

“Taking a Journey While Staying at Home”: The Subtle Shifts in a Jewish Professional Trajectory

Each year, since the start of the Jim Joseph Foundation Professional Development Initiative, our team has conducted one-on-one “clinical” interviews with participants in each of the 10 participating programs. As we have written previously, this strand of our work has provided an opportunity to observe in unusually intense fashion the extent to which participants in professional development experiences grow as learners and as professionals, and how, in turn, their learning and growth see expression in their workplaces and their lives.

As was the case last year, the interview script was designed to remind interviewees about what they had previously said and invite them to reflect on the extent to which their thinking and professional lives had changed since the last conversation. At the same time, thanks to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this year’s interviews provided an opportunity to explore the extent to which our interviewees’ work as Jewish educators had been impacted by forces we could barely have imagined when we started this project.

In the first year, we completed 30 interviews in total, including three participants from each of the 10 programs. This year—in our third round of interviews—we managed to interview 26 people, a robust rate of sample retention. As in the past, the interviews typically lasted 45-to-60 minutes. Complicating matters in methodological terms, some of the interviewees were still participating in the same program they were in when we first interviewed them (at this time just those in the JCCA Sheva program), while others had completed their PDI program more than a year previously, and in one case (M²) more than two years ago.

Distinguishing Professional Growth from Professional Advancement

As we noted in previous years, when we started this work, we somewhat expected that people would embark on a professional journey in which their PDI program experience would either jump-start or at least add fuel to an upward professional trajectory. As the years have gone by, we have seen that the reality is more complex or at least more subtle. In-depth qualitative interviews help shine a light on nuances that can easily be overlooked.

To start with, these professional development experiences have not in large part been about professional advancement. Only two programs—HUC’s Executive MA and JCCA’s Sheva program—articulate their goals as cultivating field leaders or institutional leaders. Implicitly, these two programs are positioned as providing a springboard to more elevated professional positions, and they seem to have recruited people interested in such outcomes. In this respect, these programs seem to be outliers.

From the time that I started the course, my title changed—I was the director of youth and education, now I have a broader portfolio including adult education. I got more leadership skills, it helped me identify my

professional voice so that I can articulate my vision better and navigate working with leadership in a more professional way. —HUC

I went to my first retreat a week before I just started this job as a director. So, my whole growth in this position is aligned with my growth at Sheva. I had lots of ideas and no experience. I accepted the position partly contingent to being a part of Sheva, because I didn't have any professional experience for this role. The program has been invaluable. My success is due to Sheva. —Sheva

Alumni of other programs may have advanced too, but their career moves were not preordained or even planned a long time in advance. Overall, about a third of those we interviewed (10 people) have transitioned to new roles, typically in the same organization and occasionally elsewhere. Those who have advanced in this way don't talk about their professional development programs as having *propelled* these changes. They're more likely to depict their programs as having *enabled* the change, especially when the change may not have been planned or might have been precipitated by other factors, such as COVID-19, for example.

I was not looking for a new job. I was happy teaching full time at the synagogue prior to this, I saw the job posting [for Director of Congregational Learning] and it was just so in line with where I wanted to go eventually, but I didn't expect it to happen so quickly. It's a rare opportunity and I decided to try. ... It's a big job, but it made me feel I can do it because of what I learned at SVARA. —SVARA

My official title is the teen division director, overseeing the teen department, but because of COVID I'm wearing multiple hats. I oversaw the day camp over the summer, I'm overseeing "all day at the J" for the kids who are learning virtually. Also serving at a leadership capacity in one of our locations. I'm in these roles because of COVID, but I also have the skill set to do these things. I hope to advance in this area, I had a conversation with our leadership to find a new role for me to grow into to cover the gaps. It's not yet finalized. —Gen Now

I was not 100% happy where I was at the Federation. Too much responsibility too quickly without an exit strategy or support from the leadership. ... It happened to be that by accident I fell into this development position [at a congregation]. The Fellowship helped encourage me make the change in recognizing there are a lot of opportunities to make a difference without being stuck in a workplace that's not positive. Change happens so slowly at the Federation and I had no hope for it to change. The fellowship helped me appreciate and understand my own value and gave me additional confidence in what I can accomplish." —Next Gen

People report having benefited, often profoundly, from these professional development experiences (as will be seen below), but that is not the same as professionally advancing. An alum of HUC's EMA captures well how professional growth does not have to mean moving out or up from wherever you started. As this interviewee beautifully expresses it, it can involve taking a journey while staying at home:

I used to have a dilemma in my professional life: should I stay as a classroom teacher which I like, or should I look for a promotion into administrative role? ... The program taught me that I need to find what works for me and not what the expectation of others is. Within every role I can find a way to make an impact on the community that's important to me. If I like [local community] and I feel good here, I shouldn't be looking for something else. I need to find a way to grow within the place I'm in. So I decided to stay here as a teacher and found a way to push for this title [Director of Jewish Life and Learning],

where I can find things I want to do to make a different impact, beyond the students, but also with other teachers and parents. ... I found a journey while staying home. —HUC

When people have not changed positions at all—which is just under half of the sample—they talk about an expansion in the content of their roles as compared with when they started the program. They describe doing their work differently, with more sophistication and with an expanded skill set. They have not been standing still, but their job responsibilities are more or less what they were before.

I'm doing the same thing differently, I'm changing my classroom. There's also a piece of reflection of practice, time to think about pedagogy—I find it exciting. I need to be reminded to pay attention to not just the content, but also the process. How do we engage the learner, create space and independence for them? —SVARA

These patterns help sharpen a conception of professional development as about growing where one is, seeing things differently, and being empowered. Professional development refreshes and renews, but it is not typically experienced as an upheaval in one's work life.

By the same token, professional development also does not provide an inoculation when “life happens” and blows a career off-course. Five members of the interview sample are no longer working in what one might characterize as the broader field of Jewish education. They were knocked off track by a mix of factors: ill-health, childbirth, marriage, relocation and—most unexpected—a global pandemic. (Interestingly, only one member of the interview sample seems to be currently out of work due to the pandemic.) Their professional development experiences have not inhibited the impact of these life events.

I retired last year from teaching because of the health issues. I'm a rabbi and was head of Jewish life at a day school for several years. I retired 1.5 years ago, I've been doing some writing, teaching adults at synagogues, and teaching two courses at the day school. I got a health issue when I was at the program. —Yiddish Book Center

The 4HQ experience does not seem very relevant right now. I'm focused on growing my private practice, on my career, on my relationship. Life has thrown me some curveballs, and that experience is not a priority right now. If I was still in New York and things were as they were, it would have been a different answer. —Makom 4HQ

I've been furloughed from [organization] since June. I get updates from them on a monthly basis. My role was educating, training, and hiring Birthright staff. There are no trips now. ... Right now I just need to get a job, I'm not thinking about growth at this point. ... I'm not looking for a job in this field. I'm done with this for now. It's because of growth potential and salary. It's hard to work for this salary and do things you want to do in life (buy house, have kids, go on vacation). I can't justify staying in the field. —iCenter

Just as the programs have not generally propelled their participants to higher status plateaus within their fields, so they have not ensured that everyone is able to remain on the plateau they had previously reached. Their special contribution is of a different kind.

Personal and Professional Growth Revisited

This absorption of professional development into a subtly evolving life experience is echoed in a further way. In our earlier cycles of interviews, we probed the differences participants experienced between personal growth and professional growth. They perceived these dynamics to be distinct but related, especially at the end of the first year: one process touched on who the person was and the other on what they were capable of doing in the workplace. Back in Year One, interviewees articulated how they had signed up with programs looking to build their professional skills and how they had then been surprised by the extent to which their learning was freighted with personal significance.

Two years later, while in conceptual terms the distinction between personal growth and professional growth still resonates with most of the interviewees, many found it difficult to view these processes separately, at least in terms of how they have touched their lives. Their professional growth has not only enhanced their skillset and their capacity to do their work, but it has also changed how they think of themselves and of how they think of the contribution they can make to the Jewish community. At the same time, their personal growth impacts how they view their work, their own know-how, and their sense of what professional skills they still need to learn. A SVARA participant presumed that this fusion was unique to that program:

SVARA's method is all about how learning a rigorous methodology is facilitating a spiritual growth, presence, and other personal growth. It's really hard to separate. As I grow in these hard skills, I definitely increase in confidence. Professional skills are the frame or the path to personal growth. But personal growth is actually the point. Professional skills feed the personal growth pieces in this case. That's unique to SVARA I think. A part of this pedagogy is reflection. —SVARA

We're inclined to conclude that this experience has actually been quite widespread. The following reflections capture two different dynamics, or at least two processes that began at different starting points (one personal, one professional), even while they seem to have ended up in more or less the same place.

In order to grow professionally, you have to understand yourself personally. How you bring your personal into your professional life. Knowing yourself, your strengths and limitations, what you can share and choose not to share, where you're willing to take risks—it makes work more exciting and transformative. It's vulnerability. I was tested in the program in that regard. Because of that you learn the benefits of opening up more. For a while I'd say it was more of a personal growth, but now I look back and I see how I grew professionally. —M²

I'd say I was focused on the professional skills and it's still a priority in terms of what I gained and the value of the experience. But ... exposure to new ideas and new approaches to Israel was key. ... Professionally, the experience solidified that this is an area of interest and growth for me. I have been involved in multiple conversations [around potential jobs] where my learnings have been a positive part and made me attractive to those organizations. I understand the issues from educational standpoint. I'm more marketable and I'm more of a leader in the community. Personally, it made me feel more connected to this work and to Israel. —iCenter

Networks – Where the Personal and Professional Come Together

In practical terms, the fusion of the personal and the professional was most palpable when interviewees reflected on the networks and relationships they gained through the programs. Some highlighted the professional dimensions of these networks (having access to a sounding board, opinions, feedback, and additional opportunities). Others pointed to personal outcomes (friendships made, emotional support, and the exchange of advice). Generally, the longer the program's length, the stronger its personal outcomes, with participants having observed and accompanied one another through any number of life changes, in real time. The pandemic did prove something of an equalizer in this respect, though, with personal support proving valuable to alumni however long their original interaction. During a period of so much disruption and confusion, communities and relationships built up within the programs proved to be a grounding constant and a source of stability.

Probably the network of colleagues and professionals I met [was the most significant gain]. Colleagues in difficult moments (especially in the last 6 months) allow for so much in terms of support—we've continued to meet regularly as a cohort. I organized the first 6 months of those meetings and I know that the group really appreciated them. I now passed it on to someone else. There's a value in maintaining the relationships, digging into the practice and dialogue about what it means to be a relational educator. —M²

It's the connection with the group—we bonded instantly. They tried to front load the program so we had a lot of in-person time and that was smart. Over time with the circumstances some of us got married, had kids, had to leave the program. ... But those relationships stayed and we are all still connected. It's a sense of support, I'm part of this wider network, it's gratifying. We're not just colleagues, but friends. —Sheva

Again, the following reflection from a SVARA alum might seem like an outlier. We suspect that this feeling of affinity around a shared personal or professional identity is actually quite widely shared, especially when as a Jewish educator, one can often be isolated or excluded. Forging relationships with a broader community is a special gift that comes from joining a cohort of peers.

The affinity component [is important] too, with it being queer normative. I didn't know how joyful it could be. I never get to be in spaces like that outside of SVARA especially with others. It's healing. Community is very meaningful. It's THE community I'm connected to primarily. It pushes me to think about the connection between Talmud and the world. It's grounding. —SVARA

And the following comment from a Sheva participant demonstrates that the cohort experience is not just about feeling good about oneself (a personal growth outcome); it has professional consequences too. "It's practically limitless," as one interviewee put it in a fortunate choice of words, for, as we will see, in many ways, these programs have been most powerful when they are most *practical*.

Children learn how to play and build relationship—and that's critical throughout the life. I can try and figure it out myself, but I now have connections with people who have already done it or are also looking for a solution. And I have this support now beyond the program. It's practically limitless. I'm more confident in my own work because of the cohort. —Sheva

Take-Aways with a Longer Shelf Life than Expected

With the great majority of interviewees having completed their programs more than a year ago (Ayeka, SVARA, Gen Now, Next Gen, M², YBC, iCenter, Makom), and in the case of M² more than two years ago, we were curious to see what had remained with alumni from these program experiences. We had expected to see the broader consolidation in their professional identities of the kinds described above, and the transmutation of professional learning into shifts in personal identity—shifts that likely get cemented over time in the aftermath of the program. It has however been surprising—and we believe it important—to see that the program “gains” interviewees most commonly report as having stayed with them are specific professional practices and skills. One might have expected these program take-aways to have a shorter shelf life than personal shifts in how people think about themselves. Without constant reinforcement, one could have expected these gains to have faded.

Jewish Learnings

In fact, when asked what specifically they took away from their programs in Jewish terms, it was surprising to hear interviewees point not so much to Jewish ideas or values but to Jewish learning experiences they translate directly into their own practice. The Jewish content of longest-lasting impact seems to have been that which has been deeply practical.

It broadened my scope of what “Jewish” could be. I had a lot of training in more traditional values and concepts. We did have text study, but because people came from such different backgrounds, there was no right or wrong. ... In my previous work, the text was the centerpiece and ideas came out of the text. Now I’m in a situation where I think about the situation, the people, the context and I think about how to bring the text in. —M²

There was Jewishness in this experience. The design of the fellowship was meant to bring things that aren’t Jewish into the Jewish space to give us new language. It’s the intersection between the “Jewish” and the tool. They did it. There were also explicit things—we learned from Jewish educators, we did Israel seminar, we did text studies... I really appreciated intersectionality the most. It was a pluralistic space, there was a spectrum. I do some things differently when it comes to the Jewish experience I bring to the teens. I’m trying to provide experiences to teens that meet them where they are, pluralistically, modeling what I learned at Gen Now. —Gen Now

Prayer experiences we had expanded my thoughts on leading tefilla in my workplace. We had to lead tefilla for the group and different people offered creative models that would inspire me to bring it back to my workplace. Or the text we studied, I could bring that back too. —HUC

Conceptual Frameworks

When it comes to the concepts that alumni report they gained from the programs, we observe a similar pattern. They describe having learned powerful new ideas. But what makes these ideas so powerful, and—it seems—what has contributed to their extended “shelf life”—their continued usefulness—is their practicality. Interviewees describe how these ideas have inspired or enabled them to do things differently, how they’ve translated ideas encountered within their programs into new frameworks or practices.

I gained a better understanding of how to address Israel as an educational subject as opposed to being more focused on our response to current events. I now have an educational framework. Previously a lot of our work was about building a response to BDS on campus and developing programs to prevent those types of issues. Now, we've developed an educational framework that helps students proactively engage with Israel in a positive way and develop affinity for it and connections with it on its own merits.

— iCenter

Our school has a rich history with this kind of work, but we were able to add the Jewish lens to it. We are using the new vocabulary and concepts. The idea that connection is a basis of social emotional learning. The impact of journaling and how this approach is developing and taking root in our middle school. ... On a personal level, a framework that strengthens my mind—holistic approach to Jewish text and pedagogy. My own educational philosophy. —Ayeka

[What I gained was] specific language—utilizing what I learned, I created a strategic plan for my department completely changing the approach we're using with teens. It's all about the outcomes and adaptive leadership now, social and emotional learning. I also brought the language back to the staff—communication is better now. I led the committee around improving communications with staff—not everyone felt they were getting information they needed in the time and manner they needed. So, we sat down and discussed strengths and weaknesses, along with perceptions of communication from supervisors and supervisees. We talked about the gaps and it allowed us to open an honest conversation about it. We took some concrete ideas and implemented them. —Gen Now

The common denominator here is how learnings and new insights from the programs have become embedded in the institutions from which program participants come. These ideas have not just remained as interesting or provocative concepts. They have been actionable. This feature is underlined by the last interviewee summarizing what seems to have been a dramatic series of changes in his organization as a case of “we took some concrete ideas and implemented them.” It was surely more complex than that, but this comment points to what has enabled these practices to take root, their tangibility and concreteness.

Skills

Following a similar pattern, when asked to talk generally about what they gained from their programs, interviewees point to a range of specific skills—things they now know how to do—that they learned in their programs and that they are still employing today. In some respects, these are the kinds of practices and techniques they previously described themselves looking to gain when they first signed up. It turns out that gaining these skills is more significant than just a case of expanding their repertoires and know-how, what was originally a priority for some. Gaining these skills has changed how they think of themselves as educators, and specifically as Jewish educators.

Journaling is impacting the students, where they write about the text and share if they want to. It's a new structure that they benefit from. It's less about the assignment, but more about their internal growth and learning in the spirit of Ayeka protocols and approach. —Ayeka

We did a lot of writing, research—we were encouraged to journal and publish—this gave me empowerment in having a voice in writing. In this new role I'm the writer at my department. It comes from a place of M² working with us in terms of helping sharpen our thinking and define our goals. I also

took away some really nice materials, concepts, textual learning, top educators and teachers like Erica Brown. I continue to have personal and professional relationship with the coach. —M²

In my class, I teach biblical texts. I had always incorporated art and literature into that class to compare and contrast traditional and modern interpretations. What I'm doing now is incorporating much more Jewish and Yiddish literature into my curriculum. It gives students additional relatable context outside of their own experience. Being Jewish is being human and it spans all these historical periods they are learning about. It broadens the idea of being Jewish from a small community to global and diverse perspective. —Yiddish Book Center

Self-Belief

Several participants spoke about suffering from imposter syndrome. When they began their programs, they weren't sure they fit in or they felt underqualified. They had not been confident about what they were capable of doing or what they knew. Their program experiences and especially their membership in a cohort of fellow professionals who, they discovered, shared similar goals, concerns, and insecurities helped them gain confidence. This experience enabled them to think about and hold themselves differently.

Most of all, psychologically, it helped me build myself as an educational leader, that I have the knowledge, the skills, the capabilities. I tend to be critical towards myself, so I learned to appreciate myself more. The program helped build my identity and personality. It's easier for me to talk about myself as a leader now. —HUC

[I gained] confidence—I have to continue to learn and move my practice forward, but right now I'm at the top of my game and received the best resources and I'm prepared to do what's next. —Sheva

It's been awhile since I put myself in a position where I need to change the way I work. SVARA did it, it made me feel more competent. I always want to learn new things, SVARA didn't change that. What's interesting about SVARA, it's getting to the core of my thinking about how I teach. I'm being challenged about what's core to me (my teaching). —SVARA

Bringing It All Together - Claiming an Identity as a Jewish Educator

We're aware that a minority of those who participated in PDI programs have either been unsure or reluctant to characterize themselves as Jewish educators, even after their programs concluded. 19% of respondents to the post-program, shared outcomes survey selected either "not sure" or "no" when asked "do you consider yourself to be a Jewish educator?"¹ One of these respondents explained: "I tend to steer away from this language because I find that Jewish educators are not well valued—it puts me in a certain box that limits my professional growth ability." We know from our study of the career trajectories of Jewish educators that such reticence is a widespread phenomenon.

¹ We did not include this question in the "participant audit" survey which people took before they started the program. We thought it would color respondents' perceptions of what the programs were seeking to accomplish.

It is surely significant, then, that when looking back on their participation in these programs, on how they've grown and on what they gained, some of the interviewees describe in very powerful, even moving, terms how these experiences have allowed and encouraged them to see themselves as Jewish educators.

Two years ago I didn't see myself as a Jewish educator. Going through the fellowship, they taught us how we are ones. Reflecting on it now, I'd say I do see myself as a Jewish Educator, I recognize that my interactions with people can be their only touch point with the community. I also do a bit of marketing, so I have to speak to a lot of people and channel that Jewish component. —Next Gen

I used to think about it as a job, but after Ayeka it feels more like a calling. It made me think that maybe teachers in Jewish Ed are doing it for the higher purpose, empowering the community and strengthening it. —Ayeka

Before the program, I had a bit of a feeling that I just fell into my role because I was at a right place at the right time. I didn't have the education, so I couldn't fully feel I was an educator. During the program, I became more comfortable with the term, but seeing the mentors and leaders around, it was hard for me to see myself in that role. Now I am so proud to have those titles and feeling that I'm living it fully. I have all the confidence. —HUC

Yes, I am a Jewish educator. I am Jewish and the work that we do is grounded in Jewish values and teachings. I feel that everything we do is from a Jewish perspective, supported by Jewish values and texts. It strengthens my identity. Having an option to be a part of Gen Now and being with other Jewish educators has anchored me in this work. —Gen Now

In this third round of clinical interviews, we have started to see how achieving such clarity about their identities as Jewish educators seems, in part, a consequence of gaining and growing professional skills. We argued in previous reports that participants revealed the extent to which well-designed professional development programs can touch central dimensions of people's personal identities. At the time, we downplayed the significance of the specific skills and techniques they gained. These were part of the toolkit that had attracted people to the programs but, we assumed, were not part of the programs' most important contributions. We see now that we may have underestimated the ripple effects associated with acquiring such professional skills. The acquisition of those skills is not just a technical matter. In these distinctive contexts—embedded in a cohort experience, supported by a mentor—acquiring such skills has more significance than first meets the eye. These programs have not simply been bootcamps or depots that provide off-the-shelf tools. Within these frameworks, skill acquisition has been part of a bigger picture. It is fused with personal change and personal development. The skills people gain decisively contribute to them feeling confident in their skins as Jewish educators.

When asked to reflect on the program elements they perceive as having been most impactful, interviewees kept returning to two things: the cohort experience and the personal mentoring they received. We speculate that these ingredients help elevate the acquisition of professional skills into something of greater personal significance. When these elements are present, these experiences rise above the transactional.

We offer this last suggestion speculatively. It's an insight we arrived at only in the course of analyzing these 26 interview transcripts. It's an idea we're curious to explore further in our fourth and final round of interviews next year.