Jewish Expression Today and Implications for Jewish Education

Early in the movie *Keeping the Faith*, we see fictional Rabbi Jacob Schram push his Upper West Side congregation to explore different forms of Jewish expression—reciting the morning *berakhot* within a meditation circle and bringing in a Harlem gospel choir to sing the *Ein Keloheinu* prayer, to name two examples. Leadership of the congregation are resistant, yet Rabbi Schram’s innovative techniques ignite a fire of passionate engagement within his community, inviting them to experience new forms of Jewish expression that inspired them into a more active Jewish life.

The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education is the largest multidenominational school of Jewish education in North America, granting master’s and doctoral degrees and providing professional development to educators currently in the field. Drawing upon cutting-edge thinking in both Jewish and general education, its pedagogy emphasizes experiential education, is informed by best practices and new developments in teaching, and engenders leadership in a variety of educational settings. Learn more at www.jtsa.edu/davidson.
Keeping the Faith was released in 2000, and now, nearly two decades later, we see a Jewish landscape that perhaps the movie and its fictional rabbi were foreshadowing. Empirical studies and anecdotal evidence continue to inform us that “traditional” forms of Jewish expression—attendance at religious services, keeping of kashrut, Shabbat, and other halakhah—are diminishing among a significant majority of non-Orthodox Jews. We also see a rising and emerging prominence of different forms of Jewish expression, seeking spirituality through yoga, Mussar study, and a reconceptualization of one’s theology. We also see expressing one’s Jewish identity and practice through art, performance, acts of social justice. Lastly, we are seeing prayer and theology expressed differently through the reconceptualization of G-d language, and self-improvement through seeing Judaism as a vehicle for positivity and human flourishing.

How do we, those doing and supporting the work of Jewish education, educate our learners for this new landscape? How might we think of our approach, our curriculum, our learning environments, and our relationships with our learners differently? What are the implications for Jewish education?

Just as our previous issue, Diversity in Jewish Education, asked us to consider Jewish education today as a result of the diverse learners today’s Jewish community displays, this issue informs us of various forms of Jewish expression that are currently trending and transcending our landscape, and how Jewish educators can craft their vision and practice for their learners, while being both proactive and responsive to today’s landscape of Jewish expression. We are pleased to offer pieces by our JTS faculty, alumni, as well as several partners and key voices from the field of Jewish education. We hope you find these discussions helpful to your work as we each aim to keep the faith of Jewish life, however it may be expressed, long into the future.

Mark S. Young
Managing Director, Leadership Commons
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A Key to Open Many Doors?
Jewish Education for Ambivalent, Ambiguous, and Changeable People

DR. ARIELLE LEVITES

The fastest growing religious group among American adults today is “Religious Nones.” Yet, at the same time that Americans increasingly describe themselves as having “no religion,” they also increasingly describe themselves as “spiritual.” How can we make sense of this apparent paradox? What might it mean for American Jews, the American Jewish community, and the field of Jewish education to engage with Jews who do not describe themselves as religious, yet seek sacred meaning and connection?

To start, it’s important to understand that people of “no religion” are not without religious beliefs, feelings, or interests. They are people who do not affiliate with a particular religion, church, or denomination. Having “no religion” is primarily a claim about formal membership. Thus, “Religious Nones” may still have religious beliefs or engage in religious activities like prayer. Interestingly, among American Jews of no religion, the 2013 Pew study found that almost half (46 percent) believe in God or a higher power.

Further, while research in American religion often classifies people into distinct boxes of “religious” and “secular,” sometimes human beings are more complicated than these dichotomous categories allow. Increasingly scholars are marking the ways in which individuals may be ambivalent, ambiguous, and changeable. In a recent study, sociologist Michael Hout found that many Americans are what he calls religious “liminals,” that is, moving between the categories of religious and not religious. As far back as 1994, the sociologist of religion, José Cassanova argued “that the majority of Americans tend to be humanists, who are simultaneously religious and secular.”

We are not always consistent in our approach to the world. Different events and challenges require different strategies for action. As an example, consider receiving a difficult medical diagnosis. One might choose to seek a second opinion from a top medical specialist, experiment with a New Age wellness practice, or pray to God. It’s certainly not hard to imagine all three of these activities within the repertoire of response of one person.

In my own studies of American Jewish education, which has been primarily of educational programs that foreground spirituality and alternative communities of meaning outside of synagogue and other traditional Jewish institutions, I have come to appreciate how people seek different forms of connection and expression at different points in their lives, often while still wanting to maintain an overarching self-concept of being “Jewish.” Among the many and varied orientations, one may foreground religious ritual, spiritual practices, intellectual understandings, cultural production, politics, or ethnic ties. Some may emphasize just one element or a combination of a few, and we may see different expressions ebb and flow over the lifespan.

In particular, in a recently completed study of American Jewish teens, I was struck by how teens wanted to explain that they can be both secular and religious, and sometimes have spiritual experiences and feelings. I think what is true for teens may be true for older generations as well. American Jews can be secular and religious and spiritual, sometimes all in the same day. The primary lens through which they want to orient to the world often depends on life stage, social networks, relationships, institutional settings, and transient
circumstances. People are complex and flexible, and different needs and concerns may come to the fore in the different contexts in which they find themselves.

Fortunately, the corpus of the Jewish imagination is vast and diverse. There is virtually no feature of human experience or orientation to the natural and supernatural universe, that Jews, past and present, have not tried to make sense of and connect to.

As a result, one challenge for Jewish educators today is to ensure that our learners gain some sense of the scope of the universe of Jewish ideas and communities of practice that are available as sources of meaning and connection. Educators will have their own preferred ideologies and practices that they (rightfully) want to emphasize and promote. At the same time, educators must hold in the front of their minds that at various junctures in life people may seek new on-ramps to Jewish living and diverging paths of exploration. But these will be difficult to find if they don’t know they exist.

There is a famous Hasidic story, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, in which we learn of a “master key” that opens every chamber in the Divine Palace. I recently read a poem on the subway that brought that story to mind. In “Notes on Longing,” the poet Tina Chang writes, “On the corner, there is a shop / that makes keys, keys that open / human doors, doors that lead / to rooms that hold families.”

I love this image of the shop that is occupied all day with making keys and how these keys lead ultimately to people and human connection. There can be so many barriers to participation in Jewish life. While we always yearn for the possibility of one key, a silver bullet, no one perfect method that unlocks the heart of every learner has yet been identified in Jewish education. Perhaps, as we await the discovery of the master key, we can provide learners with not just one key to open one familiar door, but multiple keys that open multiple doors.

Those who work with children and teens—even as they promote their own preferred ideologies and practice, facilitating entry to one particular door—may want to consider whether the curriculum they offer gestures toward alternative visions of Jewishness and multiple entry points.

Given that American Jews may be ambivalent, ambiguous, and changeable in terms of how they connect to being Jewish, let’s consider how Jewish education, rather than trying to find just one key, can be like that little key shop on the corner, making many keys, that open many doors, leading to many connections and possibilities.

Dr. Arielle Levites is the Golda Och Postdoctoral fellow at JTS. She is currently working on a book about contemporary American Jewish spirituality.
It’s Time for Truly Disruptive Jewish Education

DR. JACK WERTHEIMER

Observers of American Jewish life are divided about many issues, but there seems to be a solid consensus that Jewish religious life today differs radically from the past. On the one hand, rising numbers of Jews, like many of their Christian neighbors, eschew any religious identification, counting themselves among the “Nones.” Larger proportions of non-Orthodox Jews attend synagogue services only infrequently, if at all, a development that is all the more consequential because for many Jews, Judaism is largely absent from their homes. Ours, moreover, is an age of do-It-yourself religion, one in which individuals personalize their practices, often with no connection to any Jewish community, to the point where some celebrate major holiday landmarks such as Yom Kippur or the Passover seder on a date that fits their busy schedules, rather than in accordance with the dictates of the Jewish calendar and when Jews around the world mark those days.

On the other hand, declining or idiosyncratic religious participation in some quarters is partially offset by thriving pockets of Jewish religious renewal. Many synagogues of all denominations have rethought the music and choreography of religious services, offering attendees a more spirited prayer experience and more opportunities for active participation during tefillah. An explosion in the number of programs by Orthodox outreach professionals is drawing Jews of all ages into Jewish religious settings, even if only a small minority become fully observant. And a broad range of new minyanim, start-up religious programs, and “engagement” initiatives have sprung up to draw in younger Jews.

The assumption undergirding many of these efforts is a shared perception that the cause for religious decline is traceable to the failure of existing institutions to offer stimulating religious experiences. The remedy, many argue, is to package Judaism differently. Put in the crude terminology of the marketplace, synagogues, Jewish religious schools, and other Jewish settings are offering a product or experience that is “out of touch” with the actual lives of ordinary Jews. The solution, therefore, is to curate in accordance with the wants of consumers: if you build an enjoyable program, they will come.

This consumer orientation to Judaism can pose serious challenges to Jewish educators. To be sure, there is nothing wrong, per se, with packaging educational programs more enticingly or attending to the varied styles of learners or evincing sensitivity for the social and emotional dimensions of student’s lives. On the contrary, attunement to learners has brought many benefits to students and educators alike.

But it is problematic when the primary focus is on process, the “how” of Jewish education, sidestepping the “why” and “what” questions. What does it mean to be an educated Jew in 21st-century America? What should the content of a Jewish education be? And why is the chosen content important in shaping the next generation of Jews? To return to the language of the marketplace, it’s not enough to consider how an educational program will prove enticing to learners without also asking what today’s learners need to master in order to become active participants in Jewish life.

No doubt Jews of different outlooks will answer these questions in varied ways. My view begins with the conviction that Jewish education must state explicitly that to be Jewish is countercultural. Conveying this truth is necessary on pragmatic grounds: if being Jewish is simply a pale imitation of the prevailing culture,
learners will rightfully wonder why they ought to bother with the whole enterprise. Unfortunately, so much of Jewish education today stresses how consonant the Jewish tradition is with everything that students already hold dear, and then tags on that Judaism promoted the proper values first—not a particularly compelling reason to live as a Jew.

On a deeper level, if we remove our blinders it is obvious that Jewish commitments are hardly in sync with the prevailing culture. To cite but a few examples, Jewish literacy is not the same as what passes for American cultural literacy. The Jewish New Year ushers in a period unlike New Year commemorations of other cultures. Jewish religious education is not about DIY religion, but a system of externally imposed commandments. Prayer is not a fun exercise but a discipline. Indeed, organized religion itself is held in contempt by the “woke.” And a commitment to the Jewish people and to Israel is no longer a feel-good enterprise, but one that is increasingly contested as “tribal,” if not worse. A Jewish education that avoids confronting the tensions between Jewish commitments and the outlook of the wider culture therefore will fail to prepare learners for the dissonance they will encounter.

If we focus the conversation around what Jews need in order to become active participants in Jewish religious and communal life, rather than what they may think they want, we will inevitably spark conversations about expectations and what kinds of literacy an active Jew requires. Our liturgy and formative texts of Jewish life are in Hebrew and these texts emerged in an environment entirely different from contemporary America. To make sense of such an alien religious culture requires knowledge. For this reason, recent trends in religious education that focus on positive experiences and/or social action activities dare not downgrade the acquisition of language and conceptual skills necessary to live as a Jew. There are, of course, more and less stimulating ways of teaching, and it is important to engage students in active learning. Yet if Jews are to live a religious life (however broadly defined), they will need to be knowledgeable about their religious tradition.

This means that a sufficient Jewish education cannot be acquired in a few hours a week over three years prior to a bar/bat mitzvah. Jewish learning is a lifelong enterprise, starting in early childhood and continuing over the course of adolescence and beyond. The time invested in Jewish activities also matters. If “doing Jewish” is limited to a few occasional acts, it won’t get much traction and it also will be very difficult to transmit to the next generation. Frequency of participation in Jewish life matters, as does the “thickness” of Jewish culture experienced in the home and settings of worship and communal gathering.

For these reasons, Jewish education can succeed only if individuals and families practice Judaism meaningfully in the home and support what educational programs aim to attain. Except in unusual cases, schools, camps, and other settings alone cannot make up for the absence of Jewish life in the home. Winning over parents as allies and positive role models in the education of their children is an indispensable responsibility of educators.

Beyond the home, Jewish communal institutions reinforce identification with other Jews across the generations (synchronously) and in their current habitations around the globe (diachronically). A connection to generations past serves to anchor Jews in an ongoing historical trajectory they know will also continue after them; linking oneself to this chain of tradition provides a form of transcendence. And identification with Jewish people in other communities adds both to the cultural richness and diversity of Jewish civilization, and also inspires Jews to embrace a mission to aid kinfolk. Achieving a healthy balance between concern for universal causes and a commitment to Jewish particularistic ones is one of the great challenges confronting Jewish education in our time. For much of the past century, Jewish educators have understood the power of Jewish peoplehood to ground young people. They would do well to reject the voices falsely claiming that
doing so is “tribal.”

The orientation outlined here applies equally to Jewish funders as it does to educators. Philanthropists who focus on the next generation of Jewish life must not solely ask the question, “What do consumers—students and parents—want?” Or, “How can our educational program create a fun atmosphere that will bring people back for more?” The task of funders and educators, indeed of all Jewish leaders, is to ask what the coming generation of Jews needs to experience and learn—what skills, sets of knowledge, and competencies—in order to internalize that Judaism is meaningful, and thus become active participants in Jewish life. In an age yearning for innovation, what could be more disruptive?

Jack Wertheimer is professor of American Jewish history at JTS. His most recent book The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today was awarded a National Jewish Book award.

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**Generation Z and the Work of Hillel Today**

**MAIYA CHARD-YARON**

A few years ago, I was sitting around a conference table with some of my Hillel colleagues as we determined what standard questions to include in our online registration forms for major events. As part of an organization with an increasing focus on data and metrics, collecting basic information, such as name, email address, and graduation year, was a no-brainer. It became a bit more complicated when we discussed what we wanted to know about students’ Jewish background or self-identification. Previously, a drop-down menu asking the student to identify with a denomination or descriptor of their Jewish background gave the options Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Just Jewish, Not Jewish, or Other. In some ways, this denominational question felt out of place in the broader context for many of our students and Hillel’s approach to Jewish education and engagement, which focuses on relationship-building as the cornerstone of community building, acknowledges the oftentimes complex and non-linear nature of students’ identities and experiences, and embraces the creativity of students in forging Jewish experiences for their peers.

As practitioners within Hillel, we often use the word “pluralistic” as defining our approach to Jewish life. But for the average student on campus, this word does not mean much. Some students are fortunate to come to college with deep roots in Jewish organizational life and have strong and proud connections to synagogues, camps, and schools associated with a denomination. Many others do not—they self-identify as Jewish, yet do not necessarily define themselves by the core values and principles of one of the main branches of religious Judaism. When they do, their connection might be to specific home rituals, memories, values, recipes, and experiences that together create the sum of their Jewish identity.

At Hillel, we are proud of our pluralistic approach to Jewish life and the notion that there is no one “right” way to be Jewish. Thus, we offer opportunities that range from text-based classes, social action, Israel education, and cultural, arts-based experiences to social and community building programs. All of these opportunities model the diverse pathways one can take to making Jewish life personally relevant and meaningful. At many Hillels, including ours at the University of Texas, one can walk in on a Friday night and see simultaneous services being offered, showcasing the many different ways worship can look in our tradition: perhaps listening to Debbie Friedman songs strummed on a guitar, wildly clapping and dancing to traditional Hasidic melodies, or discussing a burning social justice issue thoughtfully. We empower students
to try one or try all and to explore the various modalities that stem from the righteous intention of welcoming Shabbat with community and spirituality.

One of our student leaders at Texas Hillel came to campus from a small, rural town in Texas Hill Country. The University of Texas was her first experience with a large, organized Jewish community (we estimate approximately 3,000 Jewish undergraduates on our campus). She relished the opportunity to connect with so many opportunities—trips to Israel, Shabbat services and meals, volunteer programs—that she did not have access to previously. Another student leader, from Dallas, arrived on campus with 12 years of Jewish day school and summer camp in his background. Hillel is a unique environment where these two students can connect and work in partnership to create experiences and expressions for their peers to explore Jewish life, recognizing the diverse backgrounds and approaches our students bring with them to campus.

Today’s college students are the oldest members of Generation Z, born roughly between 1997 and 2000. They thrive on personalized experiences and relish the power of individuality. Rather than placing themselves into narrow categories conceived of by their parents, grandparents, and earlier generations, today’s late teens and emerging adults create their own definitions and expressions of their Jewish and other identities, drawing upon a rich well of experiences to make them their own. We must consider how their Judaism is woven into their self-definitions as people and how it flows alongside the other parts of their identities that make them who they are—artist, musician, athlete, journalist, activist, etc.

Members of Generation Z are technological natives, only knowing a time when information was available at a simple click of a button or swipe of a screen. We live in an era when digital connections and impressions seem to rule the day. For Hillel to effectively engage students, it must simultaneously embrace the way this generation of students processes information and integrates technology into their lives, while still affirming the power of person-to-person relationships and “face time” in feeling connected and part of a community.

Frank Bruni’s September 2017 article in the New York Times, “The Real Campus Scourge,” identified loneliness as a significant factor that leads to mental health issues and potentially destructive behaviors for college students. Bruni notes “the technology that keeps them connected to parents and high school friends only reminds them of their physical separation from just about everyone they know best . . . they too easily substitute virtual interactions for physical ones, withdrawing from their immediate circumstances and winding up lonely as a result.” Thus, Hillel’s educational approach intentionally emphasizes relationship-building, connecting with students as individuals and working to create micro-communities that not only nurture students’ evolving Jewish identities as adults, but combat the loneliness so many students feel even, or perhaps especially, on the largest college campuses.

Hillel’s vision is to inspire every Jewish student to create an enduring commitment to Jewish life, learning, and Israel. The “every” part of this statement speaks to Hillel’s approach to broad engagement and expressions. Our focus goes beyond the students who walk through our doors on their own volition or only those who had strong prior experiences in the Jewish community and are actively looking to continue those on campus (though we welcome those students wholeheartedly).

“Every” means valuing the diverse Jewish experiences of our students, from those with deep backgrounds in Jewish knowledge and text, to those just opening the door on their Jewish identity for the first time. I am proud to say that Hillel has been at the forefront of this model for over a decade, focusing on individual Jewish expression and relationship-building to connect with students, oftentimes over a cup of coffee. This approach enables students to feel that the Jewish experience on campus is focused on them as individuals—that their story matters in what can feel like an overwhelming sea of people on campus. It encourages Hililess on campuses across the globe to design Jewish experiences in partnership with students, directly responding to
the needs, questions, and interests of the intended participants.

“Enduring” pushes us to ensure that what happens on campus does not stay on campus. The three, four, or more years students on campus have a tremendous impact on the rest of their lives—the friends they make, their course of study, where they will take their first job. We build our curriculum of experiences to have lasting value beyond any single program or class. Our desired outcomes for students include an increased sense of connection to Judaism, Israel, and the global Jewish people, the centrality of Judaism in their lives, the ability to create a Jewish social network, and an increase in Jewish knowledge and literacy. The hope is that the cumulative experience of being Jewish on campus, fostered with a sense of individuality and empowerment by their Hillel, will inspire a lasting commitment to Jewish expression as they emerge into adulthood and continue their journeys.

Maiya Chard-Yaron is the executive director of Texas Hillel in Austin, Texas. She has previously worked at the University of Maryland Hillel and Hillel at Davis and Sacramento, and is a recipient of Hillel International’s Richard M. Joel Exemplar of Excellence award. She received her MA from The William Davidson School in 2009 and is a 2006 graduate of Columbia University (Columbia College), where she was captain of the women’s softball team.

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From ‘God’ to ‘G!D’

ELIANA LIGHT

There is a feeling I get when I look at the mountains. I feel held and at peace. I feel awe at the grandeur and majesty of nature. And I feel immense gratitude and deference, for I did nothing to deserve the honor of living in a world that has such beauty in it, and yet, here I am. It is the feeling of being part of something greater than myself, connected with all humans, nature, and something mysterious and holy. Some have this feeling when they sing with others; some feel this way when they view a sunset, play with a child, dance at a party, or take a cleansing breath. These feelings can be hard to describe, and yet I could sum them up in one word: “God.” But once I bring the word “God” into it, something shifts. Why? Why is it so hard to talk about God?

I’ve been thinking about how we talk and teach about God for a long time. At one particular lesson with a bat mitzvah student of mine, the more we read of her Torah portion, Korah, the more upset she became. Finally she stopped me, exasperated, and said, “Wait a minute—you mean to tell me that God not only opened up the earth to swallow Korah and all those people who had a legitimate question about Moses, but then He brought a plague and killed thousands more people? Is this true? How could God do such a thing?”

I was stunned—not from her questions, but because I had had the same questions and had no idea how to answer them. Deflecting, I suggested we take a break from the Torah and open the siddur (prayerbook). “V’ahavta,” she started to chant. “Love the Lord your God.” The same God who brought you out of Egypt. The same God who opens the ground to swallow dissenters and brings plagues to the innocent. That God.

I left her questions—and mine—unresolved and unanswered, and I could never shake the thought that I missed a great opportunity. And then it happened again, this time in a religious school kindergarten classroom about a year later. The kids were learning stories from the book of Genesis, a popular subject in kindergarten, so I had prepared some fun songs about Parashat Noah. It was a blast until one kid asked the teacher, “What about all the animals and people that didn’t make it on the ark?” The teacher didn’t have an
answer. I saw the same kids an hour later for tefillah (prayer). “V’ahavta,” we sang. Love that God.

God is the main character in the Torah and the subject of our prayers, so the word “God” is used over and over again in Jewish contexts. God is also part of our culture, found in TV programs, movies, art, and politics. Mixing these various cultural and liturgical messages together means that the default image of God for many is an all-powerful “Dude in the Sky.” There is nothing inherently wrong with imagining God this way; developmentally, it makes sense for a child to see God as a friend or parent. But what about if and when that idea of God doesn’t fit with what they see and experience in the world? What if they read about God’s actions in the Torah and sing the injunction to love God, and it fills them with confusion, or sadness, or anger?

This is what happened to me; my father passed away when I was 18. All I had was an all-powerful, sky-God who must have made this happen on purpose for a reason I’d never understand. I felt that confusion, sadness, and anger. This was not how the world was supposed to work. I tried to hold on to that idea of God, but I couldn’t. I tried to let go of God all together, but I kept being drawn back in. After a long and painful journey, I realized there was a third option—one that we are beginning to see as a different form of Jewish expression today. I had to evolve my theology and change how I understood God. I needed permission to do that. Mine came in the form of When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Rabbi Harold Kushner. What can we do to give this permission? It starts with how we talk about God.

If we use the word “God” less, we can actually talk about God more. A few examples:

Communities like Romemu and Lab/Shul in New York both invoke God but hardly ever use the word “God.” By using other names such as “Holy One,” “Mother,” “Spirit,” “the Infinite”—words in both Hebrew and English—they remove the God-baggage from the Torah and from the prayers.

The Reconstructing Judaism prayerbook, Kol HaNeshama, does this in print, translating “Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey” as a different name of God in every instance. These translations give people permission to think of G!D however they choose, to pick an image that works for them—and it’s all images. The author of the prayer-poem Anim Z’mirot laments that he doesn’t know God. “I’ll tell of Your glory, though I have never seen You. I’ll give people images for You and names for You, but I do not even know You.” “Even Your prophets and pray-ers,” says the author, “only have visions of you.” But oh, what visions. We can understand this as a challenge or an opportunity.

If all we have is our human language to describe that which is greater than us in the universe, we can and must use all the language that we have.

If all we have is the word “God,” we’re setting people up for disappointment if they reach a time in their lives where “Dude in the Sky” stops making sense. When God seems like a made-up story, all of the prayers, Judaism, and Torah can seem childish, frivolous, and without value. I know many people, and maybe you do, too, who left Judaism because they stopped believing in “Dude in the Sky” God and were never shown a value beyond that.

Many educators and leaders think that not talking about God will solve the problem. This, however, makes it worse: we’re still hearing the word “God,” we’re just not talking about what that means, or could mean, to each of us. I understand the impulse not to talk about God because just like when I see those mountains, God is something that is felt. Once we name and try to describe the experience of God, we run into problems of language, and descriptions of God in our sacred text that may or may not fit with our own experience. For too many, “spirituality” and Judaism have little to do with each other. Talking about God
in a more expansive way can bridge what we feel in our lives to our sacred heritage, making room in our synagogues for radical amazement, gratitude, and the deep connection that many people are searching for.

So how can we bridge that gap between experience and language? We can talk about God more by using the word “God” less. We can experiment with trying on different Jewish theologies, all legitimate and truthful. (I’ve been connecting with non-dualism and process theology.) We can be honest with our students and community about our own struggles, doubts, and questions, which gives them permission to do the same. We can make room for singing, dancing, and deep spiritual connection. We can transform “God” into “G!D,” exploding the center to make room for a thousand possibilities.

This is why I founded the G!D Project, and why I do this work with community members and educators around the country. Children and adults alike have a desire for that deep connection to all humans, nature, and something mysterious and holy. Talking about it isn’t easy, but the fact that there is something greater than us in the world is too important to give up on. We are B’nei Yisrael, after all: the children of G!D-wrestlers. It’s time to step into the ring.

**Eliana Light** is the founder and director of the G!D Project, an initiative to expand our understanding of G!D and provide a space for spirit. She has released two albums of original Jewish music and travels around the country, providing artist-in-residence weekends, teaching at conferences, and consulting with synagogues to create intentional, meaningful prayer experiences for adults and children alike. Eliana received her MA in Experiential Jewish Education from The William Davidson School of JTS. Eliana is based in New York City and can be reached through www.elianalight.com.

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**From Deprecation to Appreciation:**
Celebrating Culture as a Form of Jewish Expression

**RABBI SHIRA KOCH EPSTEIN**

When I was a congregational rabbi-educator, many congregants would tell me that they came to synagogue for reasons of family fealty or Jewish identity, but that worship “just didn’t do it for them.” Whether they be regular participants in social justice or hesed work, holiday celebrations, or book groups, they would largely avoid meeting my eye while telling me in a confessional tone, “Rabbi, I am a bad Jew: I don’t do, like, believe in, or practice theology.”

This is not news.

The 2013 Pew Research Center Study of U.S. Jews coined a new term, “Jews of No Religion,” finding that 22 percent of Americans (and 33 percent of millennials) who identified as Jews indicated that they did not have a religion. In its 2018 study, Pew showed that of those Americans who identified their religion as Jewish, 28 percent are “solidly secular,” 17 percent are “religion resisters,” and 14 percent are “relaxed religious.” Many people who attend a program at the 14th Street Y, of which I am the executive director, self-identify in the same ways as those that Pew calls “secular,” “resistant,” or “relaxed,” referring to themselves as “cultural Jews.”

Since the moniker “cultural Jew” is usually given to the least strongly identified Jews, we often scoff that a cultural Jew is simply a person who eats bagels. This actually discounts the thick, engaged, and rich culture...
that Jews have developed over millennia. The deprecation of Jewish cultural engagement and education is further complicated by the fact that the major organized movements of American Jewish life (Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, etc.), and the bulk of our community’s resources support synagogues, which, by definition, are institutions focused on supporting and promoting Judaism as a religion.

How can we understand Jewish culture and support meaningful Jewish cultural education in our communities?

Culture is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.” Whether herring and schnapps at kiddush club or mufleta at a Mimouna feast, the resonant tones of an oud or the rollicking of a fiddle, we can see how Jewish culture is shaped as much by the diasporic cultures in which we have lived as by the narrative, texts, and traditions passed down from our ancestors. The Jewish People have always developed relationships with our ancient texts and stories while living in a particular time and context. Out of that complex and variegated relationship, we have created Jewish culture that, in turn, becomes a part of our ongoing narrative. From ancient Israel until today, the Jewish People have created and in turn been shaped by a Jewish culture through dynamic engagement with our texts, narrative, traditions, and folkways.

Traditionally, the learning of text, narratives, and traditions takes place in environments that tacitly or implicitly hold expectations that learned or learning Jews will pray or participate in devotional religious practice. Many Jews, including Jewish artists and culture makers are turned off by or perceive themselves as unwelcome in religious houses of study. Our thick and rich culture can only be sustained by ensuring access to and provoking interest in our texts, narratives, and traditions among those who lead our culture.

For over 150 years, downtown Manhattan has been a vibrant international center for the development of Jewish culture. While the majority came from the Pale of Settlement in the late 19th and early 20th century, Jews of every diasporic community from India to Poland to Argentina, as well as Israel, have found their way to the neighborhoods of Manhattan below 34th Street. These neighborhoods have welcomed American artists and intellectuals for over a century, and among them are Jews who have made lasting marks on American Jewish culture.

The 14th Street Y, with a theater rather than a sanctuary at the heart of our building, has long served as a hub for the support and development of Jewish culture. As a Jewish community center that supports art and artists, we provide a comfortable place for these culture makers and “Jews of No Religion” to express and explore their Jewish identity.

Seeking to give these culture makers access to Jewish texts and narratives, the 14th Street Y developed a program called LABA: A Laboratory for Jewish Culture, now in its 10th year. This year-long artist fellowship program, originally founded by Dr. Stephen Arnoff and directed by 14th Street Y Senior Director of Arts and Culture Ronit Muszkatblit, brings vocational artists together to study as fellows in our LABA: House of Study. Fellows are given space and support as they produce new artistic and cultural works and engage with our community. Over 100 artists of varied Jewish identities, working across a diverse range of visual, written, performing, and creative media, have participated in our secular *beit midrash* (house of study). Fellows study traditional Jewish texts monthly, which influence the works-in-progress they develop while in residence. Fellows present these works to large audiences in our LABAlive series of shows.

For many of these artists, this first taste of traditional Jewish text study becomes the impetus for greater study and connection to Jewish text and narrative. This enriches the Jewish culture produced through their art. Yet, LABA’s strength as a cultural education program extends beyond the artist’s *beit midrash*. 
Each LABAlive experience exhibits new Jewish cultural works to large audiences and engages them in Jewish text study as a part of the experience. As most artists are not Jewish educators, each LABA cohort includes a staff fellow and/or teaching artist who ensures that the Jewish texts studied and the works created in LABA impact our broader community. These teaching artists bring LABA texts, art, and process to our preschool, afterschool, adult programs, and summer camps.

The 14th Street Y has become a place where studying Jewish texts and producing new Jewish culture has cachet. As we provide access to Jewish learning and cultural expression with no expectations of religious observance, more unaffiliated Jews have sought us out. In the past three years, the 14th Street Y has engaged over 15,000 individuals in cultural Jewish programs and experiences. Along with LABA, we have begun exploring other forms of cultural education and engagement. In each program, like LABA, we seek to develop new ways of deepening the ownership, participation, access to learning, and agency of cultural Jews.

We recognize that American Jewish culture includes, but is not defined by, religious ritual and law-based observance. We neither judge the Jewish choices of those who choose to participate, nor seek to influence them toward more religious practices. We give primacy to artists, who are at the forefront of helping our culture to evolve, and encourage creative expression among all of our participants. We acknowledge and appreciate that cultural Judaism is enriched by Jews having knowledge and the ability to ground Jewish cultural development in our texts, narratives, and traditions. In these ways, we enrich Jewish culture while engaging many non-religious and “cultural” Jews in Jewish learning and community, giving them a venue for authentic Jewish expression.

Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein is the executive director of the 14th Street Y, part of the Educational Alliance in Lower Manhattan, and a faculty member of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. Shira is also a graduate of the Leadership Institute for Congregational Educators, an institute conducted in partnership with The William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of JTS and the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Shira also received rabbinic ordination from the HUC-JIR.
A Yearning for a Torah of the Heart (and Finding It in Mussar)

RABBI DAVID JAFFE

“The farthest distance in the world is from the head to the heart.”
—Rabbi Yisrael Salanter

In my early 20s, after the death of a close friend, I was searching for a spiritual salve for the pain I felt in my heart. I turned to Kabbalah, but found the introduction to Jewish mysticism book I bought incomprehensible to my Jewishly uneducated mind. Like many “seeking” Jews, I turned to an Americanized form of Buddhism and began chanting weekly with the community. In these living room chant sessions, singing a language I did not understand, I found the warm, deep, heart-opening practice I was looking for. However, an important piece was missing. I was also yearning to connect to my own lineage. Before getting too deeply enmeshed in this Buddhist community, I was introduced to meaningful forms of Jewish spirituality. I left the chanting circle for Judaism, eventually became a rabbi, and now teach Jewish spirituality, specializing in Mussar, the school of applied Jewish ethics. The spiritual search that led me to Buddhist chanting is quite common among Jews around the world; in fact, many Jews are seeking spiritual wisdom that speaks directly to their hearts.

Jewish spirituality offers treasures of Jewish wisdom and practices to help Judaism address all aspects of daily life. We are fortunate to live in a time when this wisdom is more accessible than ever to contemporary Jewish audiences. One branch of this spiritual wisdom is Mussar, the Jewish discipline that focuses on aligning values with behavior in service of living a life infused with holiness. Mussar is as old as the Torah and Pirkei Avot, but only became a distinct genre of literature in the 10th century.

The 19th-century Lithuanian rabbinic leader Rabbi Israel Salanter created the modern Mussar movement with certain favored texts and practices as part of its powerful program for inner transformation and communal change. The growth in popularity of Mussar in North America over the past 20 years is primarily due to the work of Dr. Alan Morinis and his Mussar Institute, and aligns with the overall growth in interest in spirituality in the first decades of this millennium.

An experience early on in my personal Mussar practice convinced me of the efficacy of this discipline. One of Rabbi Salanter’s key insights was that cognitive learning alone will not change a person—change comes from connecting cognitive with affective learning. The goal of Mussar, in the words of one of the masters, is to get the heart to feel what the heads knows. The primary technique for bridging the head and the heart is a form of learning that starts with intellectual study of a passage, then asks the student to hold an image in their mind of how a lesson from the passage shows up in their life. The final and most powerful stage calls on the student to do whatever possible to evoke emotion and deeply feel the lesson embedded in the passage. I tried out this technique after I caught myself speaking leshon hara about a rabbi I respected. I studied the verse from Proverbs 18:21, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue,” analyzing its many possible meanings. I focused on the image of the rabbi and how much I learned from him. I then repeated out loud, sometimes in a chant and sometimes not, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” for 10 minutes a day for three weeks.

These sessions evoked tears and feelings of remorse, love, awe, and gratitude. They forever changed the way I speak, and I am much more mindful when I feel pulled toward gossip. The practice is even more powerful done in a group when, after paired study of a text, each person creates his/her own chant, giving rise to
a delightful cacophony of holy yearning. Over the past decade, I’ve led hundreds of students in using this technique. Many report new insights into Torah passages and profound realizations. While chanting the verse, “Choose life so you and your generations may live” (Deut. 30:19), one student reported that he decided to donate his kidney to his father for a transplant. This is a particularly dramatic example of the heart-opening and behavior-changing impact of Mussar practice.

Mussar creates change over time through personal application of middot to daily life and participation in groups called va’ads. The va’ad (committee or study group) usually meets for 90 minutes every week or two, and focuses on a particular soul trait (middah) each session, led by a trained facilitator. The traits can be chosen by the facilitator or the group members themselves, and consists of such middot as humility, patience, respect, trust, courage, and faith. The power of these groups comes from the commitment of the members to work on the same trait together and to create a sacred space for learning and sharing personal experiences with the middah.

One of my groups was recently working on savlanut (patience). We studied a mystical Mussar text about imitating God by keeping our goodness flowing to people who defy our will. After analyzing and applying the texts to our lives, participants chose a child, elderly parent, or difficult colleague as the focus for their practice during the week. Others chose to practice on the highway during rush-hour traffic. Each student chanted or repeated out loud the teaching for at least one minute in the morning during the week to orient themselves to this way of imitating God. They then tried to keep their goodness flowing in at least one challenging situation each day. Afterward, they reflected on and journaled about their practice, noticing when savlanut showed up in the day. When the group gathered again the next week, we made significant time to share our experiences.

The power of the sacred space of the group is that it invites people to share authentic, vulnerable experiences. Among the many stories, we heard from a mother who struggled with not yelling at her child with disabilities even when he interrupted her work for the fifth time. We heard from a woman in her 60s who is caring for elderly parents and trying to keep an open heart even though she sometimes wonders if it would be easier if they were gone. Without giving advice, group members ask probing questions or just hold each other with silence. These experiences and stories give life to the Jewish wisdom about savlanut. One mother reported significant changes in her ability to not respond with advice, borne of anxiety, when her children tell her about challenges in school. Her ability to bear the discomfort of her children’s challenges has made them more willing to confide in her. This is the kind of everyday application of Jewish wisdom that is the hallmark of Mussar and makes it a path of holiness through daily life. Participating in a vaad gives students the experienced of being part of a sacred community working together to integrate Jewish values into all aspects of life.

In my 12 years of facilitating Mussar va’ads, I have come to see that people get very excited about bringing Mussar into various aspects of their communal lives. Several synagogues around the country have made Mussar a key feature of their religious schools and adult education programs with the help of the Mussar Institute. Leadership-development programs like the Wexner Field Fellowship, Wexner Heritage Program, and PRESIDE have made Mussar learning available to participants to supplement their secular leadership and governance training. Day schools and JCCs have Mussar parenting groups. Social justice activists and community organizers study together in Mussar groups to build resilience for their long-term social change work. It is remarkable to see this ancient form of Jewish wisdom about character transformation and spiritual development grow in popularity among Jews seeking ways to integrate Judaism into their daily lives. There is a hunger for spirituality in our community and a growing ability on the part of our institutions to respond.

I will close with guidance for educators who read this piece and want to add Jewish spirituality as an
educational offering in their institutions, be they schools, adult educational programs, or synagogues. To teach any of these Jewish spiritual disciplines well, we must practice them ourselves first. Imagine trying to teach a Jewish text without first deeply engaging with it, asking our own questions, and thinking through the implications. Such a session would be superficial, indeed. It is the same with Jewish spiritual disciplines like Mussar, Hasidic prayer practices, and meditation. Our ability to teach these disciplines will come from our own experience trying out these practices over time. If one wants to facilitate a Mussar va’ad, I recommend first joining a va’ad and practicing for at least a year. It is only then that one will acquire the practices in the kishkes and be able to share one’s own experiences with the middot in a way that will help our students access this wisdom.

Torat HaGuf: Expressing Judaism Through Embodied Spiritual Practice

RABBI MYRIAM KLOTZ

While in rabbinical school, I encountered a stunning passage from Brachot 28b in which the Gemara refers to the Mishnah, which states that the daily prayer HaTefillah has 18 blessings. It asks, “What is the significance of the number 18?” What was stunning to me, given that 18 in Hebrew is Chai, a holy number in Hebrew, which also means “life,” was the Rabbis’ awareness of how the physical and spiritual realms were not simply integrated in the act of prayer. Rather their coexistence is fundamentally interwoven. The Gemara goes on to offer multiple opinions that suggest a link between the number of times God’s name is mentioned in either Psalm 29 or the blessings of the Shema.

Then a third opinion is offered in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, which the Gemara develops in detail: the number 18 refers to the 18 vertebrae in the spine. We know now that there are actually 24 vertebrae in the spine, including the cervical, thoracic, and lumbar portions, and it is not clear which 18 are being referred to here. Yet, the insight nonetheless is revealed in this opinion: there is a fundamental, inextricable connection between HaTefillah, the “backbone” of prayer life, and the spinal column of the human body.

Sitting in class that day, I understood that some practitioners among the Rabbis of the Talmudic era perceived something about the practice of praying: prayer is at once a focused physical action that requires mental intentionality and is, at the same time, a physical practice that requires one to stretch beyond “ordinary” daily capacity. One must be willing to see the world differently, to literally bow the head below the heart to signify that one is willing to allow the heart to instruct the head in service to the Divine. This requires a level of vulnerability and the willingness to be changed, to be transformed, spiritually and physically at once, in the act of praying. That day, I met what has become a proof text that has transformed my teaching Jewish learners for two decades in many different settings. I understood this text to be offering a simple yet transformative insight: to pray means to open ourselves in our deepest regions physically, emotionally, and mentally, allowing our very beings in their spiritual essence to be transformed by the act of prayer itself.

I share my encounter with this Gemara and its impact on my practice and teaching because it elucidates the embodied approach to Jewish learning that I have been teaching for over 25 years in a variety of adult and young adult settings across the country in what might be called Torat HaGuf (Torah of the Body).

What distinguishes this approach to Jewish learning is that it looks at Jewish teachings with fresh eyes, paying attention to the act of seeing as part of the process of learning. It asks of us as students to bring our whole selves to the encounter with text or liturgy that involves not just thinking about the text, but actually exploring it through the somatic wisdom and experience inherent in our own bodies. In so doing, it can bring learners and “pray-ers” into a deeper and potentially transformational engagement with the learning. This approach also appeals to a variety of learning styles as we employ multiple modalities in the session.

A typical study session might begin with students on their backs on a yoga mat, breathing and moving gently to drop into their felt experience in their bodies. Only after inviting our body awareness into the realm of conscious experience do I then present a Jewish teaching. The next part of the lesson involves putting away
the papers and exploring the teaching through yoga or another intentional movement practice that is tailored to the text and to the students’ physical needs. So, for instance, if we were to learn the above Gemara, we would then practice stretching our spines deeply, bowing in the manner instructed by the text. After a series of movements or postures, with attention to sensations and bodily awareness, and guided attention on the breath, we would engage in a reflective discussion. We might ask: “What did you learn about prayer from this text?” “How did the physical movements impact your insights or new questions about the text?” “How did the intentionality set by the text impact your experience of bowing in your body?”

These debrief sessions consistently surprise me. Learners have incredible insights and revelatory experiences when they bring a sense of curiosity to the present moment through their experience in their bodies.

For the past eight years, I have directed the Spirituality Initiative at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. Through the initiative, we are able to train rabbinical, cantorial, and Jewish education students in embodied spiritual practice, both in structured ways and in how they relate to their own presence as spiritual leaders and teachers. Many clergy have told me over the years that they don’t feel aware of their bodies when they are on the bimah or standing under the huppah or at a graveside. I work to help them to learn their own body’s language and to be sensitive to others’ bodies. We incorporate simple exercises and experiences through which students can learn about their relationship to their bodies and develop an intentional way of being in their bodies to teach about spiritual awareness and development.

For example, if we truly believed that we were created in the image of the Divine, how might we walk? Talk? Hold ourselves in relation to another person? How might we convey or teach middot (Jewish values) or character traits such as kavod (respect), shtikah (silence), savlanut (patience), or rachamim (compassion)? These qualities shine through our eyes, our postures, the ways in which we refrain from infringing on another’s physical space, and the ways in which we invite others to feel what is happening in our heart. Simple practices, like consciously breathing—placing a hand on one’s heart or belly and noticing the rising and falling of the area as the breath enters and leaves—or standing still and then rocking gently side to side so that we come to be more aware of how our own body moves through space can have profound and often transformative impact personally and as leaders and teachers.

Throughout Jewish liturgy, teachings are filled with this central understanding that while we are alive in a physical body, our spiritual aliveness is not found elsewhere but in our body, and our spiritual growth is to be found not in transcending our body, but in sanctifying our relationship to it through intentional and conscious practices that train us to embrace our embodied existence. We don’t inhabit our bodies only sometimes, in some settings. Our Jewish learning already is actually, literally, embodied. We are seeing the transformation in synagogues, retreats, and other settings of Jewish life today. Making this approach to learning conscious can be an illuminating pivot for all of us in the teaching and sharing of Jewish values and practices.

Rabbi Myriam Klotz teaches Torah yoga in synagogue settings, at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and at Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, where she assisted three cohorts of teachers in the Yoga and Jewish Spirituality Teacher Training. Rabbi Klotz has offered Jewish yoga retreats at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, and at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, she has taught a course exploring the Torah portion through yoga.
Expressing Our Judaism Through Social Justice in 2019

CHERYL COOK

A homeless family tries to find housing in NYC with Section 8 vouchers and is turned away illegally by landlord after landlord. An asylum seeker who identifies as LGBTQ sits in a detention center. A couple who left the Ultra-Orthodox community is trying to remake their lives with no family and no resources. A woman who was trafficked to the United States tries to break free and rebuild her life here. These are just a few of the stories we hear at Avodah daily; they are a reminder of the huge amount of work needed to repair the many cracks in our broken world.

What is the Jewish response to this type of brokenness in our society? There’s so much wisdom in Jewish tradition about how every human being has inherent human dignity and worth, about how we should treat each other the way we treat ourselves, and about our ability to make a difference in the world. The Torah mentions the obligation to love the stranger 36 times, many more times than it mentions the obligation to keep kosher or observe Shabbat. Our tradition teaches that “anyone who destroys a single life is considered . . . to have destroyed a world, and anyone who saves a life is considered to have saved an entire world” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

The field of Jewish social justice is a response to the brokenness of our world and a way to bring deep Jewish wisdom to that work. For our Jewish community to fully live our justice values, we cannot hold ourselves at arm’s length from those who are in need now. Our work for justice must flow from being in relationship with people who are vulnerable, from listening to the stories that they share, and from standing up for their needs.

At Avodah, a Jewish leadership development organization for young adults, we seek to connect a passion for social justice with Jewish values. Through our Jewish Service Corps program, we provide members with the opportunity to spend a year working at a nonprofit while living and learning with a group of peers. Our programs are grounded in Jewish teachings, preparing our participants to approach every situation with open hearts and minds, and to form relationships with clients, peers, and supervisors that are based on a belief that recognize the dignity and potential of all people. “Avodahniks” are then able to process their experiences with their bayit-mates (housemates) over Shabbat meals and daily interactions. Our Justice Fellowship brings together cohorts of young adults to learn about social justice through a Jewish lens as a community. Our goal is that our participants have the greatest possible direct impact on the thousands of people they work with and on the organizations they serve. In addition, our participants are transformed by their service and learning experiences into passionate and effective lifelong leaders for social change whose work for justice is rooted in and nourished by Jewish tradition.

According to the Pew Research Center’s 2013 Survey of US Jews, when asked what it means to be Jewish, one of the most common answers was “working for justice/equality.” We believe the Avodah model has been highly effective because of the meaningful connection it makes between Judaism and social justice. Eighty-five percent of our alumni remain in social justice work and the vast majority of members also report feeling more connected to Judaism. In addition, over the last 20 years, Avodah’s 1,000+ Jewish Service Corps members have provided $20 million in staff capacity to organizations fighting issues such as chronic poverty, homelessness, hunger, sex trafficking, and gun violence.

So, how do we nurture impassioned Jewish change-makers and foster this type of Jewish expression? Here
are some of the key concepts we embed in all our work:

1. **Being proximate to suffering is fundamental.** It’s essential to understand why people are suffering in our society in order to create change. As Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, says, “When we get close, we hear things that can’t be heard from afar. We see things that can’t be seen. And sometimes that makes the difference between acting justly and unjustly.” At Avodah, this means that our Service Corps members work with undocumented immigrants, incarcerated people, individuals and families of people who are homeless and hungry, and victims of sex trafficking.

2. **We all have the ability to make a difference in the world.** When asked what advice he had for young people, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can do our share to redeem the world despite all absurdities and all the frustration and all the disappointment.” At Avodah, we are exposing young Jews to the many ways they can make change in the world and then helping them figure out which way they can lean in to make a difference. We are investing in creating leadership capacity and leveraging that experience into a lifelong personal and professional commitment to social change.

3. **Being rooted in community makes a vital difference.** Avodah’s founder Rabbi David Rosenn speaks about how social change is inspired and sustained when people are a part of communities of moral courage and spiritual strength. Avodah focuses on the role of community for effective social justice work. Our Jewish Service Corps members live together in an intentional, pluralistic bayit (home) where they can discuss ideas, troubleshoot issues, forge lasting relationships through Shabbat meals and holiday celebrations, and process their work with a group of compassionate friends and housemates. Through our Justice Fellowship, we provide Jewish social justice professionals with an essential container for religious and secular learning, reflection, inspiration, and sustainability for lifelong social justice work over the long haul. As alumna Rebecca Mather says, “Intentional communities like those in Avodah give us the opportunity and challenge of living out the future we hope to build through our social justice work.”

4. **We need to aim for solutions rather than bandages.** At Avodah, we explore the systemic causes of poverty and injustice in our communities and country. We ask deep questions about how to create permanent solutions for the most pressing issues, including racism, poverty, hunger, and immigration, and analyze how these challenges manifest themselves across cities, communities, and institutions. For example, while soup kitchens are necessary, Avodah’s participants ask, “How do we create a country and a world where no human being will go hungry?” Shaul Elson, a 2018 Service Corps member, said that Avodah taught him to “spot so much more of the injustice threaded through daily life, a skill that is essential for progress.”

Avodah is an example of how Jews actualize their deep understanding of the link between social issues and their Jewish expression. Through their work, they use this knowledge to guide their professional impact. At the same time, the organizations they work for benefit from the investment of hours and passion of our members. It is a win-win situation for all involved. Ultimately, we hope this model and the work of many other Jewish and social justice organizations will result in permanent and far-reaching healing in the world that recognizes the value of human dignity for all people. For now, though, it is our duty to keep trying.

**Cheryl Cook** is executive director of Avodah. Under her leadership, Avodah is expanding to new cities and creating innovative models for the Jewish community to help alleviate poverty in the United States. Cheryl has close to 30 years of leadership experience in the Jewish community. Cheryl is a proud alumna of the JTS/ Columbia master’s program.
Positive Judaism: Wisdom for a Life of Happiness and Well-being

RABBI DARREN LEVINE, D. MIN

A woman named Rose approached me after a sermon I gave on Positive Judaism and said, “Rabbi, I have been a psychologist for 45 years. I am the child of Holocaust survivors and I am certain of one thing: There is nothing positive about Judaism. With all the anti-Semitism, the problems in Israel, and the guilt, Judaism and positivity simply cannot coexist.”

A woman of few words, she spoke her piece and went on with her evening, but her words stayed with me and I’ve internalized them deeply.

The truth is that Rose is not alone. Though I have a different narrative, many people of all ages and backgrounds feel similarly about their Judaism. Yet for me, Judaism offers a richness, a joy, a comfort, an authentic happiness. With its focus on family, community, social justice, education, and customs, Judaism has always been a positive force in my life. I believe our tradition guides us to live a life of purpose, meaning, and contribution—to reach upward and outward and to have the most positive impact on our lives and others.

Positive Judaism is a new direction in religious and spiritual living that highlights the parts of Jewish wisdom and practice that enhance well-being with the aim to increase happiness in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. No matter one’s background or life experience—observant or cultural Jews, atheists or believers, young or old, in good health or not—positive Judaism is a religious platform open to all. It moves the conversation from “survive” to “thrive,” placing human flourishing and communal well-being as the central purpose of Jewish living in the 21st century.

Research has shown that religious people report higher levels of happiness and well-being than those who are non-religious. The assumption is that religious people are happier because they are connected to a community where they can best express their most human values (optimism, hope, love, kindness, gratitude, etc.) and appreciate and develop their psychological strengths (bravery, courage, authenticity, love of learning, humility, forgiveness, etc.).

Rabbi Israel Salanter in the 19th century said, “First a person should put his own house together, then his town, and then the world.” This is the Jewish progression for creating goodness: from self to community and then from community to the world. But how do we activate this progression?

We see expressions of Positive Judaism throughout Jewish texts and our liturgy that Jews today are embracing. First is in expressing gratitude, which has been shown repeatedly to increase individual happiness. The Talmud recounts the tale of Nachum Ish Gamzu who was destitute, blind, and without the use of his limbs. Yet, no matter what happened to him, his response was always, “Gam zu l’tovah” (“And this is also for the good”). Similarly, the daily morning prayer called Modeh Ani captures the essence of being thankful: “I offer gratitude before you, living and Eternal One, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me.”

In addition to gratitude and individual well-being, Positive Judaism helps to increase communal well-being. Practicing Judaism is, by definition, a communal experience, and Martin Seligman’s well-being theory of PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment; discussed in the spring 2018 edition of Gleanings by Rabbi Jennifer Goldsmith) is fulfilled through Jewish living. The family Sabbath
dinner, central to Jewish living, is just one example of expressing, deepening, and expanding PERMA within a community and a family.

This weekly dinner, a “sanctuary in time,” to borrow a phrase from the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, can also be seen as a positive life intervention. A weekly experience of song, food, and rituals transmits tradition from one generation to the next to give a person, a family, and community a greater sense of connection and meaning in the larger world. OneTable has embraced the Shabbat dinner as a medium to build community and Jewish engagement, and demonstrate a flourishing Positive Judaism in action.

Lastly, striving for global well-being is found in the Jewish mystical teachings of tikkun olam, the Jewish call for repairing a broken world. For example, Jews are commanded to tithe, to give tzedakah. In their book, Happy Money, Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton show that charity increases well-being not only for the donor but also for the recipient. Jewish sages teach time and again, “Mitzvah goreret mitzvah” (“One good deed leads to another”). This is the Jewish interpretation of Dr. Barbara Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory for increasing positivity in the world.

So how does Positive Judaism work? I suggest here several guiding principles that are grounded in real life and real-world living:

1. Positive Judaism asserts that every person is “created in the Divine image” and deserves to live free and well. The purpose of life is to optimize well-being and happiness for self, family, community, and humanity. This is accomplished by observing holidays and life-cycle traditions, through study and prayer, and by developing personal virtues. This will encourage all people to take responsibility for their well-being by drawing on their natural talents and strengths.

2. Positive Judaism encourages caring, loving, and trusting personal relationships. We honor “love thy neighbor as thyself” and Judaism’s Golden Rule: “That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary, go and learn it.”

3. Positive Judaism encourages strong physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Daily exercise, good diet, low stress, and quality sleep are essential to well-being. In the words of Maimonides, “Maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of God.”

4. Positive Judaism encourages individuals to pursue work as an expression of their life purpose. People should be diligent about finding their unique life calling and find ways to work in their field of passion. Communities, schools, and organizations should invest resources to help people of all ages identify a career path that offers the greatest sense of accomplishment.

5. Positive Judaism encourages people to use their money to create well-being. Money should be used to expand well-being and happiness for one’s self and others. Spend money on education, culture, and experiences that deepen wisdom and relationships. Give to charities to create a just and fair world. The goal of Positive Judaism is not to have more but to become more.

6. Positive Judaism encourages people to fully participate and to create life-affirming, celebratory, and supportive faith communities. People need a place to expand their hearts and minds, to feel the support of others in difficult times, to provide a spiritual anchor for themselves and their families, and to contribute to something greater than themselves. On a local and global level, Jews should strive to connect intimately with klal Yisrael, the Jewish People.

7. Positive Judaism emphasizes human flourishing, life satisfaction, and happiness as the
pathways for a strong Jewish future. The joy and richness of Jewish tradition cannot survive on negativity. For too long, the narrative in the Jewish community has been about surviving destruction under the banner of “Never again!” minimizing the “threat” of intermarriage, and responding to anti-Semitism. There must be more to the Jewish project of the 21st century.

For people who are seeking to enhance their personal well-being, for leaders who want to guide their organizations to flourish and thrive, and for communities that seek to have a profound impact in the world, Positive Judaism offers a compelling framework for Jewish living in the 21st century.

**Rabbi Darren Levine, D. Min.** is the founding rabbi of Tamid: The Downtown Synagogue in New York City. He hosts the Positive Judaism podcast and his upcoming book, Positive Judaism: A Rabbi’s Guide to Well-being and Happiness, will be published by Behrman House in fall of 2019. Darren recently spearheaded the second-annual Positive Judaism Summit at the University of Pennsylvania. Resources for educators, clergy, and organizational leaders, and information from the summit can be found at www.positive-judaism.org.
Educating in Uncertain Times: Understanding the Changing Nature of Judaism in People’s Lives

DR. BILL ROBINSON

“The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.”

—William Gibson

In this issue of Gleanings, we asked a group of educators, scholars, and rabbis to share with us what they have glimpsed of the emerging future of Judaism and thus Jewish education in these uncertain times.

Rabbi Darren Levine offers us a vision of a Positive Judaism as “a new direction in religious and spiritual living that highlights the parts of Jewish wisdom and practice that enhance well-being with the aim to increase happiness in the lives of individuals, families, and communities . . . It moves the conversation from ‘survive’ to ‘thrive.’” He sees human flourishing and communal well-being as the central purpose of Jewish living in the 21st century. He works to unite the insights of positive psychology with Judaism, finding resources for well-being in the latter and, in so doing, changing the way we see Judaism in our lives—from a fixation on tragedy and survival to a source of happiness.

Cheryl Cook adds deeper purpose to this understanding by reminding us that Judaism sees the world as broken and thus in need of repair. “The field of Jewish social justice is a response to the brokenness of our world and a way to bring deep Jewish wisdom to that work.” She envisions a dialogue between Judaism and social justice work, in which the wisdom of Judaism can guide the practice of social justice. In turn, social justice as a site for the living of Jewish values renews the relevance of Judaism in our lives.

Third, Dr. Arielle Levites reminds us that even among those Jews who describe themselves as having “no religion,” there remains the desire for “sacred meaning and connection”:

The fastest growing religious group among American adults today are “Religious Nones.” Yet, at the same time that Americans increasingly describe themselves as having “no religion,” they also increasingly describe themselves as “spiritual.” How can we make sense of this apparent paradox? What might it mean for American Jews, the American Jewish community, and the field of Jewish education to engage with Jews who do not describe themselves as religious, yet seek sacred meaning and connection?

She asserts that we must provide space for multiple “new on-ramps” for Jews who don’t and won’t enter through the traditional doors.

Finally, two of our authors point to the centrality of relationships in helping Jews to find happiness, relevancy, and meaning in Judaism and Jewish life in ways that speak to their own proclivities and aspirations. Maiya Chard-Yaron talks of the way Hillels do this, for example, through “coffee dates.”

I am proud to say that Hillel has been at the forefront of this model for over a decade, focusing on individual Jewish expression and relationship-building to connect with students, oftentimes over a cup of coffee. This approach enables students to feel that the Jewish experience on campus is focused on them as individuals—that their story matters in what can feel like an overwhelming sea of people on campus.
It encourages Hillels on campuses across the globe to design Jewish experiences in partnership with students, directly responding to the needs, questions, and interests of the intended participants.

And Eliana Light suggests that if we "use the word 'God' less, we can talk about God more":

When I see those mountains, God is something that is felt. Once we name and try to describe the experience of God, we run into problems of language, and descriptions of G!D in our sacred text that may or may not fit with our own experience. For too many, “spirituality” and Judaism have little to do with each other. Talking about God in a more expansive way can bridge what we feel in our lives to our sacred heritage, making room in our synagogues for radical amazement, gratitude, and deep connection that many people are searching for.

What I also took from her article is that if we talk about God less, we can focus more on cultivating individual relationships with the divine, the sacred, or the transcendent.

Dr. Jack Wertheimer is ambivalent about these changes. At its worse, he sees many of the changes in Judaism and Jewish education as efforts to please the consumer. This is certainly a pervasive problem in contemporary Jewish life, yet I prefer (perhaps with greater tolerance) to see the authors in this issue of Gleanings as offering a more subtle appreciation of emergent Judaism. For these authors, Judaism and Jewish education ought to respond to the changing values and life circumstances of Jews. Unlike a consumerist approach, we should not seek to fulfill the immediate needs of our Jewish “customers,” but rather kindle their deepest aspirations. In this, I believe we all agree.

To craft a Jewish education that does this, Wertheimer puts forth an important consideration. Over the last few decades, “the focus of these educational trends it would seem is primarily upon the ‘how’ of Jewish education and sidesteps the ‘why’ and ‘what’ questions.” I am in agreement with Wertheimer—it’s the latter questions that are most vital. We can’t just tinker with the pedagogical forms; we need to play with the content of Jewish education. Moreover, the “why” and the “what” of Jewish education cannot be predetermined by tradition or the teacher. Rather, meaningful and compelling answers (that are relevant today) can only emerge from an ongoing dialogue of teacher, learners, and the text/rituals of our tradition.

In the first chapter of Wertheimer’s important new book, The New American Judaism, he describes a fundamental change that has taken place among the Jewish People over the last several decades:

What is articulated here is a complete rejection of the notion that to be Jewish involves the acceptance of some externally imposed commandments. The conception of Judaism as a package of expectations, let alone divine commandments, seems to be alien to the current world-view. Rather, internally generated rights and wrongs are all that matter.

It is not unreasonable to see this as an organic outgrowth of Mordecai Kaplan’s Reconstructionism and Judith Plaskow’s (or, more recently, Rachel Adler’s) feminist critiques. While radical at the time, both sources have become well-accepted across the vital religious center of Judaism and have generated tremendous ritual innovation, communal revitalization, and personal re-engagement. Today’s Jews are seeking to “remix” Judaism in ways that help them to find greater relevance in Judaism and, in so doing, greater happiness in their lives. Not too bad a motivation.

Yet, we must remain vigilant that this re-mixing doesn’t deplete Judaism of its counter-cultural power. For instance, our society seems to privilege the fulfillment of needs (or rights) over obligations. Yet, while counter-cultural in contemporary American society, taking on and meeting one’s obligations is truly essential to our personal and the world’s well-being. We cannot settle for a Judaism that is simply a means of fulfilling
short-term needs and fleeting pleasures. If Jewish education does not cultivate within its learners a sense of obligation to others and the capacities needed to live in accordance with one’s commitments (even or perhaps especially) of their own making, then we have failed.

Several of our Gleanings authors point the way, nurturing obligations that emerge out of the learner’s commitment to a discipline of practice. Like yoga, meditation, and Tai Chi, let’s see Judaism as offering us a set of practices through which we can cultivate within ourselves the dispositions (middot) we need to live happy, relevant, and meaningful lives.

Rabbi David Jaffe describes how the practice of Mussar achieves this, cultivating such middot as “humility, patience, respect, trust, courage, and faith.” Participants study Jewish texts on these middot in small groups, reflect upon their attempts to live in accordance with these virtues, and take on traditional (as well as modern, secular) practices that nurture these virtues within them.

Rabbi Myriam Klotz deepens these insights further, asking, “How might we convey or teach middot (Jewish values) or character traits such as kavod (respect), shtikah (silence), savlanut (patience), or rachamim (compassion)?” The answer for her is that we literally need to embody them, so that “these qualities shine through our eyes, our postures, the ways in which we refrain from infringing on another’s physical space, and the ways in which we invite others to feel what is happening in our heart.” Beyond the acceptance of obligation, we come to embody Judaism in our everyday lives.

If this is the emergent future that we seek to make more evenly distributed across the field of Jewish education, then we must wrestle with a substantial challenge before us. As Jaffe articulates clearly:

To teach any of these Jewish spiritual disciplines well, we must practice them ourselves first. Imagine trying to teach a Jewish text without first deeply engaging with it, asking our own questions, and thinking through the implications. Such a session would be superficial, indeed.

Noting that Klotz would say we need to embody them first, I would add that teachers cannot inspire and guide their learners in spiritual practices if they haven’t taken on daily spiritual practices of their own. We need not be experts, but we need to have walked the path. In that way, we would better understand the struggles of our learners and be able to share our own experiences. Then, together we will work to glean and adapt from our heritage practices that will make our lives happier, more meaningful, and more responsive to the world around us.

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