

The Space between the Silos: Nurturing the Jewish Ecosystem

by Nachama Skolnick Moskowitz

In December 2005, Dr. Jack Wertheimer, along with other researchers, produced a report for the Avi Chai Foundation called *Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education*. Among other conclusions, the report observed that:

The field of Jewish education is currently based on a loose, barely connected network of autonomous educating institutions. Each operates as a silo — a term employed by the information technology industry to characterize the uni-dimensional manner in which institutions and fields of knowledge operate in isolation, as vertically organized operations, divorced from constructive, horizontal interaction with others.

For Wertheimer and his team, the idea of “linking the silos” was an important next step for the Jewish educational leaders and our institutions. For *with* such linking they projected that the momentum gained over the last two decades on behalf of Jewish education could be accelerated. Their report suggested that linking the silos could be actualized in at least two ways:

1. Building a pathway between institutions so that learners can benefit from a variety of educational experiences while primarily connected to one “silo.” In this instance, linking the silos could mean helping parents of preschoolers connect to a synagogue, locate Jewish summer camps for their four-year-olds, and consider parent education programs for themselves. This is a horizontal connection of the silos.
2. Creating bridges between the Jewish community’s institutions so that children and their families can identify the “next Jewish step” beyond their current involvement. In this instance, linking the silos could mean helping parents of Jewish preschoolers (in the preschool silo) choose a “next Jewish step” such as supplementary school (in the congregational silo) or day school (in another silo). This is a vertical connection of the silos.

The Wertheimer report propelled the idea of “linking the silos” into the vocabulary of Jewish leadership, both lay and professional. While I understand and agree with the idea of “linkages” towards a more holistic view of Jewish communal life, I remain bothered by the metaphor and wish, through this paper, to offer both a hypothesis and a counter-metaphor that I believe can also accelerate the momentum in Jewish education.

Hypothesis: Community should be nurtured in the “space between the silos”

Whereas the information technology industry may use the term “silo” to talk about organizations and institutions working in isolation from others, those of us who are used to seeing actual farm silos have a stark view of these containers, more powerful than the business metaphor may suggest. On farmland throughout North America, silos project a static image, with an expanse of space between the farms on which they sit. While farms are quite fertile places, the silos and the distance between them project an image of barrenness.

I wonder if this is how members of the next generation see our Jewish institutions. According to the sociologists, the current group of 20- and 30-year-olds have a general dislike and/or distrust of institutions, including those institutions that have supported and defined American Jewish life for over a century (such as Jewish Federations and synagogues). While new projects have emerged in the last five to ten years that more closely align with the needs and desires of this next generation, the North American Jewish community is still struggling with the tension between *what was* and *has been*, to *what might need to be*.

In the spring of 2006, I had the privilege of studying in Israel for a few months. I was struck by the entrepreneurial spirit in a number of Jewish educators and communal workers who, in Israel, managed to get new programs off the ground and funded. While similar innovations have come on the North American Jewish scene (a number, in fact, “incubated” with the help of the established Jewish community), this entrepreneurial mode is rarer in smaller cities because of a concern that a new program will step on the “toes” of the Jewish “establishment” (Federations, synagogues, JCCs, etc). Innovations in North America seem to often come from those currently in positions of power, such as boards or funders.¹

It is clear that established Jewish organizations and institutions should be helped to flourish and grow - even beyond the static image of a silo. But attention also needs to be paid to the characteristics of the next generation and its desire to find Jewish meaning and connections in places beyond the established institutions, beyond and between the silos. This is clearly in the spirit of the Wertheimer report and its recommendations, both in terms of “linking the silos” and in terms of “educational consumer choice” (recognizing that today’s parents make decisions for their children based on their perception of each child’s needs).

There is great energy and potential in the community that connects outside of institutions,² great power of the formal and informal connections that people make with each other -- conversations held between moms who just dropped off their three-year-olds at a Jewish preschool, *Shabbat* dinners in each others’ homes, a Jewishly-themed book discussion at a local store, and the responsibilities we feel to Jews in other communities. Some of this community is a natural outgrowth of life within the silos, but, for the non-affiliated, cultivating Jewish life between the silos might better meet their needs and desires. This image of what we might be cultivating *between* the silos to enrich Jewish life, within our institutions and without, might be likened to the mystical power of the white space-between-the-letters on the *Torah* scroll.

I believe that those of us who have built and live within the silos should work to empower our next generation to plant the landscape “between the institutions,” stepping outside the strong tall walls to create orchards, gardens, park benches, playgrounds, and pathways that enrich the environment and have the potential to lead to the door of established institutions. By encouraging the Jewish entrepreneurial spirit, we will enable our next generation make connections to other Jews and to the Jewish community in a way meaningful to them, and, I believe in a way that will help connect with the institutions that already dot the landscape.

This raises some important questions for the “established” American Jewish community:

- How can the Jewish establishment help its institutions more nimbly address the spiritual and sociological needs of the next generation?
- What does it mean to simultaneously help young single Jews and young Jewish families organically connect to each other, and to the Jewish community?
- What pathways might be created (perhaps that are designed to be “tripped on”) that help these young Jews find comfortable connections with institutions that support Jewish life?

Answers to these questions demand attention to relationships, formal and informal. They also suggest a systems approach to Jewish life, one that helps Jews learn to find community not only in institutions, but between them as well.³

Metaphor: Recognizing the “Jewish community as an ecosystem” offers a dynamic model for nurturing our Jewish future

Parallel to my study in Israel, my daughter was completing a year of learning at the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies. Through her work in environmental education, I was introduced to the concept of ecosystems. In the natural world, an ecosystem is a dynamic community of animals, plants, and other organisms that interact with their non-living environment. Interestingly, ecologists understand that the “highly intricate web of relationships is what makes an ecosystem more valuable than the sum of the species it contains.”⁴

Environmentalists use a number of characteristics to describe an ecosystem including

- the system's diversity⁵
- the web of connections between the species
- the scale (large, small) of the systems that interconnect
- the cycles and changes⁶ that occur to, and between, the species and their environment over time and space

While ecosystems take on a natural life of their own, there is a growing field called ecosystem management that looks

at the big picture, beyond federal agency boundaries, and working closely with other land managers, both public and private. It means addressing the long-term consequences of today's decisions, and it means thinking of various resources as interrelating parts of systems rather than as individual components to be managed separately. It means awareness of many scales of effect, from local and national to international and even global.⁷

Applying the metaphor of an ecosystem to Jewish life offers a rich picture of the complexity of the dynamics between individual community members, between the multiplicity of institutions, and the integrated elements of Jewish life. The Jewish ecosystem gives life to the space between the silos.

- *Jewish diversity:*
There are many ways to define the Jewish community's diversity: by age cohorts, by religious streams or movements, by Zionist philosophy, by differing cultural arts, etc. In the past, Jewish identity research in the United States has focused on markers of religious connections (e.g., the percentage of Jews who light candles on Friday night). But the ecosystem metaphor indicates the need to search out diverse ways of connecting as Jews. As with the ecosystem, the more diverse the Jewish community, the better we can adapt to different environmental conditions.

Helping Jews develop diverse ways of connecting to Judaism is key to our ecosystem's survival. Jews who have not found a comfortable place for themselves in a congregation might be open to the possibility of attending a Jewish film series, taking a trip to Israel, or enjoying *Shabbat* dinner in someone else's home. Jewish teens with their myriad interests and tight time schedules might opt for a Jewish book discussion group held at the public library, enjoy a Jewishly-themed art class offered by a local museum, or download teen-friendly podcasts on Jewish topics of interest. The key for the growth and survival of our Jewish ecosystem are multiple options within the community and a sense of "permission" among individual Jews to make rich and diverse Jewish choices for their own lives ... leading to the phenomenon of "the more, the more!"

- *Jewish connections:*
In an ecosystem, the web of connections among species is illustrated by the food chain, as well as other relationships (like symbiotic, parasitic, etc). One would hope that Jews don't see their connections with each other in the categories of predator/prey, but one of positive connections and relationships. Sociologists offer different ways of defining and encouraging connections in the Jewish ecosystem. For example:
 - Professor Steven M. Cohen only semi-jokes when he says that one of the best predictors of Jewish identity is a person's zip code – the more Jewishly identified the community living in that zip code, the greater the opportunities for a specific Jew to find modes of connection.
 - Dr. Bethamie Horowitz introduced the phrase "connections and journeys" to offer a more qualitative description of Jewish identity. Among her conclusions, she notes that significant positive relationships are important to identity formation. These are not necessarily "role models" in the traditional sense of the term, but those who "represent a 'lived' Jewish life."
 - Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz suggests that Jewish peoplehood occurs when face-to-face social interactions between Jews are structured in such a way that they enable the possibility of interaction with other Jews who are not immediately present. He says that this can occur through ceremony (which on a formal level brings a connection to the Jewish People through ceremonies like a *Pesah seder*, a camp Israel Day event, or a community's *Yom Ha'atzmaut*

celebration) and informal conversation (such as happens between a *shaliah* and a community member, or an Israeli camp counselor and a child while walking to breakfast).

Cultivating social networks is important, both in person and in cyberspace (as we have learned from the success of MySpace.com and Facebook.com). In all of our institutions, the relationships that staff members foster with the students and their families are at least as important as their program or lesson preparations. Thus, preschool staff might find ways to help parents connect to other parents and to the host institution, be it a synagogue, JCC, or day school. Supplementary school staff might spend extra time and energy connecting with the children who are deposited at their classrooms after a long day in another school setting. Youth directors might capitalize on the social functions of their role and cultivate connections between involved teens who are at the center of multiple social networks and those who are not. Those who create all-school or community-wide programs might consider the ways a specific event might help participants connect with Jews not present, be they in Israel or in the synagogue down the street.

- The scale: While we often talk of “THE Jewish community,” ecologists recognize that there are both large and small systems within a defined ecosystem. In reality, then, the Jewish ecosystem is comprised of a variety of systems of different scales that interact. These include larger, established ones (e.g., Federation, synagogues, JCCs, the Reform movement, Israel) and smaller systems (e.g., classes, families, book discussion groups, those who annually have their *Pesah seder* together, the 23-year-olds who have returned from college). The life work of a “Jewish ecologist” might be to help a variety of smaller scale systems not only flourish in the space between the larger, well established silos, but also find ways for them to successfully interrelate.
- The cycles and changes: While it can feel personally less threatening to consider the cycles and changes of a natural ecosystem, cycles and changes within the Jewish community often set off an alarm.

The previous generation in American Jewry was marked by a steep decline in Yiddish cultural expression, but it gained in the enormous cultural advantages of the State of Israel. Jews of the baby boomer generation are less emotionally attached to Israel than their parents’ age-cohort, and care less about Jewish organizations. However, they are more open to religious belief, more engaged in home ritual observance, and often quite passionate about opportunities for serious Jewish learning.⁸

Each of these changes created issues for the generation that lived them. But from the perspective of time, such changes are often seen more positively and are better understood and appreciated.

A healthy ecosystem, with diverse populations and interactions, has the ability to adapt and respond to changing environmental conditions and stresses. So too, a healthy Jewish ecosystem has the resiliency to respond to the challenges of the modern world.

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So, what would it mean for the Jewish community to see “ecosystem management” as its responsibility – cultivating integrated Jewish identities, nurturing those who want to build community “between the institutions,” and fostering a highly intricate web of relationships between the many “species” that interconnect in the ecosystem of Jewish life? How would it change our way of doing business if we considered the variety of Jewish life “as interrelated parts of a systems, rather than individual components to be managed separately?” What would it mean for those who do the on-the-ground work, such as teachers, camp counselors, youth directors, Israel trip leaders, and librarians?

This is the not work of one eco-manager, or of a committee of those who only live in the silos, or of funders who would like to plant new gardens. Rather, I see this as an organic effort of all those who are open to walking in the spaces between the silos to see the potential of what currently enriches our Jewish ecosystem, to encourage diversity that exists in all its forms, and discover what “new species” could be brought to life with some thoughtful nurturing.

ENDNOTES:

¹ For example, during the time I was in Israel I received an announcement that a group of philanthropists had formed an organization to do for congregational education what PEJE has done for day schools; the *fundors* were looking for an executive director.

² This perspective was offered to me by Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz in a personal conversation. He said that community is not just about our Jewish institutions, but it is also about moving between them.
[paraphrase]

³ I also realize that this raises the funding debate of the best use of the Jewish community's philanthropic dollars – do they go to established programs, with a track record (the silos), or can they seed a variety of programs that strengthen community “between the silos,” some of which may find fertile land and others, not. See also, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman's report: *The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews are Connecting, Creating and Organizing their Own Jewish Lives*.

<http://www.acbp.net/publications.html>

⁴ Jose Sarukhan; http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_05/uk/doss22.htm

⁵ The more diverse an ecosystem, the better it can adapt to different environmental conditions.

⁶ Healthy ecosystems are able to respond to change and stress through adaptations that demonstrate resiliency. Those at risk of dying have lost this elasticity or dynamism.

⁷ www.blm.gov/education/00_resources/articles/understanding_ecosystem_management/article.html

⁸ Steven M Cohen and Arnold Eisen, *The Jew Within*.

*Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz is the Senior Director at the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC).
nmoskowitz@jecc.org*