

Introduction

In our work at the Institute for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis University (IJE), we come into contact with a lot of different programs in informal Jewish education. They range in quality from fair to good to excellent. In this paper we address: *What is excellence in informal Jewish education?*

This question is difficult to address because there are no generally accepted criteria by which educational quality can be judged for programs in this field. We must therefore begin with the voices of Jewish youth who have participated in programs that they judge to be excellent.. We present their words in composite form to open the conversation about what is excellence in this field.

What Is Excellence?

My name is Emily and I am 16 years old. I am very active in my youth group and have been to Jewish summer camp for 5 years. But this summer I went to a program that was different than anything I knew before. It was amazing. It's very hard to put into words what made this experience so special, but with some help, I have tried to capture what I mean that this was "an amazing program."

- *Every summer at camp I made good friends, but never before have I met other kids who I felt could be my friends for life. Never before have I met kids who inspire me, who were so willing to engage with me and share ideas I never thought of before. This was friendship on another level.*
- *Most summers at camp I had great counselors who I got along with and learned from, but never before have I met a staff of educators who fascinated me as people, who were so interesting and yet accessible. We talked about so many aspects of life and Judaism. I could share the toughest questions on my mind and they would both understand and answer in ways that were both helpful and thought-provoking. They were models of honesty and caring.*
- *I love drama and have acted in plays every summer at camp. I thought I'd do that again this summer. But this drama teacher had a different idea. This time we were going to write the drama and stage it. At first I thought the teacher was crazy. Who wants to be in a play that teens write? But I was wrong. We dug deep and*

wrote very personal and revealing pieces, and then had to figure out how to stage what we wrote. That really worried us. But when the presentation was over, it felt completely different than any other play I'd been in. This one was ours, all ours and we had done it. That was a mega accomplishment.

- *Every summer I learned a lot about Judaism and thoroughly enjoyed the opportunities to live as a Jew in camp. But never before was I so challenged in my Judaism. Never before did I have to face so many questions about what I believe and why. There were times when I felt so confused I wanted to cry. But I never felt alone with my questions. We were all facing them and dealing with them around the clock. Our minds were racing. But at the end, even though I still have a lot of questions, I feel more secure in my beliefs. They are more genuinely mine. It is a wonderful feeling to know your own mind.*
- *Every summer I felt I was growing and learning a lot. But never before have I returned home feeling I am a changed person. Of course I am still me. But it is not the same me. I think and feel differently as a result of this program. I have been stretched and challenged and yet stood the test. I lost some of my naiveté, but gained a lot of confidence. I reached deeper inside and also saw deeply into the hearts of others. I have grown and become more of the Jew I want to be. That is an amazing gift.*

Principles of Excellence

Emily is an amalgam of many young Jews we have spoken to over the years. Each sounds different; yet often what they say overlaps and creates a singular impression. These are indicators of excellence and we need to attend to them.

What leads young Jews to feel so moved by the excellent programs they attend? What follows is a list of educational principles that we believe underlie excellent programs in informal Jewish education.

1. Excellence begins with vision. Educational leaders with vision can create an educational space—a Jewish cultural island—in which the rules for living are truly altered. On these islands new possibilities for Jewish living are created and the youth are quickly and effectively taught to shift gears and live by these rules. When Emily speaks of achieving a deeper level of friendship, she is referring to the safe space that this program creates and the permission it gives participants to engage more honestly and openly with one another.
2. Excellent programs select staff that are well-prepared and well-trained to facilitate the life of the community. The staff is committed to the vision of the program and devoted to imbuing the participants with the spirit of this community. They are also accessible to the participants as real people who actually try to live the values the program advocates. When Emily reports her fascination with speaking with the staff, she is telling us about counselors who understand how to speak with

- youth in ways that both affirm their curiosity and further their growth as thinking individuals.
3. Excellent programs find a right balance between fun and challenge. Participants are there to enjoy themselves, but an important part of their enjoyment will be to undertake very challenging tasks and adventures. These programs know just how far to stretch their participants without throwing them off-balance. They offer learning opportunities that are rich in content and demanding in the acquisition of skills. But they also know how to alternate between seriousness and fun, intensity and relaxation. Emily's experience with her drama class nicely illustrates how she was challenged to take a more active role in creating the drama and struggled to do so, but felt by the end a lot of satisfaction in what the group had accomplished.
 4. Excellent programs empower the participants to take increasing responsibility for their own learning. They provide plenty of structure, but balance structure with room for creativity and improvisation. Indeed they view participant creativity as the highest outcome of the program. When participants like Emily find their way to express the values of the program in their own words and actions, the highest goals of the program are met and Emily feels like a changed person.
 5. Excellent programs integrate Jewish living and learning with all the other activities of the community. They do not tolerate a Jewish agenda separate from their other learning agenda, but strive to integrate Jewish elements into all aspects of communal life. They also insist that Jewish learning and celebration be expressed at the same level of excellence as all other aspects of the program. Emily experiences that insistence as an expectation that she and her peers think seriously about their Judaism, be willing to question their naïve assumptions and yet know that they are being supported in their search for a more mature level of Jewish commitment. No wonder she emerges from this program feeling she has gained a lot of confidence and become more of the Jew she wishes to be.

Getting to Excellence

There are pockets of excellence throughout the field of informal Jewish education. But there is insufficient effort to identify what distinguishes excellent programs and to articulate the principles that make possible excellent programs in this area.

This brief paper is only a beginning effort to identify excellence and articulate its underlying principles. At the IJE we are committed to excellence in informal Jewish education and to help move this field from having isolated pockets of excellence to developing a system that promotes excellence for all of its programs.