

**“Apart From Nothing:
Towards an Organic Model of Congregational Education”
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Let's begin with a paradox.

When asked to name most significant Jewish prayer, virtually any Jew, from the most knowledgeable to the least, will answer the *sh'ma*. And in fact, the *sh'ma* lies at the core of *shacharit* and *ma'ariv*, the morning and evening prayers. It expresses our central Jewish statement of faith, and one pole of a crucial paradox: there is a fundamental Unity, a Oneness, to all existence. When we chant or recite the *sh'ma*, we affirm that the Divine pervades, embraces, and links every aspect of creation. Each person, each experience, each moment, each action is inextricably part of a single, unbroken whole. Nothing stands apart; nothing is disconnected; nothing is out of place. God is One.

And yet at the same time, Jewish tradition acknowledges, even affirms, the other pole of the paradox: although everything is interconnected, simultaneously reality is also fragmented. We experience ourselves as alienated from our selves, from each other, from the world. We live in a fractured, disordered, and unjust reality. That's why we conclude each service with *aleinu*, asserting that God will be One and God's Name will be One only sometime in a Messianic future. *Bayom hahu yiheyeh Adonai echad u'shmo echad*. Reality does not reflect the wholeness we affirm in the Shema. God's Oneness is a potential reality. Judaism posits this fundamental paradox: God is One, and God is not yet One.

In the Kabbalah, Rabbi Issac Luria's mythic account of creation seeks both to describe and to reconcile this paradox of wholeness and brokenness, of Oneness and not-yet-Oneness. It says that God created the material universe by pouring light into vessels, cosmic test tubes, the containers of the corporeal world. Because this primordial, holy light was too intense, the vessels exploded, sending shards and sparks of light everywhere, creating a cosmic mess of sacred light trapped within the fractured pieces, the *k'lipot*. The scattered sparks of light glow in the darkness, trapped in the shards, yearning to reunite.

The shattered pieces symbolize broken reality. But the glowing sparks within them, and their pull towards each other, represent a powerful, harmonizing force. According to the myth, within the debris lies a counteractive drive towards order and harmony. This integrative energy -- the workings of God -- makes us aware of disorder, fuels our discomfort with it, and sparks our instinct to unify. Jewish religious consciousness and behavior are rooted in experiencing and facilitating this process of unification, which informs all Jewish prayer, study, and action. God is in the brokenness, and God is in the impulse to overcome the brokenness and restore the wholeness that lies latent in creation.

Many rabbis I know, when their guard is down, tend to admit they really have only one sermon to deliver in their lives. You've just heard mine. I don't believe it's particularly original or complex. But I believe it provides a crucial, clear, and authentically Jewish theological framework which can guide our work in developing and renewing a compelling vision for Jewish education.

Jewish tradition holds out a fully integrated vision of the world, in which every person and each experience, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is inextricably linked to a larger whole. Jewish education and communal life may have once reflected this holistic model. But too much of contemporary synagogue life and Jewish learning tends to be fragmented, disconnected, and divorced from the actual lived experience of Jews.

What might a unified model of congregational life and education look like, one which acknowledges the fragmentation and yet tries to harmonize and integrate the pieces? How can a more systemic, integrative approach imbue Jewish learning with greater meaning? Today I'd like to spell that out a bit in terms of what we might mean when we speak about "meaningful Jewish education."

I hold two professional positions which afford me different perspectives. With the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, I work with rabbis, cantors and educators who've been trained in contemplative Jewish practice – specifically, meditation, yoga, and text study from a mystical perspective. These Jewish leaders have experienced how contemplative practice, by training us to be more attentive to the present moment, can lead to greater awareness of and connection to oneself. By teaching us to be more conscious and accepting of the present, contemplative practice can open us more fully to future possibilities. As we know, Jewish leaders are constantly pulled in many directions and asked to meet the needs of countless constituents. IJS aims to help Jewish leaders see through the fragmentation in their lives, and guide others from a place of personal integration, authenticity, and wholeness.

My IJS experience has reinforced my belief that Jewish education is most meaningful when it first acknowledges the truth of the learner's personal experience and helps amplify the resonance between that experience and Jewish tradition. This is hardly a *hiddush*: when Franz Rosenzweig opened his revolutionary Lehrhaus 88 years ago in Berlin to reconnect secularized German Jews with their tradition, he stressed a pedagogy which embraced the legitimacy and authenticity of even the most alienated Jew's lived experience. In his opening address -- still required reading for all Jewish educators -- he called for a "new kind" of Jewish learning:

... a learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or pretends to know nothing, back to the Torah.... There is no one today who is

not alienated, or who does not contain within himself some small fraction of alienation. All of us to whom Judaism, to whom being a Jew, has again become the pivot of our lives ... know that in being Jews we must not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism. From the periphery back to the center; from the outside in. This is a new sort of learning, a learning for which -- in these days -- one is the most apt who brings along the maximum of what is alien.

In other words: Jewish learning must begin with the truth of the learner's actual experience, not with the material to be learned. By affirming that truth, Jewish education can begin to help the learner discover the latent resonance between that experience and the Jewish tradition from which he/she is alienated. Analogizing to the Lurianic creation myth: by acknowledging the reality of alienation; by recognizing and accepting the holy spark in each scattered fragment, in each Jewish soul; by reuniting that spark with its source, we can facilitate the integrative process of *tikkun* and restoration.

What does this pedagogic model look like? It requires a safe and non-judgmental environment which enables the learners to integrate divergent aspects of their lives; accepts the truth of their experiences (as well as their questions and doubts) and invites them to share them; helps them integrate their experiences with the Jewish tradition and community from which they've been alienated; and, on an ongoing basis, provides a shared Jewish vocabulary and values which they can apply to their daily lives, individually and collectively.

In each year of my congregational rabbinate, I facilitated spiritual autobiography workshops in which groups of congregants wrote and shared narratives about what they considered the most powerful, transformative moments of their lives. This learning helped effect a *tikkun* -- an integrative repair -- in at least four ways. First, the very process of "telling the story," transforming important personal experience into a coherent narrative, fostered a sense of integration on an individual level. Second, sharing their narratives within a safe context nurtured a sense of connection with those who often had been total strangers. Third, articulating their stories to fellow Jews and to a rabbi engendered a greater sense of relationship to the Jewish community. Finally, understanding how their personal narratives reflected and resonated with the central myths of Judaism fostered a profoundly deeper, more personal connection to Jewish tradition.

This model was so powerful and transformational for even the most alienated congregants that we applied it to almost every setting in the synagogue:

- In bar/bat mitzvah family workshops on prayer, we began with parents and pre-bar/bat mitzvah children sharing moments when they felt most deeply connected to something larger than themselves. After finding they shared

many such experiences, the adults and children searched for and discovered points of resonance between the experiences and with specific *tefillot* in the *siddur*.

- While weekly Shabbat morning Torah study always focused on the text and commentaries, a central focus was helping participants seek out the resonance between the Torah narratives and their own lived experience, and to extract lessons to apply in the week ahead and to report back on the following Shabbat. It was explicitly based upon the assumption that each participant had a unique aspect of truth to contribute, and that the process of Torah study would weave these truths into a larger whole.
- Board and committee meetings to explore alternative educational visions began not with study of texts or educational theories, but with each person sharing their most powerful Jewish educational experience. Ultimately, those conversations laid the foundation for our vision of congregational education.

To repeat: “meaningful” Jewish education uses a Jewish framework to help integrate individuals into the community and tradition by acknowledging the truth of individual’s experience, and enabling them to bring their whole selves, their questions, their doubts, their truths, into the shared process of learning.

In my other professional role at the Legacy Heritage Fund, as director of the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project, I’ve learned the importance of applying this systemic, integrative approach not only to individual learning, but to the congregational system as a whole. Just as meaningful Jewish learning must address the entire individual, so it must embrace and unify all aspects of Jewish living and all aspects of Jewish community.

As we know, in the pre-modern era, Jewish identity developed organically, through immersion in the rhythm of Jewish life as lived by Jewish families and communities. Familiarity with Jewish practices stemmed from first-hand experience with Jewish living; formal Jewish learning complemented the process of Jewish identity formation through family and community. But in the post-modern era, we might say, the wholeness was fractured, the vessels broken: acculturation and assimilation shattered the organic nature of Jewish learning. Most Jews were no longer immersed in families or communities of Jewish practice, and so the religious school, or even day school -- rather than the family and community -- were charged with inculcating Jewish knowledge and identity. Jewish learning became divorced from Jewish living.

The congregational school model is inherently fragmented. Too often, children experience Judaism outside the framework of a life pattern, secondary to their secular educational program, learned at unwelcome times, divorced from their personal and family experience, and often terminated promptly upon

celebrating bar/bat mitzvah. Jewish family education emerged in the '80s and '90s as a step to remedying this fragmentation, and attempted to reintegrate Jewish learning and practice by addressing the family system as a whole. But it, too, has only addressed some of the fragments, just a piece of the larger system. Too often, family education has remained divorced from Jewish practice, isolated from the rest of the community, and episodic at best.

As I've said, "meaningful" Jewish learning is by definition integrative. It connects all aspects of a person's life – individual, familial and communal. It synthesizes the three aspects of Jewish living – Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hasadim*, learning, worship, and action. It weaves together disparate aspects of the community – preschool families, teens, empty-nesters. It links learning with practice.

A child's learning is more integrated, and therefore more meaningful, when it is connected with the practice of what is learned. It's even more integrated when the learning is practiced within his/her family; even more so when practiced by a community in which the family participates; even more so when it links the educational, ritual, and ethical applications. The impact of learning the story of Purim is magnified by living the story with one's family and in one's community on Purim, and by applying the ethical mitzvot of Purim through a community of practice.

The congregations which have received LHIP grants over the past three years are in the process of developing such systemic approaches to Jewish learning. They're gathering the scattered sparks by integrating and embedding children's, family, and adult learning in context – in a context of practice on Shabbat and holidays, in a context of family and communal application, in a context weaving together Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hasadim*. They're seeking to break from the fatally disconnected model of the religious school and instead to recreate, as much as possible, the organicity and integration of the pre-modern model of Jewish learning.

At Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, teams of adults – both parents and non-parents – learn on an adult level Jewish material paralleling the children's curriculum, design lesson plans, then teach the material to children in the context of the congregation's Shabbat celebration. Adults learn the material in a more meaningful way because they become teachers, the children find it more meaningful because they witness the model of their parents and other adults studying the same material, and all of it takes place in the context of the communal observance of Shabbat.

At Congregation Agudas Achim in Attleboro, MA, one time each month instead of religious school on Sunday, children and their parents join other adults to learn, pray, and socialize together in a pluralistic Shabbat community which enables the Shabbat regulars to mentor less knowledgeable adults. Many of the

congregations here today, whether they are Legacy Heritage Innovation Project grantees or not, are similarly trying to bring together the scattered holy sparks in a coherent, organic way to offer the most meaningful Jewish education possible.

None of this is easy. It's much, much harder to hold a vision of a whole system than to focus on the constituent parts. It's far more difficult to change a paradigm than to prop up a flawed model. But those of us who love our tradition, who feel deep pain each time a single child or adult moves through our Jewish educational system without being touched or transformed by the experience -- we know that we need dramatic change, change that requires bold vision, courageous action, and the willingness to fail and try again. We see the brokenness of the Jewish education system; we see the holy sparks glowing in the scattered pieces. Our task is to complete the holy work of *tikkun*, to unify once more those scattered, broken, holy pieces of Jewish life and learning, remembering all the while that this construction project is holy work, and that, as the greatest Jewish educator in history understood, ultimately our success depends upon blessing from above:

וְיֵהִי נְעִם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עֲלֵינוּ
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָה עֲלֵינוּ; וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָהוּ

May God's goodness rest upon us;

May God bless the work of our hands for our good;

May the work of our hands serve as a blessing for God and all of creation.

Psalm 90