

## Bridging the Gap from Bar Mitzvah to Birthright

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*by Adam Gaynor*

Most American Jews choose to live, work, and socialize in modern, diverse communities; consequently, most Jewish teens attend schools, camps, and extracurricular activities that are ethnically and religiously diverse (even when their parents can afford the exorbitant tuitions of comparable Jewish options). Given that the peer groups of most Jewish teens are diverse, and that adolescence is a time of identity formation within the context of the peer group, it is understandable that most American Jewish teens are not interested in participating in Jewish education that places them in exclusively Jewish silos.

However, recent research has amply demonstrated that the most Jewishly committed adults participated in intensive Jewish education as children, in exclusively Jewish settings such as day schools and camps.

So how do we reconcile these two realities? Do we direct the bulk of communal resources toward day schools and camps because, hey, we're not going to reach most Jews anyway? Or, do we re-imagine what Jewish education can look like for most American Jews?

Over the past decade TCI (The Curriculum Initiative) has experimented with the latter approach. Founded to support Jewish culture and identity at secular and parochial private high schools, TCI runs Jewish educational programs exclusively within non-Jewish schools, and has found that the following strategic principles are effective with Jewish teens in these settings:

1. **Meet students where they are**, rather than pulling them out of their environments. Meeting students where they are is not just a geographic consideration; it also connotes sensitivity to their intellectual, emotional, and social needs.
2. **Engage students' total environments**, including classrooms, clubs, assemblies, service learning projects, and after-school activities.

3. **Engage the people students trust and respect**, including teachers, deans, chaplains, diversity directors, and service-learning coordinators. Programs are more likely to be sustainable in the long term when entire school communities support initiatives from the ground up. Such an approach also normalizes, rather than tokenizes or stigmatizes, Judaism and Jewish culture in a school community.
4. **Create an intellectual discourse and high caliber programs that are open to all**, including Jewish students (regardless of prior knowledge), their friends and allies.
5. **Ground Jewish learning in multicultural theory and practice.** Students live in a multicultural world, and the Jewish community itself is multicultural. We can use Jewish wisdom and experiences to help students navigate our complex world.
6. **Prioritize emergent curricula.** Programs that are rooted in students' interests and experiences often have greater appeal and relevance for teens. Encouraging and training students to design and lead their own programs empowers them to be stronger leaders in the future.
7. **Promote process-based learning** over outcome-based learning; the focus should be on critical thinking about content, rather than on what students "should" know and by when.

Partnering with schools and other secular community institutions is not only a philosophically astute approach, but also a financially practical approach for scaling up Jewish learning in a tough economic climate. Working within someone else's institution reduces overhead, and allows us to focus resources on our most valuable asset: Jewish educators.

There is an assumption that best practices are labeled as such because the range of alternative options has been exhausted and tested. However, best practices are often the best practices of a limited set of models that have changed little over time. If there is anything that I have learned in the field of Jewish teen education, it is that successful models are 1) rooted in a deep understanding of the everyday lives of teens and their families, and 2) flexible enough to internalize the cultural shifts that occur with each generation.

*Adam Gaynor is the Executive Director of [The Curriculum Initiative](#) and a doctoral candidate in Education and Jewish Studies at New York University.*

*This post is from the series [Growing Jewish Education in Challenging Times](#).*