

Universal Jewish Literacy



JOHN F. KENNEDY'S original "moonshot" idea—to land a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s and return him safely to Earth—was spurred not so much by the need to solve a technical challenge as by a desire to stick it to the Russians at the height of the Cold War.

Acknowledging the fact that competition is a great motivator helps us understand the difficulties of bringing other types of "moonshots" to life. While Kennedy's aspiration could be broken down into a series of technical challenges, it did not *also* require masses of people to change deeply rooted behaviors and beliefs, much less entire societies rethinking their identities in novel ways.

This is why philanthropic moonshots are so difficult: They aim to transform people and communities, all within a context of trends and forces that philanthropy can't control. There are seldom actual external adversaries who can serve as a spur to competition. But there are competing values and needs within a group that pull it in multiple directions. And when big ideas are proposed in "soft" areas

of community work, such as "Jewish identity"—a difficult concept to which Jews relate in different ways—the challenges only multiply.

And yet we must try. Moonshot thinking challenges us to identify huge problems that appear impossible or intractable. It asks us to seek new approaches by developing new technologies and repurposing existing ones. And it pushes us to design concerted efforts and collaborations among many actors.

The moonshot I want to propose has all these difficulties and characteristics: achieving, among North American Jews, universal basic Jewish literacy in 20 years. Let's call it "Birthright Judaism" for now, even though it no doubt needs a different name.



Why do we need such a thing? The American Jewish community is the strongest, wealthiest, safest, and most influential community in the history of the Diaspora. And probably the most Jewishly ignorant.

While it's not true that in the past every Jew was a scholar, there was indeed a basic level of Jewish knowledge shared by all and transmitted through educational institutions, common practices, lived culture, and a communal environment. Jewish knowledge conferred social capital, public appreciation, and self-respect.

The reasons for our current Jewish ignorance are many, but let me mention just one: In responding to the challenges of assimilation, American Jewish leaders created the concept of Jewish identity, a vague notion that has created more problems than it has solved.

Jewish identity allowed Jews to define Judaism as a religion while abandoning most religious practices, to celebrate Jewish culture while ignoring Jewish languages, and to assert our place in a diverse society while avoiding the difficult question of what, exactly, makes us different from the mainstream. It has no boundaries and places no actual demands, except perhaps a nebulous sense of loyalty to an amorphous idea of peoplehood. The iden-

tity ideology also offers a hefty dose of victimhood, resulting in an overemphasis on the Holocaust and an infantile version of Israel advocacy.

On the altar of “identity,” we sacrificed much that made us truly Jewish. Identity has been, as Jon Levisohn of Brandeis University has argued, “a meaningless substitute for a focused, disciplined articulation of the goals of Jewish education” in both adults and children. What do we want Jews to know and be able to do? Read texts in certain ways? Speak certain languages? Enjoy Jewish culture? Produce Jewish culture? In what ways do we want them to be engaged with their local Jewish and non-Jewish communities? Who do we want them to be, as interpreters of Jewish history and tradition? What is our picture of engaged citizenship? What are our aspirations for the inner, spiritual lives of Jews?

These and other questions have all been left to the wayside as Jewish funders spend hundreds of millions of dollars in “identity” and “engagement,” carefully avoiding defining what Jews are actually supposed to engage *with*. Designed as gateways, the most lavishly funded programs in Jewish life instead become final destinations.

In the long run, this simply won’t do. We can no longer rely on silver-bullet trips to Auschwitz or Tel Aviv to emotionally shock people into feeling Jewish. For a culture to thrive, people need to truly know what that culture encompasses. To feel part of a historical continuum, people need to learn that history. To find comfort in rituals (regularly and at life’s key moments), people need to understand the ritual. To be guided by wisdom in ancient sources, people need to be able to navigate their structure and content beyond a handful of cherry-picked quotes. This requires sustained engagement with meaningful Jewish content.

A proper program of Jewish cultural literacy needs to cover the different areas that make up the fascinating kaleidoscope of religion, nationality, culture, and history that is Judaism. Scholars have argued extensively about what the pillars of Jewish content are,

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and many have debated what would make an educated Jew. But by and large, the fundamentals can be grouped into six buckets:

1. Rituals and practices
2. Texts and sources
3. History
4. Languages, art, and culture
5. Thought and philosophy
6. Zionism and Israel

In every historical period, especially those that witnessed seismic changes, Jews redefined and enriched Judaism to provide answers to the challenges of the times. The COVID-19 pandemic and its collateral effects have accelerated already transformational trends in Jewish life and will no doubt lead to a greater quest for meaning and purpose in a disrupted, uncertain world. Jews need to be empowered to take ownership of their own Judaism and to participate in a conversation that will shape the Jewish world for decades or even centuries to come. To do so, they need to have a basic level of knowledge in all these dimensions of the Jewish experience so they may have meaningful Jewish conversations and participate in the historical challenge of redefining Judaism for the 21st century.

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I realize that the idea of “basic literacy” or “curriculum” is under fire these days: “Who are you to define the most important content?” goes the frequent retort. But education has never been democratic. We educate because we have something we consider valuable that we want to transmit to others. We don’t need to be apologetic about proposing a “core curriculum” of Jewish literacy. We can debate what goes into it—but let’s at least have something to debate.

What of the critique that the Jewish canon is male and white (however problematic the term “canon” might be for a diverse and global Jewish community)? There’s something to it, of course, but learning about what patriarchal rabbis said in the 12th century is not an impediment to including feminist writers of the 20th and 21st. You can’t criticize or improve on what you don’t know. Take Zionism: It was a critique of traditional Judaism, but it could exist only because the early Zionist thinkers were highly literate in the tradition they were rejecting. We now have unprecedented access to Jewish texts and sources of all kinds; they can be taken together as the building blocks of a diverse, living culture.



So how would it work? I propose that most adult Jews experience at least a hundred hours of Jewish studies, covering the basic building blocks of Jewish cultural literacy. This needs to be normative and transformative—a “Birthright Judaism” in its scale and some of its features. Just as Jews have a “birthright” to the Land of

Israel, they also have a birthright to their culture and their multifaceted heritage.

There will be a variety of different formats. Immersive trips and retreats. Months- or year-long courses, virtual and physical. As with Birthright Israel, a central body will strongly subsidize those courses to eliminate financial impediments to participation. There will be different providers for those courses, representing Judaism in all of its variety and diversity, and a central mechanism for quality control to ensure that the curriculum covers the requisite material at a high professional level.

There are great precedents for these courses, on which we can build. Boston’s Project Meah (meaning 100, for the number of hours of study), the Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning, and Chabad’s Jewish Learning Institute are excellent examples. Significantly, these programs haven’t been shy about defining what they believe constitutes basic Jewish literacy. On their own, however, they haven’t achieved the scale we will need; our new program will allow them and many other programs to reach many more people.

The biggest impediment to the success of this project will not be funding or organizational wherewithal, but motivation: Will people enroll in a program in Jewish education that demands a substantial and sustained commitment? And how do we avoid preaching to the choir—adding more to the options for those who already engage in serious study?

The genius of major programs such as Birthright, PJ Library, and Moishe House is that they draw on normative behaviors. Young people travel *anyway*; Birthright makes the travel a free trip to Israel. Parents read to their children *already*; PJ Library just offers a different book to read. Young people live together and host parties for their friends *already*; Moishe House adds a Jewish dimension to these activities.

Finding normative behaviors to harness will be our core challenge. Americans aren’t already regularly gathering to study, and at first glance, our program has few obvious perks, such as free trips

or subsidized rent. But it's not insurmountable. We will need to be creative. For example, Limmud UK "used" the Christmas break, when many Jewish Britons were either bored at home or taking a vacation, to propose an alternative break—a weeklong, fun, and meaningful experience of Jewish learning in community. We can use the time when kids are at summer camps to conduct retreats for parents. We can create "destination" retreats, invite particular social networks, and even bring celebrity teachers or participants. Graduates could be offered communal perks, such as discounts on school tuition, synagogue or JCC memberships, or camp fees. Completing the course should be a communal rite of passage, and graduates should be afforded respect and leadership roles in communal settings.

Birthright Judaism will require the partnership of funders at all levels of giving and a variety of Jewish communal organizations that can serve as "delivery mechanisms" for the courses. We'll need a backbone organization to manage the enterprise and serve as quality assurance and a clearinghouse of information and resources. The benefits will ripple out across communities: Learners and alumni can gather at annual conferences; new courses of study can be added for those who crave more; and we can convene teachers across all of the programs for training and idea-sharing, creating a vibrant cohort of educators.



If this moonshot comes even close to fruition, we will have, for the first time in recent American Jewish history, a generation in which most Jews once again have a basic knowledge of their history, culture, and religion. This program won't make all Jews scholars, but it will provide a common foundation for people to have informed Jewish conversations. It will expose Jews to the richness of their culture, providing a valuable historical perspective to face the challenges of our time. It will empower them to use Jewish wisdom, sources, and ritual

to find meaning. It will make them more likely to want to transmit that heritage to the next generation.

The challenges to bringing this idea to life are many, but why shouldn't we try? We have the wherewithal and the resources to ensure that all Jews have access to a meaningful relation with their heritage. Do we want history to say that the 5,000 Jews of 17th-century Vilna—poor and persecuted—produced and consumed more Judaism than 7 million American Jews, the wealthiest and safest community of all time? *