Prompt: How Might Families Navigate Through the Range of Jewish Experiences to Secure a Robust Education?

Writer: Dr. Gill Graff

From the Exodus narrative to Moses’s exhortation to teach successive generations, the foundational text of Jewish life instructs parents to enable children to internalize the legacy of Torah. Commentators have pointed out that Torah is identified in the Biblical text as morashah (legacy), suggesting the need for action on the part of the legatee, rather than yerushah (inheritance) a word denoting transfer to the beneficiary absent any required action on his/her part. One cannot “inherit” Torah; each individual—parents and children—must make it her/his own.

The Talmud places the origins of school-based Jewish education in the first century, shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple. The Talmudic account (Baba Batra 21a) includes a fascinating turn of phrase. In referencing Joshua ben Gamla, the community leader who is reported to have initiated schooling because there were too many households in which parents lacked the requisite learning to educate their children, the Talmud notes: “b’ram (nonetheless: though the word can also be translated as ‘accordingly’) he (Joshua ben Gamla) is remembered for good.” Put otherwise, Jewish education is ideally, conveyed and internalized in the home. In the face of the erosion of capacity on the part of parents to directly “deliver,” however, “alternative frameworks” are laudable.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century: the universe of Jewish education has expanded beyond books and schools to include camps, youth groups, museums, Israel experiences, movies, social media, digital games and more. It is this proliferation of modalities and settings that calls for “navigation.” As with every aspect of children’s education, well-considered parental choices in Jewish education are vital.

In reflecting on these choices, the four “commonplaces” of education—the learner, milieu, subject and teacher—framed by the late Professor Joseph Schwab serve as a helpful navigational device. Engaging each learner in a manner most appropriate to his/her needs is, by no means original to Schwab. Its importance was recognized millennia ago in the Book of Proverbs and emphasized by John Dewey early in the twentieth century. The learner is a central actor in educative experiences, but s/he interfaces with other commonplaces, observes Schwab.
The milieu within which children experience Jewish living and learning is ever-changing. That said, in the United States of the twenty-first century there are pervasive values, and structures within which children spend their time that must be considered in thinking about Jewish education. For those (overwhelming majority) of Jewish children of school age not attending a Jewish day school, there is both a “regular” school day that runs more-or-less 8:00 a.m. — 3:15 p.m. and a whole host of extra-curricular activities competing for time and attention. A (small) minority of Jewish students is prepared to engage in Jewish learning experiences on a consistent basis several late afternoons/evenings per week, plus weekends.

In this connection, several observations are in order. Though substantial numbers of children (or their parents) may not be prepared to dedicate multiple blocks of time on a weekly basis to Jewish educational pursuits, opportunity for the same ought not be “written off.” If, for example, there are a few congregations in a reasonably proximate geographic zone (and, not unlikely Jews in that zone who are not affiliated with any of these congregations), there might be a group of families interested in a program of study offering more time-on-task than that of any set of learning experiences provided by a single, area congregation. Exploration of consortia of Jewish educational providers—extending beyond synagogues to include JCCs, day schools and other area resources—can, potentially offer expanded and enriched opportunities for broader and deeper Jewish educational engagement, meeting the needs of diverse learners.

The above is noteworthy in reflecting on parents’ navigating Jewish educational experiences, as such initiatives can be “market driven.” Consortium arrangements among clusters of Jewish educational providers are, already, in place. Recently, I was invited to speak at a well-established, Conservative congregation of nearly 1000 families. During a question and answer session, several congregants wondered aloud why every synagogue needs to independently operate an “after school” Jewish education program. In Los Angeles, where a “Concierge for Jewish Education” helps connect families with programs meeting their particular needs and interests, inquiries for particular sorts of programs not yet available in the community have led to various providers filling the void. It is a plastic period in complementary Jewish education, and parent “seekers” and advocates can help shape the landscape of Jewish educational opportunities.

Rabbis and educators are, by and large, attuned to the milieu. Challenged by the reality that many, many children at his congregation are active in a Saturday morning sports league (notwithstanding the availability of a Sunday alternative) one prominent rabbi I know initiated a one hour, Shabbat morning synagogue experience for children (welcome to come in sports uniform) and their parents. The program was scheduled so as to enable timely arrival at the morning’s “main event.” Recognizing the mid-week challenge of late afternoon traffic congestion—an impediment to consistent attendance at synagogue school—another
congregation conducts synchronous, teacher guided, computer-based instruction as an educational option. Other congregations have arranged “at home” Hebrew tutoring with an eye to 100% attendance on the part of each student, and a likelihood of heightened parental involvement. In Los Angeles, pioneering work is underway in deployment of digital, game-based learning as a vehicle of Jewish education. Each such strategy represents a creative response to the milieu and an effort to meet learners “where they are.”

Schwab’s commonplaces include special attention to the subject of curricular focus. “Judaism” is not only a body of knowledge but a way of life; the subject calls for the acquisition of skills and their application; for identity development as well as cognitive learning. That said, visions of the educated Jew vary. Developing such a vision with respect to children’s education stands as a parental decision that walks hand-in-hand with how Judaism is expressed in the home. “Robust” education is, in the final analysis, defined by the parent-navigator of Jewish educational experiences. As in other dimensions of learning and growth, parents’ vision of what it means to be an educated Jew and their aspirations for their child(ren) relative to that vision will significantly guide educational choices.

Jewish educational institutions have, in turn, increasingly refined and clarified their vision and mission. Over a recent, fifteen year period, BJE-Los Angeles worked with forty congregations to help them articulate clear mission statements with regard to complementary Jewish education and to align educational experience with well-defined goals. The Experiment in Congregational Education, NESS and other such initiatives have called upon and enabled institutions to more clearly identify the aims of the learning experiences they provide. On this backdrop, parents can more effectively explore and access those Jewish educational experiences that most closely reflect the parental vision of Jewish education.

Among Schwab’s commonplaces the teacher stands alongside the learner, milieu and subject. Teachers are mediators of knowledge and sources of (Jewish) wisdom. With information so readily available today, the role of the teacher in helping learners make sense of data is increasingly significant. When it comes to Jewish education, it is often the teacher who translates knowledge into experience. Shabbat, tefillah (prayer) and hesed (acts of kindness) may, for example, be transformed from words or ideas to lived experience through teacher-designed and/or implemented curricula. That teachers possess the tools and reflective wisdom to connect learners, milieu and subject is vitally important; it is a reality that drives significant investment in teacher education, pre- and in-service “Robust” Jewish educational institutions are characterized by ongoing staff development.

The history of Jewish education in the United States is marked by an ever-expanding array of frameworks for and approaches to Jewish learning. A multiplicity of options makes for considerable choice. The parental responsibility for Jewish education expressed in the
instruction to “teach them diligently” is today exercised through carefully selecting—with well-conceived vision and consideration of learner, milieu, subject and teacher—among the myriad Jewish educational experiences available to children and families. As we are reminded in Avot (5.26): “According to the labor is the reward.”

Dr. Gil Graff is the Executive Director of Builders for Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles since 1993. During his tenure, BJE has earned a national reputation for innovation and excellence in advancing the mission of encouraging partnership in, enhancing the quality of, and promoting access to Jewish education. He is also Professor of Jewish history at the Academy for Jewish Religion, CA.