

“Learning Torah”: Might the Rabbinic Tradition serve as an effective platform for engaging non-observant young adults with Jewish life?

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Engaging young adult Jews is a subject of much discussion in the Jewish community of late and increasingly of programmatic funding as well. Alternative Spring Breaks, Birthright Israel, new umbrella organizations such as MASA or Repair the World, leadership incubators such as Present Tense and ROI are a few of the many new initiatives aimed at encouraging the engagement of young adults with Jewish life.

An area of Jewish education focused on young adults, which is at once ancient but at the same time very new is the teaching of the Rabbinic Tradition. “Learning Torah,” which for the purpose of this monograph is defined as the study of Jewish text from the historic canon of Bible, *Talmud*, and *Midrash*, has until very recently been the domain of Jewish organizations which either focus on the religiously observant or preach religion to the non-observant. In the last five years, Torah learning initiatives are emerging, which aim to engage non-observant young Jewish adults without the intention of converting them to religion. These programs attempt to use traditional texts as a resource for sparking intellectual and emotional interest in Jewish life.

A leader in this emerging field of Torah education is Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. In the effort to provide engagement opportunities that young Jewish adults will find personally meaningful, Hillel is actively developing an approach to textual education appropriate for non-observant Jews, who represent the vast majority of young Jewish adults on campus. From Hillel’s perspective:

Emerging adulthood is a period of life when most young adults are not seeking out institutional involvement. Hillel must develop extra-institutional strategies to engage young Jewish adults on campus, who will not otherwise come to Hillel sponsored programs.¹

¹ Steven M. Cohen, Ezra Kopelowitz, Minna Wolf and Jack Ukeles. “2010 Logic Model and Theory of Change for the Senior Jewish Educators (SJE) and Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative (CEI).”

<http://www.jimjosephfoundation.org/PDF/Hillel%20SJECEI%20LM.pdf>

Given the lack of existing research and the incipient state of knowledge about methods for engaging young Jewish adults in Jewish life general, and for Torah education in particular; Hillel with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation convened a conference in New York City on June 22-23, 2010, entitled “Towards a Third Space: A New Dimension in Jewish Education for Emerging Adults.”² The “Third Space Conference” gathered a number of academics and practitioners from the Jewish community to discuss and further develop an educational model for the identity development of Jewish Emerging Adults³ (JEA).

This short monograph is offered as a testament to the cutting edge nature of the conference, in which intensive and challenging discussion of the grandest of ideas was the order of the day. We offer our understanding of key ideas presented at the conference and draw on our experience⁴ in the field to propose a conceptual framework for advancing our thinking and action one more tentative step forward.

Moral development in college-age adults

The keynote speaker at the conference, Dr. Sharon Daloz Parks, presented a conceptual

² The conference website is found at: <http://www.thirdspaceconference.com/> The conference advisory committee included Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, Dr. Beth Cousens, Aaron Dorfman, Rabbi Josh Feigelson, Rabbi James Jacobson Maisels, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, Dr. Orit Kent, Dr. Jon Levisohn, Rabbi Miriam Margles, Rabbi Scott Perlo, and Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg.

³ Michelle Sarna, a Ph.D. candidate at Fordham University in Developmental Psychology, presented the following overview of the theory of Emerging Adulthood at the Third Space Conference. The theory of Emerging Adulthood is credited to Dr. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He first coined the term in an article in *American Psychologist* in 2000. According to Dr. Arnett, in the past half century what most people experience during the years from age 18 to 29 has changed dramatically in industrialized societies. Instead of entering marriage and parenthood in their very early twenties, most people now postpone these transitions until at least their late twenties, and spend their late teens through their mid-twenties in self-focused exploration as they try out different possibilities in love and work. Essentially, a new developmental stage has been created between adolescence and young adulthood. Scholarly attention to this period has boomed in recent years, and it is now widely referred to among scholars as emerging adulthood.

See: <http://www.jeffreyarnett.com/articles.htm>

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understanding of moral development in college-age adults. Park's work has served as a touch stone for thinking about young adult education for the past decade. She has produced a series of publications on the topic, with the primary reference for the conference discussions being Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in the Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith (Daloz Parks, 2000).

In brief, Parks' theory of moral development frames "emerging adulthood" as a period of life located between adolescence and adulthood. In this transition period the young adult moves from an understanding of the world in which where one is dependent or rebellious ("counter dependent") to authority figures, to independent knowing and inner-dependence for arriving at moral decisions. Young adulthood is marked by relativism in one's knowledge and morality, an unsure state of what one thinks to be true actually is true, and a struggle to determine one's own place in the world and what constitutes one's adult community (Daloz Parks, 2000, pgs 53-70).

Mentoring relationships

Parks argues that mentors serve as a key resource for helping young adults negotiate this insecure and experimental time.

"The power of mentoring relationships is that they help anchor the vision of the potential self. They beckon the self into being and, in so doing; help to ground a place of commitment within relativism. As such, mentors exercise both cognitive and affective appeal, offering both insight and emotional support. (Daloz Parks, 2000, pg 81)"

Parks argues that mentoring for emerging adults is best done in places that promote mentoring environments. "Mentoring environments are communities of imagination *and practice* (emphasis in the original). Humanizing practices... are ways of life, things that people do with and for each other to make and keep life human (Daloz Parks, 2000. pg 154)." She highlights three concepts of practice using imagery from an earlier time and campus environment: Hearth, Table and Commons.

Hearth

The practice of Hearth envisions safe spaces where one can linger on a topic of concern and reflect in dialogue with a mentoring community. Hearth places are spaces that promote a sense of stability and security for all the people that inhabit them.

Table

The practice of Table is in actuality the context for another kind of Hearth space. “Table” invokes an environment where people not only nourish the body, but also refresh the mind and heart through conversation. Table is an established time and space for dining with others and in so doing, making and deepening the human ties necessary for community.

Commons

The practice of Commons is the recognition of a communal center where different elements of the community interact through chance or intention. On one hand, a Commons is often in practical terms a physical space on a campus such as an open campus ground that most paths between academic buildings intersect, or a student union or even fitness center. Ray Oldenberg (1999) refers to these physical locations as the “Third Space,” a place that is neither home nor work, but a place for human interactions that enable community. A Commons is always a conceptual space, where membership in community becomes reality as individuals develop shared ideas and values (Daloz Parks, 2000, pgs 154-157).

Since Parks wrote her seminal work, she has developed a corollary to her theory of Commons that she calls New Commons that factors in the increasing multi-cultural nature of daily life today:

Whatever instances of the commons remain in today’s societies, however, travel, communication, biological, and nuclear technologies have swept all of us into a new commons that is now planetary in scope and personal in impact. Economically we are swept up in global markets, and continuing education programs are challenged to assist in developing a workforce for an international world. The new commons is experienced ecumenically as cultures are meeting and colliding as never before. It is no longer unusual that a region or even a single campus may represent seventy or more languages. Among these, often there is no “majority population”. In this new terrain all educators are being called to reconsider how our institutions can serve to cultivate viable practices of civil society, and to aid in understanding what “community engagement” may mean when commitments must be held both locally and globally. We are also being challenged to recognize our new global commons ecologically as we are all

learning in new and old ways that we are a part of a vast tissue of life in which the human species can now affect the well-being of all other species—now and for generations to come. (Daloz Parks, Leadership for a Changing World, 2007, pg 29)

Connecting emerging Jewish adults to a Jewish Commons

Daloz Park lays down the gauntlet for Jewish educators. What is the “new Jewish commons” which will enable the social and conceptual spaces for individuals to connect to Jewish life and at the same allow them to interact as citizens of the broader world of which they are apart? What are the qualities of a Jewish Commons? How might Jewish educators develop mentoring environments that provide Hearth and Table; namely, the Third Spaces, in which Emerging Adults can test, probe and define their theories of self and the world as they evolve in to a full and secure adulthood?

Rabbi Dan Smokler is proposing a theory of a new Jewish Commons which he presented at the Third Space Conference in a presentation entitled “Toward a Third Space”. Smokler posited that Torah has been the historical Jewish Commons, the common place where Jews across the globe, cultures, languages and history intentionally interacted and even dialogued through its communal study and application. He argued that this transcendent Jewish Commons has been lost due to the progression of history and formed a New Jewish Commons: “New Jewish Commons emerges as a result of the upheavals of modern life: enlightenment, emancipation, holocaust, independence to name a few. In this world, the shared experience of Torah study and text-centeredness has dissolved. (Smokler, 2010)” Smokler posits that reinvigorating Torah study and returning it to its central role of being a virtual commons across time and culture is in keeping with the reality of the New Commons as described by Parks.

As we understand it, the envisioned Jewish Commons has the potential outcome of creating a **public discursive Jewish space**: Such a space would be **public** in the sense of shared knowledge, social norms and mores which enable interaction between people who might not know each other intimately and are quite different from one another in their personal lives. It would be **Jewish** in the sense of secular/universal knowledge, norms and mores mixing with those particular to Jews. The outcome is the ability of an individual who lives and identifies with life in the broader society to also engage in an intensive and sustained way with other Jews. And it would be **discursive** in the sense of conversation-based interaction which leads to enjoyable social experience, intellectual

challenge, personal Jewish growth, deepening of commitment to pursuing and then promoting Jewish discourse as a meaningful part of life.

Developing the field of Torah learning for emerging adults

The idea of Torah informing and enabling Jewish Commons is appealing. To realize the vision, there is a need for systematic elaboration of the concept of Torah learning for non-observant JEAs and a focus on best practices currently happening in the field.

For example, an evaluation currently being conducted on the Hillel Senior Jewish Educator program (Cohen, Kopelowitz, Wolf and Ukeles 2010) shows that Torah education is not a straightforward exercise of sitting and learning a traditional text. The evaluation shows that the most successful educators work simultaneously in several capacities. In particular, they serve as:

- **Mentors** – Gaining trust of students, entering into one-on-one intimate conversations touching life issues, mentoring students as they intensify their involvement with Jewish life;
- **Teachers** - Providing confidence and skills to access Jewish knowledge/culture; and,
- **Community organizers** – Motivating students to activate their social networks or build new ones around areas of Jewish life which interest them.

The combination of mentoring, teaching and community organizing enables the educator to nurture connection and interest in Jewish life. Students gain Jewish confidence and learn in the context of social networks which they find relevant and meaningful for their lives. The following interview excerpt from the Senior Jewish Educator evaluation demonstrates how a Hillel educator at the University of Texas at Austin works as mentor, teacher and community organizer while integrating traditional texts into her engagement work:

A Texas junior initially connected with the Senior Jewish Educator (SJE) on a campus visit last spring before he transferred to Texas. The SJE invited him on Alternative Spring Break to an organic farm. The group had a study session every day which consisted of studying Jewish texts on agriculture and group discussion. Every member of the group received a source book with much more information than what they studied at the farm. He sees it as a great resource. The SJE is also an environmentalist and has changed her lifestyle and habits over time, as has the student. The SJE thus serves as a guide for him. In coming back from the farm, the SJE was able to offer him insight from the trip. “It means so much, that

my beliefs [environmentalism] and my religion co-exist, that they are similar.” The student is now one of the organizers of a Gardening Group which the SJE helped initiate. As part of the Gardening group the student meets with the SJE weekly. The group is small (3 regulars) so it is very personal. They discuss environmental concerns and brainstorm ideas about how to grow their group and promote environmental thinking in a Jewish context on campus and in the local community.

This example provides a powerful illustration of a new Jewish Commons albeit more expansive in its formation than just the study of traditional texts. The interaction between mentor and student happens in different locations, tied together with others through a mutual exploration of life issues they hold dear. There is a fluid movement back and forth between Jewish text and Jewish and Secular contexts. For this student Judaism in general, and the Rabbinic Tradition in particular have come alive and are now clearly of great relevance for his life.

Dimensions for understanding how Traditional Texts integrate into Jewish education for emerging adults

The above example is but one of many ways that Hillel educators and others are seeking to introduce Jewish texts into relationships they initiate with JEAs. The challenge at this incipient developmental stage of the Field is to appreciate and nurture the many different approaches to teaching Torah on campus which are beginning to appear; and then to gain an understanding of which strategies are most affective for establishing the mentoring community described by Parks. For whom do different Torah education strategies best serve and when are they most useful? Must the texts utilized always come from the traditional canon? Are there more contemporary Jewish works from philosophy, literature and poetry that could serve the same purpose as successfully?

The following are some useful questions, the answers to which represent distinct strategies for Torah education strategies.

- 1. Temporal:** Is there an organized framework of study? Is it a singular event or ongoing? Can the context informal, such as inserting textual references in to casual conversations?
- 2. Relation of text to context:** Are the texts the center of the study experience? Can textual learning thread a thematic connection through different social contexts? How can immersive experiences be informed by texts?

3. **Content:** Is the focus of a particular text or set of texts free-standing, or is it on particular Jewish rituals or holidays, or on an issue found in daily secular life?
4. **Methodology:** What skills are needed to independently study traditional texts? Is the acquisition of those skills a goal of text study for non-observant JEAs? How can emotional or spiritual experiences such as meditation, prayer and healing be interpreted through the texts? Which texts and topics are most relevant to the developmental life stage of the students being engaged through them?

There are at least three distinct target populations for the educator working with JEAs in this Third Space context:

Individuals who are unengaged with Jewish life

The educators' task is to spark interest by establishing social and intellectual relevance of Jewish texts and contexts for their lives.

Individuals who are engaging with Jewish life

Educators offer sustained opportunities for Jewish sociability (interaction, conversation) through mentoring, teaching and development of peer communities. The goal is to build Jewish confidence and motivation, and frameworks for action and learning which are relevant to life. Learning is socially relevant and intellectually meaningful. Torah learning serves to enrich and enable a compelling social/communal framework which will expand the individual's consciousness of Jewish collective belonging and desire for more. Learning serves to establish relevance of Jewish life for individual.

Torah learning will likely focus on teaching of particular topics and perhaps have a strong therapeutic and motivational dimension. Torah learning for this population in this context is unlikely to impart classic skills for independent learning of traditional texts or stir debate over appropriate norms for living a Jewish life. Rather, the learning goals are limited to creating desire and providing initial awareness of the possibilities that come out of pursuing a Jewish journey in the company of other Jews.

Individuals already engaged with Jewish life

Of the minority of students who are already committed to a Jewish life, the educator has a role to play in helping them evolve that commitment in to a fully adult formulation. This population will be ready to acquire or expand classic skills of Jewish learning and living. It will also be ready to apply a meta-perspective of wisdom gleaned from textual study to the Jewish community beyond their own immediate selves. On a personal level they will become further motivated to engage in more sophisticated

exploration and contextualization of the multiplicity of Jewish theologies, practices, cultures, and life choices that make up the 21st century Jewish world. They might also be inspired to connect others to Jewish life and become organizers of opportunities for others to participate in Jewish life in general and Torah learning in particular.

Conclusion

While there are legitimate questions about whether or not the idea of a New Jewish Commons centered on textual study will be a broad-based answer for engaging JEAs, the presentation of this idea at the Third Space conference allowed for a serious dialogue among theoreticians and practitioners about how to bring traditional Jewish wisdom to the modern campus. The recent evaluative work on the Senior Jewish Educator model shows that bringing texts to the table, within mentoring environments at the right time and in the right format can contribute to increased Jewish growth in certain JEAs. What is still unknown is how broadly that methodology can be applied on campus and in what context. However, it is clear that the New Jewish Commons idea provides a platform for imagining what is possible, out of which we hope will develop intellectual and practical frameworks for expanding the use of Jewish text across multiple contexts and populations of JEAs.

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