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Teaching for Commitment

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Creating a Sustainable Sense of Peoplehood: **Towards a pedagogy of commitment**

Lisa Grant and Shlomi Ravid

The authors' research points to the significant difference between teaching for engagement and teaching for commitment.

In the past decade, instilling a sense of belonging and responsibility for the Jewish People has increasingly become part of the expressed agenda of Jewish educational institutions and programs including schools, camps, Hillel, and Taglit. Despite this articulated desire, the anticipated result of a paradigm shift in attitudes and actions of the participants in these programs towards the Jewish collective has yet to be achieved. We usually put the blame on those institutions for being outdated and out of touch with how young people relate to Judaism and connect to other Jews. Indeed, that may be partially true. Perhaps more significantly, however, we believe that something may be wrong or missing in the pedagogy we employ to bring the next generation into the Peoplehood "conversation."

What are we trying to achieve and what does it require?

Let's begin by defining what we are trying to achieve at the end of the day – a sustained sense of commitment to the Jewish People and its future as a thriving enterprise. In practical terms it means both embracing ideologically the notion of the Jewish collective enterprise and finding one's way of expressing it.

A "graduate" of successful Peoplehood educational process feels personally responsible for the future of the Jewish people and seeks ways to act upon that conviction. It can be through involvement in his or her local community, through helping Jews in need or through doing *Tikun Olam* as a Jewish "categorical imperative." Jews are challenged to define and create their own expressions of their commitment to Jewish Peoplehood and yet they are asked to do it through the collective prism.

Attaining this goal entails a transformative educational process, whereby participants incorporate the responsibility for the Jewish People into their value systems and ways of understanding the world, and ultimately live out these values through their actions. This multi-step process begins with meaningful experiences of engagement with the Jewish people. This is the focus, and often the starting and ending points for most current programs today. However, in order to deepen the potential for the experience to transform attitudes, dispositions, worldviews, and actions, further steps must occur. Philosopher of education Lee Shulman (2007) outlines such a process of learning as follows:

> Learning begins with student engagement, which in turn leads to knowledge and understanding. Once someone understands, he or she becomes capable of performance or action. Critical reflection on one's practice and understanding leads to higher-order thinking in the form of a capacity to exercise judgment in the face of uncertainty and to create designs in the presence of constraints and unpredictability. Ultimately, the exercise of judgment makes possible the development of commitment. (pp. 2-3)

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Inspired by this process, we want to suggest an approach to developing Jewish Peoplehood pedagogy of commitment.

Engagement vs. commitment

Often Jewish educational programs are deemed successful if they effectively engage participants in some aspect of Jewish life. Engagement, however, by definition, is in "the here and now." By design, engagement experiences are intensive, emotional, and often peak experiences that on first blush may be reported as "life-changing" but in reality, once participants come down from the peak, life resumes as usual. Taglit/Birthright Israel provides a high profile case study for understanding the fine line between a program that clearly generates an engagement with Peoplehood, but around which a debate exists regarding its ability to generate a sustained commitment to Peoplehood.

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Research on Taglit/Birthright shows that participants leave the intense social and emotional experience of the Israel trip with a heightened sense of belonging to the Jewish People and even increased likelihood of Jewish marriage (Saxe et al, 2009). However, research also shows that participation in Birthright is not leading to significantly higher involvement in Jewish community in the years immediately after the Israel trip (Saxe, Chertok, and Sasson, 2010). Thus, participants are clearly engaged through the Taglit experience. But whether they commit to a deep and lasting relationship to Israel and the Jewish people as a result of this ten-day trip remains an open question.

Shaul Kelner shows how Birthright's educational methodology is designed to produce a powerful social and emotional experience, yet it is an experience that stands apart and isolated from the complexities of Jewish life to which participants return (forthcoming):

> Before they arrived in Israel on the social experiment-cum-tour, Birthright Israel participants juggled the multiple identities, roles and responsibilities that are part and parcel of ordinary life. Birthright Israel offered a time-out-of-time in which it structured a social environment that encouraged people to overlook the complexities of identity and instead to construct a radically simplified conception of who they were. When all was said and done, the program suggested, they were Jews. Period. This is why they came to Israel. This is what bound them together as a group. This is what tied them to the land they were walking on. Anything else was secondary. This inevitably ignored or downplayed other self-definitions – a fact that bestowed upon this sense of Jewish self both its potency and its fragility. … Upon the dismantling of the liminal environment and re-entry into life's routine, the alternative self-definitions that had been temporarily submerged inevitably resurface. In this altered social context, the sense of core Jewish self that the trip fostered has to ground itself anew or wither.

Taglit/Birthright Israel provides a high profile case study for understanding the fine line between a program that clearly generates an engagement with Peoplehood, but around which a debate exists regarding its ability to generate a sustained commitment to Peoplehood.

Taglit/Birthright is without doubt a Peoplehood experience that successfully engages its participants. It is structured to capture the minds and souls of the participants but structurally cannot afford opportunities for a broad conceptualization of issues. The price paid is that it typically does not produce long-term change. As such, it does not generate Peoplehood "consciousness" as defined by Kopelowitz and Ravid (2010), which is a much more multi-layered endeavor that includes developing both an emotional and intellectual connection to the idea and reality of the Jewish People and practical contexts for Jews to act on behalf or as part of the Jewish collective.

Engagement is a necessary but insufficient pre-condition to further learning. Engagement sparks interest and excitement, but the internalization of values, beliefs, and practices requires a different kind of educational intervention. If engagement seems to focus on an experience that exists outside of the participant and connecting to it, commitment requires reflecting and reaching in to see how this fits into one's existing belief system and one's "life's routine" as suggested by Kelner. Focusing on developing a Peoplehood consciousness entails deeper and ongoing forms of teaching that demand exploration of multiple and overlapping dimensions of meaning. It also requires creating ongoing resources and opportunities to allow for Peoplehood to be a lived experience.

Shulman presents and distinguishes between pedagogies of engagement and commitment as two ends of a six-faceted taxonomy for learning. He also counsels us to avoid the trap of treating the elements as a hierarchy, but rather to think about them as a series of interdependent and cyclical steps. Commitments are developed through a process of knowledge acquisition, compelling experiences, critical reflection, and emotional connection that ultimately lead to new forms of engagement. Hence, the cycle repeats.

When applied to Jewish Peoplehood education, the post-engagement learning process would challenge participants to

identify and reflect upon the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the experience and how it relates to their assumptions and expectations about Jewish Peoplehood and its place in their own lives. Articulating these assumptions and engaging in a reflective conversation with others about them would lead to a broader understanding of the issue and its meaning and significance to one's value system. Equipped with deeper knowledge and new understanding, the learner develops a greater consciousness and appreciation of the value of Jewish Peoplehood both to one's own life and for the Jewish collective as a whole. Once integrated into one's system of making meaning, then one has the will to act and seek out further opportunities to express and reaffirm this worldview.

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Towards a pedagogy of commitment

Considerable work has already been done to articulate the core goals of effective Jewish Peoplehood consciousness education (Kopelowitz and Engelberg, 2009, Kopelowitz and Ravid 2010)). First, it must entail meaningful interaction that connects Jews to one another experientially, emotionally, cognitively, and through action. Second, it must be a multi-dimensional process that builds collective identity through time and space.

Many existing programs are effective in meeting these goals during the experience itself. However, translating these experiences into actual learning that leads to transformation of beliefs, attitudes, and action requires additional steps. As Kopelowitz and Engelberg (2009) note, it's not enough for the participant to "walk away from a program with a good feeling and hopefully a sense of awareness and perhaps motivation to continue his or her personal Jewish journey in the company of other Jews…" (pg. 4).

What then is required for the development of pedagogy of commitment? First and foremost, a clearer formulation of what we are trying to achieve when we educate for Jewish Peoplehood, what success looks like, and how we measure it. That formulation needs to be followed with a critical revision of current strategies (including the realization that in the field of identity building silver bullets are rare and few) and the development of ones that effectively address both the agenda and the challenges it faces today. Those insights into commitment and how we approach instilling it should provide the base for the development of new educational initiatives and programs.

We invite program designers and providers to put their own programs under the microscope, so to speak, and analyze their offerings by reflecting on the following questions.

Does your program leave the participant with a sense that their ongoing approach to Jewish life requires adjustment? That something important was missing or not adequately addressed, and that it calls for a change?

What is the specific Peoplehood content of your program? To what degree does it provide the knowledge and skills for participants to understand what Jewish Peoplehood means and to be able to articulate it to others?

To what extent are participants exposed to different perspectives on Jewish Peoplehood that challenge them to reflect on their assumptions, confront points of discomfort and dissonance, and grapple with the implications for what it means to be obligated to the broader Jewish collective? What steps are taken to allow for a process of critical reflection on (positive, negative, and neutral) Peoplehood experiences that give participants the opportunity to consider impact of Jewish Peoplehood on their system of beliefs and values?

What follow-up steps are taken after the peak program experience to help participants further refine their understandings and strengthen the commitment? What are means by which the process generates and measures participants' motivation to act in ways that express their evolving commitments, including seeking out and participating in other experiences of Jewish Peoplehood?

These are difficult tasks that require sustained experiences of dialogue and reflection during and beyond the experience itself. And yet commitment if it is to be meaningful and sustainable has to be a product of serious labor.

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