



Creating a Space for Questions about Identity in Jewish Education in Israel

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By Neta Polizer

[This article is the fourth in a [series](#) written by participants in the Senior Educators Cohort at M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education.]

When I was a student, I don't remember a teacher ever encouraging me to ask the question, "Who am I?" Many years later, however, I have come to realize that this is the single-most important question to ask in any educational program that aims to help students discover and explore their identity and to help them grow.

As a student, I received various messages about who I could or should be. My teachers taught me a lot about the world, stimulated my mind, and sometimes even changed the way I thought

about things – but they had no real interest in the development of my own identity: my values, my emotions, the patterns of my mind, my affinities, and the conflicts between all of them. Based on my experiences as a student, and now as a teacher, I can say that most schools in Israel still follow standard, nationwide curricula and do not focus on a student’s personal identity development. And this is a mistake.

Today the question “Who am I?” suffers from overuse, at least in Western societies, and may even seem irrelevant, but giving students the tools to answer this question is actually the cornerstone of a rounded education. It is a question that continues to impact me many years after I graduated, and especially as I have become an educator myself.

Within the world of Jewish education, this question becomes even more complex and multilayered, and requires educators to hold two opposing views at the same time. On the one hand, we want to see the student as a whole person and capable of making decisions based on his or her inclinations (allowing students the freedom to choose their own journeys and values). On the other hand, we strive to create a strong, values-based foundation that allows us to define the boundaries and the common ground on which the educational process takes place (we are making certain choices for them). As I learned this year as a participant in the M² Senior Educators Cohort (SEC), this tension, which is inherent in Jewish education, demands that educators strike a balance between enabling our students to have self-exploration in their learning while also having certain predetermined outcomes that we, as educators, would like them to walk away with.

The SEC finally provided me an educational setting that makes a serious attempt to delve deep into the “who” questions and build pedagogies around them based on academic research and practical application. The SEC’s objective is not to answer these questions, but to help train educators in how to explore and develop programs that touch on the fundamental issues of identity formation; to understand how to curate an educational experience in which students can get to know themselves better and explore the values that guide them while confronting the inherent conflicts, costs, and benefits that lie within those values; and to recognize that curating a meaningful educational experience is nothing short of an art. I owe much of my recent personal and professional development to this program.

I now understand the challenges inherent in being a pluralistic Jewish educator focusing on identity formation processes. Since values – another topic that we explored on a deep level in the SEC – play an important role in the development of identities, and examining those values affects our self-perception, it is clear that these processes include real risks. But these are risk that as educators we must take if we want to encourage and enable optimal growth and learning for our students.

A good example comes from my work in The Bronfman Fellowship – a year-long program for North American and Israeli Jewish teenagers that focuses on the deep exploration of their individual and collective Jewish identities and of the “burning” social issues of the 21st century. Every year, the educators face the challenge of curating a meaningful Israeli-North American *mifgash* or “encounter,” based on the personal and collective “who” questions mentioned

above. We strive to create an atmosphere where participants can freely grapple with such questions as: Who am I in the Israeli-North American context? Are we (Israelis and North American Jewish teens) part of the same story? What values do we share? And what are the differences or conflicts between us?

The *mifgash* moves constantly between the interpersonal level – dealing with issues of trust, common language, and power dynamics – and the collective level – which includes political and religious questions, culture, tradition, and interdependence between Israeli and American Jews. The *mifgash* requires educators to develop a clear pedagogical language and to map out values and conflicts, providing participants with a framework that helps them feel secure and face the challenges of the *mifgash* with a sense of openness, willingness, and trust. Since it is tension – between different parts of our identity, between individuals, and between the individual and the collective – that nourishes and defines the *mifgash*, the work of the educators is centered on asking the “who” questions and modeling different approaches and steps to answer them, rather than giving or demanding specific answers.

The Israeli and North American teens in The Bronfman Fellowship program are different from each other, both as individuals and as a group. The *mifgash* between them creates an opportunity to learn how to trust someone who is very different, to meet people who have a different or partially different set of values, and to gradually delve deeper into the “who” questions – as individuals and as a group. The experience is essential for engaging with the burning questions that are on the minds of introspective Jewish teenagers. All of the above can happen only in an educational space that values creativity and conflict – a space for questions, not answers.

Neta Polizer is an educator and facilitator for the Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel, and a graduate of the inaugural Senior Educators Cohort (SEC) at M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education. SEC is generously supported by the Maimonides Fund.

Applications will be open soon for Cohort 3 of the Senior Educators Cohort.