

CORNERSTONE 2018 RESOURCE

Unpacking Our Jewish Baggage

Elective 1

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SUMMARY:	What do you carry in your Jewish baggage? Have you ever felt “too Jewish” or “not Jewish enough?” Have you ever felt resentful or guilty or disconnected? Have you ever considered that this baggage might be the key to your own specific Jewish educator superpower? In this session, we’ll dig into what makes your unique Jewish perspective so special and how unpacking that baggage can help you figure that out (plus, how you can build an environment for your campers to get to do that too)!
TOPIC(S):	Identity, Leadership Skills
LEARNING OBJECTIVE:	Fellows will identify and start to work through potential sources of their personal struggles with their Jewishness. Fellows will then be able to use those new insights to figure out how to bring those struggles into more creative approaches to Jewish ritual, culture, and identity.
AUDIENCE:	Session overall is designed for staff training. With adaptations, it could be used with older campers (ages 14 and up).
TIMING:	90 minutes
APPENDICES:	“Step In” handout
MATERIALS NEEDED:	Chart paper, handout, paper and pens, markers. You can also do two of the activities with more extensive art supplies, if you want.
SET-UP DETAILS:	This program would be best indoors or in an outdoor space where it’s easy to hear each other and where there are hard surfaces to write/draw on. It should be a big enough space for everyone to sit in one big circle.

SESSION TIMELINE & OUTLINE:

Starting point: Mapping your Jewish Self

Take some time to illustrate the key elements of your Jewish self. Potential items to include: beliefs (and belief changes), practices (and practice changes), communities you're connected to (or have been connected to in the past), individuals who have especially influenced your Jewish identity/beliefs/practices, Jewish cultural traditions, elements of Jewish history, points of struggle, points of intersection between your Jewishness and other aspects of your identity.

Identifying Possible Sources of Baggage:

Start by identifying possible sources of baggage (have these pre-prepped on chart paper):

- Having a practice or belief or identity that isolates you, for example:
 - When you have a Jewish practice or belief that the Jewish community you're a part of doesn't share (e.g., when your kashrut or Shabbat practice is stricter than that of a community you're a part of);
 - When you have a Jewish practice or belief that's hard to manage in the wider beyond-Jewish world;
 - When you don't see aspects of your own identity (e.g., your race, gender expression, or sexual orientation) reflected in the Jewish communities around you or in the texts or leaders;
 - When you feel that your Jewish community isolates itself from others.
- Feeling on the outside of something you "should" be able to understand or have access to, for example:
 - When you're in a Jewish community where others are using lots of shared terms or practices with which you are not familiar;
 - When people assume things about your personal Jewishness (e.g., that you're a Zionist, that you were born Jewish, etc.) that may not be true;
 - When you feel as if Jewish institutions are built around particular expectations that may not apply to you (e.g., an emphasis on families with children, when you may not be interested in having kids or may be having difficulty getting pregnant).
- Connection to personal relationships, for example:
 - When you feel as if your connection to a particular aspect of your Jewishness is completely tied to a specific relationship (e.g., you always go to Shabbat services with your mom) and have trouble figuring out how to relate to that aspect apart from that other person;
 - When you feel as if some aspect of your Jewishness has been imposed on you by other people in your life;

- When some aspect of your Jewishness is connected to someone with whom you have a complicated relationship.
 - Feeling like there's no existing category of Jewishness (or of a particular aspect of Jewishness (e.g., relationship to Israel) that quite fits you.
 - Feeling the weight of external factors like guilt or historical trauma in your personal relationship to your Jewishness.

Take questions or additions. (IMPORTANT TO NOTE: it's not especially important that everyone agree on this list or that they're able to categorize a particular aspect of their own baggage as Type X or Type Y. Many examples will cross over multiple categories and that's fine. This list is a way to generate broader understandings of what kind of baggage various people might experience, not necessarily a way to neatly categorize any one person's experiences.)

Discuss: what feelings can go along with some of these categories? Worth noting which feelings go across certain categories that we might think of as really different from each other -- for example, it can feel isolating and outsider-y to feel both "too Jewish" and "not Jewish enough."

Sharing Struggles and Learning from One Another:

This is an opportunity for people to:

- Identify some specific sources of their own Jewish insecurities or struggles;
- See that others likely share some of those same sources; and
- Set up later opportunities to learn from one another about how someone else might connect to a particular area of Jewishness with which you're struggling.

Step In

One way to do this: create a "Step In" circle about issues/perspectives that affect individual relationships to Jewish life and ritual.

Remind participants about two basic assumptions with this exercise: self-define terms as needed, and only "stepping in" is an active choice (i.e., not stepping in doesn't mean you're actively disagreeing with the statement). If you have time, feel free to also ask after each prompt about whether a person or two who stepped in want to elaborate.

After each of the prompts below, add a moment for people to stay in (or then step in) if the topic in this prompt is a source of baggage for them.

- I affiliate with a specific denomination of Judaism.
- I have never belonged to a synagogue.
- I come from a family with multiple faith traditions.
- I engage in a regular prayer practice.
- I have or had Shabbat practices that play/played a meaningful role in my life.
- Musical instruments are an important part of my religious practice.
- I have kept kosher for a period of time in the past or currently.
- My gender identity and expression have impacted my relationship to Jewish communities of which I've been a part.
- My relationship to Israel and/or Palestine plays an important role in my Jewish identity.
- I have Jewish traditions that are linked to my specific Jewish ethnic or country-of-origin identity or group.
- Jewish continuity is an important issue for me.
- The question of how Jewish texts, spaces, leaders, or traditions relate to queerness impacts my relationship to those texts, spaces, leaders, or traditions.
- I have questions about how the Jewish community relates to the Holocaust.
- I can walk into a Jewish community space and feel that others do not see me as outsider.
- I can enjoy music at my Temple that reflects the tunes, prayers, and cultural roots of my specific Jewish heritage.
- People have said to me, "But you don't look Jewish," either seriously or as though it was funny.
- I have been part of a Jewish community that has been meaningful to me.
- I am searching for a Jewish community that is meaningful to me.

If time, you can open it up to group-suggested prompts.

Give out these prompts on a handout. Have everyone split into pairs or trios with this handout and their maps. Looking at the list of prompts and at their maps, share the following:

Share more detail about one aspect of your Jewish identity or experiences or connections that you're especially struggling with.

Share about an aspect of your Jewish identity or experiences or connections that you struggled with in the past, but have worked through to get to a more positive place.

If you don't have an example for this, choose an example of some aspect of Jewish identity or experience that you've always connected with positively and try to reflect on how this area has been able to remain struggle-free.

Come back together. Give everyone time to write down the following:

- A few key takeaways from what their partner shared (i.e., ways of thinking that you might find useful going forward);
- A couple of examples of areas of Jewishness that you struggle with where you would benefit from hearing from others who have a more positive relationship to those areas, with ideas of any people you know who might fit that description and would be good to have this conversation with.

Chalk Talk (another option for this)

In advance, write the questions below on butcher paper and put them up around the room. Give everyone 10 minutes to go around and write up their answers to the questions and to read others' responses.

- In what ways does being Jewish add value to your life?
- In what ways do you find being Jewish a challenge?
- In what ways do you find the Jewish community challenging?
- What can cause you to shut down in a conversation about Jewish life or practice?

Breakout groups: Choose which of those four topics you want to explore in more depth in small groups.

- Start by reading the responses on the chart paper.
- What do you notice about these responses? Are there any common threads? Does anything surprise you?
- What particularly interests you about this topic? How does your "map" relate to this question? What have your previous experiences been around this topic?
- What are your hopes for how your Jewish communities can best address whatever challenges you see reflected in that list (either what's on it or what's missing from it) or in your conversation?
- What are your hopes for how your Jewish communities can best exemplify the positive qualities you see reflected in that list?

Come back together; share back highlights from the conversation.

What's your Superpower?

Ask everyone to quickly jot down words and phrases that describe their ideal Jewish community.

Then each person should review their list, circling any items that are connected to their own personal skills and/or strengths.

Discuss as a group:

- Your previous challenging experiences (i.e., “baggage”) can help make you better at building the Jewish community you want. Figuring out your areas of struggle helps you better identify what’s missing and what can be built.
- How have you seen examples of this kind of thing in the past (i.e., where someone took his/her experience of struggle and turned that into a way to generate better ideas to address whatever concerns/lacks/etc. had caused that struggle)?
- Combine your particular skills with your particular perspective on what’s needed and your baggage transforms into your superpower!

Split into small groups. Each person should share the items s/he circled and brainstorm with his or her group to come up with a superhero name and a few examples of how group members could use their superpowers in the camp environment this summer. If there is time, everyone should make a quick poster that has their superhero names on it. Take photos of each “superhero squad” with their signs. Close by coming back together and having everyone share their superpowers.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR BRINGING IT BACK TO CAMP:

This program could be adapted to run for older campers as well. Suggested adaptations include:

- Spend more time on the mapping activity and include prompts to help campers think about what their Jewishness means to them, what Jewish experiences they’ve had, etc. Then give campers the opportunity to share (either with the group or in smaller groups or pairs) about particular areas on their map that are especially important to them in a positive way, as well as areas with which they struggle.
- Use the “Chalk Talk” option rather than the “Step In” option.
- Spend more time working together on the superhero section and maybe even build it out into a bigger activity with costumes, etc.