The Power of Optimal Jewish Experiences:
Experiential Jewish education a decade after Chazan

Introduction

From the first time reading Barry Chazan’s paper (2003) I knew that here we had a clear, defensible philosophy of informal Jewish education upon which we in this field could build a more coherent educational enterprise. As a close colleague I have applauded his bringing a singular clarity to what educators can aim to accomplish and his calling this field to a higher purpose than simply increasing the numbers of Jews ‘doing Jewish’ in a dizzying explosion of programmatic options.

In this essay I will explore what that higher purpose might look like. By focusing on experiential Jewish learning and how to challenge participants to go deeper in learning about the complexity of Jewish life, I will offer Jewish educators illustrative examples of how to design programs that maximize the educational value of working experientially with their participants.

Starting With Chazan

Rereading Chazan’s (2003) essay, I find that these key points still stand out for me:

1. While informal Jewish education takes place in multiple settings and is often identified with the best-known of those settings (camps, Israel trips, etc.), Chazan contends it is best thought of as an approach to Jewish education rather than being identified with any particular settings or methods.

2. Informal Jewish education is poorly named because “informal” suggests both a high degree of informality and an opposition to formal education. Yet, Chazan cautions against seeing those as defining the field. “Informal” is not a style of working with people, but an approach to how that work should be carried out in many different settings including Jewish schools.

3. Informal education is often identified with feeling rather than cognition and with fun rather than serious learning. While Chazan embraces the role that fun and feelings play in informal education, he also believes that serious cognitive learning has its place and would reject easy dichotomies between feeling and thinking, fun and learning. This approach includes all these elements in interactive configurations.
4. Informal education is often thought of as taking place spontaneously as educators seize on teachable moments. While informal educators do need to seize upon such moments, Chazan emphasizes that much of the work of informal educators involves serious preparation to structure the environment so that the teachable moment can work effectively. What people call “magic moments” actually result from good educational planning by well-trained, thoughtful professionals.

5. Informal education begins with a concern and a respect for the learner’s experience and proceeds by helping learners connect their experiences in building meaningful worldviews. In a Jewish context this involves creating cultural contexts that inspire learners to identify with positive role models, connect with networks of peers and create for themselves experiential models of what a compelling Jewish life might look like.

While all these points remain central, I have focused my research primarily on the fifth: the nature of experiential Jewish learning. I have tried to remain faithful to Dewey’s (1938) fundamental insight that while many experiences might delight us, only a handful prove to be educative. Educative, or optimal, experiences build a chain of learning that in their cumulative effect change the ways we both understand and act in the world. I have been drawn to exploring the ways that informal Jewish settings—such as residential summer camps—can provide these types of optimal experiences for their participants (Reimer, in press).

**Distinguishing Informal from Experiential Jewish Education**

While Chazan has made this significant contribution, when Bryfman and I (2008) looked at how the term “informal education” is used in the general education literature, we found that it does not map well to Chazan’s usage. Even Chazan has acknowledged that the term “informal” throws people off in understanding this approach to education. We therefore prefer to use “informal Jewish education” as a broad umbrella term to refer to the familiar settings of Jewish education outside of schools. We use “experiential Jewish education” to describe the transactive process between educators and learners in learning environment that promotes experientially based Jewish learning (Bryfman, 2011). Yet we join Chazan in advocating that experiential Jewish educators learn and practice the approach to education he has put forward.

Fundamental to this approach is the claim that experiential educators should aim higher and not settle for what is commonly viewed as success. What would it mean to aim higher? Imagine an experiential educator planning a shabbaton for high school students. So much of the planning for this event needs to focus on establishing a workable Shabbat routine that the teens can enter and joyfully inhabit. An educator might justifiably argue, “If I can just get these teens to turn off their electronic gadgets for this day and enter into the spirit of Shabbat, I will have succeeded.” And I would agree: she has succeeded in
setting up a socializing environment that teaches this group to experience a meaningful Shabbat together.

That is a wonderful first step. But what if this group is part of a high school program that will have them attending annual Shabbatonim over the course of three years? How will this educator deepen their Shabbat experience as they move from year to year? Will it be enough for them to repeat the same routine each time so they get more accustomed to its rhythms or does the educator also have a responsibility to introduce new learning elements that help to immerse them into more complex patterns of Shabbat celebration and observance? Following Chazan’s advocating for “a curriculum of Jewish experiences and values” (2003, p6.), I believe that to be true to the goals of experiential Jewish education, she needs to be continuously aiming to deepen the participants’ Jewish learning by introducing new and more complex elements of Jewish living (Reimer, 2007).

What are examples of deepening a Shabbat experience? This will of course depend on the group and its background, but let’s imagine a community day school 10th grade class that is planning for its second annual shabbaton. The educators –perhaps working with a student planning committee- might review what this grade most enjoyed a year earlier and ask: How can we build on those experiential successes and yet deepen them? Let’s imagine they remember a song session that everyone loved. They might then ask: How can we introduce z’mirot (traditional Shabbat songs) that are new to most of the group, but which we think they can learn to sing and enjoy? Can someone briefly introduce these and explain their meaning and background as the group is about to learn to sing them? Can we make people more aware of what z’mirot are and why they have become integral to the Shabbat experience? Can we design this learning so that what we teach becomes more musically complex as we move from song to song?

The example is simple, but the principle is worth articulating. A socializing goal is one that reinforces what people have already learned and helps to make that more part of their on-going routine. It uses the pleasure of repeating the familiar in the company of supportive peers as a way of winning greater allegiance to this group and its norms. As such, socializing is essential to maintaining Jewish life by enhancing a sense of “I know how to be part of this community and enjoy belonging to it” (Sales and Saxe, 2004). But educational goals aim for one step deeper. They aim to move participants beyond the familiar to explore and learn aspects of Jewish life that are new and challenging. They push the envelope of comfort and direct the learners to ask, “What more could I learn that will make my Jewish life more complex, but also more satisfying” (Reimer, 2007).

Building experiential Jewish education around the dual system of socialization and educational goals more effectively insures that what we offer speaks to participants’ need for being part of something larger as well as their need to pursue their own interests and talents in ways that are more challenging and yet truly enjoyable; to even dare for what Maslow (1970) has called “peak experiences” within their Jewish realm.
Learning from Experience

The field of informal Jewish education primarily focuses on planning programs and events. We are familiar with these: the field trip, the Purim bash, the Sukkah party, the Israel experience and the camp season. Professionals invest great energy in marketing these events and insure that the many participants will walk away feeling, “I enjoyed that Jewish event and would welcome more of those.”

Professionals justify the energy invested by saying, “Jews in North America need the experience of being together with their peers in a Jewish environment where they enjoy doing Jewish together. That is what builds Jewish identity.” And there is much empirical evidence to support the claim that when Jews voluntarily associate with one another in events that are recognized as being Jewish in nature, they tend to identify more clearly as members of the Jewish community (Cohen and Kotler-Berkowitz, 2004, Horowitz, 2000).

But we who are deeply influenced by the work of John Dewey (1938) will never be satisfied with this formulation of the goals of informal Jewish education. For Dewey does not view human experience as a collection of isolated events, but as forming a potentially connected network of learning opportunities. Dewey reminds us that the experience need not and should not end with the original event. No matter how rich a program may be and how many wonderful experiences the participants may have, the most significant educational questions are: What comes next? How do these experiences build towards the next set of Jewish experiences? What tools are provided for the participants to keep their Jewish learning alive? For the ultimate goal is not to keep people coming back for more programs, but launching them on a learning journey through which they will become more skilled and engaged with Jewish living (Schuster, 2003).

The crucial distinction is between having an experience and learning from that experience. We have many experiences, but we only learn from a few where the conditions promote a type of reflection that continues over time. More typically people seek to replicate the pleasurable experiences they have had. If these are associated with being Jewish, people will tend to identify being Jewish with having good times and come to identify as members of a voluntary Jewish community.

But a communal strategy of simply providing good times can set low expectations. Its implicit message is: “As long as the Jewish community provides you with pleasurable experiences, you will continue to identify with that community.” It can place people in a passive and dependent position waiting for their next shot of Jewish excitement. It does not teach that living a dynamic Jewish life is more like a participatory “sport” in which each participant needs to be upgrading his or her skill sets in order to get the most out of this “game.”

If active Jewish living is the ultimate goal of experiential Jewish education, I am suggesting that from the start educators need to build into Jewish experiences an element
of challenge. For challenge denotes the educator’s capacity to design an active experience that simultaneously captures the participants’ interest and yet asks that they stretch themselves in unanticipated ways that motivate them to work with concentrated effort to achieve the goals of the exercise (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Challenge has been a common theme in outdoor adventure education and now needs to become a corner stone for designing learning-based experiences in the Jewish community. These experiences are designed to build upon participants’ interests, satisfy their need for belonging and yet challenge them to actively pursue their Jewish learning as an inherent part of the experience (Bryfman, 2008).

Few people wake up each morning asking, “What risks can I take today to further my learning?” Educational risk-taking needs a context that teaches that if learners are willing to take certain risks, they will be supported. In most cases educators need to initiate learners into the quest after challenging goals and provide a safe and productive path of risk taking (Peters, 1973). To illustrate how educators can initiate young people into a quest for Jewish challenge, I will present two case studies of how educators have designed challenging Jewish learning experiences that proved to be educative in Dewey’s sense of the term.

David Hartman and getting in over your head

My first encounter with challenging Jewish learning experiences dates back to my being invited by a high school teacher to an end-of-the-summer retreat sponsored by Yeshiva University. This Talmud teacher had noticed that I was rebelling against the strictures of Orthodoxy and generously offered me a scholarship to attend this four-day retreat that was designed primarily for college students to meet with exciting young thinkers in that Orthodox world. He had the confidence that though I was young I could handle the challenge of this program.

The retreat took place at a Jewish summer camp and began on a Thursday. As Shabbat approached a palpable excitement arose among the participants: Hartman was coming. I had no idea who Hartman was; but on Shabbat evening after services and the meal, we all entered the hall to hear Hartman speak. David Hartman, it turned out, was a young rabbi from Montreal who had already developed a reputation in these circles as an exciting thinker and brilliant speaker. With everyone else, I listened with rapt attention to his talk. But I did not understand a word he said: he was speaking -as it were- a foreign language. Afterwards I would remember only two words: “Heschel” and “revelation.” Hartman repeated those often; yet I did not know who Heschel was and what revelation meant.

1 David Hartman –then a young rabbi-would go on to become a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the founding director of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and the author of many books on Jewish thought, the most famous of which is, A living covenant: The innovative spirit in traditional Judaism (1997).

2 Hartman was talking about the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel and most probably his book God in search of man (1959) in which Heschel presents a striking account of how God reveals God’s presence.
Though I understood little, I sensed that Hartman was speaking about ideas, big ideas, big Jewish ideas, and the room was alive with excitement. It did not matter to me that I could not grasp those ideas; what did matter was that such ideas filled the air and I could feel the passion with which Hartman spoke and the effect that his passion had on my older peers. I had never before been in a room filled with that passion for ideas.

After the talk I listened to my peers’ conversations. What moved me was how deeply they cared about Hartman’s ideas. Ideas were compelling to them and I wished to join in such conversations. At fifteen I could not, but witnessing these conversations had a deep effect on me. I went home and bought my first books of philosophy and tried to read them. I felt that what I had experienced put me on a path towards a destination that I could barely glimpse. Yet I needed to prepare myself for that journey.

Looking back I am proud of that fifteen year old who did not back down from the challenge of making sense of a complex experience that could have been overwhelming. I can now see that this encounter provided me with a mental model of what is possible and a desire to recreate that model in other contexts. It would take time to find those contexts and to understand the ideas that Hartman was engaging. But this singular experience pointed me in a direction and lit a flame of excitement. It accomplished what I think experiential Jewish education at its best can do: open participants to the possibility of living actively in a Jewish world where they will undertake the challenge of trying to understand Judaism in all its marvelous complexity.

Significant moments like this do not happen in a vacuum. They often happen as part of a well-designed deliberate learning environment that is set up to promote such experiential learning. In this instance, I felt welcomed by my older peers and included in their conversation. Hartman’s talk was anticipated all day Friday and came only after the community had gathered together to celebrate Kabbalat Shabbat and the first Shabbat meal. Welcome, anticipation and community-celebration were the building blocks that prepared us for the revelatory moment of Hartman’s talk and gave me the courage to see that ‘getting in over my head’ was actually an invitation to future growth (Kegan, 1994).

**Staging Oliver at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin**

I encountered a second vivid example of educators’ creating a challenging Jewish learning environment during the summer of 2008 while doing research at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. I witnessed there a unit of 14-year-old campers preparing for and performing their edah play, the Broadway musical, Oliver. Several features of this performance struck me. First, the entire performance was in Hebrew. I had been walking around that camp and not hearing campers speaking Hebrew. Yet here they were –this

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3 I am thankful to my colleague Rabbi Bradley Solmsen for this formulation.
4 I am thankful to Rabbi David Soloff, the executive director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, for supporting and participating in this research.
group of 14 years –staging this lovely musical in Hebrew. Second, virtually the whole edah was performing on stage. This was not the work of the few kids who knew Hebrew well and could sing and dance. Third, when the performance was over, the campers and staff together launched into such a joyous celebration that you might have thought they were a team that had just won the national championship.

I wondered: How did the camp educators motivate this large group of American teens to take on the challenge of mastering all the Hebrew needed for the dialogue and songs of Oliver? Why were these teens willing to do this when in most other Jewish camps plays are regularly performed in English? And why did completing the performance occasion such an ecstatic reaction by both campers and staff?

We cannot understand this single performance outside the cultural context in which it took place. This camp has a long tradition of staging Broadway musicals in Hebrew. In fact, when you enter the main social hall, you can glimpse a wall of plaques that memorialize each of the unit productions that have been staged since 1980. These 14 year olds had been witness to the productions of their older peers since they were the youngest campers and they had anticipated that their turn would come to perform in Hebrew. They would be very proud when their plaque went up on the wall and they joined the generations of Ramah campers who have staged such plays in Hebrew. They could also anticipate that in the coming two summers they would be performing other plays in Hebrew and that each summer the challenge will grow incrementally with their maturing talents. For the high point each summer is when the oldest campers perform and then the celebration I witnessed is exceeded by several decibels.

Yet it is not always the case that campers respond with such enthusiasm to camp traditions. Some traditions grow tired and fade in their allure. The educators at this Ramah certainly rely on the power of camp tradition, but they also wisely have updated and enhanced the procedures by which they prepare campers for performing these plays. It is those enhanced procedures I believe that may have made the difference in keeping campers so involved in the preparation and performance of this play.

The educational staff has developed over the years a highly sensitive support system or scaffolding that allow the campers as an edah to take on this challenge fully believing that they can succeed (Rathunde, 1988). Some of the finer points of this scaffolding are:

1. **Providing choice**: Campers have to participate, but have a choice of how to become involved which allows them the opportunity to think about their talents and interests and how to match those to many roles available in the production.
2. **Providing focused help**: Campers are not left on their own to master the challenges, but at every turn, are met with staff members whose task is to provide the needed help and encouragement.
3. **Matching challenge to available talent**: The drama staff is not charged with producing a Broadway-caliber production, but rather, the best performance
that these campers can give. The script and score are often revised to make the challenge meaningful for the talent available in this group.

4. 

Encouraging full commitment: The attitude of the edah staff is crucial: for the counselors need to feel that this production is crucial to the success of their program and that they are there to support all the campers so everyone feels he or she has an integral role to play in achieving the group’s goals (Reimer, in press).

Creating these conditions helps make the staging of these shows a qualitatively different experience than what happens at many summer camps where the drama program touches only those campers with a special interest in drama. Ramah Wisconsin has made the staging of these plays an optimal experience for most of their campers and perhaps that is why such joy is expressed when the performance is complete. This is an instance in which taking on a big challenge resulted not in resistance and frustration, but joy and celebration.

Csikszentmihalyi: Flow, Challenge and Enjoyment

Csikszentmihalyi⁵ (1990) is the psychological theorist who most clearly helps us to understand how to employ challenge so that it will result in achievement and enjoyment rather than anxiety and frustration. He is most famous for introducing and describing “flow” – that experience of being so engaged by an absorbing project that one can lose a sense of time and even ego boundaries. Initially he studied artists and then scientists who in pursuing their creative work experienced flow. But then he broadened his research to ask how flow works in the lives of ordinary people, including several studies of high school students in the Chicago area (Csikszentmihalyi et al, 1993). From these studies we can derive important lessons for experiential Jewish education.

Flow theory provides guidelines for how to make any complex cultural activity more engaging for learners primarily by creating interest, building upon existing talents and choices and then creating the right balance between existing skill levels and the complexity of the tasks the learners are faced with. The key is the relationship between challenge and enjoyment. We do not enjoy challenges that we experience as overwhelming; indeed they make us anxious and we avoid them. But when we are attracted to a challenge –perhaps because we see attractive models that seem to thrive on that challenge –we are often willing to try that activity as long as we encounter the right conditions that keep our interest growing and our anxiety in check.

That indeed was the design issue facing the drama staff at Camp Ramah. Had they insisted that only those campers who already knew Hebrew well enough to recite the lines of Oliver could be in this production, they would have had a small corps of actors. But they employed the key strategies of both diversifying the tasks so that many more talents could be engaged and carefully monitoring the challenge level of the Hebrew

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⁵ His Hungarian name is pronounced “chick-sent-me-high.”
script so that the actors and singers faced a manageable challenge in taking on their roles. The Ramah staff, I would say, intuited the basic educational insight of this theory. Perhaps that helps explain why their campers so deeply enjoyed meeting these challenges.

What makes a learning process engaging is when an educator knows the learner well enough to give a next challenge that meets one’s skill level, but also moves one forward. That educator has to encourage the effort, set clear goals, monitor progress and offer constructive feedback on how to improve. If a young person experiences that interest and feedback, he is more likely to feel “I can do this, and although this is challenging, I want to get better at it.”

Imagine a youth group setting in which one of the members is approached to take on a rather challenging task for the group. The crucial questions from this perspective will be: Is this task at the right level of complexity for this group member? Will she get the support she needs to undertake it and the feedback she needs to know if she is on track? Will the goals be set out clearly enough so that both she and her supporters will know whether the effort invested is yielding the results desired? For when these conditions are absent—as they often are—too often the youth who volunteers is left feeling, “I am not sure if what I did worked and if my efforts made a difference.” When that is the dominant feeling, no amount of thanks or praise can compensate for the sense that this was not effort well spent.

Consider when someone is asked to prepare a d’var Torah for an upcoming Shabbat service. Too often the practice is to ask the volunteer, leave it up to him to decide what to talk about and then thank him politely for what may have been a mediocre performance. From the perspective of this theory, it would be better not to ask if that will be the outcome. For how can anyone expect volunteers to get invested in preparing a d’var Torah unless there are clear expectations and guidelines, support in carrying out the process, honest feedback from a trusted others that helps the volunteers see what worked and what did not, and encouragement to try again and improve with practice. Those are the conditions that allow the volunteer to feel this was worth my while and perhaps I will try again to do better.

Dweck’s research (2000) on the effects of praise shows that certain kinds of praise can actually be harmful to the development of youth. When adults lavishly praise a general effort without indicating what worked well, youth can be left feeling highly insecure about the true worth of their contributions. But when praise is delivered with some precision and is focused on specific efforts rather then the performance as a whole, youth can actually learn something of value for their self-assessment and improvement. This second type of praise also encourages youth to take greater risks and not to be afraid to try what is challenging even if at first that might mean not performing at their best.

In many settings in informal Jewish education I find that the practice is to offer lavish praise for efforts that have not been carefully designed or thoughtfully monitored. We too often cover over mediocre performance with sweet words of thanks that paradoxically
may leave the volunteers feeling insecure about their Jewish performance skills and reluctant to volunteer again. We aim to please with our praise and end up faltering on the educational mission of our work.

The gift we can give our youth is the invitation to join us in an exciting and challenging process of Jewish discovery in which we will help one another in exploration and learning. That is what I experienced those many years ago in the encounter with Hartman. He invited this group of Orthodox students to think together with him about the meaning of revelation as suggested by the works of Heschel, a Jewish thinker they may never have previously encountered. These older peers in turn invited me into their conversations without condescension or special treatment. I was surely “in over my head”, but the conditions were right for me to struggle with what was difficult to grasp. The result was that I felt this was an optimal moment for growth, and although no one praised me for my efforts, I went home determined not to allow this profound experience to fall away simply because it was so challenging. The power of an optimal experience is that it can inspire young people to take on life challenges that otherwise might simply seem out of reach.

**Conclusion: A call to experiential Jewish educators**

Chazan’s (2003) work has set the stage for my inquiry into how experiential Jewish education can be designed to be both challenging and rewarding. His call that this field needs to aim higher has inspired my project of spelling out the conditions for supporting participants who are willing to take a risk and go deeper in exploring Jewish living in all its rich complexity.

What can experiential Jewish educators who are inspired by this approach do to create these conditions for Jewish growth? I would advise beginning by exploring one’s own areas of deep Jewish interest and pursuing those as a basis for educating others. Nothing can be duller than “generic Judaism.” Youth tend to respond to passion and to those whose passionate interests ignite their curiosity and potential explorations.

Yet passion needs to be balanced by both care and professional skill. If passion is what ignites interest, care is what protects the young from excess. Care is what bounds the passion and sets the challenge at levels that the young can manage without harm. Care is what the Ramah educators exercised when they made themselves available to help their campers manage their anxiety over how to learn all the Hebrew they would need to perform in Oliver.

Professional skill is the capacity to design the overall experience so that it leads the learners along a structured path that results in a product they can be proud of. When I watched the Ramah campers on the last days before their performance work for hours to get their songs, dance steps and musical pieces to a point of readiness, I admired the pacing and relative calm of the staff rehearsing these 14 year olds. They were clearly demanding much of these teens, but were also containing the pressure to manageable
proportions. Professional skill involves knowing how to motivate, lead and ask a lot without pushing campers over that delicate line into a frenzied anxiety.

Risk and challenge need to be introduced at the right level and with the proper supports. The group needs to feel they are being stretched, but not overwhelmed. It is helpful to have models to show the others how to move down the path of exploration with clear goals and markers than indicate progress. It helps for participants to receive clear feedback so they know how they are doing and how to proceed so they can succeed.

Above all, to successfully introduce challenge into experiential Jewish education, it is essential that the participants believe that they are involved in an effort that has a larger cultural and religious purpose. Participants need to believe that their efforts are contributing to building a better world in ways that can be seen and felt. That was a gift that David Hartman had: to make his listeners feel they were engaged in a conversation that was indeed crucial. What was at stake was nothing less than how we understood the essential relationship between God and the people Israel.

Even at Camp Ramah, where the rhetorical level is quite restrained, more was felt to be riding on this performance of Oliver than an evening’s entertainment. There was the Hebrew and all that symbolized. And there were plaques on the walls of that social hall that reminded all who knew that a very important camp tradition was being enacted in that space. These campers were performing to keep alive a tradition that dated back to the days of their grandparents.

Educators who know how to use the appropriate symbols and tropes can heighten for the participants that sense that what we engage in has deeper meaning. Educators who help youth to see that they have important contributions to make can inspire those youth to challenge themselves to rise to new levels of creative engagement.

References


