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## A New Kind of Diversity: Jewish Education in a Pluralistic Society

by Saul Kaiserman

### A New Kind of Challenge

No two students are alike, and this simple fact has always presented a challenge for educators. Any one classroom inevitably includes a mix of students with different abilities, preferences, and educational backgrounds. Some students are confident readers, while others are careful listeners; some have difficulty reading the blackboard from the back of the room, while others become restless if they are seated for more than a few minutes; and so on, and on, in infinite variations. The best teachers develop a variety of instructional and assessment strategies to account for and respond to these differences among their students.

In North America, in the contemporary era, religious and cultural pluralism represents a new challenge for educators and it will require a new kind of response. Today, the students, teachers, and other individuals who together constitute our learning communities, even those who identify as Jewish, hold a diversity of beliefs and practice a variety of observances, Jewish and non-Jewish. Few, if any, assumptions can be made about how they practice or what they believe. As Jewish identities have become increasingly complex and varied, the questions are no longer as simple as, for example, whether or not a family observes *Shabbat* or keeps kosher. Instead, they revolve around how it observes *Shabbat* or keeps kosher, and under what circumstances. A child of divorced parents may keep kosher in one parent's house but not in the other's; another child may give *Hanukkah* presents to family members and then open Christmas presents from non-Jewish step-siblings; a third may chant from the *Torah* at one grandmother's congregation and sit behind the *mechitza* with another grandmother.

If we agree with Ron Wolfson, President of Synagogue 3000, that one of our roles as educational leaders is to create learning experiences in which each individual "feels a sense of belonging" and "can learn how to live Jewishly within the context of a personal Jewish community,"<sup>1</sup> we will need to do so while accounting for the diversity of practices and beliefs among the people with whom we work.

### A New Kind of Learner

Jews today frequently affiliate with, and simultaneously participate in, several different communities, each expressing and validating a unique configuration of values, beliefs, and normative behaviors. A single student might attend a community day school, become *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* at a Reform Jewish congregation, worship on the High Holidays at an Orthodox synagogue, spend summers at a Conservative Jewish Camp Ramah, and then over the weekends go on youth group retreats organized by secular-Zionist Young Judea -- to say nothing of playing basketball or karate on weekday afternoons with kids from a variety of ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In each of these environments, individuals are presented with different assumptions about what it means to be Jewish and a different life-style is promoted as the norm. Even among institutions affiliated with the same Jewish movement, participants will encounter variations in practice and ideology among different synagogues, summer camps, and other organizations. Our programs are likely to be only one of any number of influences that shape the identities of our students and teachers and their families.

Creating a communal "sense of belonging" among individuals who hold dissimilar beliefs and practice their Judaism in divergent ways is a tall order. If we seek to build a sense of belonging within our programs, we must attend to and account for the different ways our students, teachers, and other

constituents have of being Jewish. This will require that we ask ourselves questions that do not have obvious answers: If our program has a policy of serving only kosher food, how do we include the grandparent who doesn't have a kosher home and wants to bring home-baked cupcakes for a child's birthday party? If we hold Religious School services on a Friday night, how do we include the teacher who doesn't travel on *Shabbat*? If we fail to find ways to enable the participation of such individuals, we risk leading them to believe that they do not, in fact, belong.

As we attempt to provide opportunities for participants to learn to "live Jewishly," we may find that if we attempt to promote specific values and practices, we may inadvertently fail to recognize, come into conflict with, or devalue the ways that Judaism appears in the lives of our population. If we try to affirm one particular take on Judaism as the proper one, we risk alienating the members of our community.

Further, we may discover that the specific Jewish practices or ideas we are studying in our programs bear little or no relationship to what is actually happening in the home. For example, when we are leading a discussion in which students are sharing stories from their Passover *seders*, how do we include the student who didn't attend one – and never has? The learners may not have contexts in which to apply the skills and knowledge taught in our educational programs, and the curriculum may therefore be seen as irrelevant, useless, and a waste of time.

### **A New Way of Responding**

If we are to build communities of learners, our programs must find a way to enable a feeling of belonging among individuals who bring with them a diversity of possibly incompatible beliefs and practices. Further, we must provide a means by which individuals can explore together how to live Jewishly, even if their homes and the other communities to which they belong do not embody the beliefs and practices being considered.

Here are two ideas we may wish to keep in mind in responding to the diversity that arises from living in a pluralistic society: First, as Jewish educators we must recognize that our individual programs are not the only authoritative Jewish voices that our participants encounter. We cannot explain ourselves with the phrase "this is what it means to be Jewish." Yet we need not refrain entirely from taking a stance on Jewish belief and practice. We can both inspire and make demands of our participants, not by claiming that our ways of being Jewish are the only ones or the right ones, but rather by stating simply that "this is how we do things around here," that this is what it means to be a part of this community at this time.

Second, if we wish for individuals to value the norms and behaviors that define our programs, we must give them a greater voice in setting them. When we allow for the possibility that their participation will inform the way in which our institutions understand and practice Judaism, we enable them to be stakeholders in the community, ensuring they will find the practices meaningful. We must make sure that our participants will not merely be inheritors of a fixed set of traditions, but will play a role in shaping them.

### **A New Kind of Jewish Education**

The demands that this new reality places upon our teachers cannot be understated. Our teachers must not only be comfortable amidst the plurality of views and practices that shape the populations of our programs, they also must at the same time model and advocate for the vision of the program as a viable and meaningful way of living Jewishly. Further, they must be able to implement curricula that are responsive not only to the varied experiences of the learners, but also to their families. Finally, they must be able to engage students and parents in conversations about the purposes of the educational program and provide them a voice in shaping them. Our success will hinge upon our ability to recruit, train, and retain individuals who are up to the extraordinary challenge of being, at the same time, expert facilitators and facilitators of their expertise.

Pluralism may be a new challenge for our programs, but, at the same time, it provides a new opportunity for us to collaborate beyond the walls of our individual institutions. Being mindful of the totality of the lives of our participants will require us to work as partners with one another across denominational, ideological, and geographic lines. With the common goal of creating a variety of meaningful and relevant Jewish experiences, we can build Jewish communities that will engage our participants throughout their changing Jewish lives.

**Endnotes:**

1. Wolfson, Ron. "Creating Community in the Classroom" in *The New Jewish Handbook*, Audrey Friedman Marcus and Raymond A. Zwerin, Eds. Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, 1994.

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