

JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION  
INITIATIVES: TRANSFORMING  
COMMUNITIES THROUGH PURPOSEFUL  
AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF  
PARENTS IN JEWISH LIVING AND  
LEARNING

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Introduction and Overview

We know with certainty that Jewish education is critical to the vitality, quality, and continuity of Jewish life. We also know that with the field undergoing major transformation over the past two decades, shifting social trends have altered the landscape of Jewish communal life, complicating the task of designing and delivering Jewish education. These circumstances prompt greater attention to moving Jews of all ages from embracing Jewish learning to *active Jewish living*. What we have yet to learn more about is the gap between what Jewish educational programs seek to impart and *actual engagement in Jewish life*.

The ultimate goal of Jewish education is to strengthen connections to Jewish life and build Jewish identity by engaging youth, families and adults in a pursuit of lifelong Jewish learning and affiliation with the community (Cohen, 2006, 2008; Wertheimer, 2008). As recent research indicates, the challenge is to create Jewish learning experiences that provide individuals and families with the breadth and depth of learning to enable them to engage meaningfully in Jewish life (Bloomberg, 2008).

Among all forms of Jewish education, Jewish early childhood education (JECE) holds one of the greatest potentials for the future viability of the North American Jewish community (Vogelstein, 2008). It instills a Jewish identity in children and strengthens the Jewish identity and practice of families, providing a significant venue for adults to connect with other Jewish adults, As such, this serves as a pivotal gateway to further involvement and commitment to Jewish life and the Jewish community (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2005, Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010;Vogelstein, 2008).

Of critical significance is that early childhood Jewish education not only impacts the identity of the child, but also the Jewish identity of the parents. Feldman (1992) noted the positive impact of Jewish preschools on parents and suggested a reconceptualization of Jewish Early Childhood programs as Jewish Family Resource Centers. The Alliance for Jewish Early Education, established in 2005, is built upon the premise that there is a strong linkage between young children, families, and Jewish identity development. In 2007, CAJE convened a session for Jewish early childhood professionals, the result of which was a draft statement on *Key Elements for Creating a Jewish early childhood education Program* (<http://www.caje.org/earlychildhood/JewishEC-DraftStatement.asp>). The opening section of this document is noteworthy in terms of its dual focus on children and on families. The statement also articulates engagement in Jewish life as the outcome:

The purpose of Jewish early childhood education is to lay the foundation for lifelong Jewish engagement by supporting the development and enhancement of the Jewish identity of children and their families through Jewish knowledge, Jewish values, and Jewish experiences.

## Problem Statement

Sociological perspectives provide the framework to consider children within the context of their families and social networks. This is of special importance when articulating the most desired outcomes for JECE, that is, the simultaneous growth of children *and* their families. (Ben-Avie, Vogelstein, Goodman et al., forthcoming). The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI), established in 2005, is framed by and embedded within foundational Jewish values that are meaningful and compelling to contemporary Jewish families seeking supportive communities for their families and the highest quality education for their children. JECEI's premise is that the most effective leverage for enhancing families' Jewish connectedness is a long-term transformative change effort to improve the functioning of Jewish early childhood programs. For JECEI, the unit of analysis is always the family. Excellence in Jewish early childhood education, is therefore necessarily defined in terms of the simultaneous growth of children *and* their parents. In essence, *how and in what ways* engagement of parents is achieved is key to understanding the process.

The most desired developmental outcome in Jewish education is to promote the children's relationship with the Jewish people—past, present, and future. Developmental outcomes of the process of forging a strong relationship with a religious community are framed in terms of thoughts, emotions, actions, and partaking of community. The research question, therefore, is JECEI's level of excellence and preparedness to promote this aspect of development among the families, educators, and ultimately the children.

Parents are first and foremost attracted to excellence in choosing an early childhood program. Educational excellence matters when engaging parents and families in Jewish living and learning. Research that compared JECEI schools to a comparable group of

JECE schools shows that if parents perceive that a JECE program is excellent in terms of its early childhood offering such as the learning experiences or curriculum, educators, organization, and so forth, then parents are *more* likely to be Jewishly engaged (Ben-Avie, Vogelstein, et al, forthcoming). JECEI parents in-married and intermarried families participated more in Jewish parenting and adult offering than those in a comparison group (JECEI, 2008) The implication of these data are that a change effort that focuses solely on engaging parents Jewishly is not going to be as effective as a transformative change process like JECEI that focuses on excellence both in early childhood education and in engaging adults and families in Jewish living and learning.

This paper shares JECEI's approach to ongoing adult and family education, and in so doing, identifies key components of the programs that are critical for engaging parents in Jewish learning and living. The paper also presents some initial data gathered about JECEI's approach that leads to identifying key characteristics of what makes the model effective. By exploring JECEI as a successful transformative change model of early childhood family engagement, this paper contributes to the ongoing conversation about the significance of Jewish early childhood education in attracting and engaging Jewish families and in recognizing the potential for JECE programs to serve as gateways to Jewish living and learning.

### JECEI's Change Process Model

Systemic community change initiatives for Jewish education require transformational change efforts (Bidol Padva, 2008). Transformational change process models include ways to address such factors supporting inclusive engagement among diverse parties, creating consensus-based strategies, building supportive relationships, and create deep seated changes in mindset, values, and behavior (Bidol Padva , 2008,

2009). Change models are best implemented using consensus-based approaches that include informed and passionate dialogue, along with advocating ones views coupled with a genuine inquiry into the views of others (Bidol Padva, 2008).

JECEI was created as a passionate response to the concern that too many families with young Jewish children were either not engaged in Jewish life, or worse still, alienated from it. (Bidol Padva, 2008, 2009). Families with young Jewish children seek out communities and institutions that support and inform their choices. As such, these families are at a pivotal time in making decisions that will impact their children's identity. Inspired by a synergistic blend of Jewish values and ideas, Reggio Emilia philosophy<sup>1</sup>, and customized change approaches, JECEI employs a transformative change model that enhances the capacity of Jewish early childhood centers of excellence that are also compelling family centers.

Through its work with Jewish early childhood centers, and with its focus on the family as the unit of analysis, JECEI works toward increasing the number of families with young children that actively engage in Jewish living and learning. This is achieved by meeting individual needs, by capturing the imagination and excitement of parents thereby instilling in them to desire for ongoing learning and by establishing connections among Jewish families with young Jewish children. Ultimately, JECEI's work is based on the premise that the use of inclusive and customized community change models in Jewish education will increase the number of young adults and families with young Jewish children to continue to engage in ongoing Jewish living and learning, and the that

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<sup>1</sup> JECEI recognizes that the Reggio Emilia philosophy can strengthen and revitalize Jewish education among children and their families. JECEI's most relevant application of Reggio ideas involves the deep involvement of the family. Drawing families into the school philosophically, practically and spiritually is a paramount goal of both Reggio schools and JECEI. Both programs broadly construe the idea of family — the ancient sense of protector of one's own and the current theoretical sense of the force that makes us human. In both school systems, conception of family is integral.

the Jewish community will be vitalized and connected to the rich resources of their heritage.

JECEI's organizational and community change model is based on the best practices of sustainable change. The innovative and customized family engagement options result in an increase in Jewish living and learning for families and an increased connection among participating families. The family engagement options are mutually reinforcing, and begin with the joint efforts of educators and parents. With ongoing participation, families become increasingly active in both designing the options as well as in reaching out to other families. They often affiliate with formal and informal Jewish education options, and they seek educational entities that are open to parents of Jewish youth to become leaders who can shape the educational options offered to their children. In turn, JECEI works with the communal network of centers so that they in turn can work with their community's' formal and informal educational providers in order to continue to attract more families with young Jewish children.

#### Jewish Life and Learning Communities: The *Process* of Engagement

Whether schools focus primarily on children or on families is a significant difference in philosophy and approach that affects the goal of making Jewish ECE a gateway to Jewish life and community. For some schools, parents are important to the extent that their involvement strengthens the education of the child. Parents are asked to help out in the classroom, serve on a PTO, or consulted when a problem arises with a child. While these can be warm and welcoming communities, their explicit agenda and approach does not focus on meeting the needs of parents. Other schools are family centered where the families, and not just the child, are viewed as part of the educational

vision and goals. For example, a family centered school might provide to parents learning and support in areas of interest or need, and opportunities for building relationships and community with peers. These Jewish ECE schools are intentionally engaging and are focused on facilitating the learning and growth of parents both as parents and as adults.

JECEI is committed to creating schools of excellence that intentionally, purposefully, and meaningfully engage parents in Jewish living and learning. The JECEI Model identifies two outcomes related to parents in the schools:

- Parents value the JECEI schools as a place to learn about parenting and to explore Jewish life
- Parents begin to connect with other parents

Included in JECEI's implementation plan are five Learning and Living Components that enable schools to identify models of Jewish living and learning that best align with the expressed needs of the parents and the school culture (JECEI, 2010). These components, outlined below, are intended to raise the interest and motivational levels of parents and lead, hopefully, to ongoing and sustained involvement in Jewish living and learning. Each school creates a Jewish living and learning (JLL) plan based on a customized version of the five components that lead toward strengthening Jewish living learning within and among families.

### **Component A – Learning Circles**

This is a series of small group and large group adult Jewish learning sessions that foster relationship building and opportunities to connect to the larger community. The small group meetings take place in people's homes and the large group sessions take place at the host institution. The facilitators, who are parents in the early childhood center, personally invite the parents to participate, meeting with them at parent night and sending personal email messages to current and alumni families. The facilitators meet to choose the topics for discussion that would be relevant or of particular interest and then learn the texts together prior to the meeting of the Learning Circles. Teachers are encouraged to participate in the Learning Circles program and schools provide nominal stipends for them.

### **Component B – Project Work**

Any type of project, whether it is building a playground or building a sukkah, can become a Jewish learning moment. The trigger for the project emanates from a particular interest or idea generated by stakeholders – parent, child, educator, lay or professional leader- individually or collectively and parallels the children’s experience in Reggio-inspired classrooms. It emerges from collaborative dialogue among those who lead the planning, preparation and execution of the project. In aligning with the learning in the school, projects need to be documented through text and photographs. The project is a vehicle for bringing together families in the context of Jewish life and learning and is a launch for ongoing engagement.

### **Component C – Experiential learning for families with a learning component for parents**

Parents and children participate together outside the school and/or host institution in a child-friendly interactive experience that is connected to Jewish values and ideas. There is dedicated time, also, for parents to meet socially and engage in Jewish learning to deepen their own knowledge.

### **Component D – Celebrating Jewish Life – Rituals and Observances around the Calendar and Life Cycles**

Families come together around times in people’s lives and times of the year that present moments for celebration, learning and community building. These programs offer experiences of joyful engagement, modeling of Jewish practice and opportunity for Jewish learning. Parents engage collaboratively with the school administration in the planning and execution of these celebrations as well as leading and/or facilitating the Jewish learning and/or ritual components. Families receive learning materials and suggestions for extending Jewish engagement into the home. Some programs may be open for specific age children, others to the whole school and others for the membership of the host institution.

### **Component E – Adult and Parent Courses and Speakers in Host Institution and Community**

The goal of this component is to help assure that already existing programs are intentionally and systematically responding to the needs and interests of the parents, and connected to the school and its vision of excellence. This means that: 1) Jewish ECE school professionals and parents are involved in helping connect parents to these learning experiences, 2) the Jewish ECE school is part of the planning and/or sponsoring of the programs, and 3) the programs model best practices in Jewish learning and living and adult education. In the case of other programs in the community, the Jewish ECE school professionals and parents should be conduits to helping adults identify courses that further their Jewish journey and engagement with Jewish life.

The work of JECEI is rooted in foundational Jewish ideas and values through which we view and experience our world. Core concepts, drawn from our ancient tradition, are grouped into seven interconnected categories, which are referred to as lenses<sup>2</sup>. These lenses are embedded within each of the five Learning and Living Components, and provide an ethical model for living and a language through which to articulate a shared vision for future generations. Moreover, in designing opportunities for enhanced parent engagement in Jewish living and learning, the lenses provide the tools to create personal meaning and build bridges between Jewish texts, Jewish core values, and the roles of parents raising young Jewish children in a contemporary world.

Most of the schools and host institutions with whom JECEI works with already offer some educational experiences to engage families in Jewish living and learning. The challenge for JECEI is to help schools and host institutions offer a full range of excellent programs that reflect the interests and desires of parents, and that inspire and connect

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מַסַּע / Journey (Reflection, Return, and Renewal)

בְּרִית / Covenant (Belonging and Commitment)

צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים / Divine Image (Dignity and Potential)

קְדוּשָׁה / Holiness (Intentionality and Presence)

הִתְעוֹרְרוּת / Awakening (Amazement and Gratitude)

דְּרָשׁ / Interpretation (Inquiry, dialogue, and transmission)

תְּקוּן עוֹלָם / Repair of the World (Responsibility)

Jewish families with young children to the richness and depth of Jewish living and learning. JECEI equates excellence with distinctive elements, including:

- Parents and professionals participate collaboratively in and/or facilitate the planning, design and implementation of Jewish learning & living experiences
- The interests and needs of the stakeholders are central to planning and implementing the learning experiences
- A connection to Jewish living and learning is part of all family programs
- The core Jewish ideas and values of the JECEI lenses guide the intellectual, social and emotional development of the stakeholders as they engage in transformative change
- The learning experiences draw on learner-centered, Reggio-inspired ideas about making personal meaning
- Parents personally reach out to other parents to engage them in JECEI experiences
- Programmatic changes are designed to be ongoing and sustained over time

JECEI's work in the field demonstrates the importance of providing families with rich Jewish learning that challenges them intellectually and connects to their emotional lives as parents. Moreover, families benefit when JECEI provides them with a sense that they are part of a community of Jewish families that learn and celebrate together and support each other in times of need. JECEI advocates that this is most effectively accomplished by developing governance and management structures that function well when family involvement is seen as integral, and with the idea of "parents as partners" being at the core of the school enterprise. With effective governance and management structures, families become engaged in promoting the well-being of all the children in the school.

When it comes to early childhood education, adult development and organizational growth are critically related to child development, and also necessary and beneficial to the adults. Comer & Ben-Avie (2010) use the metaphor of six developmental domains as a framework for decision-making. These six developmental domains characterize the lines along which children grow--physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical. For children to develop well along these domains, they need to identify with others, develop their own identity, and internalize a set of values. Hence the focus of attention is on *the process* by which families, educators, and children can work together as a community and learn together.

In describing how JECEI creates the necessary conditions to transform early childhood programs into quality “Jewish family life centers” analyses reveal that this is a far more complex process than simply intensifying the Judaic content of the educational program (Comer & Ben-Avie 2010). The key factor is the level of excellence of the program’s underlying “operating system” which refers to how well the programs function in fulfilling the learning and developmental outcomes of the children and the adults in their lives (Comer & Ben-Avie 2010). As the research of Comer & Ben-Avie (2010) illustrates, excellent early childhood programs have in place a process that pulls the energies and abilities of all the members of the school community together so that everyone—children, educators, parents, and community members—develop well.

In particular, healthy interactions between educators and families create the necessary conditions for the early childhood programs to impact the life-paths of the parents; and, in turn engage them in the work of improving the early childhood programs. Strong relationships are formed among the educators and families due to the initiatives of the families. The newly strengthened relationships are beneficial when the families,

educators, and administrators came together to deepen the implementation of JECEI's process for improving the operating system of early childhood programs.

JECEI promotes excellence in early childhood programs by helping school communities organize themselves into teams<sup>3</sup> that work to improve the overall excellence of the programs. In well- functioning schools, teams come together to resolve issues, and engage in global planning that leads to improved learning and developmental outcomes for children. A culture of shared accountability permeates the school community; thus, teams feel safe to take risks trying out new ideas. The process is cyclical and iterative: The schools impact the life-paths of children, families, educators and all others who have a stake in the life success of the children. Families who have been influenced by the school community, in turn, find manifold ways to improve the operating system of the schools. The process of engagement in Jewish living and learning is iterative, cyclical, and mutually reinforcing.

### Impact of Participation on Jewish Learning and Living

Interviews conducted with participant parents enable a better understanding of their perceptions and attitudes, as well as their motivation and incentive to engage in JECEI activities. Qualitative analysis of these interview vignettes highlights various thematic categories, all of which contribute to a sense of “transformed community”. To illustrate these themes, each of them is accompanied by verbatim quotes that substantiate it.

Thematic categories include:

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<sup>3</sup> The Leadership Team is the umbrella team that coordinates and structures collaborative thinking and shared decision making between the director and the educators. The School Planning and Management Team is a committee that coordinates all the initiatives bombarding the school, often with mutually exclusive goals. The School Planning and Management Team is comprised of families, school administrators, educators, community representatives—and all those who have a stake in the life success of the children. The Jewish Life and Learning Team is comprised of professionals and families that plans and implements Jewish living and learning programs.

- Enhanced awareness/knowledge of Judaism
- Developing insights into what their children are learning in school
- Increased participation in Jewish activities and practice of rituals
- Strengthened relationships between parents and teachers /honoring teachers
- Appreciation of collaborative and shared learning opportunities
- Development of a sense of “community”

(1) Enhanced awareness/knowledge of Judaism

One of the distinctive features is that the learning experiences draw on learner-centered, Reggio-inspired ideas about making personal meaning. The work of JECEI is rooted in foundational Jewish values, thereby offering participants a window to a broad array of Jewish concepts and ideas. Participants have opportunities to explore common interests and valued activities, and to begin to “think Jewishly”. As the quotations below illustrate, participants appreciate what they are learning and are becoming more aware and insightful regarding our rich cultural traditions:

“It [Keshet] allows you to pause for a couple of hours and think about very important issues that are close to you about family and home and religious and community.... things you wouldn’t necessarily about it through a Jewish lens and it opens insights and ideas that we wouldn’t have taken the time to think about.”

“It [Keshet] has connected me to the community in a thoughtful way – the JCC community and the bigger community than just my son’s class. It has also helped me further my Jewish learning. I am scared to death about this gap between preschool and bar mitzvah. It has been such a wonderful experience. I look forward to planning meetings. It helps me think Jewishly in a way that I have never done before.”

(2) Developing insights into what their children are learning in school

As parents are exploring Jewish life for themselves and their family, they are, at the same time, excited about learning more about what their children are learning in the early childhood program. Developing and maintaining connections to their children's learning creates a sense of inter-generational identification and connection, and affords deeper parent-child understanding, and increased opportunities for family-oriented discussion, dialogue and actual experience. One parent aptly captured this when she describes the experience as “a parallel process as the children are engaged in Jewish learning and we are – it makes us feel more connected”:

“I chose to attend the weekly text study sessions because my son has just started school and I wanted to maintain a connection and know what he is learning about. I wanted to learn for myself and connect with my son. I was surprised to find out how much more rewarding it is for me to learn as an adult about different perspectives and I value what everyone brings to the conversation.”

“There is a whole sense with your children about how you connect with Judaism and prayers with children. I took my son skiing and it was this amazing experience and he said *Shehechyanu* and I said it with him. My elder son likes Jewish traditions. We have always lit candles on Friday nights. Our ritual on Shabbat and Purim. On Tu B'Shevat, how have I gone my entire life not experiencing this and not thinking about it from a recycling standpoint, how to make it current. There is so much more.”

“I think it deepens the experience of being part of this school and you had this series of conversations to learn and talk about things that we are all thinking about all the time. Once you have the opportunity to share those vulnerabilities you feel bonded to them. It is a parallel process as the children are engaged in Jewish learning and we are – it makes us feel more connected. The kids talk about Shabbat and we just talked about time and stress and Shabbat, how do we bring this into our home? Now I have some vocabulary.”

“For me, the fact that my son is growing up in a bi cultural family makes it even more important to me to make sure he is connected to Jewish values and Jewish living especially since I converted. It gives me chance to learn with him and practice with him.”

“I attend the Tuesday Text Study session because the idea of being able to build on themes that are brought up in the classroom appeals to me. This is my son's first time away from me (he is 2). He is in school by himself. I wanted to maintain a connection and know what he is learning about.”

### (3) Increased participation in Jewish activities, and practice of rituals

That learning leads to or translates into active doing is indeed an integral aspect of Jewish thought. Judaism embraces the notion that we learn in order to do and to teach. It is clear that JECEI participants are putting into action what they are learning by practicing Jewish customs and traditions, and “bringing ritual into the family”, oftentimes in ways they had not done prior to being involved in the programs:

“Judaism is something that I did not grow up with in a deep way. Jewish involvement has emerged as an adult. Over the last number of years, it has become extremely important to my husband and me in terms of building a Jewish family. We are sending our kids to day school and bringing ritual into our family. This has enriched our family life immensely. We have been bringing our extended family into our Jewish lives as well. My father, who is a physician and also skilled in wood-working, helped build the sukkah at my son’s school. He has never sat in a sukkah in his life. It was a gift to have a project where he could be helpful as well as spend an afternoon involved with his grandchildren in a Jewish experience.”

“I am not observant at all and my husband doesn’t go home for Friday nights and we do *motzi* even if my husband isn’t there.”

“We do Shabbat at home and I know how my husband does Shabbat. Do I know how other families do Shabbat? I know how the rabbi taught us. Going to other families for Shabbat dinner gives me a chance to have other experiences. In Jewish life, what does a Shabbat dinner mean? What goes into it? I know the academic version and my husband is my only reference point. To be involved with other families is very important to me. I may want to start new traditions with my own family.

### (4) Strengthened relationships between parents and teachers /honoring teachers

The idea that everybody can learn from each other and that we all have something to offer, is empowering and self-validating. Indeed, rather than promote the idea of “sage on the stage” with the teacher as instructor, JECEI, as a social and interactive model of learning, encourages the idea that teachers are learners too, and

that everybody can learn from one another. Viewing teachers as inclusive, engaging, participatory, and collaborative leads to enhanced relationships between parents and teachers:

“It was so meaningful for me to bring my child for our first Jewish experience with Rosh Hashana putting a finger and honey on the Hebrew letters. It was such a nice surprise for parents and kids. And bringing the kids before school even started was a nice way to introduce them to the teachers and the school”.

“Parent and teacher relationships have changed as a result of our work together on the JECEI Leadership Team. We never think about how teachers feel about parents in their classrooms. We always think from children’s point of view. You could fairly say that most meaningful collaborations and breaking down barriers is happening though JECEI meetings.”

“I think people come into because they want to learn for their own person and as a parent they have many questions and challenges. I think it is imp for teachers to hear from parents in that manner. Teachers receive \$20 or something like that per session for participating. There are five teachers. Any teacher was invited to participate. Part of my connection is that I can come back to the teachers and get them on board – teachers can come anytime even if they can come once. In the small group you build a connection”

“What are the magic ingredients? – [Its about] willingness and openness to take a risk and to get involved. The openness to talk about the subject matter whether it is a struggle at home or what something means to our school or Judaic pieces. Joy [teacher] is amazing – she has a way of teaching that is so inviting and encouraging and no matter where you are coming it is more than okay. If it is okay, if it is a parent who is not Jewish or a parent not necessarily comfortable speaking in front a group, she is wonderful at bringing everyone in. Those are the main pieces.”

#### (5) Appreciation of collaborative and shared learning opportunities

One of the distinctive features of the JECEI model is that parents and professionals participate collaboratively in and/or facilitate the planning, design and implementation of Jewish learning & living experiences. By having opportunities for deep and meaningful discussion, participants learn with each other and from each other. Tapping into people’s interests, questions, ideas, and energy allows an appreciation of

others' viewpoints and perspectives, a process that facilitates critical thinking and reflectivity, both of which are necessary prerequisites for transformative learning. Collaborative learning opportunities encourage dialogue, increase a sense of value and respect for learning as a process, and also facilitate a sense of empathy and mutual appreciation:

“It’s a nice way for a community of parents to come together to learn about Judaism - interesting, smart people to talk about interesting great topics.”

“Keshet is a really important step in connecting parents and teachers as people. For the parents to understand what we are trying to do here and for us to understand the challenges of raising children in NYC and why they might conduct themselves in a particular way. Teachers don’t talk about that the same way as did three years ago; they invite parents in. We are sharing this journey together. It is a big part of how we make this school feel Jewish and look Jewish and do you get that sense if you walk through the doors. The experiences in Keshet have affected the parents. It says that the school values learning on all levels.”

“I have gotten to know some other parents. I think it is so different for me. I feel that I am more in the teacher role than participate. It is always a great thing to talk about parenting framed in a Jewish way, it is special to me as a rabbi and as a parent. More as a teacher than participant. I feel grateful for what people are getting out of it – T and L have no Jewish background and they are empowered and bringing it to their social circle and friends and home.”

“I think that what people comment on the most is that it has created a forum for a much richer conversation among your friends and it has allowed people to go to a deeper level. It is like college. You are discovering yourself. It is hard to get to the college level. In addition to the people liking what we are covering as topics and it is nice to see the school recognizing things and the connections, and they get to a different place with their peers that is not typical.”

“I want to relearn what I’ve forgotten over the years. I was involved in Mexico City, my birthplace, and moved around and became very disconnected. Sometimes we lived in places without synagogues. I’ve forgotten a lot. I wanted to learn for myself and connect with my son. I was surprised to find out how much more rewarding it is for myself as an adult. It is a whole lot more rewarding for me to learn about different perspectives and what everyone brings to the conversation. It is my 45 minutes early in the morning of adult thoughts.”

#### (6) Development of a sense of “community”

JECEI embraces a philosophy of learning that views social participation as a vital aspect of meaningful education. Indeed it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated. Learning together with other parents, colleagues and teachers, offers participants the opportunity to connect to other adults, to institutions, and to the broader community in a meaningful and personal way. Multiple connection points increase the potential for strengthened communal connections and enhanced sense of communal belonging and Jewish identity:

*“Havurot gives a sense of community that I love about the preschool. I have met so many friends. You even feel so connected to people you aren’t your friends. The last session we attended was about new rituals you want to create with family. I love the opportunity to tap into new people and Jewish thought and connect it to parents in Jewish life.”*

*“It [Havurot] allows you to pause for a couple of hours and think about very important issues that are close to you about family and home and religious and community.... things you wouldn’t necessarily about it through a Jewish lens and it opens insights and ideas that we wouldn’t have taken the time to think about. It’s a nice way for a community of parents to come together to learn about Judaism - interesting, smart people to talk about interesting great topics.”*

*“There were three separate schools and all of a sudden I see them as one community. In the past, I’ve seen competition among the schools. Now I see them as one Jewish community. At JECEI seminars, I have the opportunity to sit in small groups with lay people, parents and directors across the community to learn from each other and work together. I was also impressed how JECEI invited other leaders from the Jewish community. I really like the fact that the three schools in the community are cooperating and working together on behalf of children, families and the Jewish community.”*

#### Implications for Adult Learning and Development: Linking Theory and Practice<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The adult learning theory presented in this paper is drawn from an extensive literature review conducted by Linda Dale Bloomberg (2006) in preparation for her Doctoral research on Experiential Learning, Situated Cognition, and the development adult learning communities.

Making experience meaningful is critical to learning, and learning from experience plays a significant role in adult development (Bloomberg, 2006). Overall, the literature on experiential learning suggests how individuals make experiences meaningful and how they then incorporate these experiences into their ways of understanding and viewing the world--especially in the context of influencing and interpreting future experiences. The implication is that one's experiences provide the foundation for all learning, and that this process is an interactive one. This is certainly so in JECEI's model which is community-oriented, interactive, inclusive, and experiential. Participants draw on current and past experience as they learn with and from each other in groups and teams, which are essentially "learning communities" or "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998).

A learning community becomes a vehicle for communication, understanding, and the sharing of knowledge, thereby enhancing or enabling individual learning (Bloomberg, 2006). Interaction and social participation facilitate ongoing active engagement in the learning process. The work of Dewey (1938) can be seen as foundational in the development of ideas about a learning community. Dewey was committed to core social values such as justice, tolerance, concern, and respect for others. He regarded the classroom life as critical training for learning to live in a democracy, theorizing that students grow as they participate, cooperate, and solve problems together. Based upon Dewey's writing, the defining characteristics of a learning community begin with dialogue, and bear a central relation to collaboration and problem-solving (Bloomberg, 2006).

The notion of a learning community is predicated on the assumption that what is accomplished jointly is what no one individual can do alone (Shulman, 1997). Graves (1992), in defining a learning community, emphasizes high levels of cooperation and

collaboration among students and teachers, and characterizes it as (a) a cohesive yet self reflective group; (b) where everyone feels that they belong and are respected; and (c) where interaction and participation is ongoing, regular, and focused around common and shared goals. These definitions underscore that an emphasis on the social relationships among participants becomes critical to the successful development of a learning community. Fulton and Riel (1999) characterize a learning community as a group that has (a) a shared interest in a topic, task, or problem; (b) respect for the diversity of perspectives; (c) the opportunity and commitment to work as a team; (e) tools for sharing multiple perspectives; and (e) knowledge production as a shared goal or outcome.

From a constructivist epistemological stance, learning is essentially an emergent, developmental, contextual, and reciprocal phenomenon (Bloomberg, 2006). Adult education as a field has always valued learning from collaboration and from experience, with Dewey, as early as 1916 making the claim that “the social environment...is truly educative in the effects in the degree in which an individual shares or participates in some conjoint activity” (1916/1954, p. 26). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) concluded that learning is fostered through social interaction, and called for an approach to learning and teaching that is exploratory, collaborative, and constructivist. The constructivist approach engages learners in knowledge construction through collaborative activities that embed learning within a meaningful context (Bloomberg, 2006).

It was Dewey (1938) who first put forward the idea that learning was concerned with experience rather than just the acquisition of abstract knowledge. In his classic volume *Experience and Education*, Dewey observes that “all genuine education comes about through experience” (p. 13), although he proposes the caveat that not all experience educates, and that in fact some experience actually mis-educates and distorts growth. For

learning to occur, Dewey argues that experience must exhibit the principles of continuity and interaction. Continuity implies that every experience both takes up something from those that have gone before, and modifies in some way the quality of those that come after it. Learners have to connect what they are learning from current experiences to those in the past, and also see possible future implications. Interaction posits that “an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his [sic] environment” (1938, p. 41).

More recently, numerous adult educators have underscored the fundamental role that experience plays in learning (Bloomberg, 2006). Experiential Learning has been extensively developed by Kolb (1984), who defines it as “learning by doing.” Building on the foundations of Dewey and Piaget, Kolb conceptualizes that learning from experience includes four different kinds of activities that are interrelated phases within a cyclical process: (1) openness and willingness to involve oneself in new experiences (concrete experience), (2) observational and reflective skills so that the new experience can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (reflective observation), (3) analytical abilities so that integrative ideas and concepts can be created (abstract conceptualization), and (4) decision-making and problem-solving skills so that new ideas and concepts can be used in actual practice (active experimentation). Like Kolb, Boud and Miller (1996) also acknowledge that experience is foundational to adult learning, emphasizing that the knowledge produced by experiential learning is highly influenced by sociocultural and historical factors. These ideas have direct implications for the work of JECEI which draws upon Reggio Emilia philosophy and practice, and which is rooted in foundational Jewish ideas and values through which adults view and experience their world.

Sociocultural models of learning take experiential learning a step further, claiming that the social context is central to learning (Hansman, 2001). Interaction with the setting determines the quality of learning, with attention being focused on the intersection among people, tools, and context. Experiential learning emphasizes doing the task in order to learn from it. Situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998) emphasizes *interaction between learners and other learners and tools* within a sociocultural context, with the context being integrally woven with the learning experience. Presenting as it does, “a conception of learning as an aspect of culturally, historically, situated activity” (Lave 1993, p. 30), the application of situated cognition theory to education has resulted in a body of knowledge related to interactive and collaborative learning upon which the idea of a learning community or “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) is predicated. W. F. Hanks, in the foreword to Lave and Wenger (1991), describes this approach to learning as follows:

Situated learning contributes to a growing body of research in human sciences that explores the situated character of human understanding and communication. It takes as its focus the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs. Rather than defining it as the acquisition of propositional knowledge...learning [is situated] in certain forms of social co-participation. Rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask *what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place.* (p. 14) (Italics added. This is the key research question for the current paper)

Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978) among others, Situated Cognition theory posits that learning is a social process that is shaped by the interaction and intersection among people, tools, and context within a learning situation. The assumption is that people learn as they become intimately involved with a community or culture of learning, interacting with the community, and learning to understand and participate in its history, assumptions, and socio-cultural values and mores (Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger,

1991). Knowing and learning are defined as the engagement and participation in the changing processes of human activity within a particular community. The nature of interactions among learners, the tools that are used within these interactions, the activity itself, and the social and cultural context in which the activity takes place, all shape the learning process. People take their cues for understanding as they socially interact, and learning develops in context as people address and deal with challenges and issues, and establish shared meaning. Thus learning is experienced through relationships within a “community of meaning” (Jacobson, 1996).

Situated Cognition Theory suggests that learning is greatly enhanced when it is anchored or situated in meaningful and authentic problem-solving contexts (Bloomberg, 2006). Lave (1993) argues that rather than add situated contexts to learning experiences, a more promising alternative lies in treating relations among people, tools, activity as they are given in social practice. The implication is that real world contexts make the most optimal learning environments. In terms of situated cognition theory, learning activities prompt and promote the cognitive processes learners use naturally as they work towards understanding their experiences. In this conception, learning communities or communities of practice can indeed become powerful sites for situated learning (Bloomberg, 2006). The community itself is the authentic context for learning; in the learning community, learning is embedded in the process of community development, being both *within* and *about* the context (Bloomberg, 2006). From a situated view, people learn as they participate and become intimately involved with a “community” or “culture of learning” in order to understand and participate in its history, assumptions and cultural values.

The context itself within which adults learn becomes an essential component of the

learning process. This has direct implications for the JECEI model as it strives to make the context of learning (that is, the school as a “learning community” or “community of practice”) as meaningful as possible through shared learning experiences, and to increasingly enhance the context by offering multiple connection points. Teams can be considered “learning communities”, “communities of practice”, or “communities of meaning”, and these become the authentic context for learning. In the JECEI model, learning is embedded in the process of community development, and the learning that is occurring is both *within* and *about* the context. In this way, the context itself continues to engage and re-engage the parents. The challenge for educators, as JECEI recognizes, is to enable groups of learners to meaningfully integrate both current and past experience into their learning, so that they will continue stay engaged, and continue to develop their skills as self reflexive lifelong learners.

### Concluding Comments

To achieve the ultimate objective of instilling a strong Jewish identity in children, strengthening the Jewish identity of families, and serving as a key gateway to life long Jewish living and learning, the Jewish community needs to focus on engaging the families, strengthening the professionals, building excellent programs, and creating local and national infrastructures. JECEI’s approach is an effective attempt to bridge the gap between what Jewish ECE programs seek to impart, and actual engagement of families in Jewish life.

As a transformative change effort for early childhood centers, JECEI has in place a process that pulls the energies and abilities of all the members of the school community together so that everyone--children, educators, parents, and community members--

develop through learning experientially. The context itself within which adults learn becomes an essential component of the learning process. The context continues to engage and re-engage the parents, enabling them to meaningfully integrate current and past experience into their learning. The governance and management process that JECEI has implemented enables early childhood programs and schools to anticipate and manage change and strengthen relationships, thereby increasing their capacity to impact families, and ultimately communities. With this process, family engagement becomes interwoven and inherently integrated into the community's plan to achieve the desired learning and developmental outcomes of the children.

By virtue of its core distinctive features JECEI's regenerative and iterative model encourages ongoing experiential context-based learning, collaboration, and connection. This model captures the essence of what Wertheimer (2005) refers to as "linking the silos"; a concept that places a greater value on the whole rather than a sum of its parts by "enabling learners to benefit from mutually reinforcing educational experiences and to help families negotiate their way through the rich array of educational options" (p. 5) JECEI's holistic and inclusive approach indeed illustrates how we can effectively maximize early childhood curricular and pedagogic practices, that can in turn result in transformative outcomes for individuals, families and, more broadly, communities.

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