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## Lessons from Mapping Jewish Education

Amy L. Sales<sup>1</sup>

Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Jewish Philanthropy and Leadership

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The future strength and vitality of American Jewry depend on the quality of Jewish education being offered today. Children and youth need to develop an appreciation for the richness of Jewish tradition and they need to acquire Jewish knowledge and skills. This learning will occur only if there are educational opportunities that attract, teach, and inspire. In order to identify and understand such opportunities, the Jim Joseph Foundation commissioned Brandeis University to map the world of Jewish education.

The mapping project focused on Jewish education from preschool through college. It included all aspects of the field: formal and informal approaches, secular and religious programs, well-established and start-up organizations, local and national structures, and initiatives concerned directly with education and those concerned with capacity building. The work entailed: (1) interviewing the executives of national agencies and foundations concerned with Jewish youth education; (2) studying the philosophy and delivery of Jewish education in eight communities; and (3) building a database of organizations and programs devoted to Jewish youth education at the national level and in the eight communities of our study. All total, we interviewed about 170 individuals and gathered basic descriptive information on over 5,000 programs and organizations.

Results of the research were presented to the Jim Joseph Foundation (JJF) in two reports. *Mapping Jewish Education: The National Picture* presented current conditions and future trends in the field. It described the role played by foundations in the development of Jewish education and suggested what a Jewish education system—comprised of agencies, organizations, federations, philanthropists and foundations—might look like. *Mapping Professional Development for Jewish Educators* summarized the desirable and necessary features for effective professional development and examined current opportunities available to Jewish educators. Juxtaposing the two revealed possibilities for future growth and improvement in professional development for Jewish educators.

For this report, JJF invited unfettered thinking about the implications of the research for the Foundation's work in support of Jewish education. Using the research as a springboard, the report offers lessons from the national map, from the eight community studies, and from programs that interviewees identified as educational "hot spots."

### Lessons from the National Map

Jewish educational agencies, like most other agencies in the Jewish sector, rarely engage in strategic thinking about the future. At a recent conference, 200 camp leaders were asked how many had a five-year plan. Four did. They were then asked how many were

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<sup>1</sup> The Research Team consisted of Marion Gribetz, Annette Koren, Joe Reimer, Nicole Samuel, and Jackie Terry. Dave Tobey, Nina Robinson, and Gila Greenberg assisted with the development of the database.

thinking ten years out. None were. Similarly, when we sought agencies that were thinking long-term about their development needs (a challenge for every nonprofit), we located only a couple of federations and no agencies with a comprehensive, long-term view.

**Lesson #1: Discussion about the future of Jewish education needs to be contextualized within broader societal trends.**

When Jewish educators refer to today's youth as "the iPod generation," they signal that they are already behind the curve. The iPod is what exists today; it is not the future. Jewish educational institutions will be affected by mega-trends, but no one is taking a serious look at the implications. Land development and the loss of open space affect the value of camp properties. Domestic and international security concerns can affect travel to Israel, the hiring of international staff, registration systems that identify individuals (e.g., bri), and the need for sophisticated but unobtrusive security systems for schools, JCCs, and camps. Globalization of the economy increases competition in the job market and, therefore, how teens think about the value of their school and summer experiences. It is not surprising that the Hebrew-English bilingual program at the JCC preschool in Palo Alto is attractive to parents, that day schools are more often judged on their college admissions rates than on the strength of their Judaics program, that service learning programs are on the ascendancy, and that camps are being pushed to develop specialty programs. Environmentalism is an increasingly strong force in the world yet environmental education programs are under-resourced, most camps are poor ecological models (e.g., they do not use biodegradable supplies and they do not recycle), and "green" buildings are more of an ideal than a regular feature of school architecture. Demographic trends (e.g., increasing rates of intermarriage, youth identifying as GBLT, families moving to exurban areas) will affect Jewish education, as will social trends (e.g., individualism, rejection of religious authority, interest in spirituality versus religion).

Such topics may be beyond the reach of individual agencies but they cannot be ignored. A convocation on the implications of these future trends for Jewish education could generate great value and excitement. The Foundation may not be able to address these issues alone, but it can certainly be a thought leader in the field.

A vast infrastructure has been built for Jewish youth education. Though impressive, the size is more suggestive of an impulse to proliferate programs, create new organizations, and build facilities than of a massive, concerted effort to tackle the community's fundamental educational challenges. Our estimate is that 90% of the current investment and effort is aimed at programming; only 10% is dedicated to capacity building.

The infrastructure has not been organized into an effective educational system. The entire enterprise (including its leadership, funding, programming, and professional development) is largely structured around sub-sectors—camping, year-round youth group, Israel experience, day schools, congregational schools, campus work, and so on. Little advantage is taken of the potential synergy among these sub-sectors.<sup>2</sup> As well, the

<sup>2</sup> See Wertheimer, J. (2005) *Linking the silos: How to accelerate the momentum in Jewish education today*. NY: The AVI CHAI Foundation.

national organizations have not fully realized the potential for synergy vertically between the national office and local affiliates, and horizontally among the local units. Within local communities, turfism is more common than collaboration, and allocations are often perceived to favor one institution over another.

***Lesson #2: The national agencies need to determine their appropriate role in the educational system.***

JESNA, Hillel, BBYO and others that have undergone a strategic planning process have been able to define their value-added and to restructure their work to maximize their contribution. Others are trying various ways to be relevant (e.g., the development of curriculum at URJ or the JCCA) although they still struggle to hold sway over their local units. An investment in strategic planning could help strengthen the national system.

At the very least, the national organizations should be clearinghouses of information about the particular sub-sector they represent. The Foundation for Jewish Camping and PEJE have embraced this role. Others, however, have little systematic information about the size, strength, and programmatic content of their member organizations. The URJ, for example, is only now inventorying the religious schools in its congregations. JESNA has little systematic information on the central agencies for Jewish education that it is intended to serve.

The Jim Joseph Database will be one way to support the development and use of such information across the various sub-sectors of Jewish education. It thus has the potential to help the national agencies serve their local units.

Much of the recent development in Jewish education has been directed toward establishing professional fields of practice (e.g., in informal Jewish education, day school education, camping, and Israel education). Efforts include the creation of professional associations, training programs, professional networks, and communities of practice. These structures foster a sense of a coherent discipline and professional identification with the field. Communities of practice, in particular, build connections among members who previously worked in isolation from one another. Through sharing of ideas, information, and resources, these can help retain people on the job and improve their practice.

Still, Jewish education suffers from a dearth of high caliber people able to serve as leaders. There are staffing shortages and difficulties finding competent educators and administrators in day schools, congregational schools, summer camps, and other sectors of the field. Many of those working in congregational schools and informal education are part-time or temporary workers. They may not see this work as a career, they do not necessarily identify as professionals, and they certainly do not have the opportunities and perquisites of full professionals. At lower levels in the field, not enough has been done to identify, nurture, and invest in “the best and the brightest.” This failure is particularly evident in informal educational organizations.

**Lesson #3: The best practices in professional development should be applied to the Jewish sector.**

Current research and theory in education maintain that professional development should be embedded in the teacher's experience and it should be an ongoing, dynamic activity that extends across all levels and career stages. These practices, however, are rarely found in the Jewish educational world. Our review of current activity in the field identified a number of needs: to increase the numbers of those receiving professional development; to identify, recruit, and prepare new talent for professional work; to develop teachers of teachers, master teachers, and mentors to carry out the work of professional development; to arrive at clear statements of educational goals and purposes so that professional development efforts can be aligned with them; to evaluate the merits of various forms of professional development and their influence on practice. In addition, Jewish education for Jewish educators is widely needed. This need is particularly important because Jewish educators are not just teachers but also serve as role models to the children with whom they work.

The JJF/BBYO Professional Development Institute is a significant step in this direction. Importantly, the Institute includes the adaptation of best practices as a key strategy. Future efforts might be directed at helping Jewish educational organizations improve their induction of new staff, create rich learning environments for informal learning within the context of the workplace, and support formal ongoing education and training.

Similarly there is a dearth of fundraising talent for Jewish education. Synagogues, schools, and camps have come late to fundraising. Their leaders are not prepared to help with the development function and they are in competition with every other established nonprofit for fundraising professionals. Fund development is an emerging concern that will only grow in the future. The implementation and sustainability of innovations will require funding beyond that available from tuition and dues.

**Lesson #4: Foundations and philanthropists should influence Jewish educational organizations to become serious about fundraising.**

The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University encourages grantors to cover the cost of tuition and make attendance at fundraising courses a condition of their grants. Jewish educational organizations could similarly be leveraged to improve their development capacity.

**The View from Local Communities**

In order to understand how education is conceptualized, funded, and delivered at the local level, we studied eight communities that differ by size and geographic region: Boston, Washington DC, Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, Denver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. All of these communities have fully elaborated educational structures—central agencies, congregational schools, day schools, JCC preschools, youth groups, Israel

education, and the like. And all of them have unique programs noteworthy for their inventiveness and/or their success.

The research found stark contrasts among the communities, driven by the local culture, structure, funding patterns, leadership, and politics. For example, professional development takes on a unique quality in each community consistent with the zeitgeist of that locale. San Francisco—with its abundance of creative, entrepreneurial educators—has a host of professional networks that link these individuals. Los Angeles has a plethora of conferences but little continuous development work, a reflection of the community's large and geographically dispersed population and its proclivity toward institution-building (as opposed to individual development). In Boston—where education is considered the heart and soul of the community—the federation partnered with local synagogues and colleges to create new careers for Jewish educators. The federation committed to funding these congregational educators over the long-term, a commitment that contrasts with the one-year or limited-term grants for educational experimentation that are common elsewhere.

***Lesson #5: Funders, planners, and policymakers need to attend to the peculiar conditions within each community that determine how Jewish education is delivered at the local level.***

The real action in Jewish education is at the local level where children attend school and join youth groups. National initiatives eventually need to be housed in local institutions. In order to plan intelligently, funders need to understand the realities of the local communities where their projects will be sited. They require thick descriptions of the relationships among the federation, central agency, synagogues, schools, JCCs, educational leadership and local philanthropists.

This information would also be useful to communities. A community leader interested in creating a community-wide professional development program for Jewish educators recently called to discuss the infrastructure that exists elsewhere. She not only hoped to learn from these examples but also wanted to benchmark her community against comparable communities. “Are we ahead, on par, or behind?”, she wanted to know. Answers to these questions could propel the development of Jewish education within communities.

As with other aspects of the field, there is a great deal of information, experience, and wisdom at the local level, but it needs to be codified and made available to other communities. The Jim Joseph Jewish education database will address some of this need. Qualitative studies, such as those undertaken in the eight communities of the current study, will also be of great value to understanding how local systems operate.

Most Jewish children receive Jewish education in a congregational or supplementary school. Yet, despite new energy and optimism, these schools continue to be troubled

institutions.<sup>3</sup> The problems are deeply embedded in the system and cover everything from hours, administration, and faculty to parental support, resources, and the capacity of synagogues to run effective schools. The movements have, so far, been unable to drive change in this area. They, themselves, are slow to innovate, have little command power over the local schools, and in many regards (e.g., fundraising) are poor models. The local central agencies for Jewish education, which are tasked with working with the supplementary schools, are of widely varying quality. Where the federation has made education a priority in word and deed *and* has determined that the central agency is what its name implies, the agency has become an effective player in Jewish education. Baring these conditions, it has not. A struggling central agency can do little to raise the level of the supplementary schools.

As noted above, the issues are different in each community. A snapshot of the central agencies for Jewish education in the four metropolitan areas which are to receive the bulk of JFF's funding for education for teens and young adults follow:

- In San Francisco, the central agency (BJE) receives about half of its operating support from the federation and the community endowment fund, and must raise the other half through grant writing and fundraising. The central agency is thus somewhat at the whim of funders and cannot necessarily stay with particular endeavors over the long haul. It also is not structurally linked to the organizations that it is intended to serve and may even be in competition with them for funding and programming. With low support for the central agency and no educational leadership in the federation, San Francisco has not yet engaged in a community conversation about Jewish education.
- Los Angeles, too, has no central focus or overall strategy for Jewish education but it does have a structure that connects the central agency (BJE) to the various organizations that it serves. Federation, largely regarded as reactive rather than proactive, plays the role of financial steward and allocator. The BJE, considered a convener and not an innovator, provides some glue for an educational system in this sprawling community. Almost every school is affiliated with the BJE because the agency enticed them under its umbrella with offers of funding, access to consultants, continuing education, and the like. Funding for schools is based on the number of students served thereby maintaining a sense of equity and transparency. As well, the central agency sets a salary scale for teachers (with increments for participation in professional development) and a code of personnel practices for schools. The BJE also created an accreditation program. The BJE is a pass-through for federation funds, but organizations can receive community funding only if they meet accreditation standards. At the present time, all of the day schools and over 80% of the supplementary schools are accredited under the BJE system.
- The Boston federation plays a strong and central role in Jewish education. It is the source of power, money, and creative ideas. It has placed Jewish education front and

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<sup>3</sup> See Wertheimer, J. (2007). *Recent trends in supplementary Jewish education*. NY: The AVI CHAI Foundation..

center on the communal agenda with a commensurate “skyrocketing” of funding for Jewish education over the past decade. The federation’s core strategy is to enhance the education that is offered in places where people already connect. As a result, much of its effort has been targeted to synagogues where it has implemented a family education initiative, a youth educator initiative, adult learning programs, and a camper initiative. The central agency has been effectively marginalized from all of this funding, innovation, and activity.

- The central agency for Jewish education (Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning - PJLL) in Washington DC is a newly-founded independent agency that downplays any ties it might have to the federation. (A description of PJLL’s organization and mission appears in the following section.)

***Lesson #6: In developing Jewish education at the local level, funders must decide how to work with existing structures for the funding and support of Jewish education. They also need to consider what to do about the supplementary schools and whether or not to resource and empower the central agencies to bring innovation to these settings.***

Cleveland offers an instructive example of how a weak central agency was converted into one of the most powerful agencies in the community. Boston’s approach is to ignore the central agency and to support new professional positions within synagogues so that some of the responsibility for youth education can be offloaded from the schools and placed on the family or youth educator. Other communities, like New York, have turned to outside vendors (e.g., the Experiment in Congregational Excellence) to reinvigorate the supplementary schools. The URJ has tried to raise the level of its schools with new curriculum and JESNA has a plan for developing some of the central agencies. A formula for success does not exist. But a careful study of each locale should yield strategies for maximizing the value of the existing infrastructure.

### **Lessons from the “Hot Spots”**

Our study was originally called “hot spots” in Jewish education because we wanted to locate the epicenter of energy and excitement in the field. In the course of the project, we interviewed 170 educational leaders, both lay and professional, at the national and local levels. We asked informants what they were most excited about in their community, agency or organization, or in their own work. General principles for the future of Jewish education can be derived from the “hot spots” they described. The descriptions that follow are not intended as endorsements. Rather they are intended to exemplify principles for program design, development, and growth that are responsive to current trends in the youth population.

## **Emphasis on the New**

What excites educational leadership is not necessarily a program that attracts large numbers of participants, although stunning growth in a program (such as that achieved by Prozdor in Boston) does generate excitement. Given American society's current emphasis on individualism and the concomitant trend toward niche programming, it is clear that "one size does not fit all," and that creativity and success are more likely to be found in targeted as opposed to mass-marketed programs. Interviewees also did not require a project to have demonstrated success in order to designate it a hot spot. The projects they cited were often in the early stages and had not as yet been evaluated. Rather, their energy is galvanized around new ideas. Interviewees seemed to be motivated by the sheer newness and creativity of the project.

In the 1920s, a series of experiments on the effect of work conditions on productivity were carried out at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant. Curiously, researchers found that regardless of what they did—whether they increased or decreased illumination in the shop, for example—productivity went up. They concluded that any novel change in the work and any special attention given to the workers motivated higher outcomes. The Hawthorne effect, as it is widely known, may explain the energy we see around innovation in Jewish educational programming.

The 1990s saw a plethora of teen initiatives conducted by national agencies (JESNA, JCCA) and local communities (e.g., Bay Area, Boston, Minneapolis, Boca Raton, Pittsburgh). Each initiative began at Square #1. Each researched program offerings and teen interests, and each found exactly what the others had found. These initiatives insisted on asking the teens what they wanted. In their effort to be market driven, they put the onus on the teens to come up with the new idea. They managed to create a process, involve participation by members of the agency/community, and to call attention to the teen population. But they produced minimal innovation. What they needed were good ideas. It is perhaps not surprising that, in the ensuing years, communal energy was directed away from teens toward college and preschool ages, where it was hoped that greater success would be found.

***Lesson #7: Innovation in programming is necessary, even if it is within the context of "old" or traditional settings.***

Jewish education should take a lesson from the automobile industry's concept of "surprise-and-delight" features. Car manufacturers try to give the consumer something that she wants but does not yet realize is even possible. The look on the buyer's face the first time a cup holder popped up is the quintessential example of surprise-and-delight. The basic car remains unchanged but the addition of the surprise-and-delight feature captures the customer.

Without discarding tradition or history, schools, camps, youth groups, Hillels, and alternative programs need a regular flow of new ideas. These are most likely to come from those with high creativity, entrepreneurial spirit, willingness to take risks, and

ability to adapt ideas from diverse disciplines and sectors. Occasionally the source of new ideas has been a visionary funder or professional leader. New ideas can also arise from brainstorming groups and think tanks where thoughts of the new are unconstrained. They also come from creative talent that should be identified and supported. San Francisco is a magnet and home for highly creative types and the Jewish community thus has an abundance of professional talent—creative geniuses, innovators, and entrepreneurs. The Foundation might devise a way to “scale up” their talent so that their creative genius can be brought to the rest of the country.

New ideas may originate anywhere, but program innovation is most likely to come from foundations. Experimentation requires a degree of risk that is generally more supportable by foundations than by local communities. Communities need to work with diverse stakeholders to arrive at consensual decisions. They feel the responsibility to handle “public money” with caution. Their resources increase only incrementally and therefore new money for educational innovation is only incremental. Foundations, in contrast, have the resources for experimentation. They can be countercultural (an important quality for youth education). They are not obliged to seek consensus and, given their entrepreneurial spirit, they can move faster than the traditional communal system.

***Lesson #8: Innovation can be fostered through the development and scaling up of new program models and through the support of entrepreneurialism.***

Our research encountered new operating modes that are entering the rhetoric and practice of funders and agencies. The general format entails piloting and modeling new programs, conducting evaluation research, aggregating results of studies to derive general principles, disseminating findings, and scaling up successful programs. The scale of such efforts requires the leadership of a national agency or foundation. A central agency for Jewish education could not make full use of such an effort but JESNA and the Covenant Foundation, both of which are thinking in these terms, could. Support for such efforts would help give relevance to the national organizations and maximize the outcomes of experimentation with new ideas.

Support of entrepreneurialism is another way to foster innovation. Charter schools offer an instructive model. Educators were essentially told, “Here is the available budget. See if you can do education differently.” The result has been a profusion of experimental models in public school education. The Foundation for Jewish Camping is attempting a similar approach with new camp sites. The Foundation might do the same for Israel, alternative programs, campus programs, or day schools. Creating the conditions under which new programs proliferate will ultimately lead to higher levels of engagement as more participants find creative options that appeal to their niche identities and interests (see Lesson #13).

The difficulty for the Jewish community is to innovate without succumbing to faddism. The community regularly shifts focus from one sub-sector or enterprise to another, always in search of the next “big thing,” the “magic bullet” that will make Jews out of its children. For many years, day schools received disproportionate attention and funding.

The focus is now moving to the camp world, where leaders are eager to take advantage of the opportunity before the spotlight swings to the next promising realm (which might be preschools, supplementary schools, or other educational domain).

***Lesson #9: Beware of faddism.***

There is a danger in the community's faddism. The institution in the spotlight is often expected to be the be-all-and-end-all of Jewish education. Such an expectation inevitably leads to disappointment. The strength of the Jewish educational enterprise resides in its great diversity, with each sub-sector and opportunity adding another dimension to the child's education. Camping, for example, can provide a healthy dose of identity- and community-building experiences but cannot fully educate a Jewish child. Camp should stand alongside school, but it cannot replace it. The same phenomenon was apparent in the local communities we studied, most of which had "favorite" programs or agencies that were preferred by the federation, funders, and communal leadership. Rather, funders and communities need to support the growth of diversity within the educational system and seek linkages and synergies among various educational offerings.

The rate of experimentation in the field of Jewish education appears to be accelerating, with a continuous flow of pilot projects coming from the foundations and agencies and the creation of new organizations and initiatives in some local communities. Local professionals are often unaware of the activity of their national organization and of the lessons from its experiments and pilots. They, themselves, give little heed to disseminating lessons from their own innovative work. There are few mechanisms for diffusing local innovation to other parts of the field. In addition, little has been done to scale up projects that seem ripe for such growth. Directors in local organizations do not have the capacity to scale up, and many of the foundation executives we interviewed are uncertain about how to diffuse innovation and bring good ideas up to scale.

***Lesson #10: Maximize the value of lessons learned by a program, community, or sub-sector by assuring that the information is made available to others.***

A great deal is learned from each realm that receives attention. A body of knowledge was developed from experiments in family education, efforts to revitalize Hillel foundations, benchmarking efforts in day schools and day school incentive programs, to name a few. Given current investments by the Jim Joseph Foundation, the knowledge base about professional development and summer camp incentive programs is likely to grow as well. The most effective way for the community and its funders to operate is to assure that the lessons learned in one arena are made available to the others. Lessons from family education, Hillel, and day schools, for example, could all inform efforts to upgrade congregational schools, but only if the information is properly distilled, disseminated, and applied to the particular case.

## Emphasis on How

Because what is done may be less important than *how* it is done, lessons derived from one institution can readily inform the process of education in another. For example, Jewish overnight camps have a great deal to teach other educational institutions. Community and relationships are core to the summer camp experience. Camps excel at the creation of intentional communities with strong cultures, and the development of friendships, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. Adults at camp play the role of facilitators, role models, and friends. The setting is intensive. It is separated from life back home and Judaism is literally in the air. Jewish practice occurs organically, in the course of everyday life. The essence of camp is fun, which turns out to be good business and good educational practice. *Fun* does not necessarily equate with funny. In our 2006 study of Holocaust education at summer camps in the FSU, we found that even a serious topic like the Holocaust can be taught using techniques that are personally relevant, actively engaging, and based in group and community experiences. Done right, serious learning can be fun. These characteristics of camp contrast sharply with those of most religious schools, where the focus is on individual achievement and intellectual pursuit, the teacher's role is to instruct, and the mission statement fails to mention fun.

### **Lessons #11: So-called formal and informal educational programs have much to teach each other.**

Although schools do and should differ from camp in terms of content, setting, and goals, they could learn from camping's approach. If schools were to place new emphasis on building community and fostering relationships among students and teachers, they could improve the educational experience and raise children's interest in religious school. An incorporation of informal educational techniques could enliven the learning and increase its relevance. We believe that such a shift in approach could do much to lessen post-bar/t mitzvah and post-high school dropout rates.

At the same time, camps could learn much about content and curriculum from the schools. Our recent study of non-denominational Jewish camps found that individual pieces of Jewish education may be excellent but the educational program overall is scattershot. Because the program lacks a framework, the participants primarily acquire random Jewish facts and experiences.<sup>4</sup> Without losing their particular flair for programming, camps could learn much from schools about how to organize and sequence content.

## Emphasis on Engagement

Our community studies present an instructive dichotomy between Boston, a community that refers to education as its "heart and soul," and Washington, a community that replaced mention of "education" with talk of "engagement." *Education* suggests that we start by asking what students need to learn. The fundamental questions are "What is an

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<sup>4</sup> Sales, A., Samuel, N. and Parmer, D. (2007). *Growing Jewish Life at UJA-Federation's Cultural Camps*. (Unpublished report.)

educated Jew and how do we make our children such?” *Engagement* starts with the child. Its first questions are “Who is this child? What is her starting point? How do we get her on a path and keep her on it?” The field has historically followed the education model. However, given the value placed on individual choice and the prevailing metaphor of “Jewish journeys,” there are lessons to be learned from the engagement model.

The Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning (PJLL) in Washington DC is built from an alliance of the central agency, teen initiative, Hillel, and Israel coalition. The Partnership defines its mission as lifelong learning for each individual Jew. Its mission and structure are explicitly designed to “mind the gap,” to assure that the individual gets on and stays on a learning track from preschool through young adulthood.

Prior to the merger, each entity delivered services primarily to agencies: Hillel to Hillel foundations, the teen initiative to youth groups, and the central agency to congregational schools. The Partnership shifted the focus from institutions to individuals. It created a matrix structure based on age cohort by program type (e.g., early childhood, elementary, teen, college, 20-somethings, adults by school, camp, Israel, family education). Within each of the age cohorts there are professionals, lay leaders, and participants that form networks based on their shared concern. For example, synagogue high school coordinators (formal educators) meet with the heads of CIT programs at the summer camp (informal educators) to discuss post bar/t mitzvah possibilities. The congregation no longer stands alone in dealing with the post bar/t mitzvah dropout rate which is particularly high in this community (estimated at 80-90%). The structure sends the message that camp is as valid as the classroom, that institutions are part of a continuum, and that the hand-off from one opportunity to the next opportunity is as important as any single program.

***Lesson #12: The community needs to shift away from a singular focus on institutions toward a focus on the individual.***

Washington DC’s Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning with its emphasis on the individual learner suggests the need for different structures and different kinds of conversations about Jewish education. When a community is organized around its institutions, it is up to the individual to find his/her place and to figure out how to move from one experience to the next. Shifting the focus to the individual might require guidance counselors who can help the individual child or family chart the course of their Jewish engagement, camp advisors who can match the child to the best summer experience for his/her Jewish education, college advisors who can do both academic and Jewish advising. Such individual level services, which operationalize the notion of Jewish journey, would not require people to come into Jewish organizations but rather might be done through home visits. This lesson portrays an extreme shift away from traditional notions of community building. There is a danger in moving to the extreme, but imagining it should help to broaden notions about how children and youth are engaged in Jewish learning.

### Emphasis on Niche Programming

American society has witnessed an increase in individualism and personal choice and a decline in commitment to community and public life.<sup>5</sup> A generation ago, parents commonly listened to the same popular radio stations. Today, their children listen to personalized play lists on individual iPods. They create their individual profiles on networking sites like Facebook and MySpace and use these to engage with others who share their particular interests or preferences.

The engagement strategy at Hillel responds to this reality. Hillel foundations are home to a plethora of temporary niche groups that are founded by individuals around their particular identities and interests (e.g., eco-vegetarian feminists, Scuba Jews). None of these groups would be deemed successful if measured by their numbers—many have no more than eight to ten members—but students consider them important college experiences.<sup>6</sup> The groups provide the basic structure by which Hillel does its work, and Hillel directors gauge the growth and success of their foundation by the number of groups spawned.

A few years ago, Prozdor, Boston's community Hebrew high school, implemented a similar strategy. Aside from a core course for every grade, all of the courses offered are electives and students are encouraged to "find the connection between Judaism and their passion." The new strategy doubled enrollment each year for several years running. Taglit-birthright israel is another example of niche programming. Participants can choose to travel to Israel with any number of trip providers, each of which offers a specialty trip oriented towards its particular perspective.

Niche programming works when the core concern is the individual's Jewish journey. It is problematic when the goal is to build community or to create an attachment to a particular organization. Hillel's core challenge is managing the balance between differentiation and integration. It needs to figure out how to allow for the proliferation of individual groups while also fostering a sense of belonging to the greater Jewish community on campus.

**Lesson #13: Organizations that assume that one size fits all need to be retooled to suit the preference for niche programming that responds to specific needs and interests.**

Organizations might try thinking about themselves in non-institutional terms, asking the question, "What would our program look like if we had no building and no membership requirement." The American Jewish World Service, Panim, Rosh Chodesh—It's a Girl

<sup>5</sup> Bellah, R., et al. (1996). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Cohen, S.M. & Eisen, A.M. (2000). *The Jew within*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

<sup>6</sup> The proliferation of groups is not peculiar to the Jews, but is part of a larger trend on campus. See Wertheimer, L. (October 27, 2007). Join the club: Colleges see surge in new student groups. *Boston Globe*, A1, 6.

Thing!, or Jewish Youth Philanthropy, and others have shown that it is possible to operate in this way. Innovation in niche programming is a trend that is likely to continue into the future and may offer interesting opportunities for investment.

### **Emphasis on Growth**

Despite the narrow focus of niche programming, its potential for growth is unlimited. Two programs, Jewish Youth Philanthropy (JYP) and Hazon, are presented here to demonstrate possible growth models.

***Jewish Youth Philanthropy.*** JYP was started in San Francisco in the late 1990s by Michael Kesselman, then at Koret Foundation. Kesselman was concerned that bar/t mitzvah celebrations were loaded with extravagance but devoid of Jewish meaning. The first effort, with the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Brandeis Hillel Day School, raised several thousand dollars which were leveraged into a half million dollar contribution to a local women's shelter. The idea gained impetus when it was picked up by the Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School in Palo Alto. In order to maximize the project's potential, the school made it part of the humanities curriculum. Students were required to pick a topic about which they were passionate; to research the topic and the agency that dealt with it; to develop a persuasive essay; and to make a presentation to the "allocations committee" (their class). In addition to critical thinking, research, writing, and oral presentation, the project invited discussion about what Judaism teaches about values and priorities. Because students were working on topics about which they personally cared, the project gave relevance to their Jewish studies and their English curriculum.

Three growth models followed. The first created sequential experiences for teens interested in philanthropy. JYP implemented a leadership program that engages a select group of teens in running a youth philanthropy foundation. The next step might be the development of an alumni group that can provide teens with further opportunities and use this highly-trained group of young people to encourage more youth philanthropy. The second model exported the idea to other sites. At the time of our study, there were three Jewish community teen foundations in operation in the Bay Area and two more in the planning phase. There were, as well, opportunities to link the local groups to a national effort to promote Jewish youth philanthropy. The third model involved program innovation. One hundred teens from San Francisco and across the country attended a Jewish youth funders conference that coincided with the Jewish Funders Network annual conference. Attendees were required to have one year experience either with their own fund, a foundation, or a 7<sup>th</sup> grade project. Further growth might include travel to Israel or Argentina to learn more about needs abroad. Without losing its niche, JYP has developed and expanded the initial experience into other opportunities.

***Hazon.*** Dedicated to outdoor and environmental education from a Jewish perspective, Hazon's core program began with a Labor Day weekend challenge ride infused with Jewish education. This niche program appeals to those who love to bicycle and/or care about the environment. The organization diversified around this core idea and now offers a five-day ride from Jerusalem to Eilat, with 150 Americans and Israelis. Participants see

Israel and learn about a range of challenges that the country faces. The organization would like to organize a similar ride in Eastern Europe. In fact, this concept can be exported to most places in the world.

Hazon also expanded into related areas. For example, with funds raised from the Ride, it started a community-supported agriculture project that supports local organic farmers in the United States and Israel. Hazon created a leadership training program for Jewish young adults that integrates organic farming and Jewish learning and applied funds from the NY Ride toward the purchase of the house where the participants live. At the same time, Hazon expanded its educational program. One new project is a text-based family education curriculum for day school children and their parents on Jews, food, and contemporary life. The Ride also supports the Teva Learning Center with its outdoor education experiences for day schools and synagogues. Teva has taught over 5000 Jewish children about the Jewish roots of environmentalism and activism over the past 12 years. The opportunities for growth and expansion seem limitless, all within the niche of Jewish and environmental education.

***Lesson #14: Funders should take good niche ideas and help them develop, diversify, and grow.***

It is possible for a program to develop from a single idea (a 7<sup>th</sup> grade philanthropy project, a bicycle ride over Labor Day weekend) into a national or international program. After the core program fully and successfully develops, the organizers can create different kinds of opportunities related to the niche interest of the organization and its participants. They can then form coalitions with like-minded groups and organizations. We may see, for example, the creation of a national coalition of Jewish youth philanthropies or the creation of an alliance of Jewish environmental education groups. In this way, the idea becomes grandly executed but the program does not lose its appeal to its niche audience.

The future is likely to see many more niche programs. Given the complexity of the population and the desire of American youth to choose experiences that suit their individual interests, the community needs to support the creation of a wide variety of such opportunities. The proliferation of programs will serve the educational enterprise well if the new offerings are innovatively moving into new areas.

When we began this research we entitled it “hot spots in Jewish education.” Our initial idea was to identify and learn from those areas in the field that were generating excitement and showed promise for the future of the field. Our experience in building the database, conducting interviews, and carrying out the community studies confirmed that there are, indeed, hot spots throughout the Jewish education world. The challenge is figuring out how to learn from them, strengthen and sustain them, and make them the standard. Opportunity abounds.