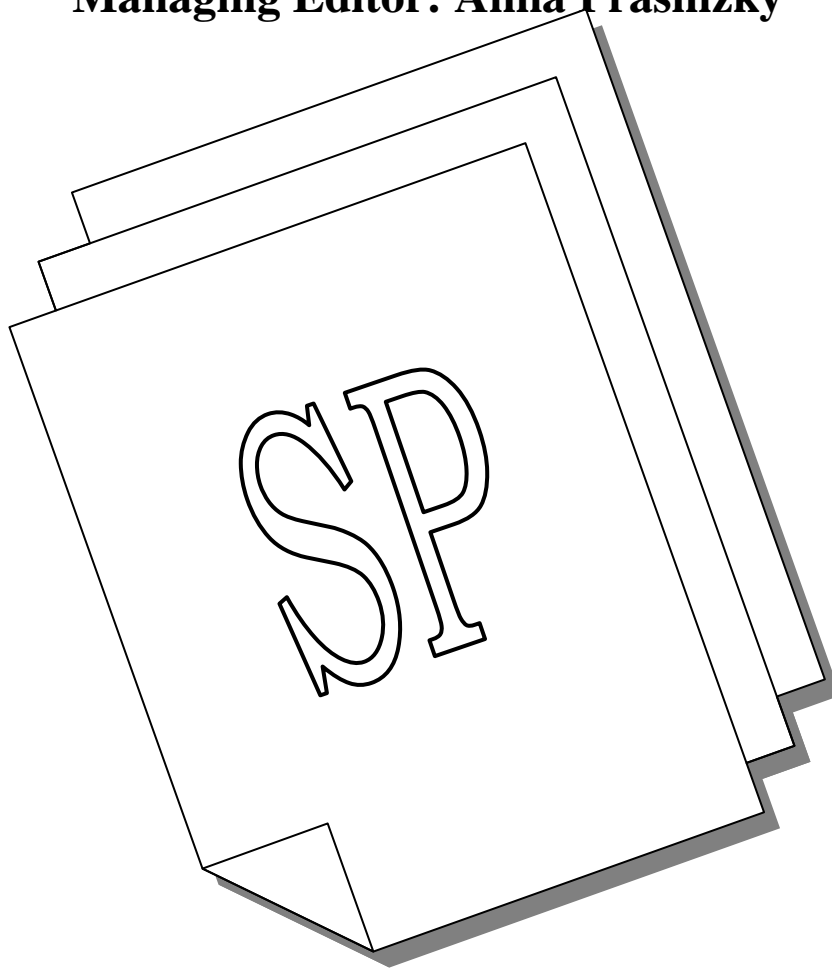


# *Sociological Papers*

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

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# Could a Facebook Group Provide a New Model for Jewish Education?<sup>1</sup>

**Emily Shire**

At five o'clock one morning last February, in the lobby of the Hyatt Regency Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia, Ken Gordon and Yechiel Hoffman realized the time was ripe for a bottom-led overhaul of Jewish education.

The two were guests at the North American Jewish Day School Conference, an annual event that brings together Jewish day school administrators and teachers across denominations and regions. Gordon, a social media and content strategist at the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, or PEJE, and Hoffman, the director of youth engagement at Temple *Beth Am*, a conservative synagogue in Los Angeles, began talking about their frustrations with the Jewish establishment's inability to innovate beyond "crappy conferences with experts in the room talking at you," as Hoffman said.

"We were really able to articulate a hunger for something else. That sense we wanted to do something was born in that lobby," said Gordon. And with that conversation, the seeds of JEDLAB were planted.

JEDLAB is a Facebook group made up of 1,300-plus teachers, rabbis, administrators, parents, and concerned citizens eager to transform Jewish education. Though you may not have heard of it yet, its membership is growing every day. 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. The group's inception comes at a dire time for Jewish education; many non-Orthodox day schools have stagnant and declining enrollment, and Hebrew schools have largely failed to engage Jewish youth beyond their bar and bat mitzvahs.

The group's mission was deeply influenced by Frank Moss's *The Sorcerers and Their Apprentices*, a book about the MIT Media Lab. The book shows how MIT researchers worked across disciplines, such as engineering, business, visual arts and sociology to collaborate and create new inventions, like the Amazon Kindle and child-safe airbags. Inspired by the book, Hoffman and Gordon, along with Tikvah Wiener, a fellow Jewish educator with close to two decades of experience, decided to create a Jewish media lab for educators to pioneer lessons and projects.

Although JEDLAB has no physical lab space, it seeks to emulate the MIT Media Lab. As stated on the Facebook group's page, its values include "creative freedom" to explore all areas of interest; "anti-disciplinary work" — "Just because you aren't a biology major, doesn't mean you can't tackle a biology problem," said Wiener — "hard fun," working hard on a project because it is fun and self-directed; "serendipity by design," taking advantage of the resources around you in the moment; "a focus on demonstration or iteration," or as the group says "demo or die" — the underlying

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<sup>1</sup> *This article originally appeared in the Forward, August 23, 2013.*

principle that you can't improve a project until you try it out — “master/apprentice relationships,” looking beyond titles to have teachers and students learn from each other; “big dreaming” to come up with their greatest and wildest goals for Jewish education; and “democratic creation,” stressing that everyone has a voice and every voice is equal in the building process.

Utilizing these guiding principles, JEDLAB has started tackling some of the most challenging topics facing Jewish education, though in a rather anarchic way. Popular discussion questions range from the logistical — such as how to manage the costs of Jewish day schools and how integrate Jewish history into general history lessons — to the philosophical — such as how to accurately measure Jewish engagement and get more parents more involved in the learning process.

Discussions evolve and take interesting turns on JEDLAB. One recent conversation on Hebrew school's negative reputation turned into a philosophical discussion on whether a family's influence on a child's Jewish education triumphs schooling. “In-home learning that is experimental seems best. [F]amily around the shabbas [sic] table, singing, learning, eating, being” wrote one JEDLAB member. Another disagreed: “In-home learning is best...when the parents actually know something an[d] are interesting in practicing. What about when they don't? It's all so nice to live in the ideal world; I have yet to teach in one.”

As shown from the above exchange, JEDLAB conversations are often frank in nature. The online space, unaffiliated with any Jewish organization, frees educators to speak their minds in the way they can't at other traditional institutions. “[On JEDLAB], I can say something controversial, and I'm not getting kicked out,” said JEDLAB member Valerie Lustgarten. “People aren't afraid to say what they're going to say.

Moreover, JEDLAB harnesses the power of the Internet to bring together Jewish educators who would never have otherwise had the opportunity to discuss and share ideas. Lustgarten had worked at a Jewish day school in Miami, but recently left to pursue freelance educational consulting. “I love it, but it's very lonely,” she said. “Now in JEDLAB, I have hundreds of people in my office at all times that I can reach out to for conversation. I feel I'm accompanied on this journey of making things better.”

At the same time, JEDLAB founders recognize that online exchange is no substitute for face-to-face conversation. And Hoffman said that the group hasn't gone deep enough yet. “Right now, the inquiry is lame. They're regurgitating. We're a baby; we're learning to talk,” he said. Still, he is optimistic about JEDLAB's potential. “It's a baby, but it has a hunger that has momentum.”

But JEDLAB is more than just online chatter. The group has been taking its ideas offline and into the classroom, the synagogue, and the community at large. At one New York meet up this past June, Gordon said that two early childhood education specialists got into a heated debate. One was a proponent of Montessori-style education, which emphasizes self-directed learning, and the other of Reggio, which stresses collaborative projects to encourage group learning. A third JEDLAB member finally suggested creating a lab school, with one room for each approach to test the merits of both systems. The educators stopped arguing and agreed that it was a great plan. “That freedom of thought is outstanding,” said Gordon.

Wiener was inspired by JEDLAB discussions as she refined plans for the Summer Sandbox, a three-day event in June in New Jersey where Jewish educators gathered to

plan lessons and programs for the coming year. A number of innovations came out of the event, including lesson plans on how to relate Torah law to other types of legal systems and how to teach students about tzedakah through researching charities while developing financial literacy.

Despite the excitement surrounding JEDLAB, it is hardly the first attempt to revitalize the world of Jewish education. The past two decades have seen some major — and expensive — attempts to revitalize the field. When it was founded in 1997, the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) sought to double the number of non-Orthodox Jewish children in day schools. But the numbers have barely changed, and in fact, some studies show a drop. In a 2011 *Forward* article, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, a founder of PEJE, admitted, “I was guilty of optimism.”

So, what makes JEDLAB different from its forebears? Unlike some previous attempts to fix Jewish education that were often fueled by a few key-major investors, JEDLAB is strictly a bottom-built endeavor. “We don't want the elite controlling the conversation,” said Hoffman. “JEDLAB is an attempt to use a model that flattens the playing field.”

And unlike other grassroots attempts, JEDLAB is a product of social media. “This is the first time in history when we actually have knowledge that is shared rather than isolated and contained,” said Hoffman. This, Wiener believes, is what makes it a truly unique innovation in the world of Jewish education. “Because of social media and things like Twitter and Facebook and this 'Hacker generation,' things are very democratic and all these hierarchies are breaking down,” she said. “JEDLAB is all about democratic creation, and all these voices coming together.”

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