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The Case for Jewish Education: 10 Principles for Making a Difference

Nessa Rapoport

Whenever I tell people that I now work in a foundation whose mission is to transform Jewish life by revitalizing Jewish education, I can see the yawn they are politely suppressing. “Jewish education?” says the cartoon above their head. “I hated Hebrew school.”

Whenever I tell people that in 1987 I held one of the most glamorous jobs in New York publishing, having edited a presidential memoir when I was 28 and the best-selling book of the decade three years later, the first thing they say to me in 1997 is: “Don’t you miss your old life?”

Well, I do miss those publishing lunches in spectacular restaurants. But I find my current life strangely more glamorous than my old one. So before I offer some principles for funding Jewish education wisely, I want to speak about why Jewish education is worth funding at all.

First, let me say emphatically that Jewish education is not an ethnic hazing ritual called “bad Hebrew school” that our parents forced us on us because their parents forced it on them. And it certainly is not only for children--or only for other people’s children. I offer instead the words of the eminent historian of education, Lawrence Cremin, who said: “Education is the transmission of culture across generations.”

“The transmission of culture across generations”: What might that mean for us? To me, all education is about knowing where you come from so that you can give something back. In any culture worth its name, that is the definition of aristocracy.

Can we associate aristocracy and Jewish education in the same sentence? Here’s why I think we can. In this country, Jews constitute fewer than 2% of the American population. In the world, our numbers correspond to the margin of error in the Chinese census. If we look back on our unique history as a people, why are we still here? We have never had

the most citizens, the most power, or the most money--and we never will. What has enabled us not only to survive but to flourish? Powerful, transforming ideas.

Yes, these words are brought to you by the people who gave the world monotheism, the Bible, the Sabbath, prophetic justice, the only successfully revived language in history, psychoanalysis, the theory of relativity, Abstract Expressionism, and American feminism.

Only education can cultivate the habits of mind and heart that have enabled us to contribute these new ways of seeing the world and solving its problems. This is the paradox: American Jews are among the most highly educated citizens of this country. In fact, American Jewish women are by far the most educated of all American women. For decades, we have pushed ourselves and our children to attend the most prestigious colleges, to flock to law, medical and business schools, making Jews and education virtually synonymous.

Why, then, do we not bring the same expectations to Jewish education as we do to general education? Why do we not demand that the settings in which our culture is transmitted be as rigorous and exhilarating as private elementary schools or Ivy League universities?

One reason is that we have such an impoverished view of what Jewish education can look like. If you've never seen and experienced excellence, it is much harder to imagine it.

What would it take to move Jewish education from reluctant bar mitzvah preparation for our children to a fascinating, lifelong journey for ourselves and our children? What would it take to move from obligation to astonishing pleasure--and profound meaning? A great education gives you the tools to ask the richest questions: "Why is there suffering in the world and how might we respond to it? What can we know about love and how can we sustain it? Why is it worth imparting an old and complicated tradition in the unreflective, quick-fix culture in which we find ourselves?"

To begin to understand how to make Jewish education important, even indispensable, I have spent the last four months asking a range of funders and recipients across the country for the wisdom they've gleaned after immersing themselves in the difficult--and addictive challenge--called "revitalizing Jewish education."

Here is what they told me:

1. There is no magic bullet, neither in general education nor in Jewish education. If you are looking for a quick and easy way to make a difference, this isn't it. Education is about two very complicated entities: people and change. If you've ever tried to change just one personal habit, you know there's no wand to wave. So if anyone claims, "It's day schools; no, it's spiritual retreat centers; no, it's trips to Israel," as the sole solution to Jewish alienation, rather than as a critical leg of a lifelong journey, be skeptical.

2. "Act local, but think global." Most Jewish education takes place locally. But it's also important to remember that the local scene--in its strengths and problems--is inseparable from national conditions.

If, for example, you have become convinced that a community Jewish high school would be a wonderful new institution for your city, you would not be alone. New community day high schools are one of the exciting phenomena on the American Jewish landscape. But when the time comes to hire the dynamic principal who is steeped in Judaica and progressive pedagogy, the one who can create the school to transmit the heritage we've talked about and still enable your children to go to Harvard, I can tell you without even knowing where you live that you're going to have to be creative. Because of the field's crisis in personnel--the stunning shortage of qualified leaders and teachers--there are very few people with the training and experience to do the job, and those few are the subject of fierce competition.

3. If the problems are systemic, the solutions can also be systemic, even at the local level. One critical systemic problem, for example, is the area of early childhood education. In Baltimore, the Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Foundation created an innovative pilot project in professional development for early childhood educators open to all educational institutions of any denomination.

A second example took place in the city of Milwaukee. In-depth research has shown that Jewish teachers are strongly committed to education as a career, but are severely undertrained. In Milwaukee there is no institution of higher Jewish learning to fill the gap. And so, in a cooperative effort, a long-distance Masters degree program for Milwaukee Jewish educators was funded in part by the Helen Bader Foundation. This funding takes advantage of sophisticated new technology that makes it possible for teachers to complete part of their M.A. requirements by studying, in Milwaukee, with educators teaching at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies.

These two programs suggest Principle Number 4.

4. Educational change demands change in people. Changing a program or curriculum is not enough. As one educator said to me: “A smart funder will give money not just for materials, but to train the teachers who will use them and to acculturate the lay leaders supporting them.”

5. New vs. old. One of the paradoxes in funding something new is that funders are often drawn to the new because it seems more imaginative and exciting than what already exists on the landscape. Unfortunately, there is also a learning curve for new ventures that can entail spending a disproportionate amount of time and money on support systems, logistical mishaps, staff turnover--those tedious problems that were the very reason the old seemed unattractive. If you're starting something new, one funder told me, “know that the project will need help in organizational development and non-profit management from day one.”

The existing project may therefore seem enticing. It is already successful and less risky. Often, the old needs help precisely because it doesn't seem as sexy as the idea that is still on the drawing boards. Sometimes, however, the old is also not meeting the genuine needs of the day. To quote a funder: “Sometimes a new idea is put down because it's a bad idea, but sometimes it's put down only because it's new.” Certainly, our times demand new ideas, and in today's Jewish landscape, it may be that only a private foundation can be bold enough to have a dream and take a chance.

6. Whatever you decide, don't engage in what one educator calls "scatterology," where you fund many projects in small pieces. Concentrate your resources and focus your effort. It's the only way to make a real difference. And if your resources are too limited in the face of the problem you want to solve, consider becoming a partner with another foundation.

7. Being well educated is not the same as understanding education, so criticize your basic assumptions. Make sure that you elicit a diversity of opinion about what you're considering, especially from people who really disagree with you. Do your homework about what else is going on around the country, in both Jewish and general education, so that you're not reinventing the wheel--or making the same mistakes someone has already paid for.

8. If the idea matters, give it yourself--or your best people. Don't fund it merely dutifully. One educator went so far as to say: "The leadership of the project is absolutely critical. If the key change agent leaves in the middle, shepherd the project very carefully until there's a strong successor in place."

9. Evaluation. Evaluation, like research, is seemingly expensive and not very glamorous. But there is nothing less glamorous than embarking on a big project and discovering five years down the road that because you never took the measure of your starting point, you now have no way to tell if you're succeeding. So build in the evaluation component from the beginning. You need to establish a baseline, with clear goals and objectives that are assessed periodically. Then pay attention to the findings and, says one funder, "have the guts to do something about it."

I see I've now reached Principle Number 10. The Ten Principles has a good Biblical ring to it, so I'll end with a principle from my own experience. In working at CIJE, I have had the chance to watch philanthropic thought in action. My final principle comes from one specific moment.

I was sitting at a breakfast at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations one Friday morning a couple of years ago. Like all GA breakfasts, this one began too

early, and I was getting as much caffeine into my body as possible while I listened to a discussion of various ideas being funded in Jewish education. One organization was describing to the group a project that sounded quite exciting. While I was busy feeling gratified that an imaginative idea had indeed found support, the chair of CIJE, Mort Mandel, asked a question.

The question he asked was: "How long is the funding for?"

The answer came: "Three years."

Mort asked: "What will happen to the project when the three years are up?"

The answer? "It will probably have to end when the funding runs out."

Mort quietly suggested that it was not responsible for a funder to give support for three years without assuring that there was a way for the project, if it succeeded, to survive, grow, and make the difference it was designed to make. "It's going to take thirty years to transform the big picture of Jewish education," he said.

What did I learn from this brief exchange? That three years of funding in the field of education is simply not enough to make a sufficient difference. This is the single point on which there was universal agreement among all my sources. You have to be willing to be a committed partner to whatever project you fund--not necessarily to continue to fund it yourself, but to ensure that everyone involved has thought through carefully the time and resources it will take to win.

And you need to carry within you a big picture of what's possible. Instead of discouraging you, the big picture allows you to be clear about what it will take to make real change happen, and how your own piece of that picture will contribute to the challenge of renewing this ancient, majestic and little-known tradition of ours.

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Why is the religious civilization that gave birth to both Christianity and Islam so little known? I think some of the attention lavished upon Madeleine Albright's revelation comes from the electrifying possibility that in the middle of your adult life, you can suddenly find out that your past is not what it seems, and that an entirely different past can unfold before you, instead of behind you--a past you knew almost nothing about.

Albright's discovery is the metaphorical condition of many Jews today. Our past has been hidden from us, lost in a century in which a third of our people--and memory--were murdered, and millions more lived under regimes that brutally tried to eradicate our history.

The great philanthropic frontier today is to redeem a culture that is every Jew's birthright, to fashion Jewish education into a vehicle of such evident excellence that it will be not an obstacle but an invitation.

The invitation is not only to explore the glories of our remarkable inheritance. It is also to do what Jews have always done--to draw on the wisdom of other cultures and civilizations, thereby renewing our own. Some of the ideas just waiting to be addressed in order to reinvigorate Jewish education--and Jewish life--are these:

1. What does current American research on how adolescent girls learn and fail to learn mean for Jewish girls?
2. What is the connection between nature and Jewishness? How can a new emphasis in American life on the beauty and fragility of nature challenge us as Jews to better protect the created world?
3. How can the arts become central to Jewish education and be understood as necessary, rather than as an irrelevant frill?
4. What role can the meditative tradition play in enriching Judaism today?

5. How can we do our work--and not only our holidays--Jewishly?

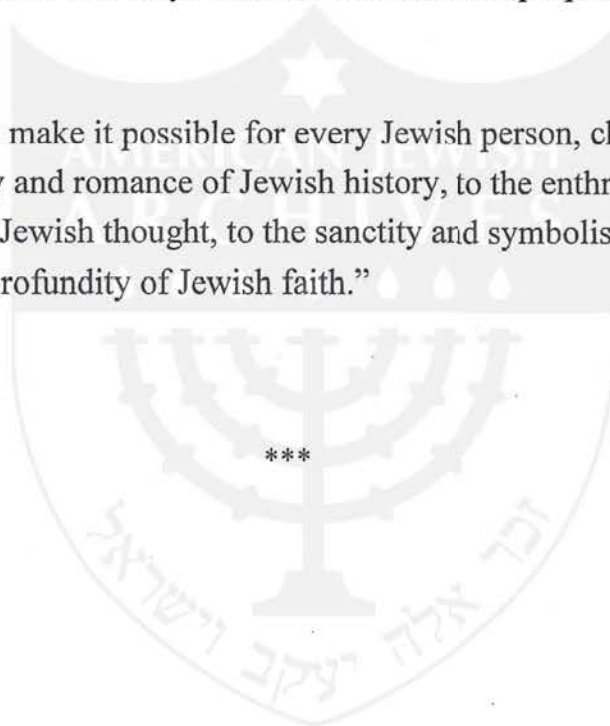
6. How do we locate pluralism within Judaism, and live it out, truly?

These are only a few of the powerful questions drawn from American life from which we can learn and grow.

I began by quoting Lawrence Cremin on education as “the transmission of culture across generations.” Let me close by offering the words of the esteemed scholar of Jewish studies at Harvard, Isadore Twersky. When asked about the purpose of Jewish education, he said:

“Our goal should be to make it possible for every Jewish person, child or adult, to be exposed to the mystery and romance of Jewish history, to the enthralling insights and special sensitivities of Jewish thought, to the sanctity and symbolism of Jewish existence, and to the power and profundity of Jewish faith.”

That says it all.



The Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE)

"Our goal should be to make it possible for every Jewish person, child or adult, to be exposed to the mystery and romance of Jewish history, to the enthralling insights and special sensitivities of Jewish thought, to the sanctity and symbolism of Jewish existence, and to the power and profundity of Jewish faith." Professor Isadore Twersky, A Time to Act

WHO WE ARE

CIJE is an independent national organization dedicated to the transformation of North American Jewish life through Jewish education. Our mission is to be a catalyst for educational change by:

- Developing professional and communal leadership for Jewish education
- Consulting about educational innovation and strategic planning to institutions, communities and national organizations
- Advancing ideas and commissioning research for policy
- Identifying, creating and disseminating models of excellence

CIJE is committed to placing powerful Jewish ideas at the heart of our work; bringing the expertise of general education to the field; and to working in partnership with a range of organizations, foundations and denominations to make outstanding Jewish education a priority. All of our work is informed by a belief in the centrality of vision, planning and evaluation.

WHAT WE DO

Developing professional and communal leadership: *The CIJE Institute for Leaders in Jewish Education; The Teacher Educator Institute; The Evaluation Institute; The Goals Seminar; The Seminar for Professors of Education.*

Consulting: *Torah u'Mesorah; The New Atlanta Jewish Community High School; Machon l'Morim; The Milwaukee Master of Judaic Studies Program; Brandeis University; The University of Judaism; Hebrew Union College*

Ideas and Research: *The CIJE Study of Educators; The Teacher's Report; Policy Brief on the Background and Training of Teachers in Jewish Schools; The CIJE Essay Series*

Models of Excellence: *The Goals Project; The Best Practices Project; The Early Childhood Project*