

Smashing the Idolatry of “Jewish Identity”

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Forgive me when I tell you that I came to Toronto a bit skeptical. I came to the Symposium on Jewish Identity with a negative bias. The term “Jewish identity” has always felt empty to me. I’d speak with educators who would tell me that the subject of the seventh grade curriculum was “Jewish identity,” or to authors explaining that they were working on a book on “Jewish identity.” I could never figure out what should really go into such a curriculum or such a book. (“Isn’t *everything* we do about Jewish identity?” I’d ask myself.)

That’s how I felt about the Symposium, until the first session of the conference. “Slogans,” Dr. Michael Zeldin explained, “express broad notions with receptive chords which people say ‘yes’ to. But they are often devoid of meaning. They are idols.” He went on to explain further, and then asked the all-important rhetorical question, “Is it possible that the term ‘Jewish identity’ is a slogan?”

Then he began asking the questions that framed the rest of the conference for me:

How do today’s Jews understand their own Jewishness? How can we facilitate their Jewish identities—the ways in which they feel Jewish, in which they express their Jewishness and in which they affiliate with Jewish communities? Instead of asking, “How Jewish are Jews?” what might we learn by instead asking “How are Jews Jewish?” How can research provide new insight into these questions, and how can we, as practitioners, translate those insights into new programs and new curricula?

We can only begin to find answers to these questions, Zeldin taught, when we throw out slogans and start looking for metaphors. Jewish lives may look like double helixes, continually spinning around fundamental issues, or like kaleidoscopes or movie projectors. By examining the ways in which Jewishness interacts with individuals’ inner private selves and with our outer North American selves, we might learn an awful lot about how to educate our students.

The rest of the conference was a blur of questions and thoughtful analysis. Dr. Bethamie Horowitz spoke about her analysis of Jewish journeys. We must stop understanding an individual’s Jewish identity, she taught, by boiling his or her life down to a checklist of Jewish activities. Instead, we must

listen to the ways in which Jews *are* Jewish, and examine the paths they take to get to this particular point in their Jewish lives.

The following morning, Dr. Ari Kelman presented research and then posed even more questions. His analysis of young adults led him to tell us that contrary to what we may think, successful Jewish education may be about socialization, not information. Furthermore, a new generation of Jewish adults sees their Jewish lives in new ways. They participate in diverse social networks, marry later in life and find resonance in a broad range of Jewish issues. How then, asked Kelman, can we rethink our institutions and our methodologies to meet the needs of this changing demographic landscape?

There was much more. At an enlightening session on technology, a panel of experts suggested that we need to remember that learners feel empowered to mold the world around them. “Learners are active creators of their own Torah,” one speaker explained. I participated in a session that examined how the broad range of learners’ Jewish identities may affect their attitudes towards Israel. In another, Dr. David Bryfman challenged us to rethink our definitions of “informal” and “experiential” Jewish education.

The midrash tells the story of young Avram smashing idols, and then explaining to his father why he did it. There must have been a moment, right after he finished smashing, when Avram stood in a room surrounded by broken idols. At that moment, I imagine he must have felt a deep sense of satisfaction and an even deeper sense of awe. I’d like to think that Avram was inspired by that moment, just as I was inspired as I watched the idol of “Jewish identity” crumble, making way for a more sophisticated and nuanced view of Jewish education. I arrived in Toronto with a sense of skepticism, and I left energized.