

## Redesigning Jewish Education *through the lens of Federation*

*This blog post reflects an evolution in thinking that began in [this essay](#) and was continued in [this essay](#). Interested readers can find more details in both pieces.*

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In 2017, my family visited family in Seattle for a week and as is our tradition, visited the Eliot Bay Bookstore. We settled into the children's section just as story time was starting—perfect timing, I thought, for my five year old niece and three year old son. By happy accident we had stumbled on a PJ Library program with a Jewish book, songs in Hebrew, and ASL—a true Jewish experience for a preschooler. As he danced and sang, the experience layered for my son the Hebrew he hears at preschool and at home and the books he also reads in both places, along with the Jewish community he experiences at synagogue. For 30 minutes, his Jewishness was woven into his everyday life, not something reserved for private experiences or uniquely Jewish places. All the more so for my niece, who had a Jewish experience that is too rare in her life in any setting.

I write and talk about this story a lot because in my mind, this single experience is the ballgame. In these few minutes and in the repeated PJ Library Song and Story programs happening throughout the Greater Seattle area, the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle demonstrates the role of Federations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: To seed, stimulate, support, and implement the infrastructure of 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish community, to work through Federation to reinvent the ways that Jews get to engage with Jewish life, to explore what Judaism is and means to them, and to put into place infrastructure, systems, that create new kinds of Jewish experiences for and with people on a community-wide scale. And, our work is to reinvent Federations themselves so that they can do this work even better, even in an environment that is ever-increasingly challenging to our work, helping Federations become organizations that can rewire community to engage people in ways that make true sense in our networked world.

This blog post dives into all of these themes in greater detail, discussing:

- The world that we're responding to—the reason we're here;
- The Jewish educational infrastructure of our future;
- And what Federation "engagement" work means for any of this.

### **Where Are We?**

It's not a *chidush*, an innovative idea, to observe that the world has changed. And still, the scope of the shift is the reason for this discussion. For our purposes, this is a different world than the one that birthed our current system of Jewish education. We have gone:

- From organizations ..... To networks  
*Where once we got things done through formal structures and now we get things done through informal—but often deep!—human connections*
- From, *kol yisrael*, particular ethnic attachments ..... To *kol yoshvei tevel*, empathy for all peoples

*Where we all once put our own community first—but now are eager to prioritize the underdog*

- From anonymous hierarchy ..... To the familiarity and immediacy of the internet  
*Where we once saw portraits on walls of our leaders and now choose who we follow and read online*
- From respect for power ..... To expectations of meaning  
*Where organizations once cultivated respect for authority by mere status and now are held in relationship only when they offer meaning in a changing world*
- From one true path ..... To options and continual choice  
*Where we once saw a single and well-traveled road through Jewish educational experiences and now the world demands a customizable journey for each learner from within an array of diverse choices, in life more broadly and in Jewish life specifically*
- From answers owned by religious leaders ..... To a competitive landscape in the meaning space  
*Where the weekly ideas of religious leadership were once enough and now, feeling that every system is unstable, we search for inspiration everywhere.*

That Jews will do Jewish activities because they're Jewish, out of inherited loyalty and lack of choice, simply is no longer true for many Jews. Most specifically, a world where all Jews had uniform Jewish experiences—religious school or day school, becoming bar and bat mitzvah, engaging with youth group, and so on—has faded.

And yet, Jews—like most humans—are eager to make sense of a world in which they feel powerless (“volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity,” [says the army](#)). They'll turn to any organization, project, or product that helps them and their children thrive, despite the unanswerable questions that we face about our world's future.

This is where Federation comes in.

### **Federations' Engagement Agenda**

Federations are not fundraising organizations (any more than are the great resource development machines of universities or hospitals). We raise funds in order to fulfill a mission that emphasizes enriching lives, in dialogue with the Jewish narrative. This means bringing people together

*Build opportunities for Jewish exploration.      Create community.      Enrich lives.*

into community—helping them to feel comfort, safety, and meaning, to have a richer life more filled with *shlemut*, with wholeness, because they get to live life with others (“It's not good for man to live alone,” God told Adam.) It means designing structural opportunities—like Seattle's PJ Library Song and Storytime—that allow people to meet other people while exploring Jewish time, ideas, and memory. It means engaging people directly and it means building engagement opportunities across the broader

Jewish institutional network. Fundraising can be a big chunk of what we do and how many of our employees spend their time. But we can't mistake fundraising as the end in itself. It is not the whole of our organizational mission, nor is a moment with a donor only about a request for funds.

Federations adopted engagement initiatives in a time of shifting fundamentals for Federations. If shrinking donor bases were in the foreground of this decision, two new and critically important truths were in the background:

- That most North American Jews are loosely connected to their or their families' Jewishness at best, and so we have to inspire people to become activated Jews before we can inspire them to become activated donors.
- That people want relational engagement, which allows them to be genuine with other people—humble, personal, and vulnerable—and to be inspired by true, deep, and lasting meaning.

If we are to mobilize resources to enrich lives, if we are to expand the number of people invested in Federation, if we are to focus on more than only those already giving or on major gifts, we need to respond to and play toward these truths. In this context, Federations' engagement work isn't an activity from the corner of the organization. It's a frame for the future.

### **Implications for Jewish "Education"**

In 2018, Federations often have broad and deep engagement agendas, frequently centering on PJ Library, often including NextGen (Young Leadership/ 20s-30s), often including One Happy Camper initiatives, sometimes also including an initiative unique to their community that may focus on teens, Baby Boomers, or interfaith couples and families. What these initiatives have in common is that they are targeted toward those not (yet) engaged with traditional Jewish institutions, connecting people personally to new Jewish opportunities in and outside of institutions, often through small gatherings and personal interactions rather than through large events. They create opportunities for people to explore the relevance of Jewish wisdom to their own lives in the context of safe peer relationships.

Federations used to only do "education," and it revolved around financial investments in preschool and day school and support for religious school. (When asked about their Jewish education work, some Federation leaders will talk only about day schools.) This system of Jewish education, modeled after (North) American education practices, assumed that students—while they needed knowledge and practice and even some deepening of commitment—would always start their learning career already in relationship with Judaism. They would always, fundamentally, be American Jews.

But today, enrollment is decreasing in traditional Jewish educational programs across North America and the concept of schooling—inside *and* outside of Jewish life—is shifting.<sup>1</sup> In the previous century, restricted to the classroom, the concept of Jewish "education" became reduced to goals of literacy and practice. Today, we need to redefine the very word "education." Now—perhaps always, but certainly now—it is a process of human growth, of striving, of becoming, all in the context of the Jewish narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the transformation of school, see [this](#) RSA Animates video and explore the [High Tech High School](#) network.

It is learning Jewish, exploring Jewish, and not just living Jewish, but living humanly, imbued by Jewish values and engaged in Jewish behaviors.

This makes the initiatives that we often consider to be engagement, actually initiatives of education. Each is or should be an encounter with Judaism—Jewish wisdom, time, and memory—in the context of a relationship that helps a learner thrive. What happens in a synagogue afterschool program and what happens in PJ Library can be complementary versions of the same thing.

To spell this out, Jewish education of the future is:

- Diverse: In traditional settings, including synagogues and day schools, at home (PJ Library), and in public (storytimes).
- Rooted in doing: Experiential and play or activity based: In schools this looks like project-based learning and teachers-as-designers; in early childhood this looks like Reggio Emilia; for parents this looks like a playgroup; for Baby Boomers it looks like service.
- Life-based: Focused on students' growth as people; starting from real questions and not from Judaism. ([Source sheet](#) as example: Is one permitted to attack a white supremacist?)
- Relational, with teachers as combination role models, mentors, pastoral counselors—imparting content, but in a much larger and more complex context of human questions and relationship.
- Radically accessible: To those raised inside of and completely without Jewish community, to Jews and non-Jews alike, to the children of intermarriage and their children.

### Implications for Jewish “Education”: Distributing the Future

The good news is that this isn't totally foreign to our Jewish educational landscape. North American Jewish organizations—leaders and educators—have been experimenting with these principles for some time. As science fiction pundit William Gibson famously said, The future is already here—it's just not distributed yet.

This kind of educational landscape includes the following:

- Content in networks (Hillel International's language). **Peer connectors** organizing their friends—in twenty-something and parent and LGBTQ and single parent and grade school and baby boomer communities—into groups that meet around issues, activities, and Jewish time (for Shabbat, Havdalah, and holidays), with sophisticated **Jewish educators** who are also spiritual mentors, role models, experiential facilitators,
- A **diverse landscape** of options, in and outside of synagogues. More day camps with high Jewish content (one week and multi-week), more incentives for overnight camps, more Sunday programs, more family programs, more retreats. Service opportunities for teens and for families. Synagogues that facilitate any of these opportunities, with their clergy serving as inspiring and mentoring educators, opportunities speaking to children and families, and parents organizing *havurot* into complementary play groups. Virtual opportunities that educate generally and experientially (via video, for example) and personally and directly (via self-moving activities and games).

- The cultivation of **spiritual entrepreneurs**. Work by Federation to identify and support those who can create opportunities for people to come together in prayer-full communities. This includes support of those employed by synagogues and also those who are building new kinds of communities.
- The building of **centers of learning that animate Torah**. Our day schools can be our best opportunities to reinvigorate learning for adults and for children. They should be ground zero for experimentation with the blending of Judaism and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, [rooting Jewish learning in doing](#), facilitating groups (networks) of learners led in inquiry by their best educators, offering the community a vision of Torah that leads us through our hardest moments.

In this context, Federation’s mandate is to design, to architect, a new infrastructure of Jewish education, to:

- Lead the messy work of change from one set of functions, purposes, and organizational mandates to another; help organizational leaders mourn for what was; manage and hold fear and doubt; continually put forth a vision of what is to come.
- Incentivize with grants.
- Initiate new projects.
- Provide technical assistance to burgeoning leaders and projects.
- Build collaborations where necessary to do all of the above.

Federations must ensure that their communities reflect a multiplicity of options that are rich enough to give many more people more varied choices to connect and engage, to start and continue their Jewish journey.

“Engagement” may have been brought into the Federation system for disparate reasons, but it offers us a window into the future of Jewish life. We can help Jewish experiences be rooted in relationship, the work of Federation can (continue to) be the building of holy community contextualized by vibrant Jewish ideas, and engagement the experimental space where we understand the implications of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the American Judaism of the 20<sup>th</sup>. [It is not in heaven](#)—the ideas and the future are on the ground, in our own hands, and we have only opportunity before us.

#### **FOR FURTHER READING**

[What are Federations doing in the engagement business?](#) (unpublished, Beth Cousens)

[Federations and this moment in American Jewish life](#)(unpublished, Beth Cousens)

[I don’t solicit on the first date](#) (JFNA blog, Miryam Rosenzweig)

[Creating a soulful organization](#) (JFNA blog, Aryeh Ben David)

[The power of belonging](#) (JFNA blog, Wendy Verba)

[Why Federation engagement matters](#) (JFNA blog, Jay Sanderson)

[The signs of marching Jews](#) (JFNA blog, David Bryfman)

[Creating a culture of engagement and an age of partnership](#) (JFNA blog, Rob Kovach)

[Opportunities abound](#) (JFNA publication)

[Adults emerging](#) (JFNA publication)