

Creating SESL Learning for Jewish Professionals

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An interesting thing happened on our way to helping Jewish educators explore social, emotional and spiritual learning for younger learners in Jewish settings. We realized that we had the unique opportunity to also invite adults into this conversation and address their needs, as well.

We know that adults in Jewish educational settings, the teachers, youth directors, principals and camp staff, are also experiencing the consequences of dwelling in quaking times. Just like their students, adults engaged in Jewish professional development experiences do not “leave their social emotional and spiritual lives at the door.” In our efforts to acknowledge the “whole child” in our classrooms, we realized that we also needed to acknowledge the “wholeness” of our adult learners. And that included paying attention to an often overlooked domain – the spiritual.

Our work over the past three years has been to help Jewish educators develop, share and apply the practices from the secular world of social, emotional and spiritual learning (SESL) to a Jewish context. This fall, as a collaboration of seminaries advocating for SESL in Jewish education, Hebrew Union College-JIR, JTS Davidson School of Education, Reconstructing Judaism and SEL4US designed a “Coaching for Character” conference for over 130 Jewish educators.

Our conference team repeatedly asked the question: How might we demonstrate the essential SESL educational principles of “teaching, modeling, prompting, and practicing” in the design and structure of the conference? Below are examples of how we structured a day of learning designed to explore important content and cultivate the social, emotional and spiritual well being of adult Jewish professionals. These practices may help others create SESL professional development gatherings.

1. Enable participants to be seen and heard

Prior to the conference we sent a pre-survey so we could anticipate the needs of participants. We then adjusted our design based on what we learned. As an example, we discovered that many of the Jewish educators attending the conference wanted ample time to learn from one another and to connect in significant ways. We carefully structured the day to have several small group discussions using certain conversational protocols. Protocols structure small group explorations ensuring that each participant has time to speak and to listen. The spiritual practice of listening happens when we listen to the voices and stories of others.

We also placed “greeters” in strategic locations in the building to ensure that every person was welcomed and felt “seen.” Greeters were also charged with being *shadchanim*, intentionally connecting people to one another. When we truly see each other we are able to live Jewish values, such as *gemilut hasadim* (loving kindness), *hahnasat orhim* (welcoming), and *rahamim* (compassion).

2. Singing in community

Conventional wisdom points to the fact that community singing is effective for bonding large groups, making it an ideal behavior to improve our broader social networks. This is particularly valuable in today’s often-alienating world, where many of our social interactions are conducted remotely via Facebook and Twitter. Affirmed by research that music binds us to one another, we opened and closed the day with the beautiful voice of Cantor Ellen Dreskin leading everyone in song. The opportunity to join together in song builds community, is able to nourishes our the soul and brings joy into our hearts.

3. Moments of silence and reflection

As John Dewey stated, “We do not learn from experience.... We learn from reflecting on

experience.” Periodically throughout the day, we devoted time for the participants to reflect and journal. These pauses, along with the silence, allowed for introspection and gave participants the time to listen acknowledge to their own feelings and thoughts about the learning experience.

4. Text study and guided meditation

Rabbi Marc Margolius, Senior program director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, led a text study that opened our minds and hearts to the idea of being present and heard. He then guided us through a short meditation. Rabbi Margolius gently encouraged us to ask, search, and perhaps even answer some of our most pressing concerns and questions about our profession, and specifically to ask why we do what we do. This connected to the “big” questions of life: What is our purpose? What adds meaning to our lives? Prior to the conference we also sent participants five minutes Jewish practices to remind them take a breath during their busy work day.

5. Pacing

We scheduled enough time for people to experience each section of the day long convening. Too often, in our zeal to cover a lot, we pack way too much into the time allotted which results, as our colleague, Dr. Rob Weinberg says, in “trying to stuff ten pounds of potatoes into a five-pound bag.” By ensuring a “no rush approach,” the tempo of the day contributed to the possibility of giving voice to questions, reflections and wonderings, the core of the inner life.

Honestly, nothing we did at this conference was ground breaking. This is the good news. The existing toolbox of Jewish education can be used to nurture the inner life of adult learners. We simply have to use them.

We understand that the process of social, emotional and spiritual learning continues to grow as a uniquely Jewish educational framework and ultimately adds a new dimension to the overall purpose of Jewish education. The very approach we are championing to shape Jewish learning for children can be- needs to be- applied to learning for Jewish professionals. They, too, are navigating an ever -increasing tumultuous world and need to be supported in cultivating their whole selves.

If you would like to learn more about SESL, we invite you to join the online Jewish Educators Book Club beginning on March 3.

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