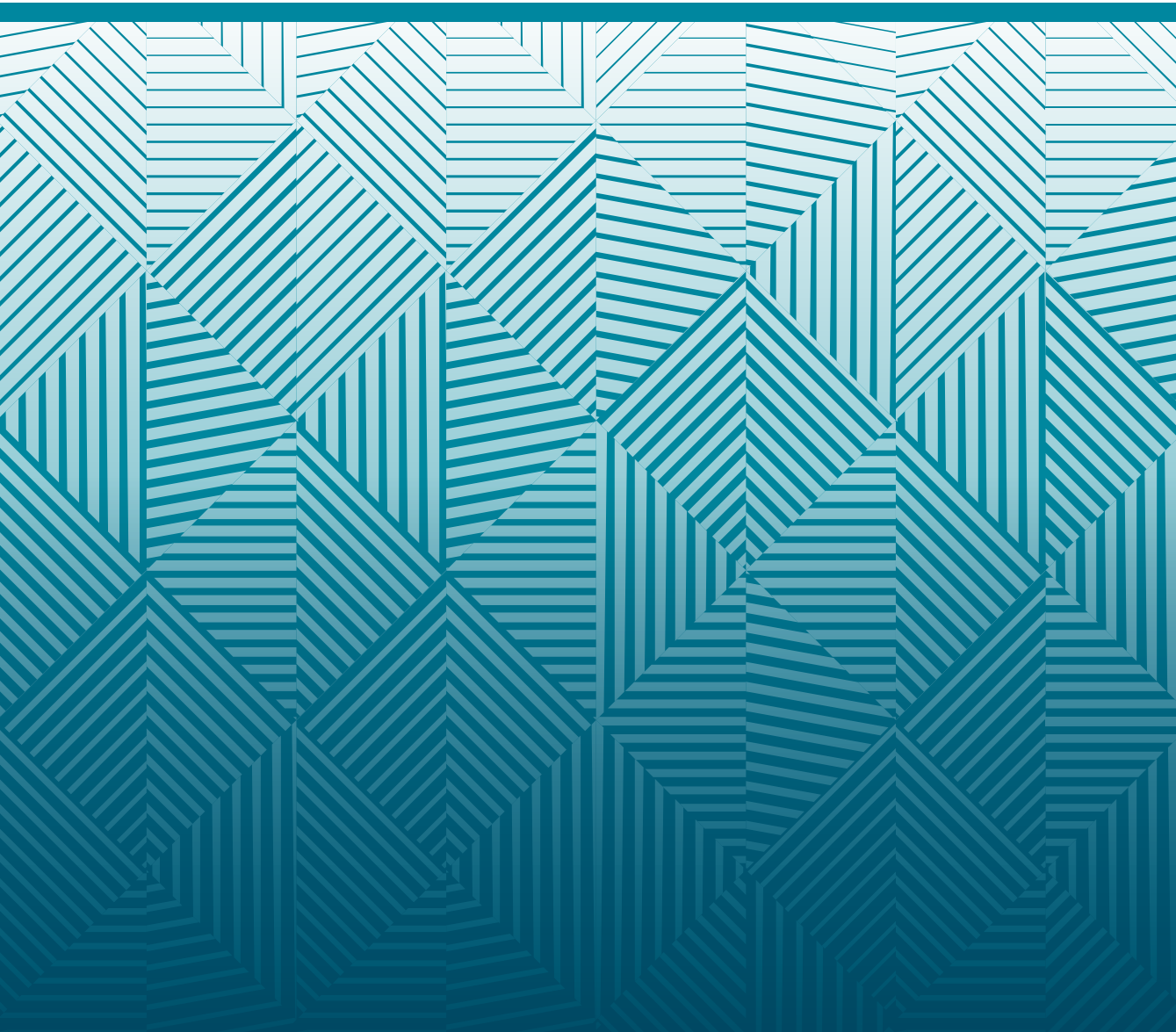


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Producers, not Possessors:

A Direction for Jewish Education
in Turbulent Times



APPLIED RESEARCH COLLECTIVE

Jon A. Levisohn, Brandeis University

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FOR AMERICAN JEWRY

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Jon A. Levisohn
Brandeis University



INTRODUCTION¹

When the COVID-19 virus hit in March 2020, educators scrambled to adapt to the elimination of face-to-face educational programs, and the Jewish and general educational blogosphere erupted as the experts weighed in with advice.

Three approaches emerged:

- Some of these experts opined that kids need structure, and that educational programs ought to maintain their schedules as much as possible. Their advice, therefore, was to convert classes to synchronous, online activities, to maintain the familiar amidst the instability.
- Others insisted that, now more than ever in this uncertain time, kids crave connection. Content coverage must take a back seat; borrowing from E.M. Forster, “Only connect.”
- Still others pointed to the upheaval facing families with children, and demanded maximal flexibility and asynchronicity. The role of the educator, in their view, was simply to provide resources—to be a curator of resources or a guide through them—and to get out of the way. Let families find their own paths at their own pace in their own time.

The critical observer could not help but notice that the advice was often contradictory, surfacing not just a lack of consensus but also a lack of clarity about purposes.

At the same time, the disruption of our normal patterns of gathering also gave us an opportunity to envision, with renewed clarity, what Jewish education ought to be about. I have in mind the way that the crisis accentuated the differences between those who feel empowered to pursue Jewish practice, Jewish learning, and Jewish connection on their own and those who did not. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the observance of the Passover seder, in those early weeks of the pandemic, as thousands of people found themselves leading this home ritual for the first time—sometimes successfully and sometimes less so.

How We Navigated Seder 2020

The disruption of extended family and communal seders in April 2020 was one of the first dramatic indicators of the impact of the virus on Jewish life. All of sudden, the traditions familiar to so many Jews could no longer be relied upon. Many found creative solutions, connecting to others using technology before or during the holiday, but many others went their own way, hosting a seder (for themselves or very small groups) for the first time.

We can envision two different types of these first-time seders. For the purposes of the thought experiment, let's imagine an extended family that typically gathers for Passover at the home of the seventy-something patriarch and matriarch. The others in the family are Sam and Sarah, a brother and a sister, each with their own young family. But that year, 2020, due to the pandemic, the older generation was on its own, and Sam and Sarah each ran their own seders in their own homes.

In one house, Sam fumbled for what to do, when, and why. Self-conscious of his ignorance, he tried to drink from the firehose of online resources that were suddenly available, a click away, from so many well-intentioned Jewish educational and cultural organizations. He read scholarly essays on various aspects of the seder. He gathered up readings and activities. He watched videos. He scanned lists of tips. He learned a tremendous amount, but none of it managed to alter his fundamental sense that he was a stranger in his own home. When the seder evening arrived, his deepest aspiration was to get through it as quickly as possible.

In the other house, Sarah seized the opportunity to envision what she wanted her seder to be for her nuclear family, what she wanted them to experience. She, too, took advantage of various resources, and learned an enormous amount—but her learning was directed by what she needed to know in order to lead the family's seder with a sure hand. When the seder evening arrived, she was at home in her home, taking her place as the newest inheritor and interpreter of a rich tradition.

Notably, in this thought experiment, each of these two novice seder-conveners had the same prior experience as seder participants. Sam and Sarah were each exposed to the same “curriculum,” throughout their childhood and early adulthood. It seems like they should each know the same things, more or less. But when it came time to enact the performance on their own, the outcomes were dramatically distinct. We might come up with a variety of hypotheses for why Sam and Sarah ended up such different places—but for the present purposes, what is significant is not the causes but the results themselves.

What the thought experiment highlights is that there are different ways of knowing. Sam is a **possessor** of knowledge. He can probably tell us a lot about Passover, especially after all his research. The information sits in his head. But Sarah is a **producer**. She has the capacity to enact this cultural performance, namely, leading the seder. She has a degree of ownership and a level of comfort, of at-home-ness, that enables her to create a meaningful opportunity for her family. Maybe it looks exactly like the seder at her parents’ home. Maybe it’s tailor-made for her own family. Those details are not important, because we can trust that Sarah is the expert on her local context—her own family and what they need. It’s not important that every seder looks alike, and knowing what we know about the history of the seder, we should not expect that they would. What’s important is that, when the time is right, Sarah can rise to the occasion.

The Argument: Producers, Not Possessors

My argument is that Jewish education, which all too often focuses on turning students into possessors of information, ought to focus on cultivating producers. Too much of Jewish education is concerned with what and how much is “covered” in our curricula. Well-meaning educators imagine their role to be conveying something that sits in their own heads into the heads of the students. Many assessments still prioritize the goal of having students regurgitate information. For their part, students are often stuck in the mind-set that their job is to “get it,” and feel badly if they don’t, rather than appreciating that their job is to work patiently over time in order to get better at whatever “it” is.²

Turning to the broader communal context, much ink is still spilled about what Jews do not know that they supposedly once knew. And in this new and difficult environment precipitated by the COVID-19 virus, the dominant metaphor is “transmission of content,” with all of the problematic assumptions that are built into that metaphor—assumptions about the static nature of the content, about educators as “content providers,” and about the passivity of the recipients of the transmission.

The guiding principle for our pedagogical and curricular decision-making, should be this: We ought to cultivate producers, not possessors.

As John Dewey once remarked, “Only in education ... does knowledge mean primarily a store of information aloof from doing.”³

We need to think more critically about our goals, beyond the possession of a store of information. We want Jews to enact Jewish practices like a seder, on their own, rather than relying on others. We want them to be able to construct, for themselves, rather than watching others construct. We want them to be speakers of Jewish languages, interpreters of Jewish texts, and creators of Jewish culture. We want them to be empowered and active producers of meaning, whether at home or in other spaces together with other Jews, rather than passive consumers of content. We want to help Jews feel and act like Sarah, not like Sam.

The argument is not limited to this turbulent time. “Increasingly,” Jonathan Woocher z”l proposed almost ten years ago, “Jews of all ages are stepping forward to become ‘co-producers’ of their Jewish lives,” suggesting that our cultural moment (and our technology) support this shift.⁴ And as I have argued elsewhere,⁵ the **possessor paradigm** is itself conceptually flawed and inadequate to our goals. It undervalues the pluralism of Jewish practice and reinforces a kind

of Jewish monoculturalism; it is overly cognitivist; and it avoids the questions posed by technological change. Instead, our Jewish educational goals are better served by the **producer paradigm**.

However, the argument becomes even more important now—when our standard modes of operation are disrupted, when so much education is going online and defaulting to an information-transmission model, when “sage on the stage” is too easily replaced by “sage on the screen,” when educators are scrambling to figure out what is essential and what can be set aside. It is a lot to ask, under these circumstances, for leaders to be more strategic and planful. Many are understandably focused on keeping the doors open, virtually, or making plans to preserve the possibility of opening actual doors in the future. But we have no alternative. The hardest choices require the most clarity about purposes.

What do we really care about? What are our core goals? What are learners’ goals for themselves or for their children? The answer, the guiding principle for our pedagogical and curricular decision-making, should be this: **We ought to cultivate producers, not possessors.**

A Comparison to Another Domain

To explore some of these issues, consider another domain—martial arts.⁶ Typically, in martial arts, students' learning is characterized by the following features:

1. **Students enter as novices under the tutelage of masters, or of those who are more advanced in the practice, or both.**
2. **Students are in community with others, both more advanced students and (usually) less advanced students as well. They can readily see examples of more advanced performance.**
3. **The instructors are very clear about the set of performances that they want the students to be able to enact, and the steps along the way to a complete and competent enactment. Students do not pick and choose which moves to learn; those moves are part of a well-developed sequence or trajectory that leads from being a novice to being a master.**
4. **Assessment is almost totally transparent: The students know what they are supposed to be able to do, and how they will be assessed in their ability to do that thing. To the extent that they may not be sensitive to variations in performance, e.g., why a particular move did not meet the criteria for that move, they trust that those with more knowledge do share those objective criteria and that they will guide the students along the path to mastery.**
5. **Progress is visible and tangible. Students have a very clear understanding of what it takes to make progress within the domain, and a very visible way of knowing when they or others have done so.**

Notably, in learning martial arts forms, there is little emphasis on student autonomy as we typically think about that trait. In other words, in this particular practice, there is little room for creativity or personal interpretation. Students are not supposed to find their own way of doing things. The goal is to be able to produce—or more accurately, to re-produce—the specific set of established moves with precision and fidelity.

So why would this serve as a good example for us in thinking the education of producers? The example is helpful for three reasons.

First, and most importantly, the educational intervention in martial arts is very explicitly oriented towards and guided by the performance that students want to learn to produce, and that their instructors want to teach them. Everything flows from that. That should encourage us to wonder: What would it look like if Jewish educational practice had something like that kind of clarity around its desired outcomes? The point is not that all Jews should learn to perform the same practices. There are any number of relevant Jewish practices, and any number of variations of those practices. But acknowledging that diversity should not preclude the possibility of pedagogic focus and clarity.

Second, nobody studies the martial arts alone. Nobody sits down with a book and earns a new belt that way. The learning is social, in a dojo—a space designed for communal engagement with this particular practice. As noted, typically, students not only have peers at their level; they also have more advanced peers, whose practice they can model. As they become practitioners of this

particular martial art, they share that identity with others. Theorist of learning Jean Lave described this process several decades ago: “Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeable skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter.”⁷

Third, as mentioned above, some realms of cultural production have a greater emphasis on autonomy and creativity, and some have less. In martial arts, students are not expected to offer creative reinterpretations of a particular move; they are expected to reproduce that move according to specific criteria. Yet, even in martial arts, we still hope and expect to see the development of a sense of autonomy and agency as students grow within the domain. The student may well feel an increasing sense of ownership or at-home-ness. Moreover, the student who has progressed to a higher belt may begin to carry herself through the world outside the dojo differently as well—with greater self-confidence.⁸

This can be helpful for us. Some domains (martial arts) have fairly stable performances; other domains (poetry or music) have greater variation and hence greater room for creativity. But the overarching goal of promoting the capacity for cultural production can apply to any of these. As I’ve argued elsewhere, “Producers begin to think about themselves differently, as capable and empowered, as active rather than passive, as having control, as doing things in the world rather than having things done to them or for them.”⁹ Producers have a fuller sense of autonomy, whether or not the particular domain of production is governed by a high degree of imitation or whether it has lots of room for creativity.

Doesn’t Knowledge Matter?

In talking about these issues, I regularly encounter resistance from those who see themselves as defending the importance of substantive Jewish content and upholding the value of rigor in Jewish education. Sometimes that concern is expressed with the incredulous question, “Doesn’t knowledge matter?” Sometimes it is expressed, slightly differently, with the proposal that production without a base of knowledge would be empty and meaningless, and therefore, that possession of knowledge must come first—an initial stage of education of **possessors**, after which we can proceed, if things go well, to the education of **producers**.

Doesn’t knowledge matter? Of course it does. Consider the phrase in the sentence from Jean Lave quoted above, “Knowledgeably skillful.” Knowing how to do things in the world, how to navigate particular cultural spaces, how to enact practices—all this inevitably involves knowledge and cannot be envisioned without it. Sarah, in our example, certainly knows a lot about the seder, and her ability to enact her role as a leader depends on that knowledge.

When we try to articulate what kinds of knowledge it involves, we often go to the easiest paradigm, namely, the knowledge of things, of information, of items of knowledge. When we see an expert biologist, we imagine all the biological information that she knows. Alternatively, when we see a group of young Jews talking about Israel, we notice the information about Israel that they are missing or that they get wrong.

On the other hand, consider what happens when we see an expert musician. In that case, we tend not to focus on what they know but rather on what they can do with their bodies and their instruments. Likewise in the case of martial arts as described above. Surely there are things that expert musicians and martial artists know too. But these examples help us to see that knowledge of information is embedded within the knowledge of the practice, rather than being the foundation upon which the practice is based.

In very concrete terms, the information that we learn, in pursuing a practice, is always “just in time” rather than being piled up in our heads in advance. A lifetime of learning about the seder does not help Sam. For Sarah, on the other hand, pursuing an answer to a genuine question that emerges from her seder planning will yield useful knowledge, knowledge that can be put into practice in a meaningful context.

So the important question is not whether knowledge matters. Of course it does. The important question is what kind of knowledge matters, and why, and how. If our goal is to cultivate producers rather than merely possessors, then our pedagogy should be structured, from the outset, in pursuit of that goal, including deliberating carefully about what kinds of knowledge students need in order to enact the performances in question. Of course students need to know things in order to do things—but the image of propositional or factual knowledge as a prior and necessary foundation for production or practical knowledge is flawed, as is the assumption that the former must be taught first before moving to the latter.

The surest way to subvert the education of producers is to get stuck in the habit of educating possessors.

Where We Are and Where We Want to Go

Given the preceding argument, how might we re-frame the problem that we are trying to solve through our Jewish educational projects and programs?

I want to propose, as I have argued elsewhere, that the problem is not a matter of “American Jewish illiteracy,” if we mean by that term ignorance of important information.¹⁰ Nor is the problem helpfully framed in terms of “Jewish identity,”¹¹ nor in terms of the continuity of the Jewish people,¹² nor in terms of assimilation away from Jewishness or Jewish culture.¹³

Instead, a better way of re-framing the problem is this:

Jewish education should contribute to the full human flourishing of Jews, at any time and under any conditions, even or especially in moments of significant challenge such as the present. Engagement with Jewish life and culture should be a source of comfort, meaning, aspiration, and purpose. In many cases it is—but not broadly or deeply enough. Too many contemporary Jews lack a sense of agency, autonomy, and ownership regarding their own tradition, culture, and community.

This is where we are. Where do we want to go?

What would it look like for the situation to be significantly or even radically different?

We can envision our point of arrival as a community of Sarahs rather than Sams—a **community of producers rather than possessors**, a community of people who feel empowered and at home engaging in and enacting Jewish life and practice.

Surely these Sarahs will display a diversity of behaviors, finding meaning in a range of sources, generating interpretations according to a variety of interpretive norms. That is an inevitable consequence of the paradigm shift—but it is something to be celebrated, not feared. To repeat an insight from a discerning observer of religious and other traditions, the Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, “If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew.”¹⁴

These Sarahs will not emerge into being spontaneously. It is our job, as Jewish educators and Jewish educational policy-makers, to create the conditions for their development. We need to do so more strategically and consistently than we are currently doing. And just as importantly, if we are serious about **cultivating a community of producers**, we need to bring deeper and more critical attention to the obstacles that the community places in the paths of many members of the community, and the many ways that we inadvertently communicate to people that they do not belong.¹⁵

The circumstances of the pandemic and the economic dislocation may well make some of these conditions more difficult to achieve, as institutions struggle with solvency and the loss of familiar pedagogical modalities. Just like it’s hard to imagine putting a dojo online, or for that matter a biology lab, it’s hard to transfer the most creative and engaged kinds of pedagogies to Zoom. It’s hard to be a producer in two dimensions rather than three. It’s hard, too, to exercise “audacious hospitality” (to borrow a phrase from the URJ) when we cannot sit down face-to-face.

Nevertheless, we have an obligation to envision a future that is different than the past, and to identify the steps that will get us there. This will involve (at least) four supporting structures.

1. **Every individual Jew who wants one must have access to a Jewish educational experience, and ideally multiple experiences, that is or are designed to develop their capacities for cultural production, with clear markers of advancement and performance within a domain or multiple domains.**
2. **These myriad and diverse Jewish educational projects, programs and institutions must be designed and implemented by educators who share the goal of, and are capable of enacting, this form of education. In other words, every individual Jew must have access to educators who are committed to the cultivation of their capacity to produce.**
3. **These projects and programs must be sustained and informed by, and in dialogue with, a rich research-and-development infrastructure.**
4. **These projects and programs must be embedded in a thriving cultural ecosystem, which would generate the models of excellence and accomplishment in various domains of cultural production that would in turn stretch the imagination and aspiration of students and educators.**

Notice that framing the problem in terms of a lack, as we did above—that too many contemporary Jews lack a sense of agency, autonomy, and ownership—immediately shifts us into a “deficit model,” focusing on what is missing and must be created or changed,¹⁶ rather than an “asset model” of building on the resources that individuals and communities can and do bring to bear. These assets include the many educators and institutions that are already aligned with the direction described in this essay.

This deficit-model thinking is an almost inevitable consequence of beginning by identifying a problem. That is, once we understand a project, any project, as an effort to solve a problem—which is a cardinal principle of a certain kind of strategic thinking, including strategic philanthropy—we are nudged into thinking about the gap that we want to fill. It seems axiomatic: Strategic thinking defines problems so that it can discern solutions that address those problems. But we do not have to adopt this approach. We do not have to envision the enterprise of education as an effort to fix problems. For their part, teachers are well aware of the dangers of characterizing their students as “problems” to be solved.

In this sense, education may be like medicine. For a long time, it seemed obvious that medicine is about curing diseases. Diseases are the problems: The job of the practice of medicine is to identify the problem (by diagnosing the disease) in order to discern and enact solutions (by prescribing a treatment). But medicine can be re-imagined not as the effort to cure a disease, but rather more holistically as the effort to promote health. Likewise, education can be understood not as the solving of the problem of ignorance (or disloyalty or under-development or some other pathology, or even the problem of disempowerment), but rather more holistically as the effort to create the conditions for the health and vitality of the individual and the community.

So if we are going to use the language of “problems,” if we focus on what is lacking as we have done here, at the very least we need to remind ourselves of the dangers of deficit-model thinking. We need to make a particular effort to avoid any suggestion that an entire sector can be dismissed as ineffective or mediocre, which is not just disrespectful but

also inaccurate and unhelpful. Instead, this essay should be understood as lifting up some of the best of what is currently in place, providing language and conceptual guidance, and encouraging further development along those lines.

How to Get There

The four supporting structures mentioned above are how we get from where we are to where we want to go. They are not sequential steps, where one leads to the next. Instead, it is more accurate to see them as a kind of nested, mutually-reinforcing ecosystem. Each structure represents an opportunity for investment to support the overall goal.

1. Exemplars

If we want every individual Jew to have access to Jewish educational experiences that are designed to develop their capacities for cultural production, we need to invest in those experiences. How?

It is truism that you cannot teach what you cannot envision. To help educators and policy-makers envision more, and more diverse, models of education that exemplify the producer paradigm, we should identify, document, investigate, and describe exemplars. These projects and programs will not be perfect. We do not envision an awards program, which typically have ambiguous criteria and promote competition on the basis of claimed accomplishments rather than deep, sustained and systemic learning. Instead, the work of documentation must be accompanied by investigation—honest and open inquiry that appreciates both accomplishments and challenges.

A better mechanism for doing this kind of work are networks of affiliated programs or institutions, built on the model of other educational networks (for example, Network Improvement Communities or NICs¹⁷) that leverage shared learning based on common principles. A network does not simply celebrate successes, although of course there are appropriate times and places for celebration. It recognizes that the implementation of change takes time, and requires sustained intellectual and material support. And in the model envisioned here, it makes the work of inquiry—investigating what is working and what is not—central to what a network can accomplish that individual institutions or programs cannot.

2. Investing in People

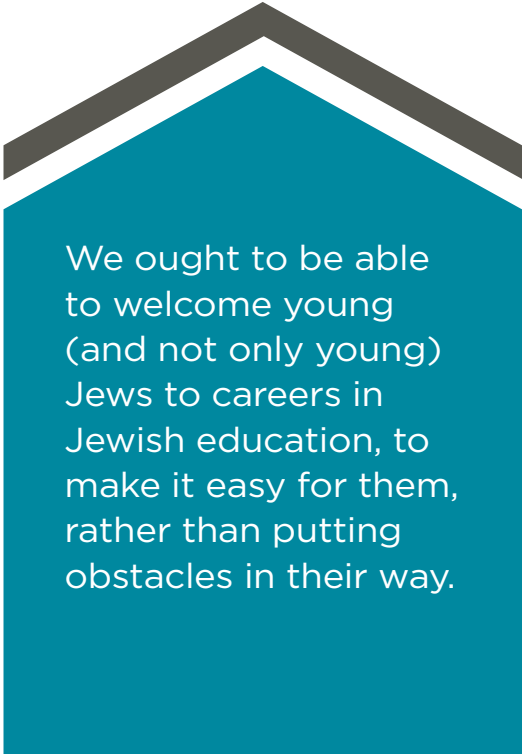
If we want every individual Jew to have access to educators who are committed to the cultivation of their capacity to produce, we need to invest in those people. How?

Here we need to acknowledge that many of our current pre-service and in-service programs for the education of Jewish educators are already broadly aligned with the producer paradigm, and in the best circumstances—although of course not all—those educators are then able to work within institutions that are supportive of those efforts.

However, the impact of both pre-service and in-service educational programs is severely constrained by the paucity of resources. Without those resources, teachers are rushed into classrooms rather than spending the time in programs in which they learn to teach in aspirational ways—or, enter our institutions without training at all. Without those resources, institutions opt for the kind of one-shot

professional development opportunities that, we know, are not effective in generating and sustaining institutional change.

Investing in people is expensive, and uncertain. Not every lesson “sticks,” and not every product of a teacher education program immediately enacts the educational practice that we might want. Not everyone stays in the field. But there is no shortcut, and the demand is great. We ought to be able to welcome young (and not only young) Jews to careers in Jewish education, to make it easy for them, rather than putting obstacles in their way. When Jews make a commitment to serve the community, we ought to make a commitment to them—a commitment to support their graduate education through direct contributions or through loan forgiveness, and to support their ongoing professional learning.



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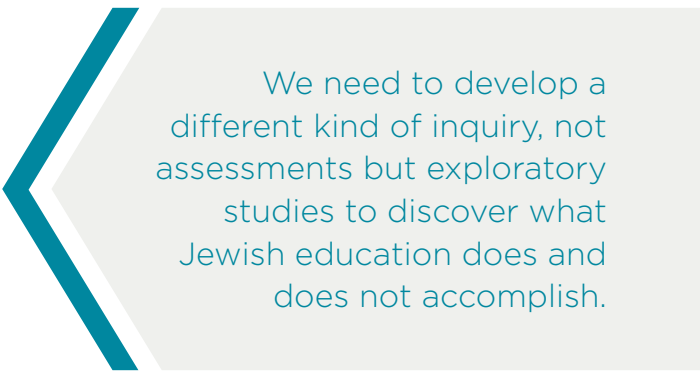
3. Research and Development

The investment in exemplars, mentioned above, is one kind of R&D effort. The research question in that case is, **What does it look like to educate for the cultivation of producers, what does that take, and what are the challenges in the way?**

But the necessary investment in R&D is much broader and deeper.

To take one important element, we framed the problem above in terms of what contemporary Jews “lack”: Too many contemporary Jews lack a sense of agency, autonomy, and ownership regarding their own tradition, culture and community. This claim, however, deserves scrutiny. What exactly do we mean by suggesting that contemporary Jews lack a sense of agency? How is that manifest? Where do they lack agency, and where do they display agency? How do we know, and what would constitute good and relevant evidence? Pursuing these questions with both patience and rigor would move us far beyond the current state of our Jewish communal discourse, in which allegations of illiteracy are frequently made with a dearth of evidence and a great deal of conceptual confusion. So a second research question is something like this: **How and in what ways do American Jews feel agency and ownership with regard to Judaism and Jewish community, and how and in what ways do they not?**

Furthermore, the claim that contemporary Jews lack a sense of agency is subject to potential misinterpretation, as if it were a claim about the supposed ineffectiveness of Jewish education. However, whenever scholars have studied the impact of Jewish education of almost every kind, formal and informal, they have consistently—with



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very few exceptions—documented the positive impact on practices and commitments. This suggests that we need to develop a different kind of inquiry, not assessments but exploratory studies to discover what Jewish education does and does not accomplish. We might think about Shaul Kellner’s study of Birthright (Tours That Bind, 2010) as a model here, asking not whether a given Jewish educational intervention “works” but, more fundamentally, **what happens.**

Next, the focus on production or enactment of cultural performances, and on the sense of autonomy or agency that flows from that production, may inadvertently undervalue the steps along the way towards that goal. To use the example above, the teaching of karate entails more than just identifying the goal (performing the particular moves) and creating transparent structures to assess and display students’ progress within the domain. It also entails a detailed and sophisticated understanding of how to help individuals make the desired progress along the way. As critics of excessive standardized testing have often noted, nobody loses weight just by repeatedly stepping on a scale. We need to develop a stronger understanding of the processes that lead, ideally and under the right conditions, to producing, creating, and acting within whatever

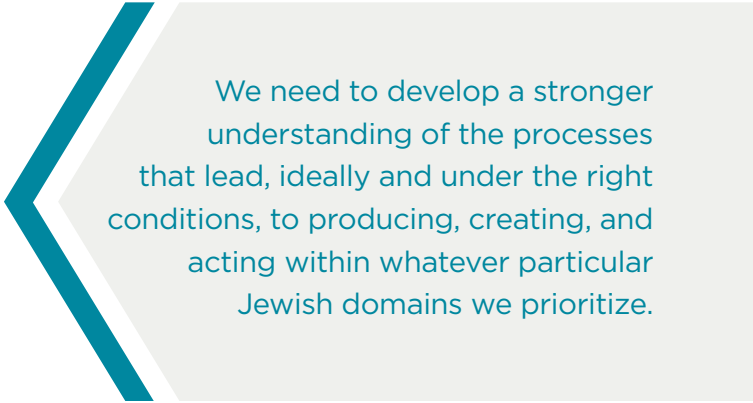
particular Jewish domains we prioritize. It doesn't just happen, magically. Individuals are motivated in certain ways, pursue certain questions, take advantage of resources that are available in their environment, try and fail and learn from mistakes, and so on. The research question here—a third broad question—is, **What does it mean to “produce” within a particular domain, and what are the steps along the way to developing that capacity to produce?**

The case of Hebrew language may be a helpful example here, because in Hebrew, unlike any other domain, the learning trajectory towards proficiency is mapped out with a great deal of specificity. In other words, we not only know what it means to be proficient, but we have a very good understanding about the steps along the way. We know that, at a certain level, students are able to do x but not y; they make certain predictable kinds of mistakes; they need help to overcome particular obstacles (verb tense, gender agreement, etc.). Thus, curricula and pedagogy can be aligned with the learning trajectory with reasonable confidence.

There are two reasons why this is so. First, while Hebrew is distinctive in certain ways, in other ways the learning of Hebrew follows the pattern of second-language acquisition in other languages—so Hebrew has benefitted from decades of careful and rigorous scholarly inquiry in adjacent fields (i.e., other languages). Second, relatedly, second-language acquisition tends to follow fairly standard and predictable patterns. There is no reason to think that progress in other domains will ever be as predictable as second-language acquisition. Still, the case of Hebrew can serve as a model of what such a trajectory can look like.

We are not accustomed, in the Jewish philanthropic sector, to the kind of investment in R&D that is necessary. Consider, for example, what happens in math education. In that context, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) is embedded in an ecosystem populated by literally thousands of math coaches and other educational leaders and professional developers within that specific domain, hundreds of professors of math education, dozens of active research programs both “pure” and “applied,” decades of published scholarship in several journals ranging from the most academic to the most practitioner-oriented, multiple competing paradigms and curricular efforts, numerous annual conferences and PD opportunities, and so on. When the NCTM publishes standards for k-12 math education, those standards are informed by and in dialogue with that rich ecosystem.

Now consider what happens in Jewish education, in specific subject areas: the Standards and Benchmarks Project at JTS for Tanakh and subsequently for Rabbinics. The development of the standards was a stand-alone project, without any of the ecosystem that exists for math. The leaders recruited a group of smart and passionate



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people to develop the standards (in the interest of full disclosure, I was a contributor), but without any of the sustained scholarly inquiry that might provide the necessary evidence base. They recruited and trained their own coaches, rather than relying on traditions of coaching within the domain. They worked with schools, but without any resources for inquiry-based iteration and improvement. This is not intended in any way as a critique of the AVI CHAI Foundation, which supported the project to develop standards, nor of the Legacy Heritage Foundation, which has supported follow-up professional development work, nor of the talented professionals who led the work with the limited resources at their disposal. But the example highlights how radically we need to change our thinking about the kinds of investment that are necessary to make meaningful change. We are accustomed to philanthropic investment that generates a discrete product. That is simply inadequate. We need philanthropic investment to create an entire intellectual infrastructure—a robust network of mutually reinforcing programs and initiatives informed by and contributing to research.

Yet another arena for research is the difficult question of evaluation or assessment of cultural production. One of the primary reasons that educational initiatives and institutions find themselves trapped in or reverting to the possessor paradigm is that their approaches to the evaluation of outcomes tend to employ instruments that are highly cognitive (or, alternatively, evaluations that assess outcomes that are disconnected from the specific domains of learning—such as when Jewish summer camp is evaluated on the basis of whether it promotes Shabbat candle lighting or giving to

We are accustomed to philanthropic investment that generates a product. We need philanthropic investment to create an entire intellectual infrastructure.

Federation). But we will not be able to disrupt these approaches unless we can provide compelling alternative instruments. So a fourth general research question is, **What are examples of rigorous, compelling assessments of learning to produce, rather than assessments of the possession of knowledge, and how might these examples be replicated in other domains?**

The assessment question becomes even more important now, when educators are scrambling to adapt but with few frameworks that help them investigate which adapted models further their aims and which do not.

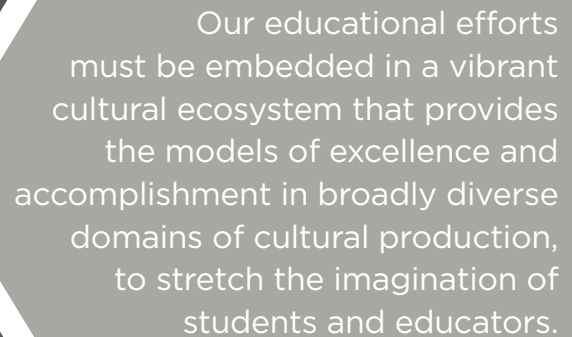
We have named several important R&D questions; there are surely others. At the most fundamental level, however, we need to know much more than we currently do about the actual condition of American Jewish productive capacities. It is all well and good to argue, as I have done, that our ameliorative efforts will not be effective if we misdiagnose the problem. But if so, then we need to invest far more time and energy to generate accurate diagnoses, based on deep and nuanced understanding of the cultural condition of American Jews, rather than clichés or caricatures.

4. Robust Jewish Culture

Finally, the outcome that we envision will require broad and direct investment in cultural production and producers, separate from the investment in particular Jewish educational efforts. It is not enough to have strong Jewish educational institutions; we must have thriving Jewish culture as well—including the arts and literary creativity, ritual, scholarship, foodways, history, language and more. Our educational efforts must be embedded in a vibrant cultural ecosystem that provides the models of excellence and accomplishment in broadly diverse domains of cultural production, to stretch the imagination of students and educators.

To take just one small example, without Debbie Friedman as a cultural innovator, we would not have the contemporary Havdalah ceremony. The ritual would surely exist, since it predates Debbie Friedman by centuries. But it would not exist as a cultural activity in the way that it currently does. And thus the productive capacity, the ability to “make Havdalah,” would simply entail the enactment of a rather narrowly prescribed technical ritual, rather than the production of a more broadly meaningful Jewish cultural performance, as it is currently enacted in Jewish camps, *shabbatonim*, and other spaces.

This is, perhaps, a surprising outcome of the argument of this essay. It will require a rather significant shift in the mindset of most philanthropists and philanthropic professionals, who have avoided investing in culture with its uncertain and uncountable impact. It will require an unwinding of the implicit instrumentalization of Jewish education that has occurred over the last



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few decades, according to which Jewish education is valuable because of the non-educational benefits that it may produce (especially in the demographic sphere). If we are serious about the outcomes we seek, we must create the conditions for the flourishing of robust, rich Jewish culture in many different forms.

We will have to focus on longer horizons, rather than on short-term metrics. We will have to avoid the dynamic of “picking the winners,” which undermines the capacity for broad communal change. We will need to identify a different set of measurable goals to capture what we mean by “robust Jewish culture,” in order to avoid collapsing back into assessing the numbers of people who attend a concert or whether those people light Shabbat candles with greater frequency. And we will need to embrace this kind of investment, which is presently so counter-cultural, as the very epitome of strategic philanthropy—designed not in a reactive way, not to solve a technical problem, but rather to bring about long-term, sustained change.

Obstacles

The agenda described above will be challenging to achieve, not just because the goals are broad and ambitious, and not just because of limited resources. It will also be challenging because of some specific obstacles. We can point to four.

First is simply the problem of changing what, for many people, in many settings, including both educators and other stakeholders (e.g., parents, funders), feels natural and normal. Focusing on the possession of knowledge is the default position. In the absence of compelling alternative models, we tend to frame the conversation about outcomes in terms of the question of what we want students or participants to know, which then seems to lead almost inevitably into the chunking of a corpus of material to be “covered.”¹⁸

It is worth noting that the coverage model—a corollary of the possessor paradigm—can sometimes have a deceptively satisfying quality, and this is even more the case when our world has been turned upside down. If we as educators have covered the material that we had planned to cover before COVID-19, if we are possibly able to hit the various elements in our mental map of what we need to convey to our students, we may well feel an enormous sense of accomplishment. We have succeeded, over Zoom, despite all! Likewise, other stakeholders may reinforce that feeling when they see those coverage models depicted in curricular plans or program brochures, even in normal times. What we do not know, of course, is whether the material that we “covered” has actually been learned, and even if it has—even if information now resides in the heads of the learners—what difference it makes in their lives as Jews or human beings. Are they now able to do anything that

they could not previously do? Do they have a sense of progress within the domain? Do they feel greater ownership or agency?

Second, our attention to producers has the potential to feel untraditional or perhaps insufficiently rigorous. “Serious” Jewish education, then, with attention to coverage of content, will continue to be associated with the possessor paradigm. A focus on producers will be taken as a kind of Jewish-education-lite, a second-class model appropriate for those who cannot handle or do not want the real thing.

To overcome this obstacle, our educational programs and initiatives must be explicitly ambitious, and they must succeed in helping students and participants to actually be able to enact the cultural performances as they are designed to do. We are very familiar with what it looks like, for example, when young people pull off an incredible artistic performance—not a cute classroom play but a dramatic performance that feels professional. We know the difference between expert prayer leaders and those who just know the basic moves, between a creative midrash that draws on the nuances and fissures of the text and one that simply and simplistically moralizes. There is no contradiction between the focus on production and upholding high standards; it’s just a matter of what our standards are about. We know that anything worth doing is worth doing well, and anything worth doing well takes time and effort. Those are the kinds of performances that we should prioritize in Jewish education as well.

Third, an entirely different kind of obstacle is the problem of power.

We are well acquainted with the fate of change efforts imposed by powerful outside actors, whether those outsiders wield political power or philanthropic power. Institutional and cultural inertia is a powerful countervailing force. Insiders ride out the waves of change, sometimes consciously confident that “this too shall pass” if they just stick to what they’ve always done and know how to do, and sometimes unconsciously doing so, imagining that they are conforming to the new paradigm without actually changing the relevant practices.

Perhaps the most pernicious manifestation of this obstacle is when projects and programs simply “re-brand” in order to access new philanthropic resources. When that happens, they convey the impression to the philanthropic advocates of the new paradigm of a groundswell of support from the field. So the philanthropic sector feels good, and the educators get new resources—but nothing has really changed.

Any philanthropic intervention, therefore, has to attend to the problem of power, not only for ethical reasons (although for those reasons as well) but for reasons of effectiveness. Unless this happens, the philanthropic investors will only hear what others believe they want to hear. And in the case of a desired change, they will hear affirmative voices about the importance of that change, and very quickly, they will hear confirmations that that change is happening. To avoid this obstacle, structures must be established that allow for practitioners to speak openly and honestly

about the challenges, and for criteria of success that are independent of the judgment of philanthropic professionals.

Finally, it hardly needs to be repeated that our standard educational and institutional practices are currently experiencing a dramatic dislocation. For many, the most important path forward is whatever will create a sense of stability, including especially economic stability and support for the committed and hard-working professional staff of our organizations. Will there be appetite for deeper cultural change, or will leaders necessarily focus on restoration of what was?

At the same time, the current situation may lead to an expansion and reinforcement of the least impactful kinds of learning. We already hear voices that marvel at the economies of scale that are possible when one online presentation can be viewed by thousands of people, or that envision a world where nobody has to travel to conferences. We already see a pseudo-Nielsen rating system for Jewish content, with no apparent consideration of the unintended negative consequences if our only criterion of excellence is the number of viewers or downloads. If we are not careful, we may learn all the wrong lessons from this crisis.



CONCLUSION

Outline of a Case Study

What would it take to shift the fundamental paradigm of Jewish education from envisioning students as **possessors** of information to a different paradigm of Jewish education in which students are envisioned as potential **producers**—as creators and enactors of significant cultural performances?

Earlier we considered Sarah and Sam as examples of the two approaches to the performance of a seder, one successful and one less so. We also introduced the example of martial arts. In closing, we might consider the example of the Jewish Learning Fellowship (JLF) for its potential to serve as a model.¹⁹

When the lead educators at the Bronfman Center at NYU began to envision a new educational program for college students about a decade ago, especially those students with minimal patterns of Jewish involvement and Jewish educational backgrounds, they did not ask what students ought to know that they do not currently know. They did not design a curriculum around an itemization of the topics or texts to be covered, a typical Judaism 101 class. Rather than filling in perceived gaps in knowledge, and rather than covering the terrain, they asked instead what kinds of Jewish experiences these students should have the opportunity to experience.

Implicitly, they were asking what kinds of Jewish cultural performances these students might learn to enact, in order to emerge with greater agency and autonomy. In other words, what kind of Jewish experiences might help them to become Sarahs rather than Sams?

The designers of JLF built the core of the program around a direct encounter with Jewish texts—again, not in order to fill in the gaps of the students’ knowledge but in order to enact Jewish learning as a cultural performance, and to invite the novices into that shared enactment, together. From the first session, novices and instructors were “playing the whole game,” to borrow a phrase from educational theorist David Perkins.²⁰

If we compare JLF to the case of teaching martial arts, there are several important differences. Unlike martial arts, progress within the domain is not clearly marked. Unlike martial arts, the “master” in the case of JLF is not the unquestioned expert within the domain. Unlike martial arts, there is a great deal of room for creative variation in the enactment of the performance.

However, all these differences notwithstanding, there is also a very important sense in which JLF is similar to martial arts: From the moment that the JLF students step into the carefully curated JLF space, they are engaged in—in fact, they are partners in—the production of a shared cultural performance, a domain in which they will progress over time in community with others, and through which they will grow in autonomy, agency, and ownership.

JLF has expanded rapidly and is now present on two hundred campuses across North America. Literally thousands of students participate in its programs. When the pandemic hit, the vast majority of the learning migrated online. We do not yet have deep assessments of the learning that has happened, nor of the impact of that transition. But the point here is not about the success of JLF. The point, rather, is that JLF created a model driven not by the transmission of information to the students, but by the kinds of Jewish experiences that students were seeking.

The measure of success for JLF—as it should be for Jewish education more generally—is not whether the participants will successfully consume the content, not whether they will become **possessors** of knowledge, but how they will grow as **producers** of their own Jewish experience.

Endnotes

1. Chelsea Garbell, Rabbi David Gedzelman, Dr. Miriam Heller Stern, Dr. Tammy Jacobowitz, Dr. Susan Kardos, Rabbi Josh Ladon, Dr. Joe Reimer, Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, Rabbi Seth Winberg, and Dr. Tali Zolkowicz all contributed constructive and critical input to the development of this essay, as did several participants in a symposium in July 2020. None are responsible for the final product.
2. David Perkins, "What Is Understanding," 1998, p. 52.
3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1916, ch. 14, cited in David Perkins, "Beyond Understanding," 2008.
4. Jonathan Woocher, "The Jewish Future is Now," 2011. See also Jonathan Woocher, "Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century," 2012. Note, however, that the latter article—sweeping in its scope—drifts between the idea of contemporary Jews as co-producers of their Jewish lives (which is close to the meaning of *producers* at the heart of my argument) and a related but distinct idea of contemporary Jews as co-producers of their own Jewish educational experiences (which is not). Woocher writes, for example, of "inviting students and families in as full partners in designing their learning" (2012, p. 198). As a strategy for designing educational programs, this may well have merit, but it is not the same as deliberating about the goals of those programs.
5. Jon A. Levisohn, "A New Paradigm of Jewish Literacy," 2019.
6. I am focusing here on learning martial arts forms, rather than martial arts sparring.
7. Jean Lave, "Situating Learning in Communities of Practice," 1991, p. 65. In our recent edited volume *Beyond Jewish Identity* (2019), my colleague Ari Kelman and I have called into question the overused and undertheorized term "Jewish identity" in conversations about the outcomes of Jewish education—especially in its most common constructs of "strengthening Jewish identity" and "deepening Jewish identity." Note that the use of identity in the present context suggests that Jewish education might focus on becoming a particular *kind* of Jew, which is a significant difference. What kind of Jew? Not a producer in a generic sense, but rather, a producer of particular cultural performances—a seder maker or a Shabbat host, an Israeli dancer or a Hebrew speaker, a visitor of the sick or a comforter of the bereaved, etc.
8. With the image of "The Karate Kid" in mind, we might initially imagine that the new self-confidence of the student outside the dojo is a function of the student's ability to defend herself. But I suspect that this is a misunderstanding. To be sure, some martial arts classes are explicitly oriented towards this kind of real-world self-defense capacity—but most martial arts are not, and are instead focused on the enactment of the practice within the dojo itself. At the same time, it does seem significant that the practice in question is a particularly physical and embodied one. There are many ways that one can develop self-confidence, but surely, learning how to do things with one's body is a primary one.
9. Levisohn, "A New Paradigm," p. 18.
10. See Levisohn, "A New Paradigm," pp. 3-4, and also my essay in response to Leon Wieseltier's "Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry," 2011, in Yehuda Kurtzer and Claire Sufrin, eds., *The New Jewish Canon* (2020).
11. See Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman, eds., *Beyond Jewish Identity* (2019).
12. See for example a classic critique of Jewish survivalism, in Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 1989, pp. 162 ff., and a classic critique of continuity discourse, in Shelly Tanenbaum, "Good or Bad for the Jews? Moving Beyond the Continuity Debate," 2000. More recently, these critiques have received new energy from an argument about the relationship between continuity discourse and gender dynamics; see Lila Corwin Berman, Kate Rosenblatt, and Ronit Y. Stahl, "Continuity Crisis: The History and Sexual Politics of an American Jewish Community Project," 2020, as well as the responses to that article in the issue of *American Jewish History* in which it was published, especially Michal Kravel-Tovi, "'Continuity Crisis' and its Instrumentalizing Effects," 2020.
13. See Jon A. Levisohn, "Rethinking the Education of Cultural Minorities to and from Assimilation: A Perspective from Jewish Education," 2012.
14. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," 1977, p. 460. Note that, for MacIntyre, calling attention to the "argument" is not a matter of Jews being quarrelsome; instead, he is claiming that people who are engaged in the work of inheriting and interpreting a tradition will inevitably see that tradition differently from each other, and advance reasons—arguments—for their positions. This is as it should be.

15. These include questions of race and class, and also, educational background. This is the paradox of Jewish communal educational hierarchies: We genuinely want to make Jewish educational opportunities available broadly and yet, simultaneously, we frequently exclude those who have not been able to take advantage of them.
16. The literature on “deficit models,” in education and beyond, is vast. See for example Curt Dudley-Marling, “The Resilience of Deficit Thinking,” 2015, and the work cited there.
17. See Bryk et al., *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (2015).
18. Critiques of the “coverage model” of pedagogy go back decades. See, for example, the discussion in Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, “The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model,” 2011, which draws on sources going back to the end of the 19th century. Grant Williams and Jay McTighe introduced the contrary model of “uncoverage,” arguing that the purpose of teaching is to uncover a subject rather than to cover it, in their *Understanding By Design*, 1998.
19. The following paragraphs draw on Jon A. Levisohn, “The Emergent Vision of the Jewish Learning Fellowship,” forthcoming.
20. David Perkins, *Making Learning Whole*, 2010.



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