INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF JEWISH EDUCATION
International Handbooks of Religion and Education

VOLUME 5

Aims & Scope

The *International Handbooks of Religion and Education* series aims to provide easily accessible, practical, yet scholarly, sources of information about a broad range of topics and issues in religion and education. Each Handbook presents the research and professional practice of scholars who are daily engaged in the consideration of these religious dimensions in education. The accessible style and the consistent illumination of theory by practice make the series very valuable to a broad spectrum of users. Its scale and scope bring a substantive contribution to our understanding of the discipline and, in so doing, provide an agenda for the future.

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Preface

This *International Handbook of Jewish Education* represents a major step in the maturation of a field of human endeavor that stretches back thousands of years yet is entirely contemporary. The editors of these volumes are to be congratulated for assembling a broad and deep series of papers that examine Jewish education from every conceivable perspective in every venue in which it is practised. And for the first time in a volume of this sort, they have gone beyond the United States and Israel, the two major Jewish communities of today, to explore Jewish education as a global phenomenon.

For readers with little familiarity with Jewish education, the chapters in this Handbook provide an introduction to the present moment in this ancient yet modern field of human activity. They will learn about issues facing Jewish schools and about the many and varied settings in which formal and informal Jewish education take place. For readers with an interest in religious education in other faith traditions, this volume provides insights that transcend Jewish education and shed light on the transmission of religious culture more broadly. These readers will read about the philosophical questions confronting Jewish education, and they will learn about organizational structures and perspectives on curriculum and planning that have implications for education in their own faith traditions. And for readers familiar with Jewish education from personal or professional experience, this volume provides a “state of the art hologram” of Jewish education by studying the field from every conceivable angle. By looking at questions of content, at issues in various national contexts, and at persistent challenges facing Jewish education, they can transcend the knowledge they have from their own experience and move to a much deeper, more textured and holistic understanding of Jewish education. All of these readers hold in their hands a gift designed by the editors and crafted by the scholars and practitioners who share their knowledge and wisdom in this Handbook.

Jewish education, the focus of this Handbook, is an enterprise that is as old as the Jewish people and yet entirely contemporary in its forms and functions. The Torah, the Five Books of Moses, is replete with dicta to “teach your children diligently” about the mores of the Jewish people and to “tell your child” the historic narrative of the Jewish people. As a result, Jewish education has topped the agenda of Jews whenever and wherever they lived. Since the destruction of the Second Temple in
the time of the Romans, the Jewish academy, first in Yavneh, later in Babylonia and throughout the Jewish world, became the premier Jewish institution. While other cultures valued philosophers and kings, Jewish culture valued scholars.

In modern times, too, Jewish life has centered around Jewish learning. Emancipation and enlightenment vaulted Jews into modernity and opened secular learning to them in ways rarely possible in earlier times. And yet, Jewish learning remained central to Jewish culture and to the Jewish people. Zionism, the national movement to establish a Jewish homeland in the ancient land of the Jewish people, was propelled by writers steeped in Jewish learning. Reform, the religious movement to modernize and universalize Judaism, was led by thinkers with deep Jewish learning. Modern Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism and other modernist movements were also guided by Jews for whom Jewish learning was of paramount importance in their lives and their very beings. Even in the Ghettos and camps of occupied Europe during World War II and the Holocaust, Jewish learning continued.

Following the destruction of European Jewry, Jewish communities throughout the world renewed their interest in Jewish learning. In Israel, the new state developed both secular and religious national educational systems. In the United States, American Jews moved to the suburbs and created new educational systems in the congregations they were creating for the new post-War Jewish community. And in the rest of the world, Jewish communities struggled to remake their educational systems in the wake of the two watershed events of the twentieth century, the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.

New forms of Jewish education flourished in the latter half of the twentieth century: Day schools expanded beyond the Orthodox world and established a foothold as an alternative form of schooling to the predominant Sunday Schools and afternoon Hebrew Schools; Jewish camping took its place alongside Jewish schooling as a valued means of educating the young; Jewish studies programs became widespread in universities everywhere; Jewish museums, many but certainly not all devoted to the Holocaust, sprung up in cities throughout the world; and travel to Israel and other sites of Jewish life, history, and culture were offered to teens, young adults, families, and seniors. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, new forms of Jewish education abound within existing organizational structures, in new community-based venues outside the structures of the organized Jewish community, and as entrepreneurial startups founded by enterprising individuals expressing their passions. The inventive spirit behind this flourishing of new forms of Jewish education has barely been tampered by the economic downturn of recent years.

As the institutional forms of Jewish education have multiplied, so too have the tasks assigned to Jewish education. Whereas in earlier times, Jewish schools could focus on the study of the Jewish textual tradition, by the latter half of the twentieth century schools took on many of the functions previously fulfilled by families, neighborhoods, and other community agencies. The main focus of Jewish education—even in schools but certainly in informal programs—shifted from content learning to the development of Jewish identity. Since the family often did not have the tools to support what children were learning and how they were developing in Jewish schools, schools began to re-envision themselves as places for Jewish education.
learning and growing for the whole family. Since children often did not have other opportunities to celebrate Jewish holidays or experience Jewish prayer, schools took on these roles, too. Since children were saturated by values from the broader culture, schools began to see themselves as places where Jewish values could be experienced and transmitted, even when—and perhaps especially when—those values ran counter to the values of the dominant culture.

Amid this increasingly complex environment comes the current volume. Its breadth is stunning: It addresses the contemporary realities facing Jewish education in all its complexity. Using the tools of a multiplicity of academic disciplines, exploring Jewish education in a wide range of national, religious, and institutional contexts, and addressing a wide variety of elements of the Jewish educational enterprise, these volumes bring together many of the leading scholars and practitioners of Jewish education to illuminate the contemporary state of thought and action in the field.

These volumes ask—and frequently answer—the most provocative questions about Jewish education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While it might have been tempting for the editors to categorize those questions by academic discipline (e.g., history, philosophy, sociology) or by educational venue (day school, congregational school, camp) or by area of educational activity (e.g., curriculum, teaching, administration), they have rejected easy categorization in favor of a more nuanced approach. In the opening section of the Handbook, they have placed together questions about the relationship of schools to their communities, the ways in which education affects identity and spirituality, how curriculum can be created, the ways in which Jewish thought can affect educational practice, and how understanding history can enrich our understanding of the present. By reading this opening chapter, the reader can develop a textured understanding of some of the major contextual factors that can enrich the ways in which educators conceptualize their work.

The section on teaching and learning which follows raises questions about the teaching of a wide variety of disciplines in Jewish settings. Questions about the teaching of various genres in the canon of the Jewish textual tradition (Bible and rabbinics) form the core of this chapter, and these chapters provide advances in the thinking about these time-honored curricular areas. This section also addresses questions about other content areas not rooted in a single genre of text: Holocaust, Israel, history, and Hebrew language. This section also raises provocative questions about other curricular areas, some like the arts which have been part of Jewish education for at least a century, but others which are quite new curricular topics: environmentalism, travel, and Jewish peoplehood, and digital media.

The third section of the Handbook boldly makes the statement implicit in other sections but quite explicit here: Schooling is not synonymous with education. In American education, a parallel notion is often referred to as the “Bailyn-Cremin” hypothesis. Drawing on the work of noted historians Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence Cremin, this view suggests that many institutions of society, notably the media, family, neighborhoods, and churches and synagogues, participate in the education of children even though they are not part of the apparatus of schooling. This section of
the Handbook presents a variation on the theme in Jewish education: Jewish schools for children and adolescents are joined in the Jewish educational enterprise by a variety of other institutions including early childhood education programs for children younger than school age, universities and adult learning programs for Jews who are beyond school age, programs for parents of school-aged children, and a whole host of venues of “informal education.” And Jewish education takes also place in one-on-one mentoring and in special community-wide programs. Of particular note is that Jewish education addresses special issues related to gender and intermarriage as well as the unique needs of special needs learners. The Jewish day school, in its Orthodox and liberal manifestations, is also presented here as a form of Jewish education that goes beyond the norm of Jewish education in the congregational setting. This section makes a major contribution by focusing also on the education of educators, from the “pre-service” stage to ongoing professional development. (Of particular note here is the inclusion of rabbis as part of the education profession.)

Finally, the Handbook concludes with a section devoted to the global character of the Jewish people and, therefore, of Jewish education. While not neglecting the United States and Israel, the Handbook widens its lens by examining Jewish education in Europe, Australia, Canada, Latin America, and the Former Soviet Union. This section is a warning against provincialism to everyone interested in Jewish education.

Readers of this *International Handbook of Jewish Education* will be well rewarded for investing their time exploring the riches it offers. They will be informed about the triumphs and challenges facing Jewish education. They will be stimulated to think about Jewish education in new ways. And most important, they will be inspired by the possibilities Jewish education offers for enhancing the lives of individuals, strengthening the vitality of the Jewish community, and stimulating value-based actions to improve the state of the world we share with the rest of humanity.

Michael Zeldin
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