

The Two Faces of Flow: A Language for Jewish Education

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Note: When we asked our colleague Joe Reimer to offer a perspective on the themes of the conference, he suggested that it might be helpful for participants to think about the idea of “flow,” first proposed by the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, which has been important to Reimer’s own thinking about educational experiences. It is not uncommon for people to use the language of transformation when describing flow experiences, especially if they are surprised by a sense of flow in an activity that is new to them. So they may say, “My life has changed by being in this program.” What they may mean, however, is something more like this: “I have never had an experience like this one before.” In other words, flow is not the same as transformation. We might frame the issue as follows: flow is a necessary condition for transformative impact on participants, but not a sufficient one. — Jon A. Levisohn, conference chair

For the past several years, I have been searching for a language to describe the best of what happens in what we commonly call “informal Jewish education.” Much of memorable Jewish education takes place in these spaces, and yet we have an impoverished vocabulary to describe these events. Terms like “informal,” “experiential,” “hands-on” and “active learning” have lost their edge in describing just those moments that may have greatest meaning for our participants.

As a psychologist I have been attracted to the work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi on *flow*. First, Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced Chik-saint-me-high) has a great story. As a young man he fled Hungary for the West to study psychology. He arrived penniless in Chicago and slowly worked his way up from being a night watchman to a professor at the University of Chicago.

The question that fascinated him was what motivates struggling artists to keep at their art when the world around has not recognized their genius or rewarded their efforts. He soon realized that the question was not limited to artists but rather applied to a wide range of

individuals with interests not widely recognized and rewarded: amateur photographers, chess players, stamp collectors and mountain climbers. None of these were likely to get rich pursuing their passion, and yet they persisted. What kept them going?

After studying these people and their practices, Csikszentmihalyi came up with the concept of *flow*. Flow is that experience of being so intensely engaged in an activity of your choosing that you lose a sense of time and self-consciousness. You feel high on the satisfaction of having tackled the problem or product you are working on. Flow is *not* what you experience lying on a beach, soaking up the sun. Daydreamers are not in a state of flow. Rather, flow is more likely to be experienced by dancers working out the steps of a demanding choreography and then, after much effort, getting into the flow of the dance as it should be danced.

But is flow limited to the intense few who spend their free time in dance studios or climbing mountains? Csikszentmihalyi studied flow in places like factories, high schools and living rooms. He found that most people can experience flow. But there are conditions that make achieving a state of flow more or less likely. Very few people experience flow watching their favorite TV shows. High school students typically experience flow in some classes but not in many others. And adults are more likely to experience flow at work than on the weekends at home. You are most likely to experience flow in a situation where you are engaged and when you feel challenged by the task at hand. You will not experience flow if you are made anxious by the demands, on the one hand, or if you are bored by a lack of consistent feedback on the other. (So, for those who are familiar with the learning theorist Lev Vygotsky, there is a relationship between flow and ZPD, the Zone of Proximal Development.)

What has flow to do with Jewish education?

Let's begin with the obvious: in our culture, Jewish living and learning is most commonly construed as a leisure-time activity with which people must choose to engage and for which there are not many obvious economic or social rewards. So what are the available incentives? For some, feeling part of a community and a historical tradition provides psychic benefits. Some enjoy spending time with family and friends in particularly Jewish ritual or cultural contexts. Others are motivated by a search for spiritual meaning. But when people ask, "Should I invest more time and energy in Jewish pursuits?", they are often seeking a more immediate payoff to motivate their participation. To my mind the best available motivator is the experience of flow.

The Jewish educators who have presented at this conference intuitively know this about flow. When a busy 40 year old is selected for a Wexner Heritage program, or a college bound 17 year old for a Bronfman program, those individuals have choices about how to spend their time. Whatever draws them to participate, they will only succeed in these demanding programs to the extent that they experience flow while participating. In these programs you actually have to engage and enjoy the learning. You may find it a struggle and at times feel down on the process, but by the end you have to feel the joy and excitement of these programs to get much out of them. You may or may not be transformed by the experience. But that joy and excitement, in the experience of the program itself, is what we mean by flow.

But is it enough that the participants experience flow and feel that their life has somehow changed? Yesterday I heard a clear answer to that question: No. Jay Moses said it most explicitly in discussing the Wexner Heritage program. He said (in paraphrase), “It is great that people feel their lives have been changed and enriched. But that is not the goal of the program. If they do not go out after the program and change their Jewish community for the better, the program has failed to meet its primary objective.” Becky Voorwinde put in different terms. She said a primary goal of the Bronfman Youth Fellowship is “to create a *beit midrash* in your mind.” That means that, after participating in peer-led intensive Jewish study during the programs, participants would do more than glow in the flow of that experience. They would continue that group conversation in their minds and in subsequent contacts with their peers. Having the experience on your own is not enough.

To capture what I heard from Jay and Becky, I need to add a second face to this discussion of flow. Keith Sawyer, who was a doctoral student of Csikszentmihalyi and is now a professor at Washington University, has developed the concept of *group flow*. Sawyer’s background is as a jazz pianist. He first got interested in studying flow from observing how differently the bands he played with performed on different nights. Sometimes they would just run through their routines and wait to get paid. But on other nights they would really get into the music and begin to jam. The jamming was never rehearsed; it just would happen when the audience was attentive and encouraging and the players felt inspired and took off. Jamming never involved just one or two players. It was either the whole ensemble or it did not work. Sawyer realized this flow was a group phenomenon and different from what Csikszentmihalyi had been describing.

What characterizes group flow? From his studies of groups at work, Sawyer found that group flow is most likely to happen under these conditions. First, the group members have to be competent in their skills and have developed a repertoire of patterned practices that they perform together. Second, there has to be relative equality among the group members without any one member dominating the others. Members have to respect one another and be open to each other’s input. Third, they have to be working on an open-ended problem or task for which there are no predetermined solutions. Fourth, they have to feel free to innovate, to follow the group’s developing intuitions. They need to be ready to go wherever their improvisation will take them.

Group flow is not a common phenomenon. Few groups work under these conditions. It is more common that there is a hierarchy of control with the person or people in charge having a predetermined goal in mind. Then the group members move at the direction of the leaders. They wait for the right cues and limit their participation to following what is expected. But in some of the Jewish educational programs that we have been discussing, there is the potential for group flow.

Let me return to the Wexner Heritage program as an example. Jay told of a Wexner group in Seattle where the members set this goal: How can we create targets of opportunity for giving back to our Jewish community? They had taken to heart the challenge to give back and decided not to leave that decision to individual members. Rather, they deliberated as a group and generated their best ideas about those targets of opportunity. I imagine the Wexner staff stepped back and let the participants take charge of their deliberation. I also imagine that, by

that point in the group's evolution, they had learned a lot about their community and developed respect for what each member could contribute to this deliberation. If all these conditions were met, they may well have experienced group flow and, as a result, produced a creative plan that transcended the wisdom of any one participant and represented the aspirations of all the members for what they could give back to their community.

Let me review. When the goal of a Jewish educational program is to affect the lives and learning of its individual members, then group leaders need to be thinking primarily about creating the conditions for individual flow. But when the goals also include creating a group of members that will carry forward the work of the program beyond the program's conclusion, the group leaders may also be concerned to create group flow. Creating individual flow usually comes first, as the members start to engage with the program's demands and opportunities. Then, once the program has their enthused buy-in, the leaders can begin to cultivate a group dynamic that will allow for group flow to emerge. They can only do that, however, by stepping back and empowering the group to take off and pursue the ideals of the program in an idiom of their own. That is always risky, but the rewards can be a group that is committed to imaginatively recreating the ideals of the program in new circumstances where creativity is needed for successful adaptation.

References

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Keith Sawyer, *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*. New York: Basic Books. 2007.