

### **Bringing the Magic of Informal Education into the Classroom**

There is a magic about Jewish summer camp that brings campers back year after year, returning as campers for as long as possible before applying for staff positions in which they remain for a number of years. Some of us are even so lucky as to work in camping professionally. This magic is recognized by many, who see and embrace wholeheartedly the success that Jewish camping has enjoyed.

Yet, many of our children do not attend Jewish summer camp. Their formative Jewish experiences happen instead in the religious school classroom. It is here that they spend anywhere from one to three afternoons or mornings of their adolescent lives, learning what they need at least to become b'nei mitzvah, or at most, what it means to be Jewish. We hope that they will continue to study in our classrooms through Confirmation and high school graduation. We sigh in sadness and regret when students drop off the Jewish education map after their b'nei mitzvah. And yet, many of us continue to teach the same way we have always taught.

In an age when Jewish education has been outsourced to us, the Jewish educators, it is our responsibility to find a way to ignite a spark within our students in which a deep appreciation and love for their Judaism can burn and grow. We should be giving them the tools with which to live Jewish lives, make Jewish decisions, and become active and complete members of the Jewish community. We must find what it is that makes camp magical and apply what we find to our congregational schools.

Deborah Newbrun writes that “[t]he setting matters: classrooms are less delightful than sitting around a campfire with darkness and cold at your back and glowing warmth before you. A

Jewish story told around a campfire elicits deeper thoughts, feelings, and discussions than the same story told in a classroom” (2007). Keeping in line with this statement, a congregation with which I work has created a twice-a-month religious education program that takes place at a camp setting. Their prayer experience occurs in the outdoor chapel under a roof of trees and is different than what they experience in their synagogue. The programs in which they participate look more like an education program run at summer camp than typical classroom lesson plans. When we sing blessings together before and after the meal that we share as a community, we create an element of Jewish community with which some were not previously familiar. Ending our day with a camp-style song session allows the participants to get up and be silly with Jewish music - they stand together around a table, dancing to the music while singing along with the songs. We try to engage the whole body throughout the day – their minds through study, their senses through all they see, smell, hear, say and taste, their muscles as they move about the camp, and their hearts as they form a bond with each other and with camp.

This model is in its infancy and still needs some fine-tuning. Yet, the participants have found meaning and community, having fun learning while participating in what they know is religious school. This program is a prime example of the idea that the setting matters. Yet, in reality, many congregations do not have a campfire at our disposal, much less an entire camp. We have classrooms, social halls, libraries, and sanctuaries. Our challenge is to make the story we tell at our synagogues just as compelling as it would be around a campfire.

Informal Jewish education, the category into which camping is most often placed, has been explored and defined numerous times in recent years. Joseph Reimer writes that informal education “is best thought of as an approach to Jewish education rather than being identified with any particular settings or methods” (2007). Jewish education as a whole should not be bifurcated

into formal and informal modes, polarizing the two. Rather, they should work hand in hand with one another. Barry Chazan speaks of the necessary joining of the two:

“[T]hey should be seen as partners in the overall goal of developing knowledgeable and committed Jews. Each has much to learn from the other: Formal Jewish education can learn to be more person-centered and participatory and informal Jewish education can learn to be more literate and rigorous. We should be talking about ‘the deformalization of the formal’ and ‘re-formalization of the informal’ rather than opposing philosophies. The time has come to unite these two critical worlds” (2003).

In order to do this, we must identify what is possible. Clearly, we cannot build a campfire in the middle of the sanctuary. We can, however, create in our classrooms an atmosphere that is similar; we can move the chairs, turn down the lights, and create on our own what might not come naturally to a classroom. This takes planning, foresight, and most importantly, the training of our educators in the classrooms and in administrative positions to shift their time-held mindset of what is possible in the classroom. We must meld what our classroom educators do well with what camp educators do well. In essence, we create a paradigm shift in our thinking of supplemental education. It is no longer only the setting that matters. Rather, it is how we use each space we occupy, whether it is in a classroom or on a playground, at a camp site or at a congregation. This shift includes how educators are viewed, as well, both by themselves and by others. Every Jewish educator – formal or informal, should have the same outlook on educating. Using the unique qualities each educator brings to his or her teaching, we should all try to educate each student in a way that provides for an experience of the mind, body, and spirit – not merely one of these aspects at any given time.

Using the eight characteristics of informal education identified by Barry Chazan, we can take steps to bring the campfire into our supplementary education settings. What follows is an

analysis of these characteristics in relation to this discussion. (Chazan's characteristics of informal education are in italics.)

*1. Person-centered Jewish education. The central focus of informal education is the individual and his/her growth... helping each individual grow and find meaning as a Jew. The emphasis is on personal Jewish development rather than the transmission of Jewish culture, and the individual is actively engaged in his/her own journey of Jewish growth.*

Everything we teach in our supplementary schools should not be simply to help our students “make it to the bar mitzvah” but rather to be with them along the journey of their Jewish lives. We help them grow and explore their Judaism, giving them tools they can use for their entire lives, not just at the bar mitzvah service. The requirement of many congregations that each bar or bat mitzvah student complete a service project is a prime example of this. Through the process of taking action on a regular basis and engaging in a project to benefit someone other than him- or herself, the student learns the mitzvah of tzedakah in a way that is experiential and powerful.

*2. The centrality of experience... [P]articipating in an event or a moment through the senses and the body enables one to understand a concept, fact or belief in a direct and unmediated way... [L]earning occurs through enabling people to undergo key Jewish experiences and values.*

Most of the time, supplementary school is viewed as teaching only to the intellect, devoid of any integrated experience. However, when we infuse experience into our teaching, through class Shabbat dinners, Tu B'Shevat seders, and “Escape to Israel” programs (to name but a few), we allow our students to learn through the experience, as well. It is imperative that we orchestrate these experiences. Judaism is not only an intellectual religion, and should not be taught as such.

**3. A curriculum of Jewish experiences and values...** *These core experiences and values may be “taught” in a variety of ways, depending upon time, place, and the individual pace of each learner.*

Each of our students comes to us with a different background and knowledge level. We must be flexible and responsive to this in order to teach both what happens in the synagogue and the values on which our tradition is built and on which it continues to grow and thrive. Recognizing this, we must take care to meet our students where they are and join them as they continue their journey. When thinking about our curriculum, we cannot think only about what we want to teach; rather, we must also take into account the values that underlie that curriculum. Once identified, we can then begin to think about the experiences our students have had, are having, and will have as their Jewish education continues. We must consider how best to teach these values while also focusing on the experiences of learning that our students are having. On any given day, we must also be flexible enough to recognize the mental, emotional and physical space our students are occupying and be able to respond appropriately.

**4. An interactive process...** *The pedagogy of informal Jewish education is rooted in techniques that enfranchise openness, encourage engagement, instigate creative dialectic, and insure comfort of diversity and disagreement.*

Some of the most successful classrooms I have seen have been those in which the teacher made a point to encourage this interaction. One teacher was open to learning from her students, welcoming their insights and comments and allowing projects and discussions to progress organically. Another teacher’s lessons reflected that he had identified from where each of his students was coming. In turn, the students were responsive and open, willing to share and eager to learn. They felt enfranchised and part of the learning experience.

As educators, we should listen and respond appropriately in both our words and our actions. As Richard Wagner writes, “kids will bring their stuff if they know that the leader is ready to listen – the good youth educator must be just that, a good listener... When someone speaks, listen to understand, to comprehend, to get a clear message. *Don’t judge*... Listening is a function of the ears, not the mouth” (1976). Only through listening can we be flexible and make sure that what and how we are teaching is relevant to our students. If we continually think only of the content we think they need to know, we risk losing not only the interest of our students for that day, but also their desire to learn beyond that *simcha* (joyous occasion).

**5. *The group experience...*** *is central in informal Jewish education in that the key values of klal yisrael (the totality of Israel), am yisrael (Jewish people), kehillat kodesh (holy community), and tikkun olam (improving the world) are experienced through its very existence.*

We do not learn in a bubble. So much of what we do is rooted in community; we have the opportunity to teach our students what this community can be like. We should see our students as integral members of the group who participate in shared experiences and grow together both as individuals and as a group, rather than merely as individuals who come together once or twice a week and upon whom we must impart a set of skills and knowledge during that time, after which they lead their separate lives.

**6. *The “culture” of Jewish education...*** *education is ultimately about “creating culture” rather than transmitting knowledge. ...It does not emphasize only cognitive or discursive content, but also the many diverse aspects of the setting as a whole: what the room looks like; what food is served and how; what happens at recess; how staff members interact with each other.*

When we teach, we teach the entire person, not only the mind. How we organize a classroom, how educators interact with one another, and how we choose to teach lessons all

speaking volumes to our students about our values and our attitude toward education. Our challenge is to think not only about the explicit content we teach, but also the implicit content that our students learn when they are with us.

***7. An education that engages.*** *Informal Jewish education intensely engages and even co-opts participants and makes them feel positive about being involved.*

Our students should not dread coming to religious school. Even if they have other things going on in their lives (as many of our students do, juggling their Judaism on the same level as soccer, ballet, debating, and more), they should view their time in religious school with the same enthusiasm as they do other activities. Yet, the burden rests with us not only to create and implement programs the students enjoy during their time with us, but also to stand up and say that what we do is important work. Addressing this problem, Jerry Kaye writes:

“Too many of us in the Jewish educational enterprise, formal and informal, put our hands in our pockets and look at our shoes when mom explains that David will miss a day of *kallah* [retreat] or a week of camp because of soccer. The soccer coach rarely tolerates our activities as a suitable alternative to his expectation. Are our programs less important if we are to move toward education and socialization in doing Jewish? The time has come to take our hands out of our pockets and put them around the shoulders of kids so they can care more about our expectation than that of the coach” (2007).

We have to believe that the education in which we are engaged is valuable, necessary, and important – not simply as important as soccer, but, in fact, more important, as we are helping to build skills on which our students will rely throughout their lives.

***8. Informal Jewish education’s holistic educator...****is a total educational personality who educates by words, deeds, and by shaping a culture of Jewish values and experiences. He/she is a person-centered educator whose focus is on learners and whose goal is their personal growth. The informal Jewish educator is a shaper of Jewish experiences. His/her role in this context is to create opportunities for those experiences and to facilitate the learner’s entry into the moments.*

*The informal Jewish educator promotes interaction and interchange. One of his/her major tasks is to create an environment that enables this interactivity to flourish. This requires proficiency in the skills of asking questions, listening, and activating the engagement of others.*

We should be able to remove the word “informal” each time we see “informal Jewish educator” and have not have our expectations diminish. Chazan’s statement about the informal Jewish educator should describe **every** Jewish educator. We should all be looking to shape the entire person, educating through our entire being, allowing each educator to be exactly who he is. Richard Wagner writes that a youth worker’s job “is to be you, but the best and most responsible *you* that you can be. You do not have to be someone that you are not or proclaim beliefs which you cannot personally accept... The person searching for answers (in the process of becoming), searching for a way of life, is a religious model as well as the person who claims to have arrived” (1976). The same rings true for our educators. We should not ask them to be anything other than who they are. Only by being themselves can they bring all they have to the table and teach our children effectively.

Sheldon Dorph writes that “[r]eal education, when not confused with, limited to, or reduced to schooling, is experiential and involves a search for understanding and meaning” (2007). There is no distinction between formal and informal. It was created because “formal education was mainly concerned with the cognitive development of the child and tended to neglect the personality of the child as a whole, the process of character building, and the values education of the young child” (Cohen and Schmida, 1997). If we infuse Chazan’s characteristics of informal education into our supplementary schools, we will prove Dorph right. There is no need to make the distinction because we should all be working toward the same goals, regardless of the setting in which the education takes place.

In Pirke Avot, Rabbi Tarfon teaches that “It is not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it” (Pirke Avot 2:21). This is our task. Our responsibility as educators is to give our students the tools to be Jews – not just the mental capacity to read Hebrew and learn texts, but to ask questions using a Jewish lens, to infuse Jewish values into their decision-making process, to celebrate Jewish holidays, and to participate in the Jewish community.

## References

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