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To cite this article: Miriam Heller Stern (2019) Jewish Creative Sensibilities: Framing a New Aspiration for Jewish Education, *Journal of Jewish Education*, 85:4, 429-446, DOI: [10.1080/15244113.2019.1686336](https://doi.org/10.1080/15244113.2019.1686336)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15244113.2019.1686336>



Published online: 11 Dec 2019.



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Jewish Creative Sensibilities: Framing a New Aspiration for Jewish Education

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ABSTRACT

Proponents of building a “creative society” through educational innovation are calling for engaging learners in new modes of collaboration, problem solving, and original thinking. How might the enterprise of Jewish education contribute to this evolution in creative thinking and action? This article explores how “the Jewish sensibilities” can be adapted into a framework infusing Jewish “ways of seeing and being” into a vision of “Jewish education for a creative society.” The proposed conceptual framework aims to spark conversation, experimentation, research, and inquiry within the broader discourse of rethinking the aims of Jewish education for the future.

KEYWORDS

Sensibilities; creativity;
creative; Jewish education;
mind-set

Leaders in creative reform in education recommend that educating for the “knowledge society” we live in today, in which vast amounts of information are accessible to anyone with an internet connection, is already becoming outdated, as it does not equip today’s learners with the skills they need to navigate an unknown future. Instead, they advocate that education must already anticipate and bring about a “creative society,” where participants know how to develop, discern, and leverage knowledge for the good of humanity and the world. A society can be creative when people are prepared to collaborate and generate inventive and useful responses to the challenges of the times. In a creative society, people are ready to confront the problems of their day with imagination, empathy, and courage. In this context, creative thinking can be understood as the process by which humans figure out how to survive and flourish in a cultural context (Clapp, 2017; Immordino-Yang, 2016; Resnick, 2017; Robinson, 2015). How might Jewish learners participate in the project of building a creative society, and how might the enterprise of Jewish education contribute to this evolution in creative thinking and action?

In this essay, I explore why a framework for Jewish creative thinking is a useful and necessary aim for the field of Jewish education today and suggest how we might begin to structure such a framework. Inspired by “the Jewish sensibilities” (Ochs, 2003, 2006), I offer an adaptation, “Jewish creative sensibilities,” which

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could serve as a teaching and learning framework that harnesses Jewish “ways of seeing and being” to the vehicles of creative thinking that are at the vanguard of progressive education today. I offer the Jewish creative sensibilities framework in the context of other compelling efforts to define the aims and curriculum of education in terms of the teaching and learning of “habits of mind” (Meier, 1995) and “creative, flexible mindsets” (Boaler, 2019). Using these models, I argue that the sensibilities have potential as a flexible and transferrable system of Jewish thinking that spans the ages, beyond being a set of fixed Jewish content standards. This conceptual argument, with examples of practice, adds a new dimension to the discourse on Jewish educational aims that questions and offers alternatives to Jewish continuity and Jewish identity (Levisohn & Kelman, 2019; Moore & Woocher, 2019; Woocher, 2015, 2012). Jewish creative sensibilities is an experimental model and an invitation to further discourse and research among practitioners and researchers who seek new language to articulate the aims of a Jewish educational enterprise that is successfully positioned to face a world of uncertainty and opportunity (Stern, 2018).

Creative Thinking and Action: Building a Creative Society

If education is to be a lever for social change, a vision for a creative society requires a redesign of how we think about educational aims, curriculum, and pedagogy. In his book, *Lifelong Kindergarten* (2017), Mitchel Resnick describes the creative thinking that MIT Media Lab’s school and extracurricular programs are designed to generate, with an eye toward a changing world. “As the pace of change in the world continues to accelerate, people must learn how to adapt to constantly changing conditions. Success in the future – for individuals, for communities, for companies, for nations as a whole – will be based on the ability to think and act creatively,” he writes (p. 158). While the innovation sector is one driver in this shift in aims, he adds a moral and social dimension as well:

The shift to a creative society presents both a need and an opportunity. There is a pressing need to help young people develop as creative thinkers so that they’re prepared for life in a fast-changing world. At the same time, we can use this transition as an opportunity to promote a more humane set of values in society. One of the best ways to help young people prepare for life in a creative society is to make sure they have a chance to follow their interests, to explore their ideas, to develop their voices. Those are values I would have wanted in any era, but they’re more important now than ever before (p. 158).

Skeptics might question if creativity can be taught. They may believe that creativity is an innate quality that certain geniuses are born with, or that creativity is associated only with the arts, entertainment, and innovation. Advocates for a new focus on creative thinking in education debunk each of these assumptions and reclassify creativity as a multidisciplinary process of substantive thinking that leads to better problem solving, ingenuity, and

human flourishing (Clapp, 2017). Sir Ken Robinson (2015), one of the more renowned advocates of creativity in education, defines creativity as “the process of having original ideas that have value” (p. 118). Learning environments can be designed to foster the generating of original ideas, as well as testing, refining, and curating them. Robinson writes that creativity is not simply “having off the wall ideas,” but also involves developing one’s capacity for critical and associative thinking. “Creativity also involves making critical judgments about whether what you’re working on is any good, be it a theorem, a design, or a poem ... It’s a dynamic process that often involves making new connections, crossing disciplines, and using metaphors and analogies” (p. 119).

Studies of creativity explain the creative process as sociocultural, determined not just by the individual creator but by how the creator’s thinking and work are received by an appropriately knowledgeable audience, and the value determined by that audience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sawyer, 2006). In other words, the value of creative work is defined in part by its effect on the community. New research on learning in creative classrooms (Clapp, 2017) further emphasizes the participatory, collaborative nature of creativity, particularly in group project work that benefits from multiple voices with different talents, in the context of a social environment. Such collaboration leads not only to the generation of new ideas that are of value in society, but to greater access and equity when learners are invited to participate.

Experts in neurobiological research who recognize the intersection of emotion and cognition in our daily thoughts, point to creative thinking as a desirable practice to deepen learning, understanding, and applied thinking across diverse content areas, including math (Boaler, 2016, 2019), ethics, and morality (Immordino-Yang, 2016), science and innovation (Clapp, 2017; Resnick, 2017).

Creative Thinking in Jewish Education

Is there a uniquely Jewish educational framework that can contribute to this emergent vision of a “creative society”? What does creative thinking look like in Jewish educational spaces and why is it essential? Before I explore the theoretical landscape and chart the various conceptual models that inspire my adaptation of Jewish sensibilities, consider these two current images of creative thinking in Jewish education that enable learners to engage with and apply Jewish ideas in original, relevant ways:

In an elective called Coding T’fillah at Boston’s Jewish Community Day School (JCDS), middle schoolers create apps to help users choose how to pray, depending on their mood and motivation. One student’s design allows users to select traditional prayer or meditation, another develops a virtual minyan (prayer quorum), a third loads an app with student commentaries, and yet another includes a choice of nature scenes for virtual inspiration. In the process

of generating, planning, and creating these apps, the young designers reflect on the meaning of the liturgy and consider the relationship between conventional fixed prayer structures and dynamic personal interpretation. They anticipate with empathy the diverse authentic feelings and prayer needs of their intended users. They contribute original tools of value into the world. In a subject area that many Jewish educators struggle to frame in a manner that captures student interest, their faculty supervisor describes the Coding T'fillah process as “generating genuine excitement, and it’s challenging enough to keep the students totally engaged” (Oren Kaunfer, in “Coding T’fillah Elective,” 2019 <https://vimeo.com/321560730>).

In another example of creative Jewish thinking, six- to eight-year-old learners at *Mayim Tamid*, an afterschool learning program at Temple Beth Sholom (TBS) in Needham, MA, get excited about making collaborative welcoming artwork to decorate the stairwell in their section of the building. Though initially the project was just for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, the children asked their teacher if they could continue to create projects that would contribute to the building and the community throughout the year. “This turned into a meta-goal for the group: ownership for taking care of the greater TBS community. . . . The children made signs for the Mayim entrance for every holiday. They made Purim mishloach manot (gifts of food) for TBS staff. When they cooked as a group activity, the plan became to cook for others in the building, and the kids became increasingly aware of who those people were.” Before long they were feeding the janitors, office staff, and the rabbis. As their Jewish Learning Guide (the institution’s variation on teacher) described, “When we’d bring it to people in the temple, they’d ask, ‘What’s this for? What is the occasion?’ and the kids would say, ‘We just wanted to make you something, just to be kind’” (Battis & Happel, 2019, pp. 31–32). Their motivation to make more, and to do it in new ways, took over, spilling purpose into each new idea and task, sparked by a desire to contribute something meaningful to their community.

Both of these examples of Jewish creative thinking show learners engaged in the practices of imagination, collaboration, problem solving, creating with a sense of purpose, and making something new of value, in the context of exploring Jewish ideas, language, and practice in their own lives. They are already building habits of anticipating the needs of others with new creations, before they even approach the age of adulthood. They are using the technologies available to them and learning through a variety of modalities. They are not just applying creative thinking to a fixed Judaism; they are thinking Jewishly in distinctively creative ways to invent their own Jewish lives and contribute to the lives of others.

It is common in Jewish education to think about how to apply “21st-century skills” to deliver and explore Jewish content. But what if we could articulate a set of Jewish thinking skills that integrate authentically with the creative thinking skills that headline progressive education today, enabling Jewish learners to

improve their own Jewish lives, their communities, and the world around them? How might we describe the modes of thinking involved in these tasks, as a set of aims and aspirations for Jewish education in the 21st century? How might these modes of thinking comprise a uniquely Jewish contribution to building a creative society? In the sections that follow, I outline why Jewish sensibilities offer compelling Jewish language not just for living Jewishly, but for applying Jewish wisdom to think and act creatively.

Jewish Sensibilities: Jewish Ways of Thinking

In a now classic essay in *Sh'ma Journal: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, Vanessa Ochs (2003) shared her observation that liberal Jews operate with a basic set of “Jewish sensibilities” that guide them in life. She defined these “sensibilities” as “particularly Jewish ways of thinking about what it means to be human, ways that guide and orient a person’s actions and choices. Knowing the code can help us anticipate how we’ll lead our lives and make decisions.” Noting that these “principles” are commonly held among American liberal Jews, Ochs pointed to the usefulness of the sensibilities framework “to Jewish communities thinking about ritual practices (in particular, ritual innovation) and ways to engage the spiritually disenfranchised.” She posited that these sensibilities were not taught through a formal curriculum, but rather learned in the “helter skelter fashion” of lived life and sharing culture: through stories, songs, role-modeling, and oft-cited sacred texts. Ochs included in her original list of sensibilities “Honor: Kavod,” “Dignity: Being in the Image of God: Tzelem Elohim,” “Saving a Life: Pikuach Nefesh,” and “Repairing the World: Tikkun Olam.”

Various efforts have been developed to teach “the code” and spark reflective conversations about how the sensibilities feature in learners’ lives. Students at Kent State University Hillel, with the guidance of Senior Educator Rabbi Lee Moore, created a deck of cards defining each sensibility. The Lippman-Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah supported Hillel International’s (2016) development of an interactive guide to the cards, and a beautifully designed and accessible curriculum of texts and learning activities for Hillel professionals to engage college students in learning about the sensibilities. The Lippman-Kanfer Foundation website (<https://lkflt.wordpress.com/our-work/jewish-sensibilities/>) (Lippman-Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, n.d.) features a page where the various sensibilities appear with discussion questions for seekers. The publication where Ochs originally tested the concept of Jewish sensibilities, *Sh'ma*, has itself been recast as *Sh'ma Now: A Journal of Jewish Sensibilities*, and includes discussion and reflection questions to invite readers to apply the journal’s commentaries to their lives. As a collective, these efforts have been focused on (mostly informal) adult learning.

There also have been nascent efforts to expand the sensibilities into a sophisticated framework for articulating and assessing the outcomes of Jewish education. In an essay included in the collection “Beyond Jewish Identity” (Levisohn & Kelman, 2019), Lee Moore and Jonathan Woocher (z”l) proposed an expansion of the sensibilities framework into goal-setting language in Jewish education, to replace the goals of Jewish identity and continuity that dominated the Jewish educational discourse since 1990. Building on Woocher’s previous challenges to the field (2012, 2015), they argued, the focus on continuity as an outcome – a perpetuation of Judaism and ongoing engagement of Jews – coupled with a particularistic view of Jewish identity, fails to adequately engage Jewish education in serving the broad, autonomous, diverse interests of 21st-century Jews. “Although the language of Jewish identity and continuity is still present in the discussion of educational goals, it is increasingly evident that it is insufficient to guide educators today from both a conceptual and practical perspective,” Moore and Woocher state. “We need goals that are more specific, more in tune with what learners are seeking, and more ambitious in terms of their potential impact” (p. 243).

Searching for “a vocabulary for thinking and talking about educational goals that addresses the broadest human purposes in a distinctively Jewish voice” (p. 246), Moore and Woocher suggest that Jewish sensibilities is a compelling paradigm for redefining the outcomes of Jewish education. Jewish sensibilities, they write, provide “a language” that “addresses the totality of our lives – how we approach the world, not only our Jewishness” (pp. 255–256).

This critique highlights several reasons why a new paradigm beyond that of identity or continuity is needed. First, identifying common goals in Jewish education is challenging when the curriculum is tugged between imbibing Jewish knowledge and practices on the one hand and the fostering of a particularistic Jewish identity or sense of belonging on the other. Moreover, when attempting to align 21st-century skills to Jewish learning, ostensibly a bridging of general and Jewish education, what inherently Jewish framework of thinking, sophisticated in its depth but accessible to learners and relevant to their full lives, exists to unite and guide the enterprise of Jewish education? Or are we simply applying 21st-century skills to Jewish content, without redefining Jewish skills of learning and living for the 21st century?

Playing with their own list of sensibilities and definitions, Moore and Woocher add a series of sensibilities to Ochs’s original formulation that emphasize both personal meaning and collective responsibility, integrating universal and particular commitments, including: “*Lech lecha* (Take Yourself and Go),” “*Na’aseh v’Nishmah* (We Will Do and We Will Hear)” and “*Brit* (Partnership)” (p. 251). Attempting to thread the needle between unity and diversity, autonomy and prescription, they explain, “The beauty of Jewish

sensibilities as a language in our view is that it invites diverse, creative expression while nevertheless always mapping to a common cultural core” (p. 258). It is the possibility that the sensibilities framework can hold both commonality and creativity, community and individuality, that I find most compelling for the project of imagining particularly Jewish ways of thinking to contribute to the creative society.

Jewish Sensibilities and Jewish Values: How Is This System Distinct?

How is this framework different from Jewish values? “Jewish values” in the vernacular sense, as they are commonly taught in Jewish learning programs, tend to reflect Jewish beliefs and ideals, which may also translate into sensibilities. In these settings, Jewish values operate as content standards that are intended to be practiced in real life. The curricularization of Jewish sensibilities into neat categories, labeled by titles, with accompanying discussion questions, texts, and examples from Jewish ritual life and practice, has the potential to blur the distinction between Jewish sensibilities and Jewish values, when the unit of analysis is how the value is prescribed in the curriculum (reflecting intended outcomes).¹ In contrast, I propose that we seek to make sensibilities visible in the myriad ways that individuals adopt and experience them in the nuanced contexts of their lives across the life span (actual outcomes, which may or may not be measurable or measured, and will look different at different stages of life).

As I explore the potential of teaching Jewish sensibilities the way we teach “habits of mind” and “mind-sets” below, I further clarify this framework as distinct from current practices in teaching Jewish values. One might think of the “Jewish creative sensibilities” framework as the ways that we condition ourselves to think, discern, design, and act, through a variety of life experiences, rather than encountering them as ideals in an encapsulated planned lesson. Adopting sensibilities means internalizing a thought process that one learns to go through when presented with a dilemma, a design challenge, a relationship to develop, or a community to build. Sensibilities are located in process more than product.

Sensibilities are a way of describing the enactment of “emotional thought,” the interdependent cognitive and affective activity that occupies much of our brains’ daily work as we interact with the world around us (Immordino-Yang, 2016). While many Jewish educators have adopted the habit of separating affective, behavioral, and cognitive goals in their planning, brain research points to the human tendency to integrate these processes. The more we integrate our thoughts and our feelings,

¹Some notable examples of Jewish values curricula and educational resources include the Hebrew University Melton Centre’s Jewish Values Project, the Shalom Learning online learning platform for children, and many day schools that use a list of favored values as the guiding principles for their scope and sequence.

the more we engage our sensibilities and associate them with new situations, we develop and strengthen neural pathways in the brain that enable us to do more of that thinking (Boaler, 2019; Siegel, 2015). The Jewish creative sensibilities are a framework that focuses specifically on the genres of Jewish creative thought that produce new avenues of Jewish flourishing.

Can Sensibilities Be Taught?

Responding to the expansion of the “Jewish sensibility business,” Ochs (2018) questioned the efficacy and depth of accessible representations of sensibilities and expressed hope that Woocher’s thinking about a potential educational framework would be expanded for the betterment of Jewish education and Jewish life (which it is in the posthumously published article cited above, coauthored with Moore, 2019). As Ochs reappraised the applications of her original formulation, she cautioned against “prescribing Jewish sensibilities off-label,” and reiterated her original intent: that the sensibilities could be learned and imbibed over time, through life experience, contact with others adopting those sensibilities, and sharing of culture. She wondered, “Can Jewish sensibilities actually be taught as a curriculum? That is my biggest question – can one formally learn what one usually learns through living?” (p. 26).

I believe the answer to Ochs’s query is affirmative. When we organize curriculum and educational outcomes not simply in terms of content knowledge, but as ways of thinking, ways of approaching learning, and ways to learn in a social context with an eye toward improving that social context, the Jewish sensibilities framework has potential for deep and rich expansion in both formal and informal Jewish education. The sensibilities framework would be wasted if it were simply applied as another prescription for Jewish character education or moral education steeped in Jewish practices, stories, and texts. Nor would I advocate for the sensibilities to be a set of content outcomes such as definitions to be memorized, vocabulary words to apply, or even texts to elicit reflection. And finally, I would not reduce the sensibilities to a list of behavioral outcomes to be logged on a chart with gold stars or hours for community service.

The real power of the sensibilities framework, accessed through lived experience, texts, stories, histories, and culture, is that it offers a way of capturing and organizing Jewish habits of thinking, inquiry, sense making, and knowing – what is often referred to in education as “habits of mind.” Habits of mind are reinforced over time, through applications in various subject areas and learning experiences. The “Jewish sensibilities” (if we are playful with Ochs’ list and Moore’s and Woocher’s adapted list) can be expanded into a framework for synthesizing Jewish wisdom with the habits of mind and mind-sets that feature in progressive educational philosophy, educational neuroscience research, and the movement to engage education as

a tool for building a creative society. In the next section, I explore how leading progressive educators Deborah Meier (1995) and Jo Boaler (2016, 2019) frame progressive modes of thinking as aims of education and design tools for curriculum and pedagogy. Then, I demonstrate how a subset of Jewish sensibilities might layer over these educational theories to produce a uniquely Jewish framework for creative thinking that can improve the lives of individuals, communities, and society.

Habits of Mind

In her now classic manifesto “The Power of Their Ideas,” Deborah Meier (1995) championed the idea that curriculum should be designed to strengthen students’ thinking, including asking questions like: Why? What if? How do you know? And, So what? Indeed, a whole industry has risen around the habits of mind that make people more effective and successful. Meier’s vision surpassed the individual though, applying a Deweyan vision of school as a place to strengthen democratic practices, including care, compassion, empathy, open-mindedness, respect for evidence, healthy skepticism, and reliability. In her then experimental school within a school, Meier tested the possibility that the curriculum could be governed by “habits of mind,” rather than a particular canon of topics, books, historical events, and subjects in math and science typical of high school curricular frameworks. Writing a quarter-century ago, her formulation is eerily prescient when revisited today, considering current social trends, including the fragile current state of civil discourse, “fake news,” polarization, and social network-driven relationships in the information age:

If we agree that what we want are citizens with a lively curiosity – who ask, How come? And, why? And, is it truly so? – we’ll have the start of a new definition of “well-educated.” How about being closely *observant*, prepared to keep one’s eyes and ears open for patterns, for details, for the unusual? Schooling should encourage *playfulness* – the capacity to imagine, to wonder, to put things together in new and interesting ways – as well as the possession of a *skeptical and open mind*. To be in the habit of *imagining how others think*, feel and see the world – in the habit of stepping into the shoes of others – should surely be one of our new basics. (How else, after all, can we follow the Golden Rule?) And of course we need to be *respectful of evidence*, to distinguish good data from bad, to hesitate before sounding off without any facts. I’d add *knowing how to communicate* carefully, persuasively, and powerfully in a variety of media – including the skilled use of written and spoken language. My definition would also put a high premium on *caring* enough about the world and one’s fellow citizens to take a stand and defend it. My definition will also honor the work ethic. ... It’s not only old-fashioned factories that care about punctuality; reliability is not passé. And such habits of work are also important in a friend, a neighbor, a mate, a colleague. No community can survive if its members can’t count on each other. (pp. 170–171, emphasis added)

Meier's habits are articulated in service of a guiding vision for humanity and society, laden with purpose. It is forward thinking, responsive to the present, and grounded in history all at once, building on the foundational thinking of John Dewey's *The School and Society* (1899), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Democracy and Education* (1916), and *Experience and Education* (1938), all of which emphasize the psychology of learning and sense making, the need to make education relevant to real life and alive in lived experience, and the power of schooling to be a practice ground for democratic engagement and responsibility. The curriculum content is not fixed. Which particular topics, texts, and subjects should be covered in breadth or depth is debatable. What is unchanging is that the curriculum content is always a vehicle for developing modes of thinking and behavior, and that thinking is designed to uphold community. This is one example of how a philosophy of thinking and action can be designed and embedded in a school culture, serving as a compass for inquiry and caring that deepens learning and strengthens community and society.

Limitless Mind-sets: Promoting Creative, Flexible Thinking

What made sense philosophically and intuitively to educational theorists such as Dewey, Meier, and others in between, is complemented and extended by more recent neurobiological research on learning and the brain. In her treatise on mindset, *Limitless Mind*, Jo Boaler (2019) situates her own studies of creative, flexible mathematical thinking and overcoming "math anxiety" (2016) within Carol Dweck's (2006) research on growth mind-set, and a broad literature on the brain and neuroscientific findings about how learning happens. She presents six "keys to learning," each one overturning the myths around curriculum and learning as fixed endpoints and learners having fixed abilities. Instead, she emphasizes the brain's capacity for growth and development if we engage the brain in adaptive problem solving. The following claims are most relevant for reframing Jewish sensibilities as thinking practices to guide Jewish education:

- (1) The brain is always growing and changing; this phenomenon is called neuroplasticity. Every act of learning strengthens and connects neural pathways, each time expanding the brain's capacity to learn more. Learners' abilities are not fixed or predetermined.
- (2) Making mistakes and going back to find the solutions strengthens neural pathways in the brain. Struggle produces growth, suggesting that teachers should embrace challenge and support learners in figuring out how to navigate intellectual and creative challenge.
- (3) "Multidimensional" approaches to learning optimize the neural pathways of the brain. Considering multiple sources of evidence, different ways to visualize and solve problems, and a variety of interpretations increases

connectivity between different parts of the brain, making it a more capable muscle.

- (4) Social cognition – the power of producing knowledge in community – is a powerful neurological force. Collaboration builds confidence and competence, and increases the brain’s capacity for executive functioning. “Connecting with people and ideas enhances neural pathways and learning” (p. 166).

Boaler’s argument is that learning is process oriented, fluid, multifaceted, and social. With a “limitless” mind-set, we open ourselves to finding multiple pathways to understanding, multiple solutions to problems, and multiple perspectives and interpretations of a text. Similarly, Jewish sensibilities are guidelines for thinking; they suggest doors to open, but the pathways are lined with choices: generations of texts, traditions, stories, and cultural artifacts, pointing to multiple ways of approaching life’s dilemmas. When we consider the sensibilities as a possible application of Boaler’s mind-set, the additional scientific argument that this kind of thinking is good for our brains, is a new compelling rationale for adopting this approach in Jewish education.

The notion that anyone can learn, and the brain can be trained, aligns with and reinforces Ochs’s observation that the sensibilities are practices at a grassroots, nonhierarchical level. For the uninitiated, Jewish sensibilities are an invitation to live by a Jewish code, a code that can be accessed by anyone who is curious enough to investigate its sources and applications in breadth and detail. As such, deep Jewish thinking and meaningful Jewish living need not be limited to an elite who has already mastered a canon. This is an incredibly liberating possibility for Jews who feel shame, guilt, or unfulfilled by their “lack” of formal Jewish education (who may use the term “bad Jew” to describe themselves). Approaching a topic with a limitless mind-set dismisses the fear or anxiety associated with a belief that one simply “can’t” do that type of thinking, as many people experience in their relationship to math.² A limitless mind-set, with Jewish sensibilities as a map, can lead Jews to discover rich lived experiences that make them feel fulfilled and validated the more they practice Jewish thinking in their lives. Moreover, Jewish creative sensibilities might have an empowering effect of helping Jews feel like “good Jews” when they contribute a novel idea to society, not just when they fulfill a particularist expectation of Jewish practice.

Jewish Creative Sensibilities

In the same spirit of other researcher-practitioners who have proposed habits, mind-sets, and sensibilities that provide a compass for essential ways of thinking,

²It would be interesting to research if Boaler’s findings about math anxiety apply to Jews studying Jewish subjects or Hebrew. Anecdotally, I have observed many Jews express very similar anxiety when it comes to Jewish knowledge and Hebrew language.

I present seven sensibilities that highlight the habits of creative thinking. I have adapted from both Ochs's lists (2003, 2006) and Moore and Woocher's (2019) list and, in translating, offered my own "commentary." Behind each of these is a deep well of sacred, classical, and contemporary texts, teachings, stories, interpretations, cultural expressions, lived experiences, and historical examples of the sensibilities manifested as abstract principles and in real life.³ As I demonstrate, we can sample and remix each of these sensibilities into the habits of creative thinking as Jews, habits which I believe are essential for our survival in the world today and for the strengthening of society for tomorrow. I offer seven sensibilities for now, but I have no doubt there are more:

- *Lech lecha/Go and be bold*: Follow the courageous move of our ancestor Abraham to respond to a calling and do what is right, even if it is not the typical, popular path. One need not innovate in as groundbreaking a manner as founding monotheism was in Abraham's day, but to use Robinson's (2015) definition of creativity, don't be afraid to go out on a limb and imagine original ideas of value. This sensibility maps onto risk taking and embracing uncertainty as an essential step in allowing the possibility of creative thinking to emerge, particularly in leadership when bold choices are necessary (Beghetto, 2019).
- *Shabbat/Sacred pause*: We create for six days; and on the seventh, we pause for sacred connection and reflection. Whether we practice a traditional halachic Shabbat or create new contemporary Shabbat practices, the pause is when we reflect and renew, so that we can muster the energy to start the creative spiral again the day after.
- *Teshuva/Turning and improving*: We are not perfect. There is always room for return and improvement when we make mistakes. We can and we must revise and refine when we veer off course; we are always learning, always improving. We are never finished. Knowing that teshuva is possible opens more possibility for trying, and gives us permission to fail. When we fail, we commit ourselves to learning and repairing. A truly valuable creative idea is not born fully developed. It takes iteration, rethinking, careful retooling; when we experiment, we often have to backtrack and start over again (Robinson, 2015). The teshuva process also forces us to face those who have suffered at the expense of our failed behavior. Learning through teshuva is a reminder that we have a responsibility to deepen our empathy and our humanity when it comes to our care for others.
- *Elu v'elu (divrei Elohim Chayim)/ The divinity of difference*: This mantra was the conclusion to a famous impasse between the houses

³Space limits exploration of the content here, but a fully developed, flexible curricular framework guided by sound design principles would be a valuable project.

of Hillel and Shamai in the Talmud, where ultimately both perspectives were declared the words of a living God. The episode reminds us that there is a place for the majority and the minority in public discourse and in community. It also reminds us that distinctiveness is valued; a creative mind can see and hold new perspectives and benefits from that diversity (Grant, 2018). Often, encounters with those “other” perspectives open new doors to understanding and birth new ideas.

- *Kehillah/Participate and collaborate*: We were not meant to go it alone. For centuries, Jews have congregated, traveled, fought, celebrated, and advocated as a community. At the same time, individual voices of dissent have spoken volumes and remain documented. A creative society requires participation in projects that can succeed only with diverse voices that come together to provide multiple creative contributions. One idea fuels the next, and constructive critique is needed to perfect the work in progress (Clapp, 2017; Catmull, 2014).
- *Be a mensch/Be a good person*: Ochs (2003) explained being a mensch by citing the same human qualities that Meier prioritized at Central Park East in Harlem, and that are baked into the culture of successful, nontoxic creative environments such as Pixar Studios and *The Daily Show* (Catmull, 2014; Clapp, 2017; Grant, 2018): compassion, attentiveness, empathy, discretion, and making sacrifices when necessary. Caring is both emotional and intellectual (Meier, 1995). Caring is the foundation of healthy critique and the refining of creative ideas and products. When participants in a creative process or a learning community treat one another with kindness and compassion that behavior creates a scaffold of psychological safety that enables participants to take risks and experiment boldly, without fear or failing or retribution.
- *Yesh Tikvah/Maintaining hope*: When our inclination pulls us toward negativity and nay-saying, hope is the ability to focus on the good, and say yes. There is beauty even in struggle, buoyed by the belief that once we overcome that struggle, something good will surely result. This is the type of faith that animates optimism, which fuels creative thinking (Boaler, 2019; Grant, 2018).

These particular Jewish sensibilities reinforce the habits of creative thinkers, grounding them in a long history of creative thinking and action. They can be practiced through any discipline. They capture a Jewish way of life in a creative age.

How Are Jewish Sensibilities Taught and Learned?

How do we teach sensibilities? I offer several ways to approach this question. The first response is that we teach sensibilities the same way we teach any method of

thinking. Model them. Provide opportunities for application. Invite learners to practice them routinely. Create an environment that encourages and supports that kind of thinking with clearly stated, high expectations for participation. Impose behavioral norms that value psychological safety, such that thinking can be deepened and critique constructively improves the thinking. This is the methodology described by Nel Noddings (2005) in her groundbreaking philosophy of caring, reinforced by more recent research in affective neuroscience (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). A curriculum built on and toward habits of thinking must be supported by a learning culture that creates the conditions for such thinking to thrive. That thinking must be modeled by the teachers, rewarded with encouragement, and evaluated with appropriate assessment.

At the MIT Media Lab, as Resnick (2017) describes it, creative thinking happens in an iterative spiral. First, the learners imagine: perhaps they begin with a desire to create a castle. Next, they create it – some might work with available blocks and materials, while others develop the story of the castle and who will live there. Then, they play as they build, adding to the structure, adjusting as they go. They share their stories: what is happening in this building? What else could happen? Each idea adds new possibilities. They reflect on what they have created; perhaps the structure has toppled, and they must consider why, and test a new strategy. Then, they imagine again, starting the “creative learning spiral” over anew (p. 12). In this scenario, the teacher is a guide, reinforcing the culture of creative thinking, standing by as a resource, encouraging collaboration.

Ideally, this learning spiral continues throughout the life span. When learning is organic and authentic, adults might not even remember when or how they first encountered an idea. We need not shy away from introducing children to deep ideas, especially when they feature in their lived experience. Educational psychologist Jerome Bruner posits that any idea can be taught at any age in an intellectually honest form (Bruner, 1960). Before we even become literate, we learn behavior and practice making choices. These Jewish ways of seeing and being can be introduced as simple concepts and stories when we are young, and when they are relevant in the moments of our unfolding life experience. (There are plenty of children’s books on some of the sensibilities, and the YouTube series *Shaboom*, a project of Bimbam, introduces Jewish sensibilities to younger children and their families.) Our sensibilities grow with us in sophistication and depth throughout our lives. As we develop our literacy and inquiry skills, if our curiosity is a motivator, we can investigate the sources of each sensibility, exploring the layers of texts, commentaries, history, fiction, and lived experience to be mined and interpreted, adding new material all along the way. A good educator can guide learners through the process of owning, interpreting, and integrating those ideas into everyday life, creative problem solving, and boldly building a better society.

Living with a reflective stance is another way that we learn. There is a level of complexity built into the sensibilities framework when it is lived, which is obscured when the sensibilities are summarized as isolated subjects or topics. What happens when a particular life situation brings two sensibilities into conflict? Ochs (2006) raises this question, pointing to the sophisticated thinking demanded when weighing two values in tension. She gives the example of the case of a person's health, where "pikuach nefesh," the primacy of saving a life, may come into conflict with "b'tzelem Elohim," when the individual's state of health is severely compromising the person's human dignity. The type of synthetic thinking and deliberation required by such a dilemma is precisely what Meier's habits of mind curriculum is designed to practice. Similarly, Boaler's practice with solving problems utilizing multiple perspectives, is also designed to train the brain to not just seek the fastest answer, but to consider all possible solutions. Positioning the Jewish sensibilities "curriculum" as a path to more sophisticated Jewish reasoning and thinking has the potential to have a profound impact on how people live Jewish lives and solve problems in their workplaces and communities.

Finally, learning through the arts is often a pathway for unlocking perspectives, visions, and interpretations that cannot be captured in conventional lessons. The arts provide another vehicle for internalizing sensibilities and stretching one's own limits. Seeing through sketching, interpreting through poetic metaphor, expressing ourselves through the language of gesture and movement, provoking others to think differently through visual art and drama, all teach the skill of flexible purposing. Flexible purposing is what Elliot Eisner (adapting John Dewey's original articulation in *Experience and Education*, 1938) calls the intellectual improvisation associated with shifting the goal as the need emerges in the work (2002a, 2002b). Many of us are uncomfortable learning in the arts because we are most comfortable in a predictable process where the outcomes are prescribed and then achieved in a linear fashion. The arts give us experience in living in process, welcoming surprise, and then summoning our intellect and our emotions to shift gears and make decisions. In addition to the technical skills that arts instruction enables creatives to use, even for learners with limited technical training, exploring Jewish sensibilities through the arts can inspire new thinking about how to live fully, manage the unexpected, welcome surprising turns of events, and create boldly.

Conclusion

Ochs's rhetorical question, is it even possible to formally teach and learn the sensibilities – "can one formally learn what one usually learns through Jewish living?" – is one of the enduring dilemmas that has shaped the history of Jewish education in America. It is a question borne of emancipation, migration, and the modern world. As we investigate the landscape we live in now, and boldly

anticipate how we might contribute to and navigate what comes next, the question of how to teach intentionally what historically was taught incidentally is critical. There are sound educational philosophy and brain-based research that suggest that cultivating habits of mind and creative and flexible thinking produce more confident, competent, and creative contributors to society. The Jewish sensibilities framework suggests a starting point for integrating Jewish wisdom into these modes of thinking: learning through living, and living through learning.

Over two decades ago, in a field-shaping article summarizing the history of Jewish education, historian Jonathan Sarna (1998) posited in the *Journal of Jewish Education* that “schools serve as the primary setting, along with the home, where American Jews confront the most fundamental question of Jewish life: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, part of the larger American society and apart from it. This question . . . is what Jewish education in America is all about, and has always been. Jewish education serves as the vehicle through which we train successive generations of Jews to negotiate their own way, as Jews, in the American arena (p. 9).

The purpose and question as Sarna framed it 20 years ago is still active in the discourse and dynamics of American Jewish life. The persistence of antisemitism, demographic shifts, and the contentious and unpredictable political landscape in the United States, Israel, and the world keep the question of Jewish survival and navigation of two worlds alive in the realm of Jewish education as well. Perhaps the integration of Jewish sensibilities and creative thinking produces a contemporary strategy to address that question of Jewish survival.

We might also consider that this moment in history begs a new formulation of purpose and aspiration in Jewish education that is more ambitious and inspiring: the broad enterprise of Jewish education serves as the vehicle through which present generations, individually and collectively, learn to adapt, disrupt, and create the Judaism and the society of tomorrow. To achieve such a vision, Jewish learning environments will need to engage participants in developing the habits of mind, the Jewish creative sensibilities, that will serve them in the task of creating the world they want to see.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Dr. Diane Tickton Schuster for providing valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this article, and to Dr. Bethamie Horowitz for encouraging me to develop this essay for the *Journal of Jewish Education's* themed issue on Jewish sensibilities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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