THE PHILOSOPHY OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Barry Chazan

BEYOND SCHOOL: A NEW ERA IN JEWISH EDUCATION

What happened to education?

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century we are witness to significant changes about what education is and where it happens. Traditional notions about where people learn are constantly being re-examined, and some dramatically new and unlikely milieus and venues have emerged. The new settings join the traditional venues of education—elementary schools, secondary schools and universities—as vibrant partners in the process of education—and sometimes they even challenge traditional hegemonies.1

The Jewish world has exhibited great excitement about this kingdom of “beyond school” frameworks, which encompass camping, Israel programs, travel to other Jewish sites, retreats, youth movements and youth organizations, adult programming and the internet, among others. The territory of education beyond schools has come to popularly be denoted as “informal” or “experiential” education. In addition to diverse programs the field has been characterized by a growing body of articles and research,2 university courses, training programs, increased funding and heightened lay interest. Spearheaded specifically by demonstrated achievements in camping and Israel educational travel, Jewish policy-makers, donors, professionals and lay people often view informal education as the exciting new arena for the amelioration of Jewish life. Indeed, there is a kind of frenzied excitement in which informal education is sometimes seen as the panacea for Jewish life.

MEANINGS OF ‘INFORMAL EDUCATION’

The emergence of a distinct term to denote “out of school” education was initially driven by the linguistic need for a term to denote this “other” kind of education.

In the early part of the twentieth century in America this non-school phenomenon was frequently denoted as ‘recreational education’.3 In Austria and Germany a group of educationally minded colleagues of Sigmund Freud called this kind of education “indirect education”.4 By the late 1950s this “other” kind of education was increasingly denoted as either “informal” or “non-formal” education.5

In Jewish education, the “Benderly Boys” spoke about a “total environment educational strategy” that encompassed camping, music, arts and culture.6 The term “experiential Jewish education” was introduced into the lexicon in the 1970s by our late colleague and teacher Bernard Reisman of Brandeis University. The word “experiential” seemed to have been chosen to imply a connection to John Dewey’s

2See articles on informal and experiential Jewish education in: Roberta Goodman, Paul Flexner, Linda Bloomberg (editors), What We Now Know About Jewish Education (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 2008) and Helena Miller, Alex Ponsen, and Lisa Gross (editors), The International Handbook of Jewish Education (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011), the Journal of Jewish Education and this volume.
5Paulston, op. cit., pp. – (“non-formal education” is structured, systematic non-school education; and training activities of relatively short duration in which the sponsoring agencies seek concrete behavioral changes to fairly distinct target populations, and “informal education” is “learning in a systematic manner from generally unstructured experiencese cultural facilitators”.
EXPERIENCE AND JEWISH EDUCATION

notion of experience and education. My colleagues Joseph Reimer and David Bryfman have made an important contribution to the emergence of the term "experiential Jewish education" as common parlance in twenty-first-century Jewish life. Generally, in the literature of general education, "informal education" has had two different emphases. The first direction has looked at "informal education" organizationally, viewing it as educational activities that take place outside of "schools." According to this approach, "formal education" refers to "schools" and "informal education" refers to "out-of-school educational activities." This approach is rooted in a structural or institutional delineation that focuses on venues or places in which education is delivered. This "definition" is concise, clear and certainly convenient. At the same time, this approach doesn't hold up in all or even many cases. There are many activities that take place in "schools"—clubs, sports, extracurricular activities—that, while occurring in a school building, are generally still regarded as "informal." Moreover, there are some out-of-school frameworks—a boot camp, specialized sports programs—that are outside of school but, in terms of practice and approach, seem not to be "informal" at all. Another problem with this approach is that it doesn't tell us what "informal education" is; it only tells us what it is not. So-called negative definitions are not very helpful in describing a phenomenon in an operative way. Ultimately this approach does not help the educator who wants to know exactly what "informal education" is so that he or she may be able to do it in practice.

The second emphasis in general literature has focused on the voluntary nature of informal education. This approach says that informal education's main characteristic is that one chooses to participate in it, whereas schooling is a required type of education. There is some validity to this voluntary notion, but in terms of Jewish life it is ultimately neither precise nor particularly helpful. In contradistinction to public school that is legally mandated, ultimately all of Jewish education is voluntary. Families are not legally required to provide any Jewish education to their young—and all of Jewish life is, in a sense, a matter of choice. In addition, the notion of "voluntary", when related to youth, is somewhat precarious; the young don't have total choice over their out-of-school choices. They may express strong preferences or even have right of approval or refusal, but ultimately families decide whether or not to send a youngster to camp or a trip or a club. While "voluntary" may be a sociologically interesting concept, in terms of helping us understand what "informal Jewish education" is, it is ultimately not practically helpful.

Some colleagues have asked the legitimate question, "Why bother with all this?" Some even suggest that the distinction between "formal" and "informal" sets up a false dichotomy and does damage to Jewish education. Rather than attempting to separate, why don't we just talk about "Jewish education"?

There is something tempting in this argument. However, for decades I have continued to be preoccupied with understanding what "informal Jewish education" is, not out of stubbornness but out of curiosity. I feel and believe that there is something out there called "informal (or 'experiential') education." I believe it is useful to try to understand the essence of the "thing out there" because it can help us do it better and it might improve the overall work we do in Jewish education. I do not necessarily defend the division that exists (indeed, as the reader will see at the end, I propose a much greater interaction between the two), but rather I believe that words are important and that understanding them is not semantics but useful conceptual clarification. Therefore the subject of this monograph—and the ones before—is the explanation of the meaning of the concept "informal Jewish education."
GENERIC TYPE ANALYSIS AND DEFINING INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Over the years I have utilized a methodology of analytic philosophy of education to attempt to arrive at an understanding of the term “informal Jewish education”. This approach (known in educational philosophy as generic type analysis) presents a number of examples of activities that are often denoted in common language by the use of this term and, on the basis of analysis of these terms, extracts what seem to be a group of common (or “generic”) characteristics that are shared by most or all phenomena denoted as “informal Jewish education” (this approach is similar to explicating what a “car” is by looking at a Toyota Corolla, a Hyundai Sonata, a Fiat 500 and others and then attempting to see what elements they have in common that could qualify as defining a “car”).

So let us look at some popular examples of “things” called “informal Jewish education”. One of the most prominent activities today referred to as “informal Jewish education” is camping. Jewish camps are educational settings where (generally young) Jews spend blocks of time with peers (often in the summer) in a diverse range of activities, including education, sports, recreation, social pastimes and Jewish living. Camps (and their related “sibling”, the retreat) are particularly effective in creating an intense Jewish milieu. The Hebrew-speaking summer camp made Hebrew language and culture come alive twenty-four hours a day. The weekend “Shabbaton” affords a full experiencing of Shabbat—preparation, kabbalat Shabbat, Shabbat meals, singing zmirot, study, singing and dancing and havdalah—that many young people have never before encountered. Camps and retreats are effective at developing a sense of “togetherness” and group loyalty. The “bunk” (which refers as much to a social network as to a building) or camp as a whole often becomes a close-knit community that is united by shared songs, experiences, activities, shirts and memories. In camps all elements of the schedule—waking up, sports, nature, evenings, meals, free time—can be co-opted for educational purposes. Every moment in camp or at the retreat is potentially a time for education, and the overall setting is a “classroom” and “campus” for learning. Finally, the experience of going to camp or to a retreat has an aura of great engagement and fun about it.

Jewish travel is today regarded as a very important form of informal education (major travel venues include Israel, Eastern Europe and Jewish sites in America). Jewish travel refers to organized educational programs that take young people and adults to various places in the world of Jewish interest. This kind of education involves directly experiencing sites, events and people. The trip to Prague or Venice presents a living “museum” of exciting historical settings of creative interactions between Jewish and general culture. To travel to Poland is to experience the height of Jewish creativity—and the depth of human depravity. Traveling to Israel is about seeing, feeling and touching the Jewish past, present and future. Jewish educational travel does encompass well-defined subject matter, and a great deal of cognitive learning takes place, but it happens through seeing, visiting, touching and participating, rather than through lectures or “looking in from without”. Travel programs often create a sense of community and also are usually regarded as great fun. Like the “bunk”, the “bus” connotes not only a vehicle of physical transportation but a newly formed bonded group of peers deriving support, reinforcement and pleasure from being together.

For many decades a prominent form of informal Jewish education was Jewish youth movements and organizations. These terms refer to frameworks in which young Jews participate in cultural, educational, ideological and social activities within a peer group context. (Youth movements encompass both ideological and associational dimensions, whereas youth organizations focus more on the latter.) The power of the peer group and culture is a striking dimension of youth movements and organizations. Many young people enjoy being together and “hanging out” with friends in their youth groups. Youth movements and organizations are often led by charismatic and engaging “counselors” that are close in age to the participants. These leaders have the ability to excite and inspire their younger charges, and there is often a great

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sense of identification with them. Youth movements frequently address topics that are immediate and of interest to young people. The participants are excited about attending weekly meetings, going away for weekends and spending summers together with friends and colleagues from the "movement" or the "club." The whole experience of taking part in these youth activities carries an aura of enthusiasm and fun.

In some circles, Jewish Community Centers have been referred to as examples of informal Jewish education.18 JCCs are multipurpose institutions established to provide a diversity of recreational, cultural, social, athletic and Jewish and general educational activities for a broad cross-section of Jews. In recent decades, in communities in Latin America and North America, they have proven to be a new kind of "Jewish neighborhood". Jews of all ages pass through the JCC's halls, and it is one of the few places where Jews of all kinds meet together. It is a center of diverse kinds of Jewish and general activities: pre-school teachers sing Hebrew songs, staff members study Jewish history; hallot are baked on Friday morning, parents and children swim together, fathers and mothers work out and play baseball ("Jewish oxygen flows in this place and it is breathed by millions of Jews who enter its doors.") JCCs lack a "curriculum" in the sense of a fixed set of subjects or books, but they do have a broad menu of Jewish programs, activities, learning and observances. Jewish activities happen at JCCs in a way and in a constellation that differs from traditional school models. JCC staff includes highly skilled professionals with "people skills" who are also knowledgeable and committed Jews. Many JCCs have full-time Jewish educators who, in addition to teaching, also "hang out" in the health club and the gym as well as in the study room or library. As is true of all the other forms of informal Jewish education, it's engaging and fun to go to the JCC.

In general education (and in Jewish life, too) adult learning is often denoted as "informal education."20 This framework refers to programs established to enable adult Jews to enrich their Jewish knowledge and acquire Jewish skills in warm and non-threatening settings. These settings are voluntarily chosen, revolve around text study and form fellowships of discussion, reflection and bonding.21 Adult learning involves interactive and learner-centered educators, presenting the texts in ways that relate to the lives and life settings of the participants. Beyond being knowledgeable, the teachers are skilled at making adults—and young people—feel comfortable about Jewish learning. The learning has nothing to do with grades or advancement on a hierarchical ladder. Those who gather to learn become more than a class, and very often in the case of adult learning they are transformed into a "family-like" group.22 This field has developed a strong network of ardent believers and noteworthy spokespeople.23 Other areas that are sometimes denoted as informal Jewish education are Jewish family education, the internet, preschools and museums. Moreover, some analysts of the modern Jewish day school imply that these "schools" might be better seen as total Jewish "cultures"—formal and informal—rather than as "schools" in the narrow sense.24 Day schools "educate" as much by the environs, community and culture they create as by the facts they transmit. These additional examples underscore qualities that were prominent in the kinds of education we saw above: the importance of the learner, the role of the group, involvement, the total setting and the fun and excitement of the experience.

18 Nancy Chasen, What is Jewish Education in JCCs? (Jerusalem: Jewish Community Centers Association, 1994), Nancy Chasen and Steven Cohon, Assessing the Jewish Educational Effectiveness of JCCs: The 1994 Study (New Jewish Community Centers Association, 1994), Nancy Chasen and Mark Chemers, ed., Jewish Education and the Jewish Community Center (Jerusalem: Jewish Community Centers Association, 1994), Patrick Cloeren Hart, Richard Jurem and Alvin Mats, "Jewish Education in the JCCs" in Goodman, Pfeiffer and Bloomberg, What We Now Know about Jewish Education, op. cit., 431-432.
20 Delmore, op. cit., Steven Brookfield, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1984).
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THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

These examples reflect the phenomenon I have been attempting to explain for over three decades. After looking, thinking and deeply engaging in these and other examples, I believe that it is possible to identify eight (generic) characteristics that are common to these and other examples of "informal Jewish education". These characteristics constitute what I regard as the phenomenological attributes of informal Jewish education. The uniqueness of informal Jewish education lies in the configuration and synergy of these characteristics.

1. **Person-centered Jewish Education.** The central focus of informal Jewish education is the individual and his/her growth. Underlying this focus is the belief that human beings are not simply empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather the individual is an active dynamic organism who grows and is shaped through his/her own active engagement in learning. Hence, this kind of education places primacy on the person's own involvement and progress. He/she is considered an active partner in the educational dynamic. Educationally, this implies what is often called a "person-centered pedagogy," which means that people learn best when there is a focus on personal interests, listening as much as telling, starting with questions, identifying interests and collaborating rather than coercing. In terms of informal Jewish education, the person-centered principle means helping each individual to grow and find meaning as a Jew. The emphasis is on personal Jewish development rather than the transmission of Jewish facts, and the individual is actively engaged in his/her own journey of Jewish growth.

The preoccupation with the person in informal Jewish education also implies concern with affecting the learner's *total* being. While selected activities may focus on a specific Jewish skill or Jewish topic (such as learning to speak Hebrew or build a sukkah), the ultimate aim of informal Jewish education is building the person's overall Jewish character. Thus, informal Jewish education does not see "Jewish growth" as exclusively intellectual but rather as a synthesis of aesthetic, affective, moral, behavioral and cognitive dimensions.

2. **The Centrality of Experience.** Informal Jewish education is rooted in a belief that the experience is central to the individual's Jewish development. The notion of experience in education derives from the idea that participating in an event or a moment through the senses, the body and the mind enables one to understand a concept, fact or belief in a direct and unmediated way. Experience in education refers to learning that happens through participation in events or by direct observation or hearing. John Dewey expanded upon this idea by suggesting that people are active centers of impulse rather than passive vessels and they learn best when they are actively rather than passively engaged in experiencing an idea or an event. Such experiencing is rooted in the interaction of the idea or event with the person's life and with a continuum of ideas that enables the experience to contribute to ongoing personal growth. The focus on experience results in a pedagogy that attempts to create settings which enable values to be experienced personally and events to be experienced in real time and in genuine venues, rather than their being described to the learner. Over the years this notion of experiencing has become closely identified with "experiential learning", often seen as the "calling card" of informal education. In terms of informal Jewish education, learning occurs through enabling people to undergo key Jewish experiences and values. For example, an experiential approach to Shabbat focuses on enabling people to participate in Shabbat in real time—buying flowers Friday afternoon, lighting candles at sunset, hearing Kiddush before the meal and eating challah. This approach does not deny the value of learning about Shabbat in classes and from texts, but it does suggest that exclusively verbal learning about an experience cannot replace the real thing.

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28 In my reading over the years of the writings of John Dewey, I have not found any precise citation where he uses the phrase "experiential" education as it is popularly used in Jewish education.
Jewish education lends itself particularly well to the experiential approach because so many of the concepts that we wish to teach (such as Shabbat, holidays and daily blessings) are rooted in actual experiences. The moral system of Judaism—honoring parents, helping the needy, social justice—is rooted in deeds. The cultural life of Judaism—songs, food, holidays—is rooted in meals, singing, ritual objects and specific celebrations. Israel in Jewish life is not an abstract concept but a real place that can be visited, touched, walked and inhaled. Jewish education is extremely well suited to giving primacy to experience, and informal Jewish education is the branch of Jewish education that highlights that primacy.

3. A "Curriculum" of Jewish Experiences and Values. The word "curriculum" has been generally associated with formal rather than informal education. "Curriculum" is commonly understood as courses of studies, with lists of subjects to be covered, books to read, ideas to be learned and tests to be given. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this notion of "curriculum" was subject to much discussion, and a more generic and broader concept has emerged in contemporary curriculum theory which understands the term to refer to an overall blueprint or plan of action which guides the broad range of teaching or educational activities of an educational institution. In this new sense, "curriculum" is very much part of informal Jewish education. "Curriculum" in informal education is rooted in a well-defined body of Jewish experiences and values which is presented in a pedagogic style that is dynamic and flexible and which closely relates to the lives of the learners.

In contemporary Jewish life there is a diversity of views regarding what are the core experiences and values of Jewish tradition or culture. Religious approaches are likely to emphasize prayer, study, holidays and rituals. Ethnic approaches are likely to emphasize Hebrew, holidays, music and customs. National approaches are likely to emphasize the Land of Israel, travel to Israel, Hebrew and Jewish history. Because of this diversity, it is difficult to arrive at one agreed-upon core curriculum for teaching experiences and values. However, there are some Jewish experiences that seem to be shared by the majority of informal Jewish educational systems: (1) Jewish holiday and calendar experiences; (2) Jewish lifecycle experiences; (3) studying Jewish texts; (4) Jewish cultural and peoplehood experiences; and (5) acting upon Jewish values. Most forms of Jewish informal education throughout the world—whether in the Deportivo in Mexico City, a NFTY retreat in Oconomowoc, or a Countpoint Seminar in Melbourne—present programs around such themes as the Passover seder, Shabbat candles, tikkun olam, tzedaka and rallies for Israel or Jews in need.

A central dimension of informal Jewish education’s curriculum is its flexibility and dynamism. The methods of teaching “core contents” and the sequence in which they are taught are open to change and adjustment. These core experiences and values may be “taught” in a variety of ways, depending upon time, place and the individual pace of each learner.

4. A Pedagogy of Inter-Activity. Informal Jewish education is rooted in the belief that the active interchange between students and students and between students and educators is a critical dimension of Jewish learning. Interaction refers to a reciprocal effect or influence between two or more people. The behavior of one, it is assumed, acts as a stimulus for the behavior of the other. People learn and grow through active social interaction, which stimulates ideas, causes us to think and rethink views and helps us to re-conceptualize our beliefs and ideologies. The active dialogue back and forth with others is not simply pedagogically useful; it is, in a more basic sense, a pivotal factor in shaping our ideas, beliefs and behaviors. The principle of interactivity implies a pedagogy of asking questions, stimulating discussions and engaging the learner. To stimulate interactivity, educators must create an environment which invites learners to listen to each other and to react with dignity and decency. 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.
For example, students may be asked what they think; how great rabbis of the past might have reacted; what the Jewish content means for their lives; and what they agree or disagree with.

Informal Jewish educators cannot really complete their work unless there is a dynamic interactive process between student and educator, student and student, student and text, and student and Tradition. Neither ingenuous nor instrumental, this interaction is an inherent element of informal Jewish education’s theory of learning. It is important to add that this characteristic—like others in our analysis—is not unique or idiosyncratic only to informal education. Interactivity is central to several approaches in formal education, therapy and group work.

5. The Group as Educator. In informal education, the group is an integral component of the learning experience. Groups are important factors in shaping of identity; the groups of which we are part shape our minds, language and selves in very central ways. Educating a group is not simply about transmitting knowledge to an aggregate of individuals gathered in one room, but rather is very much about the dynamic role of the collective in expressing and reinforcing values that are part of the culture of the society that created the group. Indeed, groups are not simply aggregates of people learning individually in parallel fashions; they are social networks that teach ideas and values through the essence of the group process.32 The group often serves as a mirror of selves or identities—a reflection of others who are like “me” in many ways and who at the same time exemplify ideas, values and behaviors to which I might aspire. In the best of cases the group could be a kind of creative hall of mirrors to help me see and shape my identity. Thus, the group experience is an additional educational resource to create culture, to present values, to expedite experiences and to help touch the individual. The group is especially relevant in informal Jewish education because of the centrality of the concept of “group” to Jewish civilization: klad yisrael (the totality of Israel), am yisrael (Jewish people), kahillat kodesh (holy community) and tikun olam (correcting the world) are experienced through the collective group experience of Jewish peoplehood.

As some critics note, a group emphasis can sometimes lead to tribal triumphalism.33 This is an important reservation, and co-opting the group phenomenon to education need not be exclusively for group loyalty or supremacy. In informal Jewish education the group is another contributing component in the journey to personal growth and identity.

6. An Immersive Culture. Informal Jewish education is concerned with creating a culture or a setting that in its totality immerses participants in the ideas, values and behaviors being presented. This approach utilizes the total environment to create a context in which the walls, the design, the architecture, the colors, the food—as many components of the venue as possible—“breathe” and “teach” the desired contents. This approach aspires to create an environment that exudes the educative moment and, as it were, fills the room with the oxygen from within rather than transmitting knowledge from without. This educational perspective (called the culturalist perspective34) ultimately is focused on enabling education to, as much as possible, imitate real life.

This means that logistical and organizational considerations are neither incidental nor secondary to the educational program; they are themselves inherently educational issues. On the Israel trip, for example, it is the educator and not the bus driver or innkeeper who should determine routes and room allocation. The dinner menu on the first night of a Jewish summer camp is as much an issue for the camp educator as it is for the business manager or dietician. The latter are rightly focused on finance or nutrition, while the former, zeroing in on the transition of the campers (and possible “newness panic”), seeks to create a warm Jewish home atmosphere.

The notion of an “educational culture” also implies that education is not limited to specific locales such as classrooms or school buildings; it can occur anywhere. The notion of a culture of education also suggests that no one agency has a monopoly on Jewish education. Such a culture can be created wherever Jews are found: in community centers, Jewish family service offices, sports clubs; at
retreats and conferences; during meals and bus rides. Some of these places may well be ideal venues for Jewish education because they are real settings where Jewish experiences can be lived out. The task of the educator is to shape all settings so that they may serve the larger educational vision.

7. The “Playfulness” of Informal Education. Informal Jewish education intensely engages and co-opts participants and makes them feel positive about being involved. Because of its focus on the individual and on issues that are real to him/her, informal Jewish education is often described as “fun,” “joyful” or “enjoyable.” This should not be taken as a sign of frivolity or lack of seriousness. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga suggested that, at the core, humans and societies are homo ludens—playing people and societies. Erik Erikson and others have taught us that identity is in part a sense of positive and “glad” feelings about a group or a world view or one’s self. Positive feelings play a very important role in the development of identity. The literature of identity development, happiness and well-being emphasizes the significant role of “flourishing”, enjoying and feeling positive as important linchpins of positive identity. In that context, it may well be suggested that Jewish life has over-emphasized the lachrymose—crisis, suffering, the struggle for survival—and instead would do well to emphasize the joyful, the playful and the fun motifs which are part of our culture and history (perhaps it is time to replace the traditional Yiddish epitaph that “It is difficult to be a Jew” with the joyful proclamation of the twentieth-century poet Muriel Rukeyser that “To be a Jew is a gift”).

8. The Holistic Educator. The informal Jewish 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.

The informal Jewish educator is a creator of community and kehillah: he/she shapes the aggregate into a group and utilizes the group setting to teach such core Jewish values as k'hal Yisrael (Jewish peoplehood), kvod ha-adam (the dignity of all people), shofet goral (shared destiny, and shivyon (equality). Informal Jewish educators are creators of culture; they are sensitive to all the elements specific to the educational setting so that these will reflect values and experiences they wish to convey. The task in this instance is to make every decision—big or little—an educational decision. Informal Jewish educators must be able to engage those with whom they work and make their learning experience enjoyable. The stimulation of positive associations is part of the informal Jewish educator’s work. The informal Jewish educator needs to be an educated and committed Jew. This educator must be knowledgeable, since one of the values he/she comes to teach is talmud torah—Jewish knowledge. He/she must be committed to these values, since teaching commitment to the Jewish people, to Jewish life and Jewish values is at the heart of the enterprise. Commitment can only be learned if one sees examples of it up close. Finally, informal educators must, in the words of Parker Palmer, “teach from within.” They must harness their innermost self and allow it to give voice to its commitments, beliefs and feelings as a model of the engaged person.

Informal Jewish Education Defined. Having identified these characteristics, we can spell out a definition of informal Jewish education:

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35 Over the years I have wrestled with various terms to describe this phenomenon, including “fun,” “play,” “engagement” and “playfulness.”
40 Parker Palmer, Teaching from the Heart (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).
Informal Jewish education is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens through the individual's actively experiencing a diversity of Jewish moments and values that are regarded as worthwhile. It works by creating venues, by developing a total educational culture and by co-opting the social context. It is based on a curriculum of Jewish values and experiences that is presented in a dynamic and flexible manner. As an activity, it does not call for any one venue but may happen in a variety of settings. It evokes fun in the present, pleasurable feeling, and warm memories. It requires Jewishly literate educators with a "teaching" style that is highly interactive and participatory, who are willing to make maximal use of self and personal lifestyle in their educational work.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION?

The synergy of the eight characteristics. Informal Jewish education is not defined by any one of its characteristics. As noted, each of these characteristics is also a component of other kinds of education and other professions that involve working with people. The coming together of the various characteristics in the new construct called "informal Jewish education" is the key to understanding the concept. By way of analogy: Chicken soup on Friday night requires not only the combination of water, vegetables and chicken, but also the presence of candles, hallah, dusk and a loving family to become part of the Shabbat experience. Likewise, a person-centered approach, an emphasis on Jewish experience, a curriculum of experiences and values, interactivity, group process, a culture of education, an engaged mood and a holistic Jewish educator are all required to add up to informal Jewish education.

Informal education and informal Jewish education. Jewish and general informal education share some of the defining characteristics: both are person-centered; experience-oriented and interactive, and both promote a learning and experiencing community, a culture of education and content that engages. At the same time, informal Jewish education is a unique sub-category of informal education that is related to other faith-based forms of education. It differs from general informal education in two major respects: its curriculum of experiences and values and its holistic educator.

The first difference has to do with the goal of curriculum in Jewish as opposed to general informal education. Informal Jewish education is inherently about affecting the lifestyle and identity of Jews. All forms of informal Jewish education are ultimately education for Jewish character or lifestyle. It is true that there are specific examples of informal Jewish education that seem to be about well-defined topics, rather than about identity. The adult learning class on "The Rhythm of Jewish Life" helps participants acquire knowledge about the Jewish calendar. The trip to Poland enables a better understanding of the role of the Holocaust in Jewish life. But in both cases the larger, overall goal is Jewish character or identity education.

In general informal education, on the other hand, a class or workshop may be about learning a skill or improving one's skills. It might also be about recreation and use of free time. But it is not always necessarily about ultimate identity or about character education. In informal Jewish education the specific Jewish experiences (holidays, visits to Jewish sites, the Israel trip) that make up the “curriculum” are really about a curriculum of Jewishness in toto, whereas in general informal education the specific experiences and skills (sports, ceramics, music, learning about other cultures) that make up the curriculum are the ends in themselves.

The second difference has to do with divergent conceptions of the role of the informal educator. Educators in informal Jewish education are inherently shapers of Jewish experience and role models of Jewish lifestyle. They need to be skilled in the facts of the Jewish calendar or the history of Polish Jewry, but ultimately their unique mission is to create Jewish experiences and affect Jewish identity. If an educator's sole role is giving a good lecture about the Polish kehilla in the nineteenth century, he/she is called a “visiting lecturer”. A person whose sole task is to take a group through the streets of Prague or Krakow is a tour guide. Only if the mission is to affect the total Jewish being of the traveler is the guide an "informal Jewish educator".
WHERE INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION DIFFERS FROM OTHER FORMS OF EDUCATION OR WORK WITH PEOPLE

Our analysis of informal Jewish education helps us to clearly see that it is not confined to a place, even though it does more likely happen in certain venues such as camps, educational travel, youth movements or retreats. Many of its methods are shared by other forms of "the helping professions," such as social work, therapy and good school classes. At the same time, it is true that certain methodologies such as group process, dialogue and experiencing are very central to the practice of informal Jewish education. Let us take a closer look at informal Jewish education and (1) schools; (2) Jewish communal service; (3) therapy; and (4) life itself.

Informal Jewish education and Jewish schools. As we have seen, the most common comparison is between informal Jewish education and that which takes place in Jewish schools. In fact, we have been suggesting that there are important similarities: Both are rooted in some overall Jewish vision or ideology. Both have a program or a "curriculum" that guides their work. Both are populated by people whose role is to "shape," "teach" or "guide" and others who are in the setting to learn and grow. Both happen in specific social and cultural contexts and are conducted by some public or private agency. Both are concerned for the Jewish future.

At the same time, there are also sociological differences that seem to suggest some differences between Jewish schooling and informal education in the reality of twenty-first-century life. Generally, contemporary schooling—Jewish and general—has become associated with the task of transmitting knowledge. Schooling does have important socialization and acculturation objectives, but the transmission of knowledge remains a central focus. This knowledge is usually categorized in terms of a curriculum or course of study which becomes the definitive "map" of what should be taught. These contents have usually been seen in cognitive terms, and they are often linked to the idea of a core intellectual "canon," a culture or a society's body of basic texts. The central personalities in schools are generally called "teachers," whose roles are multiple but certainly linked to transmitting knowledge. Much of general schooling is aimed at progressing along a hierarchical ladder of educational achievement, which means advancing to the next rung of schooling and ultimately to a profession. Jewish day schools must be effective in advancing their charges on this ladder. Schooling over the years has very much become linked to a system of sanctions rooted in grades and outside evaluative measurements.

Given the realities of contemporary life, some of our day schools have sometimes seemed to emphasize the primacy of grading and academic achievement and the sharp distinction between Jewish and general studies.

Informal Jewish education, as we have seen, emphasizes experiences, the role of the learner, and the educator as shaper of environment, group process and interaction. It is undoubtedly true that many contemporary Jewish schools also value these attributes, and in that sense Jewish schools and informal Jewish education are often close relatives rather than opposing forces. Jewish schools have played and will continue to play a central role in the education of the individual and the advancement of societies; informal Jewish education proposes acting as a viable and vibrant partner in that process.

Informal Jewish Education and Jewish Communal Service. Informal education is sometimes equated with Jewish communal service. In training programs, journals and professional development, these two spheres often are aligned, and it is worthwhile to examine their relationship.

Informal Jewish education shares the concerns of Jewish communal service and social work for the needs of the Jewish people and Jewish communal life. In addition, informal Jewish education and Jewish communal service also share the grounding in group dynamics and group process, and focus on the person. Both of these approaches are rooted in the helping professions and in the rich social science tradition of individual psychology, social psychology, organizational theory, the clinical process and group relations.

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63 Alifie Kohl, Schools We Deserve, op.cit.
However, informal Jewish education and Jewish communal service are not exactly the same. The former is an overt form of Jewish education in its concern with presenting individuals at various stages of their lives with a Jewish vision that will be meaningful for them. With its main task the Jewish growth of the learner, informal Jewish education is centrally concerned with Jewish experiences, Jewish lifestyle and Jewish worldview. Jewish communal service responds to the various needs of Jews and the Jewish community—social, cultural, recreational, welfare. It comes to help Jews wherever they are, and it aims to advance Jewish communal improvement. It is not contradictory to the goals of informal Jewish education, but it is not exactly its equivalent.

Informal Jewish education and therapy. Informal Jewish education is influenced by presuppositions that underlie certain major approaches to therapy in the past century. These approaches share with informal Jewish education the concern with the individual and the individual's needs as the “client”. Both therapy and informal Jewish education require the engagement of the individual in order to do their work. Both are committed to words and to dialectic as a central technique for engaging clients and for enabling them to grow.

There are, however, major differences. Therapy is ultimately very much about helping and healing people: “Psychotherapy aims, in general, to reduce or eliminate distress and disability that are a consequence of the neurotic person’s reaction against himself. In short it aims simply to repair.” While it can also be said to help people grow, therapy’s tasks are adaptive and rehabilitative. It does not replace education, but very often it is an adjustment to and even antidote for education. Informal Jewish education is overtly about educating, building and helping to give shape to a Jewish way. It is not about healing or repairing (although it sometimes does that), but about creating and unfolding.

The major difference is ultimately related to worldview. Therapy comes to help individuals confronting personal dilemmas to find their way, and it generally does not propose or promulgate any one worldview. It is ultimately a technique to help a person function better and make choices. Informal Jewish education shares therapy’s commitment to individual choice, but it also speaks in the name of Jewish values and lifestyles that it regards as desirable. It is not just a technique; it is also content-based, ultimately rooted in a worldview that is Jewish. It may be diverse, and it certainly does not come to impose the worldview, but it does represent a belief that there are values and behaviors that are integral to the Jewish perspective and are good and valuable.

Informal Jewish education and life. It is appealing to say, “All of Jewish life is informal Jewish education.” Informal Jewish education, like life itself, encompasses diverse Jewish experiences in a variety of settings. However, while we do learn many things from Jewish life, there is a critical distinction. Jewish life is a complex pattern of personalities, events and processes over which no one person or force has definitive control. General events, the economy, world forces and other religions and cultures all shape Jewish life, as do the dynamics of Jewish organizations, Jewish leaders and Jewish communities. Jewish life as a whole is not something that can “set” goals and outcomes or build a curriculum of experiences. It does “educate” in the sense that it has an impact upon us, but it doesn’t have the ability to “choose” this. The events of Jewish life—like all of life—are the outcome of a multitude of historical, political and sociological forces over which we do not have total control.

In contra-distinction, informal Jewish education deliberately selects Jewish experiences with the conscious intent of affecting the learner. Jewish life is a haphazard flow of events, the outcome of a multitude of historical, political and sociological forces. Informal Jewish education is a conscious effort to shape what Jewish life is. Jewish education chooses to be.

THE SOURCES OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Informal Jewish education is an eclectic theory that is informed by several diverse sources. The development of the literature of this field is still at an early stage and will require time and a willingness to roam.

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wide and far in Jewish texts and in history, world literature, philosophy and the social sciences. We are at the very beginning of the journey.

One important source for understanding informal Jewish education is the history and texts of Jewish tradition. The great texts of our civilization, along with the social history of Jewish life throughout the ages and across continents, reveal much about basic educational approaches and practices in Jewish communal and religious life. There is no one definitive classical Jewish text on “education”. Thus, we need to learn and be taught by the rich comprehensive canon of Jewish texts to learn about education. Important resources include: biblical and Talmudic texts, the history of Jewish education and community in Eretz Israel and in Babylonia, the academies of the great rabbis, the classical yeshiva, the kehilla of nineteenth-century Poland, Jewish camping and youth movements in the twentieth century and the thinking of such diverse personalities as Rabbi Akiva, the Salanter Rebbe, Martin Buber, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Janus Korczak.

In recent years there is increasing wisdom to learn from emerging work in the field of Jewish educational research and thinking and from case studies of prominent forms of contemporary informal education in the Jewish world and the world at large.45 This arena has been in its early stages, but there are signs that it has a small but growing group of interested parties. The practice of informal education is blossoming and is worthy of serious and diverse modes of research and analysis.

General intellectual and educational thought is a critical resource for understanding informal Jewish education and includes the ideas of such figures as: Socrates, St. Augustine, Maria Montessori and Sigmund Freud; John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Bruno Bettelheim, Paolo Freire, Michel Foucault, Claude Levi-Strauss and Oliver Sacks. While most of them did not write about “informal education” per se, their thinking about education, knowing, learning and context are critical for the shaping of the theory of informal education.

I believe that there are extremely significant new directions in the neurosciences and cognitive sciences which will have significant implications for the very essence of how we look at education—and concomitantly for thinking about informal education. Daniel Kahneman’s path-breaking work on “Thinking Fast and Slow” describes not just two diverse ways of “thinking” that characterize humans, but may have significant implications for the settings and educational techniques used to develop these two types.46 The research summarized by David Brooks in The Social Animal suggests new frontiers about the sources of being human and the process of “educating”.47 Together with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow”,48 Ariely’s notion of “rationally irrational”49 and Seligman’s emphasis on a positive psychology which is aimed at the concept “happiness”50 suggest significant new directions being studied by serious scholars and researchers which may break down and rebuild the phenomenon called “education”. We may be on the cusp of dramatic reworkings of the entire domains of formal and informal education.

IN DEFENSE OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Over the years a host of reservations about informal Jewish education have been raised. In this section I shall attempt to address some of these and provide answers to my interlocutors.

“Informal Jewish education has no Jewish content or curriculum.” Informal Jewish education does have Jewish content. Its content is a body of Jewish experiences, values and behaviors that its proponents wish to present and help learners internalize. Informal Jewish education comes to enable a person to confront and internalize basic dimensions of being Jewish by experiencing them. It is true that this content is not the same as a body of facts and ideas about Judaism organized according to academic categories

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45Joseph Reimer has devoted much effort to documenting such case studies.
46In an email to a student of mine, Kahneman indicated that he had not thought a great deal about educational implications, but it was an important question (spring, 2012).
48Csikszentmihalyi, op. cit.
50Seligman, op. cit.
or presented in books. Its contents are not limited to bodies of knowledge or texts but rather encompass the internalization of Jewish knowledge, facts and values into a personal life style. There is an informal Jewish educational curriculum, and it is well defined and explicit, but the dynamics of its teaching are not carved in stone. The curriculum of informal Jewish education doesn’t look like school curricula with lists of themes, dates, facts, generalizations and specific lesson plans for the day. It is more likely to be organized around key value concepts, kinds of experiences and moments in time, and it is much more flexible and adaptive in nature.

“Informal Jewish education neglects the Jewish canon.” The “canon” is a popular contemporary term referring to a compendium of basic texts regarded as the core of Jewish culture and civilization. This canon is typically held to include: Bible, Talmud, commentaries, Midrash, rabbinic literature, siddur and other texts that are assumed to comprise the core of Jewish learning. Teaching the canon is central not only to Jewish education but to Jewish life and continuity and must be incorporated into any comprehensive Jewish program of learning. Teaching the canon requires knowledgeable and talented teachers and structured settings. Informal Jewish education is informed and shaped by the canon and reflects its best principles; however, its ultimate task is not the transmission of the canon per se but rather the canon’s underlying values and ideas. While informal Jewish education may not specifically teach the texts of the canon, it is inherently shaped by them. The traditional texts are certainly a part of informal Jewish education’s own eclectic “canon”.

Studying texts surely is serious and one of the cornerstones of Jewish education. But other Jewish experiences also can be serious, in the sense of life shaping life. The study of great Jewish books should be treated very seriously, but so should the experiencing of Shabbat, visiting the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw or strolling through the hills of the Galilee on a spring day. Informal Jewish education is not a replacement for the canon but rather makes its ideas and teachings come alive.

“Informal Jewish education is touchy-feely.” It is true that informal Jewish education is concerned with attitudes, feelings and choices, but that does not mean that it is unconcerned with substantive teaching of Judaism. Adult learning programs, camp programs and Israel trips help students become more knowledgeable about Judaism although their ultimate goal is knowledge that leads to action and lifestyle. Affect is clearly an important part of identity and of Jewish life, and neglect of this fact in Jewish education is often lamented by the unattached. The emphasis on affect and behavior is not a rejection of intellect and understanding. Indeed, informal education may be about correcting the bifurcation between affect and intellect and restoring the organic harmony between deeds, intellect and emotion.

“Informal Jewish education is simply having fun.” Informal Jewish education isn’t “simply” fun, but fortunately for Jewish life it certainly does seem to be enjoyable! Calling informal Jewish education “fun” is significant because this says that there are kinds of Jewish experience and education which can engage and ignite people. But it is also education, and when done properly it can advance Jewish understanding and living. We should not be afraid or skeptical of things that are fun—we should jump at the educational opportunity they present.

Informal Jewish education is play in the sense of deep involvement in a comprehensive activity that completely engages the learner. Many studies tell us how central play can be in child therapy, in the cultural life of a society and in personal relationships. Erikson looked to toys as a key to understanding young people, and Giamatti compared the end of the baseball season and the advent of Rosh Hashanah as important transitional moments in the year’s lifecycle. Informal Jewish education is not playing in the sense of being irrelevant and casual—it is play in the sense of engaging and energizing.

“Informal Jewish educators are not serious professionals.” Informal Jewish education in fact calls for extremely serious educators and training! To be a truly professional informal Jewish educator one needs Judaic knowledge; a Jewish lifestyle; a knack for group dynamics; the ability to be interactive and...
to listen; the ability to engage others; and the ability to impart ideas and values twenty-four hours day, seven days a week. One has to be accomplished in many areas—encompassing both content and method, Jewish and general—often demonstrating proficiency over and above that required of teachers. Thus, the training and work of informal Jewish educators is very challenging, to the extent that some of my critics have regarded it as a "mission impossible".

It is indeed a difficult and challenging profession, but the work can be done. The theory is based on real life, real experiences and real people. There are masters of this work out there accomplishing this kind of education, and many readers of this treatise have been affected by them. Some readers are these educators. The fact that something is complicated does not mean it is impossible.

"Informal Jewish education is simply another way to say 'good education.'" "Informal education" is not simply a synonym for "good education." "Informal Jewish education" is a term that exists in common language and a phenomenon that exists in contemporary educational practice in countries throughout the world. I have attempted to show that there are formal dimensions which define this phenomenon and distinguish it from other kinds of education. Moreover, all informal education is not mutandis mutandi "good education"; there can be good informal education or mediocre informal education or bad informal education. In contemporary educational parlance and practice, the term "informal education" is a formal category that describes an idea and a form of education.

"Informal education does not exist." This argument encompasses two contentions. The first position is that these two fields shouldn't be separated." This position seems to me to be an ideological stance of what should or shouldn't be and not an analytic point of how we do talk and think about concepts. The second contention is that "informal education" has become a way of collecting all the "goodies" about education and wrapping them neatly with the emotively positive term "experiential" or "informal". As already indicated, I am not at the moment interested in what is "good" or "bad", but rather what "is". I believe there is a thing called x (Informal or Experiential), and I want to understand it.

"Where does the thinking of Chazan and Reimer and Bryfman agree and/or disagree?" My colleagues Joe Reimer and David Bryfman have made important contributions to the advance of experiential/informal education. I believe the three of us agree about more things than we disagree. We agree that there is an important educational phenomenon that has been denoted as either "informal" or "experiential" Jewish education. We agree that this phenomenon is important for Jewish life and worthy of serious study and implementation. We agree that it is a potentially seminal force in affecting identity and life. I have identified eight characteristics of informal Jewish education. They speak of three distinct initiatives which are involved in experiential learning: recreation, socialization and challenge. Their notion of recreation is parallel to my fifth and sixth characteristics—an immersive culture and the playfulness of informal education. Their notion of challenge as the stretching and growing of an individual parallels my notions of learned centered and a pedagogy of interactivity. Their notion of socialization has informed my thinking and caused me to expand my comments on the group dimensions of informal Jewish education and the rich potential of informal Jewish education.

Where we differ is: 1) I posit some additional characteristics that they do not emphasize, i.e., a curriculum of values and behavior, pedagogy of interactivity, and a holistic educator. 2) I agree that socialization to be an active member of the Jewish community is a goal of informal education, although for me it is not the primary nor exclusive goal. 3) I believe that any discussion of informal Jewish education involves certain type of skills that need to be fostered in educators to make it happen. 4) I agree that the criteria I propose are "lofty", but I do not believe that they are unrealistic. Over the years I have observed these qualities in many people and institutions. They are real, accessible and happen in practice. Moreover, I think that informal Jewish education will not be serious or taken seriously until it is willing to establish lofty goals, no less rigorous than those for being a rabbi, educator or professor. Overall, my thinking has
grown because of the writings of David, Joe and others, and I believe that these articles are best read as a shared, ever-evolving creative compendium.

THE PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

What is the promise of informal Jewish education? This kind of education is uniquely equipped to introduce people of all ages to some of the great experiences and moments of Jewish life. Its focus on the person and its emphasis on actually participating in significant moments offer great promise for affecting individuals and the Jewish community very powerfully. It offers great promise for affecting Jewish feeling and behavior. It can deepen some Jewish skills very well—for example, speaking Hebrew or reading Torah or building a sukkah—because in informal Jewish education one learns by doing. It is very effective in helping individuals advance on their personal journeys and growth, as a plethora of voices from summer camps, Israeli trips and other kind of informal education attest.

Informal Jewish education may be less effective for systematic Jewish text learning, for a systematic expansion of Jewish literacy and for the meta-analysis of Jewish ideas. In that sense it is less effective in the overall goal of imparting Jewish culture, an important objective for the Jewish people as a whole. Informal Jewish education's strength is not in guaranteeing transmission of the Jewish canon and cultural legacy, which is so important for Jewish survival. Informal Jewish education is not anti-intellectual, but it does not make the cognitive and the intellectual its sole or even main preoccupation. It does seem fair to say that schooling has several potential advantages in enabling systematic Jewish learning.

Finally, because informal Jewish education is so focused on the individual and his/her personal journey and choice, it cannot guarantee collective cultural outcomes. The hope of informal education is that the learners will choose a Jewish path, but they may or they may not. Ultimately, the bottom line is that the learning that occurs in informal Jewish education and that which occurs in formal Jewish education are both critical, and they should work in tandem. We cannot afford a Jewish education that is only formal, just as we cannot afford a Jewish education that is only informal. We should look forward to the day when these two kinds of education work side by side, hand in hand and interchangeably, to touch the young and old learner alike, and from all sides.

CONCLUSION: INFORMAL EDUCATION AND JEWISH LIFE IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

The bifurcation of education into formal and informal is in many ways artificial and inefficient. While we begin the twenty-first century with formal and informal Jewish education, this state of affairs is not irreversible. In the decades, years and century ahead we may yet succeed at restoring the organic unity that once was. We should work hard to correct the notion that informal and formal Jewish educations are separate entities. In fact, they 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.

Informal Jewish education, as an approach that maintains that people learn by being actively involved, is a good fit with the diversity, mobility and longevity that characterize the twenty-first-century Jewish world. With its emphasis on experience and values, informal Jewish education seems uniquely equipped to help people on that most important of human endeavors—the search for personal meaning. The twenty-first century warmly welcomes an education that reaches out to each of us as unique human beings and helps us grapple with the search for answers to life's big questions. The days of informal education being "supplementary" or "extra-curricular" are over. Informal Jewish education is ready to assume a major new educational role in twenty-first-century Jewish life.
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