
Take the EJE Challenge! (It's Not What You Think)

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Harry Potter and friends are on the run. They have already made it most of the way through the lengthy series, so they must be exhausted. Now they encounter a new challenge: whenever someone utters the name of the evil villain-who-shall-not-be-named, one of the villain's henchmen pops up. The word itself serves as a GPS-homing device. Though only fiction, it is an example of words shaping reality.

Words also have power in the Jewish tradition. God's creations emerge from God's utterances: "And God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light." We all know the power of words to inflict pain through *lashon harah* or bullying. Saying that taunts are "only words" does little to assuage the reality the words trigger for the victim.

Words can also serve to cloud, confuse, or obfuscate reality. The builders of the Tower of Babel degenerated into chaos as a result of linguistic confusion. Even when people speak the same language, the meaning of words can be fuzzy when they are used to name concepts or categories that themselves are open to multiple interpretations. This often occurs with what we refer to as *buzzwords*. Two politicians, for example, can both claim to support *freedom* and *democracy*, yet have completely different viewpoints and platforms. We talk about the importance of *Jewish identity*, yet define it in many different ways. A professor tells a student a paper lacks *substance*, and the student wonders how exactly to fix that (More citations? More analysis? Additional recommendations and takeaways?). A consultant tells you that your workplace would benefit from more *synergy* among departments, and you wish the advice had been more concrete.

I am concerned that *experiential Jewish education* (EJE) is falling into this buzzy, fuzzy linguistic category. That is, it seems to be a term that is used with the assumption of shared agreement about its meaning, but in reality the term is used to refer to many different things. I am not speaking of academic attempts to pin down a meaning. Rather, I am talking about the everyday use of the term that I encounter with students, practitioners, and policy makers, and, yes, even academics. We have made some movement to avoid using the term *experiential* as a category of setting, and instead use *formal* or *informal* to describe settings (so one can have experiential education in *formal* settings and in *informal* settings). Beyond that, the term *experiential*, in my experience, is used as shorthand to refer to a Jewish education that

- is fun, exciting, and/or engaging
- is innovative, out of the box
- involves some type of activity that gets people up and moving
- encourages reflection
- is based on the interests of the learners
- includes art (song, drama, etc.)
- employs group processes
- is camp-like (a term that itself is used in multiple, fuzzily defined ways)
- promotes Jewish identity (to use another buzzword)
- is oriented toward emotions and attitudes
- challenges the learner

And this is only a partial list.

I am not arguing here that the term's ambiguity should compel us to find a consensus definition. Actually, I would love to see the opposite: instead of using the term, let's use the idea-that-we-wanted-to-capture-by-using-the-term. So I would like to hereby issue the Experiential Jewish Education (EJE) Challenge: please stop using the term *experiential Jewish education*. Instead, use a different term that more concretely conveys your intended meaning. So, for example, instead of "I want to make my school more *experiential*," one might say, "I want to give learners more opportunities to reflect on the relevance of the learning to their lives" and/or "I want to organize more activities that pull for student input, rather than have the flow of information constantly coming from the teacher." Or whatever was *really* meant by using the phrase "more *experiential*."

Think of the challenge as a variation of the popular game *Taboo*, in which one gives clues about a keyword to a teammate, but must avoid saying certain words in doing so. Yes, the result might be bulky, it may require lengthy description and more forethought—and it will be more

challenging. But that's the whole point—in the game and in the EJE Challenge. We can stop trying to impose definitions on the term *EJE*, and embrace the idea that it can stand for multiple, significant ideas that may not benefit by being lumped together in one term. It may be difficult, but try it—at least for a while. Next time you want to use the term *EJE*, think *Taboo*—and just say what you *really* mean.

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