Diversity in Jewish Education

*Da Lifnei Mi Atah Omed* (“Know Before Whom You Stand”), from Berakhot 28b in the Talmud, is a text that we at The William Davidson School use as a lesson for our students. We ask of our graduates to know before whom they are educating or leading. For if we do not know or take into account who our learners are, we will fail to effectively educate, engage, or inspire them.

As JTS professor Dr. Barry Holtz has said, “diversity is diverse.” In this issue we attempt to broadly address several arenas of our diverse Jewish educational landscape, including 1) learners with diverse or special learning needs, 2) LGBTQ learners and broader issues of gender, 3) racial diversity, 4) socioeconomic status, 5) pluralism among our religious movements, and 6) geographic diversity.

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Today, we are all very much aware and in dialogue about the diversity within the Jewish communities of North America. Yet we are still travelers on the road toward embracing that diversity. How might we better engage the diversity we find in our classrooms, camps, and communities? How might we better understand those before whom we stand? How might we address the needs and empower the voices of all our learners? How might we do this through redesigning our curricula, programs, communal structures, and the everyday stances we take ourselves?

In this issue of Gleanings, we hope to add to this growing conversation and to help address these questions by assembling a select group of practitioners and scholars to share their wisdom gleaned from practice. We recognize that even the most well-meaning of Jewish educators and institutions who are poised for change must surmount the obstacles in their midst. By learning from one another, we may all be equipped to accept the challenge of embracing our diversity completely and wholeheartedly. Our hope is that our authors, through their personal stories and professional work, provide the perspectives, context, and strategies to help us all navigate and overcome these challenges.

For Jewish education and Jewish life in the future to be strong and secure, it requires us all to embrace and champion the diverse nature of our constituencies. By being mindful of the diversity among us, we can know with whom we all stand and remain steadfast in our journey of shared purpose, b’yachad (together).

Mark S. Young
Managing Director, Leadership Commons
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Embracing Diversity While Building Jewish Community: An Imperative

DR. ABIGAIL UHRMAN, DR. BARRY HOLTZ, AND DR. JEFFREY KRESS

Diversity is a defining feature of today’s ever-changing world. For many of us, it is also a welcomed, embraced, and meaningful attribute of our global and local communities. We see its potential to enrich our collective lives while affirming a vast array of individual and group experiences, identities, and abilities. In its best form, every person is included—and has equal opportunity and access—to all our community has to offer.

These goals of diversity, however, do not come without challenges. In Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth’s (2001) discussion of community, and in this case, teacher community, they aptly discuss this tension:

This process of defining both a center and periphery is a natural process in any collective dedicated to maintaining a diverse membership. But our experience refutes idealistic notions of the community’s desire for diversity. Community and diversity are in constant tension. As individuals forge a common vision, the centripetal forces of community pose a constant threat to the centrifugal force of diversity. By its very nature, community presses for consensus and suppresses dissent. (992)

Community, they argue, necessitates certain standards or expectations of belonging. These qualities may limit the possibility of creating an entirely diverse and inclusive collective. In the Jewish world, this clash is felt both explicitly and implicitly—in our religious laws and in our cultural assumptions and attitudes. The effects, while affirming for some on the inside, are often devastating for those who do not neatly conform to our communal norms.

Learning occurs at the intersection of the individual and the community. Building a community of Jewish learners means bringing into relationship individuals from a range of backgrounds, respecting differences while creating a sense of interpersonal connection. A well-functioning community needs to balance centripetal and centrifugal forces, maintaining a core sense of unity while recognizing that each individual is a member of numerous communities. Inclusion involves making communal space for the multiplicities of identities that learners bring with them, while at the same time creating a space that is a unique product of its individual parts.

Up to this point, the term “inclusion” has generally been applied primarily to individuals with disabilities, one particular dimension of diversity. While numbers are difficult to ascertain, it is estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the overall population falls into this category. Inclusion involves not only addressing the academic and social needs of learners with disabilities, but embracing the idea that having a diversity of learners is a good thing. As such, the term need not be limited to considering learners with disabilities, rather more generally to the notion of enhancing the community as a whole through embracing the differences of those that comprise it.

An outsider looking at a tiny slice of the North American population might be surprised to hear the Jewish community described as diverse. Jewish educators and communal leaders, however, are quick to acknowledge this reality. Jews represent a range of ethnic backgrounds—not only Ashkenazi and Sephardic

but also African American (African Canadian, etc.), Latinx, and Asian. Be’chol Lashon estimates that at least 20 percent of the Jewish population is “racially and ethnically diverse.” Further, there is no reason to believe that the percentage of LGBTQ individuals in the Jewish community differs from national statistics. Despite age-old stereotypes, Jews come from all socioeconomic strata, and the issue of Jews living in poverty has recently gotten increased attention. And, while the community can debate policy about intermarriage, there is no disputing the constellation of family compositions from which our learners come—single parent, two parents, Jewish parent, Jewish-by-choice parent, parent(s) from another faith. The diversity of our learning settings is undeniable. But a diverse classroom does not an inclusive community make.

Dr. Jeffrey Glanz of Yeshiva University, writing specifically about learners with disabilities, states that inclusion “is a moral necessity and an ethical imperative” and “[a]n ideological, social, political, and intellectual commitment to ideals of justice, equity, and excellence for all students [that] must be continuously affirmed and reaffirmed.” We agree and extend this argument to encompass multiple dimensions of diversity. The inclusion imperative is consistent with a vision of the dignity of individuals (who are created b’izelem elohim (in the image of God) and the interdependence of a community, in which kol yisrael arevim zeh la’zeh (all Jews are responsible one for the other). A non-inclusive environment serves to distance members of the Jewish community, building barriers to engagement. In learning settings, a cohesive, caring community is a prerequisite for optimal learning.

At the same time, we acknowledge the complexity of pursuing inclusion. While any change of practice is difficult, addressing various dimensions of diversity might be particularly fraught. Not only may Jewish educators be unsure of how to facilitate discussion of difference in a learning setting, they may find the issue to be personally uncomfortable. Questions about educating children of patrilineal descent, for example, will cross over in some communities with interpretations of halakhah. In addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities, costs may be incurred in settings already stretched to budgetary limits. Discussions of race and class may be uncomfortable even among friends; how much more so with a class (or bunk) full of youth? We also strongly believe that inclusion efforts will yield valuable growth opportunities and a respect both for the “other” and for the range of connections that can be found within Judaism. Moreover, membership in an inclusive learning community can solidify the dispositions needed to maintain relationship and dialogue with those who are different and those with whom one disagrees.

While we and other academics have experience and expertise with elements of inclusivity that include textual sources, differentiated instruction for diverse learners, community building, and social and emotional learning, we believe that our main contribution will emerge from the questions we ask:

- What do Jewish texts and traditions have to teach—beyond upbeat and pithy statements—about the complexities of inclusion and diversity issues, and what are the implications for contemporary Jewish educational institutions?
- How can Jewish educators address issues of engagement, growth, and meaning making for a diverse group of learners?
- How can we build community while honoring difference?
- How can Jewish education better meet the needs of a diversity of learners?
- What can we learn from educators and settings that have done innovative work in this area?
- What are the dilemmas that educators have faced and how have they resolved them?

We seek to develop collaborative efforts with those in the field and with those representing the diversity of voices in the Jewish community to find answers. We call on all of us—academics, practitioners, and community leadership—to join us in this line of inquiry.

**Dr. Abigail Uhrman** is an assistant professor of Jewish education at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Barry W. Holtz** is the Theodore and Florence Baumritter Professor of Jewish Education at JTS. His most recent book is *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* (Yale University Press, 2018).

**Dr. Jeffrey S. Kress** is the Dr. Bernard Heller Chair in Jewish Education at JTS.

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**Beneath the “We”: Promoting Productive Discomfort as a Means to Educating Ourselves in Our Own Diversity**

SARAH OSSEY

“*We.*” It is one of the most powerful words in Jewish education and in community-building. The word asserts commonality, perhaps a shared past, a shared vision for the future, or shared interests and concerns. In Jewish contexts, it rises not only to meet but to counter the exclusionary “we’s” that Jews may encounter in other domains. The “we” provides a powerful primitive urge for human beings to form a sense of connection to others. Sometimes, “we” is evoked in aspirational terms, celebrating a sense of potential partnership. While it may not be intended to ignore diversity, it also entails an enormous degree of assumptions of sameness that may be, in fact, spurious. “*We*” signifies a commonality that has the potential to deny or silence difference. We may willingly acknowledge difference that feels far away, yet proximate diversity, at least with certain dimensions of difference, often makes us uncomfortable, as our tribalist nature leads us to emphasize the similarities of those within our group(s) and to quash or deny variation within. This discomfort, as a result, undermines our attempts to agree upon or to construct a universally accepted “we.”

Thus, as we claim that our Jewish spaces are “safe” and are places in which our Judaism unites us, as opposed to differentiating us as it does in so many non-Jewish contexts, it is incumbent upon us that we begin to develop a real and meaningful comfort with difference. We can begin this process by acknowledging the differences—obvious, seemingly safe ones—of those within the room. For example, we can address the regions and countries of origin and family history of the learners present. Of course, there are fertile opportunities for educators to teach about certain dimensions of identity about which students may know little. For example, there is room to explore origins of Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Mizrahi, and other Jews, and to help learners explore their own backgrounds, while also recognizing the positions of power and privilege afforded to these various groups historically and currently. Once a developing facility with acknowledging difference begins to emerge, the opportunity arises to address potentially more fraught ones, such as socioeconomic diversity, which may be easier to conceal and may carry complicated feelings of responsibility and/or blame.

These differences need not all be explored in direct relation to the people in the room. Rather some can be about exposure to difference within the broader community. A word of caution: We must create space for
our learners to identify themselves rather than having the educators do so for them. For example, learners should have the chance to share what and how they choose about their gender identity, preferred pronouns, and so on, rather than having the educators ascribe such descriptors. During the very first gathering of an educator and learners, learners can have the opportunity to share their preferred pronoun verbally or in writing. While it may not make sense to everyone, those to whom it does can find it a powerful and hopeful expression of expectation and possibility for the learning environment. After acknowledgement of distinguishing elements, we have the opportunity to explore the impact of such differences and consider how they lead to varying lived experiences.

Exploration of diversity necessitates great sensitivity, yet it is my belief that there is no way to attain depth in this process without considering a departure from comfortable educational experiences. Discomfort need not be unsafe and may even stand to be productive. Boler and Zembylas (2003) espouse a notion of a “pedagogy of discomfort,” particularly as it enables us to wrestle with difference. They believe that it stands to “reshape and expand the terms of discourses and practices in education, enabling different thoughts and feelings to be experienced, enlarging the space of discourses and practices” (p. 132). Boler and Zembylas, as well as Bekerman and Rosenfeld (2011), remind us of the central inevitability of power dynamics at play in recognizing diversity. Such power dynamics are deeply embedded in society and must be acknowledged and examined. After all, “the greatest enemy of all such groups is the belief that existing beliefs and structures are inevitable, uncontrollable, and necessary” (Bekerman and Rosenfeld, p. 59).

That said, I would like to suggest a productive path to upending these beliefs and structures that cause unjust, inequitable relations among differing populations: social justice education. In my understanding, meaningful social justice education necessitates agitation, or an experience of “questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions” (Boler, p. 176), often a profoundly discomfitting process. Recognizing this starting point is critically important. It is absolutely necessary to undo what our learners have already come to understand. However, it need not always be the approach to social justice education. We have the opportunity not only to think about social justice education in terms that meet the current reality but also to dream about social justice education for a future in which we begin differently—laying foundations that elevate rather than deny dimensions of diversity—and thus, do not find ourselves in need of the same degree of “unteaching.”

Dewey (1938/1997) alerts us of a concern with the “miseducative,” which he defines as an experience “that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25). Similar to the worry of having to undo what has been taught, averting the miseducative provides direction in developing meaningful educational experiences. As educators, we must consistently check in with ourselves to ensure that we thoroughly consider the explicit and implicit lessons of our teaching so that we do not thwart or misdirect future opportunities for learning. This could entail recording and reviewing a session of learning in order to examine the language used not only in planned parts but also in unanticipated elements, such as responses to questions that may arise. The deceptively simple idea of the miseducative can bolster us when we face opposition to the learning we seek for our learners. While we may encounter resistance in attempts to unsettle worldviews that perpetuate the status quo, restating the goal so it is clear that the learning is meant to avoid miseducative experiences may diffuse any possible struggles.

We have long held to certain images of the Jewish community, assuming more homogeneity than exists. We must not lose sight of the potential outcome of an evolving, deepening recognition of diversity and striving for social justice. Concern with diversity has become fashionable, yet the current draw of it should not undermine the humanity at stake. To recognize and understand diversity is not just an opportunity to broaden our learners’ consciousness. It also reestablishes the dignity and the place of those who have previously been written out of our stories and institutions.
Educators Learning to Address Race: An Uneasy and Critical Process

PROFESSOR SHIRA EVE EPSTEIN

“How comfortable are you talking about race and racism?”

I asked this question to a group of teachers at the start of a class that would involve conversation about race. Drawing on materials from Teaching Tolerance’s *Let’s Talk! Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students*, the teachers selected statements including, “I would rather not talk about race/racism,” and “I am very comfortable talking about race/racism,” with various gradations in between. Then, they explained to the class why they chose the statement they did. This helpful opening acknowledged the discomfort people might feel around these topics and enabled everyone to speak about their personal readiness for the impending discussion.

I encourage Jewish educators to ask themselves this question and begin a process of teacher-inquiry that can bring greater race-awareness into Jewish learning environments. The Jewish community is racially diverse, despite the fact that many schools and institutions do not appear so. More broadly, all youth live in a world where race matters and racism must be fought. Accordingly, Jewish educators have a role in exposing their learners to multiculturalism in the Jewish world, fostering the racial understandings of both their White students and their students of color, and supporting students to critique racism in history and the present day.

To aid in the greater infusion of race-awareness into Jewish education, in this article I share some insights about how race is addressed in schools and other learning environments at large. I draw on research and theory developed not exclusively in Jewish settings but in consideration of public and other community schools as well. Despite the fact that such schools might be more diverse, the notions can also apply to Jewish settings. Indeed, as Jewish learning environments work to practice race-awareness, Jewish institutions may become more diverse, inclusive, and antiracist.

To start, I aim to establish a vision of multicultural, antiracist education. Multicultural education is the antithesis of monoculturalism, where little attention is paid to diversity and “dangerous topics,” such as racism, are avoided. Yet, avoiding monoculturalism does not mean that teachers are enacting curriculum that is antiracist. For example, teachers might support a “human relations approach” to multiculturalism that prioritizes positive interpersonal relationships between members of diverse groups. These teachers

will facilitate learning on the beneficial contributions different groups have made to society, usually framing such lessons as supplemental to the main curriculum (e.g., special programming on Martin Luther King Jr. Day). This work has some value, yet to more robustly forward social change, educators and learners must also analyze inequality and develop skills for social action. Imagine a day school environment where students study a local or national example of racism and learn about initiatives to address it, perhaps through a tzedek (justice) project.

Most educational settings are currently far from this ideal. In fact, educators and learners can suffer from "colormute," a condition where race is completely absent from public conversation. White teachers are particularly prone to resisting race talk and minimizing the importance of race. They can use a form of White privilege to avoid racial issues and the concerns of people of color.

Teachers can even distance themselves from race talk as it is occurring right around them, leaving students to figure out how to navigate it on their own. Their hesitance stems from many factors including the teachers’ socialization through which they have learned that race talk is inappropriate and colorblindness is preferred, a lack of experience with race talk, and/or a fear of being seen as racist or being required to consider their own racial identities.

These conditions point to the importance of educators developing their racial literacy and then facilitating learning so their students can do so as well. With racial literacy, people can understand how racism operates and resist racism. Racial literacy practices include recognizing everyday racism and viewing it as a structural problem that involves social institutions as opposed to solely the problem of individuals, and assuming a critical learner stance from which to understand how race functions in particular contexts and problem-solve accordingly.

A good first step toward increased racial literacy, as related to assuming a learner stance, is for educators to engage in their own inquires about race. Through this self-exploration, teachers start with questions like the one I posed at the top of the article—“How comfortable am I talking about race?”—and then move to questions about how race matters among their learners and how race is addressed in their curriculum and related programming. Finally, they craft plans for moving toward an increasingly antiracist classroom. A recent group of studies illustrate how White teachers are by degrees taking up these and other race-visible practices.

How might Jewish educators specifically engage in this process? The Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan’s efforts to take on the challenge of antiracist education gives the Jewish community ideas of how to do the same. First, the work is sustained through the leadership of Benjamin Mann, head of school, who has written in a previous Gleanings about his vision. School leaders like Ben can ensure that his faculty have the administrative support, curricular space, and professional development needed to carry out these prescribed steps. Indeed, Schechter Manhattan’s teachers have participated in teacher development programming run by Be’Chol Lashon, an organization dedicated to ethnic, cultural, and racial inclusiveness in education.

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Schechter Manhattan’s antiracist focus also grows with the support of a parent body that knows how essential these conversations are if we are to raise children who embody the values of menschlichkeit (humanity) and tikkun olam (repair of the world). While in my professional life I support antiracist and civically engaged education in secular contexts, I am honored to serve as the co-chair for the Schechter Manhattan Conversations about Race (CaR) parent group. CaR has convened six sessions for parents dedicated to understanding racism and exploring how we address it with our children.

Given the pervasive impact of race and racism in our society, I gain hope knowing that Jewish educators, parents, and children are finding their ways into the conversation.

Professor Shira Eve Epstein is an associate professor of curriculum and instruction at the City College of New York (CUNY). Her research focuses on variations of civic education and how students and teachers address public issues through the curriculum. Her first book, Teaching Civic Literacy Projects: Student Engagement with Social Problems, Grades 4–12, was published in 2014.

The Power of “We”

YAVILAH MCCOY

As a diversity and equity practitioner, I work with communities to grow interest and excitement in the vast possibilities that exist for connecting education, outreach, and engagement to the principles, values, and practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the Jewish community, there are choices that Jewish educators are empowered to make each day, whether in schools, synagogues, JCC’s, Federations, or more broadly focused areas of outreach and engagement. Through our daily choices, be they on personal, interpersonal, structural/institutional, or cultural levels, educators are creating environments that bring people into deeper relationship and more beloved community with one another or serve to perpetuate boundaries in access, privilege, and power that continue to live with us in society and inhibit our capacity to experience deep connection with one another across difference.

As we consider the future of Jewish education and our prospects for creating Jewish learning environments where all students can enter the classroom with the expectation of encountering Jewish learning that is animated by joy, curiosity, and grace, it is imperative that we embrace opportunities for learning and re-learning what we can do to create more equitable Jewish learning environments.

PRINCIPLES AND VALUES: THE POWER OF “WE”

As the parent of an African-American child that attends a Jewish day school where they are one of few students of color among hundreds of White students, I have had to grapple with the implications of how well-meaning and good-intentioned educators in my child’s educational experience use the pronoun “we.” Recently, in a unit on the novel Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, a teacher called me with a concern that my child was putting her head down and not actively participating a discussion regarding the novel’s depiction of racial segregation and violence in the Jim Crow South. During her instruction, the teacher had encouraged the students to think about “the other”—to step into “another’s” shoes and try to understand what it must have been like to live through racism. What we both soon realized, was that in discussing this period of U.S. history, the teacher had unwittingly created an invitation in the classroom for “us” to experience a “them” that
made “we” White people and “them” people of color.

As the only Black child in the classroom, experiencing this discussion “othered” my child from her classmates. Through our phone conversation, we discovered that “othering” was also occurring in the discussion of US segregation. The class discussion focused on experiences that impacted people of color in the South without seizing equal opportunities to discuss the ways that White people were impacted by the reality, experience, and practice of segregation, as well. An equitable invitation to a multiracial community of beloved classmates to explore racism could have held opportunities for both those whose identities have been historically included by racial divisions in our society and those whose identities have been historically excluded to engage each other regarding how “we” relate to a historical experience that was shared by all who lived through those times. In teaching a majority White group of Jewish students, there were also opportunities missed to investigate students’ own relationships and their families’ histories as White Jews encountering American segregation and grappling with its impacts.

PRACTICE: THE POWER OF EDUCATORS

In teaching educators to practice the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion in learning environments, I often reference the famous teaching of educator and psychologist Haim Ginott, who wrote:

I’ve come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

On a personal level, educators can practice spending time reflecting upon and becoming familiar with the ways that language in classrooms can be used both subtly and viscerally to include and exclude students across diverse experiences. As part of our craft, educators must spend time noticing whom we are teaching, whom we are not and whom we would like our lessons to be connected to. Our modeling deep connections to diverse communities in all that we teach from the front, can inspire our students to be more connected to both those who are with them in the learning environments we facilitate and in a world of humanity beyond the classroom whose experiences matter. We can engage in this practice with hope that our students will be better prepared to lead similarly as future generation leaders.

On an interpersonal level, educators can guide their students to see and experience each other and the world through the lens of more than one story or narrative. We discover conscious and unconscious biases when people have opportunities to interact cross-culturally with others who are different from them. Where educators teach in primarily monocultural environments, we can introduce diverse people and perspectives into classroom learning. This is imperative to broadening students’ capacity to think critically and imaginatively about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and many other categories of difference that regularly inform peoples’ perspectives, leadership, and experiences in the world around them.

On systemic, structural, and institutional levels, educators must consider who has the decision-making power to create and support the policies and standards that we uphold within the environments we teach. If the leadership, faculty, and decision makers within our institutions are a majority of White people, how will we realistically arrive at educational outcomes that appeal to multicultural audiences and represent multicultural perspectives?

Lastly, on a cultural level, Jewish educators have the power to set the tone and make choices regarding
patterns of “in-ness” and “out-ness,” what is considered beautiful and what is considered “the right way” to speak, dress, or be valued in our educational environments. We have the power to pay attention and discern ways of being that are prioritizing some and leaving others behind. When we perceive standards of appropriate action, thought, and expression of a particular group, explicitly or implicitly, as preferred, negative, or less than, we run the risk of modeling for our students that in order to become their most powerful selves, they must be ready to conform, change, or “fit in” with the standards of those who have been culturally privileged in the educational environments they will encounter. For many students, encountering this cultural reality for the sake of acquiring an education can be debilitating.

My hope, as we continue to grow in our competencies for connecting Jewish education to the principles, values, and practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion, is that we will do so from a beginner’s mindset. A beginner’s mindset encourages us to be willing to start fresh and engage in serious and challenging exploration of what we know, what we don’t know, what we are willing to remain curious about, and what we are willing to explore as we use our power as educators to create oxygenated Jewish educational environments where all of our children can thrive. In this work and in beloved community, I am with you.

**Yavilah McCoy** is the CEO of the Diversity consulting group, **DIMENSIONS Inc.** For more than twenty years, Yavilah has worked with a broad base of leaders and organizations to provide transformational resources for diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies. Yavilah is a pioneer of the Jewish diversity and equity movement and has been an activist and mentor for the empowerment of Jews of Color for most of her life.

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**Why Race and Ethnicity Are Absent from the Conversation About Jewish Education**

**RABBI RUTH ABUSCH-MAGDER, PHD**

The small sanctuary was filled to capacity with students and teachers from the afternoon congregational religious school. I engaged everyone in a quick identity game. The student body was fairly diverse, with Black, brown, Asian, mixed race, and white students.

“Raise your hand if you love soccer.” The majority of hands flew into the air. “Raise your hand if you love ice cream.” This time the hand-raising was nearly universal. “Raise your hand if you identify as Black.” Fewer hands this time, but still not an insignificant number.

But as the hands were being raised this last time, an older student, likely in fifth or sixth grade, light skinned with red hair, leaned over to the similarly light-skinned student sitting next to him and said, in what he thought was a whisper, “Isn’t it racist to ask that question?”

After eight years of working on racial and ethnic diversity in the Jewish community, it was no surprise to me that a white Jewish child was unsure whether or not it was okay to even talk about race. While race is an issue throughout American life and culture, it is rarely talked about within the Jewish community, and if it is mentioned at all, it is usually done so as part of a vision of helping others, not as an internal Jewish concern. The focus on race as an external *tikkun olam* project obscures the multiculturalism that exists within the Jewish community.
I work for Be’chol Lashon, an organization dedicated to celebrating the racial and ethnic diversity of the Jewish community. According to Be’chol Lashon’s research, approximately 20 percent of Jews in the United States are Black, Asian, Latinx, mixed-race Mizrahi, and/or Sephardi. This diversity is a combination of the historic global diversity that is our collective Jewish heritage, as well as the changing demographics in America. Jews are following the general American trend becoming more accepting of interracial marriage and other factors like adoption, intermarriage and conversion also play a role. Millennials and younger generations are the most racially diverse generations in American history, which means that even young, white, Ashkenazi Jews are more likely than their parents to be part of diverse communities and workplaces. These young Jews want their Jewish lives to reflect and connect with the diversity of their social reality.

To capitalize on the potential for growth and engagement this reality represents, Jewish educators need to be able to talk and teach about racial and ethnic diversity. Children as young as five are able to distinguish racial features. Yet, if their teachers are not able to help guide conversation, the ability to see race will not translate into the skill of talking or thinking with complexity about race. Our children are relying on the adults to guide them. Although not always easy, it is possible, needed, and meshes well with many of the values and skills Jewish education already aims to instill.

There are several reasons why it is challenging for Jewish educators to teach about racial and ethnic diversity. In our 18 years of experience of working on diversity in the Jewish community, we recognize that most Jewish educators do not see racial and ethnic diversity as a priority. Despite years of intensive Jewish education, a doctorate in Jewish history, and rabbinic ordination, I, who am white and Ashkenazi, knew little about the racial and ethnic diversity of the Jewish people before working with Be’chol Lashon. Although Jews are a multicultural people who have lived around the world for millennia, this rich history is not reflected in Jewish educational materials. Our stock photos rarely spotlight multiracial Jewish families; our textbooks do not include the history of Ethiopian, Indian or Iraqi Jews; and our teaching of customs rarely highlights the variety of observances, music, or traditions.

Filled with good intentions, many Jewish spaces have embraced a colorblind approach, attempting to treat all students as equal and not highlight differences. Yet, not recognizing differences means overlooking elements of identity that are fundamental to how students see themselves and how they are seen by society. When Black or Asian students don’t see themselves reflected in Jewish life, it exacerbates their sense of isolation. As one Jewish educator said of her own children, “When they walk into our school they need to leave their Iraqi Jewish identities behind.” Studies show that for most white Americans, talking about race is difficult and most Jewish educators are not exceptions to this rule. We often defer to color blindness because it is easier than dealing with the complexity and nuance inherent in social identity. By not acknowledging the many kinds of experiences that are essential parts of our students identities, we contribute to their invisibility in Jewish spaces.

In order to address the diversity of the Jewish people, Jewish educators must know more about the complexity of Jewish history, culture, and tradition, and our classroom resources need to expand and become more inclusive. Be’chol Lashon began to address the lack of educational resources when we founded Camp Be’chol Lashon nearly 10 years ago. Like our organization, the camp puts racial and ethnic diversity at the center, and the majority of our campers are Jews of color. We had to rethink the standard approach to Jewish education. Issuing “passports,” we created a program that has campers “travel” to different countries each day and engage with the history, culture, and customs of the Jewish community in that place.

Over time, we named this educational approach “Passport to Peoplehood,” and with the help of the Covenant Foundation, we expanded and piloted these educational resources in a variety of settings,
including schools, JCCs, camps, and aftercare programs. Building on that work and with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, we are looking forward to making Passport to Peoplehood available more broadly, in conjunction with trainings for Jewish educators across the country. The trainings help broaden the understanding of diversity as a Jewish concern and build both skills for awareness and sensitivity. The educational resources help Jewish educators integrate global Jewish stories including, but not limited to, Indian or Ugandan Jewish history and culture, into learning about everyday Jewish values, such as welcoming the stranger or Shabbat. We encourage educators to expand their sources of information so that they are taking in different racial perspectives, explore the global Jewish music scene, and take time to reflect on their own experiences when it comes to race and ethnicity.

We know from experience that Jewish educators who are attuned to issues of identity and marginalization as a result of both training and their own inclination, have the potential to be leaders in raising a generation of Jewish students who are able to speak to the complexities of racial and ethnic inclusion. Thus, as awareness grows about the need for more nuanced understanding of the historic and contemporary diversity that is part of klal Yisrael (Jewish People), we hope that Jewish education will begin to change and embrace the possibilities, to move beyond thinking about race as a tikkun olam project, and to engage learners within and outside the Jewish community.

Jewish educators should not be in the position of the young person who wondered if it is okay to talk about race. Rather, they should be leading the charge, answering with confidence that it is not just okay to talk about race, but that talking about race and ethnicity, especially examining our own diversity as a Jewish community, is a very Jewish and holy thing to do.

Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder, PhD, is a rabbi-in-residence and director of education at Be’chol Lashon. A graduate of Barnard College, she received her doctorate from Yale University and was ordained at Hebrew Union College.
Toward Inclusive Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Jewish Learners with Disabilities

RABBI RUTI REGAN

In recent years, there has been a growing consensus within the Jewish community that our schools and youth programs must welcome learners with disabilities. At the same time, many schools have found it difficult to put this into practice. Why is that, and what can we do about it?

One reason inclusion is hard is that we have inherited a long legacy of discrimination against learners with disabilities. Prior to the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, American public schools were not required to accept students with disabilities. Exclusion went beyond school. Two generations ago, children born with disabilities were routinely taken away from their communities and placed into institutions. In the period during which institutionalization was widely accepted, two leading Orthodox halakhic authorities, Rabbis Tzitz Eliezer and Moshe Feinstein ruled that it was permissible to leave Jews with disabilities in institutions in which they were fed non-kosher food. This discriminatory practice has led to the absence of learners with disabilities in both Jewish and secular settings, and to major gaps in our understanding of pedagogy. This is a systemic problem, and not the fault of individual teachers who are struggling.

Since learners with all kinds of disabilities have largely been excluded from schools, our pedagogies have been developed with the assumption that no one in the room has a significant disability. In both Jewish and secular contexts, our existing approaches implicitly assume a population far less diverse than the actual groups of learners we are responsible for teaching. Our methods of instruction in Jewish schools need revision to account for all the learners in the room, including those with disabilities. In order to truly build inclusive Jewish schools, we need to build inclusion into our pedagogies. This is easier said than done, but every step we take in that direction will make life better for all of our students.

Progressive instructional methodologies are not inherently inclusive. For example:

- Facilitated discussions or “think, pair, share” exercises can exclude learners with cognitive or communication disabilities. Those who process information more slowly may not be able to follow the conversation and those with speech disabilities may not be heard.

- Big paper activities depend on the ability to read and write on big paper. Without inclusive planning, students with impaired motor skills, visual impairments, or social anxiety may not be able to participate.

- Arts and crafts activities may be difficult or impossible for students who struggle to understand the instructions or do the physical tasks involved.

- Variation and novelty in modalities can in and of itself be a problem for learners with disabilities. Some learners may find it disorienting; others may find that every novel activity brings with it a novel access barrier.

11. https://educationonline.ku.edu/community/idea-timeline
12. Tzitz Eliezer, 14:69, 1946
As we revise methods to account for the presence of learners with disabilities, it is critical to take both individual uniqueness and minority commonalities seriously. Learners with disabilities almost always have something in common with at least some other learners with disabilities. This is similar to developmentally appropriate practice: all children are unique, but children who are the same age generally have certain things in common. Instructional design is much more effective when we are aware of both probable commonalities and individual differences. Being mindful of similarities allows us to use methods created for one person in one learning environment with others learners and/or environments. Being mindful of uniqueness allows us to avoid the rigidity of stereotypes and relate to our learners as real people.

In addition to general inclusion, we need to revise our pedagogical content knowledge for Jewish subjects. Inclusive PCK takes into account the ways that disability can affect prior knowledge, perspectives, conceptions, preconceptions, and misconceptions. Disability, by definition, affects a person’s body or mind in a significant way. Their disability is part of who they are all the time and it affects their life experiences in both direct and indirect ways. Both the physical differences themselves and the social meanings of those differences have an impact. Since students with disabilities have different experiences, they often have different knowledge sets, and the questions they ask may sometimes have a different range of connotations.

For example, in text study, when discussing the words of Moses, “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exod. 4:10), and “Do not insult the deaf; do not lay a stumbling block before the blind” (Exod. 19:14), learners without disabilities tend to read allusions to disability as metaphors. Learners who have the relevant disabilities may read these texts and other with similar language as a literal reference to bodies like theirs. Inclusive PCK allows educators to respond appropriately to both kinds of responses.

Similarly, young learners may understand allusions to death differently. Most typically developing children think of death as something that happens to old people. Children with disabilities are often much more aware of both their own mortality and the fact that children sometimes die. Inclusive PCK for Holocaust education, Torah stories that involve death, and High Holy Days liturgy takes into account the possibility that some learners may understand mortality differently and more potently as a result of their own life experience.

In order to develop the inclusive Jewish pedagogical content knowledge that we need, here are four sets of questions we should be asking in every context:

1. Are learners with disabilities present and participating? Who is missing? For instance, do discriminatory policies exclude learners with disabilities or are they allowed to attend? Are learners with disabilities able to physically enter the building and remain there safely? Are they in the same spaces and programs as nondisabled peers? Once they are in the building, do learners with disabilities have things to do there?

2. Do learners with disabilities have meaningful access to the same content that others are learning? How do you know?

   For instance, are modifications made for students with disabilities merely enabling them to perform superficially similar tasks or are they enabling them to understand the content?

3. Are learners with disabilities included in shared experiences that define group membership?

13. For an example of a literal reading informed by disability experience, see Rabbi Lauren Tuchman’s “Pokeakh Ivrim: Opening our Minds to New Forms of Inclusion” https://www.ritualwell.org/blog/pokeakh-ivrim-opening-our-minds-new-forms-inclusion
For instance, are learners with disabilities welcome and accommodated in field trips, Israel trips, and other special activities valued by their peer group? When typically-developing learners routinely break rules together, are learners with disabilities allowed to get away with breaking the same rules, or are they held to standards that separate them from the group? When there is a tzedakah project, are learners with disabilities seen as having a contribution to make?

4. Are learners with and without disabilities treated equally?

For instance, are learners with disabilities seen as having the right to be there, or is their presence treated as an experiment? Are learners with disabilities welcome in all activities, or is their participation restricted to a special program? When learners with disabilities contribute to class discussions, do others take what they say seriously? Is disability a taboo topic or are learners with disabilities welcome to reference it?

When we say “learners,” we must include learners with disabilities, every time. A curriculum can’t be regarded as finished if it was written without inclusive PCK in mind, including accessibility and differentiated instruction considerations. When we evaluate a theory of education, we must ask how it takes into account the presences of learners with disabilities. Every education course must be designed to prepare educators to include learners with disabilities in every pedagogical skill they are learning. If we shift our expectations towards inclusion, we have the power to change the world.

Rabbi Ruti Regan (RS ’17) is the rabbinic disability scholar in residence at Matan, a nonprofit organization that facilitates inclusion of children with disabilities in Jewish educational settings. In this capacity, Rabbi Regan researches Jewish disability issues and creates educational resources, including a free monthly webinar. Rabbi Regan was ordained by JTS in 2017, is a disabled disability activist, and the author of realsocialskills.org. Follow Matan on Twitter and/or Facebook @mataninc.

Inscribed Upon Your Doorpost:
Our Responsibility to LGBTQ Young People

IDIT KLEIN AND JUSTIN ROSEN SMOLEN

Two days after the November 2016 election, Idit received an email from Erin Schreiber, a Hillel director at a small college outside of St. Louis. Erin described how early that morning a transgender student reached out to her in crisis. The student said he felt terrified about what the future might hold for him given his perceptions of the incoming administration. Erin drove to the Hillel office to meet the student, trying to compose herself and imagine what words of comfort she could offer, even as she was consumed by her own fear and shock about the election results. She opened her office door, still not knowing what she would say and then nearly stepped on an envelope that was stuck under the door. She opened it and saw that inside were the LGBTQ Safe Zone stickers she had ordered the previous week from Keshet. She pulled out a sticker just as her student walked in and held it up saying, “Look! There is hope in the world. We have a whole community that is standing with us.”

Our work at Keshet enables us to engage with Jewish communities around the country, and we often hear such stories. Stories of LGBTQ young people feeling vulnerable and finding support in a trusted rabbi, youth

16. Keshet is a national organization working towards the full equality and inclusion of LGBTQ people in Jewish life
group advisor, day school teacher, or other educator. Yet we also hear stories of LGBTQ young people who seek support and fail to find it. We hear directly from queer Jewish teens about how they look to the leaders of their Jewish communities for signs of solidarity, especially now. Queer Jewish teens tell us how grateful they are when Jewish leaders speak out about LGBTQ rights in the broader world of inclusion in their own communities. They also tell us how profoundly let down and alienated they feel when their leaders remain silent.

There are indeed many ways that Jewish educators, clergy, and other leaders can demonstrate support for and solidarity with people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. To guide these professionals, we have developed three modalities for fostering LGBTQ inclusion: **signaling**, **responding**, and **celebrating**. When practiced together, these modes help create Jewish communities where LGBTQ Jews feel at home and the entire community benefits from the warmth and vitality of a fully inclusive community.

**Signaling:** We recite in the passage following the Shema: “You shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.” This text from both Deuteronomy 6:9 and our daily liturgy stresses the importance of making our intentions, values, and commitments explicit. So, too, we encourage Jewish institutions and communities to apply this mandate to how they invite the participation of LGBTQ youth and adults. For example, LGBTQ Safe Zone stickers, like the ones the Hillel director requested, signal to queer and trans Jews that they are both seen and embraced. Many queer Jewish kids have shared personally with us that when they see an LGBTQ Safe Zone sticker on a teacher’s desk or a youth group advisor’s office door, it assures them that they could confide in a trustworthy adult if and when they feel ready. We, too, feel a sense of comfort and belonging whenever we travel to communities and see a LGBTQ Safe Zone sticker. Something so small as a sticker can speak volumes.

**Responding:** Symbols like Safe Zone tickers are important signposts of inclusion. The next critical step is knowing how to respond to an LGBTQ community member who needs support. A youth group advisor, religious school teacher, or other Jewish educator may be the first person young people confide in about their sexual orientation or gender identity. We know a 15-year-old girl at a Jewish day school who approached her beloved Tanakh teacher with trepidation. She said, “Can I share something with you? I’m a lesbian. And I’m in love with my best friend.” Without skipping a beat, the teacher responded, “Mazal tov!” That student will always remember that the first person to whom she came out responded with love and support. She will likely also remember that she sought—and received—affirmation from a trusted adult in a Jewish context. Jewish educators also may witness—and must respond to—anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment. We know a sixth-grade boy who was called a “faggo” by another boy in front of his entire Hebrew school class. His teacher immediately stopped the class and delivered an impromptu lesson on the importance of respectful speech and upholding human dignity. She made it clear that disrespectful language was unacceptable in her classroom and in the Jewish community. She cited Leviticus 19:16: “You shall not stand idly by your neighbor’s blood.” She reminded her class of sixth graders that all of us are responsible to stand up in the face of injustice.

**Celebrating:** When the rights and dignity of LGBTQ people are threatened, a responsive Jewish community explicitly affirms queer and trans Jews. Yet Jewish communities must move beyond affirmation to create joyful moments and rituals that celebrate the narratives and lives of LGBTQ Jews. At Keshet, we center the experiences and identities of queer and trans Jewish youth at our LGBTQ and Ally Teen Shabbatonim (Shabbat retreats) throughout the country. With the guidance of Keshet educators, teens create and facilitate programs on topics such as queer Jews in American culture, LGBTQ youth mental health, and gender diversity in Hebrew language and Jewish texts. Whether in sacred moments or in everyday
conversations, the experience of feeling at the center of a community at the Shabbaton helps teens develop pride and confidence in their identities as LGBTQ Jews and as leaders in both Jewish and secular contexts.

We encourage leaders and facilitators of all Jewish community settings, beyond those designated specifically as queer teen programs, to center the experiences and lives of LGBTQ Jews. All of us, particularly those of us who are marginalized in Jewish life and in broader society, need to know that our Jewish communities view us as vital to the Jewish story. If we take seriously the injunction “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), we must create community for others as we desire it for ourselves.

When Jewish educators create space for LGBTQ young people to thrive at the center of Jewish experience, queer and trans young people will claim their rightful place in the story of our people. Moreover, all young people will understand the rich diversity of the Jewish narrative.

LGBTQ young people still face a barrage of degrading messages, behaviors, and policies in our society. We have a responsibility to create a different reality in our Jewish communities. On our literal and figurative doorposts, let us inscribe messages that uplift, affirm, and embrace. If we do, LGBTQ young people will join us.

Idit Klein is a national leader for social justice with more than 20 years of experience in the non-profit sector. Since 2001, she has served as the founding executive director of Keshet, the leading organization for LGBTQ equality and inclusion in the Jewish community. A graduate of Yale University with a Master’s in Social Justice Education from UMass Amherst, Idit was honored by the Jewish Women’s Archive with a “Women Who Dared” award and selected for the Forward 50, a list of American Jews who have made enduring contributions to public life.

Justin Rosen Smolen (LC ’08) is national director of Youth Program at Keshet, where he works with teens and educators around the country to create inclusive, vibrant, and celebratory spaces for LGBTQ young people in Jewish life. Justin is a graduate of the dual-degree program of Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he earned bachelor’s degrees in philosophy and Jewish thought. An alumnus of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, he holds a Master of Public Administration in nonprofit management and a master’s in Jewish studies from New York University.
From “Impure” to Sage: 
Transforming Our Conceptions of the Educator

LAYNIE SOLOMAN

When thinking about rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators, what images come to mind? What do they look like, sound like, speak like? What do they wear? Where do they teach, and who is learning with them? How do they move, take up space? Do any of these teachers look like you?

In the beit midrash at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, we often teach a text from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 17a) that is, at its core, asking the question, “What kind of person should a rabbi be?” Essentially, what is a rabbi?

“Rav Yehuda said that Rav said, ‘We place on the Sanhedrin—the highest court—only one who knows how to purify a sheretz [an impure, creepy-crawly thing] using Torah.’”

In other words, the rabbi-est of rabbis who sits on the most authoritative governing body of the Jewish people is someone who can be metaher et ha sheretz min hatorah, able to purify the creepy-crawly thing that the Torah says, by definition, is “inherently impure”. A requirement for rabbinic leadership, power, and authority, then, is to use the Torah to declare pure something that the Torah itself defines as fundamentally and unchangeably impure. To be a rabbi is, in short, to be able to overturn the Torah itself—even, or perhaps especially, where the Torah seems least able to be overturned.

Throughout so much of my own life, I have felt like a sheretz. In Jewish communities and beyond I have experienced my presence as a source of discomfort, agitation, and even tum’ah (categorical impurity defined by the Torah). I felt like the questions I asked and the ways in which I tried to make Torah relevant to my own experiences as a queer and non-binary person were a source of impurity, drawing out repulsion from those In the spaces I inhabited. I felt deeply aware of the ways in which my own identities were agitating to my colleagues, teachers, and fellow community members, even when their intentions for inclusion and affirmation were evident. I sensed that they felt as though they needed to fix me, move away from me, or try to make me pure.

As a non-binary, young person, one who identifies with a gender that is outside of the gender binary of “male” or “female,” I never thought I would fit in as a grown-up because I never saw anyone who looked like me. I never saw adults who inhabited their genders the way I did, whose clothes fit their bodies the way mine did, or who moved through the world like me. The first time I met a non-binary, transgender teacher of Torah, I was 24 years old. That was just four years ago. It took 24 years of an engaged Jewish life, full of camp, synagogue, and dozens of learning spaces, to finally encounter a leader in whose image I could see myself, my story, or my Torah.

Images we’ve encountered of what a Jewish educator can or should be so often define for our learners what the tradition itself is. How can I see myself in a text that has never been taught to me by someone in whom I can see my experiences and perspectives reflected? Further, while the image of a Talmud teacher specifically or Jewish educator broadly is changing due to the tremendous growth of explicitly feminist and egalitarian learning spaces, many people naturally hold tightly to the internalized reified images of rabbinic power, authority, and mastery over the tradition that they were taught: predominately straight, white, Orthodox, cisgender, male. I can count the number of queer and trans teachers from whom I’ve personally learned
Torah on one hand. Yet, even those few teachers have radically redefined for me what a teacher is, what the Torah has been, and what the tradition might become.

When I learned the talmudic text about the sheretz at SVARA—a queer-normative home for rigorous, serious Talmud study that recognizes the centrality of the insights of those who dwell on the margins—I learned it alongside colleagues, comrades, and fellow learners in whom I saw myself. For the first time in my learning, I felt not like a sheretz but like a sage, a rabbi. The power of learning the words of my ancestors from educators whose experiences and identities matched or reflected my own enabled me to enter our tradition in ways I could not have previously imagined.

What I learned from that text, in that space, is that the move from impure to pure, from tameh to tahor, is not only possible but it is essential—and seemingly required by the tradition. This move that Rav makes ensures that the Torah not remain static or stagnant. It does not preserve a world in which a sheretz is a sheretz, but instead inaugurates a Torah that not only can but must be transformed, subverted, and reimagined, by the very sheratzim whom it seemingly maligned.

This is why, at SVARA, we aspire to create an intergenerational, intersectional, queer-normative home for sheratzim to learn, develop, and teach Torah. If we’ve done our job right, a new generation of Talmud learners will answer differently when asked, “Whom do you think of when you picture a Talmud teacher?” “Queer folks,” they’ll say. “Radical people, disabled folks, trans folks, femmes. Anyone. Me.” Images of queer, subversive, creative interpreters of tradition will become synonymous with the iconic Vilna Shas (the most common printed edition of the Talmud still in use today), introducing a culture of rigorous, critical, and queer pedagogy to the world of Talmud teaching and learning.

We think that sheratzim can make the best rabbis. Who better to know how to purify a sheretz than a sheretz? That particular Gemara in Sanhedrin referenced above teaches me, and should teach all of us, that the insights of people who live their lives as sheratzim—the experience of living as an outsider, of being on the margins, of being maligned and clarifying for oneself the purity deep inside that few understand—make one a more powerful, effective, inspiring, authentic agent who can be metaher et ha’sheratzim in ways that can rarely be imagined by those who have not had that experience on the outside.

Think of a Jewish educator. What image comes to mind? We hope it’s a sheretz.

*Laynie Soloman* is a faculty member & the director of Educational Initiatives at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, and is concurrently completing a dual M.A. in Talmud/Rabbinics and Jewish Education at The Jewish Theological Seminary. They love facilitating experiences of Jewish learning that uplift the piously irreverent, queer, and subversive spirit of rabbinic text and theology, and they have taught and lectured on these topics in various community spaces, campuses, and in academic settings.
From Field Preparation to the Harvest: A Formula for Practicing Deep Institutional Pluralism

RABBI SCOTT SLARSKEY

Nearly 10 years ago, two St. Louis Jewish Day Schools—a Reform Jewish school and a Schechter School (affiliated with the Conservative Movement)—merged to form a pluralistic community school. At the time, parents, students, and local clergy spoke openly about pluralism as a liability to rigorous Jewish learning or building meaningful Jewish identity. Partisans of each movement mourned the loss of their schools. Few found comfort in the founding of a new, intentionally pluralistic Jewish school to serve the families of legacy schools. We began to see that we had to ask ourselves, “How might we create deep, authentic, and creative Jewish learning, ritual, and culture that honors diversity of practice and engages students across differences of movement identity?”

In the years since the merger we have enthusiastically expanded this question—asking how we might engage students not just across movement identities, but also across differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, mental health profile, and financial circumstance. As we continue to grow our understandings of our students’ and families’ many identities, it has become increasingly clear to us that practicing pluralism requires us to adopt a mission-level commitment to enthusiastically and respectfully engaging each other across differences for the sake of learning, building community, and hidush (renewing and constructing culture).

Concurrent with our development of this realization, we committed to cultivating a culture of pluralism among our various constituencies: community leaders, board members, school professionals, parents, and, of course, the student body. Below I describe stages of this cultivation cycle, actions we took at each stage, and target constituencies for each action.

**Field Preparation.** We began our cultivation by “clearing weeds and aerating soil.” While movement partisans within our community understandably felt a sense of loss connected with the merger, when our leadership team recognized that school professionals, too, had adopted the language of “liability” and “loss” to describe our institutional commitment to pluralism. We saw that we were part of the problem, so we agreed to clear out these “weeds” in our own discourse. We began by intentionally adopting a language of curiosity about, and ultimately passion for Jewish pluralism. We noticed that enthusiastically and clearly explaining to prospective parents how and why we support and model diversity of prayer and kashrut practices increased prospective parents’ interest in learning about the merits of an intentionally pluralistic Jewish environment and helped garner the support of our staff as well.

**Fertilization and Planting.** Almost simultaneously we began to create a domain that would nurture early growth. We strategically introduced what we hoped would be new, generative learning and professional practices that included seeking out underrepresented Jewish voices and finding ways to integrate and raise the volume of these voices. We led professional-development programs and engaged in coaching conversations to help our faculty feel comfortable exercising their own Jewish voices. We dedicated significant faculty-wide professional-development time to “fishbowl conversations,” wherein our head of school (a Reform Movement stalwart) and I (a Reform Movement defector, ordained through the Conservative Movement) sat in the center of a circle as our faculty listened to us tell our Jewish stories. They continued to watch as we then asked each other probing questions about apparent contradictions in our lived
values and when we felt “othered”—each by members of the other’s respective community.

We then provided faculty with a written framework and guiding questions for their own one-on-one conversations. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Many opted to stay beyond the allocated time to continue their conversations. We also actively reached out to and cultivated relationships with exemplary Jewish clergy, leaders, and educators of diverse gender expressions, sexual orientations, races, movement affiliations, and political bents who visited our school to teach and engage with our school professionals, students, and families, modeling what it might look like to raise one’s own particular and authentic Jewish voice.

**Planting Bigger.** Within four years of our merger, we decided to “plant bigger.” The result was Same Difference, an event that ran annually for two years in which we created a larger, public forum to practice engaging each other enthusiastically and respectfully across our differences for the sake of learning, teaching, and building community. Same Difference began with a brief keynote address from a nationally recognized expert in Jewish pluralism, followed by a deeply personal panel conversation of diverse, local, Jewish clergy facilitated by our speaker. Each year it included over 20 rabbis of diverse Orthodox and progressive backgrounds--paired to co-teach multiple breakout learning groups related to different Jewish interests—from Zionism to food to theology. All members of the St. Louis community were invited. Board members were strongly encouraged to attend. Faculty were required to attend. Same Difference served the dual purposes of teaching faculty about diversity of Jewish expressions of Jewish identity and branding ourselves as a local home for pluralism.

**Weeding and Feeding.** After two years, we saw that Same Difference had reached its target constituencies and served its purpose, so we “weeded” it out from our practice. It was time to “weed and feed,” weeding our Same Difference and “feeding” our pluralism of practice in the middle school by purchasing a new set of Reform siddurim to complement the Conservative siddurim we had been using—committing to use one set on Mondays and another on Thursdays. We also “fed” by doubling down on our commitment to modeling diverse, authentic Jewish practices by requiring middle school students to use the birkat hamazon (prayer after meals), from one siddur after lunch one week and from the other siddur the following week.

This past year, as part of a unit of study on birkat hamazon, our middle school students developed their own creative blessing based on each of the four component blessings of the traditional one. We now use this one each Friday—further increasing the diversity of our Jewish practice. For two years teachers and community leaders delivered their monthly Ani Ma’amin (I Believe) presentations in which we told our students about the formation and testing of core personal beliefs, then opened ourselves up to student questions about these beliefs. This past year—with faculty coaching—students started developing and presenting their own beliefs. Two of our earliest volunteers spoke about their own struggles with abuse in their family and with issues of personal mental health.

**Harvesting and Marketing.** After several years of cultivating a practice of pluralism within our classrooms, board meetings, and parent conversations, it is time for “harvest” and to take our practice to “shuk” (market). As there has been significant learning, piloting of new language and programming, as well as an institutional effort to touch all of our constituencies, it is time to reflect honestly on the “yield” of our institution’s efforts. Happily, we see fewer parents push back against the value of practicing pluralism in the service of developing strong Jewish identity. Notably, a very small handful of families who have not shared our commitment to this value have left our school, yet many others have become strong advocates for the value of pluralism.

Our efforts have helped us see that Jewish expression is far more diverse and perhaps not as closely connected to movement identity as we would have imagined a few years ago. We are discovering how to
listen more closely for new voices and to develop the culture of trust and listening that allows everyone to be more widely heard so that each member of our learning community can grow from the insights, questions, and creativity of every other.

Rabbi Scott Slarskey is the director of Jewish Life at Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School in St. Louis and a mentor teacher in the Legacy Heritage Teacher Institute for the Arts. He was ordained through the Zeigler School of Rabbinical Studies at American Jewish University. Scott has worked as the Jewish educator in residence at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco and as the Upper School principal of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston. He has taught in state parks, juvenile detention centers, supplemental schools, Jewish day schools, and colleges. Scott is an enthusiastic advocate for pluralism and believes in raising children to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to engage with each other productively across their differences.

To Open the Gates, Let’s Open Our Mouths More Mindfully

RABBI MATT DREFFIN

I’ve traveled around the South for the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) over the past five years, which has afforded my rabbinate a wide range of opportunities. I’ve prayed with a handful of worshippers in small Mississippi synagogues and facilitated learning sessions in the South’s biggest cities, including Atlanta and Dallas. I come in as a guest to various congregations, which gives me the unique opportunity to observe mannerisms and cultural behaviors that appear warm and open and usually are intended as such. Yet, in these very same actions, communities can accidentally miss the mark on inclusivity with their words and cause more harm than good—closing up minds and offending our brethren. My experiences have taught me that however unintentional, many of us make a variety of assumptions about those we connect with—often thinking they are much more like us than is the case.

For example, in the small-town South, it would be rare to enter a congregation without anyone acknowledging your presence, asking who you are and how you’ve come to your current position. However, there are times when lack of forethought regarding inclusionary language can lead to some frustrating small talk. When I am on the road, I’m almost always asked the following four questions:

1. “Are you married?”
2. “Did your wife come with you?”
3. “How old are your children?”
4. “Is your wife with the kids?”

I have to assume the folks asking me these questions have no ill will or wish to offend me, but let’s analyze all of the inherent assumptions, implied or stated, in these questions.

1. I identify as male.
2. I am heterosexual and my partner is female.
3. We have children, wanted children, and were able to have children.
4. I am the breadwinner.
It’s 2018—people should know better at this point, right? Yet the above questions are typical from those trying to be friendly in the South. However, they are not realizing that their questions reflect only their own perspective or bias. Though intended kindly, the questions may achieve the opposite of what is wished-for by making a guest or newcomer feel unwelcome and uncomfortable from the get go.

As part of our work at the ISJL office, we train our colleagues throughout the region to show kindness and hospitality in intention and action. We focus on three critical areas so we can be more attuned, receptive, responsive, and inclusive of our colleagues’ and community members’ diverse backgrounds: how we gather, how we engage online, and how we teach.

**How We Gather:** Meetings, whether formal department team meetings or coffee dates with colleagues at conferences, are a daily necessity in our line of work, and they present opportunities to create an inclusive and welcoming environment that respects and honors the diversity among us. I've been in other organizations where meetings have a cursory “social acknowledgment” phase before launching into the *tachlis* (or “practical purpose,” here used to mean “logistical tasks”). Or, they launch into a Jewish-learning component without acknowledging the diversity of who is in the room (In the South, the people in the room are likely to be much more highly connected to people of other faiths, if not themselves ascribing to a different religion). With these thoughts in mind, at ISJL we make it a point not defer to stereotypically Jewish cultural and language norms. One of the ways in which we try to do that is by thinking about how we open our various meetings, asking ourselves, “How can we set an inclusionary tone with an intention?” We take the time at the beginning of our sessions for an activity that creates a safe and open environment, which involves asking our colleagues open-ended, non-judgmental questions. Doing this before we get to the *tachlis* assignments can do wonders for team inclusion and keep everyone mindful of the diversity embedded in our community throughout our daily routine.

Diversity in religious and ethnic backgrounds is not the only consideration; we must also be attuned to the diversity in our learning and listening styles. Not everyone can speak up in the meeting if put on the spot. For some, having the agenda in advance, one that includes definitions to clarify “insider” terms should we find it necessary to use them, allows each of us to consider accepting the ideas discussed as our own. For others, bouncing ideas off someone else aloud may be the only way for us to get to a resolution. Diversifying the style of our meetings and making sure everyone understands all the terminology is as important to productivity as it is to honoring diversity. The Hebrew term for synagogue is *beit knesset*, which tells us all our houses of worship are places of meeting. Thus, these recommended norms for our meetings that prioritize inclusivity and honoring a community’s diversity must also apply to whether we congregate for prayer or executive committee meetings.

**How We Engage Online:** In their book *Reframing Organizations*, Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal lay out the concept of visualizing every organizational structure and encounter through four frames—structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. The most powerful of these frames for me is the symbolic frame, exemplified often in the first encounters anyone has with our organizations, which for many is our online footprint. What do our websites say about our attitudes toward diversity? What pictures do we have representing our institution in the slideshow of our homepage? Will people visiting our Facebook page see people who look like them—their age, color, or family makeup (to name a few)?

On our registration forms, for example, do we use people-first language and think about the different sort of relationships that exist in our registrants’ lives? Or, reflecting back to the opening questions of our well-intentioned person that was laced with assumptions, do we use language that only reflects a traditional nuclear family—a straight father, a straight mother, and their two cisgender children? After you complete reading this essay, I encourage you to research your own institution, review your organization’s website and
other areas of your online presence you can find. To honor our diversity, we must not only be concerned about timely content and high-resolution photos; we must also consider and act on the content and the words, captions, and titles around the content we post and moderate online. Even in the South, we are not a homogenous set of people—our different backgrounds, political leanings, and socioeconomic standings should all be reflected in our online presence.

**How We Teach:** At the ISJL, we have a daunting task as we craft our comprehensive, fully scripted curriculum. We generate 30 lessons for each grade that aim to serve congregational schools across religious movements, and this mindset requires us to perform quite the balancing act. How do we phrase the laying of **tefillin** (phylacteries) that will both satisfy a halakhically Conservative Jew who wraps every day, while not shaming the non-halakhically practicing Jew who may never have seen a set of tefillin? How do we speak about G-d, Moses, and the author(s) of the Torah in a manner that will alienate neither a traditionally religious worshipper nor a secular humanist?

To tackle these conundrums, we often ask ourselves, “How would a Martian who speaks English experience this?” In the South, we may very well have a teacher who is as ill-informed as a Martian when it comes to instructing on Jewish subjects. We start by trying to engage with facts as much as possible. Instead of saying “G-d commands us to lay tefillin this way,” we might say, “The Torah, our Bible, is the basis for how Jews have prayed for centuries, which includes the practice of laying tefillin.” Thus, we engage in the curricular writing process so everyone at all connected with our faith, even those just being introduced to it, can be as comfortable as possible with the information—and feel empowered and welcome to make our tradition their own or at least more familiar for them. We must imagine there is a person, the Martian, who knows nothing about what is going on, yet is tasked with teaching it. Such is actually the case in some of our smallest southern Jewish communities. There is one in particular in which the only person willing to show up to teach at the Jewish Sunday school is a Catholic neighbor, and this person, too, needs to be honored and invited into the conversation.

These critical three foci may appear to be a small start, yet we have witnessed them making a big difference to those feeling less seen, included, or invited within our communities for who they are. It has worked well for us as we strive to further recognize, welcome, and honor the diverse nature of our southern Jewish community, and, as southern Jews, interact with Jews and people of other faiths from other geographic regions. Indeed, I would argue that these steps would help us in the Jewish south feel more welcome and inclusive when we engage with our friends and colleagues from across North America and the globe. I encourage you to not disregard us, intentionally or unintentionally, just because we come from a different geographic or cultural location. We have a lot of great people who are committed to our people, religion, and culture. Let us together analyze our use of language, photos, and other media, how we engage with ourselves in person and how we teach each other, to see if we imbue a philosophy of active inclusivity and the striving for constant learning and growth. Let us make room for more people to feel at home with us. More than that, to know they are us. By opening our mouths more mindfully, we can truly begin to open the holy gates to our entire community.

*Rabbi Matt Dreffin, MAJE,* was born and raised in Sarasota, Florida. He spent summers at URJ Camp Coleman in the hills of north Georgia, and received a BFA in Hot Glass Sculpture at Tulane in New Orleans. After his ordination from HUC-JIR in Los Angeles in 2013, he came to the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Mississippi. He currently serves as the director of education and enjoys welcoming people to the South with his Alabamian wife and Mississippian daughter.
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