

The Challenge of Educational Goals: Language, Concept, and Context

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman and Rabbi Toba Spitzer each reformulated Kaplan's five criteria for the resources of an effective Jewish education. Their proposals, which appear below, raise an interesting question: Are the rabbis' suggestions best understood as changes in language that modernize Kaplan's OR do they reflect a different conceptual and valuational landscape entirely from the five criteria Kaplan articulated in 1934?

In the words of Rabbi Spitzer, this effort challenges us to think of the "spirit of Kaplan" as well as the content of the chapter. It demands us to contemplate how Kaplan would have framed the goals and challenges of Jewish education in the 21st century.

Kaplan's Original Five Goals of Jewish Education

1. Understand and appreciate Hebrew Language and Literature
2. Practice Jewish Ethics and Religious Life
3. Participate in Jewish life
4. Give artistic expression in Jewish values
5. Cultivate Jewish ideals and role models (a paraphrase of Kaplan's original goal)

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman's Five [Kaplanian?] Goals of Jewish Education in the 21st Century:

1. Concrete and creative approaches for living a meaningful Jewish life when families are pulled in so many directions by extracurricular activities and other priorities.
2. A sense of spirituality and a framework of Jewish ethics to help our children and teenagers navigate the complex issues of growing up in the 21st century.
3. Experimentation and innovation of Jewish life so that it is accessible enough for marginalized Jews but compelling enough for Jews who are long-time members of our communities.
4. Models for creating truly inclusive Jewish communities that honor the experiences of diverse Jews with a range of needs.
5. Curricular ideas that address important issues in our students' generation such as white supremacy, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and climate change and provide thoughtful approaches to incorporating Jewish texts, critical thinking, and active learning exercises into our schools.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer's Five [Kaplanian?] Goals of Jewish Education in the 21st Century:

1. Have an awareness of the great diversity and richness of Jewish cultures, including languages, cuisines, religious traditions, historical experiences, and more. This would include not privileging Hebrew as “the” Jewish language (see below for its necessity in religious life), but familiarizing our people with the many expressions of Jewish culture in Yiddish, Ladino, English, etc.
2. Give our children and adults the tools they need to participate in Jewish religious life, including some knowledge of Hebrew, ability to engage with Biblical and rabbinic texts in translation, and a sense of the great variety of Jewish traditions and of Judaism as an “evolving religious civilization” of which they are an active part.
3. Foster the spiritual resilience of kids and adults through teaching Jewish spiritual practices that will enlarge our capacities for patience, generosity, equanimity, endurance of the difficult, joy, and more.
4. Equip Jewish children and adults with Jewish language and conceptual frames to address the pressing needs of our time - including racism, climate change, vast income inequality, changing concepts of sexuality and gender, and the overall degradation of human communication and community.
5. Equip our kids and adults with an ability to wrestle with the existential challenges to Jewish individual and communal identity that have arisen from the success of the Zionist project and the attending moral dilemmas that have ensued in the decades since. Foster new conversations about Israel to overcome the crippling divisions in our community and to enable new kinds of thinking about Jewish identity both in America and in Israel. [This is my take on the third point in the Neshama section of the 21st Century Kaplanian Vision of Jewish education: “Thirdly, any effective Jewish education needs to be in constant dialogue with the emerging ethical and spiritual challenges of the present moment.”]

Questions to Consider:

1. Which of these formulations is most useful for:
 - a) A teacher
 - b) An education director
 - c) A parent
 - d) A rabbi

2. What do you see as the primary virtue of each of the three formulations?

3. What is captured in one particular set of goals that might be missed in the others?

4. Which set of goals is closest to your own view?

5. What do you think best explains the differences between the three sets of goals?
 - a) Times have changed
 - b) Our language has changed
 - c) Kaplan's formulation was appropriate for 1934; the other two for today
 - d) Something else: _____

6. If you were creating your own list of five goals of Jewish education today, which of Rabbi Kaplan's goals, Rabbi Zimmerman's goals, and/or Rabbi Spitzer's goals would you definitely want to include?

7. If you were creating your own list of five goals of Jewish education today, what goals would you include that are not captured in any of these examples?