

# JEWISH INSTITUTIONS AS JEWISH LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

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*Today's challenge is to identify how Jewish institutions can become visionary, generative, and transformational. Three ways to do so are to deepen Jewish values as the core of institutional identity, implement a commitment to Jewish learning, and develop the capacity to be a learning organization. Then, Jewish institutions can become compelling communities of Jewish learning and living in which learning is both the means and the end of institutional renewal.*

Historians and sociologists will look back on the decade of the 1990s in Jewish life as a period of instability, introspection, and innovation. The awakening, as well as anxiety generated by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, challenged the North American Jewish community to examine its assumptions about Jewish identity, Jewish institutional life, and the Jewish future. Emerging from a period in which the Holocaust and the State of Israel provided a compelling basis for Jewish identification for Jews who did not primarily understand their Jewish identity in religious terms, we came to understand that these pillars of Jewish self-consciousness would not have the power to sustain Jewish identification in the decade of the 1990s or in the future. The mainstream institutions of Jewish life—synagogues, Jewish Centers, federations, agencies, and Jewish day schools—were being challenged both by the questions of Jewish leaders about their effectiveness in sustaining Jewish identification and by their own doubts about whether their current structures could serve a changing Jewish community and changing society.

While the community attempted to mount conversations and deliberations about strategies for the Jewish future and for Jewish institutional life—the Commission on Jewish Education in North America (1988–1990) and the North American Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity (1993–1995) serving as examples of such efforts—many felt that the results pointed to long-range

efforts but did not provide any immediate answers. The sense of urgency and the complexity of the question motivated some philanthropists, organizations, and individuals to simply move ahead with experiments and initiatives that would speak to the challenge of community viability and individual Jewish identity in the twenty-first century in the short range.

In the midst of these ongoing conversations one of the great debates centered on the effectiveness of mainstream Jewish institutions, particularly synagogues and Jewish Centers and to a lesser degree day schools. While these are the very institutions where affiliated Jews are to be found on a more than occasional basis, leaders and researchers have continuously questioned the impact of these institutions on the Jewish behaviors and commitments of their members. Some voices have advocated for the need to create whole new institutions of Jewish life that are better suited to the twenty-first century Jew and Jewish family. The most recent study by Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen (1998) suggests, “Jewish meaning is sought and discovered in odd places, not necessarily in the conventional quarters of the synagogue and the Jewish organizational boardroom.” At the same time other voices, which have been heard in this very journal (Ruskay, 1995/96; Shrage, 1991), argued for the need to reinvigorate our mainstream institutions of Jewish life as the entry points to Jewish life for most identified Jews and the accessible

communities in which these Jews can find the educational, religious, and social support for building meaningful Jewish lives.

In the context of this debate I wish to offer the following hypothesis and its implications: *Although there is a need for creativity and responsiveness that would shape new forms of Jewish expression, both individual and collective, without enduring and immediate Jewish communities—be they in the form of synagogues, Centers, day schools, or other Jewish organizations—the modeling of and support for sustained, and hopefully expanding Jewish lives of commitment will not be possible.* Thus, the challenge is to identify the ways in which these Jewish institutional communities can become visionary, generative, and transformational for both the individuals within them and for the collective that they represent.

This hypothesis guided a decision by the Rhea Hirsch School of Education of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1993 to create two national projects in institutional transformation, one directed to synagogues and one to day schools. These two projects, the Experiment in Congregational Education and Day Schools for the 21st Century, have been discussed in a variety of conferences and consultations, as well as analyzed in a number of papers. Some lessons that have been learned are summarized in a paper by the directors of the two projects, Drs. Isa Aron and Michael Zeldin (1990) of the Rhea Hirsch faculty. The most salient point about these two projects for the purposes of this article is the focus on systemic change and cultural transformation that is at the heart of these experiments. The deepening of articulated Jewish values as the core of institutional self-identity, the commitment to Jewish learning as the mode of self-expression and institutional inquiry, and the development of capacities to be learning organizations are the major identifying features of these efforts at institutional transformation. Although all Jewish institutions and organizations have an ultimate Jewish purpose, these efforts speak to creating a deep institu-

tional culture of Jewish values, expression, and commitments that infuse the day-to-day life of these institutions and permeate the way they “do business” in all aspects of their functioning. The operating assumption is that such institutions can become compelling communities of Jewish learning and living only when the Jewish aspect of their self-identity is not segregated into special programs and activities, but suffuses the day-to-day life of the institution and its members.

With this starting assumption these two projects developed processes for guiding selected synagogues and day schools along the path of institutional transformation. The object in sight was the creation of communities of Jewish learning, where learning was both the means and the end for institutional renewal. The principles that characterized these processes were shared leadership between lay and professional leaders, Jewish study as a regularity of the process, reflection as a mode of deliberation and self-analysis, values-based visioning as the foundation for future directions, and commitment to challenging the structural and cultural regularities of institutional life, as well as the programmatic. After almost five years of experience with fourteen congregations and six day schools throughout the United States, we have come to believe that we needed not only to guide these institutions to a self-identity as communities of Jewish learning but also to a self-identity as a learning organizational community. Here we draw heavily on the work of Peter Senger (1990) and others. It is to this synthesis that I want to draw attention.

In the past five years there have been a variety of efforts directed to institutional renewal or transformation of Jewish institutions. Much of the focus has been on synagogues and Jewish Centers, although the New York UJA-Federation’s Continuity Commission has offered grants to a wide array of Jewish institutions, including camps, Hillel foundations, and others, to transform themselves into “compelling settings for Jewish living and learning” (Ruskay, 1995/96). These projects and initiatives have involved a num-

ber of different entry points to institutional transformation, including worship, social action, family education, youth programming, and leadership training. The focus on Jewish learning as the entry point has defined the Experiment in Congregational Education and Day Schools for the 21st Century both philosophically and structurally. While the focus on Jewish learning is a natural outgrowth of both the interests and expertise of the Rhea Hirsch School, the emphasis on Jewish learning as the point of intervention has significance beyond this natural affinity. Here the teaching of our tradition, *Talmud Torah K'neged Kulam*—the study of Torah is equal to them all (the *mitzvo*)—has some bearing. Whatever the engagement is in Jewish institutional life—be it worship, social action, life cycle, creating community, or other—Jewish learning is the foundation for understanding the deeper meanings of these engagements and for renewing them for our time. If an institution seeks to change and renew these modes of engagement, such transformation must include study of the Jewish tradition, as well as exploration of our contemporary circumstances. Every primary expression of Jewish life and commitment is part of a curriculum of Jewish learning about our beliefs and our purpose as the Jewish people. To deepen the Jewish essence of the many acts in which Jews engage individually and collectively, Jewish learning is essential. Forging a collective vision for institutional life must also be grounded in Jewish learning if it is to embody the core values that have characterized Judaism and Jewish life across time and space. Confronting the many problems and challenges in Jewish life is an important Jewish experience and not just an organizational exercise, when it is informed by Jewish learning and values. It is from these convictions about deepening the Jewish character and culture of Jewish institutional life that the goal and the means for institutional transformation have been grounded in Jewish learning in the projects of the Rhea Hirsch School. The vision that informs our work has been the guiding of institutions to shape themselves as

communities of Jewish learning.

The processes that have been central to the Experiment in Congregational Education, and to a great degree are reflected in Day Schools for the 21st Century as well, are described in a recent paper by Isa Aron (1998), project director for the Experiment. One of the most important processes is the integration of Jewish text study in all task force, leadership team, and other meetings of the congregations and day schools in these projects. Leadership of this text study is predominantly by lay leaders, and not clergy or professionals. One aspect of these transformational processes is empowering lay leaders to be Jewish learners and teachers. Text study is also an integral part of all national gatherings of the congregations and day schools in these projects. The other significant Jewish learning component relates to the fashioning of visions for the future for these institutions. The starting point again is Jewish texts and values, which are probed for those core meanings and commitments that the institutions are ready to affirm as central to their aspirations for the future. Finally, in these congregations and day schools the engagement with Jewish learning spreads out from those most deeply involved in the transformation process to the remainder of the institutional structure and program. Jewish text study becomes a regularity at board and committee meetings, study becomes the basis for making major decisions about issues in the institution, and lay leaders of the institution become accessible models of learning and teaching for other members. All of these important steps are the foundation for transformed programs and models for all those within the institution. From this integration of Jewish learning into the very essence of the institution's functioning, the community of Jewish learning emerges.

The effort to guide Jewish institutions through transformational processes has led to a complementary vision—that of synagogues, Centers, day schools, and Jewish organizations as learning organizations. In addition to the work of Peter Senge cited previously,

there is a vast literature in the organizational field about the concept of the "learning organization" and the importance of ongoing learning in an organizational world where the most consistent regularity is change (Chawla & Renesch, 1995; Stacey, 1992; Vaill, 1996). The basic assumption about the need for learning organizations is that all organizations in the contemporary world need to continuously develop their capacity to respond to the changing world and the circumstances in which they exist. This capacity enables the organization to continuously renew itself, to develop the visions and achieve the results that are of ultimate importance, to enable the members of the organization to grow in their understanding of the organization and its values, and to strengthen their ability to be productive contributors to the organizations' vitality.

Several vitally important principles inform the concept of the learning organization. Senge (1990, p. 13) states, "A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create reality and how they can change it." In order to achieve that state of affairs Senge suggests that there are five vital dimensions: (1) systems thinking as the critical conceptual framework; (2) personal mastery, which involves continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision; (3) unearthing the mental models, assumptions, and generalizations that influence how we understand the world; (4) building a shared vision; and (5) team learning in which dialogue and thinking together are the dominant modes. There is a critical connection between individual learning and collective learning in this model. The relationship between current reality and a vision of a desired future is an important learning opportunity, as Senge (1990, p. 155) reminds us, "An accurate insightful view of current reality is as important as a clear vision." He also suggests, "Failure is, simply, a shortfall, evidence of the gap between vision and current reality. Failure is an opportunity for learning" (Senge, 1990, p. 154). Finally, Senge concretizes the character of

the learning organization in the following way: "That means building an organization where it is safe for people to create visions, where inquiry and commitment to the truth are the norm, and where challenging the status quo is expected—especially when the status quo includes obscuring aspects of current reality that people seek to avoid" (Senge, 1990, p. 172). Another insight about the concept of the learning organization is offered by Charles Handy (1995, p. 55): "It has been said that people who stop learning stop living. This is also true of organizations."

To implement the concept of the learning organizations in our Jewish institutions would require the following: engagement of members, lay leaders, and professionals in shared learning about their organization; a willingness and capacity to challenge assumptions and cultural regularities in the organization; the capacity for reflective thinking about problems and issues and the consideration of alternative understandings of the issues and possible solutions; the commitment of time by all those involved to the process of organizational reflection and learning; the openness to thinking in new ways about the life and functioning of the organization; and the appreciation of process as a critical element of learning. These activities of the organization would take place in the context of studying trends in the Jewish community, reflecting on the ways the organization is fulfilling its Jewish mission and serving its members, considering a vision of Jewish communal life and the engaged contemporary Jew, and assessing of emerging needs of both individual members and the institutional collective. If Jewish institutions are to become more compelling Jewish communities for their members and potential members, institutional renewal and transformation cannot be a one-time or occasional event. As new trends and needs emerge, as these institutions grow in their self-understanding, as events in the Jewish and general world affect our institutions, the continuous learning that has been outlined above is essential. Furthermore, Jewish learning is the content of a Jewish

learning organization alongside all the other knowledge and insights that must be considered. For the Jewish institutions in our community, becoming and remaining both communities of Jewish learning and Jewish learning organizations go hand in hand. This is what we have learned from working with synagogues and day schools, and we can make a case for application of this model to other organizations and agencies in the Jewish community.

Why at this particular time in the history of the North American Jewish community has the modeling of the community of Jewish learning complemented by the Jewish learning organization become so important? Currently, the Council of Jewish Federations and the United Jewish Appeal, two of the most important structures for Jewish communal life, are debating how they can come together as a single entity. Many forces—economic, social, and political—are driving this attempt. In this past decade federations and synagogues have entered into a new kind of relationship, in which both have realized the urgency of collaboration, rather than competition. Alongside our synagogue *minyanim*, lay-led worship and study communities of all kinds are springing up everywhere. Jewish Centers are in the midst of redefining themselves and their relationship to other institutions in their communities. Even the Jewish academies of higher learning are reimagining their missions and contemplating how to relate in new ways to other Jewish institutions. Philanthropists are calling for joint efforts between quite dissimilar institutions, and they are offering to support such efforts with funding. There seems little doubt that all of these changes and challenges point to the need to question our individual institutional status quo and enter into a journey of learning about who we are, who we want to be, and how we are going to get there. At the communal level we need to engage in the learning that will enable us to see new patterns of interrelationship and interdependence. No institution or agency can ignore these impulses and attempt to maintain the status quo or to create what are in reality

“cosmetic” changes.

Where does the community of Jewish learning enter into these efforts? In synagogues, day schools, and Jewish Centers the centrality of Jewish content and learning may seem self-evident. What of the other agencies and organizations of Jewish life with their own special missions in regard to the Jewish people? One of the important lessons that emerged from the many conversations following the publication of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey was the need to create many opportunities for Jewish meaning-making for Jews of all ideologies and interests. The encounter with Jewish tradition could not be confined to the classroom, the sanctuary, or the lecture hall. Wherever Jews might gather and for whatever purpose, there needed to be an opportunity for Jewish learning and an integration of that learning into the shaping of their individual lives. We could no longer be a community where Jewish learning and literacy was a product we supplied for others but had little import on our own lives.

Thus, the community of Jewish learning needs to be an aspect of every Jewish institution and agency. Although this community of Jewish learning will look different in every context and will be appropriate to the structure and mission of each institution and agency, it is important that it be seen as core and not as an add-on. This is an incredible time in the history of the North American Jewish community. Instability has generated creative tension, which in turn has unleashed innovation, new thinking, and the possibility of a different future from what we may have imagined even 25 years ago. The lessons we have learned at the Rhea Hirsch School from our work with our two transformation projects, the Experiment in Congregational Education and Day Schools for the 21st Century, have enriched our work and our preparation of future professional leaders for the Jewish community. It is our hope that by sharing them with a broader audience these lessons will contribute to the efforts to build those community structures that will shape a dynamic Jewish future.

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