Blog Post: Jewish Identity Complex: Why we Cannot, and Should Not, Get Along

By Sharon Weiss-Greenberg
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This guest post is by Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, community engagement manager for CASJE. It was originally published at eJewish Philanthropy.

We all carry what has been termed FOMO, “a fear of missing out.” Today at least, although Jewry is concentrated in the vicinity of New York and in Israel, technology allows us all to tune in from wherever we are located. We do not have to miss out. I’ve been glued to my computer screen during lectures, communal debates, and the like. I followed people’s Facebook and Twitter comments during Yeshivat Maharat’s historic graduation, for example, while simultaneously watching live-feed streaming from the graduation itself. While the modern age has allowed all of us to participate in a number of events and conferences, our engagement can still be limited due to time, technological glitches and other factors.

As the Community Engagement Manager for the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE), I was thrilled to learn of blogcasting, a new communication medium wherein everyone has equal access to a conversation and all are welcome to contribute; there are few better ways of “keeping up.” CASJE recently collaborated with ReplyAll to host our first blogcast, “Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking the Purposes of Jewish Education.” The medium allowed us to create a panel, or “cast,” of contributors, who posted regularly over the course of one week. In line with CASJE’s mission, the cast included researchers, practitioners and funders. The topic of “Beyond Jewish Identity” was inspired by an important conference recently hosted by the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. Conference chairs Jon Levisohn and Ari Kelman gathered some 40 researchers, practitioners, funders and thinkers for the conference, entitled “Rethinking Jewish Identity and Jewish Education.” While they released a podcast after the event sharing highlights from the conference, we at CASJE wanted to extend the conference conversation and make it accessible to a global network of Jewish education researchers, practitioners and funders. The Mandel Center enthusiastically agreed to partner with us in this venture.

By the time the blogcast wrapped up after a week, more than 1,000 unique visitors had accessed the conversation. A number of these visitors posted comments and questions of their own with the “cast” of conversationalists. Questions included: Who cares about Jewish Identity? What does it mean? How is it measured? Should we even care about Jewish Identity?. These questions were open for all of us to debate and grapple with. Participants
acknowledged that ‘Jewish identity’ tends to be a popular term used by funders, programs and organizations as the hallmark of success; a program is a success if graduates, be they campers, students, congregants, etc, have a Jewish identity.

Our blogcast drew from a range of voices and experiences. While all participants agreed that they wanted the same or at least similar outcomes for their contingencies, they found the term “Jewish identity” “vague,” “empty,” or “lacking in meaning.” Nor were they compelled by alternative constructs such as Jewish assimilation, acculturation, literacy, fluency, or sensibility, each of which seemed somehow inadequate.

We found that what makes a conversation about Jewish identity and educational outcomes especially difficult for a group as diverse as the one we were fortunate to gather, is that it is challenging to find a balance in the conversation between the theoretical and the practical. Academic discourse is quite different from conversations amongst practitioners. Perhaps partly because of this, everyone in this discussion grappled with a desire to define terms that would be relevant and meaningful across settings: in Hillels, day schools and day camps; practically, they found that wasn’t possible. We learned through the conversation that we cannot devise a universal set of conceptual rules, desired goals or outcomes for Jewish education. We cannot even achieve such consensus in like-for-like organizations. One significant outcome of the week-long conversation was that participants saw a need for all organizations to undertake the challenging work of defining their particular goals so that they got clear what they meant, in their context, when seeking that graduates be “fluent,” “literate” or “identify” Jewishly. What became clear as a result of this conversation is that Jewish identity, a term that is used regularly as if its meaning is simple, is anything but.