

DEVELOPING COMMUNAL FUTURE JEWISH IMAGERY WITH A GROUP OF TEENAGERS

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This article describes an effort to facilitate interaction among parents, Jewish educators, and teenagers for the purpose of generating new thoughts and future solutions. The teenagers developed a set of mission statements for the community Hebrew school that point to a striking transformation in its role—from a provider of supplementary Jewish education to a primary provider of Jewish experience. The community should re-evaluate its educational mission and structure based on this glimpse into the teenagers' inner world.

In recent years, the American Jewish community has been vigorously evaluating the social and religious trends that are shaping its evolving communal and ethnic look. Many of the studies published in the last decade warn of alarming changes in the structure and religious character of the American Jewish community (Feldstein, 1984; Nussbaum Cohen, 1991). These studies were conducted using various forecasting methodologies. Yet, there have been no published studies describing an exercise that would help participants invent the future—not just predict it. This article reports such an exercise conducted in the Minneapolis Jewish community.

The aim of this exercise was to help the Jewish community generate new images of a relevant and improved future. The phrase "images of the future" is a fundamental concept used in future research. It represents people's perceptions, insights, thoughts, ideas, feelings, and intuitions about the future (Kurth-Schai, 1984).

The Minneapolis Jewish community was faced with the problem of how to use the knowledge accumulated in the various American Jewish future studies throughout the country to develop a better communal Jewish life. The researcher used the Imen-Delphi (ID) procedure (Passig, 1993), which is a variant of the classical Delphi forecasting technique (Helmer, 1966a,b) that was originally designed as a method to solicit and synthesize the forecasts of groups of experts.

In the early 1950s the RAND Corporation adopted the name Delphi for a procedure in an early experiment called "Project Delphi." The experiment attempted to select (from the viewpoint of a Soviet strategic planner) an optimal U.S. industrial target system and to estimate the number of bombs required to reduce the munitions' output by a prescribed amount. The procedure aimed at eliciting the most reliable consensus of group opinion through a series of intensive questionnaires (five rounds) interspersed with controlled opinion feedback, while avoiding direct confrontation of the members of the group with one another. The experiment was sponsored by the U.S. Air Force, which, for security reasons, kept the study unpublished for at least another decade. The Delphi technique received its metaphoric name from the mythic Greek oracle, Delphi, where Apollo claimed the ability to foresee the future.

As Delphi has spread, many variants of the process have emerged, with each aimed at refining the method. The Imen-Delphi (the ability to emerge is *in me*) is best described as a procedure for eliciting and refining non-expert group opinions about their future. The ID is an exercise for structuring the communication process of a group that allows it to learn about experts' forecasts, deal with some of their own future problems, generate new future images, establish common ground, and determine a communal future working mission. It is best described as a responsibility, self-

awareness, and concepts enhancement procedure (Passig, 1993).

Based both on the number of future images generated by the teenaged and adult participants and the quality of their recommendations, the Imen-Delphi procedure was effective in translating the participants' conceptual approach to the future into highly organized, clearly focused, and value-oriented solutions.

The results also indicate that the perceptions and images of the future held by the participants point to a striking transformation of the perceived role that the Hebrew school is playing in their Jewish life. The purpose of the community Hebrew School in Minneapolis, the Talmud Torah (TT), since its foundation in 1894, has been to provide a supplementary Jewish education through instruction in Bible, Hebrew language and literature, Jewish history, and traditions.

To date, its mission continues to be the provision of supplementary Jewish education, supplementary to such other Jewish institutions as the synagogue, youth movements, camps, and the family. However, from the content of the future images generated in this study the teenagers conceive the Hebrew school not as a provider of a *supplementary* Jewish education but as a *primary* provider of Jewish experience. This study is pointing out a fundamental change in the perceived role of the community Hebrew school of Minneapolis.

PROCEDURE

The great majority of families who send their children to the Talmud Torah of Minneapolis are members of Conservative congregations. Thus, in this study, 100 participants from the local Conservative community were provided with an opportunity to take part in a future-oriented discussion about their future Jewish life. The participants comprised 30 parents of students attending the school, 15 members of the school's Board of Directors, 15 faculty members, and 40 students aged 14 to 17.

The parents, boards members, and teachers (who are referred to as the *participants*) were provided with various studies and forecasts about the future of American Jewish life, and were asked to draft questionnaires for presentation to the teenagers. The questionnaires generated by the participants were presented to the teenagers in a first round (300 questions). A second round was required to facilitate the generation of a list of future mission statements (420 questions). A third round was required to reach agreement on a workable future mission. The participants' working sessions were scheduled over a period of three months. The teenagers' sessions were scheduled over a period of six months.

Although the affiliation of the participants and teenagers is not known, it is assumed that the great majority belong to a Conservative congregation and reflect the larger universe of the Talmud Torah students and families.

PARTICIPANT SESSIONS

Four pamphlets were developed to reflect four aspects of future American Jewish life that were of interest to the school: future American Jewish beliefs, personal behavior, family behavior, and communal organization. Various issues in contemporary and future Jewish life were incorporated into these four pamphlets (Passig, 1992). The researcher mailed the participants one new pamphlet every three weeks.

The participants were given this assignment:

- to read the pamphlets
- to imagine the teenagers sitting in front of them reading the same material
- to imagine they had the opportunity to ask the teenagers questions on how they view their future in light of the studies they all had just read
- to think about questions that would evoke images from the teenaged panelists' minds and hearts concerning their future
- to challenge the teenagers' motivations

and self-expectations

- to imagine that their child was a panelist and to challenge his or her personal attitudes, values, and dreams
- to draft actual questions relevant to the teenagers' Jewish life
- to draft a story dealing with a future dilemma that would challenge the teenagers to use their perspectives, notions, and objectives in dealing with that situation

First Round

Repeated attempts were made to convince the teenagers of the importance of learning their future. They were told, both verbally and in writing, that we are accustomed to thinking that the causes of the present lie in the past. However, in a very real sense the causes of the present lie in the future, which means that the image of the future that people have in their minds can have a dramatic effect on what they do right now. One of the reasons for this study was to inform them about the possibilities within their future Jewish lives, so they could assess their present actions accordingly. Another reason that was repeatedly emphasized was that individuals who actively imagine themselves in a variety of clear future roles tend to generate long-term goals. Most importantly, they tend to work enthusiastically and self-confidently toward their attainment. Thus, the purpose of having them learn their Jewish future was to help them generate positive personal goals and promote their confidence in attaining those goals. It is important to learn and create complex images of the future because on their basis it is possible to develop skills through which one may both adapt to change and create change.

The researcher then developed eight booklets (for an example of a first-round questionnaire, see Figure 1). The teenagers were asked to do the following:

- to read the attached excerpts and projections, which experts had compiled
- to read the questions and answer them

briefly

- to read the stories and try to enlarge upon them in their reflections
- to submit questions to the rest of the panel if they chose to do so

Second Round

The purpose of the second round was to facilitate a thorough interaction that would generate specific ideas listed as mission statements, which the school could carry out as a redefined mission. Therefore, the second-round questionnaires were designed around proposed mission statements. While the teenagers were completing the first-round questionnaires, the researcher was engaged in organizing the answers that were received. He summarized the responses in four reports coinciding with the original four categories—beliefs, personal and family behavior, and communal organization. These reports were mailed to the participants and presented to the teenagers. They were all asked to review the first-round reports and to submit mission statements around which the second-round questionnaires were formed.

The purpose of this round was to help focus the discussion around more specific solutions for (1) preferred futures, (2) expected futures, and (3) important futures. The Imen-Delphi procedure is aimed at producing some type of agreement on an alternative future mission (for an example, see Figure 2). The teenagers reached a majority agreement on the mission statements of the second-round.

Third Round

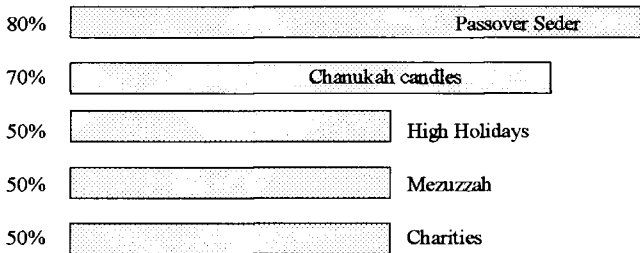
The list of mission statements discussed in the third round was adapted from those of the second round that received the majority vote as being *very important goals* for the future of their Jewish communal lives. The purpose of this round was to have the teenagers take responsibility for those statements, formulate a final proposed list of future mission statements, and generate new ideas and recommendations.

Figure 1. Sample of a First-Round Questionnaire

Personal Behavior OBSERVANCE Survey

1. Sociologists point out how the minor holiday Chanukah has grown in importance as a Jewish alternative to Christmas.
2. More American Jews, (probably over 80%) participate in some Passover Seder than even light Chanukah candles (70%).
3. Fasting and attending services on Yom-Kippur and Rosh-Hashana, having a Mezuzah on the door, refraining from bread on Passover, giving to United Jewish Appeal (UJA), Federation or other Jewish charities (more than 50% of American Jews).

Widely Observed Religious Rituals



First Interaction

157. What makes the most observed rituals so popular?

158. What is, in your opinion, the most important Jewish holiday?

159. Is the increased importance of Chanukah an attempt by American Jewry to assimilate? Explain.

RESULTS

This exercise is best described as an exploratory investigation into two aspects of the teenagers' future imagery: (1) the complexity of their Jewish future-imagery, and (2) their capacity to draw upon their future-imagery and suggest to their school/community a list of future mission statements.

The majority of the teenagers' agreed that they are satisfied with what the school and their community are doing to develop communal Jewish life. However, they urged the community to strive to achieve the following ten objectives:

1. *Jewish Identity*: To teach how to maintain distinctiveness as Jews among Gentile friends; how to fight anti-Semitism; how to keep being involved in college; and how to carry what they learn into their daily lives and homes. Enhancement of the religious environment—in terms of customs and tradition within the school walls—is a desired goal.
2. *Jewish Values and Beliefs*: To teach more about monotheism and its philosophical implications, the Jewish Messiah and its significance, and the concept of God as creator of the universe.
3. *Jewish Practice*: To convince parents in the community to practice at home whatever their children learn about Judaism; to influence teenagers to observe all Jewish holidays, to influence students to observe Jewish rituals while in

Figure 2. Example of a second-round questionnaire.

Jewish Beliefs — Round 2												
Statements	Question I <i>Do I prefer this statement to be fulfilled in my future Jewish life?</i>				Question II <i>What is the likelihood that this statement will apply to my future?</i>				Question III <i>How important is this statement to the future of my Jewish community?</i>			
	A%	B%	C%	D%	A%	B%	C%	D%	A%	B%	C%	D%
1. I will accept the authority of my Rabbi on religious matters.	25	57	18	0	36	18	39	7	36	46	18	0
2. I will accept the leadership of my Rabbi on social and political matters.	18	57	21	4	21	29	43	7	18	57	18	7
3. I will look for Jewish celebrities as role models.	0	50	39	11	0	43	36	21	11	18	46	25
4. I will maintain distinctiveness as a Jew among my Christian friends.	61	21	14	4	64	11	21	4	61	29	11	0
5. I will exercise first my Jewish values and then my American attitudes.	21	50	29	0	32	25	43	0	46	32	21	0
6. I will be a religious Jew.	32	39	18	11	46	11	36	7	29	50	11	11
7. I will try to be a more observant Jew than my parents.	25	32	32	11	25	18	39	18	18	50	14	18
8. I will pray alone if I cannot attend services.	4	25	57	14	7	25	36	32	0	25	68	25
9. I will be a Conservative Jew.	57	29	14	0	71	11	18	0	39	29	29	4
10. I will be an Orthodox Jew.	4	7	36	50	25	11	4	57	7	14	43	32
11. I will be a Reform Jew.	4	7	32	57	36	14	7	43	7	29	32	32
12. I will try with all my heart to keep Jewish traditions alive.	57	25	18	0	57	11	25	7	64	21	14	0
13. I will keep a Kosher home.	18	43	29	11	25	29	32	14	7	50	32	11

< % are rounded to nearest whole number >

- college; to influence families to put a *mezuzah* on their doors; and to influence teenagers to refrain from eating *Chametz* on Passover.
4. *Jewish Education*: To invest efforts in educating young parents to be informed and aware of what the Hebrew school is about today.
 5. *Conservative Education and Affiliation*: To learn more about Conservative Judaism's philosophy; promote egalitarian policies in synagogues, women in

- the clergy, and increased membership levels.
6. *Jewish Friendships*: To further influence teenagers to seek Jewish friendships and to plan outreach programs among youth of the different denominations.
 7. *Interfaith Relationships*: To influence teenagers to date only Jews, to take a clear stance against intermarriage, and to feel obligated not to intermarry; and to educate teenagers not to participate

- in any other religious rituals.
8. *Family Orientation:* The majority of the teenagers were satisfied with what the community was doing to promote family education. However, they were not satisfied with what their families were doing to promote their family ties. Therefore, they find it important, as reinforcement for a future mission of the school and families, to influence young adults to have a Jewish family, to have at least one child, to observe rituals that are family oriented, to spend at least a full day a week together, and to attend services with their children.
 9. *Jewish Activism:* To influence teenagers to be more involved than were their parents in the Jewish community, to learn the functions of the local community institutions, to volunteer their expertise, to vote for a candidate who supports Jewish causes, and to look for Jewish activities while in college.
 10. *Teaching Israel:* To influence teenagers to visit Israel at least three times in their lifetimes, to support Israeli causes and positions without any conditions, and to be strong Zionists.

DISCUSSION

The perceptions and images of the future held by the panelists point to a striking transformation of the perceived role that the Hebrew school, the Talmud Torah of Minneapolis, is playing in the teenagers' Jewish lives.

Although the Talmud Torah's mission continues to be the provision of supplementary Jewish education, the teenagers envision the Hebrew school not as a provider of a supplementary Jewish education but rather as a primary provider of Jewish experience. Throughout the three rounds of this study the teenagers expressed their perception that the Talmud Torah is the primary source from which they nurture their Jewish identity and practice their Jewishness. If this notion is correct, this study is pointing out a fundamental change in the perceived

role of Talmud Torah. The historic supplementary mission of the Hebrew school, at least as perceived by this group of teenagers, is not relevant to their Jewish life anymore. They expect their Hebrew school to play the role of a Jewish neighborhood, Jewish family, youth movement, and a place where they can practice their Judaism. In other words, the Hebrew school nowadays plays a central role in their Jewish identity.

This group of teenagers also expressed a variety of images of the future that reflect their desires and expectations from their Jewish identity. The content of the teenagers' future imagery suggests that they are worried about the prospects for their future Jewish life. They point a finger toward their parents who are not doing enough Jewishly—in terms of observance and family participation in Jewish practice.

The teenagers would like to see themselves increasing their participation (more than the current level of their parents) in family-oriented rituals, synagogue attendance, and their future children's Jewish education.

The teenagers shared a broad perception that having a family is their ultimate value and that it has a higher priority than their professional success. They would like to increase their family-oriented activities, would have more Friday night dinners and more holiday participation, and would send their children to a Jewish day school. The teenagers indicated their expectation to devote more leisure time to their family and to spend time with their children teaching them about Judaism. They were saddened and scared by the many divorces they see around them.

They also would like to see community support for more demanding requirements from the children attending Hebrew school. They would like to have their teachers increase their demands for educational achievement. In addition, they would like the Talmud Torah to offer a wide variety of courses reflecting worldwide contemporary Jewish life. But, above all, the teenagers would like to see the Talmud Torah as a

Jewish activity center that incorporates Jewish education, family education, worship, practice, and Jewish socializing opportunities.

For the majority of the teenagers, the Talmud Torah experience occupies an average of 9 hours per week (6 instructional hours and an average of 3 more hours in traveling time) of their already very busy schedules. As such, it is reasonable to say that Talmud Torah occupies the largest amount of their weekly Jewish time. One can thus understand the teenagers' perceptions that stress a need for a different mission—a mission that takes into account the changing Jewish environment in which these teens are living.

Generally speaking, the teenagers are satisfied with what the school is offering. However, they delineate a list of mission statements that reflects their changing expectations and a fundamental shift in the perceived role of the Talmud Torah in the future. They suggest that the board of directors and the administration of the school take an innovative approach to restructuring the instructional framework and incorporating the changing nature of Jewish life into extracurricular programs planned in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This exercise provides the community with a glimpse of the teenagers' inner world. The teenagers' perceptions and future Jewish imagery should serve as one impetus for the re-evaluation of the current mission of Jewish education.

To maximize the results of the exercise it is recommended that the community take the following steps:

- The Talmud Torah board of directors should study the results and assign a committee to present ideas on how to react to the teenagers' future-imagery and suggestions.
- The rabbis of the community should study the results, discuss their congregational implications, and bring to the at-

tention of their congregants the teenagers' perceptions and future-imagery.

- An adjunct committee comprising the Talmud Torah's administrators, the rabbis, and officers of the local Jewish federation should be convened with the mission of recommending operational strategies reflecting the results of this study.
- Public panel discussions of this study should be held.

CONCLUSION

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of youth (Psalm 127). The teenagers' ideas may turn out to be valuable guiding arrows in the creation of the future if the Minneapolis Jewish community is willing to include their future-imagery in its long-range planning efforts.

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