Prompt: What do educational leaders in the complementary setting need in the 21st century?

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Any analysis and understanding of the needs of Jewish educational leaders in complementary settings with specific regard to experiential education must include the following criteria:

- Identifying those leaders (including clergy) with reputations as excellent educators and educational leaders, and gathering data from them and their constituents about their processes and approaches to teaching and learning. Without this kind of evidence we are functioning only on the level of theory, hearsay, and anecdote, rather than grounding our proposals in the lived experience and wisdom of practitioners who toil in our congregations and communal settings. Their voices must be heard.

- Accepting the attenuated nature of Jewish home life for many American Jewish households, and seeking ways to foster the complementary setting as a “Jewish home away from home” that can become a framework and a bridge for these households to the Jewish aspects of their private lives.

- Grounding the work of Davidson in its roots as the Teachers Institute, which, through Mordecai Kaplan’s influence, drew deeply upon and adapted John Dewey’s philosophy of experience and education. In this regard, Davidson, as the offspring of the Teachers Institute, reflects a very different orientation to Jewish education than the other divisions of JTS, one that ought to be mined as it moves forward in contributing to defining experiential Jewish education as a serious field of endeavor in the American Jewish universe.

The following remarks will address those three priorities. They are based upon my extensive research and scholarship on congregational rabbis as educators in congregational settings, on my extensive reading about educational leadership, and on my current work with mentors and students who are or aspire to become Jewish educational leaders in complementary settings.

Part One – Profiles of outstanding Jewish educators in complementary settings

Beyond curriculum, beyond programs, beyond mission and vision statements, stands the outstanding educator. These individuals, and the cadre they represent, matter more than anything else to the flourishing of complementary education. We need to know more about who they are and how they work. Some of these educators have completed formal degrees in
Jewish education, but many of them have learned through the wisdom of practice and the capacity for sophisticated self-reflection. Few of them have been exposed to the principles of experiential education. They spend a lot of time figuring things out for themselves. But these educational visionaries lose vital time along the way because they learn while doing, often reinventing the wheel; others, who are less naturally gifted, never get there at all. We ought to make every effort to identify the approaches and practices of these excellent educators, and in combination with theory, develop plans for educating our students (and those already in the field) based on the knowledge we gain. Vitally, such learning must be combined with a serious and ongoing study of Judaism, and include opportunities to connect secular theories of education with Judaism and Jewish living.

There are several qualities of a Jewish educational leader in the setting we are discussing that support excellence. Among the most important are:

- View the educator as facilitator: this word, often bandied about loosely, is essential to experiential education. It means many things to many people, but the best description I have encountered through my research is conceptualizing the educator as midwife. This term is not unfamiliar to general education; it has been used by Plato and by feminist scholars (Belenky et al., 1986). Two of the three rabbis in my dissertation research also used it in separate conversations to encapsulate their understanding of themselves as educators. What aspects of a facilitator do educational leaders embody? According to Galbraith (1991):
  
  The facilitator may be the challenger, role model, mentor, coach, demonstrator, content resource person, and learning guide. The learning process is a collaborative and challenging encounter that incorporates diverse characteristics and strategies...we have moved in the direction of collaboration in an effort to assist learners to become critically reflective and independent individuals who are aware of and understand the nature of their beliefs, values, and actions. (p. 8)

- Helping Jewish educational leaders gain a more sophisticated grasp of the nature of systems thinking and how it affects their collaboration with colleagues, lay people, and learners of all ages and backgrounds. Synagogues and other communal settings in which complementary learning occurs are very complex organizations. Many of our leaders have absolutely no knowledge of or familiarity with the dynamics of and differences in, for example, working as a team or working as a group, or the various theories of leadership, all of which are addressed in systems thinking. They do not need to become scholars of this body of knowledge, but in order to better interpret and evaluate the way they and the other people in their institution interact they do need to have a language that helps them situate their work in a more nuanced manner. Jewish educational leaders often act in the dark on these matters. There is a body of accessible
literature that must be incorporated into our leaders’ libraries and actively resourced in order to bring these organizations into the 21st century.

Part Two – Jewish home away from home

A paradox exists in American Jewish life. According to Cohen and Eisen in The Jew Within, more and more Jewish households see creating and celebrating home based rituals as key to meaningful Jewish life. They depend less on public institutions for their Jewish observance and celebration. The Internet is a veritable encyclopedia of how-to information for such people. And, yet, there is the equal concern that with attenuated knowledge the Jewish home is no longer a primary setting for Jewish life. How do educators navigate between these two dimensions of current reality? My research strongly suggests that places of complementary learning must transform themselves into “Jewish homes away from home.” Experiential education can abet this process. This does not mean that content learning is absent from the education, only that it needs to be carefully integrated with the principles and practices of experiential learning. Here, we might take a page from the way that Jewish girls were historically inducted into Jewish living until very recently. While they were denied a formal Jewish education in the sense of schooling, they learned via doing (and no doubt discussing along the way) in the home and neighborhood. Public places of learning need to figure out ways to incorporate these Jewish modes of learning with the theories espoused by figures such as John Dewey on how to translate organic learning of the home into educational settings. It is impossible to control what happens once the learners leave our sites, but the more we help them to connect learning with the intimacy of their homes (in the best ways), the more we lay a foundation for them to feel confident and comfortable bringing those ways into their own homes.

There is a further reason why imagining our task as creating a Jewish home away from home is fundamental. The home is one crucial locus of memory building, for better and for worse. We construct some of our most enduring memories by translating experiences from home into stories we tell ourselves about our lives and the world. My research reveals that building up a storehouse of stories that translates into memories for our learners of positive and invigorating Jewish relationships and associations is a powerful avenue for long-term learning and Jewish connections. Scholarship in the field of narrative education is still in its relative infancy, but as far back as Jerome Bruner’s insights from the 1990s regarding narrative learning, researchers have been aware that educators miss a huge opportunity when they minimize or diminish the extent to which human beings learn, situate, and order themselves psychologically through narrative. Our learners need to find themselves within the larger Jewish narratives, and they need to feel that they have a role to play in those evolving narratives as well, as authors and characters. Efforts on the part of our educators to conceptualize how experiential learning and narrative learning can intersect through Jewish education are vital for this reason. Otherwise, too many of our learners leave with a fragmented and incoherent sense
of their Jewishness and of their links to meta-narratives of the Jewish people and Judaism as an evolving religious culture.

Part Three – Davidson’s roots in the Teachers Institute

Educational fads come and go. This is the case in Jewish education as it is in general education. Donors often look for the magic bullet that will resolve the dilemmas and problems identified by experts as undermining or threatening a vibrant Jewish sustainable future. Of course, there is no such magic bullet, which is precisely why the fads are fleeting. If Davidson truly believes that experiential education in complementary settings is vital to the flourishing of Judaism and the Jewish people in the United States, then it has to find better and more persuasive arguments than the ones currently being offered; otherwise, this latest effort will become the next educational fad. It seems that by situating itself within a tradition shaped by Mordecai Kaplan and his associates, and influenced by John Dewey’s philosophy of education, Davidson stands on a firmer ground with which to build into this century. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; there is a need to experiment and explore how we can be enriched by the wisdom of our forbearers and respond creatively and intelligently to the demands of our time as well.

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References
