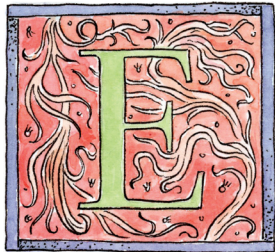


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# Jewish Education Should Have ‘Shoulds’



EDUCATIONAL systems generally favor stability over change. Most educational efforts aim to preserve and convey cultural norms from one generation to the next through particular content, skills, behaviors, morals, and dispositions. New ways of knowing, seeing, or doing are typically met with backlash and resistance. New schemes that manage to penetrate educational systems wind up being retrofitted to conform to existing organizational structures, rather than bringing about the large-scale change that their creators might have envisioned.

Despite these challenges, we can point to initiatives that have had a significant impact on the evolution of the Jewish educational enterprise in North America over the past century, particularly in recent decades. Some of these changes have been countercultural, providing fresh alternatives to the long-standing forms of Jewish schooling and summer camping that dominate the landscape.

Take, for instance, the explosion in both the supply of and the demand for experiential education programs—informal Jewish education—ranging from Jewish-themed group travel to online gaming. Some reforms are more progressive, insofar as they aim to modernize, update, restructure, or renew well-established Jewish educational activities and settings. Organizations such as Edah, MoEd, and Makom bill themselves as “not your grandparents’ Hebrew school,” even if they are still Jewish after-school programs. Others take a more moderate tack, like the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge, which fosters disruptive change in the service of teaching traditional Jewish values and wisdom.

One recent initiative that defies easy categorization, and with which we have both been deeply involved, is the 18x18 Educational Framework: *18 Things a Young Jew Should Know, Care About, and Be Able to Do by Age 18*. The 18x18 was developed by one of us, Benjamin Jacobs, and Barry Chazan on behalf of a consortium of leading Jewish educational philanthropies (including Maimonides Fund, publisher of SAPIR). It addresses a series of core questions related to being Jewish in the 21st century. How can education foster Jewish life in an open society? What launches young Jews on a Jewish educational journey today, and what inspires them to continue that journey? How do we prepare Jewish children for effective citizenship and participation in ever-changing Jewish communities?

More specifically, the objectives of this project are to: 1) articulate a vision of core Jewish content, attitudes, values, skills, and commitments that Jews should develop over the course of their lives; 2) formulate frameworks for Jewish learning that foster this vision; and 3) contribute something valuable and constructive to the important work of practitioners in a wide array of formal and informal educational settings.

The initial reception of the 18x18 was mixed. Many educators, especially those on the front lines, were grateful for the straightforward guidance on what to teach, why, and how. But there was also a lot of pushback.

# 18x18

## 18 Jewish Things a Young Jew Should Know, Care About, and Be Able to do

			
CONTRIBUTE TO THE CHAIN OF JEWISH TRADITION	ENGAGE WITH JEWISH ROLE MODELS	PRACTICE TIKKUN OLAM AND GEMILUT HASADIM	RECOGNIZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WRESTLING WITH GOD
			
RESPOND TO ISSUES FACING AMERICAN JEWRY	ACCESS HEBREW AND JEWISH TERMINOLOGY	CONNECT WITH JEWS AROUND THE WORLD	PARTICIPATE IN THE KEHILLA
			
CARE ABOUT ISRAEL AND HER PEOPLE	EXPLORE SANCTITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND PRAYER	UNDERSTAND THE WHY AND HOW OF JEWISH MITZVOT	PARTAKE IN JEWISH CULINARY TRADITIONS
			
CULTIVATE JEWISH FRIENDSHIPS	DISCOVER JUDAISM'S RELEVANCE TO LIFE'S QUESTIONS	INTERPRET JEWISH TEXTS AND CORE NARRATIVES	APPRECIATE JEWISH CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCES
			
ENGAGE IN JEWISH RITUALS, HOLIDAYS AND EVENTS	EXPERIENCE JEWISH ARTS AND CULTURE		

Some critics complained about what the framework included, others about what it failed to include. One viral social-media post, for example, claimed that 18x18 gave too little attention to social action—which then inspired a group of rabbis, educators, and organizational leaders to start discussing ways of increasing the prominence of social justice work in Jewish education.

Another line of critique centered on the alleged conceit of two aging white male scholars, funded by three prominent foundations, presuming to determine the ways that diverse Jewish educators should go about doing their work.

Also, echoing broader educational debates, some detractors fundamentally rejected the idea of foisting “shoulds” on Jewish education at all. As in such broader educational debates, critics argued that standards dumb down and de-skill educators as well as learners by circumscribing what they need to know and be able to do, rather than encouraging creative and independent inquiry. This feels especially retrograde within the field of Jewish education, which is increasingly intent on becoming more grassroots, informal, and expansive, rather than oriented toward traditionalist Jewish concerns.

Yet another fear stemmed from advocating common knowledge, when our culture favors, above all, an abundance of choice. The universalization of Jewish education is built on the premise that a program can be everything to everyone. But trying to be everything to everyone often results in being nothing to anyone.

These criticisms are important and hold many truths. Yet they generally stem from fears about taking a stand and putting stakes in the ground. If establishing a certain set of goals necessarily excludes other goals, the argument goes, then we’re better off not articulating any goals at all. This leads to educational and curricular paralysis: It seems easier to continue doing things the way they have always been done than to embark on new countercultural initiatives.

The intention of the 18x18 was to provide an ambitious, unapologetic, and clear direction for Jewish education that could

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## Good educational work needs generative ideas and tools to help educators reexamine their core assumptions and activities.

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be implemented and assessed across the Jewish educational ecosystem, providing educators anywhere—schools, summer camps, community centers, youth groups, experiential programs, synagogues, cultural institutions, Israel, and even the home—with a foundation upon which to design and build a vision for Jewish education. It is predicated on the belief that good educational work needs generative ideas and tools to help educators reexamine their core assumptions and activities.

It is an aspirational document above all, neither purporting to determine who the ideal Jew is, nor asserting that teaching and learning the 18 dimensions will guarantee particular life outcomes. Rather, its more modest but still bold hypothesis is that the better equipped young Jews are along the lines the framework suggests, the more prepared they will be to become committed participants in adult Jewish life. Likewise, the better prepared Jewish educators are to teach the 18x18, the more likely they will be to achieve clearly defined and measurable goals.



To begin to bring the 18x18 to life, M<sup>2</sup>: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education, which Shuki Taylor runs, launched the 18x18 Executive Fellowship in April 2021. M<sup>2</sup> invited more than a dozen practitioners from local, national, and international Jewish organizations to participate. The common denominator was not a desire to embrace and implement the 18x18 as a whole, but rather

simply an eagerness to experiment with using the 18x18 as a way to build novel educational strategies within the fellows' respective organizations.

As the Fellowship unfolds, we are learning with and from the fellows what it takes to move an ambitious educational framework from theory to practice. Three key lessons have emerged:

- 1 | *Educational frameworks are meant to catalyze conversations, not shut them down.*

The moment an educational framework such as the 18x18 evolves from theory to practice, it becomes a living document: Educators and learners alike embrace, reject, and reformulate it. Educators get to debate the value of engaging with a particular framework, as well as its applicability to their particular organizations and constituencies. It is precisely the framework's constraints that stimulate deliberation and creativity: Users can play with, adopt, or completely reformulate its many components. As Jewish hermeneutic tradition teaches us, a canon is not meant to be rigid—it is meant to be critically interpreted, applied, and then interpreted again.

- 2 | *Recognize the diversity of Jewish education and of the Jewish community.*

Asking Fellows to assess their organizations' educational goals in light of the standards that the framework articulates was revealing, particularly with respect to how diverse the landscape of Jewish education actually is—or, rather, is not. Educational institutions often talk about certain kinds of diversity, especially those based on identity. But they ignore other kinds, including the diversity of ideas, knowledge, preferences, and experiences. The organizations in the inaugural 18x18 Fellowship represent a significant slice of Jewish organized life across North America, and it was frankly unsettling for everyone to discover how homogenous they are: The

majority are pursuing many of the same elements of the framework, while other elements remain almost entirely ignored.

This raises a key question: Are our educational organizations pursuing a diverse enough set of goals? If our educational institutions are doorways to Jewish experience, are we opening enough doors? If, for example, a person is interested in exploring the goal of “wrestling with the divine,” but there are almost no Jewish organizations tending to that goal, have we lost the opportunity to engage that person and everyone like him? The 18x18 compels us to consider not only the vision and purpose of Jewish education on the supply side, but also the interests and aspirations of diverse learners on the demand side. Organizations need to consider adding goals to the ones they currently offer, to open new access points to Jewish life for a wide variety of diverse learners.

### 3 | *Change is incremental, not an all-or-nothing proposition.*

No one is asking institutions to either adopt or reject the 18x18 in toto. Rather, the framework is meant to catalyze a generative encounter. This clearly articulated set of goals encourages educators and their organizations to expand the ways they think about and realize the many different aims of Jewish education. The 18x18 can help institutions and the field as a whole identify areas of saturation and areas that need more attention. Incremental expansion — adding two or three elements to an institution’s goals — is both realistic and aspirational.

A key critique of the 18x18, or of any ambitious educational framework, is that asserting what good education “ought” to do feels countercultural in a world that prefers that people choose their own adventure. We remain committed, however, to the notion that Jewish education should, in fact, be guided by shoulds. Claims that

are prescriptive rather than descriptive can offer a clear vision of *what Jewish education is for*.

In recent years, we have seen an inspiring proliferation of innovative ideas, organizations, and programs that have sought to expand the reach of Jewish education beyond its traditionally parochial concerns and limited constituency. Engaging rank-and-file, unaffiliated American Jewish youth has been the order of the day, with competition to determine what might be the best carrot to draw them in. (As a team, one of us a professor and the other a lead practitioner of experiential Jewish education, we have worked assiduously in these directions ourselves.) In the process, however, we have lost clarity about what we intend the outcomes of the Jewish education enterprise to be. We demur at goals such as “cultivating Jewish friendships” (too particularistic) and instead settle for “having friends” (reassuringly universalistic) — as though friends of any stripe will help build a robust Jewish community. Research — not to mention intuition — demonstrates that this is surely not the case. We need to put firmer stakes in the ground if we want Jewish education to sink in.

The 18x18 is an effort to boldly assert the fundamental values, purposes, and goals of Jewish education. It isn’t perfect. In fact, some might call the 18x18 a castle in the air. If it is so, our collective task is to put the foundations under it. \*