

It Takes a Kehilla to Make a Mensch:
Building Jewish Identity as Part of Overall Identity

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We live in a challenging period of Jewish life in America. Jewish educators are grappling with seeing the next generation of American Jews through the formative years in the creation of their Jewish identity. Issues of Jewish continuity weigh heavily, as alarming statistics continue to be announced on a regular basis. More and more, educators are recognized as the front-line resource for Jewish identity enhancement, the spotlight on them ever-brightening with the publication of further research highlighting the role of Jewish education in promoting Jewish continuity (see Schiff and Schneider, 1994a, 1994b).

At the same time, we are realizing the broad and crucial role religious identity can play in the life of an individual. Issues related to the development of a Jewish identity can have a major impact on a variety of life outcomes. A religious orientation has been shown to reduce likelihood of participation in problem behaviors such as substance abuse (Jessor, Donovan, and Costa, 1991; Jessor and Jessor, 1977). Our own research has shown that religious variables can impact on the how one handles stress, through such skills as problem solving and anger management (Kress, Elias, and Novick, 1995; cf., Pargament et al., 1990).

Further, the development of a religious identity cannot be understood outside the context of identity development in general. Adolescents and pre-adolescents are engaged in a complex process of self-definition. Failure to successfully navigate this challenge can result in rootlessness and rebellion (cf. Sarason, 1993). Fowler (1981) discusses religious faith, values, and conventions as providing a stable base for entrance into the adult world, especially in providing perspective when adolescents begin to question adult norms.

JEWISH IDENTITY: WHAT'S DIFFERENT NOW

The already complex task of identity development is further complicated in the case of Jewish identity. London and Chazan (1990) maintain that the challenges to promoting Jewish identity in youth are different now than at any other historical period: Population mobility weakens the influence of family and neighborhood; powerful socializing influences such as television, movies, and other media compete with school and home to affect customs and aspirations. Further, Jewish children often receive conflicting messages from adult role-models regarding expectations for Jewish identity; what they hear from (or observe of) their parents may

well be very different from the expectations conveyed by their religious school teachers or rabbi (cf., Perry, Kelder, and Komro, 1993).

Jewish identity carries with it identification with a social group, further complicating the process of identity formation. Jewish youth in America often have to move among several different social spheres. For example, a student may attend public school during the day, religious school on Sunday, and participate in a sports league during the week. We can image the potential of each of these to bring with it a distinct, and sometimes conflicting, set of norms and expectations. Jewish youth must struggle with issues of similarity with and differences from peers. The complexity of this task is highlighted by findings from our research which suggest that those Jewish students who endorse traditional Jewish values are more likely to reject interaction with people of difference--i.e., differing denominations as well as ethnic groups (Kress, Elias, Novick, Schoenfeld, and Zibbell, 1995).

While promoting Jewish identity is widely accepted as a major goal of Jewish education in the United States, the specifics of this goal may differ in various settings. Expectations for Jewish ritual practices, for example, differ between, and even within, denominations. In our own research, parents, when asked to discuss their expectations for their children, often talked in terms of wanting him or her to become a mensch. However, individuals may take differing approaches to this concept as well.

CONCEPTS OF BEING A MENSCH

Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) raises the issue of how to be a *mensch* in 2:6, when it insists, Strive to be a person. This same book in 4:1 provides guidance about character, pointing to *Proverbs 16:32*-- He who is slow to anger is better than the strong man, and a master of his passions is better than a conqueror of a city, and in 5:13-22 grounding notions about *menschlekhkeit* Judaically. But there is another key concept missing.

A clue can be found in the biblical injunction against creating graven images. Buber and others have pointed out that this prohibition is because we are made in the image of G-d. Our work on earth involves becoming G-d-like in character and in the way we treat other persons, other living creatures, and in our stewardship of the earth. In other words, the process of becoming a *mensch* involves becoming fully human, to fulfill G-d's role for us, with the Torah

and teachings as our guide for doing so. This notion provides us with a working definition of Jewish identity, the details of which may vary, but whose similarities include a moral and ethical competence within the context of Jewish ritual practice.

But how does Jewish education function to strengthen Jewish identity? Contributors to *Jewish Education News* (Gillman, Winter 1995, pages 10-11) have warned that models for Jewish education must embody the principles they seek to convey; they must be genuine and authentic to be maximally successful. This means the total context of Jewish identity development must be strengthened, with a developmental recognition of the shift from the predominance of parental/teacher influence in childhood to peer/mentor influence in adolescence. This requires, the most difficult step of all, ...to create, with care and deliberation, communities which foster Jewish living and provide the supports for practicing the behaviors which have been adopted (Kaye, Spring 1992, p. 19).

Another key point is raised in *Pirke Avot 2:21*, You are not expected to finish the job, but you are not free to quit. The task of promoting *menschlekhkeit* is an inter-generational and ongoing process; it is not for the parent to do alone. Relatedly, we are taught, All Israel is responsible for one another. *Menschlekhkeit* and *kehilla* go together, and the collective responsibility of *menschlekhkeit*-promotion rests on the shoulders of the community. The Jewish version of the African proverb might be, It takes a *kehilla* to raise a *mensch*.

KEHILLA-CENTERED APPROACH AND ECOLOGICAL THEORY

The importance of a *kehilla*-centered approach to development is underscored by the developmental theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory, development is seen as a reciprocal interaction between the individual and the developmental contexts relevant to the individual, the settings in which an individual finds him or herself within the course of daily activity. These developmental contexts are defined both on a micro level, i.e., individuals with whom and settings within which the individual interacts directly (e.g., a teacher in a classroom), and more broadly, as systems that include the individual, but with which he or she has no direct contact (e.g., the local school board).

Bronfenbrenner stresses the interaction between individual and environment, seeing both of these factors as being of equal importance. To understand the development of the individual,

we must look at the systems in which he or she is embedded, the roles played by the person in these systems, and significant others who interact with him or her. Importantly, we must also examine how the individual internalizes these influences, and how this then guides his or her actions in a particular setting.

Successful development is seen as depending on the existence of multiple, and increasingly complex, roles, relationships and activities. Also of great importance is congruence in the values of the various settings and the degree to which there is mutual support among contexts. A crucial role is given to individuals and activities which bridge settings. Finally, Jay Belsky (1980) adds an intergenerational dimension to this discussion, stressing how contexts provided early on in life set the stage for the creation of similar contexts later on.

An ecological perspective requires an understanding and appreciation of the contexts of influence in which children and adolescents participate, and how these interact and vary over the course of children's developmental history. Findings from our own research (Kress, 1998) illustrate the range of contexts and influences that come into play. When we asked sixth and seventh graders to name the greatest influence on their Jewish identity, they said (in descending frequency) parents, teachers, synagogue officials (rabbis etc.), grandparents, and their peer group. When parents were asked to list people and contexts which are of influence to their children's Jewish identity (and were allowed to give an unlimited number of influence), the results provide an even clearer illustration of the multiple arenas and contexts of influence. Parents listed an average of 8.4 influences, with a range of 2 to 18. Looking at the accompanying table, we can see the variety of these influences.

Table 1:

Categories of Contexts of Influence on Jewish Identity as Listed by Parents

(Most to Least Common)

Family Member

School/Education

Holidays/Sabbath

Peers

Temple/Services/Rabbi

Youth Group
 Israel
 Bar/Bat Mitzvah
 Jewish Culture
 Home Environment
 Holocaust-related Experience
 Charity
 Observance of Kosher Dietary Laws
 Other

Further, findings in the literature suggest that the degree of commitment to Judaism reported by individuals is predicted by involvement in Jewish identity-enhancing contexts such as the Jewish family (Himmelfarb, 1982; Dashefsky and Shapiro, 1974), educational settings (Schiff and Schneider, 1994a, 1994b), peer group (Himmelfarb, 1982, for a review), and the general community religious climate (Horowitz, 1993; Horowitz, 1992). Our own research findings suggest that the level of commitment to Judaism reported by a student is predicted by the number of Jewish communal contexts and family Jewish rituals in which he or she participates (Kress, 1998).

CONTEXTS OF INFLUENCE

The *kehilla*-centered approach raises certain questions which can serve as a guide to beginning to understand the ecology of a particular community: What are the major contexts of influence, including influential people, places, and things? How accessible-- literally and figuratively--are these influences to youth of various ages? (e.g., Is there an opportunity for adolescents to interact with the rabbi?) What are the barriers to participation in these settings? (e.g., Can members of the community afford religious school or day school tuition?) What are the major competing contexts? (e.g., Does the soccer league meet Saturday mornings?) Is there agreement on the values and expectations in the settings in which youth participate? (e.g., Do parents support the teachings of the Hebrew school?) Do bridges among settings exist? (e.g., Do parents have a role in religious school activities?) At key developmental milestones, are transitions between settings encouraged? (e.g., Do graduating high school seniors in the teen

youth group have the opportunity to meet with college students to discuss their involvement in Hillel?) With all of these questions, we should be striving toward answers which stress continuity, both physically and in terms of values and expectations.

As for how the task of Jewish identity promotion should be approached within the various settings, two general principles serve as guidelines: The first is Abraham Joshua Heschel's observation that the act teaches us the meaning of the act. We learn by doing, and learning about who we are is no different. Second, is the advice of our tradition to teach a child according to his or her way. Appropriately targeting our efforts at the intended audience will drastically affect results.

HANDS-ON, BRAINS-ON, HEARTS-ON

The first point has to do with active learning, a process by which students become engaged, as part of the learning process, through a variety of hands-on and (for lack of a better term) brains-on activities. A plethora of psychological and educational research has highlighted the idea that what we know, and who we are, develops as a result of behavioral participation in the learning process, accompanied by the opportunity and encouragement to process these activities cognitively. The former can be achieved by planning educational activities which fit within the values one is trying to impart (for example, a unit about *bikur holim* visiting the sick, can include hands-on activities such as writing get-well cards, visits to hospitals, interviews with family members regarding experiences with illness, etc.).

Brains-on activity relates to getting youth cognitively involved in the learning process. One particularly powerful way to accomplish this goal is through engaging children effectively in the exploration of big ideas. These are the concepts, or values, that are essential building blocks of life. For students in religious school, this approach is a wonderful opportunity to help them see not only the secular, everyday implications of these big ideas, but also the Judaic basis and implications. Through working with students on big ideas at appropriate ages, we help youth think about the meaning of their activities, and how it relates to who they are.

Finally, we must acknowledge London and Frank's (1987) advice not to neglect the affective or emotional side of education. In particular, we must strive to make the process enjoyable to youth at various ages. The theme of educating according to his or her way relates

to providing educational activities appropriate to the recipients. One way that this can be achieved is by working to ensure that activities are structured to the developmental needs of youth at various ages.

BIG IDEAS APPROACH

In Table 2, below, we take a look at the three age periods most often included in religious schools prior to *bar/bat mitzva*. We highlight what we feel is most distinctive to an ecological/developmental perspective: the key concepts or *big ideas* that can be taught to engage the interest and imagination of students in both secular and Jewish contexts, and how to work *lefi darko*, according to the way of each group of students in terms of what teachers can expect from children in their classrooms. We outline how the classroom can be set up in a way most developmentally appropriate to engage the students in the *big ideas* and other identity-developing activities.

Table 2:

Key Developmental Concepts, Expected School-Related Behaviors, and Developmentally

Grades Pre-K- 2	Appropriate Environments	
<p>Key Concepts: honesty, fairness, truthfulness, trust, hope, confidence, keeping promises, empathy</p>	<p>*Ensure that classrooms and school-related locations are free from violence and threat *Arrange for school life to include consistent, stimulating contact with caring adults</p>	<p>*Making/using effective group rules *Participating in story-based learning *Opportunities to negotiate *Providing time for laughter, occasional silliness</p>
<p>What School-Related Behaviors Can Parents and Teachers Reasonably Expect?</p>	<p>Grades 3-5</p>	<p>Grades 6-7</p>
<p>*Paying attention to teachers *Understanding similarities and differences (e.g., skin color, physical disabilities) *Working to the best of one's ability *Using words effectively, especially for feelings *Cooperating *Responding positively to approval *Thinking out loud, asking questions *Expressing self in art, music games, dramatic play *Liking starting more than finishing *Deriving security in repetition, routines *Being able to articulate likes and dislikes, have clear sense of strengths, areas of mastery, can articulate these, and have opportunities to engage in these *Exploring the environment *Being self-confident and trusting-- what they can expect from adults in the school; believing that they are important; that their needs and wishes matter; that they can succeed; that they can trust adults in school; that adults in school can be helpful</p>	<p>Key Concepts: initiative, purpose, goals, justice, fairness, friendship, justice, equity, dependability</p>	<p>Key Concepts: democracy, pioneering, importance of the environment (spaceship Earth; earth as habitat, ecological environment; global interdependence; ecosystems), perfection and imperfection, prejudice, freedom, citizenship, and liberty, home, industriousness, continuity, competence</p>
<p>How Should the Learning Environment Be Set Up in a Developmentally Appropriate Manner?</p>	<p>What School-Related Behaviors Can Parents and Teachers Reasonably Expect?</p>	<p>What School-Related Behaviors Can Parents and Teachers Reasonably Expect?</p>
<p>*Have clear classroom, school rules *Provide opportunities for responsibility in the classroom *Make lines of authority clear, fair, deserving of respect *Provide frequent teacher redirection</p>	<p>*Setting academic goals, planning study time, completing assignments *Learning to work on teams *Accepting similarities and differences (e.g., appearance, ability levels) *Cooperating, helping, especially younger children *Bouncing back from mistakes *Being able to work hard on projects *Beginning, carrying through on, and completing tasks *Being good problem-solvers *Forgiving after anger *Being truthful, generally *Showing pride in accomplishments *Calming oneself down after being upset, losing one's temper or crying *Being able to follow directions for school tasks, routines *Carrying out commitments to classmates, teachers *Showing appropriate helpfulness *Knowing how to ask for help *Refusing negative peer pressure</p>	<p>*Accepting rules that students have had a hand in modifying *Preferring novelty to repetition *Learning planning and management skills to complete school, bar/bat mitzvah requirements</p>
	<p>How Should the Learning Environment Be Set Up in a Developmentally Appropriate Manner?</p>	<p>How Should the Learning Environment Be Set Up in a Developmentally Appropriate Manner?</p>
	<p>*Opportunities to comfort peer, classmate in distress, help new persons feel accepted/included *Being in groups, group activities</p>	<p>*Minimize lecture mode of instruction *Vary types of student products (de-emphasize written reports) *Give opportunities to participate in setting class, school rules, policy *Provide clear expectations about truancy, aggressive behavior, verbal behavior *Give opportunities for setting, reviewing personal norms/standards *Provide youth group/academic enrichment/other extra involvement *Give exposure to older teen role models continuing their Jewish education</p>

Consider, as an example, a lesson that would have the same basic structure for all age groups, but would look different as carried out at each level. It involves asking a student to answer this question: What does it mean to you to live like a Jew, to act Jewish, to live Jewishly? Students can provide their answers in terms of drawings, words, puzzles, games, or other creative formats. The assignment would begin in school, but would also go home, so that students and parents could discuss and think about it together. Parents would be expected to add their ideas, and then the project would come back to school for class sharing, discussion, and creation of finished products which could be displayed at the school or synagogue. This assignment could be repeated each year, with the results serving as a powerful portfolio of learning and identity development over the course of one's religious school education and through the *bar/bat mitzva*.

By taking an ecological/developmental perspective on identity, Jewish educators can better see the link of Jewish identity to broader identity issues facing students. Teachers can then create situations that make it more likely that children will reflect positively on their Jewish identity, allowing the latter to take a meaningful place in their overall self-concept.

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