

KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

Jewish Education Center • Cleveland, OH

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Good evening colleagues and friends.

The tradition you have here in Cleveland, annually celebrating the community's Jewish education accomplishments in this way, is not commonplace in America. The substance and spirit of the evening, as I myself have had the privilege of experiencing it in past years, makes this a special occasion. The night is a reflection of what each and every one of you in the room helps it to be – by rejoicing communally in the centrality of education to Cleveland's Jewish character.

To all of you – avocational teachers and professional educators, donors and volunteers: *Kol ha Kavod*. Your contributions of time and talent and treasure give the JECC and the Federation; the day and congregational schools; indeed, all of Cleveland's Jewish educational enterprise the extraordinary brand that makes it the envy of virtually all of America's 400 Jewish communities served by 155 federations.

I asked myself repeatedly as I prepared for tonight: what remarks can I make that the majority of you will find truly meaningful? I know I must rise above the obvious if any of my comments are to resonate.

I could, for example, focus on the much-discussed need to infuse early childhood education with the resources it patently deserves. But the Cleveland Jewish Community realizes it is lousy educational policy to fail to take early childhood education seriously. The community has started down a path to ameliorate long standing inadequacies. JECC's newly revised Strategic Plan devotes several pages to desirable early childhood education initiatives.

...At the national level, thankfully, a Jewish early childhood organization has been formed; distinguished faculty from UC Berkeley to Harvard, using their academic clout, are pushing the importance of early childhood up on the educational agenda. *This* audience already realizes the value of early childhood education. It accepts the fact that "nursery neuroscience" has indeed established a scientific basis for enlightened early childhood education. You also appreciate the significant opportunity the community has to engage young and first-time parents in their own Jewish learning as part and parcel of their child's Jewish pre school experience. No need to belabor this issue, I mused.

Next I thought about a completely different topic, wondering if I should share with you reflections on the structure of the organized community as it relates to education. In this respect, I would analyze how federations and bureaus, day and congregational schools, JCC and denomination sponsored youth groups and camps, and so on, might work most effectively together. But here, too, I thought, there's not a lot for you to learn. Historically, Cleveland's educational

establishment has enjoyed the fruits of superb annual campaigns, with a record amount raised in 2007 under David Strauss's leadership. The syndicate of funders who's Commission on Jewish Continuity annually subvents Federation's Annual Campaign, with those dollars directed to day schools, is an exemplary communal effort. The Centennial Initiative's Day School Endowment Fund is a remarkable resource. Unlike many other cities in the U.S., Cleveland's JECC is a trusted, respected convener for educational practitioners and lay leaders, while at the same time an effective advocate for education. Day and synagogue schools, camps, the community's Hebrew schools – all are beneficiaries of a communal structure that is rational and sound. This is yet another topic, I concluded, that doesn't require my commentary.

Ultimately, what I decided to concentrate on this evening are observations and insights that inform my work as Executive Director of the largest private Jewish foundation in North America whose mission and vision are focused exclusively on the philanthropic support of education of Jewish children, youth and young adults in the United States.

With this privileged position comes the obligation to develop a well researched, grounded sense of what's happening on the U.S. Jewish educational landscape. Furthermore, it is incumbent on me to develop a sound critique of what exists but is not working so well; to articulate coherently what might be, if it were re-engineered, re-visioned, better-managed, more generously funded, etc; and to

speculate intelligently about what could be but has yet to be imagined.

Three themes, then, for you to consider:

First, the veritable renaissance of Jewish learning occurring in this country is a certain indicator of an abundance of faith, religious vitality, and intellectual prosperity in the Jewish world. Jewish education in the United States is flourishing in an open marketplace of both traditional and innovative Jewish *limmud*.

Secondly, technology has decentralized and democratized learning in a profoundly revolutionary way. The de-institutionalization of learning—in home schooling, *hevruta*, book clubs, on line study, educational travel—compels us to think differently about where and how one becomes educated in this millennium.

Thirdly, it is foolhardy and I believe perilous to think that there is a normative Jewish identity. Judaism is a life-long journey of personalized engagements of the individual with Jewish tradition and texts; ritual and faith; spirituality and God; culture and community; Israel. The essence of identity is ***differentiation***. The mixed blessing of 21st century Judaism is that ultimately it must be ***chosen*** if it is to flourish. Solely building established institutions to preserve the Jewish narrative is an impoverished approach to perpetuating a vibrant Jewish future.

Let me begin by making the case for the assertion that the Jewish world is laden with abundance. Day school and camp enrollments continue to increase. Over 15 programs of congregational renewal are in operation. For the first time ever, we have the alphabet soup of providers – STAR, ECE, PELIE, NESS, Synagogue3000 – in conversation with one another. So called “emergent communities” thrive. Jewish culture manifest in music, best selling novels, film, and even comedy, is everywhere in our society, frequently critiqued in leading journals and popular magazines. You can find Jewish culture in JCCs, magnificent museums, private clubs, public spaces, salons, and purveyed extensively online.

Everything from the serious study of Yiddish to Jewish environmental activism is on the ascendancy. Volunteer service and youth philanthropy have enjoyed exponential increases in the number of participants during the last five years. Departments of Jewish Studies proliferate on American campuses; there are now 1600 members in the Association for Jewish studies. (I predict you will see a similar phenomenon with Israel Studies in the next fifteen years.)

Scholarship on Judaism is voluminous, emanating from such prestigious places as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Universities of California and Chicago, Cambridge, and Oxford presses.

Frankly, I don't know whether Cleveland sees this spectacular array of Jewish learning or not. I assure you it is happening as I have described it to you.

Couple this bounty of Jewish educational activity with astonishing advancements in technology and you have an educational scene that looks unlike anything we have ever witnessed. There has been a proliferation of ways to access teachings of our traditions. My second theme, you will recall is that technological and communications innovation means that learning is ***distributed*** in the contemporary world. Learning is, in fact, virtually unbounded. Teaching and learning occur in real time, anytime. Both self-directed study and group experiences of meaningful educational interactions with substantive matters of Jewish content happen all the time, even if we don't see or recognize them.

The new media certainly promote distributed learning but so, too, does the condition of the contemporary Jew that empowers her to be what Cohen and Eisen call a "sovereign self." Individuals opt in and out of Jewish learning, assuming roles not only as learner but also teacher. Individuals who are not necessarily licensed, credentialed, certified or degreed as educators produce a plethora of material that is culturally consumed. Whether or not you and I condone Web 2.0 content is beside the point. It's there, and much of it is unmistakably educational.

If educational planners are not yet convinced that disruptive technologies have infiltrated traditional institutions and also expanded the boundaries where bona fide Jewish learning takes place, then they certainly should feel compelled to come to terms with the voluntaristic nature of Judaism. Current trends toward personalism

and subjectivity in religious practice are undeniable. For younger Jews, personal agency and individualized expressions of faith are paramount; they take precedence over commonly sanctioned communal obligations.

In Deuteronomy, this way into Judaism as sanctioned “if you’ve made a door for yourself, the teachings accompany you.” Rabbah 6:3

And then there are those already deeply immersed in our faith whose individualism we seem to have rejected. Some speak out in protest, publicly and vociferously, as Iraqi orthodox Jew Loolwa Khazzoom has, proclaiming: “Nobody has the right or power to shut me out from who I am: not the Orthodox Israelis who question my mother’s conversion; not the Eurocentric society that attempts to turn me against my own body; not the Ashkenazim who try to undermine my heritage and not the Mizrahi men who want to silence me...I demand to be seen and heard as I am” (pp.117-118 in Khazzoom’s essay in *Joining the Sisterhood*). My third theme, you remember, is that contemporary American Jews are individualists who “engage in a wide range of practices through which they enact their freely chosen religious commitments and identities, thereby escaping the limits of birth and community norms” (p. 29 in *The Tribe University Curriculum Guide*).

So, it’s fair of you to ask given my depiction of Jewish education in the United States, what needs to be improved? What would benefit most from additional resources? How does the Jim Joseph

Foundation, its partner funders and the organized community position themselves to fund to a state of sustainability both key existing programs of education as well as the next major idea in the field.

The Jim Joseph Foundation believes for its part that exceptionally well-trained educators are the fulcrum of a future in which increasing numbers of young Jews will engage in ongoing Jewish learning and choose to live vibrant Jewish lives. Whether these educators are teaching in schools or in congregations; advising youth groups or Hillel students; directing camps; serving as Jewish educators on volunteer terms-of-service; guiding Jewish teen docents or equip high school students to produce Jewish film – the modeling of purposeful Jewish learning happens in pivotal ways at these intersecting points of teacher/learner interaction.

The foundation's clear focus notwithstanding, we are keenly aware of criticisms of Jewish philanthropy. As astutely noted by Ariel Beery and Aharon Horowitz, co founders of the Presentense Institute for Creative Zionism, the community as a whole and funders in particular “need to prioritize value over image.” This means that we should bring a more sophisticated review process to bear on the decisions we make in funding institutions and initiatives. It behooves us to exercise much greater diligence in determining if funds allocated and grants awarded produce results...Read: Value.

We would all benefit from a better framing of the critical issues we want to address. Then, too, we could stand to more rigorously

formulate hypotheses about how we can achieve results that actually matter. Beery and Horowitz are imploring us to shift attention from the business of grant making to the more consequential matters of philanthropic effectiveness and social impact.

I think we too often shy away from the more perplexing issues that if resolved would have durable impact on Jewish education.

In day schools for example, given that we at long last have baseline data on educators collected and analyzed (in the forthcoming JESNA/EJSS study) we can begin to postulate and test if the data support a reconceptualized view of teacher professionalism. How could that reconceptualization bolster education occurring in Jewish day schools? What would happen if we experimented with a new approach to structuring of a teaching career in the following fashion: “front-load” salaries; compress the number of years on the experience schedule to move teachers more quickly to the top of the salary scale; and implement a differentiated staffing model that, while it might increase class size, would bring greater specialization into day school classrooms to benefit students, offer a bona fide career ladder opportunity for the professional educator.

How would the day school movement benefit if there were resources available to teachers to pursue national standards of certification with guaranteed increases in salary awarded to those who were successfully certified?

Can we induce Hebrew schools across the country to re-imagine how they work if we created a national technical assistance center to aid communities in building PROZDOR and Communiteen-like community Hebrew schools?

Relative to pre-school education, what would it take – as is already the case in California – to work with general community partners to create a policy environment that induces early childhood educators to pursue an appropriate college degree with an automatic salary increase awaiting them if they complete a state-subscribed program of study? I am reminded of Rabbi Schulweiss informing a group of his congregational leaders “it might come as a shock to you, but there is some wisdom outside the Jewish world.” Let’s at least acknowledge that recently approved federal legislation sets 2013 as the date by which 50% of Head Start teachers will have earned a BA in early childhood.

Will local communities consider allocating communal funds to cooperate with mega funders whose capacity-building support of birthright will likely create a cadre of well-trained, generously compensated birthright engagement fellows? This personnel will connect birthright alumni to Jewish life in entirely novel and productive ways, an essential development in our communal well being given the more than 125,000 U.S. birthright alumni and the fact that current communal infrastructure falters badly in serving young Jewish adults.

If you have not carefully read Roben Kantor's article *birthright: Day 11* in the current issue of World Jewish Digest, I implore you to do so.

What forum do we need for the community to debate the now front-and-center issue of state-supported Jewish charter schools?

Recognize that from 2002-2005, 1200 foundations committed 380 million dollars to 104 organizations promoting school vouchers and k-12 education tax credits. In the Jewish world, 800 students enrolled in Broward County, Florida's Hebrew language and culture charter school in a market that school founder Peter Deutsch believes could accommodate 4500 Jewish students K-12, securing at that level \$25 million of state support annually. What kind of consideration does the community need to give to this model?

What I hear all the time is that for every complex issue there is a simple answer ...to which I always respond, invoking H.L. Mencken, "there is always a well known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong."

The Jewish world is full of complexity and opportunity. Making durable change in the world is messy business. Fortifying existing institutions in meaningful ways that give them the capacity to be more self-sustaining over the long run while also supporting innovation requires thoughtfulness, strategy, sound implementation, exceptional execution, and ongoing evaluation – the results of which should be broadly disseminated. More to the point, as Albert Einstein warned

us with his typical brilliance, “A problem cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness in which it was created.”

Fortuitously, there is a flowering of Jewish education philanthropy in the United States that appears to take seriously the notion that impact as a necessary outcome of foundation work calls for the mindfulness to which Einstein alludes. Mindless philanthropy is constrained by myopic perspective, avoidance of fact patterns drawn from credible data, and an overall closed consciousness. By contrast, a mindful philanthropic enterprise embraces multiple perspectives on a particular grant opportunity as potentially complementary; entertains a continuous flow of ideas; and relies on carefully compiled, mined, and creatively interpreted data to maximize its chances to be successful.

In this vein, Jewish philanthropists have begun to catch up with their secular peers, whose decade of experience in venture philanthropy and solutions-oriented grant making has produced enviable results. We now find that Jewish grantors and grantees are cooperating to co-create sustainable initiatives.

I would like to think JJF is becoming a member in good standing in this “club.” Here are two examples.

Example #1: JJF funds both the DeLeT and *Melamdin* teacher education programs. The Foundation supports a full-fledged alumni program for the more than 60 Pardes graduates teaching in US day

schools. We have begun conversation with the New Teacher Center, which as many of you know, is already involved working with the AVI CHAI funded teacher induction program in New York City Jewish day schools.

Our intent here is to gather the teacher educator institutions to explore the possibility of a best practice mentor/mentee initiative. We will begin right at the outset to hypothesize what a scaled model might mean to the Jewish world. We will try to anticipate how an ongoing stream of capital could be secured and structured to ensure that the proposed teacher induction program(s) actually takes hold in the Jewish world.

Example #2: The foundation knows, as you do, that residential Jewish camping is a reliable predictor of participants' ongoing engagement with Judaism. JJF has invested heavily in two camping initiatives, awarding more than 11 million dollars of funding for an incentive that we project will draw 3000 eleven, twelve, and thirteen year old first-time campers into the *ruach* of Jewish camping; and granting 8.4 million dollars to incubate four Jewish specialty camps that we expect, beginning in 2009, will not only attract 2500 Jewish teens to unique three week summer experiences but also catalyze the creation of additional specialty camps. Our alliance with the Foundation for Jewish Camping represents an ideal match of their mission and JJF's vision. The initiatives address directly our shared strategic priorities. As such, both JJF and FJC have a major stake in the two initiatives being successful.

So I want to conclude with a challenge...

That has to do with new forms of communication, connectedness, and community.

Would each of you please stand,

And remain standing after each of the next ten questions, posed one at a time, if you can answer affirmatively to the question I ask:

I have:

- At least two email addresses.
- Visited a Jewish web site devoted to study of Torah in anticipation of one of last month's Shabbat observances
- Text messaged a business associate or friend in the past 48 hours
- Downloaded music or a short film (DVD) from I tunes
- Been invited to a Jewish event through a Facebook communication. (of whom there are now 58 million as compared to 8 million in April of 2006, averaging 250,000 new subscribers daily)
- Watched or placed a video on You Tube (of which there are 2.5 Billion viewings and postings each month; and 71 million members)
- Checked a MySpace page anytime in the past week
- Blogged

- Participated in a wiki space exchange to revise and edit an open document.

It will likely come as a shock to you that in any representative group of teens or 20 and even young 30 somethings, 40 to 60% of an audience this size would still be standing.

It is far too easy to discount what you want to fervently deny exists. I ask you: has the JECC and Jewish Cleveland confronted this altered reality of next generation Jews?

No less formidable a scholar than Michael Rosenak remarks that "...every living faith has diverse paradigms, and presents theirs as synonymous with faith and tradition. They may forget that paradigms that are never reexamined or placed in perspective may also betray, blind, and incapacitate us. Remaining stubbornly with a paradigm may make us incapable of clearly apprehending new circumstances with which we must deal... (page 211, *Tree of Life Tree of Knowledge*).

You are members of a marvelous Jewish community, steeped in traditions of excellence in Jewish education. I exhort you to make what is great extraordinary. JECC's Nechama Moskowitz's words should inspire you. She says: "a healthy ecosystem...has the ability to adapt and respond to changing environmental conditions and stresses. So, too, a healthy Jewish ecosystem has the resiliency to

respond to the challenges of the modern world (in “The Space between the Silos: Nurturing the Jewish Ecosystem,” *Jewish Education News*, Summer 2007).

Allow me to conclude with a blessing for all the educators who share this evening with us:

For Israel, its teachers and students,
And the students of their students
And all of those who engage in the study of Torah
Here and in all places,
May you and they have much peace,
Grace, kindness, mercy, long life, and fulfillment,
From Adonai, the teacher of teachers.
And together we say, Amen.