

JUDAISM IN THE IN-BETWEEN:

THE NEW JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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I'M PRETTY SURE THAT MY 4-YEAR-OLD SON THINKS EVERYTHING IS JEWISH. He has a sense that not everyone is Jewish, but for him, Jewish opportunities are everywhere. Some of that is us: We spend Friday nights at synagogue, we chose a Jewish preschool, and we make Havdalah at home. But a lot of that is PJ Library. His books are Jewish. His music is Jewish (thanks, PJ Library Radio). He gets Jewish swag in the mail.

And then there was the time we were visiting Seattle for a Thanksgiving vacation and wandered into a bookstore, only to find that the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle's PJ Library Song and Storytime was starting that very minute. The books and music he heard at home came alive, in person. He heard Hebrew, which unified his at-home and school experience with his out-in-the-world experience. Our family word "mensch" got normalized by others.

My son is the beneficiary of what I call a new Jewish educational landscape, the opportunities that exist in the "in-between spaces" of life, not at home or at school. These are what help him live a truly integrated Jewish life, where doing, being, and learning Jewish are practiced simultaneously. Judaism is alive, palpable, and relevant for him because it happens seamlessly.

As the 20th century has morphed into the 21st, it has become clear that the organizations we know will shift under the pressures of our new society. Network theorist Clay Shirky observes, "When we change the way we communicate, we change society."¹ In other words, we don't just talk on Facebook and Twitter. These platforms and the ways that they are built shape our expectations of what it means to meet in community. We rely on networks, we more readily access information from peers and

not experts, and we turn to these networks for leadership. We tend to distrust hierarchies and process, particularly processes that can't be understood quickly.

When Jews came to the new world, the Eastern European *kehillah*, or community structure, had to adapt to America's democracy, norms, and organizing principles. In the wealth and industrialization of the 20th century, Jewish life was shaped in the image of the American organization: Our organizations became physically big, with complex hierarchies focused around power and authority. The organizations were impersonal, keeping information within a core of people. But that didn't matter as much in a tight-knit community.

Today, we have to translate and transition Jewish life for the 21st century, creating transparency, equity, and opportunity for collective action.

This work of change matters for the entire Jewish communal system – but it is existential for Jewish education. Learning about Judaism happens in these mostly 20th century institutions – in synagogue schools and in day schools. When most North American Jews trusted and even relied on organizations, they chose readily to participate in Jewish education. But today, Jewish education cannot happen in Jewish institutions that reach only a segment of our communities. We run the risk of Jewish education failing to reach enough people and in enough varied ways to make Jewish life and community vibrant and meaningful for all.

Reorganizing Jewish education according to 21st century norms and values means making it more accessible, less hierarchical, more networked, and less expert-reliant. It means making it happen alongside and outside of institutions. It means creating Judaism in the in-between spaces, where life is lived. It does not mean dismissing legacy institutions – but rather, innovating within them and building onto them.

“Jewish education” is many things. From a policy perspective, from a communal perspective, it is the infrastructure of concrete opportunities that is made available to help people explore and celebrate



Judaism and all that it means. It means, literally, that there is a *Tu B'Shevat* seder available to families in a park on a Sunday morning; or an age-inclusive, project-based religious school program at a synagogue on Tuesday afternoons; or an experiential after-school Hebrew school at the JCC; or a day school teacher leading evening Talmud study in a downtown bookstore. Or, maybe there aren't those things. And the “maybe” matters: Because most Jews don't do or organize Jewish at home or on their own, the Jewish educational infrastructure in a community dictates what Jews get to do or not do. They get what the landscape makes available to them. And our landscapes must be intentional.

That morning in the Seattle bookstore was magical. In a public space, we were about 15 families. We were speaking in Hebrew. We danced and listened and sang and gained Hebrew words and celebrated what it means to learn as we live. It wasn't an accident: The Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle found and employed the talented Betsy Dishel and her Red Ukelele, supporting her work throughout Seattle public spaces.² Jewish federations power PJ Library in most communities, with many housing PJ Library as well as mobilizing its funding (from many generous individual donors). Building

– architecting, intentionally designing – the landscape of the in-between is the job of funders and policy makers. It happens on purpose, even if it looks and feels organic.

Judaism needs to be in the in-between spaces, not only in our institutions and not only at home. The future is bright, filled with our best teachers in and outside of their classrooms, working in networks as well as in organizations, alongside regular people empowered and trained to reach out to and build Jewish community with their peers. The future is beautiful – and as those who make the Jewish educational landscape happen, it is ours to create.



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¹ *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 17.
² www.redukelele.com/about/