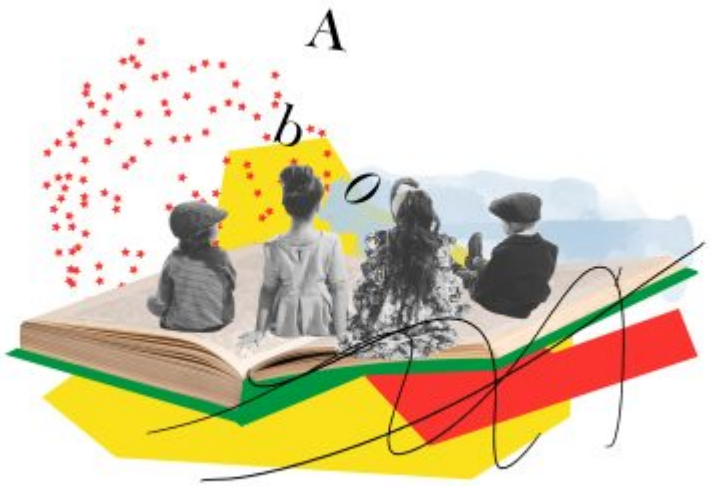
‘It’s Not Great’: What’s the Deal With Jewish Education?



Jewish education rests at the epicenter of our communal infrastructure. In that vein, as 18Forty explores the ingredients of Jewish education this month, we surveyed the 18Forty community to feature unique, first-hand perspectives on the state of Jewish education today.

We sought to understand how Jewish students, educators, and parents felt about the Jewish education of today and of tomorrow. Responses flooded in from across the world, offering new insights on a system that is currently shaping the next generation.

Two main themes emerged from the responses: The first was a sociological concern—who are our teachers and what are their aims; and the second was a pragmatic concern—what is being taught and how. These words from the 18Forty community canvas remodeling curricula, financial realities, and a blossoming hope for a better Jewish experience. More than anything, they offer a glimpse into those living with the reality of Jewish education.

Jewish Education Today: What Helps and What Hurts

Where’s the Feeling?

“Today it seems that even if a child gets 12 years of formal yeshiva education, it does not mean anything unless s/he goes for a *shana ba’aretz*. None of the education seems to stick really, and the *shana baaretz* year is the make it or break it for that child’s yiddishkeit. There needs to be more of a focus on skill building than memorizing content. More importantly, yeshiva day schools need to do a better job of fostering a child’s emotional and spiritual connection to yiddishkeit and not just on focus on the academic/talmud Torah aspect of religion. Again, it seems that if one doesn’t go to yeshiva/seminary, that deeper connection has no opportunity to develop.

“In brief, yeshiva day schools solely emphasize the vocational side of yiddishkeit, which turns kids off from religion. They need to do a better job of portraying the emotional/spiritual side to religion as well.”

— Gaby Rahmanfar, Brooklyn, NY

(Rising Jewish Educator)

‘More Child-Centered’

“I think we are working very hard to be more child-centered, and a lot of our educational institutions have made great strides in this arena. We’ve made huge strides in areas of mental health and acknowledging that the issues that exist ‘out there’ exist within our schools and communities, as well. We are working hard to address them.”

— M.T., Florida

(Jewish Educator)

‘It’s Not Great’

“It’s not great. Too many parents are looking for a private school education, but with a minimum of Jewish content added—thus the dumbing down of many non-Orthodox day schools. Also, too many parents are looking for a bar/bat mitzvah for their kids, a social event with the minimum of Jewish skills necessary to make it look good, and many synagogues are accommodating this. And serious Jewish educators get frustrated, and are often bounced out by those who feel their needs—minimalist or otherwise—are not being met.”

— Danny Horowitz, Houston, TX

(Jewish Educator)

‘More Positivity—Not Punishment’

“Let me start by saying I have definitely seen a shift in the education more towards connecting to Hashem as opposed to just learning subjects without bringing emotions into it. I think we need to add some chassidut into the mix. We need to move away from doing things by rote and doing things because it will make our relationship with G-d better. Things like tefilla are very difficult to impart, but if we move away from telling kids they have to do things or because ‘That’s what our family does,’ and start saying that they should do it because Hashem loves them and yearns for a relationship with them, we may get them to daven. Things like dress code for girls is received better from a positive perspective. Proud Judaism—not because you must. In HS, when they interact with public school kids who would love to go to yeshiva, our kids feel more privileged and proud. More positivity—not punishment.”

— Susie Lewin, Woodmere, NY

(Parent of Jewish Student)

‘The Pendulum Has Swung Too Far’

“I think that in many schools we’re falling short when it comes to having our students learn the most important texts and ideas in the most effective way. The pendulum has swung too far. Sometimes it seems that educators (parents, too?) are too concerned with kids ‘liking’ Judaism and therefore prioritize experience over actual learning. Citing stories like one of my grandfathers who was hit in a cheder on the Lower East Side and felt a negativity towards Torah for the rest of his life, people say things like, ‘It doesn’t matter what they know, it matters how they feel.’ Raising a generation of kids who ‘feel good’ about a Judaism they don’t actually understand and whose texts they can’t access seems to me a colossal mistake.”

— Rick Schindelheim, Cleveland, OH

(Jewish Educator)

Jewish Education Tomorrow: Hopes and Fears

Three Pillars of Good Teachers

“TEACHERS! Their recruitment, development and retention. I think there are several factors that contribute to this phenomenon (I’m happy to share my theories) but when you compare the Modern Orthodox education system to the more Yeshivish community, one outstanding difference is the age and experience you find in the classroom. In the Yeshiva world you see Rebbeim who have been teaching (4th grade, 7th, high school) for 30 or 40 years. In our schools, if you don’t have some kind of administrative role and your own office by the time you’re 29, you have some explaining to do (forgive the hyperbole).

“I think life-shaping education is built on three pillars: (1) Essential Content (Torah), (2) Effective Pedagogy (Avodah), and (3) Relationships (Gemilut Chasadim) [built on teacher’s self-understanding, understanding of kids and genuine connection]. (Article pending: Please don’t steal my formulation). Of course, factors outside the individual teacher, like home, school culture, community, etc. play important roles as well. However, schools that lack teachers who teach with three pillars will be mediocre at best. At the same time, cultivating them takes time. Often, by the time an educator has spent enough years in school to learn and develop these attributes he or she is hardly in the classroom anymore. We need talented and experienced educators in the front of Jewish classrooms: Where are they? How will we bring them and keep them there?”

— Rick Schindelheim, Cleveland, OH

(Jewish Educator)

Two Concerns About ‘Price’

“I have two main concerns. First, the affordability. Some families break their backs to pay for Jewish education, and as more and more is expected of them—summer camps, two years in Israel, etc.—it will put more of a strain on families and push some to their breaking point. Cost of living has gotten higher and most salaries have not increased. My concern is yeshiva and day school tuition may not be affordable. My second concern is connected to my answer on what we can do better in our education system: Many kids get to Israel and get what they have been craving for all along. The love of learning, the love of Shabbos, the passion doing of mitzvot, the excitement of being frum, and they grab and begin to live it authentically and reject the Modern Orthodox lifestyle altogether. When they come back after two plus years, many choose a more yeshivish path and may make our Modern Orthodox day school and yeshiva education a thing of the past.”

— Susie Lewin, Woodmere, NY

(Parent of Jewish Student)

Building Better Foundations

“Aside from cost, we are not focusing enough on foundations—what are the basics that every kid needs to know to succeed? I don’t think being able to read a Tosfot or Ran is critical for a Grade 8 or 12 student, although it is helpful. But understanding how/why we believe in Hashem and the basics of Judaism is. I think children are not getting that type of environment till their gap year, when it is late in their formative years.”

— Yoni Eis, Toronto, CA

(Parent of Jewish Student)

‘The Allure of Western Rationalism’

“We are losing too many [children] to the allure of Western rationalism or mindless hedonism.

“Secular studies (at least for girls) are often more interesting, relevant, or intellectually rewarding.

“As for teachers, we are losing the best talent to more lucrative fields.”

— Chana W, Williamsburg, NY

(Parent of Jewish Student)

‘Observant but Not Very Religious’

“‘We are raising a generation of young people who are very observant but not very religious.’ How do we get young people to think deeply and meaningfully about their religious lives, and not just stand passively and move robotically on the conveyor belt so conveniently set up for them? This is especially apparent in a time where the ubiquitousness of screens and digital media has sapped teens of their attention spans and grit.”

— Nissa Levy, Cedarhurst, NY

(Jewish Educator)