Two Models of Transformation

Introduction to the Conference on Transformative Jewish Education

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For a number of years, we’ve been thinking about the idea of “transformation” in Jewish education and trying to figure out how we might develop some deeper understandings of it. This conference is the first step in that process.

I should also mention, however, that some folks have counseled me against it. They didn’t think that we should be wasting our time talking about a term that is mostly used as a bit of overheated rhetoric. According to these critics, these skeptics, when Jewish educators talk about “transformation” or “transformative experiences,” they’re just trying to promote a product.

There’s not a lot to be discovered, behind these terms. They are simply empty bits of rhetoric that do not mean anything in particular. There’s no reason to believe that there’s any well-reasoned conception of transformation that grounds the use of the terms, and certainly no reason to believe that there’s any justification or legitimation of their use. Nobody, that is, has evidence that their programs are actually transformative for their participants.

I do think the skeptics have a point. We often do make claims about our programs that we cannot really justify. And there’s no reason to think that, each time a flyer or a website uses the term “transformative” to describe a program, those usages can all be subsumed under one coherent conception of transformation.

But I also think that, when we talk about “transformation” in Jewish education or use the adjective “transformative” to describe a program, there’s something else going on. The term, I believe, points to a desired outcome that is important to us, even if we’re not very articulate about it. It gestures towards an aspiration for the program to have a certain kind of impact on the participants.
What kind of impact? We want some educational programs not just to teach participants certain ideas or certain skills, but to do more. We want to go deeper, to shape their character or their identity.¹ We want to have an influence on how they move through the world. We are thinking not just about what they know or what they can do, but who they are.

Josh Satok pointed me to the following quip, attributed to Rebbbitzen Dena Weinberg: “Torah is not education. It's transformation.” Weinberg is an ultra-Orthodox educator, the widow of Rabbi Noach Weinberg, the founder of AISH. Most of us probably do not agree with her on most things, but I think this line captures the idea that I’m talking about.

She’s suggesting that Torah – and here we should think about Torah in the expansive sense, all of Jewish learning rather than just the Chumash or the Tanakh – is not about knowledge. The point of engaging in Torah study is not to become smarter or to accumulate information. The point is to be transformed in the encounter, to become a different kind of person, a better person.

So, by focusing for the next two days on the idea of transformative Jewish education, we want to frame an investigation of those deeper and higher aspirations, the various ways that we hope to influence participants to become different and better kinds of people.

Another way of putting the point is this. We don’t actually care about transformation, per se. We don’t care about coming up with a precise definition of the term. We don’t care about discriminating between those programs that are genuinely transformative and those that only pretend to be. We don’t care whether we continue to use the term, or whether we stop using the term and start using some other term. But we do care about our highest educational aspirations, aspirations to influence character and identity in particular ways, and we want this conference to be a place where we can talk about those aspirations in ways that we do not usually have the opportunity to do.

So how should we think about transformation?

Dan Smokler suggested that I consider the famous story about the great 1st century sage Rabbi Akiva.

How did Rabbi Akiva start out? He was forty years old and had never studied anything. Once he stood at a spring.² He said, “Who engraved this stone?”³ They told him, “It was the water, which drips upon it every day.”

¹ Some readers may know that the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education convened a conference in 2014 on “Rethinking Jewish Identity and Jewish Education.” The book emerging from that conference, Beyond Jewish Identity (Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman, eds.), is forthcoming from Academic Studies Press. That project was dedicated to the agenda of critically examining the uses of “identity” in Jewish educational discourse and to proposing some alternatives. It argued that, for the most part, our use of phrases like “strengthen Jewish identity” are hopelessly vague and generic. But that project does not deny that the concept of “identity” has meaning or value. And in particular, it does not deny Jewish education should seek to cultivate particular kinds of Jewish identity.
² Others translate the Hebrew be’er as “well,” but the story makes more sense if we think about a spring from which water drips, rather than a well from which water is drawn.
Rabbi Akiva immediately drew a conclusion about himself: “If something soft (like water) could chisel its way through something hard (like stone), then surely the words of Torah, which are as hard as iron, can penetrate my heart, which is flesh and blood!” Immediately, he turned to studying Torah.4

The narrative, like most rabbinic narratives, is terse, but it seems clear that this is a story of transformation. So what happened here? How should we think about the change that Akiva underwent? It seems to me that there are (at least) two different ways of thinking about the story, and each of those can serve as a conceptual model of transformation.

The first reading of the story, the first model of transformation, is that Akiva had some kind of powerful experience at the spring, not a mystical experience in the sense of an encounter with something otherworldly, but a disorienting experience nonetheless. When he thought about the spring and the water, something happened to him that pulled him up short5 and made him realize that his fundamental assumptions about himself were not true.

What were those assumptions? We don’t know, but we can speculate on the basis of the text. Perhaps he believed that he was fated to a life of ignorance. Perhaps he saw himself as a failure, with a heart that could not be penetrated or changed. In a moment, the image of the water on the stone reshaped those assumptions, changed his frame of reference, and opened up new possibilities for him.

This model, of some experience or intervention that changes one’s frame of reference in some fundamental way, is how Jack Mezirow, the researcher most frequently cited in the field of transformative education, thinks about it.

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our “line of action.” Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioral) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.6

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3 From the context, it seems that Akiva was admiring a stone at the spring that displayed an intricate pattern of marks or grooves.
4 Avot de-Rabbi Natan 6:2
So for Mezirow, transformation happens when someone moves from a narrower frame of reference, with more limited possibilities, to a more expansive one. And he believes that this happens to adults, in particular, not to children (although we might not necessarily agree with that claim).

Moreover, he believes that it happens through an encounter with something that destabilizes or disorients the learner, to shake the learner out of the prior frame of reference.

Perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma — a divorce, death of a loved one, change in job status, retirement, or other. The disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions. Anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or “trigger events” that precipitate critical reflection and transformations.  

Without the disorienting dilemma, we remain oriented in the ways that we have always been. Something, some event or text or person, has to provoke us to re-examine our frames of reference.

Now, we might wonder whether the story of Akiva fits Mezirow’s model in every detail, since the encounter with the water was not, it seems, an “anomaly” or a “dilemma.” However, the important point is not precisely what provokes a fundamental re-orientation, but the fact that something does. Sometimes, as we go through the world, we encounter some event or text or person or idea that makes us question what we thought we knew, in some deep way. For Mezirow, that’s the paradigm for transformative education: changing our frame of reference, in response to some disorienting episode.

So Transformation Model A can be summarized as, changing a frame of reference, in particular in response to a disorienting dilemma. But there is another way of thinking about transformation that we should also keep in mind.

If I were to ask a group of people, for example a group of about sixty people at a conference on Transformative Jewish Education, how many of them are musicians, a small number would raise their hand. If I were then to ask the same group of people, how many of them have studied music, a larger number would raise their hand. The set of people who have studied music is significantly greater than the set of people who consider themselves musicians. Why? How did some members of the second group become members of the first group? How did it happen that some people who participated in an activity (music lessons) became certain kinds of people (musicians)?

The answer, of course, is practice. Some people kept at the music lessons, where the rest of the people stopped. Over time, those people underwent a remarkable transformation, from being a person who takes music lessons, to being a different person, a musician. We cannot

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necessarily say exactly when that happens, because it doesn’t happen at one moment. But we know the difference between a music-lesson-person and a musician.

This is a second model of transformation, different from the model of Changing a Frame of Reference. We can call this model of transformation Becoming What We Do. And we can see the model articulated in a classic text from Maimonides in the 12th century (which is, itself, based on Aristotle).

Our Sages taught: Just as God is called "gracious," you shall be gracious. Just as God is called "merciful," you shall be merciful...

How should one train oneself to follow in these dispositions, so that they become ingrained? Let one practice again and again the actions prompted by those dispositions, and repeat them continually till they become easy and do not present any difficulty. Then, the corresponding dispositions will become a fixed part of one’s character.

In this second model, there’s no disorienting encounter. The person undergoing transformation doesn’t leave behind one frame of reference or one set of fundamental assumptions, and adopt another one, as we saw in Mezirow. Instead, the person being transformed adopts a practice or a set of practices, and over time, those practices influence the person’s character. The person becomes transformed into a different kind of person. By adopting gracious practices, one becomes a gracious person. By adopting merciful or generous or thoughtful practices, one becomes that type of person. Just like, by practicing music, one becomes a musician. Instead of a sudden shift, the transformation is incremental and perhaps even imperceptible, moment-to-moment. But the outcome is no less significant: becoming a certain kind of person, different than the person one was to begin with.

If we go back to the story of Rabbi Akiva, we might notice that what seemed so significant to him, about the water, was precisely that it had an affect over time that seems analogous to the effect on a person that Maimonides is describing. So, on the one hand, the story seems to fit with Transformation Model A, the idea of a change in the frame of reference. But on the other hand hand, the story also seems to fit with Transformation Model B, the idea of an incremental change over time in which the person (or thing) being transformed ends up changed through the relentless pressure of a particular pattern.

Ironically, perhaps Akiva’s original mistaken assumption, the incorrect frame of reference that he suddenly realized was erroneous, is that people change suddenly – that they get hit by lightning and suddenly become pious or wise. Maybe that’s what he was waiting for, that’s what he thought he needed, until he encountered the spring and drew a contrary lesson from it. So he didn’t need to get hit by lightning, but he did need to get shaken out of the idea of getting hit by lightning. He needed to realize (all of a sudden) that change would not necessarily happen suddenly, and instead, to begin to see the way in which the practice of Torah, enacted patiently over time, drop by drop, could actually transform him.

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8 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot, 1:6-7.
Abstracting now from the story of Akiva, we have two divergent models of transformation, two ways of thinking about how people change. Sudden or slow. Through an encounter with a disruptive or disorienting experience or through the patient enactment of a practice over time. Each leads to a person being different than they were, in some fundamental sense.

Which one of these models of transformation is the right one? Which one should shape our thinking about the goal of transformation in Jewish educational settings?

The answer, of course, is both. Both capture an important aspect of the set of phenomena that we’re interested in. Both models can be conceptual tools for us, to understand instances of transformative Jewish education. As we examine particular programs and think together with their leaders about the kinds of transformative impact they aspire to achieve, and how they aspire to achieve them – what pedagogies, what mechanisms, what technologies – we should keep in mind that there is more than one model for what it means to become transformed, to become a certain kind of person as a result of an educational experience.

Our purpose, at this conference, is not to evaluate programs for their successes or lack thereof. Nor is our purpose to evaluate one model against the other. Instead, our purpose is to understand more deeply aspects of the phenomenon that we’ve identified as being worthy of our interest – initiatives in Jewish education that aspire to shape their participants in deep and fundamental ways, to affect their character or who they are or who they perceive themselves to be. Our shorthand for those aspirations is “transformation.” We believe that we have a lot to learn from each other, and we’re grateful that you’ve decided to join us in this exploration.