

Jewish Education: Why We Should Care

A conversation with

**BARRY FINESTONE, RABBI LEON MORRIS
& ABI DAUBER STERNE**



THE FIELD of Jewish education in North America boasts a wealth of talented and dedicated professionals. These are educators, administrators, scholars, board members, and funders who commit their days, and often their careers, to this work. We brought three of them together for a conversation about the current state of Jewish education and about where new investments of time, energy and funding might best be deployed. It was a congenial and inspiring conversation that we've edited down for clarity and brevity.

Barry Finestone is the president and CEO of the Jim Joseph Foundation (JJF), America's leading supporter of Jewish education for youth, teens, and young adults. JJF has granted more than \$735 million in its first

17 years. Barry has led major institutions in all of the types of arenas where formal and informal Jewish education happens in America: a JCC, a synagogue, and an overnight summer camp.

Rabbi Leon Morris is president of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, an open, inclusive, and diverse learning community that has educated thousands of North American students for 50 years. Before making aliyah, Leon spent a decade as the founding director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Temple Emanu-El (now the Streicker Center) in Manhattan. He has written extensively on the need for an increased commitment to Jewish learning in Reform Judaism.

*Abi Dauber Sterne is now studying for the rabbinate in Israel, after stepping down as the longtime director of Makom, the Israel-education arm of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Prior to that, she held leading Jewish educational roles at Hillel International, Mandel Jerusalem Fellows, and Limmud NY. With her colleague Robbie Gringras, she is currently developing a new methodology for teaching about complex hot-button issues, through *For the Sake of Argument*.*

Felicia Herman: Why don't we start with a bit of biography — who are you, and how did you get into Jewish education?

Abi Dauber Sterne: I grew up in a modern Orthodox home in Buffalo, New York. My parents were so committed to Jewish education that they sent me to board with a family in another city so I could attend a yeshiva high school, since we had none in Buffalo. That made a real impression on me. After a gap year in Israel, I studied religion at Penn, and then wound up getting a job at UJA-Federation of New York. I've stayed in Jewish communal organizations ever since, including after making aliyah. Most recently I was the head of Makom, an educational arm of the Jewish Agency, here in Jerusalem; I'm now in rabbinical school. Judaism has always been the thing in my life that is the most meaningful

to me, and I'm grateful to be able to work every day on the thing I'm most passionate about, exploring Jewish ideas and texts, and giving other people opportunities to engage with them.

Barry Finestone: I grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, in a wonderful Jewish household. We celebrated holidays at home and went to synagogue a lot—though, like so many British Jews, we'd drive to our Orthodox synagogue and park a few blocks away so no one would see us driving on Shabbat. Like Abi, I realized at an early age that Judaism was a critically important facet of my life, and I've basically only worked in Jewish communal organizations—youth groups, camps, synagogues, JCCs. I now direct the Jim Joseph Foundation, which is focused on Jewish education. That varied experience has exposed me to many of the pathways into Jewish education—different programs, educators, learners of all ages and backgrounds.

Leon Morris: Like both of you, I found Judaism to be deeply fascinating from a young age, but I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania where there were only 10 Jewish families, and my family wasn't particularly Jewishly involved. So on my own, I tried to read everything I could get my hands on, soaked up Hebrew School, got very involved with NFTY, the Reform youth movement. Like Abi, I studied religion in college. But when I got to rabbinical school, I realized I had barely scratched the surface—the *beit midrash* (study hall) was full of books I had never even heard of. I became obsessed with what it might look like for non-Orthodox Jews to spend their lives immersed in these texts—or as the master educator Ruth Calderon says, “marinating” in the texts. I'm now running the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, with a pluralistic *beit midrash* in Israel and programs worldwide, to try to do exactly that. My whole life has been a search to discover what it means to be a Jew, and to open Jewish wisdom up to as many people as possible.

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Herman: Beautiful stories! So tell me: What do you think the purpose of Jewish education is?

Sterne: I have three answers, influenced by my colleague Jonny Ariel's theory of the three “gateways” to Jewish life. I think of them as three purposes. The first is universalist: to better the world, *tikkun olam*. How do we as Jews contribute to the world, improve it, and do good? The second is particularist: How do we take care of our family of Jews around the world? And the third, though it feels radical to say it these days, is to serve God. It's the sense of feeling personally commanded, of feeling an obligation to something larger than yourself. Unfortunately, many organizations or institutions feel as if they have to choose from among these things—i.e., “we're all about *tikkun olam*” or “we're all about serving God”—but Jewish texts show us that we need to keep all three of these frameworks active at once to help people live meaningful lives, to truly be a force of good in the world.

Morris: I'll add another purpose: developing a sense of ownership and empowerment. David Bernstein, my colleague here at Pardes, always says that the Torah belongs to everyone—not just to the Orthodox, or the rabbis, or men, etc. Our goal should be a universal sense of ownership and empowerment—the idea that you can take this wisdom and make it your own. This also

means planting the seeds for a lifelong love of Jewish learning, including that people understand that they'll love some of the specific texts they encounter and will hate others, that they'll agree with some and disagree with others. What matters is you're never done—you never walk away. Learning and engaging with the text never ends.

Jewish text is both a mirror and a set of binoculars. It reflects back to us and gives us insight into who we are, and it also gives us a set of lenses with which to view the world outside. So Jewish education gives us a shared language for speaking about everything—everything human and everything Jewish. There's something powerful about accessing a set of concepts, references, words, and symbols that connect me to my fellow Jews. And we can also use that language in a much broader way, too—to speak to everyone, not just Jews.

Finestone: What an absolute treat this conversation is. Let me shake it up a bit and say what I think the purpose of Jewish education is *not*. I don't think it's to "make people more Jewish," or "better Jews." I don't know how you'd even measure that in a robust way. And if we found out that a terrible criminal regularly lit Shabbat candles, that wouldn't make him a "good Jew"; it wouldn't be a Jewish educational success. I don't want to get trapped into that set of behavioral measurements.

Sterne: That's the kind of measurement I leave to God, actually.

Finestone: Agreed. So what *is* the purpose of Jewish education? I always think about something Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, used to say about why all of the ancient civilizations had come and gone except the Jews: "The Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built the Parthenon, the Romans built the Colosseum, all the while Jews built schools." Jewish education is like a thread that I can pull all the way back

through a couple of thousand years, and also across all of the places where Jews have ever lived. That's a kind of purpose in and of itself—to not break that thread.

But I also agree with what Leon said about the enormous wealth of knowledge and wisdom that has been built up in our texts, and that people like Abi and Leon are still building up today. It didn't stop at Sinai—it's continued for millennia, in part to make the wisdom accessible and useful for everyone, like a piece of incredibly complex software that's been updated for thousands of years. How inefficient it would be to ignore all of that! Up on our Jewish bookshelves we have some of the greatest books ever; it seems like quite a *shonda* not to use them. We want people to say, "There's something in my tradition that talks about this or that life experience—how can I mine the tradition for guidance?" It helps you to become a whole human being.

There's no replacement for literacy, and there's also no shortcut to literacy. It is, as Leon said, a lifelong journey. And this is for everyone—at our foundation we talk about "all Jews, their families and their friends," recognizing that we're living in a world where the separation between Jews and non-Jews is just nonexistent. We can't expect that we're going to be able to cordon Jews off and provide experiences just for them; we need to throw the doors wide open.

Herman: Great point—so let's get into that. Who is Jewish education for? Individuals, institutions, and communities have limited resources—they can't be all things to all people. Whom should we be focusing on?

Morris: First, I'll repeat my colleague's comment that the Torah belongs to everyone. That said, individual institutions still have to make choices, as do funders. One of the trends that troubles me is that it seems that we've chosen to ignore a critical

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category of learners: the people who are the *most* engaged and want to go even deeper. These are people who could offer so much return on a deep investment in their education, because of what they turn around and do with that education. We imagine that these people are doing fine on their own, so we focus instead on getting Jewish learning “to scale.” But that often means we can touch more people, but only in shallow ways. Let's consider what's being lost, what's *not* happening in Jewish life, in the world of Jewish ideas, as a consequence.

I think a lot about a piece I read at the beginning of the pandemic by [Jewish Funders Network CEO] Andres Spokoiny, where he hypothesized that Jewish communities would emerge from the pandemic with a massive spiritual hunger, but that we wouldn't have the theological and spiritual ideas that we needed to address it. We haven't been investing enough in content, he argued, or in producing our future intellectual powerhouses. I think we need to be cultivating a Jewish leadership that is *deeply* knowledgeable, and *loves* learning, and is *mastering* it. Rather than spread ourselves thin, we need to create *thickness* in Jewish life—a *thicker* Reform movement, a *thicker* Conservative movement, etc. I want to see more investment in intellectual leaders, rabbis, educators. More investment in Jewish ideas.

Herman: Barry, what's your take on that? Your foundation invests both in breadth and in depth—but even you have to make choices.

Finestone: Actually, I want to push back on the notion that there's a scarcity of resources that requires us to take from one thing and give to another. We have a lot of foundations, Federations, and individual donors, and together, we have tremendous resources. We might not be deploying those resources as wisely or as generously as we could—but they're there to be activated.

I agree with Leon about doubling down on the people who are very much on the “inside.” Frankly, funders have been responsible for a lot of where we are today, and not in a good way—we've aimed for quick and observable solutions, rather than investing in idea generation and in leaders who might take *decades* to truly become masterful. We need to be giving people more space and time to think, and to dig deeper, to dream. When one of our program officers recently asked Abi what else she wanted to be doing, her answer became the new book she wrote with Robbie Gringras, *For the Sake of Argument*. That's what we need more of—more ways to help our great educators to achieve their highest and best use. Instead, we ask them to run organizations, where we then judge them on, say, whether they got 105 people to a program instead of 100. Why aren't we asking them about where they think Jewish communities are going to be in the next 50 years, and what it would take to prepare for that?

If you look at American Jewish history, you see that there was a kind of flourishing of Jewish life in the 1920s. American Jews realized they were safe in America, and this led to a lot of experimentation in Jewish education, synagogue life, rabbinic training. The Depression slowed down this growth, and then the Shoah and the founding of the State of Israel, two of the most cataclysmic events in Jewish history, consumed our attention for decades. We changed the world through our organizational and philanthropic responses to all of this, but there was a cost:

We neglected to prioritize Jewish education. And now we have a couple of generations of basically illiterate Jews.

Morris: Another component to this history is that Jews responded to freedom in America in part by emulating their neighbors, for whom the most respectable institution was the church. So American Jews invested creativity, energy, and money in the synagogue—primarily constituted as a *beit tefillah* (house of prayer)—even though the Jewish institution that seems *most* compatible with who American Jews really are is actually the *beit midrash*, the house of study. Why, with all of our skepticism about dogma, did we create synagogues that we only occasionally went to, rather than houses for conversation, reading, arguing, discussion, which is what we *love* to do?

Herman: I love that we’re bringing a historical perspective to this. Where we are today is due to choices previous generations made, and we ourselves are making choices that shape the future. So tell me about some things you’re seeing that you want more of—the bright spots in the Jewish-education landscape.

Sterne: One program I’ve been thinking about throughout this conversation is Honeymoon Israel, specifically because of the comment that Barry made about how intertwined Jews and non-Jews are. Honeymoon Israel takes groups of couples—including couples where one partner is Jewish and the other is not—on thoughtful trips to Israel. I’ve worked with their groups in Israel, and it’s remarkable to see the lack of distinction between the Jews and the non-Jews. It pushes me, productively, to ask about my own work: How do we make sure this is all really open to everyone? What are the implications of making sure that our Jewish institutions and communities are open to everyone? What gets stunted and what gets developed?

Finestone: Let me add another layer onto this. One of the questions

that drives me bananas is: “What trends are you seeing in Jewish life?” The question should be: “What trends are we seeing in *life overall*?” Here’s one: The most transformative innovations often take *years* to develop. This phone I’m holding in my hand took decades of experimentation. Big ideas don’t emerge fully formed. We need patience, experimentation, and investment in our superstars.

And we need to think about what truly moves people. I’ve been reflecting on two words that I believe are core to what the best of Jewish education and Jewish life can be: beautiful and delightful. How do we show people that so many elements of Jewish education, Judaism, Jewish life are both beautiful and delightful? For example: In my family, we bless our children every Shabbat. And it’s just beautiful and delightful—and would be for anyone, even if they did it at 5:30 on a Tuesday. And it’s a doorway, opening up a whole world of thinking, learning, feeling: How do we think about family? About taking care of people?

Where we make a mistake, I think, is that we’re often thinking in terms of “what’s this problem that I need Jewish education to solve,” rather than “how do I make this tradition welcoming, beautiful, and intriguing?”

Sterne: Barry, this idea of “beauty and delight” reminds me of a line from Psalms (Psalm 119:92): לֹלְגֵי תוֹרַתְךָ שְׂשׂוּעַי אֲזִי אֶבְרַתִּי בְּעָנִי, which means, “Were not your Torah my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.” Delight—*sha’ashuai*—is like a plaything. Torah, Jewish learning, is our plaything, our beauty and our delight—without it, we’d be lost, we’d be impoverished. That’s the vision of Jewish education.

I’ll add another example. We haven’t yet talked about Jewish *community*, another element at the core of Jewish life and Jewish education. You just can’t really “do Jewish” without being in community. One of the most broken and heartbreaking trends today, especially in America, is the epidemic of loneliness in many

places — people feel unmoored, without anchors, and alone. It's, of course, so much worse after the pandemic. The other day, a friend of mine in the States told me that her kids don't have anyone to play with during the week, because they don't live near anyone else. And I just cannot imagine a reality like that. Because of my communal obligations, because my Jewish life can't be lived without other people, I'm constantly enmeshed in community. And this is a place where Jewish education and Jewish life can help anyone, because it's teaching us, even commanding us, not to be alone.

Finestone: We've recently done some research among Jewish young adults, and one of the things that stood out is that when you ask young Jews where they're going, where the Jewish people are going, they have no idea. They don't have a sense for a Jewish future; they don't have aspirations for it. It can't just be about passing the torch, but more about what we've been discussing: thriving, empowerment, creativity — all those things at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and not just survival, which is at the bottom. We're not doing a good job of talking about what a better world actually looks and feels like, and how Jewish learning, Jewish ideas, Jewish texts can help get us there.

Morris: I'm sure you've all seen the paper that Jon Levisohn of Brandeis wrote about this, about a new paradigm for Jewish literacy. He argues that Jewish literacy means having the capacity to create new forms of Jewish cultural life, being a producer of Jewish life, not just a consumer. That's not passing a torch — it's passing crayons, or an easel and paints. It means saying: Now it's *your turn* to take this wisdom and see what you make with it.

Finestone: Yes, I loved that paper, and that kind of creative thinking about literacy and education is definitely a bright spot. Here's another: the absolute explosion in text study in America in the non-Orthodox world over the past couple of decades.

This needs to be part of the way we're educating professionals as well as lay leaders — to embrace the learning that comes from being in dialogue with, and even arguing with, people who think differently from them.

Sefaria has revolutionized access to text forever; Hadar and the Shalom Hartman Institute and Pardes are engaging thousands of people in study of all kinds every year; new organizations like SVARA are taking particular approaches to the text and opening it up to even more people.

If we built on these foundations and could produce a couple hundred truly great rabbis and educators in the next couple of decades, we could transform the community entirely. Some would go to congregations, some would run organizations, some would be entrepreneurs, some would teach. We know that the trouble with every great idea is that it takes good people to implement it. So let's double down on finding, training, and supporting great people. And we can't forget that great ideas come from the fringes of Jewish life as well — so "finding" people means looking everywhere.

Morris: What about a Jewish MacArthur Award?

Herman: Rabbi Ari Lamm actually proposed an idea like that in SAPIR a couple of issues ago! We should definitely keep talking about what that might look like. And that's a great transition to my last question. One of the hallmarks of SAPIR is that we try

to include policy prescriptions wherever we can. We've talked about investing more in leadership, and in giving leaders more time to think and create. What else should we be doing?

Finestone: I'd love to see more really high-quality day schools being created, that take both the Judaics and the secular education to the next level and make day schools the envy of any private or public school. Why not create a school model that we then replicate in different places? And let's create some standards for Jewish literacy—things we know that we have to teach, that people need to master, to be Jewishly literate. These are both levers that are just not being pulled at scale.

Morris: I have a few ideas. First, as I've been saying, we need to invest in depth and sophistication in Jewish education, not just entry-level programs—for hundreds of people. Second, we need to help our synagogues, JCCs and other organizations become *batei midrash* (houses of study) in their own ways, embedding Jewish education everywhere. Third, we need to invest more in Jewish educators, raising salaries so really talented people will know they can make a good living by being a teacher or a head of school. Fourth, online learning: We need a Jewish Coursera, where the greatest teachers and scholars are offering well-constructed classes in every area of Jewish studies. Fifth: Give artists deep experiences with Jewish study that will inspire new works of Jewish arts and culture. And sixth: Do something similar for Jewish social justice leaders—a deep dive into Jewish text study, so their actions will be anchored in Jewish life and have depth and nuance.

Sterne: I love that list. I'll just add one more thing to it: As Jewish educators and Jewish leaders, we need to bring Jewish wisdom to ending cancel culture—what professor and author Brené Brown calls “with me or against me culture.” Maybe we can't

change the whole world, but we can at least change this within our communities. We need to say with a strong Jewish voice that this is not okay—that we cannot be destroying people, reputations, institutions through mob behavior, social-media pile-ons. This needs to be part of the way we're educating professionals as well as lay leaders—to embrace the learning that comes from being in dialogue with, and even arguing with, people who think differently from them.

Herman: Abi, I'm so glad you brought that up. Jewish texts, of course, are a monument to argument and disagreement. But we're seeing more and more examples of people who are shamed for thinking differently, or who are accused, tried, and convicted by a mob before they even get a chance to explain themselves. This doesn't only feel un-Jewish—it's also un-American. Whatever happened to due process and free speech? How can we have any kind of education, Jewish or other, in an environment that punishes disagreement, resorts to name-calling, and excommunicates? I agree that we need a systemic intervention, framed in Jewish wisdom, to stop this.

Morris: This is the Torah of the rabbinic tradition that America needs more now than ever before, that the world needs more than ever before. We need 100 different versions of the book that Abi and Robbie just wrote—and hundreds of people like them who are willing to say such things. That's why Pardes created our Makhloket Matters programs and educational series, which uses Jewish texts to help people engage more constructively in disagreements. This is the *tikkun olam* of the 21st century—what Jews can do to heal the world.

Herman: That seems like a pretty perfect way to end this conversation. Thank you all not only for your wisdom today, but for all of the hard work you put into Jewish education every day. May you go from strength to strength. *