



Utilizing Jewish Content in the Part Time Jewish Education Setting: An Invitation to Deepen and Enrich

Rabba Yaffa Epstein, Rabbi David E. Levy, Mara Braunfeld

In the past, there was a perception by some that formal Jewish education should mean depositing knowledge into learners, with the goal of creating literate and knowledgeable Jews who felt ready to participate fully in Jewish life. A critique leveled at this type of education was that it did not allow our students' individual interests to emerge, nor did it provide an understanding of the ways that Jewish learning could nurture and support them in navigating their own lives. Over the past several decades, and intensified by the pandemic, a movement emerged to place a greater focus on relationship-development and nurturing a sense of belonging. This approach helped learners to feel more connected to their learning and to one another, but did not necessarily allow them to understand the unique gifts that Jewish wisdom, ritual, and tradition offered them.

Today, there is a need for recalibration. Jewish education must be content-rich AND relationship-driven, deeply centered on Jewish texts AND life-relevant, meaningful AND engaging. It must lead to our students thriving. Equipping Jewish educators – at every level – with deeper and richer Jewish content, and pedagogic tools to make that content meaningful is a necessary path forward.

Rooted in Research:

During the 2023-2024 academic year, The Jewish Education Project convened a Think Tank of eight senior educators who have dedicated their careers to bringing Deep Rich Jewish Content (DRJC) to their learners. These educational leaders—represent diverse institutions around the country, and across the educational world, from synagogue environments to independent after-school programs to academic institutions—collectively explored their methodologies, identified points of convergence and divergence, and helped develop a practical toolkit to allow educators to successfully integrate deeper Jewish content into their learning environments.

The participating organizations included [Makom Community](#) (Philadelphia); [Institute for Jewish Enrichment](#) (Chicago); [Adas Israel Congregation](#) (Washington DC); [Temple Shalom](#) (Dallas), [Hadar Institute](#) (New York); [Pardes Center for Jewish Educators](#) (Jerusalem); and The Jewish Education Project.

Shared Successes:

The think tank participants discovered four core values that produce positive outcomes regardless of the setting:

1. **Listen to the child in front of you** - Listening to children and their ideas shows that we take them seriously as Jewish learners, and models how they also ought to see themselves. This leads to more active participation and investment in learning.
2. **Model an approach to Jewish text that incorporates curiosity and wonder** - When educators demonstrate genuine enthusiasm and inquisitiveness toward Jewish texts and traditions, learners naturally follow suit. This creates an environment where questioning is valued and where intellectual exploration is celebrated.
3. **Jewish Education must be about empowerment and agency** - Rather than positioning learners as passive recipients of knowledge, effective Jewish education equips learners with the skills, confidence, and authority to engage with Jewish texts and traditions on their own terms.
4. **Choose depth over breadth** - Attempting to "cover" vast amounts of content with limited time often results in superficial learning. By exploring fewer topics with greater depth and intentionality, learners are more likely to develop meaningful connections and transferable skills that serve them well into the future.

A New Paradigm:

This toolkit represents not just a collection of teaching strategies, but a fundamental shift in how we should approach Jewish education—one that honors both our rich tradition and the unique needs and capabilities of today's learners.

We outline six fundamental pedagogic approaches that enable educators to bring deeper Jewish content into their classrooms while ensuring learners thrive: 1) The Use of Primary Text, 2) Introducing learners to Textual Layering, 3) Exploring Text through Multiple Modalities, 4) Creating a Relationship-Centered Pedagogy, 5) Demonstrating Authenticity and Vulnerability, and 6) Developing Self-Efficacy in Learners.

These tools represent tested methodologies that have transformed Jewish education in diverse settings across the country. Each pedagogic approach is displayed in [individual videos](#) where our partners explain and demonstrate their particular tool.

There are real challenges in the Part-Time Jewish Education space such as limited time with students, educators who lack foundational knowledge, and educators facing a barrier

to viewing themselves as capable of teaching texts. Yet the think tank's work shows that with appropriate training, support, and resources, these barriers can be overcome.

What makes this approach important is its rejection of false binary. We need not choose between relevance and rigor, between accessibility and authenticity, or between engagement and depth. Indeed, this think tank demonstrated repeatedly that students are most engaged precisely when they encounter Jewish content in its full richness and complexity.

Just the Beginning:

The Jewish Education Project is developing a full resource platform for deep, rich, Jewish content. As these methodologies spread across the Jewish educational world, we can look forward to a generation of learners who not only feel pride in being Jewish, but who also feel empowered to take ownership of their Jewish lives, drawing on their Jewish textual heritage to navigate their lives in a complex world.