Learning about Learning in Jewish Education

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In this chapter, Kelman begins with a critique of Jewish educational researchers' relative neglect of learning processes, and points his readers to the work of Lave and Wenger as a framework for understanding Jewish learning and its outcomes. He suggests five directions that emerge from Lave and Wenger's sociocultural learning theory: learning about and from a variety of "experts" in realms of Jewish activity or engagement; deep examination of the way learning happens in different Jewish educational settings; exploration of the broader ecology of Jewish learning; a focus on technology and Jewish learning; and the way in which "non-Jewish Jews" learn about Jewish communal participation. Through charting these directions, Kelman builds his case for the importance of greater attention to Jewish learning as a focus for Jewish educational research.

Nobody is born Jewish. Everyone who sees themselves as Jewish or who engages with Jewish culture, Judaism, or Jewishness in some way, has learned to do so. For some, it is the result of their family of origin or the context of their upbringing. Others choose to be Jewish as adults. Still others marry into Jewish families, become friends with Jews, or otherwise find themselves participants in Jewish communities and rituals in spite of identifying otherwise. In any event, engaging in Jewish life results from an array of acquired skills, cultivated in classes or summer camping, constructed from knowledge gathered from any number of sources, nurtured in the practice of family-based rituals or through participation in a synagogue, community, or Jewish social organization. The data and discourse favoring families with two Jewish parents over those with one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent support this perspective, insofar as they argue for a fundamentally sociological definition of Jewishness, rather than a genetic or theological (or even *halakhic*) one, while scholars debate whether Jews are an ethnicity, a religion, a people, a nation, or some uniquely syncretic example of a

combination of social categories. Jewish education has developed as one response these sociological realities, and it has emerged as one programmatic answer to the question of how to facilitate the process by which people learn to be Jewish.

Across the range of Jewish educational sites and settings, responses to this question have taken any number of forms: through the teaching of classical Jewish texts, by domestic mimesis of home-based ritual, by creating structures of Jewish education that mimicked the “grammar of schooling” observed in public education, by modernizing Jewish schools, by organizing educational tours, by focusing on training elites, by writing new curricula, by creating multimedia, by teaching Hebrew, by empowering people to practice their own “hands on” Judaism, and so on. Each of these represents a response to the question of how best to facilitate Jewish education, and, consequently, they tend to cluster on the programmatic side of the question posed above.

Absent from literature on Jewish education, insightful and inspiring though it might be, and missing from the incredible diversity of educational programs, efforts, and institutions is any sustained attention to the question of how people learn to engage in Jewish life. What does such learning look like and what does it entail? How does one cultivate a sense of connection with Jewishness, Judaism, or Jewish people? In what ways might it resemble learning math or history, and in what ways might learning to be Jewish resemble learning to be a lawyer or an engineer or a basketball player? Little, if anything, is known about the answers to these questions. Looking across the literature, so much effort has been expended on ensuring curriculum and programs, but nobody seems to ask whether or not all of those offerings helped people learn, perhaps because nobody seems to ask *how* people learn.

This is a significant shortcoming in the literature on Jewish education, and this chapter—along with other chapters in this book—offers the beginnings of an effort to fill this lacuna. It begins by providing an overview of the situation as it has evolved by focusing on significant studies of Jewish education. From there, it will offer five possible directions for future research projects that, together, could begin to contribute to our understanding of learning in Jewish education. In this effort, it draws strongly on literature from the Learning Sciences, the insights of which have encouraged me to write this chapter in the first place. Drawing on the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, it seems that the most successful learning endeavors engage learners in “constructivist” activities, in which the learners are not imagined as empty vessels to be filled, but active participants in the construction of meaning and new knowledge. Understood in this way, learning becomes a fundamentally social endeavor, insofar as individual-level

learning cannot be extracted from the social context in which it happens. To explore this phenomenon further, scholars have studied the crews of ships at sea,¹ Girl Scouts selling cookies,² skiers skiing,³ tailors learning their craft and alcoholics in recovery,⁴ professional dairy workers,⁵ high school students becoming track athletes,⁶ and more. Each of these settings provided a site for inquiry into the ways in which people developed new knowledge and capacities, and each revealed the social dimensions of that process.

So, consider this an initial attempt to outline some possible avenues by which the field of Jewish education could begin paying attention to learning.

What We've Learned About Learning in Jewish Education

The short answer to the question of what we've learned about the actual learning that takes place in Jewish educational settings is: not much. Research on Jewish education has largely neglected to engage with the question. The *International Handbook on Jewish Education*⁷ does not contain a single contribution that closely examines the dynamics of learning. Both *What We Know About Jewish Education*,⁸ and its successor, *What We Know Now About Jewish Education*⁹ offer little insight into how people learn or the experiences of learners in Jewish educational settings. Despite their breadth in other areas, none of those three collections contains a single article that focuses on learning.

Literature on educational philosophy in Jewish education has similarly avoided discussions of learning and focused instead on broader questions

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- 1 Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).
 - 2 Barbara Rogoff et al., "Mutual Contributions of Individuals, Partners, and Institutions: Planning to Remember in Girl Scout Cookie Sales," *Social Development* 11, no. 2 (2002): 266–89.
 - 3 Richard R. Burton et al., "Skiing as a Model of Instruction," in *Everyday Cognition: Development in Social Context*, ed. Barbara Rogoff and Jean Lave (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 139–50.
 - 4 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
 - 5 Sylvia Scriber, "Studying Working Intelligence," in Rogoff and Lave, *Everyday Cognition*, 9–40.
 - 6 Na'ilah Suad Nasir and Jamal Cooks, "Becoming a Hurdler: Low Learning Settings Afford Identities," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2009): 41–61.
 - 7 Helena Miller et al., eds., *International Handbook of Jewish Education* (New York: Springer, 2011).
 - 8 Stuart L. Kelman, ed., *What We Know About Jewish Education: A Handbook of Today's Research for Tomorrow's Jewish Education* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1992).
 - 9 Roberta Louis Goodman et al., *What We Now Know About Jewish Education: Perspectives on Research for Practice* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 2008).

about the underlying principles of the enterprise and how it ought to be carried out.¹⁰ Research on pedagogy has followed a similar approach, tending to emphasize what teachers ought to know or how they ought to approach their practice rather than seeking to understand how people learn and then developing appropriate pedagogies to suit those modes of learning.¹¹ Perhaps the largest body of literature in the field of research in Jewish education has focused on the impact of site-specific educational experiences including families,¹² day schools,¹³ summer camps,¹⁴ heritage tourism,¹⁵ supplementary schooling,¹⁶

- 10 Seymour Fox, "Toward a General Theory of Jewish Education," in *The Future of the Jewish Community in America*, ed. David Sidorsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 239–59; Seymour Fox et al., eds., *Visions of Jewish Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Joseph S. Lukinsky and Philip W. Lown School, "'Structure' in Educational Theory," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 2, no. 2 (1970): 15–31; Joseph S. Lukinsky, *Integrating Jewish and General Studies in the Day School: Philosophy and Scope* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1978); Michael Rosenak, "Jewish Religious Education and Indoctrination," *Studies in Jewish Education* 1 (1983): 117–38; Michael Rosenak, *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987).
- 11 Barry W. Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2003); Sharon Feiman-Nemser, "Preparing Teachers for Jewish Schools: Enduring Issues in Changing Contexts," in Helena Miller et al., *International Handbook*, 937–58.
- 12 Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis, 2007); Alice Goldstein and Sylvia Barack Fishman, *When They Are Grown They Will Not Depart: Jewish Education and the Jewish Behavior of American Adults*, CMJS Research Report 8 (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 1993).
- 13 Geoffrey Bock, "The Jewish Schooling of American Jews: A Study of Non-Cognitive Educational Effects" (EdD diss., Harvard University, 1976); Geoffrey Bock, "Does Jewish Schooling Matter?" (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1977); Harold S. Himmelfarb, "The Impact of Religious Schooling: The Effects of Jewish Education Upon Adult Religious Involvement" (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1974); Steven M. Cohen, "The Impact of Jewish Education on Religious Identification and Practice," *Jewish Social Studies* 36, no. 3/4 (1974): 316–26; Fern Chertok et al., *What Difference Does Day School Make?* (Boston: PEJE and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, May 2007); Alex Pomson and Howard Deitcher, eds., *Jewish Day Schools, Jewish Communities: A Reconsideration* (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009).
- 14 Steven M. Cohen et al., "Camp Works: The Long-Term Impact of Jewish Overnight Camp" (New York: Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2011); Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe, "How Goodly Are Thy Tents": *Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press and the AVI CHAI Foundation, 2003).
- 15 Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis, 2008); Shaul Kelner, *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).
- 16 David Schoem, "Jewish Schooling and Jewish Survival in the Suburban American Community," in *Studies in Jewish Education* vol. 2, ed. Michael Rosenak (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984),

b'nai mitzvah,¹⁷ and “experiential education.”¹⁸ Each of these scholarly responses to the question of how to educate American Jews emphasizes a different modality for doing so, but they have done so without attending to the question of learning in any sustained way.

Even Jon Woocher’s¹⁹ critique of this situation failed to engage the question of learning. In his essay, “Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century,” he argued that the principles of Jewish education in the twentieth century placed Jewish educators at the center and “intentionally or unintentionally prioritized their ideas about what is important to learn and their needs and desires to ‘hold on’ to learners.” The result has been a Jewish educational model that “has been largely a top-down, professionally driven enterprise.”²⁰ He concluded that broad social and cultural changes have rendered this model of Jewish education inadequate to address the needs and interests of American Jews, and that in order to stay “relevant,”²¹ Jewish education had to reorient itself around the needs, capabilities, and desires of learners.

This marks one of the first departures from much of the scholarship that has tended to take a more prescriptive approach to Jewish education. In his article, Woocher challenges Jewish educators to consider the needs of those they teach. “How,” he asks, “can we help Jews find in their Jewishness resources that will help them live more meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling human lives?”²² This is a welcome shift in perspective, as it posits Jewish education as a “learner centered” enterprise, rather than one that focuses on what teachers should teach or broad notions about what Jews should know.

52–64; Madeline Heilman, “Sex Bias in Work Settings: The Lack of Fit Model,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 5 (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1983); Joe Reimer, *Succeeding at Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made It Work* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997).

17 Stuart Schoenfeld, “Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of the Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America,” *Contemporary Jewry* 9, no. 1 (1987): 67–85.

18 Barry Chazan, “The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education,” *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, accessed November 11, 2017, http://www.infed.org/informaljewisheducation/informal_jewish_education.htm; Joe Reimer, “Experiential Jewish Education,” in *What We Now Know about Jewish Education: Perspectives on Research for Practice*, ed. Roberta L. Goodman et al. (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 2009), 343–52; David Bryfman, ed., *Experience and Jewish Education* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 2014).

19 Jonathan Woocher, “Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 78, no. 3 (2012): 182–226.

20 Ibid., 195.

21 Ibid., 201.

22 Ibid., 189.

Nevertheless, despite the essay's focus on "learners," it does not quite go far enough, because it retains a focus on a kind of person rather than on an effort to understand the activity that defines them. Woocher wants us to adopt a much more learner-focused stance in Jewish education, but the learners here seem more like consumers (of a product called education) than people who are engaged in a practice that we might call learning, a practice or a process that we desperately need to understand better if we are to make any progress. Focusing on people (learners) over practices (learning) ultimately limits Woocher's critique, insofar as it still organizes the enterprise of Jewish education around the question of who is learning rather than on how they are doing so. In this way, it still fails to address the question of how people learn to be Jewish. Providing them with access to ideas, texts, rituals, experiences, vocabulary, or other people who might help them "live more meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling human lives" is a worthy project, but it does not offer any insight into the ways in which people make meaning, purpose, or fulfillment out of Jewishly sourced material.

Woocher's essay is an important corrective. It represents a significant departure from the visions of Jewish education that preceded it, owing in large measure to its insistence that learners should matter. Yet, by failing to address the question of learning, Woocher proposes that the remedy to a century of "top-down" educational efforts rests in better-informed versions of those same efforts. But without attending to the ways in which people learn, it seems difficult to truly change Jewish educational practice so that it matches or meets anyone who wishes to learn in ways that serve not just their needs for a meaningful, fulfilling life, but so that it meets their needs as learners.

Toward Learning about Learning

Therefore, I want to spend the remainder of this chapter exploring five directions that research in Jewish education could pursue, in order to begin to engage more seriously with the question of learning. I offer each of these as a possibility for new opportunities for research, with much more to be done in terms of research design, sampling, methods, and so on. Those details, of course, will determine the validity of the research and the generalizability of the findings generated by each project, and I trust good researchers to take these questions up in a serious manner, should the field take seriously the dearth of reliable information about learning. The ideas that follow should therefore be read as proposals, suggestions, or indications of possible research directions.

Collectively, however, these five directions point toward a more nuanced and complicated theoretical framework for what we mean by learning in Jewish education.

1. Learning Expertise

To understand learning requires a conceptual framework that allows scholars to observe the development of learners as they move from one set of understandings to another. As a result, much of the scholarship on learning has taken shape around understanding the differences between novices and experts, and the behaviors and capacities that constitute expertise within a particular construct.²³ Research has focused on questions like: What do expert players or surgeons or historians do that is different from people with far less experience? What kinds of habits of mind do they practice when they practice their craft? If it is possible to discern those skills, approaches, or practices, then it might be possible to create a scaffold around which one could become, progressively, more adept at using them. In these studies, the language of learning refers to the process by which one adopts skills and behaviors that derive from expert practice. The issue is not that all chess players or physicists need to be experts, but rather that the identification of expertise allows the creation of a trajectory for learning that is demonstrable in some real fashion.

Experts and expertise, however, come in many forms. Sometimes, it can be practiced by an individual like a Chess Grand Master or a Nobel Prize winning physicist, each of whom has achieved a level of success within a particular domain that stands in for evidence of expertise. Another approach has been the study of what might be called “working knowledge.” This latter mode is deeply contextual and can emerge from the ways in which factory workers or health care professionals have developed time or energy-efficient work-arounds or have jiggered remedies to systemic problems. Both Nobel Prize-winning physicists and factory workers possess a kind of expertise that is highly specialized, and that cannot be understood to be properly “transferable” to other domains. Knowing how to operate efficiently within the space of an industrial dairy production plant is not necessarily going to go very far in a physics lab, and the same would be true of a physicist in a dairy. Yet, both

23 National Research Council, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2000); Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

domains allow for a kind of local expertise that is useful when thinking about Jewish education.

With respect to Jewish education, the analogous question should not be: how do we make Jewish experts? Any attempt to establish the parameters of a generalized Jewish expertise will be wrought with all of the predictable problems and weaknesses. What or who could constitute a Jewish “expert?” Politicians? Religiously observant Jews? Artists? People might argue about whether or not the celebration of certain holidays, engaging with the State of Israel, or reciting prayers in Hebrew constitute desirable behaviors for American Jews, but engaging in those behaviors or holding those beliefs does not necessarily represent expertise of any demonstrable kind. The very notion of a Jewish “expert” in a general sense seems perverse, as the domain is too broadly construed to be particularly helpful.

Consequently, I want to suggest the study of expertise within particular domains of knowledge and practice. So, for example, how does an expert *shalihat zibbur* (prayer leader) do her job? Studying a number of *shlihei tzibbur*, employing a variety of methods, we might begin to understand what kinds of decisions she makes while leading communal prayer, and how she makes them. Surely, “expertise” in this domain is not demonstrated by whether or not her prayers are answered, nor by technical knowledge of Hebrew and melodies. Instead, we might explore how she operationalizes a variety of forms of knowledge with consideration for her congregation, their shared musical repertoire, and the sense of allotted time for congregational prayer, all within context of a prayer service. The ability to negotiate these various considerations in this context is comprised by a set of skills that, together, constitute a kind of expertise in this domain.

We might apply this same approach to a variety of “experts” within the Jewish world: curators, journalists, teachers, Talmud scholars, chefs. Each represents a domain of expertise within Jewish life, and each could be studied with a similar approach to understanding how an expert in each of those fields goes about doing the work that defines it. The Learning Sciences would provide the groundwork for understanding the broad contours of expertise, and close study would contribute more finely grained accounts of expertise in action. With those understandings in place, we could begin to scaffold a course of study that we imagine could help a learner move from being a novice to someone further along a trajectory of development. Regardless of whether or not a person wished to become an expert in that domain, such a study would at least allow for the modeling of informed learning pathways based on what expertise looks like.

2. Learning in Place

Learning always happens in places. We typically measure learning through tests or individual survey responses, which assume that whatever we learn ought to be transported with us from place to place, and ought to be accessible to us as individual respondents. But learning is always a product of social relationships, embedded in cultural contexts. Jean Lave²⁴ referred to this as “situated learning,” in order to emphasize its local nature. Learning, for Lave, is not about the acquisition of abstract knowledge, but about engagements with knowledge as part of a web of other social, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions that shape the nature of learning itself. Knowledge, she argued, could hardly exist out of context; to extract it from its context would rend it from the social structures that make it meaningful. For this reason, John Seely Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid refer to learning as “enculturation.”²⁵ For them, learning to use a “tool”—a term that includes material as well as conceptual ones—without understanding the value or meaning of that tool in its cultural context renders the tool effectively worthless. “The community and its viewpoint, quite as much as the tool itself, determine how a tool is used.”²⁶ Building on their understanding of tools, they write “conceptual tools similarly reflect the cumulative wisdom of the culture in which they are used and the insights and experience of individuals. Their meaning is not invariant but a product of negotiation within the community.”²⁷ Neither tools nor ideas are transparent and readily meaningful. Instead, they argue, their meaning rests on the specific social and cultural contexts in which they exist. Barbara Rogoff extended this line of thinking to her studies of children, whom she called “cognitive apprentices,” in order to emphasize the practical and local dimensions of their learning. She explained, “cognitive activities occur in socially structured situations that involve values about the interpretation and management of social relationships.”²⁸ Together, these arguments point to the significance of studying learning in place.

The majority of empirical research in Jewish education has not pursued this line of inquiry, focusing instead on outcome measures that run across a

24 Jean Lave, *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

25 John Seely Brown et al., “Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning,” *Educational Researcher* 18, no. 1 (1989): 33.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Barbara Rogoff, *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 61.

range of normative behaviors and attitudes. As a remedy to this situation, I propose a series of deep studies of learning in place. Focusing on sites designed to facilitate learning—schools, summer camps, adult programming, educational tourism—it is possible to engage in qualitative studies that seek to understand the dynamics of learning in each of these sites. Research in this vein can draw on a wealth of school ethnographies,²⁹ and Lave and Rogoff, among others, have offered pioneering studies of smaller communities of learning ranging from Girl Scouts selling cookies³⁰ to British wine merchants in Portugal.³¹ Each provides some insight into the ways in which people learn, and the ways in which learning is tied to specific people in context. The field of Jewish education has much to learn from pursuing similar efforts, in an attempt to understand the ways in which people learn. No single site will capture the entire picture of Jewish education, but a few studies might begin to reveal patterns by which people learn to be Jewish within those localized settings.

3. Learning Ecologies

Brigid Barron defines “learning ecologies” as “the set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning.”³² For research on Jewish education, which has largely focused on outcomes born of particular institution—schools, camps, tourism, classes, families—moving to an ecological framework means expanding our understanding of the ways in which these sites intersect and interact. A learning ecologies approach does not try to isolate variables and assess the impact of one setting over another, but rather seeks to understand the ways in which people engage in learning across a variety of intentional and unintentional domains. This kind of approach will provide a

29 Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008); Denise Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

30 Rogoff et al., “Mutual Contributions,” 266–89.

31 Jean Lave, “Getting to Be British,” in *History in Person: Enduring Struggles, Contentious Practice, Intimate Identities*, ed. Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2001), 281–324.

32 Brigid Barron, “Learning Ecologies for Technological Fluency: Gender and Experience Differences,” *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 31, no. 1 (2004): 1–36; Brigid Barron, “Interest and Self-Sustained Learning as Catalysts of Development: A Learning Ecology Perspective,” *Human Development* 49, no. 4 (2006): 195.

much more textured account of learning, insofar as it will focus on the ways in which the network of institutions, contexts, or settings enable a learner or a set of learners to generate knowledge.

The ecological approach to studying Jewish learning would home in on the ways in which people engage with and produce knowledge across and within a learning ecology. It is less concerned with the question of whether or not the apparent outcomes of day school can be attributed to the school or to the types of families that send their children to day schools, because such finely grained distinctions do not represent the ways in which learners understand their learning experiences holistically, across rather than defined by particular domains.³³ For example, researchers could study a set of students in a Hebrew School or a collection of families in a congregation or *havurah*, exploring the various ways in which people engage in learning across and through various sites and resources. Students' families probably play a role in enhancing or inhibiting their Jewish learning in ways that extend beyond the Hebrew school setting. Similarly, members of a *havurah* likely engage in not-strictly traditional holiday celebrations which they construct out of and across resources both contemporary (online, print, etc.) and inter-generational (memories of childhood, etc.). At issue in this approach is the question of how people learn across rather than between them, and how the various settings in which they participate in Jewish life (home, school, online, synagogue, museums, etc.) collaborate in facilitating Jewish learning.

4. Learning Technologies

To state the obvious: American lives at the beginning of the twenty-first century are intensely and intimately connected to digital technologies. The penetration of digital technology into American life, culture, commerce, and politics has been both widely bemoaned and celebrated. In terms of education, the promises of “online learning” or “blended learning” have sent traditional educational institutions into apoplexy as they attempt to engage in the open education alongside privately funded efforts like Khan Academy, Udacity, or the wide and varying offers available via YouTube. Jewish education has waded into these waters with a number of online efforts, including MOOCs, podcasts, apps, free and subscription services for online content, the digitization of Jewish texts,

33 Ari Y. Kelman and Zoe Wolford, “Learning Across Church and State: Student Experience of a Released Time Program,” *Religious Education* 111, no. 1 (2016): 49–74.

and many others. These tend to focus on specific channels for the delivery of content and while some are more equipped to measure audience engagement than others, none can adequately assess the ways in which people utilize technology to learn to participate in Jewish life.

People use technologies for a variety of things: to remind them of birthdays, to check the time of sundown for the beginning of Shabbat, to look up whether or not something is kosher, to read pertinent news, or to keep in touch with family and friends. But *how* people use technology to gather and generate information about Jewish life remains largely unknown. How do people use social media technologies to engage in public discourse about American Jewish life? How do people use Skype and other messaging platforms to virtually connect with far-away family during holidays? How do people study or engage with sacred texts online and do they do so differently than they do on paper books? What kinds of information are people seeking and what do they do with that information? All of these are questions that a careful study of technology and its uses would provide researchers interested in understanding how technology is facilitating Jewish education.

This builds on the Learning Ecologies approach but focuses intently on technology, which has enabled greater access to information and people than has been historically possible. The question of access, however, is only one element of the broad impact that digital and mobile technologies have had on Jewish life, and insofar as people now rely on their phones for everything ranging from driving directions to recalling telephone numbers, we think with our technology more than we ever have, and this certainly has some impact on the shape and dynamics of Jewish life, more generally. Measuring website “clicks” or video views might reveal the meaning of a specific mediated interaction, but it cannot illuminate the ways in which people are actually engaging with technology to facilitate their Jewish lives across a variety of domains.

5. Learning of Non-Jewish Jews

What marks this moment in Jewish history, perhaps uniquely so, is the significance of people born of non-Jewish parents in the families and institutions of the Jewish community. For some scholars of American Jewish life, this trend—or exogamy, specifically—raises a concern about the demise of American Jewry,³⁴

34 Steven M. Cohen, “Intermarriage and the Jewish Future,” in *A Statement on the Jewish Future: Text and Responses*, 10–19 (American Jewish Committee, 1997); Steven M. Cohen and

while others advocate for a more sympathetic understanding of the role that Jewish families that include non-Jews can play in Jewish communities.³⁵ But either way, the demographic reality is that a majority of families in the Jewish community have one or more non-Jewish members. Given this reality, we have an opportunity to examine the ways in which adults learn to join a “community of practice”³⁶—that is, how they learn to be, if not Jewish themselves, at least members of Jewish families.

Though Lave and Wenger coined their term to describe a very specific social formation, one that has been organized around a particular practice (tailoring, midwifery), researchers might be able to take advantage of the looseness of the term to explore the ways in which non-Jewish adults learn to engage in Jewish cultural and religious practice, regardless of how they might define it. Roy Pea’s³⁷ concept of “distributed intelligence” may be helpful here. He offers the concept as a way of accounting for the ways in which a social system engages with information. “When I say that intelligence is distributed,” he wrote, “I mean that the resources that shape and enable activity are distributed in configuration across people, environments, and situations. In other words, intelligence is accomplished rather than possessed.”³⁸ For non-orthodox Jewish families in the twenty-first century, this must include an account of the ways in which their non-Jewish members participate in this effort.

Edwin Hutchins³⁹ offers an extended version of Pea’s theory that called not only for an account of distributed intelligence, but distributed cognition. Through rigorous ethnographic research, Hutchins argued that individual understanding or skill can only ever be one part of a larger system. “The process by which work is accomplished, by which people are transformed from novices into experts and by which work practices evolve are all the same process.”⁴⁰

Jack Wertheimer, “The Pew Survey Reanalyzed: More Bad News, but a Glimmer of Hope,” *Mosaic Magazine*, November 2, 2014, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2014/11/the-pew-survey-reanalyzed/>.

35 Keren R. McGinity, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Jennifer A. Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples Are Changing American Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

36 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*.

37 Roy D. Pea, “Practices of Distributed Intelligence and Designs for Education,” in *Distributed Cognitions: Psychological and Educational Considerations*, ed. Gavriel Salomon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 47–87.

38 *Ibid.*, 50.

39 Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*.

40 *Ibid.*, 351.

In the fullest rejection of the approach to learning that celebrates individual cognition, Hutchins concludes “cognition is a cultural process,”⁴¹ arguing that what happens in the mind of a single person within a given context cannot adequately account for the acquisition of knowledge because it ignores the social and cultural dynamics that provide a framework for making that knowledge meaningful. What is often attributed to one person is, in fact, an artifact of the larger systems in which they are operating.⁴²

Foregrounding the information-producing and -processing efforts of Jewish communities shifts the emphasis from the ways in which they are not living up to normative standards for behaviors and attitudes, and toward a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which they participate in the creation of Jewish knowledge. This would illuminate the complex landscape of American Jewish communities in light of twenty-first century demographics. Non-Jewish members of Jewish communities provide a site for exploring this kind of learning.

Social Learning

These five interlocking research directions are connected by a shared interest in the social dimensions of learning. Whether based in institutions or ecologies, whether focusing on novices or experts, these proposals for research on Jewish education seek to place learning at the center without reducing it to test scores or outcome measures. As with learning, Jewish life is inherently social, so emphasizing the social and contextual dimensions of learning should be good news for Jewish education, insofar as this approach seeks to understand the ways in which learning and Jewish life might inform one another. However, most of the scholarship on Jewish education, to date, has sought to identify which curricula or experiences have the greatest impact, and thus have inadvertently extracted learners from both their social contexts and the processes that might constitute learning in a social environment. Instead of acknowledging and seeking to better understand the social dimensions of learning, the

41 Ibid., 354.

42 See also, R. P. McDermott, “The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability,” in *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, ed. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 269–305; Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979).

normative approach isolates and extracts. Focusing on individual learners at the expense of the ways in which those learners engage in the “adaptive reorganization of a complex system”⁴³ misses the ways in which learning is, itself, a social endeavor.

Studies of Jewish education that avoid attending to learning miss the social dimension of the enterprise and fail to acknowledge the systems within which people learn to be Jewish. Learning is never an artifact of a single input, whether that input is camp or family, tourism or day school. Attempts to prescribe what one person’s idea of what a knowledgeable Jew should know or research intended to isolate the “impact” of a single experience cannot account for the social dimensions of learning. These approaches reduce people to outcomes and communities to context, drawing artificial distinctions between people and the social systems in which they participate.

Learning in the Future

For much of the twentieth century, research on Jewish education focused primarily on broad, prescriptive visions of what American Jews ought to know. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, with the increased focus on assessment and accountability in American education more generally, scholars of American Jewish education began utilizing approaches that emphasized the study of specific educational outcomes, and trumpeting those as evidence of the “success” of a particular educational enterprise. Day schools, summer camps, and taglit-birthright have capitalized on this approach particularly well, using data to describe reported outcomes but not engaging in any significant way with anything that could properly be called “learning.” This approach persists.

This essay is an effort to shift the discussion in research on American Jewish education away from prescriptions and outcomes and toward a more nuanced and detailed account of the ways in which people learn to engage in Jewish life. Drawing on the work of the Learning Sciences to develop research programs that promise to illuminate dimensions of Jewish learning will make a significant contribution to our understanding of Jewish life in general, as it will provide much needed details about the ways in which people engage with and create meaning from elements of Jewish culture and knowledge. Focusing on learning affords a kind of inside story on socialization in Jewish communities,

43 Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*, 289.

insofar as it may reveal insights into the ways in which people engage with media, institutions and information.

In order to begin shifting the discourse on Jewish education, I want to propose that we focus on the dynamics of learning—not on its outcomes or motivations, but primarily on learning on its own terms. Until we are able to develop a robust set of theories that can help us conceptualize learning within Jewish education, the enterprise is going to remain mired in functionalist and behaviorist analyses that merely update older educational paradigms. The question facing Jewish educational research in the twenty-first century cannot be phrased in terms of the utility or applicability of the experiences of participants. The question must foreground learning as a dynamic process not only of knowledge acquisition, but as a cultural practice of American Jews. This will require an expanded understanding of learning that draws significantly on the work of the Learning Sciences, in order to embed the study of learning in social networks and cultural contexts. We can affirm that Jewish education is the key to ensuring the future of the Jewish people—but we do not yet understand the full range of ways in which people learn to be Jewish.

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