Introduction: What the “Learning Agenda” Is and Why It Matters

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The title of this volume declares its aspiration: to advance the learning agenda in Jewish education. What does that mean? Why does something called “the learning agenda” need to be advanced? And how might that happen?

Over the past thirty years, we have seen the growth of familiar forms of Jewish education and the development of new ones. In the former category, we can name day schools, camps, academic Jewish studies, and Israel trips, as well as innovative new forms of supplementary Jewish education and renewed interest in early childhood education. In the latter, we can point to Jewish service learning, Jewish environmental and food programming, Jewish heritage tourism to other countries, online Jewish learning and Jewish gaming, and more. In every sector, talented and creative educators are developing new materials and new pedagogies.

Yet, amid the creativity and growth, we believe that contemporary American Jewish education is not as strong as it could be. And we believe that at least part of the reason for this is that American Jewish education suffers from a lack of clarity about our desired learning outcomes, inconsistent focus on and assessment of those outcomes, and insufficient understanding of the experiences of learners. For example, supplementary school educators have been known to say that their programs should be more like camp. This is undoubtedly an important development, but their focus tends to be on the atmosphere and activities, the things that make camp “fun” rather than clarifying appropriate learning outcomes or documenting impact. The field of Israel education, according to several studies, bounces between uncritical celebrations of Israel

and narrowly focused advocacy activities, lacking a coherent framework that describes what can reasonably be called “learning outcomes” in the domain of Israel education. And in higher education, academics in the field of Jewish studies tend to invest their time and energy in crafting the excellent lecture or presentation, or assembling the most important materials into a syllabus, but invest far less time in exploring their students’ understanding.

It is a truism in teacher education that novice teachers must overcome a natural tendency to focus on themselves—on saying and doing the right thing in the classroom—in order to focus on the students in front of them. In her work on novices, Sharon Feiman-Nemser calls this the “transition to pedagogical thinking.”¹ We can also describe it as a move from thinking about *teaching*, primarily, to thinking about *learning*. At the risk of hyperbole, we believe that this is a move that the field of Jewish education, as a whole, needs to make. The point is not to reach consensus or unanimity about what those desired learning outcomes are. That is unlikely to happen, and our efforts here should certainly not be understood as endorsing one particular set of learning outcomes over others. But we do believe that educational leaders in the various settings in which Jewish education takes place need to focus more attention on learning.

Thus, the “learning agenda” is shorthand for encouraging increased focus on conceptualizing learning outcomes in sophisticated ways, more sustained attention to how learning actually happens and how it sometimes fails to happen, and deeper curiosity about the experience of learners themselves in educational environments. “Advancing the learning agenda” means promoting these ideas among practitioners and researchers alike. We want educators and educational policy makers to be asking more and better questions about what kinds of learning ought to be happening, and what kinds of evidence we might have that they are.

Why? We are scholars, but our interest in advancing the learning agenda is not only a scholarly one. Our interest is also a practical one. We believe that the more we understand about what we want students to learn and how that learning comes about (or does not come about), the more directed and more effective our educational efforts will become. In other words, advancing the learning agenda in the ways we have described is a strategic intervention into the system. We believe that the best way to improve pedagogic practice is by helping educators, of all kinds, to be more reflective about their desired

1 Sharon Feiman-Nemser and Margret Buchmann, *The First Year of Teacher Preparation: Transition to Pedagogical Thinking?* (East Lansing, MI: The Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University, 1985), microfilm.

outcomes, more self-critical about the effectiveness of their teaching, and more curious about the learning of their students.

An example may be useful to illustrate what this can look like. Recently, as part of another project, we have had the opportunity to share the results of a pilot study of recent graduates of Jewish day schools—specifically, a study of their thinking about and understanding of rabbinic literature. Setting aside the specific findings of that study, what is relevant here is the reaction of educators when they learn about the findings, or even when they encounter the interview transcripts. In this case, we watched as they responded with energetic and intense curiosity. They eagerly pulled apart the data, interpreting nuances in the students’ formulations and raising endless questions about their significance. Unprompted, they turned their analyses back on their own teaching, challenging their prior assumptions, and they expressed excitement about asking similar questions of their own students or even designing their own studies.

We cannot claim that all educators will react in similar ways, of course, nor do we know precisely how these reactions will translate into classroom practices. But we consider these experiences as corroborations of our hypothesis. Professionals in the field of Jewish education have precious few opportunities to dive into the learning of their students, and few structures to support doing so. The cultures of Jewish educational programs and institutions do not emphasize this kind of attention to learning. However, when given the opportunity to do so, educators seize hold of it with enthusiasm. This is what it can look like to advance the learning agenda in Jewish education.

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For the most part, the chapters of this book do not present specific empirical studies of learners and learning (although almost all are based on empirical work by the authors or others). Instead, these chapters and this book strive to advance the learning agenda in different ways—by promoting nuanced ideas about what learning means in Jewish education and by drawing on work outside of Jewish education to propose new models and frameworks. In several instances, authors took the opportunity to think out loud, as it were, about how we might think differently about learning in Jewish education.

The first section of the book, “Learning from the Learning Sciences,” does this most explicitly. Two chapters, one by Rena Dorph and Christian Schunn and one by Janet Kolodner, build upon extensive research in science education, the most well-developed area of the learning sciences. Researchers in that field have long understood that they cannot be satisfied with rote learning, that the

desired outcomes are more subtle and nuanced (and harder to assess) than that. In Kolodner's chapter, she describes her work in developing a series of science education programs that explicitly focus on cultivating a kind of scientist- or engineer-identity, and draws implications from that work for Jewish education. Dorph and Schunn, on the other hand, delineate an outcome that they call "science learning activation," that is, a set of dispositions, practices, and knowledge that enable success in proximal learning experiences. They propose, in other words, that the goal of science education is to enable further (richer, deeper) science learning, which is enabled by "science learning activation." The analogy to Jewish education, while imperfect, is generative: they propose that in Jewish education, too, the goal is to enable further (richer, deeper) Jewish learning—and not just learning but also living.

In the third chapter in this section, Ari Kelman starts by broadening our purview; he wants us not to focus on learning specific Jewish content, primarily, but rather to think about "learning Jewish," i.e., how people learn the numerous practices, formal and informal, that comprise Jewishness. He then roams widely over the literature on learning in general education in order to chart a number of promising avenues for investigating learning in Jewish education, avenues that are attuned to the situated and social nature of learning in ways that Jewish education rarely is.

Finally, in the last chapter of this section, co-authors Lauren Resnick and Daniel Resnick call our attention to the dramatic shift in the scholarship on general education from didactic pedagogy to dialogic pedagogy—pedagogy that creates an environment for substantive conversation around a text. This paradigm emphasizes inquiry over information transmission. Notably, this kind of dialogic pedagogy has begun to take hold in fields such as science and math, and also, unsurprisingly, in the humanities. The Resnicks celebrate the tradition of text study within Judaism, but call for renewal of that tradition, especially in liberal Jewish settings.

The second section of the book, "Learning from Jewish Education," includes three chapters that focus on specific Jewish educational settings. The authors are each experienced researchers of those settings, but in these chapters, their task is not merely descriptive. Instead, they attend to those settings in order to draw out ideas or implications for learning more generally.

It is commonplace, in the study of contemporary Jews, to separate the orthodox and especially the *haredim*, or ultra-orthodox. Their lives are different, with ritual and cultural practices that seem oriented around an entirely distinct set of norms. It is a culture that, at least for men in *yeshivas*, is intensely focused

on *lernen*—a Yiddish term which is typically Anglicized to “learning” but which, unlike the standard usage of the word “learning” as an achievement term, actually signifies the process of reading and discussing classical texts. Baruch Schwarz believes, however, that we have a lot to learn from how *haredim* engage in *lernen* in *yeshivas*, especially in terms of the positive valuation of argumentation and the cultural conditions that support high levels of self-motivation for study.

The contemporary liberal Jewish summer camp is about as far from the traditional *haredi yeshiva* as one can imagine. But just as Schwarz brings the perspective of the learning sciences to bear on the latter, Joseph Reimer brings that perspective to bear on the former. And what he sees, when he does so, is an educational opportunity that is not fully realized—in part because it is not well conceptualized. His particular focus is on Shabbat at camp. Kids learn to do Shabbat, which is unlike anything they know from home, over time, through a process that looks a lot like Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s “legitimate peripheral participation.”² But then their learning trajectory flattens out. Reimer argues that David Perkins’ concept of “whole game learning”³ provides a more compelling framework, not just for understanding what *does* happen when kids learn to do Shabbat at camp, but for imagining about what *could* happen if we were to think about this process more ambitiously.

The last chapter in this section turns to Holocaust education as a location for thinking about learning. Simone Schweber begins by admitting that we may be averse to trying to learn from an extreme case like Holocaust education, but persists in her inquiry nonetheless. She avoids the standard approach, which is to emphasize the moral lessons of the Holocaust. Instead, she finds other important lessons about learning—about appreciating the “messiness” of real lives and real moral quandaries, about the ways in which contexts shape our thinking, and most generally, about a desired outcome of Jewish education that she calls “reasonable Jews.”

The third and final section of the book, “Conceptualizing Learning Outcomes,” includes four chapters that tackle the question of learning outcomes directly. Of course, this distinction is somewhat artificial, because other chapters also propose ways of thinking about what we want students or participants to learn. Dorph and Schunn, for example, proposed “Jewish learning activation” as an outcome. Kolodner focused on fostering a self-conception of

2 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

3 David N. Perkins, *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

oneself as capable within the domain of Jewishness. Schweber, we just noted, identified “reasonable Jews” as her desired outcome. But the three chapters in this section take up the question of outcomes directly, not just identifying them but exploring them and also problematizing them.

For those familiar with Sam Wineburg’s research on historical thinking, it should come as no surprise that he is impatient with hagiography or mythologizing. But in his chapter here, he tries to move beyond the poles of uncritical memory and critical history, noting that there is a role that the past does and perhaps should play that is not quite encompassed by—and in fact stands in tension with—the bounds of academic, critical history. “Can there be a course,” he asks, “that steers between dogmatic belief and absolutist disbelief?” Lurking beneath the question is a fundamental challenge to our assumptions about why study history, especially Jewish history, at all.

When we ask the question about how Jewish education differs from other kinds of education, we might be tempted to argue that Jewish education is a form of religious education. But it turns out that we’re not quite so clear on what that means. Eli Gottlieb has been thinking about and studying the religiosity of religious education for a long time, or more specifically, has been studying how children and others think about God and theology and how they might be encouraged to do so differently. His chapter here surveys what he’s learned from this process; perhaps most intriguing is his suggestion that, among our desired Jewish educational outcomes, is the capacity to engage in the kind of “epistemic switching” that he documents among a set of sophisticated Jewish adults.

The third chapter of this section argues for greater attention to social-emotional learning outcomes in Jewish education—and not just greater attention but in fact more rigorous assessment as well. The Resnicks advocated for learning texts. Reimer focused on learning Shabbat. Wineburg explored the learning of history. But for Gil Noam and Jeffrey Kress, all of these subject-specific outcomes are overly narrow, and secondary to our primary desired outcome in Jewish education as in other arenas, namely, the cultivation of healthy, well-adjusted, mature individuals, with all the inter- and intra-personal qualities that those adjectives entail. This is not an add-on to the core educational endeavor, conceived of as learning “content.” This *is* the core educational endeavor.

Thus, Noam and Kress, in expanding beyond the cognitive, build on aspects of earlier chapters. Kolodner, for example, emphasized the cultivation of a certain kind of identity. Kelman explored the myriad ways that people learn to be Jewish. Schweber’s conception of “reasonable Jews” goes far beyond what those Jews know to a stance they take toward the tradition, the community, and

the world in general. Indeed, all of the scholars in this volume would endorse the idea that advancing the learning agenda means, among other things, attending not just to what students know, and not even what they can do or how they feel, but rather, to the kinds of people that they learn to become.

Finally, the last chapter of the section and the book—co-authored by the editors—frames a debate between two different ways of thinking about the desired outcomes of Jewish education. The first way, argued by “Abraham” in the chapter, focuses on the development of the student, the Jewish individual. The second way, argued by “Sarah,” focuses on achievement within specific domains. Neither position is entirely satisfactory on its own. But in pursuing the debate, we believe that we can offer some helpful ideas to the field, to think in deeper, more nuanced, and more critical ways about learning in Jewish education. This, in the end, is the “learning agenda” that we want to advance.

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