



Boxing outside the box

By Shoshana Gibbor

As an organization that prides itself in being the meeting point on campus for meaningful Jewish education, Hillel has been dramatically impacted by nearly three “unusual” academic years, where in-person gatherings had to be reimaged in the virtual landscape. The signature pillars of our communities are the way that we gather: for Shabbat, for holidays, in learning cohorts, and as a campus community more broadly. The absence of physical gatherings has required educators at all levels to up their game, more thoughtfully integrating experience design into all elements of our work so that we can continue to provide the same caliber of holistic education that we’ve become known for.

After a decade working at MIT Hillel, I have a sense of what works for my students. But these last two years, I had to discover new ways to provide top-notch immersive, meaningful Jewish learning on campus. Using my training from Masterclass: Israel — Hillel’s six-month Israel education fellowship for educators — and a willingness to approach my work with a fresh set of eyes, I learned how to “box outside the box.”

Following many of our peer organizations in shipping boxes to our students in lieu of in-person gatherings, I’ve learned that boxes aren’t merely “care packages,” but rather “experience kits” that enable high-level, experiential education. As the Delta variant proliferates, extending the unpredictability of the future, and as students prepare to depart campus for Thanksgiving break, I am reflecting on what “boxing outside the box” taught me about remote education.

Like all education, an experience kit must have a defined purpose.

As “Rabbi” Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering*, says, hosts need to have a clear vision for their gatherings. The same is true for an experience kit. The purpose of the kit should be clear, and everything inside of it should feed that purpose.

For example, for Yom Haatzmaut, we wanted to provide students with a self-guided experiential learning opportunity around diversity in Israel. In such a polarized landscape, and with many students whom we hadn't yet met because of the pandemic, our goal was to spark conversation. Designed for a dynamic and disparate student audience, we believed that engaging all five senses would provide a platform to thoughtfully explore Israel's complex landscapes. We included elements that directly connected back to sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. For sound, we shared a link to an Israeli playlist that was inclusive of a wide range of melodies, lyrics, contexts and interpretative meanings. We noted “Music can have a profound emotional impact on us. Whose stories do you listen to when you encounter Israel?”

Our purpose, then, was to strike a balance between thoughtful provocation (critical thought) and joyous pride in celebrating Israel, all centered around our core themes of identity, belonging and community.

Hit them with Hello.

A good experience begins with hello. So should a good experience kit. Not only does a welcome message give a personal touchpoint, but it also reminds students we care about you, we're thinking of you.

From an educational perspective, this is the most important item within the box. It describes the intention behind each item and is an opportunity to share the message and takeaways you hope the box will spark. Practically, this includes a combination of descriptions and reflective journaling prompts. The welcome card is their “tour guide” through the box.

Design for Use and Interactivity.

In good learning environments, students aren't merely the consumers of educational experience, they are active partners in it. Experience kits, then, should be interactive. Sending some swag is okay, but the majority of the box must be integrated into the program itself. Remember: You're not sending a gift. You're enabling an educational experience.

For Yom Haatzmaut, we sent a journal in which they could respond to artfully crafted reflection prompts, such as "Smell has the power to jog our memory: what scent(s) conjure up home for you?" along with an explanation and sample of *mentha spicata* (nana), a Mediterranean spice prized by Israelis. These activities could be completed independently or virtually with our community.

This framing not only clarified why we put nana in the box, but it also sparked a thoughtful reflection for students that related to our theme of Israel's ethnically diverse landscape.

Tie it with a Bow.

While you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, thoughtful design is important. You want students to feel excited by your kit, in the way that you'd want them to feel excited to walk into your physical space.

If you're like me, the excitement of getting a package is dimmed when the insides have been shaken up or broken. To avoid this, pick a box that fits your contents, and fill any remaining space with crinkle paper. As a bonus, you can select paper that matches the theme of your contents, such as blue and white for Yom Haatzmaut.

When students open the box, make sure the first thing they see is your welcome card. In design terms, your welcome card should be aesthetically pleasing, warm and informative. Use an online platform like Canva to create something artful and unique. Think about style, color, font and format. All these elements create a "look and feel"

that should match your purpose. To see the Canva templates used for our Yom Ha'atzmaut box, [click here](#).

Shackled by Shekels.

Here's the elephant in the room: sending kits costs money. While you can curate thoughtful experience kits on a limited budget, the shipping and packaging costs alone can be prohibitive. There are ways to be cost-efficient in your boxes, but you can also think about curating "digital boxes" using the same best practices described [here](#).

For example, when journals were beyond our budget, we were planning to design reflection questions in a google doc and then send students a QR code or TinyURL to a digital journal in its place.

Cost isn't the only limiting factor. It took our whole team 20 hours to design, package, and ship 180 boxes to students (and we're a relatively small campus!). Without a robust staff team with the capacity to invest significant time in "boxing," this approach might not be feasible. You can, however, still, take these best practices and integrate them into Zoom gatherings, emails or other digital materials that you send your students. Designing education should always be purposeful, welcoming and interactive — regardless of your platform.

Defining purpose, creating a threshold for participants to cross over and a thoughtful welcome into a class or programmatic space are steps that I am still thinking through intentionally when designing experiences for my students as they return to in-person events on campus. Whether you are creating in-person, virtual or hybrid programming for your audience, taking the time to break down your program in these ways may help you design "outside the box" too!

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