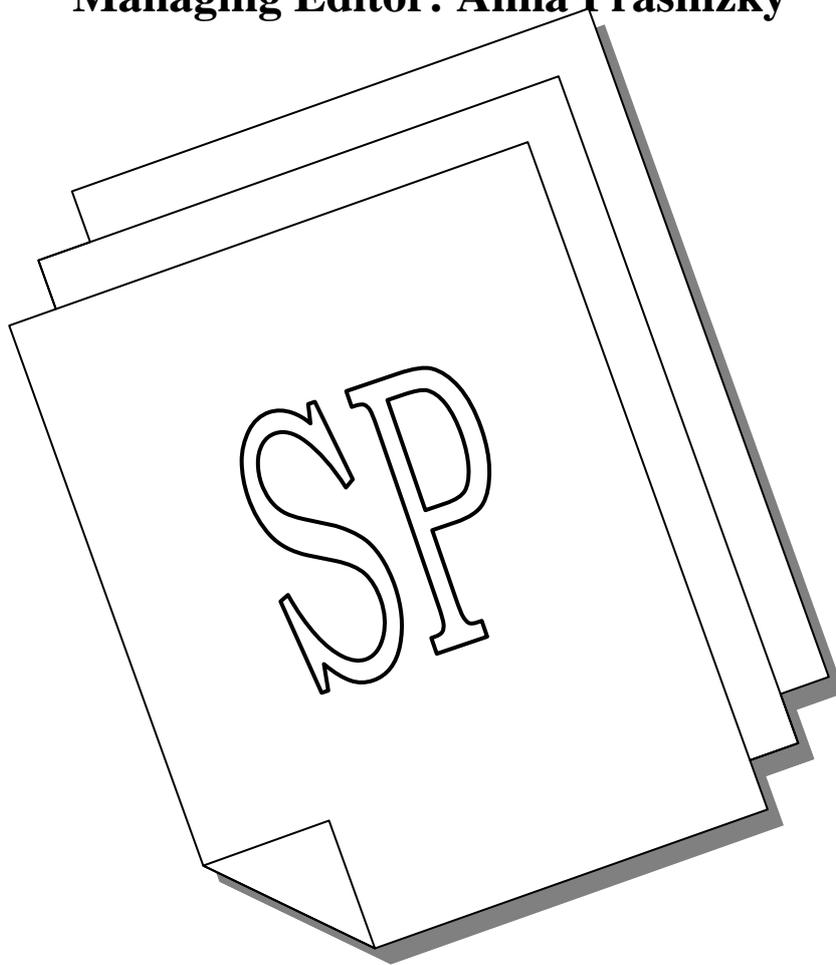


# *Sociological Papers*

## **Formal and Informal Jewish Education: Lessons and Challenges in Israel and in the Diaspora**

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**Volume 17, 2012-2013**

**Sponsored by the Leon Tamman Foundation for  
Research into Jewish Communities**



**SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

# **Jewish Education and Jewish Continuity: Lessons and Challenges**

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This Special Issue of *Sociological Papers* brings together a variety of research papers and essays written by academics and activists involved in the broad range of Jewish educational and community projects in the US, Australia, Israel, and Russia. Most of them belong to the domain of secular or cultural Jewish education targeting children, adolescents and young adults of Jewish background in order to foster their Jewish identity and the sense of belonging to the global Jewish people. Late-modern global Jewish landscape is shaped by the two opposing demographic trends: the expansion of the margins and the implosion of the center. In Israel, US, and some European countries, the ranks of Orthodox (and especially Ultra-Orthodox) Jewry are constantly expanding, both in absolute terms and as a segment within total Jewish population, due to their high birth rates, segregated schooling, and effective ideological indoctrination of the youth. At the same time, the numbers of Jews who identify as secular, unaffiliated or Reform are shrinking because of their small families, growing exogamy and singlehood, and the receding interest in the Jewish heritage, even if defined in cultural or ethnic terms. As a result, many secular Jews outside Israel, especially those of mixed ethnic origin (with one Jewish parent or grandparent), lose any touch with their Jewish roots and sever ties, if any, with organized Jewish life (Liebman and Cohen, 1990; Goldberg et al., 2011).

In this context, various venues of Jewish education, a broad spectrum of institutions and activities ranging from full-time/day and Sunday schools, to Jewish youth camps and clubs, Hillel groups on campuses, JCC-based Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish history classes, and 'heritage tourism' between Israel and the diaspora – emerge as the primary vehicle of ensuring Jewish continuity for the coming generations. Since Jewish identity in most western countries is voluntary and reflects personal cultural choice rather than necessity, traditional venues of formal Jewish schooling may fall short of the young Jews' needs and are often perceived by them as imposed and inflexible, if not obsolete (Cohen, 2007). In this context, the role of informal venues that impart Jewish knowledge and culture while drawing on contemporary forms of youth culture, such as experiential learning and social media, emerge to the forefront of this contested domain (see Shire, this volume). The global nature of social media is in synch with the newly-popular concept of *Jewish peoplehood* that hinges on the sustainable social, cultural and sentimental ties between Israeli Jews and Jews living in North America, Europe, former Soviet Union, Oceania, and other global locales, aka the Diaspora (Cohen and Wertheimer, 2006).

Yet, these ties cannot be taken for granted. While solidarity of Diaspora Jews with Israel is increasingly challenged by the contested politics around the Land/Borders, and Arab-Israeli Conflict, younger generations of Israelis are increasingly ignorant about 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish history and apathetic towards Jews living elsewhere. The systems of Jewish education in North America, Western Europe, Russia, Australia,

etc. are increasingly focused on historic and biblical studies, Jewish calendar and holidays (*chaggim*), traditions and mitzvot, as well as local Jewish heritage, with Israel and other Jewries occupying small and shrinking place on their curriculum (Cohen, 2007). The very number of Jewish day schools (especially of secular-cultural type) in the diaspora and their student enrollment are showing decline, due to prohibitive tuition costs and the pursuit of high educational standards - that Jewish parents associate with the best public and non-sectarian private schools (Kelner and Cohen, 2007). In their turn, Israeli public schools (secular and state-religious) teach the Bible, Israeli history, and Hebrew literature, reflecting a self-centered agenda of this contested society and rarely addressing the matters of modern Jewish (or international) history and politics beyond the Holocaust (see Davidovich and Soen's article in this issue). As a result, different national branches of global Jewish youth are raised in mutual disengagement. One successful global project that was initiated in the early 2000s to resist this trend is *Taglit/Birthright* sponsoring 10-day long free educational trips to Israel for diaspora Jewish youths age 18-26 (see Fishman et al. in this volume). The articles selected for this collection shed light on different challenges faced by Jewish educators and community leaders striving to preserve and fortify the fragile fabric of contemporary multiple Jewish identities, in the three countries with the largest Jewish populations (Israel, US and Russia-FSU) and in one country with a small but well-organized community (Australia).

The collection opens with the article by David Mittelberg, Fern Chertok, and Dina Laron focusing on the emerging educational paradigm of transnational Jewish peoplehood and the development of mutual understanding and appreciation of the unique contours of Jewish identity in Israel and the diaspora. This paper utilizes data from a multi-year study of a secondary-level school twinning initiative to explore the impact of the program component of travel on student outcomes, such as connections to peers, attachment to Israel or American Jewry, and feelings of Jewish peoplehood. The paper discusses dynamic tensions put in motion through travel: the balance between comfort and discomfort as teens navigate the disruption inherent in international travel, the juxtaposition of common heritage and significant cultural differences, and the exploration of multiple attachments to homeland, diaspora and peoplehood.

Continuing this theme, the article by Shira Fishman, Michelle Shain, and Leonard Saxe casts an analytical glance at the interactions of American and Israeli youngsters on the tour buses during *Taglit/Birthright* travel program in Israel. This program motivates participants "to explore their Jewish identity through a peer educational experience of historic and contemporary Israel" and attempts to strengthen relationships among young Jews in the Diaspora and Israel. Previous research has shown the overall positive impact of *Taglit*, but there are still multiple questions about the mechanism through which *Taglit* impacts the participants. Drawing on the analysis of pre and post-trip surveys, the authors explore the impact of togetherness emerging during the 10-day trip on participants' connections to Judaism and Israel through the sociological lens of bonding social capital. Their findings show that an atmosphere of community and friendship on the bus is a strong predictor of trip outcomes. Implications for participants' connections with the Jewish community are considered.

Dorin Tubin and Avigail Gans discuss the role of formal and informal venues of transferring the Israeli identity from immigrant parents to their American-raised children, based on the ethnographic study of the Israeli School (an assortment of

supplementary classes held in Hebrew) in a suburban American town of Lexington, MA. The analytical framework chosen by the authors draws on the "holy trinity" of The People, The Land, and the Book as the foundations of modern Israeli identity. The study showed that structured after-school activities can have a tangible effect on preserving Hebrew proficiency and the Israeli culture when they are supported by the creation of informal islands of Israeli socialization at home and in different enrichment venues for the children.

Matthew Boxer's article offers a methodological contribution to this research stream. Using data from a national sample of Jewish schools collected by JData.com, an on-line repository for information on Jewish educational programs in North America, his research revisits the widely-used Himmelfarb model that estimates the average annual hours of Judaic instruction offered by Jewish day and supplementary schools in North America and provides its contemporary update.

The essay by Boris Gorbis stands somewhat apart from the rest of this collection in both in its focus and style. His article analyzes active sources of continuing misalignment between the Jewish mainstream and the Israeli, Iranian and Russian-speaking Jewish 'colonies' in America. As the Jewish establishment attempts to engage and integrate these growing ethnic enclaves, it encounters systematic mistrust, resistance and passive rejection from both adult immigrants and their children. Focusing on Russian-speaking Jews (RSJs) in the US, Gorbis identifies major stumbling blocks of engagement, such as false assumptions about the content of RSJs 'Jewishness', their lingering negative stereotypes, the asymmetry of 'needs', and the inflexible terms of joining the American Jewish mainstream. A consistent and non-intrusive investment into grass-root organizations and institutions within the ethnic Jewish communities is needed to produce truly effective structures and new leadership responsible to its constituency, capable of influencing the mainstream agenda, and thus building a sense of mutual ownership of Jewish future in the United States.

The final contribution from the Anglo-speaking Jewish world is the article by Danny Ben-Moshe about life-cycle ceremonies as an important venue for informal Jewish socialization in Australia. Ben-Moshe considers and compares the aims, content and methods of five diverse Bar and Bat-Mitzvah programs in Melbourne, the home of Australia's largest Jewish community. The overall finding is that ideology and philosophy of each Jewish organization remain a primary driver in shaping its Bar and Bat-Mitzvah programs, manifesting either universal/secular or parochial/religious tendencies, with little in the middle. The research illustrates the plurality of Jewish identities and Bar/Bat-Mitzvah educational agendas offered to Jewish adolescents (most of whom attend Jewish day schools), but points to the universal absence of Israel and Peoplehood education within these programs. The article calls for a stronger emphasis on Jewish Peoplehood and organizational synergy between Bar/Bat-Mitzvah education and other Jewish formal and informal educational experiences, including day schools and youth movements.

The following articles explore the challenges of Jewish education beyond the Anglo world. The article by Nitza Davidovich and Dan Soen follows the Israeli students who visit the historic Jewish communities in Poland and the sites of Nazi death camps. The trip is designed to reinforce the youngsters' sense of belonging to the Jewish people, their connection to and identification with Jewish heritage and history, and their commitment to the future of Jewish life in Israel and its sovereignty. The study explores the impact of organized trips to Poland on Israeli and overseas university

students. The vast majority of participants confirm that the trip emphasizes the important role of the Holocaust memory and commemoration. The findings on the impact of Holocaust education on other Israeli and Jewish values (e.g., the significance of *Aliya* and ties to the Diaspora) are discussed, along with the implications for future Holocaust education programs.

The following two articles introduce the informal Jewish education scene in Russia and other former-Soviet territories. Irina Kopchenova examines the role of the educational programs in the area of Jewish and Judaic studies at the *Sefer* Center ([www.sefer.ru](http://www.sefer.ru)), established about 20 years ago as an umbrella organization of students and young academics united by their common interest in the Jewish civilization. Sponsored by American and Israeli philanthropists, *Sefer* became a vivid expression of Jewish cultural revival after the end of state socialism. Catering for broad segments of young Russian intellectuals (both Jewish and not), *Sefer* organizes thematic courses, mobile schools, and experiential field trips (expeditions) to the local sites of Jewish history across the FSU, thus building bridges between the past and present of Russian-Soviet Jewry. The article shows how student programs at *Sefer* facilitate the fortification of the tenuous Jewish identity (and particularly its secular brand) among post-Soviet Jewish youths and young adults.

Alek Epshtein takes the reader to Jewish summer camps organized by the Jewish Agency in the former Soviet lands. His research is based on two surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012 at nine youth camps organized for high school students' education and recreation in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. Among the campers who responded to the survey, only a minority (26-38%) had not been previously involved in formal or informal Jewish educational frameworks. Despite the fact that over two thirds of respondents had attended Jewish schools or clubs, most of them had very limited knowledge of general Jewish and especially Israeli history. Thus, only under a quarter came up with three post-biblical names of historical Jewish figures and only 23% could state three meaningful names in the history of the State of Israel. These youths raised in post-Soviet families have also manifested poor knowledge of the recent Russian-Jewish history (e.g. Soviet-era antisemitism, Jewish contributions to Soviet science and culture) suggesting that neither Jewish day schools they attended nor their parents ever broached these subjects with them.

The last article, reprinted from the American Jewish newspaper *Forward*, illuminates the novel forms of Jewish education aligned with the Age of Internet. JEDLAB (Jewish Education Laboratory) is a Facebook group made up of 1,300-plus teachers, rabbis, administrators, parents, and concerned citizens eager to transform Jewish education. JEDLAB participants have begun organizing small in-person meetings and pilot projects throughout the country to brainstorm about the future day schools, Hebrew schools, and more. Popular discussion questions range from the logistical — such as how to manage the costs of Jewish day schools or integrate Jewish history into general history lessons — to policy-oriented, such as how to accurately measure Jewish engagement and get more parents involved in the learning process. But JEDLAB is more than just an online forum. The group has been taking its ideas offline and into the classroom, the synagogue, and the community at large. Its activists assert that this is the first time in history when we actually have Jewish knowledge that is shared rather than isolated and contained. This lack of hierarchy and openness to the grass-root creative ideas is what makes it a truly unique innovation in the world of Jewish education.

Together, the articles in this collection illuminate the promise and peril of the established forms of Jewish education, also pointing to creative, novel paths to presenting and fortifying Jewish identity among the emerging generation of Jewish adolescents and young adults. It underscores the plurality of Jewish identities, their embeddedness in the local historic and political context, and a permanent tension between universalistic and sectarian agendas among key players on the field of Jewish community life. We hope this volume to become a useful reader for Jewish academics and professionals, as well as for broad audiences interested in Jewish cultures and continuity.

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