

The Challenge of Experiential Jewish Education

“Life’s challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they’re supposed to help you discover who you are.”

Bernice Johnson Reagon¹

Each year, as part of my summer camp’s traditions, we would go on an overnight hike. On these treks we would walk, and talk, and climb and struggle, and sing and sweat. We would only ever walk as fast as the slowest person in the group – or so the mantra was recited. It was on these walks that I remember some of my greatest conversations with my madrichim (counselors) and my fellow campers. It was after these hikes that I would wear each scratch and each blister as a badge of pride that we had overcome some of nature’s greatest obstacles – only one summer to learn that we had been walking and sleeping only half a mile from the summer camp site.

Those were the overnight hikes that I remember from my days as a camper in Habonim Dror, and although I am sure that nostalgia and memory lapses have somewhat clouded my recollection of these journeys – they were certainly seminal experiences that have helped me understand how various challenges in my Jewish education allowed me to grow and to learn.

In attempting to deconstruct why these hikes became so important amongst my many Jewish educational experiences I have outlined five features, which although specific to these treks, are also I believe universal in their application to the notion of challenge in Jewish education.

1. Individual and Group Achievement: Although the hike was clearly a collective activity, and one which could only be completed as a group there was also a tremendous sense of individual achievement involved. We were in this together, campers and madrichim alike.
2. Engagement: When we were hiking nothing else seemed to matter. Entrenched in the hike all of our cares in the world seemed to vanish, as the only thing that mattered at the time was climbing that mountain or wading through the river.
3. Novel Experience: This activity was not something that we did in every day life. Even though it was something that we did every year, it was clear that each year’s hike became slightly more difficult, building on what we had achieved the year before. All of this was in preparation for the major hikes that we would face when our group would graduate from high school and spend a year together in Israel.
4. Ease of difficultness: The hikes were never easy. In fact there was seemingly never ever any guarantee of success, although we all knew deep down that we would get home safely after completing the hike.
5. Reflection: Even when the hike was over, it was never really over. Returning to camp was always accompanied by group chants and then a chaotic rush for the

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showers. In the hours and days that followed so too would the formal and informal discussions. Why had we succeeded? How did the group perform? What lessons did we learn as a group? Did you learn anything about yourself?

The act of hiking each year was not just a worthwhile and engaging experience but also an educational and a Jewish experience.

To explain why this was an educational experience I refer to a chapter written by Joseph Reimer and myself in the forthcoming publication “What We Now Know About Experiential Jewish Education” (Reimer & Bryfman, (In press.)).

Experiential Jewish education, we argued, is dependent on three broad components being evident in every experience. These parameters – recreation, socialization and challenge – only when operating together allow for participants to learn, develop and grow through their experiences.

“Recreation - As recreation, experiential Jewish education aims to provide its participants with social comfort, fun and belonging in a Jewish context. Experiential Jewish education operates primarily as a set of leisure-time activities. Participants voluntarily choose to participate in the programs that are offered. They must enjoy these activities or they will cease to attend. As recreation, Jewish experiential education provides safe space for Jews to enjoy the company of other Jews in pursuing common cultural activities.

Socialization - As socialization, experiential Jewish education aims to provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be an active member of the Jewish community. When people feel part of a social unit, they begin to identify with its procedures, rules and world view. They want to belong and become an identifiable “member” of that unit. We call that process of identification “socialization.” In the Jewish world, we encourage participants to identify with a Jewish group and to internalize those behaviors, attitudes and feelings that characterize members of that group. We also encourage their identifying with the Jewish people in some broader sense.

Challenge - As experiential educators, Jewish educators aim to encourage participants to undertake the challenge of stretching themselves and growing towards a more complex participation in one’s Jewish life. Because there is a lot more to Judaism than participating skillfully in the activities of one’s Jewish camp or youth movement, experiential educators need to motivate individuals to stretch beyond their comfort zone and creatively explore a variety of Jewish modes of expression. The goal is to deepen and personalize individuals’ Jewish experiences so they feel they are on a Jewish journey and are not simply a member of a Jewish club.”

In understanding experiential Jewish education in this way, challenge must be understood of as being able to exist only if recreation and socialization have preceded it. Challenge, as a learning process, can only be conducted in a space where an environment has been established that makes people feel safe enough to take risks and trust one another.

This articulation of experiential Jewish education may not sound like everything that we have traditionally categorized as informal Jewish education. Here I must be very clear. The terms informal and formal, describe the settings in which Jewish experiences are taking place and not necessarily what is taking place within them. Formal educational settings are those which are involuntary in nature, bound by time and space, and where the primary purpose of such education is the transmission of knowledge. In a classic and historical sense, the traditional Jewish school or yeshiva is an example of a formal Jewish educational setting whereby their successes are measured by their ability to impart students with specific Jewish content. Informal Jewish educational settings lack most of these characteristics. In large part the participants attend these institutions voluntarily, and the learning is often free of more traditional constraints such as taking place in classrooms and according to a pre-ordained time schedule. Most importantly informal educational settings are not traditionally categorized with educators depositing knowledge into individual learners (Freire, 1970), but instead by enabling groups of participants to interact and learn from one another within a Jewish context, infused with Jewish values, often focusing on the social and emotional aspects of human development (Chazan, 2003).

The dichotomy between formal and informal settings is useful in distinguishing between various contexts in which Jewish education takes place but is in no way indicative of the types of activities taking place within these institutions. Youth groups, an example of an informal setting, usually excel in providing recreation and socialization experiences. Some also provide educational experiences for their participants, but I am claiming that these are only achieved when the element of challenge is embedded within the program. Alternatively a school, the paradigmatic formal setting, is most commonly filled with academic and cognitive challenges for its students, but may also include a number of instances where experiential Jewish education can and does take place.

In these examples, I hasten to add, that there is nothing wrong with either the youth group or the school. Hanging out with fellow Jews is extremely important, especially for a community that values teenagers meeting, dating, and eventually marrying fellow Jews. There is also nothing wrong with organizations that excel in Jewish socialization or enculturation I believe that a world where more Jews know the rituals and traditions of a Jewish community will be a much richer one. But for us to understand what experiential Jewish education is, we must recognize that an absence of challenge often ensures that it is only recreation and socialization that are taking place.

According to John Dewey, sometimes referred to as the father of experiential education, experience occurs when the two core principles of continuity and interaction intersect. Continuity is the notion that people's futures are directly impacted by their personal experiences. Interaction explains how one's past experiences relate to the current situation in order to make meaning of a present experience (Dewey, 1938). With this understanding, isolated moments of Jewish learning, which fail to recognize that the learner is a product of all of their past experiences, should not be classified as experiential Jewish education. A summer camp with a program that scaffolds the skills of campers

over several years is able to achieve such enduring educational experiences. In a meta sense, an Israel experience which enables the participants to make meaning of their Jewish selves, within the contexts of both the contemporary and historical Jewish state, is also able to bridge this nexus between continuity and interaction.

The question of what makes a challenging educational experience a Jewish one needs to be carefully considered. To be Jewish the experience needs to take place in a Jewish context embedded with Jewish values. There was never any doubt in my mind that the forest where I hiked was a Jewish place. When we would sing our chants as we walked they would be interspersed with Jewish and Israeli songs. When we spoke about leadership we referred to *doogma ishit* - the Hebrew term for setting a personal example. When we prepared and ate our dinner we created our own *mitbach* (kitchen) and did *toranut* (chores) - emulating the work ethic of the early kibbutz pioneers upon whose ideology our movement was based.

As seen from the forest example, the setting does not necessarily have to be an intrinsically Jewish one although synagogues, summer campsites and youth halls can all be Jewish spaces. But the setting does need to be transformed into a Jewish context. In much the same way that American Jewish World Service treats Honduras, or Panim el Panim relates to Washington D.C, these sites become places where Jewish values and Jewish learning permeate every aspect of the respective programs.

Critical to challenge in experiential Jewish education is an understanding of who the educator is in this process. Within experiential Jewish education the educator is not the bearer of all knowledge whose task it is to deposit his/her information into the banks of the learners (Freire, 1970). The educator is literally a *madrich*, a guide, who along with the participants should embark on a journey of growth and learning together. The educator's skill as an influence on the group process will only be heightened by the depth of their knowledge and their ability to infuse information without dominating the natural flow of the experience. Of course, a carefully designed experience will have been established in such a way that it will move in certain directions, but unlike more formal learning, experiential education must be flexible and open to wide possibility of outcomes.

Not every activity that Jewish youth partake in needs to be challenging. With the amount of stress and pressure that teenagers are under today, endless struggles could become overwhelming. But when our mission is to provide Jewish educational experiences then all activities, whether they are recreational or allowing socialization to take place, should be building a foundation for challenge to occur.

For educators, themselves struggling with how to incorporate challenge into their educational programming the following five guidelines should be useful.

a) Objectives: In every educational activity one's objectives must be intentional and well articulated. In experiential Jewish education it might be appropriate for these objectives to be made extremely transparent to the program participants. When considering

challenge in Jewish education consideration should be given to the potential of each activity to allow for a cognitive, behavioral, affective or spiritual transformation to occur for the participants. Particularly in experiential Jewish education these objectives are integral, as they become the benchmarks to which a program's success can be measured.

b) Exploration: From the very outset a challenging experience should involve exploration. This exploration should be in the form of a new or novel experience for the participants that demands that they take risks in order to discover something. In relation to Judaism, this will often allow, "Jews to creatively engage with their Judaism" (Kaplan, 1934). In programs where learners are asked to become educators I have routinely observed the search for knowledge becoming extremely personal. The student, now invested in the process of becoming an expert, often looks for personal connections to the material as they embark on ways to make it more relevant to their peers.

c) Struggle: The exploration must be experienced first hand, as participants grapple with new ideas, practices and thinking which stretch their comfort zones. Ideally this struggle will allow participants to become immersed in a state of flow, where nothing else matters in that moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). These struggles will ultimately stretch the learner towards a more complex participation in their Jewish life. Many times I have observed educators describing in detail what they saw and how they felt when they first traveled to various locations of Jewish interest – including the Western Wall, Auschwitz and the Lower East Side of New York. Despite their good intentions to prepare the learner, in most instances may just have well appeared in documentaries or textbooks. Once they personally set foot on these sites the learner might be able to appreciate the context that the educator provided, but now creates their experience with their own struggle to make personal meaning of the site in question.

d) Reflection: Time must be allowed for both the group and the individual to make meaning of their experience. It is through this reflection that one is able to learn and to grow. This reflection, often of both content and process, also allows the cycle of experience and learning to continue (Kolb, 1984). Reflection is not only sitting around in a circle and asking learners, "what they learned" or "how they felt" after a certain experience. Recently I was impressed by a group of campers that confided in me that it was through their experience writing a journal to their counselors that they were able to better understand the motivations behind why certain things at camp happened the way they did.

e) Growth: While some educators might consider this element with trepidation, it is ultimately, I believe, the enterprise that we are engaged in – how do we assist Jews to engage in a more complex relationship with their Jewish identities. Not every experience needs to be transformative in the sense that it needs to bring about major change. But in all cases one experience building upon others should allow growth and development to occur. Measuring such growth is not simple. Although some longitudinal studies of Jewish teenagers do exist; these provide only part of the picture we are seeking.

Challenge can exist in Jewish educational settings. In good educational environments challenge is occurring a lot of the time, and Jewish youth are growing and benefiting as a direct result. The following are all real examples of some of what I have been fortunate to observe over the last few years.

- A group of teenagers from a wide variety of religious backgrounds discussing and deliberating about how they wanted to, and what they would need to do, in order to be able to spend Shabbat together.
- A fairly heated exchange at a youth movement deciding whether or not their Yom HaShoah commemoration should focus more on the death of six million Jews or whether the core message should be that of the suffering and genocide in the Darfur region.
- A camp unit watching the movie Crash, exploring themes of racism in American society. This was followed by a discussion of their personal encounters and reactions to anti-Semitism. In this instance the group was divided on whether the struggles that they and other Jews of their generation faced could even be compared to the racial injustices that have been experienced by blacks in America.
- A youth group partaking in a chocolate seder around the festival of Passover, not only consuming chocolate throughout the evening, but also raising questions and making connections between the traditional Passover narrative and issues of personal significances.
- A program of Jewish youth interacting with Native American youth, learning about each other's identities, culture and values. In learning from the other and perhaps even more so by presenting the self to the other, the participants were stretched to better understand who they were and what really mattered to them.

In each of these instances I witnessed Jewish youth being challenged. All of these experiences contained, to varying degrees, the five core characteristics that I experienced while walking through the Australian forests – and listed above.

Of course in my view I never saw enough of these types of experiences, enough skilled educators capable of running such activities, or enough Jewish youth engaged in such challenging situations. Perhaps I will never be satisfied until these experiences became so ubiquitous that an article like this is no longer necessary. I firmly believe that challenging experiential Jewish education is not only desirable but also possible. We Jewish educators need to first challenge ourselves to aspire to this level of interaction and then model for our stakeholders what difference this approach can make in making a lasting impact on our Jewish youth.

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