

How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions
20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

No Such Thing as Too Jewish

Cheryl Finkel
Tali Zelkowicz



Bringing Jewish and American Values into Conversation: A School that “Talks the Walk”

If collective wisdom tells us that actions speak louder than words, then New Jewish Community High School, or “New Jew,” shows us how words can actually make actions louder and clearer. We can learn from this unique school that talk is not cheap. Language can become the tool for navigating one of the most acute tensions that liberal Jewish day schools face: namely, combining a Jewish and general American education under one roof.

About 30 miles northwest of Los Angeles proper, in the suburban area known as West Hills, you will find a Jewish day school of 340 students in its eleventh year that offers a profound and stimulating twist on the old adage, “If you are going to talk the talk, you need to walk the walk.” New Jewish Community High School **talks** the walk. This means they not only strive to practice what they preach, but they also **preach what they practice**.

In recent years, current American cultural understandings of religion have tended to emphasize personal meaning, emotions, and experiences, over knowledge, observances, and affiliation. This shift challenges Jewish day schools, where literacy, observance, and obligation to the Jewish people are classical hallmarks of a distinctly Jewish education. Knowing that American culture speaks loudly and compellingly to contemporary Jews, the schools also want to include the personal, emotional, and experiential dimensions of religion. But they want to achieve these multiple goals without unintentionally diluting expectations among parents, students, teachers and even school leaders of a rigorous Jewish program. Given these tensions, the dual curriculum can quickly become a dueling curriculum, where American general and Jewish religious studies departments compete against one another for time, status, and money. All day schools face this challenge. This is the story of one school’s explicit and shared language about their distinctive Torah, which allows them to navigate this ubiquitous challenge head on and wrestle with it consciously, explicitly, and unapologetically. It is an account that purposely magnifies and clarifies this one aspect of the school, allowing other issues to remain in the background.

A Language Problem

From the very beginning, Founding Head of School Dr. Bruce Powell understood the challenge of navigating Jewish-American cultural tensions as a linguistic problem. While he knew there was some work to do around building shared philosophies and visions, this was not what he viewed to be the source of the problem in attracting liberal Jews to a Community day school education. He perceived tremendous confusion around language and noticed that some of the same values were being called by different names. So Powell decided to find shared language that all stakeholders could find meaningful and which did not constitute any sort of “sell-out,” as he puts it, of Jewish content and practice. To do this, Powell turned to Bill Clinton for inspiration. Like many, Powell views Clinton as a brilliant orator able to simplify the most complex issues so everyone can understand them. Together with the support of his board, Powell developed language he knew his community could digest and relate to.

Top on the list for reclaiming was the word “religious,” which Powell says is a scary word in the non-Orthodox world, conjuring up long black coats, *peyos*, and black hats.

“The non-Orthodox community has allowed the Orthodox community to steal the word from us and to define it in a particular way, with language such as ‘*shomer kashrus*’ and ‘*Cholov yisroel*,’” Powell explains. The English teacher in Powell led him straight to the root of the word: “lig,” as in ligament, which connects things.

“So what are we connected to?” he asks prospective parents at an open house night. This is the first time prospective parents and students learn how to speak “New Jew.” But it is only the first of many and ongoing formal and informal opportunities to become socialized to the talk that New Jew and its “New Jews” walk.

Powell goes on to tell parents, “Being religious means being connected to language, culture, history, and arts.” Then adds boldly, “Now we’re going to show our kids how **we’re** connected.”

Powell recounts how parents begin to realize, “Oh, so being religious does not just mean *shomer Shabbat*?”

Gaining momentum and vigor, Powell answers, “No, no, we are not only that,” and launches into a story that has been calibrated precisely for them. It is a Jewish story and an American story which addresses both post-war and pre-war periods. And it goes like this:

Powell tells parents, “Everyone thinks they understand the Holocaust. But they don’t really understand it. You remember the January 1942 Wannsee conference? You remember Hitler? OK, well Hitler decided to have a business conference and invited some of his top leadership — M.D.’s and Ph.D.’s from the **top German universities**. I’ve got your attention, yeah, everyone remembers that. So we learn from this that people can be a Ph.D. **and** an S.O.B.”

Powell says everyone laughs, but then they think, “Aha. I know some Ph.D.’s who are S.O.B.’s; having a high education does not make you a moral human being.”

Then Powell’s narrative jumps to the Nevada desert in July 1945.

“We unleashed the power of the sun — the power of God — into the world as an atom bomb,” he tells them. “We had the smartest scientists in the world developing that bomb. And I’m glad they did because it saved my father’s life; he was a Marine. But they unleashed a hazard that can destroy everything. What was the moral discussion of the time? Did they have a Jewish ethical lens? Some were using Jewish lenses, by the way, and they understood the power. But today we’re still living under that blanket of fear and still have to control things.”

Moving to more current issues, Powell talks about cloning and celebrates science with a caveat, telling them, “We can do all of this, but we need a **values** lens.”

At this point, Powell says people “get it.” He says they grasp what is written right into the school’s website:

They get science and they get values, and they get that one can hold a Ph.D. and be an S.O.B. They get that these Germans possessed tremendous intellectual imagination, yet were horribly devoid of moral vision or ethical action. And finally, they learn that advancement in the world depends upon the power of the intellect; but the very existence of the world depends upon intellectual imagination and ethical action. The two are inseparable.

In the last act of Powell’s tale, the drama peaks when he names parents’ ultimate concern. In a calm, understated but respectful tone, he says, “You’re thinking, ‘How are they going to get my kid into college?’”

Theatrically, he lifts his favorite prop of a Yale jersey high in the air so everyone can read the logo.

“Anyone ever hear of this school?” he asks the crowd rhetorically.

“Yeah, yeah,” there are nods and acknowledgments.

“Okay, but look closely, what are these letters?”

There are Hebrew words in the logo.

An Israeli parent will invariably notice, “Oh, look, it says, *“urim v’tumim.”*”

It also says “Lux et veritas” which is translated as “light and truth.”

Powell drives home the moral of his story, explaining,

In 1701, Yale didn’t even allow Jews to go there. But this American story is completely bound up in Jewish values that are central to America’s foundations. ‘Mr. Yale’ had a dream that he couldn’t get into heaven because he couldn’t speak Hebrew. So Yale students had to be able to read Torah in its original in order to graduate. And to give another example, notice how the preamble to our American constitution sounds like the Torah, ‘to promote general welfare, clothe the naked, feed the hungry.’ So if Hebrew and Bible are so deeply embedded into America’s roots, why shouldn’t we give Hebrew too? Wouldn’t we want our young Jews to be the ones who show up at a place like Yale, already knowing how to read and translate the school logo?

Powell reports that by this point, parents are saying, “Oh my God, my kid is going to get that here? Okay, we get it, and we are going to get all of this, a total package, from a Jewish high school.”

In short, Powell contends that a Jewish education is an outstanding American education. Only then does he start telling them about the high school.

A School in the Valley

One could say that it was this narrative itself that gave birth to the New Community Jewish High School in the first place. In the late 1990's, new non-denominational Jewish high schools were opening all over the place: Long Island, Westchester County, Manhattan, Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Baltimore, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley. Some of the founders were inspired by their encounters with Jewish scholars through Wexner Heritage groups and CLAL; seeing how much Jewish knowledge was enriching their adult lives, they wanted local Jewish high school opportunities for their own and their communities' children. By 2000, such a group of founders had gathered together ready to establish a new school for the largely underserved population of non-Orthodox teens in the Los Angeles Valley. They did not have to look far to find a premier Jewish educator in Dr. Bruce Powell. Here was a hometown boy from L.A. with a local and national reputation as a successful school founder, a mentor for new school heads in the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI), a PEJE consultant for new schools, and an expert on governance. The founding board hired him as their Head of School, and together they spent two full years before New Jew opened in 2002. They developed (together) a clear mission, vision, and philosophy; established exemplary governance practices; and set strategy in place. From the start, they made it clear that Dr. Powell was their educational leader, and they entrusted to him and the staff he brought with the full responsibility for turning that mission and vision into a living, breathing, learning Jewish high school. Even before the first student enrolled in 2002, Powell was telling the story of how, for a Jewish teenager, a great Jewish education is a great American education. At that time, the promise was a dream yet to be realized. Today the claims Dr. Powell makes to prospective parents can be validated in classrooms and hallways of New Jew and in the achievements and contributions of its alumni. As time goes by, the narrative remains consistent, growing ever richer in anecdote and example.

Powell has honed this narrative down over the years, and now half his faculty can give it. They tease him incessantly, but it serves as a shared rationale and vision for why the

school exists. They refine it every year and do a post mortem on it, asking, "What did we miss?" Powell's team will tell him he missed x, y, and z, and he receives feedback from members of the faculty and administration. By telling a story that is compelling and powerful, Powell finds he does not have to pander to anyone who does not want Hebrew, or Judaic studies, or prayer. In fact, Powell says the point of the story is so that he and his leadership never have to "renege on core values." Illustrating his point, Powell explains, "When people say 'we need more time for math,' they won't say, 'let's water down the Jewish studies program,' since we know that is from whence all these values come. So we find more time for math in a different way. We solve the problem within the values, and don't get rid of the source of the values."

Is it possible, though, that New Jew manages to create and maintain a strong sense of community and shared culture and language around Jewish and American values all because of a dramatic rehearsal of a carefully honed narrative by a head of school? Not likely. Even Powell would agree that there are other factors at play. These other factors include a delimited canon of carefully selected words which become shorthand for referencing those core values that everyone uses, on and off campus. Again, we see more attention to language. We turn now to this discrete list of New Jew vocabulary, recalling that Powell's story, or master narrative, becomes the foundation for the knowledge, skills, and behaviors the school wishes to foster. It serves as the touchstone for what New Jew stands for and what it ultimately means to strive to be a "New Jew."

Language Solutions

One of the most common words you will hear on New Jew's campus, used across math and art class, from office staff to administrators, from the rabbinic to the admissions and recruitment departments, is "ESLRs:" Expected School-Wide Learning Results. While the term is used in American education as a synonym for student outcomes or achievements, at New Jew ESLRs (pronounced "esslers") have been reappropriated from a universalist realm and claimed in particularistically Jewish ways. New Jew's six school-wide learning results come from the Talmud. They derive from

Masechet (Tractate) *Shabbat* 31a, where the rabbinic sage Rava indicates six sets of questions that a person is asked in the hour that he or she is to be judged. Talmudically, these are the six questions God will ask of us when we depart from this world. Powerfully, at New Jew, they are also the six questions asked of graduates when they cross the *bimah* [stage] on graduation day. Here is the abbreviated text¹ of these six questions, which can be found hanging in the classrooms, faculty rooms, and administrators' offices:

1. Were you honest in business?
2. Did you make a set time to study?
3. Did you raise up the community?
4. Do you have hope?
5. Did you act with wisdom?
6. Do you understand a big thing from a small thing?

These six Talmudic questions have animated the school's ESLRs which are:

1. Students engage in thoughtful acts of *tikkun olam* (world repair), and act with integrity, honesty, and wisdom.
2. Students understand that learning is a life-long enterprise, and recognize the vital interaction of knowledge and Jewish values.
3. Students appreciate their obligation to participate in and strengthen all facets of community life, and to respect the religious practices and ideals of others.
4. The school engenders in its students a sense of hope, joy, self-confidence, personal meaning, and passion for life based upon their understanding of Jewish tradition.
5. Students achieve critical, synthetic, and evaluative thinking skills and strive for wisdom in their judgments and choices in life.
6. Students strive to search for the deeper meaning in life and determine that which is truly important.

The principles behind these goals go beyond even the power of language; they pose ideological and psychological challenges. Each question is understood and applied across the school's

entire curriculum, by both Judaic and general studies teachers and administrators. Remarkably, these ESLRs are raised regularly and genuinely not only of the students, but also of board members, faculty, and staff. But they ultimately represent a vision for an ideal New Jew graduate. To this end, Powell and the school's founding leaders were careful to interpret and express each Talmudic question in ways that are developmentally attuned for today's teenagers.

For example, being honest in business is directly tied to acts of "*tikkun olam*" or repair of the world, including how to be in ethical relationships. Setting a time to study is about lifelong learning and striving for excellence in intellectual pursuits, but also in matters of personal health, artistic development, and in matters of values and high standards of character and behavior. It also involves appreciating the interaction between the greatest minds of Jewish and general thought. In the original Talmudic passage, raising up the community is about having actual children, but New Jew expands the interpretation beyond procreation, to include being a part of the "village" that raised all of the community's children. Even more broadly, they ask, "Did you become a part of all of the communities of all of our children?" Having hope is about being an optimist whose positive outlook on life allows you to engage in acts of *tikkun olam*, because you believe you can make a difference and work for peace in Israel and the world. Acting with wisdom involves knowing when to let go of the unimportant, separating the argument from the individual, and making a contribution of wisdom to the greater academic and world communities. Understanding a big thing from a small refers to the deeper and hidden meanings of life, ultimately focusing on what is "truly important and meaningful in life, and that which will make a difference for future generations."

Built on these teen-tuned, Jewishly-grounded, school-wide goals is another set of words that you will hear on campus multiple times on any given day, from the mouths of students and staff alike. Unlike Powell's master narrative which addresses philosophical and visionary concepts, or even the ESLRs which are still big ideas, these words represent concrete ways in which these narratives and goals can be lived on a daily basis, in and out of class. They are not formalized or listed

¹ See Appendix for the school's fullest version of the text and description of the ESLRs, which can also be found on the school's website at: <http://www.ncjhs.org/about-us/eslrsideal-graduates/>

anywhere in writing, but these words reside persuasively at the very heart of New Jew's lived and uttered Torah. They include:

- A+ Human Being
- AP Kindness
- Circle of Friends
- *Kodesh* [Holy or sacred] Moments
- *Lashon Hara* [harmful speech, gossip]

Note how these concepts, too, are intensely developmentally appropriate for high school teens and also serve to integrate Jewish and general, American universalist and Jewish particularist cultural worlds. Most striking is a lack of cynicism about the use of these phrases. Students are very serious when they talk about these values and express genuine gratitude for them. For so many of them, it is clear that being an "A+ human being" is as important as being an "A+ Student." As one 11th grade girl put it, "What makes this such a great school is that there is just as much a focus on doing well in life, not just on doing well as a student."

"AP Kindness" is one of the most commonly heard phrases and may reflect a satisfaction at having reappropriated the whole factory of stress that is the culture of Advanced Placement classes in this country. Sue DeRuyter, Dean of Academic Advisement and Director of College Guidance, defines AP Kindness as:

A day-to-day watching out for each other, and it's about being cognizant going through the college process that you are not disparaging other schools, since that might be someone else's school. Or it can simply mean holding a door for someone. That loving community does come across. We try to teach values here so we don't need so many rules. This is a special place. I've seen hundreds of schools, and I'd say they're doing a lot that is right, here. Whenever I read students' questionnaires about college goals, I'm impressed that the Jewish values are coming through. And they are very well prepared academically.

The Director of Global Education, Yoav Ben Horin, puts it most starkly when he says, "Teenage is not a very kind age, but Bruce and others have pulled it off here. The notion of values is related to caring in a Jewish way."

The strongest evidence comes from students themselves. In one senior history class, a boy cited AP Kindness as what

was missing from one country's behavior during war time. That, in turn, reminded him of an incident during a recent basketball game where the opposite team commented on New Jew's sportsmanship, and they even knew to call it "AP Kindness." He recounted the anecdote with pride, and not a single eyeball rolled in the room. These concepts are treated with sincerity and affection. At times, students and faculty alike can be playful with these terms and make some gentle jokes about them, but it is clear how significant and real they are, especially to students. For example, a 9th grade boy explained that being an A+ human being means nobody sits alone at lunch. A 10th grade girl sitting among her peers spoke passionately about how "no one cared about *lashon hara* at my middle school; but by being aware of the core values of New Jew, you're implementing it." Another 11th grade girl explained:

Since 9th grade, we've been taught a set of values, '*kodesh* moments,' for example. So I consider things I do and call them *kodesh* moments. Not only would Rabbi Vorspan [Rabbi-in-Residence] who first taught us about *kodesh* moments be sad. I would, because doing them makes you feel good. It makes both me the others feel good.

Students are genuinely grateful for their school's culture, and contribute freely and independently to its maintenance. Describing the courses he has taken as part of the Jewish studies department, one boy expressed how "the Jewish classes have made me realize what's more important in life. Family and friends are most important." Hearing this, a female classmate of his demonstrated what she is most grateful for, saying, "There is a great emphasis on community, here. And you need specific values in order to **contain** the community, so that you don't feel distant from the community." Moreover, the students can see very transparently that faculty selection at the school happens carefully. "They really understand the school values, and our lives," one male senior student observed. None of this means academic excellence is compromised. Most at the school would argue it is enhanced, since, as another male senior put it, "We are allowed to do drafts and revisions of our papers to get that A, because it's not just about a grade, it's about learning. They [teachers] want us to really **understand** how to write an A paper."

At New Jew, it turns out, nobody does sit alone at lunch. This is neither an accident nor a case of atypical teenagers. Gregg Kerr, Director of Student Life, grade level dean, and film studies and English teacher, talks about how social concerns loom largest for a 9th grader, and when you are not worried about sitting alone at lunch, your grades will be better. So the concept of a Circle of Friends has particular power for the students. Powell explains to them during orientation that a clique is an insecure group of people, whereas a Circle of Friends is a secure group that can always let someone in. And then he charges them, saying, “So you have to decide, are you secure or insecure?” Their answers seem unanimously to be “secure.” And like so much at New Jew, this is a decision made consciously, autonomously, but guided by clear values and constantly reinforced through naming them using distinct, shared vocabulary.

A Place to Match Language to Mission: The B-Ring

New Jew talks its walk. Instead of allowing Judaic studies and general studies to be described as two separate and distinctive worlds, New Jew employs linguistic strategies to weave its whole high school experience into a coherent whole and to claim that whole as distinctively Jewish. How does this work? They tell, retell, and rehearse an overarching master narrative. They speak the language of the school’s Talmudic ESLRs, and they talk the school’s distinctive and concrete Torah with language like AP Kindness and A+ Human Being. In addition to this highly intentional use of language, there is another important way New Jew talks its walk. This is a structural practice that permits frequent, meaningful communication and joint planning throughout all the school’s departments. This is called the B-Ring meeting, and it is an intrinsic part of New Jew’s ethic.

New Jew’s leadership structure is not a top-down organizational flow chart. It consists of concentric circles with permeable flow between and among them. The head of school is in the A-Ring. The B-Ring consists of staff and faculty responsible for all other leadership portfolios, both academic and non-academic. Once a week, for up to an hour and a half, everyone comes together for “B-Ring Meetings.” Open and

transparent, the notes are posted on the website workspace, where anyone in the B-Ring can comment or add an agenda item if they wish. The website work space is open to everyone. On a given day, you will have almost 20 people packed cozily into Powell’s not especially big office. A rich cross-section of an art teacher, the CFO, the director of administration, the director of experiential education, subject matter department chairs, and the school principal are present. Powell is always there and takes notes personally.

The meetings serve as a policy-making body. They struggle weekly with matters like how time is used in the curriculum, new programmatic proposals, and Shabbaton issues (for example, should sex education and a guest speaker who is an HIV survivor be part of the program during Shabbat, and does that comport with the school’s values?). The B-Ring meeting grants a genuine voice and a significant amount of real power to a very broad range of staff at the school. It enfranchises all the teachers and educational leaders and keeps them in regular and collaborative conversation with one another. It is very difficult to objectify or even demonize the Judaic studies department or faculty, for example, when they are sitting on the floor next to you, perhaps even supporting your idea for a biology fair or art show or homecoming dance.

Surrounded by 18 staff and faculty sitting on chairs and the floor, we were lucky to witness a B-Ring meeting on a Monday that addressed five different issues and some good and welfare. The discussion was remarkably lively, intense, honest, and also playful. The first issue addressed that day was dubbed the “perennial dress code issue,” and this time, the group was discussing and clarifying the fundamental values that underlie their dress code, which basically includes “modest dress.” They debated whether the value to guide the practice should be *tzniut* (literally, “modesty,” but a distinctively Jewish value rooted in Jewish text and tradition), or professionalism (a secular notion that involves how you wish to be perceived by the world and appropriate ways to present yourself for different contexts). Professionalism seemed to win out, among Judaic and general studies representatives alike. But no one felt it was a loss of integrity of the Jewish soul of the school. This was true because the B-Ring is, above all, a place where the school’s leaders decide what language to animate the school’s mission in its daily life.

New Jew Uses Language to Claim Jewish Distinctiveness

New Jew seeks to help contemporary Jews wear Judaism as comfortably as they wear America. Typically, liberal Jews tend to gravitate to universalistic values, culture, and language, while particularistically Jewish expressions are not as readily accepted or integrated into life. New Jew, a pluralistic community high school made up primarily of liberal Jewish families, seems to have an unexpected knack for achieving the opposite. Through using the various language strategies discussed earlier, they take ideas and concepts from the universal American sphere and Judaize them. They take ESLRs, the language of educational results, and refract them through Talmudic lenses. They turn the pervasive college prep language of “APs” into a life value and lesson called “AP kindness.” They take the history of anti-Semitic Ivy League schools and turn it into nothing less than a rationale for teaching Hebrew. Even the Holocaust is used in an unconventional manner. Instead of the survivalist fears about Jewish continuity, Nazism becomes a sharp reminder to live ethically and be a *mensch*, above all. As Tsafi Lev, the Jewish Studies Department Chair and a Conservative rabbi, put it, “It’s not just what you know, but what you **do** with what you know; that’s what AP Kindness or being an A+ person means.” And in a way, his afterthought may encapsulate New Jew’s whole philosophy. “It’s pretty clear,” he added, “that it takes more than being academically successful to be a productive person on this planet.”

This act of claiming the universal as particular raises an interesting question regarding the politics of Jewish authenticity. In other words, what ends up actually counting as legitimately and authoritatively Jewish, and how is that determined? We asked this question over and over to everyone we met. The responses were varied, but all seem to have one thing in common: whatever it is, it is only Jewish if it is an honest expression of one’s true self, critically examined from multiple perspectives, so that it bears intellectual and emotional integrity. Here are some of the specific ways that New Jew faculty at the school grapple with the question, “What counts as Jewish?”

For Yoav Ben Horin, being Jewish is all about wrestling without anxieties about loss of identity. Accordingly, he asserts,

If you are willing to do away with the fear of slippery slopes, then engaging in debate and being challenged is not a scary matter. My job is to confuse in order to reassemble, but not without context. I seek a dispassionate-passion balance. I present them with a model of being a thoughtful contemporary Jew who doesn’t have all the answers. Like me.

For Becca Bodenstein, Director of Jewish Life and Experiential Education, what counts specifically as Jewish is also a difficult thing to pin down. As she reasoned aloud, though, she clarified what is most important to her:

Well, if students emerge saying they don’t understand Jewish ethics and morals, that would make me sad. But if they didn’t light Shabbat candles? I don’t know, I don’t teach that. How about knowing how to keep kosher? If they took my class, I’d hope that they’d know that! I want them to know what is biblical, rabbinic, and modern Jewish literature, and the relationship among them. I want them to know how genres of classical Jewish literature interact. What I really want them to explore is **why** these categories exist and ask, “What’s the point?” And “how do they manifest in our time and is there an ethical reason to relate to our food ethically?”

Rabbi David Vorspan’s Jewish vision complements Bodenstein’s. He wants students to have tools to answer Jewish questions, and to model how to look at “how we Jew.” But he adds something new to the mix, as well. After recalling Heschel’s famous statement about a greater need for “Jewish textpeople” than Jewish textbooks, Vorspan concludes plainly, “If students leave here hating Judaism because they hate a Jewish teacher, then we’ve failed. If they leave here loving Judaism because they love a Jewish teacher, then we’ve been successful.” For Vorspan, this means “getting Judaism into the *kishkehs* [guts, where things are felt and owned].” But Vorspan adds that this is a very complicated thing to do. He cites a *midrash* which seeks to explain why Moses threw down the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Of course he saw people worshipping the Golden Calf, the *midrash* teaches. But they were not just engaged in idol worship, they were **dancing**. That means the idol worship got into their *kishkehs*. Applying this *midrash* to his work, Vorspan says, “God didn’t warn Moses about **that**. Moses wasn’t prepared for **dancing**. So we do so

much experiential stuff here, in the hope that there will be that moment when we will grab their *kishkehs*.”

Perhaps nothing clarifies New Jew’s Jewish mission better than one dramatic incident that caused the school’s Jewish leadership to engage in a major clarification of principles. Rabbi Lev describes it as one of the most problematic and inspiring examples of navigating boundaries of Jewish identity formation at New Jew. A few years ago, Lev, Powell, and the other two rabbis in residence at the school, one Orthodox and one Reform, had to take on the question of a gifted sprinter. New Jew could not join the local league as the school does not participate in competitions on Shabbat, when all of its running meets were held. But this boy wanted to run, and he wanted to represent his school. The student asked Lev’s rabbinic team, “Can we do this?” Lev recalls emphatically, “We wanted to support this kid, but it was complicated. For the Orthodox rabbi, there was a way to make it work halachically. But for the Reform rabbi, competition is not in the spirit of Shabbat. So it was not fun, but we said, ‘No.’” But this is not the end of the story.

The following year, the same student came back to the deciding body and said, “I really need you to understand me. I went to Auschwitz with my family, and all I wanted to do was run, to show that I’m not weak. And I want to run as a Jew; that’s how I express my Judaism.” The rabbis reconsidered their position in light of this student’s conviction and unique mode of Jewish expression. They discussed possible criteria: that he would do Kiddush and light candles, and go and compete as a Jew. In addition, the rabbis developed a protocol that framed his choice within the mission of the school. They asked this student: 1) Tell us where you stand as a Jew and how this is going to enhance your Shabbat; 2) Make a proposition about what Shabbat means to you, stating three ways this activity will deepen your Shabbat practice; 3) Say a blessing for the occasion; 4) Have a meal with your team family (teammates); and 5) Share the experience: identify two Jewish values that come into play and write it up to teach it to the school.

Reflecting on this fascinating test of New Jew principles, Lev concludes, “So we are trying to do pluralism without doing homogenization, and that makes a lot of things complicated. We don’t have one halachic standard that allows us to be done with it.”

What is common to all these examples is internalized, meaningful investment in what being Jewish means to the individual, within the community. Yonatan Rosner, the director of a fascinating initiative and experiment at New Jew called the “*Tefilah Kehilah* Institute,” calls this kind of ownership doing things “New Jew style.” Rosner explained:

This means letting the students lead themselves, within a structure, with context and content. But ultimately the students need to ask the questions about what makes and keeps this school Jewish. So what makes us Jewish? We’re aware of it. And we are in a continuous process of asking these very questions.

New Jew’s Board President, Scott Zimmerman, also alludes to this kind of genuinely internalized claim of being Jewish when he says, “If a student ends up saying, ‘My parents made me go here’ or ‘I’m Jewish because that’s the team I was born on,’ that’s a failure.”

In a variety of ways, we have seen how New Jew uses language to get its Torah into its members’ *kishkehs*. By continuously “talking the walk,” language and individual words become external signs of shared values. Perhaps we learn from New Jew that accessible, meaningful language may be the bridge that liberal Jews need in order to fully invest in what leading American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna calls, “the most fundamental question of American Jewish life: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, **part of** the larger American society and **apart from it**, to exist simultaneously a part of **and** apart from American society, **as Jews**.”² Upgrading and reappropriating language may be what liberal Jews in particular need in order to navigate the gaps and dissonances between Jewish and American cultures. New Jew identifies the pressure points and reframes tensions in, literally, new Jewish ways. They seek to help liberal Jews live squarely and unabashedly in the two worlds and value them both. Jewish leaders often say, “We no longer need to teach Jews how to wear ‘blue jeans.’ They now know how to ‘wear America.’” By naming and claiming Jewish values as Jewish, and applying them to contributions to life in America, New Jew seeks

² Sarna, Jonathan D. (1998) “American Jewish Education in Historical Perspective.” *Journal of Jewish Education*, Volume 64, Numbers 1 & 2, Winter/Spring.

to help contemporary Jews wear **Judaism** as comfortably as they wear America. Put most succinctly, they seek to make it normal to be non-normative.

This means there is actually no such thing as “too Jewish.” In fact, to any parents who are afraid their kid is going to be “too Jewish,” Powell counters,

So are you worried about being ‘too math,’ or ‘too history,’ ‘too human,’ or ‘too moral’? There’s no such thing as too Jewish. If you’re afraid your kids are going to be too Jewish, they will be *pareve* and vanilla on [the college] campus. So don’t be boring, make a contribution and make it count, and make it as a Jew.

Powell traces this immensely positive and upbeat frame for what it means to be Jewish in America back to his own teacher and mentor, Shlomo Bardin, about whom he wrote

his doctoral dissertation. Powell recalls vividly and reenacts an analogy that Bardin used to repeat:

Being Jewish is like having a million bucks in the bank, son. The problem is: you don’t know the name of the bank. And once you know the bank, you don’t have the account number. So that’s why you come **here**. So we can give you the name of the bank, and help you find the account number.

New Jewish Community High school strives to provide a Jewish education that allows and requires the next generation of Jews to make interesting, unique contributions to American and therefore also Jewish life. “So don’t be boring,” they are told. Fearing being “too Jewish” becomes tantamount to fearing being too innovative, too transformative, too brilliant, too kind, or too contributory. Through the reclaiming of language, the category “too Jewish” becomes a logical, philosophical, and linguistic impossibility.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. What is the “story” your school tells about the ultimate purposes it serves? How could you go “public” with your story in order to communicate it to the range of stakeholders in your school community?
2. How does your school manage the complex tensions of competing Jewish and American values? What are the pressure points? What are the strategies that you and your school have developed for navigating these tensions?
3. What do you imagine might become of Powell’s “master narrative” that anchors New Jew’s vision and philosophy when Powell retires and there is new leadership? How might a school’s defining story, distinctive language, and values transcend founding leaders?
4. What does the word ‘religious’ mean to the various stakeholders in your school’s community? To what extent are there negative or positive connotations?
5. If there were a glossary of terms that defined key concepts and values of your school, what might those words include?
6. What do you think of New Jew’s “ESLRs” (Expected School-Wide Learning Results)? What are the overarching norms that define your school’s ideal outcomes for graduates?
7. This case narrative suggests that New Jew’s central strategy for grappling with competing values among Judaic and general studies is “to make it normal to be non-normative.” As such, New Jew strives to render the whole notion of “too Jewish” an absurdity and even an impossibility. What are your reactions to this approach?

Appendix

NJCHS ESLRs (Expected School-Wide Learning Results) – Fullest Version

1. Students engage in thoughtful acts of *tikkun olam* (world repair), and act with integrity, honesty, and wisdom.
2. Students understand that learning is a life-long enterprise, and recognize the vital interaction of knowledge and Jewish values.
3. Students appreciate their obligation to participate in and strengthen all facets of community life, and to respect the religious practices and ideals of others.
4. The school engenders in its students a sense of hope, joy, self-confidence, personal meaning, and passion for life based upon their understanding of Jewish tradition.
5. Students achieve critical, synthetic, and evaluative thinking skills and strive for wisdom in their judgments and choices in life.
6. Students strive to search for the deeper meaning in life and determine that which is truly important.

Ideal New Community Jewish High School Graduates

In the Talmud, in the section called *Masechet Shabbat*, Rava points out that there are six sets of questions a person is asked in the hour he or she is to be judged. The school's vision of the ideal graduate grows directly from these Talmudic queries.

1. **Did you conduct your worldly affairs in a righteous manner? Did you take unfair advantage? Were you honest in business?**
Our graduates engage in thoughtful acts of *tikkun olam* (world repair); understand that they are part of a larger plan, yet are essential to the completion of that plan through individual acts of loving kindness; and know that justice is created in the world by donations of personal time and material resources.
Our graduates understand that knowledge is for the sake of achieving wisdom; wisdom leads to peace; peace engenders a context for *tikkun olam*; and *tikkun* creates an atmosphere of Godliness in our world.

2. **Was lifelong learning a priority? Was it a regular part of your life? Did you fix a regular time to study?**
Our graduates possess deep and integrated knowledge of Jewish tradition, values, and world civilization; recognize the relationship among all facets of human knowledge and appreciate the interaction between the greatest minds of Jewish and general thought.
Our graduates love to learn and have mastered the reading, comprehension, and analytical skills to enable the pursuit of lifelong learning activities. Our graduates will strive for excellence in intellectual pursuits, personal health, artistic development, and in matters of values and high standards of character and behavior.
3. **Did you engage yourself in the raising of children? This means not just in the sense of procreation, but were you part of the “village” that raised all of the community’s children? Did you become a part of all of the communities of all of our children?**

Our graduates consider themselves “trans-Jews” or those who possess a full range of Jewish knowledge and skills, so as to be comfortable in any Jewish community anywhere in the world. When asked to lead a prayer *minyan*, our graduates can lead; or when asked to explain Jewish holidays, texts, history, and philosophy, our graduates can explain. In essence, our graduates appreciate and respect all facets of Jewish life and can easily “transit” within the complex Jewish world.

4. **Were you an optimist? Did you try to make things better by participating in acts of *tikkun olam*? Did you have faith in God and the goodness of the world? Did you work for peace in Israel and the world?**
Our graduates achieve a sense of self-confidence, of joy and passion for life, based upon a deep understanding of Jewish tradition and knowledge of how that tradition creates personal meaning and inner peace. They support the State of Israel and appreciate Israel’s centrality in Jewish life and Jewish history.

5. **Did you use wise judgment? Did you argue details with wisdom? Did you know when to let go of the unimportant? Did you separate the argument from the individual? Did you make a contribution of wisdom to the greater academic and world communities?**

Our graduates know and apply critical thinking skills needed for analytic and synthetic thought. These include inductive and deductive reasoning; finding similarities and analogies; synthesizing information; assessing the costs and benefits of ideas; predicting short and long-term consequences; achieving insight — the awareness of self in relation to others, to moral problems, and to world issues; and the ability to analyze one’s own thinking process, to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to adopt strategies for productive action based on the highest principles of moral and ethical thinking.

Our graduates gain admission to fine colleges and universities not only to enhance their own education and opportunities, but also as a means to enhance their ability to make a significant contribution to our local and national communities.

6. **Did you understand and search for the deeper meaning and hidden meaning of life? Did you understand a word within a word or the thing within a thing?**

Our graduates value their special gifts, and understand their responsibility to use those gifts to uplift humanity. They maintain balance and perspective in life, thereby being able to determine that which is truly important and meaningful, and that which will make a difference for future generations.