*—a caring, more intimate group. To build safe space members must feel comfortable and not intimidated. At the outset you want to establish a “heimish” setting. The environment should be a climate where persons are accepted, supported, and embraced. The educational

process is conducive to this desired ambience.

Whenever I am working with a Jewish communal group that includes newcomers, “two circles” (Table 3) is an ideal activity. It should be introduced before any of the more threatening, self-disclosing activities.

JEWISH LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Every Jewish professional and every lay leader is a Jewish educator. How they con-

Table 3. Sample Experiential Activity Three: Two Circles

Purpose: To allow group members to get to know each other quickly and to instill a participatory mindset. This activity also serves to divide a large group into small groups ready to work on a subsequent experiential activity. “Two Circles” is the activity that we use most frequently in beginning experiential programs.

Setting: A room with sufficient space to accommodate all the small groups. Straight-back chairs are set up in two concentric circles containing the same number of chairs. Chairs in the inner circle face out, and those in the outer circle face in.

Time: 35–40 minutes.

Instructions:

1. Participants sit on the pre-arranged chairs. If there is a large group, one should separate spouses and people who know each other into different small groups.
2. The leader explains that the activity will involve a series of brief conversations (of about 3 to 4 minutes duration) on subjects to be assigned by the leader between the two people sitting facing each other. Before beginning the conversation, the two persons are asked to introduce themselves. The leader then announces the question and asks both persons to speak to the question within the assigned time. Participants are asked to stay on the subject and, if needed, to prod their partner to obtain a full response.
3. After discussion on the first question, the leader asks the people in the outer circle to move one chair to their right. (For variety, people from the inner circle can be asked to move one chair to the left.) The new pair introduces themselves, the leader assigns a new question, and the pair converse. This continues until every pair has conversed on an assigned question.
4. Since members of the same circle have not had a chance to talk with one another, the leader suggests that members of the inner and outer circles move around and introduce themselves to the others in the circle.
5. At this juncture the participants are aware of a dramatic contrast between their initial anxiety and the warm afterglow generated by the series of personal conversations. This leaves them with a sense of trust for their new colleagues and receptivity to continue the process of personal sharing.

Sample Questions for Discussion in the Circles

1. Describe a person whom you feel exemplifies a good Jew.
 2. What is there about the work of this organization that you like most?
 3. Which person whom you have known has had the most impact on your life as a Jew?
 4. What do you value most about being Jewish?
 5. What do you recall as being an especially positive experience since you have been at this organization?
 6. What kind of Jew makes you feel most proud?
-

duct themselves, the kinds of statements they make, how they relate to others—all of these behaviors transmit Jewish value statements—some positive and some negative.

The contributors to the Reisman volume emphasize that we are each teaching role models. As a “virtual Jewish school,” we have multiple characteristics. Jews today are autonomous so that Judaism must become a more attractive and compelling lifestyle. We advance their exploration by doing experience-centered learning. Jews should have Jewish experiences, rather than simply talking about them. It is one thing to study Shabbat; it is more transformative to go to a shul and absorb it.

We are encouraged to be interactive; quality relationships with our colleagues, lay leaders, and clients are as critical as the actual work in which we are engaged. In this person-centered milieu we reach out to others to do Jewish. Our curriculum of Jewish values encompasses behaviors and beliefs we want others to internalize. And we seek to make the method of Jewish learning enjoyable. Talking heads are out; caring Jewish role models are in. We teach Jewish by demonstrating and acting on our beliefs, not simply by telling or lecturing. It is on this expanded campus where we do God’s work of Kedushah.

Jews today are strongly affected by early life experiences, including the home, Jewish schooling, and synagogue involvement (Horowitz, 2000). Later voluntary experiences—especially Jewish youth groups, Hillel activities, and quality trips to Israel—have an impact during adolescence and early

adulthood. Even if people miss out on these early and often choices they can still have high-impact Jewish experiences. For any given person we do not know when the desire for Jewish identity will be activated. The best strategy to create Jewish learning communities of excellence is to construct an exciting array of experiential options for all life-cycle stages. Reisman’s book articulately catalogues this vast array of growth opportunities.

Reisman has trained an entire generation of Jewish communal lay and professional leaders. My wife, Frieda, and I have seen Bernie as our mentor for almost thirty years. In considering his influence, we are reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s statement, “To leave the world a bit better, to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.” By this measure, Reisman has succeeded. Or as *Pirke Avot* 4:1 observes: “Who is wise? Those who learn from everyone...Who is honored? Those who honor all people.”

REFERENCES

- Dewey, John. (1964). *Democracy and education*. New York: MacMillan.
- Horowitz, Bethamie. (2000). *Connections and journeys: Assessing critical opportunities for enhancing Jewish identity*. New York: UJA—Federation.
- Morrow, Alfred. (1967). Events leading to the establishment of the National Training Laboratories. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 3, 114–150.