

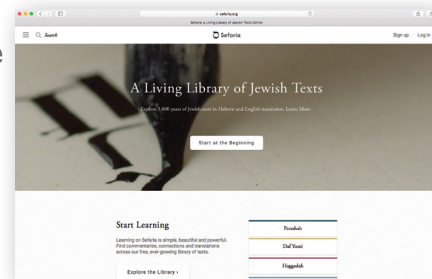
Any platform from Facebook to Wikipedia can distribute information about Jewish life, and almost everyone we interviewed said their searches for information almost always began with Google. As a result, almost any platform could be considered a source for Jewish online learning insofar as people gather information about Jewish life through any number of sources. They also talked about email and various messenger platforms (iMessage, WhatsApp, GroupMe, Skype) as ways to connect with friends and family and sometimes share media with Jewish content. These methods of communication and connection appeared to be nearly ubiquitous, facilitating connections of all kinds and thus did not meet the specific needs of this research study. To narrow our focus, we selected a small number of platforms that identify themselves as providers of Jewish content. This narrower framework allowed us to examine how people sought out, processed, engaged with, and shared learning that they, too, identified as specifically Jewish.

Beginning with these platforms, we recruited participants through email lists and social media, which we used to circulate a short survey. From the pool of over 1,000 respondents, we selected interviewees with the intention of representing a demographic range of users. The findings presented here emerged from in-depth interviews with 24 adult and young adult learners across the 10 Jewish online media platforms. Interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 57 and were split about evenly by gender identity between male- and female-identified respondents. Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes and included questions and answers, as well as a mapping exercise. The results were coded using an emergent coding approach.

Methods

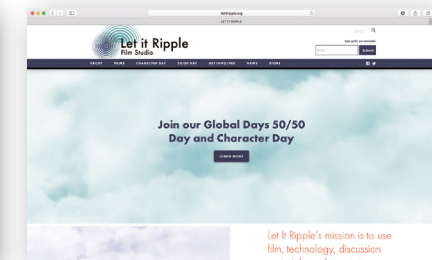
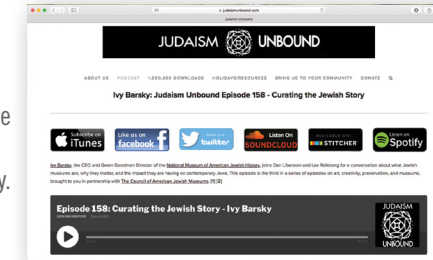
Platforms included in the study:

Sefaria:
Comprehensive, open-source database of Jewish texts in both Hebrew and English.
www.sefaria.org

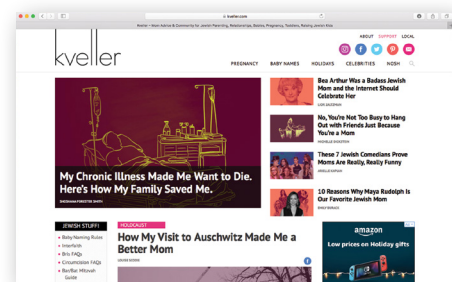


My Jewish Learning:
Cross-denominational website of information about Judaism.
www.myjewishlearning.com

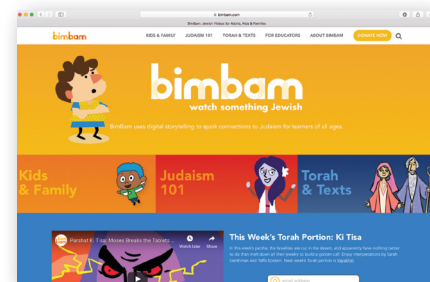
Judaism Unbound:
Podcast aimed at helping disaffected but hopeful American Jews to re-imagine and re-design Jewish life in America for the 21st century.
www.judaismunbound.com



Let It Ripple:
Media company dedicated to using film, technology, discussion materials, and virtual and live events to discuss a variety of challenging and relevant topics.
<http://www.letitripple.org/films/making-of-a-mensch-and-character-day>



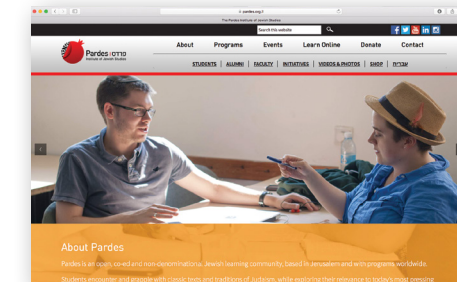
Kveller:
Parenting website with a Jewish slant.
www.kveller.com



BimBam:
Jewish videos, apps, and animated series that teach Jewish ideas and life to kids and adults.
www.bimbam.com



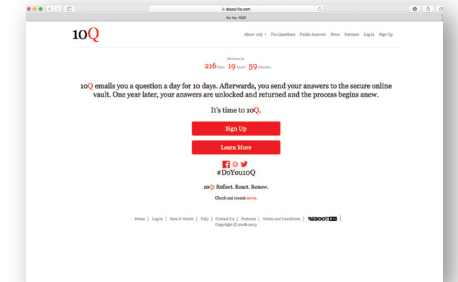
Project Zug:
Users select an online course and are then paired with a *havruta* with whom they can learn via video chat.
www.projectzug.org



Pardes Elmad:
Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies' podcast-based learning library on Torah, history, holidays, and more.
<http://elmad.pardes.org/>



PJ Library:
Monthly delivery of Jewish books (and sometimes other media) for Jewish families.
<https://pjlibrary.org/Home>



10Q:
Program offers daily reflection questions for the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
<https://www.doyou10q.com/>



1 Characteristic 1: Learning Is Social

Recent reports from the Pew Research Center (2018) demonstrate the near ubiquity of adult Americans on social networks like Facebook and Twitter, even as teens seem to be migrating away from these social networks and toward others like Instagram and Snapchat. Though the chatter in these spaces varies by community, sharing, linking, and discussing topics with friends and colleagues are inherently learning-driven social practices. From multimodal audio and video, to analyses of political issues, to announcing a professional milestone, sharing is a means of educating, understanding, and reflecting back to the world your own perspectives. The result is a highly social learning environment in which the practices of learning are collaborative. Social media platforms and the means of adopting popular features such as “liking” and “commenting” foster these dimensions of learning, even if the principles of forming and synthesizing new knowledge remain invisible to most users.

Though all of the users we interviewed rely on larger platforms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) to connect directly with others in their communities, Jewish online media play a special role in connecting people around a sense of shared Jewish interests. The connections born of reading and sharing become the basis, both real and imagined, of a sense of belonging to a Jewish community. Sharing content becomes a way to connect with people around Jewish interests, and sharing allows those interests to become part of the relationships born of the practice of sharing.

“I think that one thing that’s particularly helpful about Judaism Unbound is that it’s an easy way to share with my parents and my family and friends the questions that I’m thinking about and the challenges that I’m facing in terms of what I want to do in the Jewish world.” **Jessica**

“I had a friend [who was] thinking of converting [to Judaism]. But she had a tattoo and was planning on getting more . . . so I sent her over the [My Jewish Learning] article with tattoos and Judaism . . . for her to utilize [it] like I did.”

Melanie

For some users, having access to information helped inspire confidence in their sense of belonging to a Jewish community. This was particularly powerful for those who were questioning their place in the Jewish community and for whom information became a way to establish their feelings of belonging.



“I do feel like I’ve benefited. . . .10 or 15 years ago we didn’t have these opportunities, you’d have to leave your house to have access to these kinds of teachers and not just leave your house but leave your community, leave your country and I feel like that’s not something I could do. I feel just really appreciative that I have these new ways of connecting [to Pardes].” **Zoe**

“[BimBam] made me a little more confident because it’s verbal versus just written. . . . I still feel like I’m probably going to say something wrong, pronounce the word wrong, but I’ll get it closer than I would have if I was just reading it . . . I feel more connected and I feel more part of the community because of it.” **Raquelle**

For other users, the platforms themselves became a kind of community, providing them with a sense that they were not alone in their Jewish learning.

“I think it has helped me not be as isolated. . . .It’s really cool to know that there’s a greater community outside of my community and. . .that [Kveller] kind of ties it all together.” **Robyn**

“The [Judaism Unbound] podcast gives the sense that there’s something of a national movement and it brings together a lot of these different things that I’ve sort of known about and had some exposure to. . .” **David**

If one of the benefits of online learning is its ability to connect users to one another through content, the social dimension of Jewish online learning seems both more intimate and more ethereal. Respondents felt strongly about the social connections that the platforms facilitated, and noted how it emboldened their claim of membership in Jewish communities.

The social dimensions of learning came largely through sharing stories or media encountered on Jewish-themed platforms. Learners did not talk about sharing (or even reading) comments on websites, engaging in the kind of real-time sharing afforded by online gaming, or even logging or blogging feedback about books, holiday celebrations, or other things.

Key Finding: Learners connect with others around Jewish learning.

Learning online reinforces learners’ sense of connection to a Jewish community however they define it. This suggests that the act of learning, even in a relatively diffuse setting, has the power to reinforce a sense of connection with others, almost more than the question of what, specifically, is learned. Learners described how the social dimensions of online media reinforce their connections with others, both real and imagined, around engagement with Jewish content. Sometimes, this takes the form of sharing podcasts, videos, or texts. Sometimes this sensibility is more diffuse, as people imagine others who might be having a similar experience elsewhere, in relationship to these same media.



Questions to Consider:

- 1 What kinds of learning foster which kinds of connections?
- 2 How might online learning enable more inclusive Jewish communities?
- 3 How can the social dimension of online learning enhance extant modes of Jewish learning offline?
- 4 How can Jewish educators leverage the social dimensions of online learning?



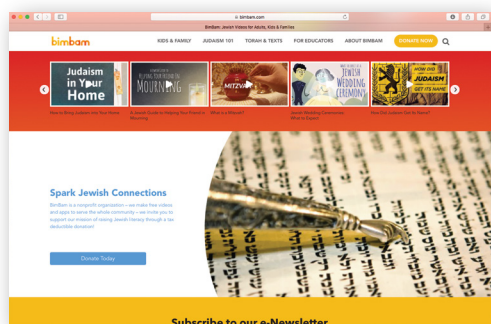
2 Characteristic 2: Knowledge, Expertise, and Power Are Distributed

Unlike traditional classes and schooling environments that center on the knowledge of particular instructors or sources, discussions in online environments often revolve around topics of mutual interest in which people might offer their particular expertise, receive feedback from multiple perspectives, and exchange thoughts in a bazaar-like environment of flowing ideas. Online communities function within affinity spaces, whether we are talking about Facebook groups, a specific fan-community, or a committed group editing specific Wikipedia entries. Online environments allow individuals with shared interests to exchange and freely engage with one another's ideas. Leadership may be identified through some individuals having greater agency—such as moderating and approving posted material, but expertise is more often shared among members. Browsing a message board about music to clarify the discography of a favorite band, looking for an alternative translation to a biblical text, or offering a seasoning suggestion to a recipe are all examples of personal knowledge that can be offered in online spaces. What may appear (even to the author/participant) mundane or common knowledge remains an important aspect of how digital, social interactions broaden the possibilities of learning for others.

This is part of the character of online learning. The distributed nature of knowledge and power online has resulted in a great democratization of knowledge and access. It has created Wikipedia and hackathons, and it has opened the doors to new ways of thinking about knowledge and who possesses it.

This ethos was in evidence among online learners on Jewish platforms. By restructuring how one might learn, online sources have reshaped conceptions of the kinds of people and places from which one could learn in the first place. Learners found Jewish life and learning to be more open and accessible than they did when limited to synagogues or schools. This encouraged learners to both ask questions and contribute to online conversations. The revelation of new sources for learning had a corresponding effect in the willingness of learners to claim their place in Jewish life.

“BimBam has definitely been nice because I’m . . . learning . . . through an activity that is natural to me and . . . not being forced on me from someone who I don’t listen to.” Sara



“When I was still questioning my religion and [asking] ‘does this really fit me?’ I did have a lot of questions that I feel like I didn’t want to ask a rabbi because I didn’t want to seem like I was uneducated....I’ve utilized [My Jewish Learning] to answer those questions for myself.” Melanie

The shared nature of expertise online led interviewees to express appreciation for Jewish online media platforms that exist outside of traditional institutional structures.

Even for those living in more religiously observant or traditional Jewish communities, the ability to search for information from an array of sources can be empowering.

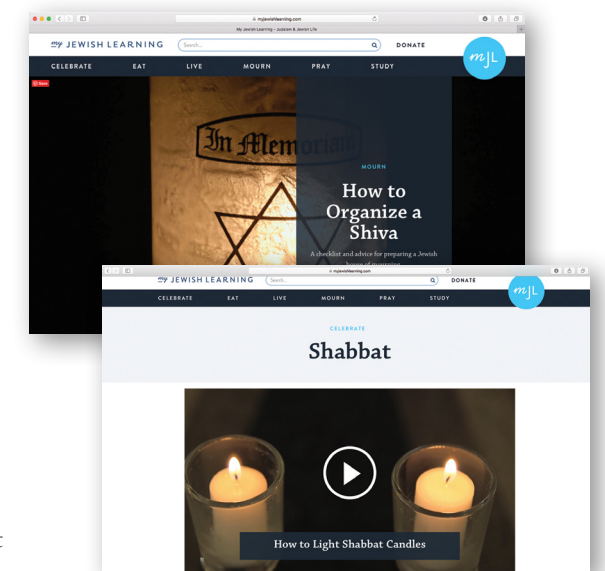
“I’ll do research on a topic and come to my own personal conclusions....One specific example is about [the use of] tekhelet on your tzitzit. Based on the research that I personally [conducted on Sefaria], I made the choice to change my practice to wear them.” Saul

Pursuing opportunities for learning across a variety of sources can empower learners in two ways. First, it empowers them as active participants in their own learning. Second, it emboldens them in their relationship with Jewish knowledge, and as members of Jewish communities. They may or may not contribute to these discussions, but engaging with knowledge that comes from both institutional and non-institutional sources emphasizes the process of learning and the context of learning almost as much as the content.

Yet, most of the learners we interviewed did not talk about actively participating in the production of online knowledge, as one might with Wikipedia. Rather, they referred to their role largely as consumers, processors, and sharers of knowledge provided by the Jewish platforms. They were readers, viewers, listeners. Some were teachers or educators who used content they found online in their own educational endeavors, but online learners were not, usually, engaged in content creation on or through the platforms themselves.

Key Finding: Learners access Jewish knowledge beyond Jewish institutions.

To google a question about Jewish life takes the same amount of skill as googling a more general inquiry, and, as a result, learners feel more empowered to learn on their own and to seek out knowledge or wisdom that they find more immediately meaningful or necessary, without having to navigate the landscape of American Jewish institutions. Learners value access to Jewish knowledge that offers perspectives that are not bound to institutions of Jewish life. They often feel validated and empowered to ask questions they might otherwise not, and the accessibility of online information lowers barriers to entry for learners seeking answers to questions. Finding relevant, necessary knowledge how and when they wish, in response to questions that drive them to seek out answers, enables learners to engage with Jewish learning without fear of embarrassment.



Questions to Consider:

- 1 What does the distribution of expertise mean for our definitions of rabbis or teachers?
- 2 How can educators think differently or critically about the roles they play, with respect to distributed learning?
- 3 How might learners be encouraged to contribute more to online communities of learning and draw on their own specialized expertise?
- 4 What new kinds of learning experiences might this key finding suggest we pursue and how might it alter institutional Jewish life?



3 Characteristic 3: Learning Is Both Synchronous and Asynchronous

Historically, social networking in online environments has been an asynchronous practice; even today, comments, likes, and shares of a Facebook post frequently trickle in minutes, hours, and days after the original content was posted. Podcasts and YouTube videos have grown, largely, because of their asynchronous schedules. Although these practices still remain an important part of how individuals learn online, the rise of live-streaming video, of hash-tagging, and of video conferencing or group-chatting highlight the “real-time” nature of many learning contexts today.

Live-streaming or facilitated interactions over video conference platforms or apps create environments for synchronous engagement in which context, commentary, and critique are offered through chatting, linking, and explaining as literary practices in live contexts.

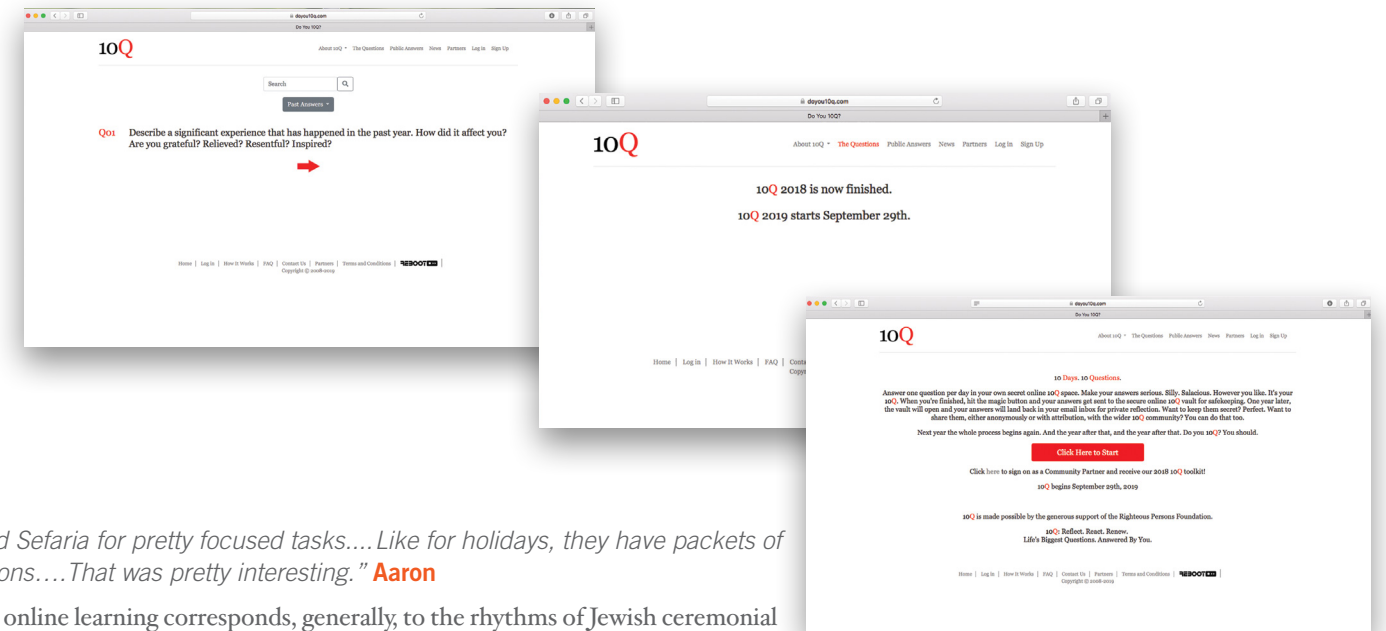
With the exception of learners in Project Zug (where participants learn synchronously, at the same/specific time via Skype), online learners in this study took advantage of the flexibility of online media to engage at their convenience. They listen to podcasts while commuting, cleaning, or walking their dog. They read articles on their phones and laptops, and they largely consume Jewish media in all the ways that they consume other media online.

One unique feature of Jewish online learning lies in the patterns of media distribution, which often follow the Jewish calendar. For example, Pardes’s podcasts often focus on weekly Torah portions, and listening tends to follow that calendar. Similarly, Jewish holidays encourage spikes in attention to articles from platforms like My Jewish Learning or source-based inquiry on Sefaria.



“I remember printing some stuff [for the Passover Seder from Pardes]....It made me feel good that I had the ability to share it if the opportunity had presented itself.” **Zoe**

“Why do I [10Q]? I find Teshuvah [forgiveness] to be really hard. I’m not always the most reflective person. This is a good structure that allows me to reflect. It’s something I can do when I’m not doing anything else. It doesn’t take a lot of time.” **Dina**



“I used Sefaria for pretty focused tasks....Like for holidays, they have packets of questions....That was pretty interesting.” **Aaron**

Jewish online learning corresponds, generally, to the rhythms of Jewish ceremonial time. Users are not totally asynchronous, but neither are they fully synchronous, as few sites even have the capability to host real-time conversations (and few could do this better than Twitter, Facebook, or any of the other social media platforms). Project Zug is one exception in this regard; its learners highly valued the opportunity to learn with other people in a facilitated environment, and they found the experience deeply meaningful.

Key Finding: Learners learn in sync with the rhythms of the Jewish calendar.

Online Jewish learning takes on an additional layer of meaning as it follows the rhythms of the Jewish calendar. Whether driven by the platforms or by the interests of learners, the pattern is clear. By following the calendrical cycle, learners both become aware of and follow the rhythms of Jewish life as they time their learning to newly available material. Regardless of whether learners know about the religious roots of the Jewish calendar, and whether or not they care, the tendency to follow these patterns brings learners, even subtly, into conversation with holidays and other ritual ways of living out the year according to Jewish time.

Questions to Consider:

- 1 How is the addition of online content, specifically around holidays, changing the nature and practice of Jewish holiday rituals?
- 2 What kinds of opportunities exist for learners less interested in holidays and/or ritual observances?
- 3 How might online learning be mobilized to influence Jewish learning across the lifespan, to honor not only holidays but life cycle events too?
- 4 How else might technology tools and online learning be utilized to enhance Shabbat and holiday observances in real time, as they are happening?



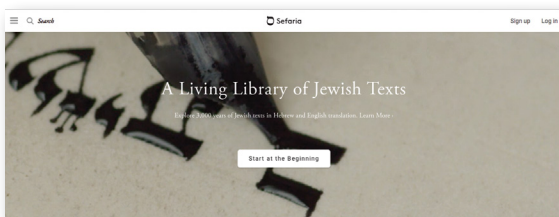
4 Characteristic 4: Platforms Shape the Learning Experience

Different kinds of tools foster different kinds of learning. Twitch allows people to watch and discuss particular kinds of entertainment, while Udemy facilitates more formally structured, scholastic study with built-in quizzes and check-ins. Facebook offers avenues for asynchronous discussion of linked content, and blogs hosted on Wordpress offer users the opportunity to write, publish, and amplify their own thinking and share it across other internet communities. Each tool, then, highlights specific audiences, forms of interaction, and practices. Each tool is intentionally designed to serve its distinct purpose. Visiting a site and exploring how voices are shared, how interactivity is structured, and the kinds of choices offered to users allows individuals to understand their role within specific media platform ecologies.

Learners appreciate and expect their user experience to be seamless and platform specific. For people accustomed to iTunes or YouTube, a site that cannot perform a simple search or stream media smoothly is simply not acceptable. Consequently, the professionalism, functionality, and curatorial and editorial visions of Jewish online media platforms influence the learning experience.

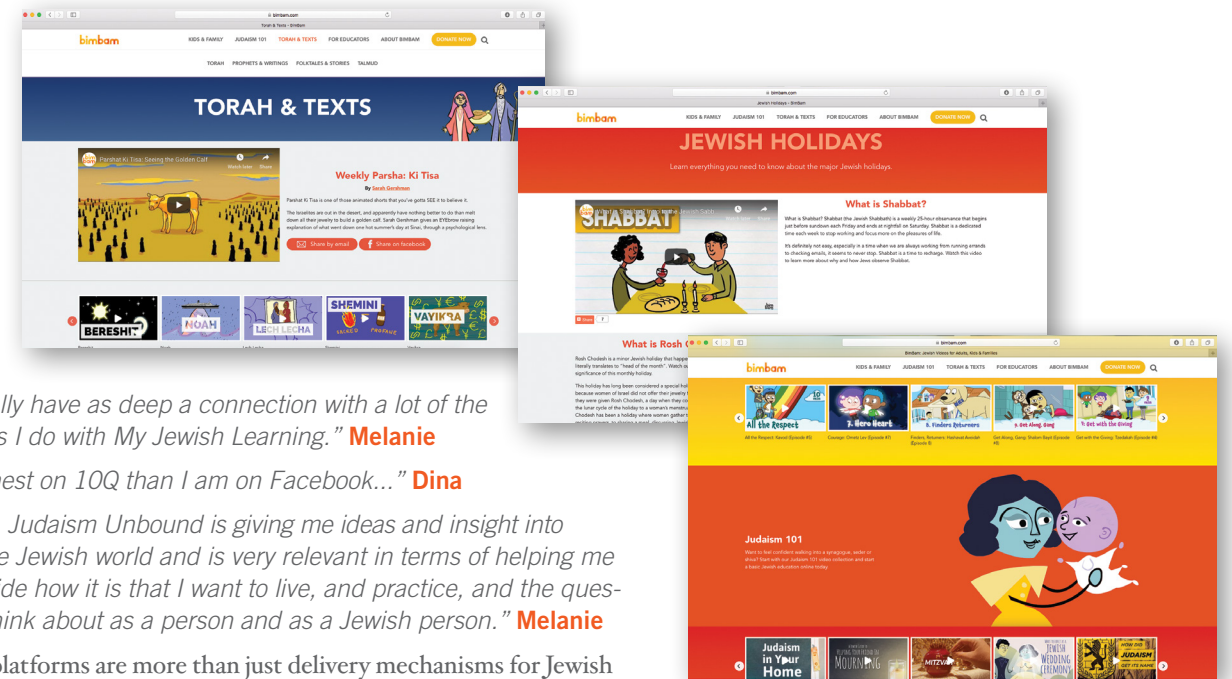
"I've gone on YouTube and I've gotten videos for different things. . . . I've gone on to different Jewish resource sites to get content. But not [anywhere] where [the materials are] actually put together. [With the exception of LetItRipple] I've never really gone to a site where it has the video and the discussion material." **Ruth**

One outcome of this sensibility is an appreciation for the platforms and the specialized knowledge that they uniquely provide. More than brand affinity, learners relate to the platforms themselves, almost independently of the content that they feature.



"I'm an aerospace and a software engineer, so I approach technology as a developer would....That is one of the reasons that I have such a good feeling towards Sefaria specifically....It's a real breath of fresh air when there is something that I can appreciate both from a technical and a content perspective in a Jewish site." **Saul**

"My number one is definitely BimBam. . . .If I can't find it then I go to YouTube and I start searching weird stuff. . . . So I actually prefer BimBam because I know it's a Jewish source, I know it's reputable." **Rachel**



"I feel like I don't really have as deep a connection with a lot of the websites that I use as I do with My Jewish Learning." **Melanie**

"I'm much more honest on 10Q than I am on Facebook..." **Dina**

"For my personal life, Judaism Unbound is giving me ideas and insight into what's going on in the Jewish world and is very relevant in terms of helping me understand and decide how it is that I want to live, and practice, and the questions that I want to think about as a person and as a Jewish person." **Melanie**

Jewish online media platforms are more than just delivery mechanisms for Jewish knowledge. They shape the very ways in which people learn online. Different platforms facilitate this differently and therefore enable different kinds of learning experiences. BimBam, Sefaria, LetItRipple, and Kveller all present different kinds of learning experiences intended to foster particular ways of engaging with their content.

Key Finding: Learners use different platforms for different ends.

The design of the platforms is fundamental to the learning experience. The experience of learning enables people to develop connections to certain platforms and value the expertise those platforms offer. Wikipedia, in all likelihood, has more information overall than My Jewish Learning, but the Jewish imprimatur of the latter bears additional significance for learners.

Questions to Consider:

- 1 How can the overall diversity of venues for Jewish online media be enhanced such that it enables the cultivation of certain affinities and allows learners to move freely among them?
- 2 What new platforms or learning experiences might be necessary to engage a broader diversity of learning communities?
- 3 How might Jewish online learning be influenced by people's management of "screen time" for themselves and their children?
- 4 How might we think about other devices (phones, smartwatches, smart speakers, to name a few) in the engagement in Jewish learning?



5 Characteristic 5: Online Learning Is IRL, Too

Looking across online learning practices, we need to recognize that online learning is no longer limited to digital spaces. Today, our attention moves fluidly between online and physical spaces constantly. From ordering books with a swipe to playing geospatial, augmented reality games like Pokémon Go in local parks and neighborhoods, to receiving phone and desktop notifications from a home thermostat or doorbell, online and offline worlds are merging in ways that are reshaping informal learning opportunities. As much as we may consider online learning as happening in an online, virtual space, we are interacting with these tools in ways that increasingly blend relationships between online and offline worlds. Recognizing that digital learning environments are not divorced from the physical world reframes the phenomenon from one that happens “out there” in cyberspace to one that is deeply embedded in our everyday lives, both online and offline. The two spheres of learning and action are less distinct than they appear, and both benefit from engagement with the other.

This is also true for people seeking Jewish learning online. Mostly, people are driven by a desire for resources, inspiration, and connection in their Jewish lives offline. They might connect with family and friends through social media, they might share videos or podcasts, and they might seek a Jewish perspective on pressing questions or current events. But the motivation for all of this is that they are seeking resources that suit their lives both online and off.

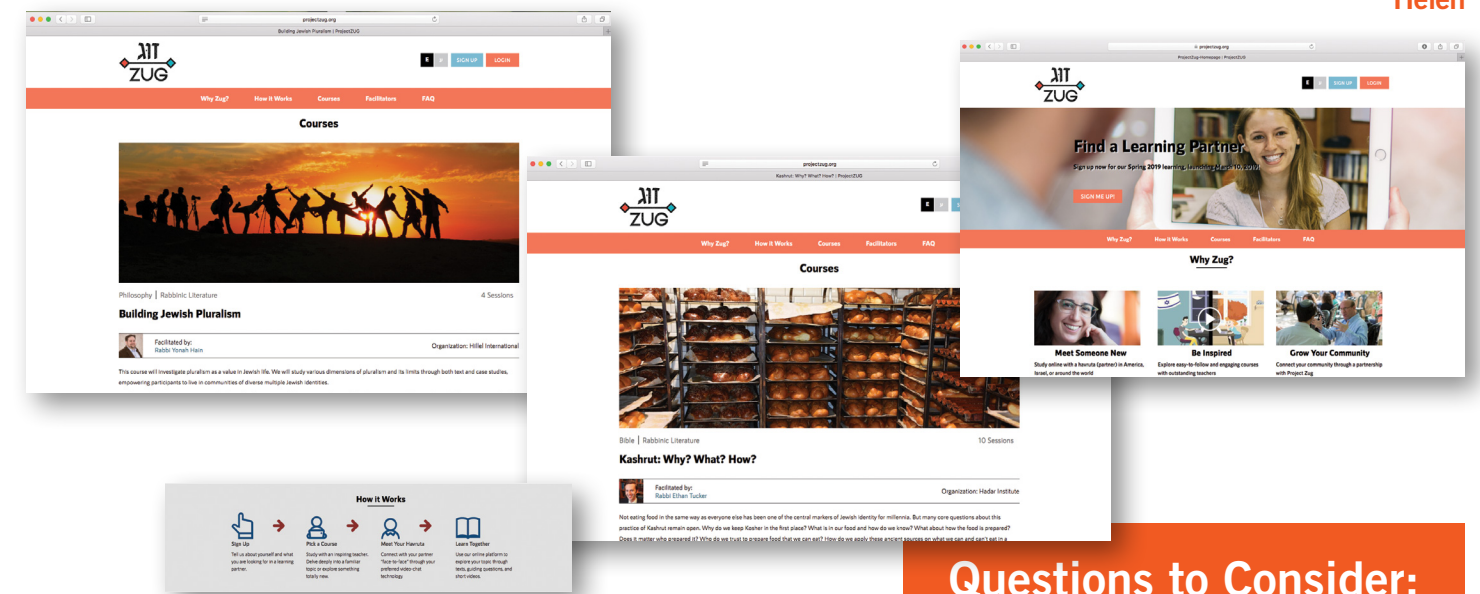
The connections between online learning and offline interests or needs was quite porous among those we interviewed. Learners spoke rather uncritically about the ways in which these two realms of their life intersect.

“Even though my husband is Jewish and was brought up in a Jewish family, he could take it or leave it. But if I want there to be some Judaism, I have to be the one to bring it in. So, something like Judaism Unbound, which really resonates with me...makes it real easy.” **Georgia**



“[Learning on Project Zug] is a nice way to connect with my friend and also, it’s a really nice way to start the day . . . it’s just something I can do just for pure thought and open-mindedness and inspiration and where I can just focus on wanting to be in the present moment . . .[with a] mindset of being deep in thought and having a study-buddy.”

Helen



Questions to Consider:

- 1 What does an increasingly interdependent world of online and offline learning hold for Jewish communities?
- 2 What does the increasing presence of technology mean for our Jewish families?
- 3 How are these developments going to change our schools, congregations, rituals, and/or gatherings?
- 4 How might we leverage online technologies for Jewish learning but not succumb completely to the full embrace of technology in every aspect of our lives?

Key Finding: Learners integrate online learning and offline practice.

Online learning is fundamentally connected to offline experiences and vice versa. While not entirely “frictionless,” learners are brought to online media because of needs or questions that they cannot answer or adequately address without them. Similarly, the experiences of learning online find their way into conversations with family and friends, change practices, and enable new formations and formulations of Jewish life as it is lived, both online and off. It is impossible to imagine online learning without an offline component. From the perspective of the learners, online learning is completely integrated into their professional and personal lives, as evidenced by the array of online tools they use regularly.