



Embracing a Jewish Educational Vision During a Pandemic

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman July 6, 2020

On the opening day of the summer conference for NewCAJE, a national organization that supports Jewish educators, Rabbi Laurie spoke on a panel entitled the "Summit on the Future of Jewish Education" with Professor Jeffrey Kress from the Jewish Theological Seminary. This piece was adapted from her talk.

I want to begin by saying how honored I am to join this conversation on the future of Jewish education and to engage in dialogue with so many amazing educators. I've been the rabbi and education director at Congregation Shaarei Shamayim for the past 17 years. We have about 40 kids in our school, and because we're small, I've been able to experiment with different educational models over these years.

As Dr. Jonathan Sarna and Dr. Yonatan Mirvis emphasized, these are challenging times. The pandemic is creating extraordinary change in the Jewish community, and we will never return to Jewish the life we had before the virus wrought havoc on our world. Jewish schools are part of this upheaval.

I was asked to share my thinking about the plan that I developed for our school. This past month I have been thinking carefully about two important questions: How can we effectively work within the constraints that are imposed by the pandemic? And how can we use this moment to experiment with new ideas and push forward our vision of Jewish education?

Parents and students always have diverse needs, but even more so for this coming academic year. Some parents want in-person education; other parents won't do it. Some parents want virtual learning; other parents won't do it. As a parent myself I feel the dilemmas of raising children during a pandemic on a daily basis. The biggest risk to our schools is that many families are going to take the year off because the program we design just won't work for them.

I wanted to create something that was flexible and individualized so it could meet families' needs. This was a hard decision because I believe so strongly in community, and a highly individualized plan poses the risk that we will lose a lot of a sense of being together as a community. We are faced, however, with the reality of educating our children during a pandemic and we cannot, at this point in time, cram into an assembly room and share a meal together.

Our program is a "choose your own adventure" approach. Every family will work with an advisor to create a learning plan and will check in briefly with her on a monthly basis. Parents and students can choose to do six-week virtual classes, outdoor physically distanced family field trips and outings, acts of caring and social justice projects, holiday kits, a short assembly, children's services and holiday celebrations, and Hebrew tutoring.

I don't have time to go into the details now, but the curriculum and model is laid out on our congregation's website. I would like to spend the rest of my time talking about vision for our educational programs. Vision is essential. We need to be able to articulate what our purpose is and how it will inspire our students and their parents. Everything we do should revolve around our vision.

I begin with these questions: Where do we want our students to end up when they are adults? What values, skills, or practices do we want them to have? What role will your educational program play in helping them get there?

We have three goals in our school: 1) We support our students in developing a strong Jewish identity and commitment to Jewish community; 2) we instill in our students the Jewish values of compassion and open-heartedness, commitment to justice and equity for all people, and intellectual curiosity and ethical deliberation; and 3) we engage our students in Jewish teachings that will help them grapple with the most challenging issues of their time.

An example: Next year we will teach a six-week class entitled "Jewish Wisdom for Navigating the Pandemic." We will start with Torah and try to understand how our ancestors confronted infectious disease in their lives. We will discuss Jewish texts and stories related to *pikuach nefesh*, or saving a life. We will read the story from midrash about the guy who drills a hole in the boat, not thinking that his actions will drown everyone onboard.

Then we will explore the concept of Jewish ethical decision-making. This works for all ages. We will teach our students Jewish texts and values and ask them to apply these ideas to various scenarios: What if your friend was lonely, but it wasn't safe to give her a hug? What if your brother wasn't social distancing and you were about to visit your elderly grandparents? What if your parents won't let you attend a Black Lives Matter protest because of COVID-19 but you feel you must participate in the movement?

Judaism has so much to say about the world we live in. I want to help our students to think critically and to be self-reflective. I want our community to take their concerns seriously. We often don't give our kids enough credit – they really can think deeply at all ages. Our job is to give them the skills and the practice to do so in a supportive and meaningful Jewish community.

Our students will never forget this pandemic. It has profoundly disrupted their lives. Most miss their friends and their routines. Some worry that their parents will lose their jobs or become ill. Some are suffering from abuse and neglect. They are carrying so much sadness and anxiety. When they look back at this time, I want them to remember that their Jewish community was there for them. That we offered them space to think through hard, complicated, and confusing issues. That we shared with them a Jewish framework that helps them navigate their world. And that we supported them when life felt so chaotic.