

# ASSESSING JEWISH KNOWLEDGE OF STAFF IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

## A Case Study

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More than fifty years ago, Mordechai Kaplan, one of the foremost Jewish thinkers of this century, asked, "What incentive is there for making the study of things Jewish part of the cultural interests of the adult?" (1934, p. 176). The issues with which Kaplan wrestled in his day—making Judaism relevant to modern Jews, making Judaism pertinent in a world of competing values, and making Jewish experiences inviting for Jews—are clearly still at the forefront of discussions about Jewish education. Nowhere are these discussions heard more loudly than in today's Jewish Community Centers. The ability of Centers to bring together Jews from all walks of life, to provide and pass along knowledge and values while supplying recreational programming, is crucial to the viability of Jewish culture in America (Chazan, 1996). Yet, if Center staff are unfamiliar with Jewish concepts, values, and holiday observances, the Jewish intellectual discourse is silenced, and a crucial mission of JCC programming falls by the wayside.

This study was born out of an all-encompassing initiative to integrate Jewish values into every aspect of programming that was undertaken by a Center in the Northeast. This initiative was guided by committees that were largely made up of staff who were unfamiliar with Jewish values programming in general and the specific values the executive staff chose to promote: *tikkun olam* and *kehillah*. The staff members' struggle was evidenced by frustration in pronouncing the Hebrew words and understanding concepts that could not be easily translated into English. During no part of the initiative did staff come to the Jewish educator or executive staff to explain their frustration or ask for help. Over the course of a year, staff largely abandoned the project.

The research described in this article examined the level of comfort staff workers feel in transmitting Jewish values, knowledge, and customs to clients. Workers rated themselves on a Likert scale covering 38 areas of Jewish knowledge in order to ascertain the areas of self-perceived competency and lack of competency in Jewish knowledge. The accuracy of knowledge was not tested; only the self-perception of knowledge was investigated.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The goal of adult education is to develop a total environment conducive to human growth and fulfillment—an educative community (Knowles, 1977). Psychologists agree that learning involves change, and such change is permanent when it leads to altered behavior, as evidenced by newly developed skills (Brookfield, 1983). Moreover, in today's global age that is characterized by advanced technology; accelerated and continuing change; economic, political, and social instability; and cultural pluralism, the educational needs of all citizens have become much greater and more complex (Haines & Schwoebel, 1982). A society whose central dynamic is change requires a citizenry that is able to change (Knowles, 1977).

Many organizations have come to recognize that the continuing education of their employees is the most efficient means for increasing the effectiveness of their operation. For example, the mission of the JCC in this case study is to be a center for Jewish life and an instrument of Jewish identity. Staff education should therefore prepare staff to design programming in accordance with the mission.

To be effective, the educational process must take place in an environment that is

conducive to learning. The quality and amount of learning are clearly influenced by the quality and amount of interaction between the learner and the environment (Knowles, 1977). Learning must occur with the continuous supervision of a professional adult educator. Because learning involves change, resistance and fear of the educational process are inevitable and come from several sources:

- doubts that teachers will respect their maturity and experience
- embarrassment over poor command of academic basics
- a heightened sense of peer pressure
- fear of failure when studying in the workplace
- a possible need to repudiate present ways and values (Haines & Schwoebel, 1982)

In the past two decades, Centers have undertaken a major effort to upgrade the quality and quantity of Jewish education they offer. Informal Jewish education has assumed a central role in Centers (Chazan, 1991). Unlike synagogues, "JCCs pose few ideological barriers, religious demands, or expectations of liturgical competence that may inhibit newcomers from crossing the threshold" (Cohen & Holtz, 1996, p. 33). Therefore, the Center can serve as a gateway to Judaism and other Jewish institutions. One can discover his or her Jewish self at the JCC. More aggressively, some staff maintain that their mission is to put Judaism in front of members.

Since 1982, the Center movement has engaged in numerous activities to enhance Jewish education and staff development in Centers. The Commission on Maximizing the Jewish Educational Effectiveness of JCCs (COMJEE) began the process of examining the status of Jewish education in JCCs (Chazan, 1996). In 1995, COMJEE II outlined a set of outcomes for Centers that would result in the enhancement of Jewish continuity, including creating an inviting and openly Jewish environment. It also recommended creating the position of a resident Jewish educator to serve as a Jewish resource, pro-

grammer, advocate, teacher, and scholar (Cohen and Holtz, 1996).

Ideally, Jewish education in Centers does not occur exclusively in a structured classroom environment. It takes place in the gym, art gallery, early childhood, and family programs, as well as through the overall environment of the agency. The goal of all Jewish education, formal and informal, is to affect the Jewish character of individuals—their cognition, emotions, and behaviors (Chazan, 1991). "Jewish education refers to the life-long process by which the Jewish community transmits and perpetuates the traditions, norms, and values of the past and the ongoing process through which an individual Jew's daily life is continually shaped and transformed" (Chazan & Poupko, 1988).

Key to creating a community—*akehillah*—of Jews are Jewish professionals who can serve as positive role models, thereby influencing their clients' Jewish identity. "Centers are arenas and setting in which Jews can meet and be influenced by positive Jewish role models" (Chazan, 1996, p. 16). Staff ideally help members experience Jewish life through cultural, ritual, national, and associational Jewish experiences. The Center strives to provide a vast network of learning opportunities for staff, board and members of all ages in a setting that emotes Jewish pride (Chazan, 1996).

To serve as positive Jewish role models, Center staff must be Jewishly literate: "familiar with key phrases, ideas, concepts, texts and moments in Jewish experience" (Chazan, 1988, p. 6). Workers must be concerned with defining their own Jewish lifestyle by incorporating Jewish behaviors in their private and professional lives. The workers must struggle to ask questions, listen to varying perspectives, and search for answers while encouraging others to do the same. They must engage in a continual effort to define personal and vocational Jewish values (Chazan, 1988).

The following study set out to examine how well staff at a JCC were prepared for the many challenges of being a Jewishly literate Center professional.

## METHODOLOGY

### Instrument

I developed the survey using the *Guide to Jewish Knowledge for the Center Professional* (Chazan & Poupko, 1988), which outlines topics about which the ideal Center professional should have some knowledge. The survey focused on three broad areas: (1) the types of Jewish education in which the worker has participated or is currently engaged; (2) the level of competency to teach a series of Jewish concepts, including Shabbat, various Jewish texts, and Jewish life-cycle issues; and (3) the level of competency to teach about various Jewish holidays. The survey also asked pointed questions about respondents' desire to engage in areas of Jewish study. Respondents could also simply write in what topics might interest them.

### Survey Administration

The survey was distributed to staff members of three departments at the JCC: Family Services, Early Childhood, and Senior Services. These three departments cover the age groups served by the JCC and offer the most direct opportunity for staff to provide clients with Jewish knowledge. Each program director agreed to distribute the survey to line staff. Line staff then returned the survey to an envelope posted in a central location. To alleviate resistance to participating, the cover note indicated that the survey was voluntary and anonymous (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). Program directors did not see the completed surveys. Each department had two weeks to distribute and collect the surveys. Response rates varied. In family services and senior services, the response rate was 50 percent; in early childhood the response rate was 60 percent. A response rate of 50 percent is considered adequate for analysis and reporting, and a response rate of 60 percent is good (Rubin & Babbie, 1997).

Line staff ranged from college students to individuals trained on the bachelors and masters levels in education, social work, and Jewish communal service. All program di-

rectors had masters level degrees appropriate to their positions. No level of Jewish knowledge was required to work at this particular JCC.

In addition, I spent eight months working in the agency as a social work intern, giving me the opportunity to become a "participant observer," someone who was both inside and outside. Because I had no contractual arrangement with the agency, I had the freedom to criticize aspects of the agency without fear of retribution. I also had ample time to get to know staff and observe the agency culture as it moved through the year of holiday celebrations. The conclusions reached below are drawn from a combination of the empirical research and observation over the course of eight months.

## RESULTS

Although the survey data were analyzed by department (family services, early childhood, and senior services), as well as by part-time versus full-time status, this section examines the data for the agency as a whole. For the purpose of this section, a worker is considered capable of transmitting a concept if he or she scores three or above; he or she is incapable of transmitting a concept if the score is one or two. Capability is defined as possessing the skill and knowledge to transmit the values in a given program. Incapability is defined as not possessing the skill and knowledge to do so.

### Jewish Educational Attainment

The form of Jewish education that most staff received was after-school supplementary education. Sixty percent (n=16) of staff partook in this type of education. Forty-one percent of staff attended Jewish summer camp and had Bar/Bat Mitzvah training. A small number (n=4) of staff attended day school through eighth grade, whereas no staff continued on to Hebrew high school. Only one staff member took classes on the high school or graduate-school level. In college, 26 percent (n=8) of staff took at least one Judaic studies course.

Few staff presently engage in any type of Jewish education (Figure 1). Those who are taking Jewish education classes indicated that they were involved in synagogue-based adult education or were teaching themselves.

**Ability to Teach Jewish Concepts**

In the next section of the questionnaire respondents indicated their level of competence in teaching a series of Jewish concepts as part of their programmatic role. Again, it was beyond the purview of this study to judge whether or not their knowledge was correct. Twenty-four concepts were rated; only two—*kehillah* and *tikkun olam*—are discussed here. These two values, as mentioned above, were the focus of the JCC's Jewish values initiative.

The ability to teach Jewish concepts varied strikingly by department. Because there were only two respondents from senior services, only the family services and early childhood departments are analyzed. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the dramatic differences in staff ability between members of the Family Services and Early Childhood departments. The relative competence of the Early Childhood staff is not surprising given their role as teachers. Yet, Family Services staff share in this responsibility in after-school programs, camp, holiday celebrations, and the like. In fact, staff are charged with upholding the agency's mission by making Jewish values programming a priority.

The concluding questions in this section asked respondents to list other areas of Jewish knowledge with which they felt comfortable

and whether there were subjects about which the respondent would like to learn. The vast majority of respondents left this section blank (n=18). Those who did choose to fill it out included such answers as "none" (n=4) or "Hebrew language" (n=1). One wrote that she is interested in all Jewish subjects; another expressed an interest in studying *Kabbalah*.

**Ability to Teach Jewish Holidays**

Jewish holiday celebrations are an important part of the atmosphere at the JCC. The Sukkah during Sukkot, the Hanukkiot during Hanukkah, and Hamentashen during Purim create a Jewish flavor in the Center. Yet, the ability to teach Jewish holidays varied similarly among departments. Here too, the Early Childhood Department staff is much stronger than that of the Family Services Department. For example, 100 percent of Early Childhood staff are very capable of teaching about Hanukkah versus 63 percent of Family Services staff. The results for Passover are similar: 100 percent (n=9) of Early Childhood respondents feel capable of teaching about Passover, in contrast to 69 percent (n=11) of Family Services staff. In terms of the entire staff, there seems to be a balance between those who are capable and those who are not. Early Childhood Staff carry the rest of the agency in this regard.

**Interest in Pursuing Jewish Education**

The last question of this survey asked whether the staff had an interest in pursuing

Figure 1. Present Participation in Jewish Education: All Staff

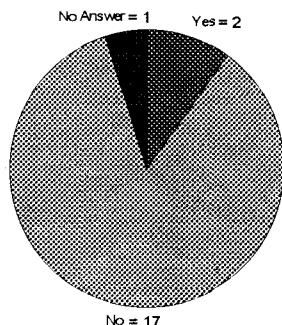
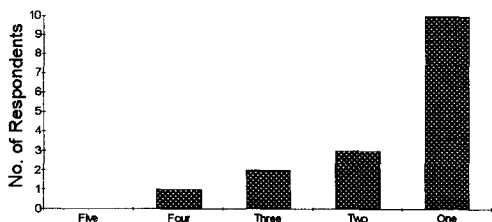
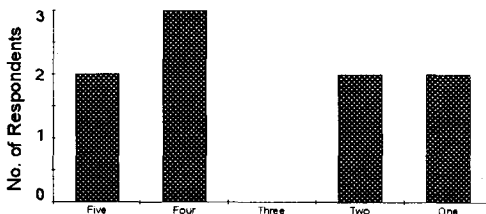


Figure 2. The ability to teach the concept of Tikkun Olam.

**Family Services: Ability to Teach Tikkun Olam**  
(5=Very capable; 1=Not capable)



**Early Childhood: Ability to Teach Tikkun Olam**  
(5=Very capable; 1=Not capable)



Jewish education. More than half expressed no such interest. Those who were interested noted these topics: holidays ( $n=3$ ), mysticism ( $n=1$ ), "basics" ( $n=1$ ), philosophy ( $n=1$ ), life-cycle issues ( $n=2$ ), *tikkun olam* ( $n=1$ ), ethics ( $n=1$ ), Bible ( $n=1$ ), and Talmud ( $n=1$ ). One respondent indicated an interest in making "Judaism feel like a comfortable old shoe."

### DISCUSSION

These findings above are troubling on numerous levels. Only a limited number of staff feels capable of disseminating crucial information to clients regarding Jewish life and practice. Yet, the fact that staff does not share a high level of Jewish educational attainment is not nearly as disturbing as that 85 percent of staff are currently not engaged in any type of Jewish study and 52 percent are not interested in pursuing further education. With several dozen synagogues in the immediate vicinity and numerous Judaic studies institutions in and around the area of the Center, a high level of complacency is evident. Even an agency-wide initiative to integrate the values of *tikkun olam* and *kehillah* into programming could not shake this complacency.

These findings raise these key questions: Why do staff feel incapable of disseminating Jewish knowledge in programming? Why would workers commit themselves to *Jewish* communal service when they appear to be disengaged from their Jewish selves? What theories might explain the current state of affairs?

The physics theory of inertia states that a body will remain at rest until a force acts upon it. The systems theory in social work indicates that groups of people attempt at all costs to maintain homeostasis, therefore shying away from change in any part of the system. The practitioner, therefore, intervenes on the environmental level while maintaining a focus on the individual (Meyer, 1995). What is called for here is a radical systemic intervention that motivates staff on all levels to engage in Jewish study. A force must act upon the body of the agency.

The first step is staff recognition of the need to study. Staff must be convinced that their own Jewish self-growth is important personally and professionally. The fact that 85 percent ( $n=17$ ) of staff do not currently engage in Jewish study and that 52 ( $n=14$ ) percent are not interested in doing so makes this an uphill battle. To learn, a person must first be able to state that he or she does not know (Chazan & Poupko, 1988). This is not an easy step to take, as clearly illustrated during the course of the JCC's Jewish values initiative when staff did not ask for help from available resources: the Jewish educator, executive staff, local rabbis, and local Jewish educational institutions.

One reason why staff should acquire Judaic knowledge is simply to do a better job. Yet, often one does not realize to what extent additional knowledge will improve practice until after having obtained that knowledge. One can then reflect back on practice mistakes and envision future improvements. Staff

needs to be shown that “programmatic enhancement will be the natural outgrowth of Judaic learning that takes place for the sake of learning” (Chazan & Poupko, 1988, p. 10).

Chazan and Poupko (1988) suggest several measures to increase staff members’ motivation to study. One such measure is calling a “town meeting” of staff to discuss the mission statement and their personal relationships to Jewish identity and continuity. Staff must be helped to understand that they are the ambassadors of the JCC’s mission, creating the environment required for the mission to be fulfilled. Those running the town meeting can help staff envision how, as they gain confidence in administering Jewish programming, their practice will be improved through Jewish education (Haines & Schwobel, 1982). Simply put, staff must come to see that Jewish education must be part of everybody’s job description, because it is everybody’s business (Chazan, 1991).

The natural outgrowth of this town meeting at the JCC, it is hoped, would be the crucial realization—“I don’t know.” Then, the Red Sea will have parted, and the opportunity for Jewish education will be on the shore.

Next, a committee of staff at all levels and board members should be formed and charged with creating a Jewish education curriculum for staff. The adult learners must participate in curriculum development if they are to be invested in it.

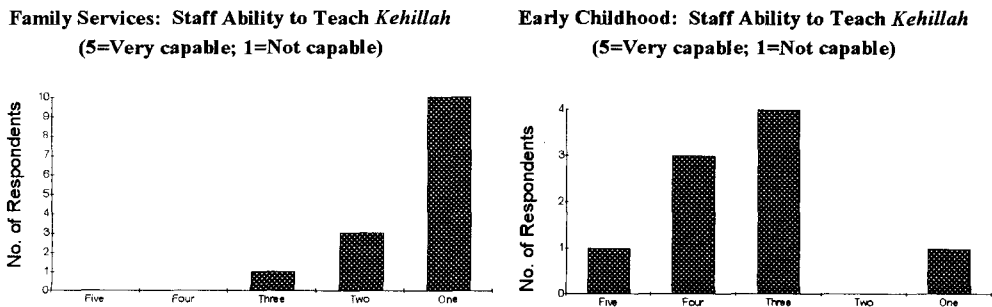
The executive director is the key player in creating the appropriate learning atmosphere.

He or she must encourage the board to support the Jewish education initiative, must hire Jewishly knowledgeable staff in program director positions, and must ensure that the staff grows in terms of Jewish knowledge and commitment. Jewish educational attainment should become an important part of staff evaluations and promotion decisions. The executive director must also have a close alliance with the Jewish educator, thereby ensuring that he or she is integrated into every level of the agency. The Jewish educator and executive director should also make time for study during the workday, therefore setting a public example for all staff. The executive director and Jewish educator may also wish to do a comprehensive evaluation of all programs for Jewish content. Moreover, the executive who is deeply committed to his or her own Jewish life serves as a powerful role model for staff and board (Cohen & Holtz, 1996).

A board of directors who is supportive of the Jewish educational mission of the Center is also crucial to the success of any Jewish education initiative. The board must uphold the importance of the initiative and support it with enthusiasm and financial resources (Cohen & Holtz, 1996). The board of directors should also engage in study with the Jewish educator or independently, as they are not exempt from the requirement of becoming knowledgeable Jewishly.

Of course, the Jewish educator is key to enhancing the Jewish learning at the agency. Because many staff members will not be

Figure 3. The ability of staff to teach the concept of Kehillah.



Jewishly knowledgeable, he or she must be nonjudgmental and open toward those individuals. He or she must also be comfortable with a wide range of beliefs and even with non-belief. The educator should regard staff as his or her clients on an equal level to JCC members. Staff, however, may be suspicious of the educator and view him or her as someone who is trying to make them "more Jewish." A level of trust is crucial to the success of this relationship (Cohen & Holtz, 1996).

It thus becomes the role of the educator to choose material that is within the realm of interest and understanding of learners so as to expand their experience (Dewey, 1938). "Consequently, the JCC approach to Jewish education says that the educative process must relate to each person as a person" (Chazan, 1996, p. 16). Moreover, an educator who is unable to "meet the client where he or she is" will not succeed in a JCC (Cohen & Holtz, 1996).

In addition to a comprehensive staff development initiative, several environmental changes at centers may help create an atmosphere more conducive to Jewish growth. Environmental education uses the methodology of effective advertising: grabbing attention, holding it tight, letting it go, and repeating the message over and over. Repetitive messages are the mother of learning. Even if staff are unable to disseminate Jewish concepts, information about those concepts can simply be posted in appropriate locations. For example, a simple statement explaining the mezzuzah can draw attention to this important *mitzvah* (Perman & Singer, 1992). Hebrew dates can accompany Julian dates on all written materials. Jewish periodicals can be left in areas where staff and members congregate, such as the front lobby. Staff might also be offered subscriptions to such periodicals as *Moment*, *The Jerusalem Report*, the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, or their local Jewish paper. The agency may also wish to engage in a "Mitzvah of the Month" project, the goal being to establish an agency-wide theme for programming around a *mitzvah* (Perman & Singer,

1992). Departments might rotate this responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge with which we started this investigation—how to make Judaism relevant to the modern Jew—is a key task of the Jewish Community Center. It *must* be both Jewish and modern (Poupko & Chazan, 1988). The aim is to make Judaism alive for the staff and membership. The goal is not to simply drill facts into the heads of staff, but rather to present education as an opportunity to interpret the modern world. The most important attitude that can be formed is a desire to continue learning. One must not underestimate the power of creating Jewish experiences for staff in concert with formal Jewish study. "If the experience arouses curiosity and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person... continuity works in a very different way" (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). The intellectual stimulation must blend with desire and impulse to acquire moving force. Desire gives ideas impetus and momentum. The idea then becomes a plan and activity to be carried out. Herein lies the ultimate goal: Staff is inspired by learning to carry it over into daily programming. The mission is fulfilled, and Jewish oxygen fills the lungs of all who visit the JCC (Chazan, 1996). The agency thus becomes a *kehillah* of Jewish learners in pursuit of *tikkun olam*.

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