

ReFrame White Paper
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Prompt: *What is Experiential Jewish Education?*

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Describing EJE for Reframe

The term experiential Jewish education (EJE) has come, to a large degree, to be embraced as a more acceptable term than *informal* Jewish education to describe...something. The term has the advantage of not implying that such education happens "informally," without serious planning and preparation. Also, it allows for such education to happen even in settings considered to be "formal," such as schools. The term, however, still raises questions about the *something* that it describes. My goal in this paper is to describe EJE in a way that I believe will be useful for the Reframe project while being at least somewhat consistent with the canon of the field (e.g., Chazan, 1991; Reimer, 2003; Reisman & Reisman, 2002).

EJE involves the intentional shaping of experiences so as to maximize their Jewish developmental impact. Development involves a creation of a coherent life narrative that weaves together the various elements of who we are (e.g., Jew, American, son, father, professor) into a coherent sense of self. Some of these elements may be experienced as overlapping to a degree (my professional and Jewish selves might be related, for example), and their place in the overall sense of self is ever-changing (I experience my professional identity more while at work; my parental identity evolves along with my children's growth). Each of these self-elements encompasses a complex and interconnected range of behaviors, points of knowledge, feelings, affiliations, beliefs and attitudes (see Kress, 2012, for more detail on this and other elements of this paper).

The specific set of elements that weave into our life narratives is idiosyncratic and evolving. While some people have a very strong thread involving self-as-athlete, I don't. However, I may come to have more of a sense of myself as an athlete over time, given the right conditions. As we engage in experiences (particularly those marked by certain elements, to be discussed), the relevant behaviors, points of knowledge, feelings, affiliations, beliefs and attitudes evolve. Creating the conditions for the incorporation of a Jewish thread into the tapestry of my life narrative is the point of experiential Jewish education.

The term *experience* has already been used several times and it is reasonable to wonder to what it refers: What exactly is an experience? My answer, perhaps frustratingly, is that everything is an experience. However, the work of EJE involves shaping experiences so that they are more likely to impact on how we weave our Judaism into our ongoing sense of ourselves. Research from psychology and education provides us with strong starting points for understanding the active developmental ingredients of experiences (Lerner & Benson, 2003; Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). Of course, the list generated by a review of the literature can be quite long. I will provide some categories here for the sake of organizing a complex discussion. The categories themselves overlap and it is possible that one might feel that certain ideas actually fit into a different category than described here. The categories are simply meant for utility:

An experience's developmental impact is maximized to the extent that it is marked by:

1. Strong relationships and sense of community.

We learn from and with one another, particularly when we feel that those others care about us and our growth. This category includes relationships among and between learners and educators. It also recognizes that the categories of "learner" and "educator" are fluid. Youth can learn from their peers, from adults, and from those slightly older or more advanced than themselves. Creating of a caring community, in which all participants feel that they are known and respected as people, is a central idea of EJE. Learning together, whether in paired *hevruta* or in other formats, both adds to the sense of community and results from intentional efforts to foster relationships.

2. Engagement of emotions and spirit

Learners should feel safe and cared-about in their learning environment. Further, we can think about connotations of the terms emotion and spirit. Both terms refer to elements that are (a) exuberant or external and (b) quieter or more internal. Banging on the table and screaming out a group cheer engages emotion and spirit in the former way; quiet time to sit by a tree in the woods engages emotional and spirit differently. Arts and outdoor activities are two methods that can activate emotions and spirit in a variety of ways. So can intense discussion about a text or idea. Elements of challenge can also be seen as falling into this category, with the optimal degree of disequilibrium potentiating new ideas about who we are, what we believe, or what we can do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

3. Multiple entry points and opportunities for co-creation

Our learners have always been a diverse group, and we are increasingly embracing the idea that there are many ways for individuals to make meaning within Judaism. A learner's connection to Judaism may look different than that of her peers' or her educators'. Enabling learners to bring their skills and interests with them into the experience helps them connect Jewish growth with other valued parts of their identity. When participants can help shape or co-create the experience, they can more actively make such connections. Strong motivation results from feeling that one can participate in way that makes a real difference in their learning environment or community.

4. Scaffolded opportunities for reflection

Reflection has been described as the defining element that makes an experience educational. To use the terminology of my mentor Dr. Irving Sigel (1993), reflection provides "distance" needed to step out of an experience and use it to make broader connections (here, to the developing self). Reflection, too, can have multiple entry points, and opportunities can be provided to reflect in different ways (e.g., individual journaling, group sharing).

5. Connections with other experiences with similar goals.

On the most basic level, we can think of experiences as being more than one-shot deals. Beyond that, we can think about what Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to as the "ecology" of development. Youth participate in many different contexts; maximizing developmental impact involves creating synergy among these. Synagogues, for example, provide many experiences beyond the "school" (or whatever non-school term we choose to use) but these are often siloed. As we create new and exciting synagogue-based programs, we should also keep an eye on how these can be linked to other aspects of the synagogue (e.g., Shabbat services, *tikkun olam* efforts etc.) and beyond.

For experiential *Jewish* education, a sixth element is

6. Authentic integration of Jewish content (broadly defined)

While the above five characteristics would maximize the identity impact of any experience (allowing us to best "learn from" the experience), EJE involves the incorporation of a Jewish framework. This framework could take many forms and it too will vary by community (e.g., different denominations or synagogues may differ in their Jewish approach) and by the individual (participants will have different ways of incorporating the experience into their Jewish self). Ideally, engagement with Jewish texts, ideas, and/or actions will be deeply integrated into the activity itself; while a "study session" tacked on to some other activity has its merits, the

disconnection from the rest of the activity might diminish its impact.

A few comments about these six elements:

I conceptualize EJE as a matter of degree, not a binary category. That is, an experience may be characterized by more or less of the six components thereby maximizing or attenuating its developmental impact. I don't imagine some sort of ideal balance among the characteristics...different ones may take more or less precedence in different situations. Part of the "art" of EJE is aligning these characteristics so that they meet one's goals for a particular set of experiences with a particular set of learners.

I am not sure that there is any one make-or-break characteristic without which an experience does not "count" as EJE (though without some Jewish connection, it might be better described as EE and not EJE). While an argument can be made that reflection is a "prereq" without which an experience is not educational (Reimer, 2003), I hesitate to embrace this without fully considering (a) questions of learning and identity that go beyond our discussion (for example, there has been recent attention to the role of habits in shaping our behavior...if I have a habit of attending Shabbat services but have not reflected on what that means to me as a Jew and a person, does this "count"?) and (b) an acknowledgement that while one may learn from reflecting on an experience that lacks the other five characteristics, it is questionable if this would really help facilitate the creation of a Jewish life narrative (or, to put it another way, I can reflect on anything, but not all reflections help me grow Jewishly).

Reframe will work with learners at different age levels, and the form these six characteristics take with any given age group will obviously differ. It is hard for me to imagine, though, learners participating in our work for whom these six *do not* apply. I say this to emphasize the applicability of these elements to adult learners, particularly in light of the fact that Reframe will likely result in suggestions that the adults working in the schools (educational leaders, clergy, teachers, etc.) adapt and change their practice. Just as we would not expect our young learners to embrace Jewish growth "because we told them to," adult educators will need to grow and develop in their own practice. Consultants and trainers would benefit from considering how the six elements can translate into professional development and implementation of new practices.

To anticipate some questions emerging from this paper:

Q: This description of EJE is not different or distinct enough; it sounds like basic educational common sense. It can describe any setting, even those that might be easily recognizable as a "school." Doesn't this defeat the purpose of describing EJE in that it does not build a unique category?

A: If the reaction to this paper is that it can relate to any setting, I see this as a good thing. If we have some sense of elements that boost the power of learning and growth, then let's apply them and not get hung up on creating or maintaining unhelpful distinctions.

Q: But aren't we supposed to be tossing out schools and instead using the blueprint of camp, or arts, or something else non-school-like?

A: Starting from a "ditch-schools, do-camp-style-instead" has the potential to divert the discussion from the core question of how an educational setting – whatever we call it - addresses the six elements above. Believe it or not, schools can be very motivating, and a camp experience can be ho-hum. Don't look at the container, but at what's in it. If we want to change the container (such as what we call our setting or how we set the schedule), it should be in the service of its contents (that is, promoting the six characteristics discussed above).

Q: Where does fun fit in? Kids like non-school settings because they are fun.

A: Not all fun experiences promote Jewish growth, and the "fun" that promotes Jewish growth can take some unexpected forms. My sense is that when these six elements come together, they lead to an experience that is motivating and engaging and may be described as enjoyable. I think of the reaction of a parent who learns that her teenage daughter volunteered for the daily 6:30am compost shoveling shift at the summer farm program. "*Why is it that at home my daughter sleeps until noon and won't clean her room?*" I suspect the answer to this question can be found among the elements described above.

Q: Do the experiences of EJE need to be Jewish?

A: This is a very complicated issue that hinges on the larger question of what is a *Jewish* experience (e.g., is a bunch of Jewish kids learning science together in a day school a "Jewish experience?" How about a bunch of kids dozing off during tefillah at camp?). I encourage those involved in Reframe to grapple with the issue and to avoid simplistic understandings. It is possible that *how* the six elements are used (as opposed to the "what" of the Jewish content) is important. Under certain conditions, participating in tefillah (prayer) can have a positive impact on the Jewish thread of my life narrative. Under certain conditions it can have little or no impact...or even a negative impact. [Note that the same can be said for experiences such as going to the mall during Christmas season.... there are ways to incorporate this into an EJE framework.]

In closing, I wish success to those involved with this important project and hope that as they create new containers for Jewish education, that they be filled with the characteristics of experiences described here.

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