

“First We Touch, and Then We Teach”

Understanding Dr. Shlomo Bardin’s Contribution to Informal Jewish Education

Bruce Powell

Founding Head of School of the New Community Jewish High School in Los Angeles; Former Director of Brandeis Camp Institute from 1985–1989

and

Rabbi Scott Aaron

Doctoral Student in Experiential Education, Loyola University, Chicago; Former Director of Brandeis Collegiate Institute and Director of Education for the Brandeis-Bardin Institute from 2001–2004

This article compares a stand-alone program with no linkage to formal Jewish education, the Brandeis Collegiate Institute, with the most currently accepted criteria of informal Jewish education (IJE). It demonstrates the inherent educational value of IJE programming in strengthening Jewish identity and affiliation.

THE FLOWERING OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

In the past 15 years, research has shown that three areas of Jewish experience for American Jews contribute more to Jewish identity development than any other currently used, and these are camping, youth groups, and travel experiences to Israel (Cohen & Holtz, 1996; Ruskay, 1995–96; Winer, Seltzer, & Schwager, 1987). These areas of Jewish experience as well as others fall under the rubric of informal Jewish education (IJE). IJE has been an integral component of Jewish education for literally thousands of years, although as a support mechanism for formalized Jewish education, it was not known by that name. A *seder* is an IJE experience. A *sukkah* is an IJE experience. Making *challah* with your

mother is an IJE experience. Only recently, however, has there been an attempt to define and understand IJE as its own mode of education separate and distinct from formalized, classroom-based Jewish education. However, the exact impact of IJE is difficult to measure, evaluate, and therefore define. Until recently, the prevailing attitude among formal Jewish educators was that, if IJE could not be defined and delineated as clearly as the concepts and categories of formal Jewish education, then it was not actually education but rather programming that tangentially supplemented education.

The goal of this article is to compare one program, the Brandeis Collegiate Institute, with the most currently accepted criteria of what constitutes IJE and thereby advance through practical application the debate

about the educational impact of IJE programming. The Brandeis Collegiate Institute (BCI), arguably the longest-running IJE program for adults in North America, was developed and perfected by its creator, Dr. Shlomo Bardin, well before the concept of IJE was introduced into the Jewish educational dialogue. Focusing on a successful IJE program and thinker that predate the modern philosophical concepts of IJE can demonstrate the inherent educational value of IJE programming by showing the proven long-term benefits of stand-alone IJE programs that need no linkage to formalized Jewish education to make a significant impact on Jewish identity and affiliation.

CHAZAN'S CRITERIA OF INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION

In 1991, Dr. Barry Chazan wrote the seminal article to address this question of definition. In this article, "What is Informal Jewish Education?" Chazan argued that IJE met eight programmatic criteria, which he reiterated more clearly a decade later in *The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education* (Chazan, 2001). Chazan defines IJE as having "eight formal attributes" and posits that "the uniqueness of informal Jewish education lies in the configuration and synergy of these eight characteristics" (Chazan, 2001, p. 5):

1. *Person-centered Jewish education*: "Helping each individual grow and find meaning as a Jew. The emphasis is on personal Jewish development rather than the transmission of Jewish culture, and the individual is actively engaged in his/her own journey of Jewish growth" (p. 5)
2. *The centrality of experience*: "Learning occurs through enabling people to undergo key Jewish experiences and values. . . . Cognitive learning about an experience cannot replace the real thing" (p. 5).
3. *A curriculum of Jewish experiences and values*: "While it is both flexible and closely related to the lives and significant

moments of the learners, this curriculum is rooted in a well-defined body of Jewish experiences and values. . . . There are some Jewish experiences that seem to be shared by the majority of informal Jewish educational systems: (1) Jewish holiday and calendar experiences; (2) Jewish lifecycle experiences; (3) studying Jewish texts; (4) Jewish cultural and peoplehood" (p. 6).

4. *An interactive process*: "The pedagogy of informal Jewish education is rooted in techniques that enfranchise openness, encourage engagement, instigate creative dialectic, and insure comfort of diversity and disagreement" (p. 7).
5. *The group experience*: "Groups are not simply aggregates of people learning individually in parallel fashion; they are social networks that teach ideas and values through the essence of the group process" (p. 7).
6. *The "culture" of Jewish education*: "Informal Jewish education . . . attains its goals most effectively by treating the entire educational setting as a comprehensive culture. 'Culture' here refers to the totality of components that make up educational contexts: architecture, styles of dress, codes and norms of behavior, seating patterns, physical and aesthetic decor, norms of human interaction, language patterns, and many others. . . . Informal Jewish education emphasizes the importance of orchestrating settings to reflect and model the values and behaviors deemed important" (p. 8).
7. *An education that engages*: "Informal Jewish education intensely engages and even co-opts participants and makes them feel positive about being involved. Because of its focus on the individual and on issues that are real to him/her, informal Jewish education is often described as 'fun,' 'joyful,' or 'enjoyable.' Research on informal Jewish education points to the high degree of participant satisfaction as compared with other spheres of Jewish life" (p. 9).
8. *Informal Jewish education's holistic edu-*

cator: "The informal Jewish educator is a total educational personality who educates by words, deeds, and by shaping a culture of Jewish values and experiences. He/she is a person-centered educator whose focus is on learners and whose goal is their personal growth. The informal Jewish educator is a shaper of Jewish experiences. His/her role in this context is to create opportunities for those experiences and to facilitate the learner's entry into the moments" (p. 9).

In response to Chazan's criteria, a plethora of debates, articles, and examinations of IJE as a separate and distinct professional field of Jewish education began to appear in Jewish communal venues. Although most agreed that IJE has been part of Jewish education for most of Jewish history, few could cite any examples of a theoretical IJE approach in Jewish educational history. This failing, in fact, has led to an ongoing argument about IJE as a professional field; namely, is it replicable and teachable as a theory, or is it a purely instinctual process that can only be experienced to be transmitted? Moreover, can its impact be measured effectively over a long period of time in a manner similar to the evaluation and measurement of formal educational methods and practices?

As the debate continues about the future direction of IJE as a professional field of education in light of Chazan's criteria, it is worth examining the enduring work of a 20th-century Jewish educator, Dr. Shlomo Bardin, who is little known today but whose systemic approach to what we today call IJE was decades ahead of its time. By comparing Bardin's work to Chazan's eight criteria, it can be shown not only that IJE can be understood theoretically but also that it can have an enduring and measurable long-term impact.

THE BARDIN METHOD

A Brief History of Bardin

The Brandeis Method, synthesized and applied by Shlomo Bardin at the first one-

month "*aliyah*" (session) of the Brandeis Camp Institute (BCI; in 1988 renamed the Brandeis Collegiate Institute) in Amherst, New Hampshire, in 1941, continues to form the core vision and method of what is today the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, located in Simi Valley, California.¹

While completing his doctoral studies in education at Columbia University in 1932, Bardin learned of the educational method used by the Danish Folk High School in Denmark. This three-month high school, which met usually in the winter months, was initially designed for Danish farm boys who could not work the fields during the harsh Danish winters. Its founder, Reverend Grundtvig, wanted to stem the incursion of German culture during the mid-19th century. He believed that, by offering to these boys a rich educational diet of Danish folk culture (music, dance, drama, and art), along with Christian teachings and communal living, he would succeed in imbuing Danish culture and ideology and thereby create a sense of ownership and pride in Danish life and traditions among his students.

Bardin, a Russian Jew living in Palestine, returned to America in 1939 where he was stranded by the outbreak of World War II. Urged by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis to do something to stop college-aged youth from rejecting their Jewish culture, Bardin agreed to create a summer program in conjunction with the Zionist Youth Organization. Bardin merged his experience living on a kibbutz in Palestine, his knowledge of the Danish Folk High School, and his appreciation for the American summer camp model into what he would later call the Brandeis Method.

¹It was announced in March 2007 that the Brandeis-Bardin Institute and the University of Judaism would merge to create the American Jewish University. BCI is expected to continue under this new entity with its own separate advisory board and will eventually be able to qualify for college credit.

The Brandeis Method

The Brandeis Method proclaimed a simple educational mission: “to make Jews.” In other words, its mission was to imbue Jewish people with an appreciation for the joy and power of their Jewish traditions, its intellectual depth, and its ability to create meaning and purpose in one’s life. Bardin believed that the ages of 18–26 were the ideal time to apply his mission and method. He called this age range the “plastic years” when young minds were open and ready for transformation, serious thought, and life decisions.

To make Jews, he translated Danish folk culture into Jewish dance, music, drama and art; he exchanged Christian ideology for Jewish philosophy and thought; and he transported the redemptive nature of “work” and communal living in the kibbutz model of A. D. Gordon to the setting and administrative structures of the American summer camp. He selected 28 days as the ideal time frame in which to bring 50 to 60 BCIs together to experience the Brandeis Method and learn, in a powerful, pluralistic, nonjudgmental, informal educational environment about Jewish values, vision, thought, and meaning.²

Before selecting the specific informal educational tools he used to “touch” his BCIs, Bardin first selected important Jewish values that he believed would resonate with college-aged students. These values included but were not limited to the following:

- *Simchah* (joy and celebration)
- *Eretz Yisrael* (the land and birthplace of the Jewish people) and *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel and permanent home of all Jews)
- *Tikkun Atzmi* (self-reflection/spirituality)
- *Avodah* (work)/*Menuchah* (rest)

²The session length has been shortened to 26 days in recent years primarily for logistical reasons with no discernible diminution of positive effect on participants.

- *Da’at* (knowledge)
- *Kehilah* (community)
- *Teva* (nature)

Bardin selected each of these values for its high degree of affective content. Each demanded, at some point, a participatory, emotional interaction either with one’s self, with the people around one’s self, or with nature.

Corresponding to the values listed above, Bardin chose “process tools” that he believed would be most effective in transmitting these values:

Simchah: Jewish folk culture including song, dance, drama, and art

Eretz/Medinat Yisrael: Domain/*Makom* (Godly space)

Tikkun Atzmi: Religious Jewish experiences

Avodah/Menucha: Work/Shabbat observance

Da’at: Lecture/Study/*Beit Midrash*

Kehilah: Communal living

Teva: Outdoor physical work

Each process tool was then translated into concrete programmatic designs and activities. Each “student,” for example, spends 90 minutes daily in a selected folk art workshop (i.e., Jewish drama, dance, music, or visual art); works in the gardens for an hour; learns Jewish philosophy and vision from Jewish scholars for 90 minutes; participates in communal singing and dancing; eats meals together; blesses his or her food; and resides within a spectacularly beautiful natural setting reminiscent of the land of Israel. On Shabbat everything changes. Everyone participates in Shabbat services, wears white, rests and plays, and experiences a powerful *Havdalah* moment at day’s end. And within this informal educational setting, even more informal moments occur as students debate “hot” topics with the staff and each other; stay up late talking with new friends; or take long night walks or *Shabbat* afternoon hikes through the hills where perhaps new ideas and relationships materialize.

Perhaps one of the most powerful ele-

ments of the Brandeis Method is the rule about “no pairing off.” Whereas this restriction may seem ridiculous for a group of 18- to 26-year-old men and women, it is, in fact, a huge relief for many. It becomes a crucial factor in building serious community, understanding the value of that community, and, for one month, attempting not to fracture that community with couples who would separate themselves. Needless to say, many couples and marriages do transpire, but the point of this rule is to remove the social pressure and expectation of coupling so inherent in modern culture and provide permission and space for self-focus and community building.

There are few accidents in the Brandeis Method. The impact is subtle and nuanced, but the application is self-conscious and focused. Bardin carefully crafted each methodological tool to convey effectively the Jewish values he believed central to “making Jews.” The tools themselves convey a Jewish message. For example, Jewish dance, or as Bardin would say, “learning Judaism through the feet,” is itself a value, the final result being an authentic Jewish way to express joy and celebration. The land takes on a Jewish dimension. One might characterize the actual property of Brandeis-Bardin as *HaMakom*, which means “the place” in modern Hebrew, but in its more traditional translation is another name for God. Where the community gathers, where ten adult Jews share experience, the place itself becomes transcendent and Godly.

In its basic design and elegance, the Brandeis Method is deceptively simple. Most contemporary informal educators might recognize this method, in part or in its entirety, in almost every good Jewish camp in America. Its application, however, for college-aged youth and its careful blending of Jewish values with their corresponding methodological Jewish tools are far more complex. The Method needs highly skilled informal educators who understand the “24/7” nature of the task and the intricacy of the values/tools matrix. It demands people of

deep intellectual and artistic Jewish knowledge and passion. And it requires an advisory and administrative staff that understands why and how each piece of the Method operates apart and together.

PROCESSING BARDIN THROUGH CHAZAN

Was Bardin’s innovative formula a critical precursor to the philosophy of IJE outlined by Chazan?

Chazan’s first attribute of “person-centered Jewish education” requires interaction and active engagement on the part of the individual. Bardin’s structure—which requires participatory learning in the study process, independent creativity in the arts workshops, and personal responsibility in completing work tasks that enable the ongoing functioning of the community—is designed to be “person-centered.” Bardin saw the value of providing a context for guided control of one’s Jewish experience to those whom society was ceding complete control of their lives.

Chazan’s second attribute of “centrality of experience” can be found in Bardin’s expectation that BCIers live together in community, which enables them to practice those Jewish rituals and actions “in real time” that they are simultaneously learning about through their studies. The extended time period spent living in an intentional Jewish community allows them to modify or experiment with rituals and actions to find a more personal meaning in them. This mechanism also meets Chazan’s third criteria of a “curriculum of Jewish experience and values”: the curriculum designed to be implemented over three and a half weeks of Jewish communal living is structured both to stimulate new perspectives in Jewish thought and opinion and to explain and model set traditions and practices of the various streams of Judaism extant in America today. In addition, real-time practice and experimentation are incorporated into the curriculum, the enabling it to be

modified based on the evolving needs of the community.

Chazan's fourth criteria of an "interactive process" of dialogue rooted in mutual respect and decency has been a root tool for Bardin's implementation of group study.³ It has always been a standing rule at BCI that dialogue and debate are encouraged and even expected on any topic. Judaism has always respected and embraced the idea of argument *l'shem sh'mayim* (for the sake of Heaven) as a means to create a more perfect understanding of our texts and beliefs, but the modern world often has seen argumentation as adversarial and counterproductive and discouraged it unless it was absolutely necessary. With the rise of denominations in America, Jews simply split off and risked a divided community, rather than engaging and debating to find common answers or at least a full understanding of where they disagreed. BCI's experience, which is centered on the interactive process of respectful dialogue tied to communal living, removes the possibility of walking away from a fellow Jew with whom one disagrees or simply ignoring his or her opinion or need. Because such conversations can and must continue with those whom they see all day, every day, participants must address and resolve issues to achieve coexistence and communal support. This is a lesson Bardin thought was missing in the freedom and affluence of the American Jewish experience and that he worked hard to impart to BCIers as a mechanism of community in their own lives.

Chazan's fifth criterion of "group experience" envisions the social network of the aggregate as a paramount educational

mechanism in informal Jewish education, and again Bardin foresaw that value. This can be seen in the Method's use of various group sizes throughout the day in key educational moments, be it the entire *aliyah* in the *Beit Midrash* or a smaller group in the arts workshops or a handful of BCIers on an overnight together. Almost all BCI segments focus on group experience rather than individual experience because the synthesis of the group creates the cultural experience and leavens the creative dough.

Bardin's mission embodied Chazan's sixth and seventh criteria of using culture to transmit and create a Jewish experience in an engaging way. Bardin envisioned a place where the very land evoked a feeling of Zionism in those who had never visited Israel. He designed a campus that emulated a kibbutz for those who had never been on one. He brought Hebrew as a comprehensible tool of cultural beauty to Jews who never heard it spoken outside of the synagogue and certainly had not understood it in the synagogue. He actualized communal ideals into labor practices for Jews raised in complete individualism, and he gave permission for cultural experimentation and risk-taking to Jews who understood Jewish ritual as rigid and fixed. Bardin did not want merely to re-create an experience as a teaching mechanism, but rather to stimulate an individual's experience in a community of Jews as a teaching mechanism. He insisted that the total experience engage the college-aged Jew at the communal level of intellect and sophistication they were capable of processing, as well as pushing them as individuals as far as they were willing to go in that experience. Bardin knew that if young adult Jews in North America were not Jewishly engaged at the level the other components of their world engaged them, they would at best stagnate in their Jewish identity and at worst abandon it altogether as they grew into full adulthood.

That Jewish engagement all hinged on a program designed, driven, and staffed by educators who fulfilled Chazan's eighth criterion of being "holistic" in their approach

³Bardin originally called group learning at BCI a "lecture" and modeled it on university-style teaching with one or two scholars teaching for the entire *aliyah*. In later years after his death, the term *Beit Midrash* was applied, and the format of group study was expanded to allow for scholar-directed options. Because scholars in recent years have changed weekly if not daily, students are given a potpourri of Jewish learning models to experience and process.

to Jewish education. BCI hires staff who put the needs of students above themselves and who could process the student experience and be able to adapt to meet needs in "real time." Educators at BCI have to be able to be fully present and engaged in all areas of the program, not just their own areas of expertise or comfort. This means sharing of themselves beyond their formal role and connecting to BCIers as friends and community members, and not just as instructors. This is not a simple expectation or one that many academics or cultural artists may have had much experience meeting. Therefore, the selection and training of staff and faculty members are the linchpins to the successful implementation of the BCI experience. Indeed, conducting a due-diligence process for selecting the right personalities and talents for each BCI summer is still one of the prime duties of the BCI director. As the program enters its 65th summer, its faculty have included some of the leading thinkers and creators in Judaism and Israel in the last century, many of whom came to BCI before attaining wider respect and attention in the larger Jewish world.

ANECDOTE VERSUS DATA

Bardin did not know the term "informal Jewish education," but he developed a formula decades before it was coined that serves as proof-positive of its value and impact. Today we are skilled at measuring outcomes and impacts in empirical ways, but in his time he relied on the power of anecdotal recollection of those who shared the experience. In a sense, Bardin saw the passionate value of allowing each BCIer to create his or her own personal *midrash* of their BCI experience as an IJE method of cultural identity and memory. However, little data exist that measure or substantiate the lasting power of the BCI experience or that demonstrate the validity of its methodology.

Two studies, though, do give some preliminary data on the lasting impact of the BCI experience and, by extrapolation, in-

formal Jewish education for college-aged adults. Dr. Gene Levine, a sociology professor at UCLA in the 1960s and a 1951 BCI alumnus, designed and implemented a study on the impact of BCI that was self-published by BCI in 1971. This study, with an astounding 65% response rate, showed clear trends of cultural behavior, Jewish affiliation and adult Jewish education among BCI alumni from 1947 through 1969 (Levine, 1971). In 2003, we sought to repeat the Levine study to enable a comparative analysis of the impact over the next 30 years of BCI, most of which transpired after Bardin's death. We sent the survey instrument to 2,460 BCI alumni from the years 1970–2002, yielding a response rate of 13%. However, given the disparity in responses rates between the two studies and the fact that the original methods of analysis could not be ascertained, we determined that any detailed comparative analysis of the two sets of results would be unreliable. Yet, some general observations from both sets of results suggest the continuing impact and value of the BCI informal Jewish educational experience for young adults.

For example, it is a stated goal of BCI to impart a love of Israel to Diaspora Jews. In 1971, 31% of respondents had visited Israel at least once and 13% had lived there at least six months, compared to 40% and 28%, respectively, in the later study. It is a stated goal of BCI to give BCIers the context for creating Jewish homes. In 1971, 96% of married alumni (including divorced, widowed, or engaged) respondents had married Jewish spouses. The later study, which measured BCIers who came of age in a period much more accepting of intermarriage, found that 90% of married respondents (including divorced or widowed or engaged) had Jewish spouses.⁴ In 1971 97% of respondents indicated that they defi-

⁴It is important to note that an inability to probe more deeply into the issue of intermarriage due to a lack of raw data from the Levine study was one of the major factors in the decision not to do a deeper comparative analysis of the two cohorts.

nately had or would enroll their children in some form of Jewish education compared to 94% in the follow-up study.

The knowledge of Hebrew is understood today as highly important for Jewish identity among Diaspora Jewry, and BCI has made it a mainstay in its program since its inception. In 1971, among BCI alumni who came of age when the teaching of Hebrew was less common than today, only 20% reported fluent Hebrew-reading skills and 3% had fluent Hebrew-speaking skills before they came to BCI. In 2003, in an era with increased formal educational access to Hebrew in the Jewish community, still only 28% reported fluent reading skills, and 7% reported fluency in speaking it prior to BCI. The rate of those who sought to improve their Hebrew skills subsequent to BCI remained comparable among respondents: 33% in 1971 versus 29% in 2003. So too did the rate of commitment to giving their children a Hebrew education: 75% in the 1971 study and 80% in 2003.

A goal of BCI is to promote Jewish community and not one specific type or definition of Jewish community. The data from responding alumni in both surveys show this message was internalized. In 1971, 59% of responding BCI alumni reported affiliation with at least one Jewish group other than a synagogue compared to 50% in 2003. Synagogue affiliation rates are also noteworthy, with 66% of 1971 respondents and 69% of 2003 respondents reporting synagogue membership. Even the bare-bones measure of attendance in synagogue for the High Holidays found 80% of 1971 BCI alumni and 87% of 2003 alumni reporting such attendance. The measure of affiliation by regular reading of Jewish media found that in 1971 88% of responding BCI alumni reported reading books about Jews or Judaism during an average year and 64% reported regularly reading a Jewish magazine, newspaper, or periodical, compared to 2003 rates of 70% and 66%, respectively.

Although this data comparison is not objectively reliable, it certainly suggests the value of the BCI program as a vehicle of

informal Jewish education. This in-house research suggests the need for objective studies using control groups to be done on the long-term impact of BCI and the effectiveness of Bardin's methodology. We encourage the Brandeis-Bardin Institute to partner with credible research bodies to conduct this research in order to glean educational information that benefits not just the BCI program but the entire field of IJE. At the very least, our research demonstrates that the BCI experience is an important milestone in its participants' journey of Jewish involvement and identity and suggests the value of IJE experiences in general to that journey.

CONCLUSION

Since published in 1991, Chazan's formulation of criteria for successful informal Jewish education has become the catalyst for the development of the professional field of informal Jewish education. Courses are now taught in Jewish communal graduate programs on IJE, and professional associations have developed around the various program areas of IJE. Most of the growth in the field, though, has stemmed from youth-focused IJE, and many young IJE professionals are under the impression that IJE methodology is a recent creation as well. Bardin was a pioneer of IJE and created an enduring methodology in BCI to meet the needs of post-World War II college-aged adults for whom formal Jewish structure and practice were neither relevant nor resonant. Although the implementation of this methodology has changed with the years, it is abundantly clear, at least anecdotally, that it maintains its long-lasting impact in fostering momentum toward affiliation and leadership with the Jewish community. Credible research on the lasting impact of the Bardin method is now called for to guide the development of the most effective IJE methods for reaching Jewish young adults. We hope that, as the academic field of IJE evolves, more objective data will be collected to quantify the impact of this quality IJE experience.

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