

Diversity and Informal Jewish Education

by Kerry M. Olitzky

In recent years, informal Jewish learning environments (youth groups, summer camps, and trips to Israel) have grown in stature and now occupy a place — and rightfully so — alongside formal environments such as day schools and supplementary schools. To meet the needs of the increasingly diverse Jewish community of the 21st century (one that spends more time outside of the community at its periphery than at its core), what might be called “episodic education” has to be given equal legitimacy and raised beyond the level of a program.

While such education admittedly may not yield the same immediate results as do more traditional programs, most of those on the periphery of the Jewish community will not be willing to take the quantum leap required to participate in those more demanding forms of Jewish education that are part of the inner core of the community. A more gradual approach is required, and that is where informal learning activities can serve a great purpose, acting as a bridge between the completely unengaged and those deeply and thoroughly involved in the Jewish community.

Unfortunately, it now appears that in the 21st century those on the periphery are increasingly unwilling to venture into even the informal environments of Jewish education. We can see much evidence for such a claim. Participation in summer programs is waning (perhaps exclusive of birthright Israel), and the overall majority of the relevant cohort still are not involved in activities such as Jewish day schools and summer camps.

We contend that this is why serious attention must be paid to what we at the Jewish Outreach Institute call “outreach” (defined as a methodology rather than a target population)—taking Judaism out to where people are, rather than waiting for them to come to us. Public Space JudaismSM, an important component to our outreach strategy, actually refers to a three-tiered approach to community programming that employs secular venues for effective Jewish programs. If the Jewish community of the 21st century spends more time in the secular world than within Jewish institutions, we must move our episodic education outside the walls of our community in order to reach those on the periphery—and more such programs. Why? This is where we find most of the diversity of the community. Perhaps it is even one of the reasons why those on the periphery are more attracted to such informal programs of activity. Informal programs—that used to be more attractive to those on the outside are perhaps suffering because of a growing reticence of those outside the core of the community to commit to engagement or affiliation before they feel fully ready.

While the immediate goal might not be to get those who attend to enroll in Hebrew school or other formal institutional programs, an interest in episodic informal education that takes place in public spaces can be the beginning of a bridge to more concentrated forms of learning—if they are designed in order to do so. If planned in such a way, formal programs of Jewish education—those in the core of the Jewish community—have the potential to reflect a greater diversity—a diversity that has become the real Jewish community, not just the one represented by the core community and its institutions.

There will be those who will say, of course, that when we adopt such an inclusive approach—in a more public context—we run the risk of lowering barriers *too* far. Programs that reach the masses, they say, have no depth to them. The nature of entry programs is that they are low-barrier by design but they can (and indeed are specifically designed to) lead to programs of greater depth. Few will take a leap to such programs on their own. However, outreach activities are not meant to exist in a vacuum. These low-barrier entries should always be ways to get people to take the all-important “next steps” to greater engagement.

This approach also helps us as we strive to ensure that we create an environment that allows for all viewpoints to be presented rather than trying to homogenize Jewish education. Without the disagreement that often comes from a diversity of opinions, we cannot have the in-depth discussions that can lead to real learning and deeper understanding of the issues at hand. The Talmud is reflective of such diversity as it encourages insinuating a larger number of people into our community not so that differences could be glossed over but so that discussions stemming from those same differences could be used in a way that shows that Gd has made each person unique. The way to create such dialogue is by making sure there is diversity reflected in each Jewish educational setting, and the way to ensure diversity in Jewish educational settings is to reach out to all members of the community—where they are. That includes those members who traditionally reside on the periphery, such as the LGBT community, the intermarried, and the children of the intermarried. In order to reach those community members, though, who spend more of their time outside the community than near its core, it is imperative that we extend outreach and educational activities beyond the walls of communal institutions.

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