



ish college activities or a trip to Israel.” (See her essay in this issue for a fuller account of this research.)

We call these voluntary experiences “informal Jewish education.” But the term “informal education” is problematic. What gives these experiences their power is not primarily their informality. What matters, in part, is that they are chosen rather than prescribed. But what really matters is that for many these are their first opportunities to be *in* the river, to experience Judaism as a live current that carries them along and leaves a lasting impression.

There is a mystery here that we barely understand. The human mind registers certain experiences in lasting ways while other experiences are scarcely remembered. Some experiences — especially when something happens to leave a lasting “memory trace” — are often remembered years later when more routine experiences have long been forgotten.

The power of informal Jewish education, I am suggesting, lies in the creation of lasting Jewish memories. When reluctant or ambivalent Jews get surprised and experience themselves — in the company of trusted peers — swimming in powerful Jewish currents, they take notice. Before they have the time to erect the usual defenses, they are standing before the Western Wall and finding its allure overwhelming. They are singing *Lecha Dodi* at camp and the Sabbath Queen is dancing before their eyes. They are holding their friends’ hands in the dark as they bid farewell to Shabbat by the light of a hundred havdallah candles. They are talking about God at 2 a.m. They are crying at the gates of *Yad Vashem* as

they take in the horror of the past. They are doing Jewish and not feeling strange or awkward about it. Is it any wonder these moments stand out and are not forgotten?

Such moments do not create themselves. They are as carefully designed as when Dusty told us to jump into the river. Informal education has its spontaneous moments, but on the whole its programs have to be as carefully and thoughtfully designed as lessons in a classroom curriculum. Informal educators — at their best — are artful designers of other people’s experiences. They have to know enough about experiential learning to design programs that catch people a little off guard, and yet help them to take in and record the significance of what they have experienced.

The Jewish community is only now becoming aware of the full educational potential of informal education. But that potential will be realized only when there is a complementary awareness of the craft of the informal educator. Designing powerful experiences that create meaningful Jewish memories is an art form that is not often appreciated. At the Institute for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis, we are cultivating that art form, celebrating its practitioners, and preparing a next generation of artful designers. This is pioneering work that has significant long-term implications for creating the memories that will seed the Jewish identities of today’s Jewish youth.

Dr. Joseph Reimer is Director of the Institute for Informal Jewish Education and Professor at the Hornstein Program at Brandeis University.

Informal Jewish Education as Art Form

Barry Chazan

Dear Joe,

Your rafting trip sounds great! As always, you succeed so well in using life to teach us about life. And here I am stuck in my book-filled office trying to “understand” what informal education is. So let me take a stab at it and try to do some straight-laced analytic conceptualizing about the art form you so well describe.

As we both know, most people think that “Jewish education” means schools and children. But that

is not the whole story. Learning happens in many places: at camp, at a Jewish Community Center, on an Israel trip, at a retreat or Shabbaton, in an adult study group. Contemporary Jewish life shouts loudly that the campus of Jewish education extends much beyond the walls of primary or secondary school. Indeed, there is another “school” that has touched all of us — the “school” of informal Jewish education. I think this “school” has seven characteristics:

1. AUTONOMY: It’s something that one

chooses freely.

2. **PERSON-CENTERED:** It makes the person the center of education.

3. **EXPERIENCE-CENTERED:** It educates by enabling Jews to actually *have* Jewish experiences (rather than merely talking about them).

4. **INTERACTIVE:** It highlights the relationship between educator and learner as central to Jewish education.

5. **A "CURRICULUM" OF JEWISH VALUES:** The "curriculum" of informal Jewish education is about the Jewish values, behaviors, and beliefs that we want Jews to internalize. This curriculum is not carved in stone but is flexible; paper and pencil tests do not measure it.

6. **FUN AND ENJOYMENT:** It is fun and assumes that enjoyment enhances rather than inhibits Jewish learning!

7. **DIFFERENT BREED OF EDUCATOR:** Informal Jewish educators are living role models of the values, beliefs, and behaviors they teach, and they "teach" by showing, doing, and asking rather than by telling, lecturing, or posing. (They are also likely to wear shorts, t-shirts, running shoes, and sports uniforms!)

Informal Jewish education refers to an approach to education that is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens through active participation in a diversity of Jewish experiences. It is rooted in basic Jewish beliefs, values, and behaviors. It requires careful planning – along with great flexibility. It requires educators who are very interactive and participatory, and who live what they teach. It doesn't take place in any one venue but happens *all over*.

The big question that we both wrestle with is how to make this happen?

There are two hefty challenges we face in this context. First, we need to professionalize the field. Our colleague Mark Charendoff writes well about this subject in this issue of *Sh'ma*; the Institute for Informal Education is an important step in this direction.

Our second challenge is to convince the contemporary Jewish world and its leaders that informal Jewish education is really significant. We must show them that it is not "secondary," "extra," "fluff," "window dressing," or simply "fun" (these are all words we have both heard). We must ensure that informal education is as much a system and context in which people learn as are schools and syllabi. Our friends in general education have learned this lesson — hopefully we can teach the same lesson to our family within Jewish education.

Perhaps the way Jewish life was traditionally "taught" is the best to learn — utilization of the entire campus of life to educate. As we have told each other so often, maybe the real story of Jewish education is a story of a great informal educational system.

Joe, keep rafting and may we continue to ride the crests of this great new stream!

Best regards,
Barry

Barry Chazan is Professor of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Education Consultant to Birthright Israel. He is the author of books and articles on moral education, informal education, Jewish education, and teaching Israel.

Jewish Community and the Informal Educator: A New Pact for a New Era

Mark S. Charendoff

I was struck recently, at a gathering of informal Jewish educators, by the passion and commitment of those in attendance. Unfortunately, that was not the only thing that struck me. The event, like many others I have seen in the world of informal Jewish education, lacked a certain discipline. People arrived to sessions late and left early. Some were sloppy, inattentive — even rude. What struck

me most, though, was in contrast to other professional conferences the lack of professionalism here was even more stark.

No doubt, I will be accused of generalizing. These pages of *Sh'ma* include essays by informal educators who are models of professionalism, skill, and dignity. But here the exception serves to prove the rule. A historian would have to determine who