



## ***Excellence in Experiential Jewish Education***

Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow

### ***Excellent Experiential Jewish Education:***

**1. Is executed with *kavanah*, intention, in which each activity is done with the purpose of achieving a larger goal**

Activity for activity's sake is not experiential education—it's just an activity. Educational experiences should be intentionally designed to convey Jewish learning outcomes and values in an authentic way. In formal settings, a popular version of this process is "[Understanding by Design](#)." It is essentially designing a program 'backwards'. Educators need to begin with the goals and end with developing the activity itself. Regardless of how trivial the behavior may be, the activity must be founded on 'big ideas'. Moving from just trying to socialize participants toward experiential education only happens with hyper-intention, using moments of 'planned spontaneity' to achieve carefully considered specific and concrete educational goals. Feedback is critical to ensuring that this is education and not merely activity. Not being able to rely on traditional tests and papers that are prevalent in formal education, experiential educators can and must utilize other forms of feedback for evaluation. Educators will only know if they have achieved their intended outcome if they build feedback mechanisms into their regular practice.

**2. Has inherent and authentic Jewish content**

We are living in a time that cherishes the rare commodity of authenticity. To be authentic, Jewish content needs to be inherent to Jewish education. Educators should not shy away from content. Jewish education needs to be steeped in content that is relevant to all stages of life. Students know when something is "pasted-on" and inauthentic as compared to "passed-on" and heartfelt. Judaism and Jewish culture cannot be an afterthought, it can and should be integrated and inherent in the learning itself. Claiming something is a Jewish value by simply calling it one (for example, rebranding making sandwiches for the homeless as *Tikkun Olam*) is not sufficient to root this as a value in our tradition. This value claim must be in authentic dialogue with the text, stories, art, music, actions, and practices of the Jewish People.

**3. Utilizes reflective processes to frame the journey in Jewish values**

Jewish values cannot be simply relegated to an area of content. Programs should use questions and activities to ensure that participants internalize the lesson and value by asking, "How is this valuable to me?" "How does this value have a Jewish context?" "In what way is this value Jewish?" "Is it valuable to me because or despite it being a Jewish value?" Excellent experiential education does not only leave room for reflection, it demands thoughtful consideration and discussion of the meaning of activities and experiences. This experience must evoke the tension between something having been a Jewish value throughout history and it

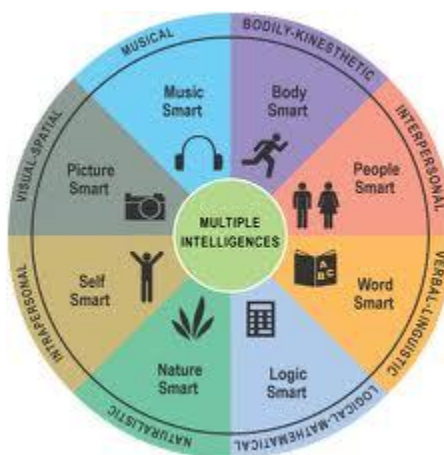
being valued by Jews today. This reflection aims at orienting the participant, helping him/her realize a new knowledge or skill, and inspiring him/her to make enduring commitments to meaningful action.

**4. Happens when the participant's narrative is used as a primary text**

People often describe successful Jewish educational experiences as “life-changing.” The focus of this education is personal transformation and individual growth. Relevance is a key component of any Jewish educational experience. Whereas in formal educational environments the course of study often follows the text, it is often the opposite in experiential education. Text plays the role of reacting, commenting, and transforming the students’ narratives. As the Jewish philosopher [Franz Rosenzweig](#) said, “it is learning in reverse order, a learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life but the other way around: from life...back to the Torah.” Revelation is not limited to something that might or might not have happened long ago at Sinai; it is something that is happening in the learning experience itself today. Textual learning is integrated in and is a manifestation of the relationships in our lives. In this context, all learners can access and feel ownership over Jewish Text. The educator needs to trust the educational process. Like the two teams who excavated [Hezekiah's Tunnel](#) starting at each end of the tunnel and then meeting in the middle, experiential educators must negotiate the tension between reacting to the students and reaching the ‘big ideas’ (see #1). The educator needs to maintain the trust of each student and also trust that they will navigate a meaningful path for the group.

**5. Utilizes the full spectrum of sensory and kinetic learning modalities to engage all of the participants**

We are the People of the Book. Does that mean we are limited to books as our only mode of learning? In order to engage each student the educator needs to provide a variety of entry points for learning to meet the diversity of learning styles of their students. As Howard Gardner has written about, there are multiple entry points for diverse learners (See graph below). There are many different ways to shine and a variety of ways to contribute. The diversity of participants — range of interests, preferred learning modalities, special needs — should be accounted for when developing experiences. Authentic education succeeds in its mission when educators honor the idiosyncratic talents and interests of each student while maintaining a clear view of the common obligations and goals. To understand this idea of [Multiple Intelligences](#) in its most natural sense, please [watch this video “Animal School”](#) by [www.raisingmallsouls.com](#)

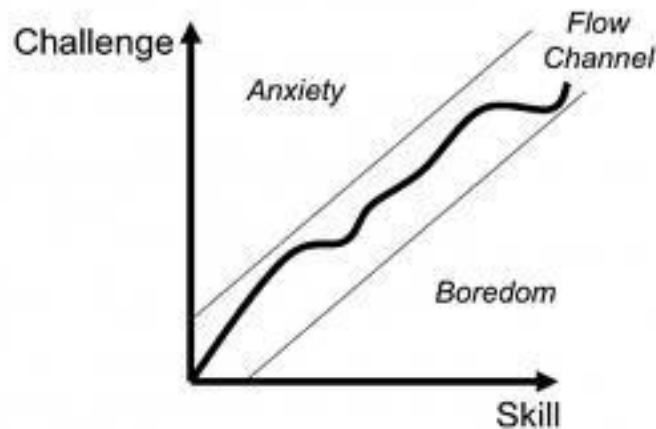


**6. Utilizes rituals to focus participants attention and solidify memories**

While we tend to associate ritual exclusively with religious life, excellent Jewish experiential education is replete with its own rituals. Rituals help place the student in a context of Jewish time and help create Jewish space in which they can focus and create meaning. Done well, rituals help communicate the desired values and a sense of tradition. In understanding, creating, and enacting effective ritual it is essential that the educators are intentional in their planning, designing, implementing and facilitating programs that challenge their students to learn, grow, and develop. These rituals need not be sacramental in nature. In bringing together the timely and the timeless they are teeming with meaning. Rituals serve as vessels in which memories are cultivated and optimally transformed into habits to be utilized long beyond the educational context.

**7. Fosters productive discomfort to keep participants in “Flow.”**

[Mihály Csíkszentmihályi](#) described “Flow” as the optimal place where we are behaving within our abilities while also being challenging enough to maintain our interest (See below graph). When people are in flow, they are completely immersed and engaged in one task, enjoying it to the point that they lose track of time. In other words, when people are in flow they do not realize that they are learning because they are having fun. Engaging Jewish educational settings are first and foremost safe spaces, and therefore they are the ideal places to encourage the sort of ‘productive discomfort’ that emerges from feeling appropriately challenged. Experiential Jewish education pushes learners to grow in this safe but challenging space. Games are excellent tools for getting students to experience flow. Games based on trivia should be avoided. Education that is solely driven toward data acquisition often misses getting or keeping students in flow.



"Flow" concept by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Drawn by Senia Maymin.

**8. Is founded on open inquiry and aims to foster more questions than answers**

Excellent Jewish experiential education is an interactive process. Learners should be encouraged to listen to one another and engage in respectful and meaningful dialogue. When appropriate, the role of the educator is to validate, contextualize, challenge, and help students refine their questions. Staving off the urge to answer questions, educators model the ability to sit with the questions and create the space for the students to come to their own answers. Educators need to value questions over answers because they keep the conversation going to ensure long term impact. This means that educators need to move evaluation of this education from verifying data acquisition to determination of the quality of questions.

**9. *Creates a dynamic and collaborative environment where there is space to explore roles and identities***

Where formal environments demand certain structure and hierarchy, excellent experiential educational environments invite participants to challenge these roles. Whether these relationships are between peers or role models, participants have the opportunity to play with and reimagine their new roles in the group. Since so much learning happens in these moments, educators need to give a lot of attention to the social and emotional dynamics of the group. This system works because there is a tight learning loop where young participants see older participants and aspire to become like them. This 'role model continuum' keeps participants' attention and devotion at every level of the educational process. As students and staff get older they model this by taking on more responsibility in shaping their environments. The nature of this [dynamic and collaborative environment](#) mandates that the educators abandon being the "sage on the stage" and opt for being the "guide on the side". Optimally this manifests the teaching of Rabbi Chanina when he said, "I have learned much wisdom from my teacher, more from my colleagues, and the most from my students" (Ta'anit 7a). This dynamic challenges the charismatic leader to step back ( [tzimtzum](#)) and make room for other voices. This in turn fosters a vital community in which all the participants feel an urgent sense of belonging.

**10. *Takes a holistic view of participants' lives in and out of the learning environment***

Experiential Jewish education is aimed at creating a web of experiences that foster personal growth and develops skills, relationships, and knowledge of Jews of all ages. Educational settings are often limited to a fixed time and space. Immersive environments lend themselves to excellence in experiential education and are much more porous. Educators are ideal role models selectively using aspects of their personal lives to instruct students. Experiential educators care about their students as individuals, and understand that the text of their narratives extend before and after a particular experience or program. Given the enmeshed nature of this learning community (see #9) care is necessary to maintain appropriate boundaries given that these lines are intentionally blurred.

**11. *Is founded on the group experience and consciously creates and continually evolves culture and community***

Growth and reflection occur in a dynamic communal setting. Educators must address the needs of each learner. Excellent experiential education capitalizes on the unique benefits of group dynamics. This group is often experienced through a smaller subunit. At times, this smaller group feels like a nurturing surrogate family or a competitive team. Sometimes educators will have to limit the choices of different entry points for different students to foster the group experience. The culture of this larger group may or may not look like the tradition of Jewish life, but it needs to be a rigorous culture that is in conversation with this tradition. Consciously or unconsciously, over time this learning community is creating culture that needs to last beyond the framework of the educational experience. Ideally participants see how they will continue to grapple with these ideas and be involved with this group throughout the course of their lives.

**12. *Acknowledges the moment of mutual trust as a requirement for the creation of moments of 'deferred revelation'***

Powerful learning is about relationships. It is only when educators meet the students' basic needs and achieve a mutual trust that the 'magic' can really happen. In establishing this trust, educators do not demand transparency in the experience. Where formal education often relies on direct instruction, experiential education happens with a certain kind of 'indirect instruction'. The deepest learning often happens when educators help students get out of their own way in the service of their learning. This works when educators trust that the process will yield future revelations and breakthroughs in learning. (See forthcoming article on 'deferred revelation')

**Further Reading:**

Ackerman, David (1998) 'The Educating Moment' in *Judaism and Education: Essays in Honor of Walter I. Ackerman*, ed. Haim Marantz, Beer-Sheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press.

Bryfman, David and J. Reimer [What We Know About Experiential Jewish Education. What We Now Know about Jewish Education.](#)

Chazan, B. (2003), 'The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education' in *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, [www.infed.org/informaeducation/informal\\_jewish\\_education.htm](http://www.infed.org/informaeducation/informal_jewish_education.htm).

Kress, J.S. (2012) So, You Want Your School to Be More Like Camp? [http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial\\_opinion/opinion/so\\_you\\_want\\_your\\_school\\_be\\_more\\_camp](http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial_opinion/opinion/so_you_want_your_school_be_more_camp)

Kress, J.S. (2013) What is Experiential Jewish Education? <http://blog.jtsa.edu/reframe/2013/03/18/what-is-experiential-jewish-education/>

Litman, Lesley (2013) Prompt: What are the implications of experiential education on curriculum design? <http://blog.jtsa.edu/reframe/2013/04/09/prompt-what-are-the-implications-of-experiential-education-on-curriculum-design/>

Orlow, Avi Katz. *Tail of Two Jewries: Some Innovative Lessons From Chris Anderson and Jewish Summer Camp.* *Journal of Jewish Communal Service.* Jewish Communal Service Association of North America (JCSA). Spring 2011: 184-193. <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=13803>

Reimer, J. (2003) 'A response to Barry Chazan: The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education', *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, [www.infed.org/informaeducation/informal\\_jewish\\_education\\_reply.htm](http://www.infed.org/informaeducation/informal_jewish_education_reply.htm).

The 13 Dynamics in Israel Education <http://www.theicenter.org/aleph-bet>