Blog Post: An Underutilized Resource in Jewish Education?

By Jon Levisohn
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Before the wave of professionalization and innovation that swept through the Jewish camping world in the last decade, before Birthright Israel and Masa, before the dramatic expansion of the Jewish day school movement in the 1980s and 1990s, the American Jewish community produced another significant and dramatic accomplishment in Jewish education. It created the field of academic Jewish studies.

From its modest beginnings in the post-war period, to its development as a field in the 1960s alongside other fields of ethnic studies, to its explosion in the years since, academic Jewish studies is now such a part of the landscape that we take it for granted that every major university will have a Jewish studies program and that even less prominent campuses have their share of available courses in the field.

The facts of the emergence of academic Jewish studies over the last 3-4 decades are not in dispute. But not everyone would consider this phenomenon to be a significant accomplishment in Jewish education. I do.

Granted, as a professor, I might be accused of having a vested interest here, and I freely admit that that is the case. Still, I think it’s important to see academic Jewish studies as an important element in the Jewish educational landscape for three reasons.

First, the field of Jewish studies pedagogy demands it. We can’t afford to artificially separate the teaching of (e.g.) Jewish history that occurs in Jewish educational settings from the teaching of Jewish history that occurs in universities, if we hope to get smarter about the particular, subject-specific pedagogic challenges and opportunities. This doesn’t mean that academic historians should dictate the curricula and pedagogy to schools and synagogues. But it does mean that academic historians and history teachers elsewhere ought to be participating in one shared conversation. (For more on this point, see the work of the Bridging Initiative at the Mandel Center.)

The second reason to situate academic Jewish studies within the Jewish educational landscape is that academic Jewish studies can foster a positive, mature Jewish identity. Of course, there are certainly ways in which the discoveries of critical historical inquiry challenge traditional Jewish beliefs. That’s not surprising. And, equally obviously, many of the students in university Jewish studies courses are not themselves Jewish. Nevertheless, it remains the case that serious, disciplined academic study – of biblical and rabbinic texts, of various periods and phenomena in Jewish history, of Jewish philosophy, of Jewish literature and culture of all kinds – has the potential to engage the modern Jew. Academic Jewish studies can contribute to something that we might fairly call “identity development,” without
compromising its scholarly integrity. (For more on this point, see the articles here and here.)

But the third reason to think about academic Jewish studies as an important element within the Jewish educational landscape is that it is an enormously valuable resource that, so far, has gone largely untapped. We have not clarified the role that academic Jewish studies might play in the development of students’ identities in a way that respects the academic setting and its boundaries. Some of the most talented, passionate and deeply knowledgeable members of the Jewish community do not have the opportunity to share their passions and knowledge. We have not linked the silos, smoothing the path for young Jews from our schools or synagogues to find enriching Jewish studies experiences when they arrive in college. Our communal return on investment is not what it might be.

What would it take to improve our ROI? Not surprisingly, it would take further investment. The Schusterman Foundation and, now, the Jim Joseph Foundation have already begun this kind of investment, through the Jewish Studies Expansion Program at the Foundation for Jewish Culture. It is particularly admirable that the Schusterman/JJF project has brought together the cohorts of selected fellows to work on their teaching. But much more can and should be done.

Imagine, for example, if we could regularly convene advanced doctoral students or young scholars in particular fields with Jewish studies – Jewish history, literature, or classical texts – to support the development of their teaching. Imagine if, in partnership with the AJS, we could create a culture at the annual conference where scholars explored teaching and its substantive challenges alongside their particular areas of research. (See my previous blog post.) Imagine if we could develop a set of webcases of strong and thoughtful university instructors, cases that would allow others to see inside those classrooms and even more importantly to get inside those instructors’ pedagogic decision-making.

The field of academic Jewish studies is flourishing, and that’s a good thing. But it is an underutilized resource for Jewish education. If we want to increase our return on that investment, we have some work to do.