



## Frequently Asked Questions About Informal Jewish Education

Professor Joseph Reimer  
Director, IJE  
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### What is Informal Jewish Education?

To be successful Jewish education has to happen in two contexts: in schools and in a less structured, more interactive space. Schools are important to teach basic Jewish knowledge. But winning the hearts of children needs to take place outside the classroom in settings where Jewish youth can engage in living Judaism together. This second realm is called informal Jewish education.

Today the field of informal Jewish education has expanded tremendously to include Jewish summer camps, youth groups, family education, JCC cultural and sports events, Hillel events and the Israel experience. What unites these diverse settings is that they all actively involve participants in Jewish living and learning. Informal education teaches through direct experience. One learns as one participates, and the test of one's learning is not an exam, but how one incorporates that learning into one's life.

The name "informal education" can be problematic because "informal" connotes loose, easy and not serious. While it is true that informal Jewish education strives to be fun and put people at ease, it still involves a serious, planned effort to build strong Jewish identities in its participants. Some informal educators prefer to call their work "experiential education" to stress that it is the *experience* of Jewish living that powerfully educates participants to the richness of Jewish identity. Whichever name one prefers, the important point is that creating powerful experiences for participants is as serious and complex an educational task as teaching in a classroom.

Research shows that powerful informal Jewish experiences often have significant long-term impact on the Jewish identities of their participants. These are powerful Jewish experiences that can make a real difference in people's lives.

### What are the critical success factors for informal Jewish education?

It would be untrue to claim that all informal Jewish education works; many informal events fail. There is the camp bunk from Hell, the youth group event that never gets off the ground, and the family education event that is a bore. Failures commonly occur alongside the life-changing events that participants will never forget. What accounts for success rather than failure in this field?

We offer a list of five factors for success in informal Jewish education, based on Barry Chazan's article, "The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education." They refer to success not in the context of a single event, but rather in terms of ongoing programs such as a summer at camp or a year at a Hillel foundation.

1. It must be fun.

Informal Jewish education is totally voluntary. People come and stay because they like being there. They have to feel engaged. Fun is not enough, but it is an essential component.

2. Participants should feel accepted.

Successful informal Jewish education programs focus on making participants feel accepted and welcome. There are many internal divisions between Jews, but for informal education to work, the diverse participants have to each feel "I am accepted here for who I am." Acceptance of difference creates psychological safety that makes learning possible.

3. The content must be interesting and challenging.

Participants in informal Jewish education programs expect experiences that will capture their interest and even challenge their assumptions. They want to emerge better informed and more skilled. They want serious content as long as it remains fun to learn.

4. A multi-faceted Jewish vision must permeate the program.

Participants often come to informal Jewish educational programs in search of Jewish identity and meaning. They are not expecting to be told what kind of Jew they should be, but hope they will encounter serious models of Jewish commitment. If a Jewish educational program does not offer strong and diverse models of Jewish commitment, it is failing its participants. Programs themselves model Jewish commitment by establishing consistent frameworks of Jewish practice that are flexible enough to accommodate different needs. Camps, for example, need to provide multiple ways of celebrating Shabbat, and Israel experiences need to provide multiple ways of identifying with and supporting Israel.

5. There must be leadership to provide guidance.

Informal Jewish education tends to encourage participants to take leadership roles within the organization. But achieving a high degree of participant involvement should not obscure the crucial role that top leadership plays in informal Jewish education. That leadership sets the policies, initiates the programs, raises the resources and guides the participants along the way.

In summary, we believe that successful informal Jewish educational programs are fun, interesting and Jewishly challenging. They are accepting and involving of their participants. They are run by a leadership that provides guidance to the participants and vision to the program.

### What are the main challenges facing informal Jewish education?

Informal Jewish education as a field is rich in potential, variable in success and challenged to progress toward more consistent excellence. Why does more consistent excellence yet elude this field? What are the main challenges to reaching that goal?

The following is a list of general challenges that the IJE has noted in working with this field to progress towards excellence.

#### 1. Developing Top Professional Leadership

This field has yet to create a deep enough pool of professional candidates to fill top leadership positions in their organizations. Aspiring professionals have few opportunities to be mentored and few ways to learn the requisite skills. Executives have few opportunities to improve their skills or hone their visions. The IJE, through its Seminar in Professional Leadership, is a pioneer in providing a context to prepare and nurture a next generation of leaders for this field.

#### 2. Building a Lay Leadership

This field lacks a strong base of lay leadership. Each organization has its board, but beyond those boards, there is no way for concerned lay leaders to help this field grow. As a result there are few lay champions to advocate for the needs of the field in Jewish communal councils. While recently Hillel and Birthright Israel have become exceptions to this rule, they remain isolated examples of strong lay advocacy.

#### 3. Attracting Wider Circles of Youth

In many cases informal Jewish educational programs engage only a small minority of the available Jewish youth who might become participants. Too often organizations have been satisfied to service the most committed Jewish youth while forgetting about the majority who have walked away. There is not enough effort to engage those who might

be interested, but have not come on their own. This type of engagement is just beginning to emerge as an imperative in this field.

#### 4. Inducting, Training and Retaining Young Professionals

While there are a good number of college students who take jobs in this field (primarily as camp counselors), there is no widely-accepted route to enter this field as a professional. Most enter without any graduate education and view their involvement as short-term. The field has only begun to think about building career ladders. To do so will require providing better training and support, more attractive salaries and benefit packages and an administrative structure that supports more senior professionals to run these organizations in a more professional manner.

#### 5. Developing Greater Financial Resources

While each organization in this field raises funds to support its own program, there is no larger campaign to grow the field as a whole. There are no funds to address the challenges that face all the organizations in this field. Informal Jewish education is today where day school education was before the creation of PEJE (Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education). It has no central address, no funding to support new initiatives or to develop the broad professional and lay leadership needed to move this field towards more consistent excellence.

### Conclusion

Informal Jewish education has proven itself to be a powerful tool for developing strong Jewish identities, especially among Jewish youth. But for all its wonderful potential as a field, informal Jewish education is still underdeveloped. While it will take vision, leadership and substantial resources to evolve this field toward excellence, the potential benefit for Jewish life in North America is considerable.