The Four Pillars That Actually Shape Jewish High School



What are the most important values in a Jewish high school education?

In 2017, the Jewish Federations of North America contracted Rosov Consulting to examine the "most prominent features" of the Jewish day school landscape. That study, which did not look specifically at high schools, identified four main issues: financial sustainability, student recruitment, leadership retention, and educational quality. From the standpoint of values being sought by prospective parents and students, these could be read as: affordability, popularity, quality leadership and good teachers. In the near decade since this study, much of the consulting and analysis I have seen in the world of Jewish education has focused on these values.

I would like to suggest that, when it comes to Jewish high school, there are four alternative values that anchor the lived experience of those engaged with the daily life of high school. These values are mental wellness, social connection, inspiration, and academic learning.

They have emerged over the last two decades or so among the stakeholders that live each day in and around a typical Jewish high school. They are recognizably part of the culture but rarely, if ever, explicitly referenced as anchoring values; little attention is paid to the relative weighting schools give to any of them at different places in the high school experience.

For example, I have never experienced a discussion on how a student's daily schedule should be optimally balanced to allow for meaningful growth in each of these areas. We simply maintain the typical bell to bell schedule we inherited from generations past that keeps students in classrooms for 80% of their day, ostensibly focused on formal academic learning during that time. Becoming intentional about these values is, in my opinion, essential to what happens in school and what ultimately makes or breaks the experience of a Jewish high school education for parents and students.

Each value has a stakeholder group that is the primary advocate for that value, although there is certainly a fair amount of overlap among the groups. Parents, generally speaking, are highly invested in their teenage children's mental wellness. Adolescents, for their part, are largely invested in their social development. Teachers and administrators are divided. One group, often but not always Judaic studies teachers, are primarily invested in inspiration. The other group, for the most part general studies teachers, are primarily invested in academic learning.

In this essay I would like to describe my observations of these values and how they have played out among these groups in my experience as a Jewish educator. I will also make a case that, if my descriptions resonate, we would be wise to approach these values with a greater degree of intentionality. Instead of each constituency advocating in a silo, our schools can be stronger if we become aware of the competitive landscape upon which these values contend with each other. This will enable us to better balance the ways we shape our school programs, spend our limited resources, and personally consider our own priorities as parents, students, and educators.

Mental Wellness

The opening scene of the iconic 1980s teen-drama *The Breakfast Club* features a screen with the following David Bowie quote: “And these children that you spit on as they try to change their worlds, are immune to your consultations. They’re quite aware of what they’re going through” (“Changes,” on Hunky Dory, 1971). In many ways, that perfectly captured the experience of being a teenager-facing adult authority in the 1980s and 90s—independent and unrelatable. In many ways, our generation’s parenting style, having grown up in *The Breakfast Club* era, is in direct response to Bowie’s sentiments.

In the decade plus I served as a high school administrator, by far the number one expression of hope for their children that parents shared with me could be captured in one word: happiness. “At the end of the day, I just want my child to be happy” was a common refrain I would hear from parents. (I believe that parents are typically referring to the larger goal of mental wellness when making that statement. Whether “happy” is an effective descriptor of overall mental wellness is an issue for a different time.)

I have worked in highly competitive environments where many of the students, and their parents, aspired to attend elite post-secondary programs. As prominent as that priority appeared to be, it was, understandably, quickly discarded when it began to impact a child’s mental wellness. When children are putting academic performance pressure on themselves to the point of severe anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, all priorities change toward helping the child get well. The same could be said of other important parenting goals, such as religious observance—again, understandably so. For example, in my experience in Modern Orthodox schools, I have seen parents deeply worried about their child’s Jewish observance only to shift gears entirely when realizing their child was struggling with an LGBT identity.

We are a generation of parents invested in our children’s mental health in a way our parents and grandparents, and probably many generations prior, were not. Some of this undoubtedly comes from a general increased awareness of mental health concerns, especially among adolescents, in the broader culture. And some of it, I believe, comes from our reactions to our experiences as teenagers where we often felt our overall happiness was not the most pressing concern the adults in our lives had for us. We suffered and we knew our friends who suffered, and the adults in our lives—parents and teachers—were most often left out of those struggles. Whatever the specific causes, we are heavily invested in guiding our children through their struggles, advocating for their needs, and making sure their mental wellness is a top priority for the adults in their worlds.

Social Connection

Our children are, as teenagers have long been, primarily focused on their social lives. For several years now I have taken to periodically asking students what they think the main purpose of high school is; on nearly every occasion, the answer is some variation of "friends." Just as most parents would throw their Ivy League aspirations for their children out the window to help them with a mental health challenge, most teenagers would throw their classroom learning out the window to achieve the social outcome they desire. This value typically expresses itself differently among boys and girls. Where girls may seem very explicitly invested in status groups and who is friends with whom, boys often desire brotherhood or feelings of comradery and loyalty among their peers. In both instances, this growing sense of social independence is the predominant focus at the early stages of adolescent development.

This value set crystallized for me on a recent school Shabbaton where I observed the staff and administrators heavily invested in the informal educational program for Shabbat. They mulled over questions like, who was at minyan? Did this session topic work? Was the guest speaker inspiring? All the while, this focus of the staff was something of a sideshow for the students who were almost entirely engrossed in a Shabbat fully engaged with social connection. It's fair to say the rooming arrangements probably had a greater impact on the student-experience of the Shabbaton than all the learning programs put together.

I want to pause my descriptions to reiterate the overlapping nature of these values. Obviously there are parents worried about their children's social lives and teenagers focused on improving their mental wellness. In fact, social life in high school is often bound up with mental wellness. My observation is only that these stakeholders, in broad terms, map onto these value categories. But these categories are certainly not mutually exclusive of each other. What I want to offer is a picture based on the particular value you will most often see being articulated and advocated for among the stakeholder group identified. In other words, high school students are most often focused on their social lives and parents on their children's mental wellness, while these categories are themselves intertwined with each other.

Inspiration

In terms of the values of professional staff in a Jewish high school, they will typically divide themselves into two camps: the academic camp and the inspirational camp.

There are certainly academically focused teachers who are inspirational and inspirational teachers who also seek academic learning. What I am referring to relates to a question I would ask every teacher or administrator I interviewed when I was a high school principal: Why do you want to teach high school? Invariably there are two types of answers to that question. Some high school professionals want to inspire young people to discover a purpose or pathway in their lives. Often these professionals were themselves impacted by an inspirational high school teacher or mentor in a profound way such that it guided their choice of career. These professionals are typically represented among Judaic studies teachers.

This is also, in my experience, representative of a generational shift. When I graduated high school in the late 1990s, one could already see the beginnings of a change. The older rabbis and teachers who treated Judaic studies largely as academic subjects to be learned were giving way to a new generation of rabbis and teachers who treated Judaic subjects as a means to inspire Jewish commitment and lifelong Jewish living. Having a *kesher* (personal connection) with a rebbe or a teacher is often the predominant outcome that Judaic studies teachers seek to achieve with their students.

For other educators, the focus on inspiration may not be toward explicitly religious goals. Many high school professionals value the wide array of informal learning experiences available to students such as co-curricular programs and sports. Take *leadership*, the buzzword of nearly every third-party organization offering informal learning opportunities for high school students, such as Yeshiva University Model UN, as well as fellowships from programs such as Hartman, Bronfman, Tikvah, etc. These programs most often seek to inspire young people to develop certain value frameworks through which they can engage with the world as future leaders in Jewish communities and organizations. What these examples have in common is a focus less on formally measured achievements in cognitive skills and more on developing an intrinsic motivation to live by a particular value set.

Academic Learning

For another group of high school professionals, the response to why they want to teach high school will relate directly to formal academic learning. This is a desire to develop and formally measure certain levels of understanding and cognitive skill among students. If learned, these skills will enable the young people who master them with the ability to successfully navigate a variety of advanced learning environments in the future. In an environment where attending university after high school is the norm, this group is most consistently represented among general studies teachers. They operate with the assumption that there are certain core pieces of academic knowledge and skills students need to advance to the next stage of their learning, and these professionals aspire to train them to those ends.

Here again, it is not exclusively the general studies staff who have this goal. A smaller number of Judaics studies teachers, especially in advanced classes, also seek to build student skills as independent Jewish learners equipped with the ability to pursue advanced textual Jewish learning into adulthood.

The High School Experience

These four values—mental wellness, social connection, inspiration, and academic learning—are the four practical pillars holding up the typical Jewish high school experience. While imperfectly assigned, each stakeholder between parents, children, teachers, and administrators will often view one of these values as their primary focus. As I have argued, these values emerge naturally, either from the basic developmental instincts that animate each constituency or from cultural norms particular to the current generation of parents and adolescents. Often we prefer to focus on the value most important to us while seeing the others as just additional features of high school life. Here I believe we are missing an opportunity to view each of these values as foundational and to consider an intentional and transparent balance among them.

Here’s a conceivable scenario that illustrates how the imbalance currently functions: A certain school in a large Jewish community has a reputation for being cold and academic and is losing market share to other schools competing for the same students. Consultants are brought in and vision and value statements are drawn up. As a result, the Board of Directors seeks a new head of school who will focus on warmth and inspiration. Pretty soon the new head is at odds with the existing value set in the school, dismisses several staff representing the old guard in a shakeup, and eventually changes the school’s culture to the desired outcome. However, after a time, there is a new Board seeking to make the school academically serious again, new consultants are brought in, and the inspiration value is no longer a top priority and the head either has to adjust or move on.

This is an unproductive cycle. We can avoid these reactionary swings if we take the step to explicitly focus on certain values as emergent, foundational and universal for Jewish high schools. The best approach does not prioritize one or two of these values but sees each as fundamental to the experience of high school life, and intentionally weighs each in order to seek a healthy balance among them. Talented heads of school often do this instinctively. For example, they will hire an inspiring personality when they get feedback or begin to sense it is missing.

But I have not yet experienced an organized attempt to structurally balance these value forces at the hiring and budgetary levels. Boards and heads could organize a school’s budget around these values and consider, for example, what it spends on inspiration toward leadership compared to academic achievement. Or, student activities staff could examine the extent to which a Shabbaton plan is designed for social connection or religious inspiration. Principals can hire based on which professionals have expertise in each of these areas and consider how best to spread them within the school. Finally, schools can identify key performance indicators in these areas while setting achievement targets and measuring success. This might look like targeting specific percentages of student time dedicated to each value, meeting set criteria for balancing budgetary spending toward each value in proportion to a predetermined balance, or being intentional and transparent about what value new hires are meant to address and what the criteria are for their success in that regard.

These four lived values exist in our culture and have emerged as dominant forces for this generation of Jewish high schools. I suggest we approach them with the attention that merits something foundational. This can certainly begin by testing and researching the presence of these values among stakeholders, seeing if my observations are broadly reflected. But even if they merely resonate as true, I suggest we acknowledge them as a useful framework for improving conversations around a school's purpose and balance within these cultural forces. By doing so, we can be intentional about setting goals, allocating our resources, and enhancing Jewish education as a whole.