

Positive Jewish Education: A Pathway to Thriving in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish Education

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Advisor: Amy Rosenthal

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## Abstract

Jewish education has been a core value to the Jewish people throughout history and is essential to carry on Jewish tradition and values. Jewish education influences Jewish identity, engagement, and continuity. A decline in enrollment in non-Orthodox Jewish educational programs poses a real threat to the future of the Jewish community. Many young adults decide to stop participating in Jewish educational experiences after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience at age 13 since students often fail to find meaning, positivity, and relevance in their Jewish educational experiences, which can influence their future engagement in Jewish life. Positive psychology and positive education can serve as a pathway to propel Jewish education, enabling students to find new meaning in Jewish values and tradition. Positive education infuses academics with a focus on character strengths and well-being and can lead to academic and personal flourishing. While many secular schools have embraced positive education, the vast majority of Jewish schools have yet to adopt this growing field. A positive Jewish education framework for implementation and recommendations for interventions can strengthen the future of Jewish education and help schools and students thrive in the 21st century.

*Keywords:* Judaism, positive psychology, positive interventions, religious education, positive education, religion, gratitude, optimism, education, well-being, Jewish education

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### **Introduction and 21st Century Jewish Education**

Jewish education is essential to assure that future generations will continue to find meaning and pass on Jewish traditions and values (Schick, 2014). Accordingly, Jewish education must be revitalized for the 21st century in order to be relatable for current and future generations. It also should spark meaning and purpose for young people who are grappling with their religion and belief systems, and to help cultivate positive personal and communal well-being. Positive psychology and positive education can assist with this revitalization and help strengthen the roots of Jewish education. A positive Jewish education framework will enable students to find new meaning in longstanding Jewish values, while providing tools to cultivate and nurture well-being from a Jewish perspective.

### **Jewish Education in Context**

Jewish education today includes a broad range of options for K-12 students ranging from day schools, which integrate Jewish education and secular studies on a full-time basis, to congregational schools, which typically meet at a synagogue one or two days a week after school and/or on Sunday. While Jews in Orthodox and Chasidic communities are more likely to send their children to Jewish day schools and yeshivas, there are day schools across 37 states and the District of Columbia that cater to a diverse range of religious practices including: Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, Yeshiva Orthodox, Chassidic, and community schools which welcome Jewish families from all denominations (Schick, 2014). Day schools provide students with a comprehensive Jewish education. Hebrew, Talmud, Jewish history and ethics, and even Jewish electives, such as Israeli dancing, are integrated into the curriculum. Yet, sending a child to a day school can cause some families to be concerned that, because there are only so many hours in the school day, time spent on Jewish education will take

away from students mastering secular subjects. Day schools are considered independent schools which can also create financial obstacles, as rising tuition becomes a challenge for many families (Schick, 2014). A solution for some families is to instead send their children to Jewish summer camps and Jewish youth group programs. These options offer tremendous opportunities for enriching Jewish experiences and creating positive Jewish identities. Studies on Jewish Youth Serving Organizations show that involvement in these organizations are related to positive teen outcomes (Levites & Sayfan, 2019). Teens involved in a Jewish Youth Serving Organization feel good about themselves, their community, and their Judaism, and believe Jewish culture is something to celebrate (Levites & Sayfan, 2019). Camp provides an opportunity to create a community of Jewish friends for the child to develop and grow with and a community of Jewish friends is one of the predictors of Jewish engagement and commitment later in life (Gordis, 1999).

### **Jewish Education by the Numbers**

According to the last U.S. Jewish Day School census, in 2014 255,000 students were enrolled in 860 schools throughout the nation (Schick, 2014). These numbers reflect a decrease in Conservative/Solomon Schechter schools and an increase in enrollment in Orthodox schools. A decrease in enrollment size impacts the likelihood that these non-Orthodox schools can survive. Forty percent of day schools have fewer than 100 students enrolled (Schick, 2014). Non-orthodox schools represent only 13% of the day school population, down from 20% in 1998, (Schick, 2014) which poses a significant threat to Jewish identity and engagement for future generations. In addition, there is a decline in enrollment by grade level. There are twice as many kindergarten students in Jewish day school than 12th grade students (Schick, 2014).

The majority of non-Orthodox students in Jewish education are participating outside of



their primary school in synagogue congregational programs (Schick, 2014). Congregational programs often begin as early as pre-school and students typically are involved through their Bar/Bat Mitzvah process at age 13, learning the foundational skills for this coming of age ceremony. Yet, since congregational programs meet outside of school once or twice a week, time constraints can present challenges in learning the diverse range of content in an engaging way. Congregational programs struggle to cover a vast amount of material including Hebrew language, the Bible, Talmud, and Jewish history in a limited amount of time (Telushkin, 1991). These programs also compete with secular activities and extracurricular commitments making it a continuous battle to find enough time to cover the depth of material necessary to create a sound foundation of Jewish learning (Telushkin, 1991).

### **Hebrew School Dropout**

Most Hebrew school students attend during the elementary school years leading up to their Bar/BatMitzvah. Engagement in congregational programs dramatically declines after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience has been completed. Unfortunately, there is little incentive for students to return after this milestone, which impacts congregations across the nation and poses a significant threat to the future of American Jewry (Ravitch, 2002). In a Hebrew school drop-out survey, students made it clear that there were no compelling reasons to return. One student candidly shared, “The day I read my Haftorah (Torah portion), I’m outta here!” (Ravitch, 2002, pp. 256). This is a common sentiment heard from 13 year-olds who found the educational process leading up to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process as not “meaningful,” “valuable,” or “enjoyable” (Ravitch, 2002, pp. 256).

Additional reasons students reported for not returning to Hebrew school after their Bar/Bat Mitzvah included: outdated curricular materials, mediocre teaching, and lack of

engagement and relevance to their lives outside the synagogue (Ravitch, 2002). Students who left reported that their teachers failed to engage them in innovative and interactive learning experiences, often sticking to dated teachers' manuals that didn't allow for much creativity or student involvement. Students felt *forced* to sit in uninspiring classrooms with teachers who appeared disengaged and unmotivated. This has the potential to create a lasting negative Jewish education experience for students. This is an unfortunate reality because their Bar/Bat Mitzvah symbolizes their entrance into adulthood in the Jewish community. If this is the final exposure to a formalized Jewish education, students may feel less compelled to want to return to or engage in future Jewish life. The Hebrew school experience needs to be revamped to meet 21st century student needs, encourage retention, and create a positive and meaningful experience.

### **From Surviving to Thriving**

One way to achieve this revitalization is through integrating a positive Jewish education curriculum that includes Jewish based character development, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and deepens participation through positive engagement and choice. If students associate their Jewish education with a sense of pride, meaning, and connection with peers and teachers who make them feel valued, there is a stronger likelihood that they will want to continue their association with Jewish education, choose to engage in Youth Serving Organizations, and stay involved through college by participating in Hillel and/or Chabad programming. This can deepen their sense of Jewish enrichment and continue their community and religious ties. Creating a positive Jewish education experience requires a culture-wide emphasis on fostering Jewish based values of gratitude, love of learning, optimism, and well-being. Positive psychology can serve as a pathway and guide to access these deeper Jewish education connections and commitments for all Jewish denominations.

To strengthen Jewish education and enrollment rates and to encourage families from all denominations to engage their children in Jewish education, day schools and congregational schools need to find compelling ways to showcase the academic and personal benefits of a positive Jewish education. Day schools and congregational schools need to highlight how academics, personal and spiritual growth, and character development can co-exist together within the unique Jewish educational space.

A holistic Jewish educational approach not only provides insight about one's religious background and identity, but also about character, Jewish ethics, values, and optimal well-being. At its core, Judaism provides a guide for how to live a flourishing life based on *mitzvot* (i.e., commandments) and *middot* (i.e., virtues). This aligns organically with the growing movement of positive psychology, the scientific study of human flourishing. Jewish teachings and texts can be reinvigorated to be relevant to our world today. I believe that incorporating positive psychology into a Jewish curriculum, that is grounded in evidence-based research about meaning, purpose, values, and resilience, can increase relevance. It can serve as a pathway to help Jewish educational programs relate to students and families in a meaningful way that is applicable to our modern world. By finding the intersection between ancient values and traditions and research based positive psychology constructs on well-being, we can propel Jewish education forward to serve this generation and future ones.

As a former Jewish day school student, I have firsthand experience with the benefits and challenges of this type of Jewish educational experience. I attended Sinai Akiba Academy, a Conservative day school in Los Angeles. I have fond memories of singing Jewish songs, celebrating the holidays and learning about the traditions and stories behind each. I learned the weekly Torah portion and enjoyed our weekly Shabbat celebration - especially when it was my

chance to be *Shabbat girl*. These early years provided such a strong sense of community that still exists in my life today. Many of my best friends to this day are from my Sinai class and the relationships formed at the school have helped me associate this experience with deep community connections and a positive Jewish identity.

My Jewish identity was deeply ingrained in me from my years in a day school setting. My family practiced at home what I learned in school, reinforcing these values. We cherished weekly Shabbat dinners with my grandparents and family friends, and I sought out Jewish communities once I left home for college and again as a young adult in New York and Houston. These Jewish communities across the country helped me find a sense of meaning and belonging as I adjusted to new chapters in my life. I am passionate about ensuring that this generation and future ones can find meaning in their own Jewish background and identity and I am eager to connect Judaism and positive psychology as a pathway to human flourishing.

I believe weaving positive psychology into Jewish education is a pathway to modernize Jewish education. This will provide Jewish schools and students with the tools and resources to thrive. Wisdom, creativity, and love of learning are celebrated Jewish values called *Chocma* (Levine, 2017). Yet, many students find Hebrew school classes not relevant to modern life. Jewish education greatly impacts Jewish identity (Reimer, 1997), but the education needs to be innovative to retain student interest and identity. If Jewish schools and programs revitalize their curricula and models to incorporate positive psychology and introduce a common language that shows the intersection between Judaism and resilience, character strengths, and optimism, students can gain tools to help them thrive, nurture their well-being, and maintain their commitment to a Jewish identity. In addition, this will also help them find relevance with the Jewish material and ways for it to be meaningful in their modern life. I believe this will give

parents a compelling reason to send their children to Jewish schools and help Jewish schools set themselves apart from other independent and public schools. Interweaving Jewish values with the concepts of positive education will help Jewish schools and students prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Positive Psychology**

The study of human happiness has intrigued philosophers, religious leaders, and psychologists throughout history. Aristotle is particularly notable for his philosophies on happiness and the virtuous life. He viewed happiness as an activity of the soul and essential for the good life (Melchert, 2002). While traditional psychology focused on mental illness, in more recent years psychology has evolved to revisit these ancient virtues and theories of happiness to determine how to live a life of optimal well-being and flourishing (Seligman, 2011).

Martin Seligman is often considered the father of positive psychology and during his presidency of the American Psychological Association in 1998 he created positive psychology, a visionary new direction to supplement the field of psychology. Dr. Seligman believed psychology should not only focus on how to treat mental illness or *fix* what is wrong with people, but to also study what makes life worth living (Seligman, 2011).

A major breakthrough in the field was the development of Seligman and Peterson's *Character Strengths and Virtues* manual which was based on their research on the core strengths and traits that lead to *the good life* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This manual has served as positive psychology's counterpart to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), providing an alternative and positive strengths based categorization system, instead of one focusing solely on mental illness and deficits. Seligman and Peterson scoured religious, philosophical and sociological texts from all

over the world. They identified: “wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence” (Schnall & Schnall, 2017, pp. 161) as the common core strengths that influenced humanity from ancient civilizations to modern times. This served as the foundation of positive psychology’s strengths-based approach which is one of the distinguishing features of the field.

Since its founding twenty years ago, positive psychology has evolved from the science of happiness to the science of well-being and human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Researchers and professors from all over the world have advanced the field by studying character strengths, positive interventions, resilience, grit, optimism, gratitude, and by developing and testing well-being theories. Many college campuses have embraced the field and are appointing well-being directors on campuses and offering courses on the science of happiness, which are often the most popular elective course on campus (Shimer, 2018). A positive psychology course at Yale recently broke the record for largest course enrollment, with 1,200 students enrolled or one-third of the entire student population. Harvard’s positive psychology classes have also enrolled nearly 1,000 students at a time, reflecting both the growing interest and necessity of teaching about well-being at schools across the nation (Shimer, 2018). Often, what is taught in these science of happiness courses is Seligman’s (2011) well-being framework called PERMA along with applied positive interventions.

## **PERMA**

Seligman’s (2011) well-being model of PERMA includes the essential components for *the good life*. PERMA stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Each element is an essential ingredient in a flourishing life and each can be cultivated through positive interventions to help promote greater well-being.

**Positive emotions.** Positive emotions impact us on a psychological, emotional, and physical level. When we experience positive emotions, we reap the benefits of *broaden and build*, which is an opening up to the world around us, improving our mindset, ability to learn, our relationships, and even our immune system (Fredrickson, 2009). When patients are exposed to positive emotions even from watching a funny movie they heal faster and when students experience positive emotions they perform better academically. Positive emotions are the building blocks of the good life (Lerner & Schlechter, 2017). Positive emotions create upward spirals of positivity, helping boost the building blocks of our resilience (Fredrickson, 1999). Barbara Fredrickson, has spent her career researching positive emotions which range from: love, joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration and awe (Fredrickson, 1999). Positive interventions such as mindfulness exercise, and counting one's blessings serve as pathways to bolster positive emotions and the different elements of PERMA (Seligman, 2011).

**Engagement and flow.** When we are highly engaged in an activity we are *in the zone* or in a state of *flow* which is defined as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, pp.4). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) began his research on flow by studying activities where we lose track of time, and become fully immersed both physically and mentally, often referred to as optimal experiences. Artists, athletes, and surgeons, spend countless hours gaining control over their medium, developing grit and mastery. Through deep focus, clarity, and motivation, they experience an organized state of consciousness or flow, which leads to euphoria, purpose, and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). After a flow experience, a person feels more capable, accomplished, unique, and skilled. By dedicating ourselves to an intense and complex goal that requires concentration, we reap the benefits of experiencing self-awareness, growth, and personal satisfaction.

**Relationships.** Positive relationships are key to the learning experience (Wolfson, 2013). Starting in nursery school, students start to develop friendships, and by adolescence 80-90% of teenagers have “best” or “good” friends (Peterson, 2006). The single biggest indicator of success and well-being in college is in quality and positive relationships (Lerner & Schlechter, 2017). Creating “good” friendship is based on trust, respect, savoring happy moments together, support, and taking a genuine interest in one another. In teens, shared activities and emotional support rank high for positive friendships (Peterson, 2006). At all stages of our lives, quality relationships are one of the greatest predictors of our well-being. Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (2002) studied the traits of the top 10% of happiest people and found that the happiest people live vibrant social lives, spend less time alone, and have good relationships. Long-term meaningful friendships are as critical for happiness as romantic relationships, and compared to married people, singles have more lifelong close friends (Lyumbomirsky, 2007). Quality relationships can take many different forms but they all add tremendous value to our well-being.

Positive relationships prime our brains to be more open and collaborative which is essential to fostering a healthy and productive learning environment for students.

**Meaning and mattering.** Meaning is often defined as the sense that life is worthwhile and valuable (Martela & Steger, 2016). Communities and schools thrive when individuals feel that they are both valued and adding value to the community, this enables individuals to feel as if they matter which positively impacts meaning and engagement (Prilleltensky, 2016). Religious schools can also help students find meaning through spiritual pathways and transcendence, connecting them to a higher sense of purpose that extends far beyond the individual. Religion enables us to feel connected to something much larger than ourselves and often provides a guide for finding meaning and purpose, along with a search for the sacred (Lyubomirsky, 2007).



**Accomplishment.** Accomplishments are an important part of human happiness, they give our life purposes, individuality, and direction. Peterson (2006) describes accomplishment as the combination of interest and ability, with a large dose of perseverance. Engagement, flow, and accomplishment, all start with cultivating a passion for an interest. Children often have vast interests, yet many fade as they grow. They should be encouraged to nurture these passions, and young children especially need support for learning and engagement (Peterson, 2006). This helps them grow to approach work and hobbies with a love of learning, and sustained interest later in life is associated with healthy aging (Peterson, 2006). Students should be encouraged to think about which activities in their lives spark flow and create goals to set out to accomplish will be gratifying and help boost their confidence. Parents and educators should encourage children to seek out more flow experiences at school, at home, and in their extracurricular activities.

### **Positive Interventions**

Positive psychology is focused on applying research-based techniques and positive interventions to cultivate well-being and boost positive emotions (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Positive psychology's applied approach empowers individuals to implement well-being strategies autonomously and capitalize on strengths which promotes human flourishing. By creating a habit of positive interventions, such as counting one's blessings, meditating, savoring positive experiences, expressing gratitude, and displaying acts of kindness, individuals can arm themselves with skills to nurture well-being, even during challenging times (Lyubomirsky, 2007)

Having a diverse and expansive positive intervention tool-kit equips individuals with resources and coping mechanisms to better handle unpredictable obstacles. Positive interventions should be practiced to nurture well-being during *normal weather* or periods of stable mental health. Positive interventions are also effective in *severe weather*, or during a challenging period

(J. Pawelski, personal communication, December 7, 2018). Positive interventions are not one size fits all and should be updated and customized to align with each individual's goals and preferences during various seasons of their life. When we create a habit of applying positive interventions as a tool to elevate our well-being, we are able to cultivate a life of intent, purpose, and flourishing. Happiness and flourishing are not a fixed or permanent state, yet they become more obtainable through incorporating habitual positive interventions. Positive psychology is accessible to individuals, communities, schools, and organizations and a broad range of populations. Unlike many branches of psychology that require a therapist and treatment plan, positive psychology interventions can be self-administered and brief, while yielding significant positive effects on well-being (Layous, Sheldon, Lyubomirsky, 2015). Yet, positive psychology is not just focused on happiness or solely positive experience, but also on resilience and post traumatic growth (Reivich & Shatte, 2002), and making meaning after a challenging period (Smith, 2017). All of these themes are intrinsically connected to Jewish values and can be taught through incorporating positive education into the fabric of educational communities.

### **Positive Education**

What exactly is positive education? When parents are asked which skills they want most for their children, the most common words are typically: happiness, contentment, kindness, love, balance, and fulfillment (Seligman et al, 2009). Yet, when they are then asked about what content is covered in schools the typical responses include: critical thinking, math, reading, discipline, test taking, and work (Seligman et al, 2009). School has become a place to learn academic and professional skills to prepare and launch students to college and the workforce. While important, schools are missing an opportunity to also educate students on the ingredients for a flourishing and meaningful life.

Positive education is a research-based approach that blends academics with a well-being and strengths based curriculum (Botts et al., 2017). While many schools and Jewish schools in particular focus on incorporating values-based learning, positive education is a unique approach that is fully rooted in scientific research on academic and personal well-being. In addition to preparing students with a core academic education, positive education also focuses on incorporating life skills based on the science of well-being to help students thrive. Example skills and topics include: character strengths, grit, resilience, optimism, growth mindsets, purpose, engagement, mindfulness, and relationships (Botts et al., 2017). Students are taught foundational positive psychology concepts and these themes are blended into the school wide culture, inside and outside the classroom. Positive education cannot just be sprinkled into a curriculum for a short-term project, it requires embedment and buy-in throughout the school community (Noorish, 2015). A true positive education school embraces these philosophies from the all school meeting which may open with mindfulness and gratitude shout-outs, to the science lab where curiosity and team-work are at play, on the soccer field where coaches encourage grit and fairness, and in a religion class where students discuss ethics and spirituality along with what adds meaning to their own lives. Positive education is not a fad but the necessary future of education to prepare students to be thriving, well-rounded citizens for the world we live in today.

If schools aim to educate our future leaders, politicians, scientists, doctors, educators, researchers, authors, and more, we need to incorporate and teach valuable life skills that will set students on a path for flourishing. Positive education will prepare students to be creative problem solvers and innovative thinkers. Skills of resilience (Reivich & Shatte, 2002), grit (Duckworth, 2016), growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), and optimism (Lyubomirsky, 2007), constructs that will be explored in more detail in later sections, can translate into skills that will benefit individuals,

our world, and society. In Jewish schools, incorporating these skills align with the ultimate Jewish mission of creating mensches, or people who act with honor and do the right thing at the right time.

### **Social, Emotional, Education**

Positive education schools prioritize educating the whole students from a social, emotional, and academic lens. While educators, parents, and politicians worry about losing precious class time for non-academic subjects, research shows that incorporating well-being into the curriculum improves academic success while decreasing depression and anxiety (Seligman & Adler, 2018). A growing movement of schools across the world are trying to combat the stress epidemic and change the future of education to focus on nurturing the whole student, increasing academic and personal well-being.

In addition to teaching core academic subjects, schools should also teach students how to cultivate their well-being. Imagine a school where optimism, resilience, character strengths, meaning, and positive relationships were taught alongside core subjects. By infusing education with the foundational principles of positive psychology, schools can create an opportunity for a shared common language centered around strengths and well-being. Positive education research shows that this can spark deeper learning and personal growth, a win-win (Seligman, 2011). Teaching positive education does not detract from the academic rigor of an institution, instead it compliments and enhances the academic and personal well-being of students and staff (Seligman, 2011). When students learn how to activate the different levels of PERMA, they are more open to learning, and are engaged, enthused, and ready to have a meaningful and positive learning experience (Seliman, 2011). For more than a century schooling has been a place to learn foundational skills for college and the workforce. Little to no content covers well-being and how

to achieve a fulfilling life. The few schools who have embraced a positive education curriculum have seen tremendous benefits.

### **Geelong Grammar School**

Positive education is a relatively new field and its roots all trace to the prestigious Geelong Grammar School in Australia. Geelong has served as a pioneer in the field, paving the way as a role model to other schools. In 2005, Dr. Seligman was invited to visit and consult at Geelong and he laid the foundation for the school-wide implementation of positive education (Seligman, 2011). In Geelong's 150-year history, positive education has been one of the most prominent and important milestones of growth and change. In 2006, Geelong embarked on a full school wide positive education implementation after raising \$18 million dollars for the project (Seligman, 2011), showing their commitment to the program as the most important step towards securing their future. Instead of building a new gym, Geelong prioritized the well-being of their staff and students and undertook a significant fundraising campaign to support the efforts. With the funding in place, Dr. Seligman and his team spent the majority of 2006 educating, training, and consulting with the staff, students, and parents at Geelong. All 200 teachers and staff were trained in the concepts of positive psychology, character strengths, and resilience (Bott et al., 2017). When starting a positive education program, it is important to train all staff and teachers first, as adults model well-being in and outside the classroom impacting the campus culture.

The training and implementation were led by key figures in positive psychology and resilience research including 20 positive psychology trainers from the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center (Seligman, 2011). Dr. Karen Reivich and Jane Gilham spent nine full days training staff on the foundational framework of positive psychology. Dr. Seligman and his wife spent their sabbatical on Geelong's campus and he oversaw the

project and brought in renowned speakers and researchers from all over the world to educate the community on the latest research from positive emotions, to appreciative inquiry, and growth mindsets. Geelong also appointed a positive education director and curriculum designer to create a K-12 positive psychology syllabus to embed these teachings into a curriculum (Bott et al., 2017).

**“Learn it, Live it, Teach it, and Embed it”.** Instrumental to Geelong’s positive education curriculum is their foundational framework based on Dr. Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model. Geelong adopted their own positive education model that includes six related dimensions to PERMA, yet adapted for positive education. These include: Positive Relationships, Positive Emotions, Positive Health, Positive Engagement, Positive Accomplishment, and Positive Purpose (Bott. et al., 2017). Complimenting this framework is Geelong’s implementation mantra which reflects their comprehensive and systematic approach of full immersion and embedment: learn it, live it, teach it, and embed it. In addition to all the present staff who has been trained, all new staff members participate in the *learn it* section which is four-day intro course to positive education (Bott. et al., 2017). Parents are also encouraged to learn about positive education through parent programming and events. Staff are encouraged to *live it*, embracing positive education in the classroom and in student interactions, modeling this behavior for the community. *Teach it* refers to staff teaching positive psychology and positive education courses in grades 5-10, along with teaching and incorporating positive education principles into other academic subjects (Bott. et al., 2017). Through these positive education platforms, Geelong strives to *embed it* in all layers of the school community, creating a cyclical model for school wide well-being and flourishing.

**Positive education in the classroom and in the wild.** Geelong infuses positive education in visual arts by having students cultivate self-awareness through drawing self-portraits, in Geography class students study how different environments hinder or cultivate well-being, and on the theater stage mindfulness and creativity are encouraged and activated (Noorish, 2015). Elementary school students create a blessings journal and discuss the importance of gratitude, in middle school character strengths are celebrated as badges of armor and students create shields that depict their signature strengths to wear proudly (Noorish, 2015).

Ninth grade students at Geelong create a *what went well* white-board that gets updated every night before bed while they spend the year at Timbertop, an outdoor education program to cultivate skills of resilience (Noorish, 2015). In addition to writing what went well personally, they express gratitude to classmates and staff and collectively savor the highlights from the day. “What was most significant is that students learned not only to be grateful and to see the value of expressing gratitude, but also that sharing with others what went well in their day connected them powerfully to others” (Noorish, 2015, pp.71). At Timbertop students quickly learn the meaning of teamwork as they chop their own wood in order to have heat and hot showers, grit and perseverance are cultivated on strenuous hikes and camping trips, and students create a *Community Declaration of Optimism* that they live by (Noorish, 2015). Geelong’s positive education curriculum is centered around character strengths and the Timbertop experience stretches students to grow and activate their character strengths in profound ways.

At their main campus, Geelong hosts annual positive education days where classes are cancelled to focus on themes related to community, relationships, curiosity, and creativity (Noorish, 2015). These days often take a strengths-based focus and students select a panel of classmates who embody different character strengths, conducting interviews to learn how they

have worked to grow this strength over time (Noorish, 2015). On positive education days, mental health is also part of the conversation and a primary focus is helping reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for mental illness (Noorish, 2015). Interestingly, an audience member once asked if visits to the counseling center have decreased since the implementation of positive education and Geelong replied that visits have increased, which they believe is a positive outcome, because more students are prioritizing their mental health and seeking support (Noorish, 2015). Counseling is viewed as a resource that is not just available during periods of distress, but also as a tool that can help bolster well-being and promote human flourishing (Noorish, 2015). This has impacted the school-wide culture and is truly an inspiring approach that highlights Geelong's level of embedment and commitment as the leader in positive education.

Geelong practices what they preach. After educating their entire staff in positive psychology and resilience skills, they embraced a train the trainer model to further broaden their reach both on campus and as global leaders in positive education. Geelong has their own Institute of Positive Education comprised of seven staff members who have trained over 10,000 educators from more than 600 schools across the globe (Bott. et al., 2017).

**Measuring Geelong's success.** In a three-year study that measured the effectiveness of Geelong's positive education program, researchers found compelling results (Brodrick, Rickard, & Chin, 2014). The key findings showed that students in grades 9 and 10 who participated in the positive education program experienced: improved mental health, decreased depression and anxiety, the ability to use resilient thinking in everyday life, an increase in growth mindset levels, higher levels of well-being and social relationships, meaningful student-teacher relationships, and greater life satisfaction and gratitude. Tools used to measure well-being included: the social



and emotional well-being measure, the flourishing index, the assessing well-being in education tool, and the well-being profiler (Bott et al., 2017). Measuring positive education outcomes is a key step in successful embedment.

### **Shipley School**

On the other side of the world in Bryn Mawr Pennsylvania, the Shipley School has been a pioneer in embracing positive education in the United States (Tassoni, 2018). Shipley is an independent Pre-K-12 school with an enrollment of 830 students. They offer a rigorous college preparatory program while also incorporating positive education into all layers of the curriculum from identifying character strengths in action on the theater stage and during physical exercise (PE) to writing in gratitude journals as part of language arts, discussing growth-mindsets in AP Chemistry, and celebrating diverse viewpoints during classroom discussions so all students and staff feel seen and valued. Shipley has worked closely with Geelong and the Positive Psychology Center from the University of Pennsylvania to establish themselves as a leader in the field (Aljneibi, Chung, Glass, Li, & Wolf, 2018). They have dedicated themselves to immersive retreats and staff-wide positive education trainings, hired full time positive education staff members, consultants to measure the effectiveness of the implementation, and they are constantly working to integrate new cutting-edge programs that increase school wide well-being buy in (Aljneibi., et al, 2018). Shipley's positive education program serves as an extension and complement to their SEED model which focuses on social, emotional, and ethical development (Tassoni, 2018). Similar to Geelong, they also developed their own framework that represents the core principles of their positive education program which includes aspects of psychological and social health that leads to well-being. This framework was based off of a metasynthesis of more than 18,000 research articles which identified the key traits that led to the motto "feel good,

function well, and do good” (Waters, L., Sun, J., Rusk, R., Aarch, A., & Cotton, A., 2016, pp.245-264). These traits represented in Shipley’s framework include: strengths of character, emotion management, awareness and attention, relationships, comprehension and coping, and habits and goals.

Shipley (Tassoni, 2018) and Geelong (Robinson, 2019) have not just sprinkled positive education into their curriculum, rather it is the foundation in which the school runs and prides themselves on being dedicated to these life changing principles. In addition to staff training and professional development on positive education, teachers started practicing incorporating positive education into their daily classroom activities. Strength spotting was integrated into Shakespeare and religion courses as students discussed character strengths of literary and biblical figures, students in physical education discussed ways they could use their strengths to improve their athletic performance and teamwork. Shipley and Geelong have measured the outcomes from their positive education programs and both have seen a decrease in depression and negative affect, and an increase in engagement, well-being, and notably, academic success (Seligman & Adler, 2019). This shows that taking the time to incorporate positive education into school’s curriculum is a worthwhile goal and increases all layers of importance for holistic student success.

### **Positive Judaism**

There is a growing movement in the Jewish community that is focused on thriving instead of just surviving (Weinstein, 2019). In previous decades the goal of Jewish education was primarily focused on continuity to ensure that the Jewish people survive because of the long history of anti-Semitism and the most recent experience with the Holocaust where six million Jews perished. Jewish education was thought to help reduce the rising rate of interfaith marriage

which poses significant threats to future generations' carrying out Jewish traditions (Phillips, 1998). Today, while surviving as a people is still important, it should not be the sole focus or purpose of Jewish education.

When Jewish parents are asked what they want most for their children, common words used to describe what they want them to be include: kind, ethical, responsible human beings, the traits that will help them grow up to be a mensch (Kurshan, 1987). Raising a mensch has remained a core goal for Jewish parents across generations, yet today parents are also looking for a more innovative Jewish education approach that also sparks meaning and purpose (Wertheimer, 2008). Positive psychology can help achieve this goal of a relevant and meaningful Jewish experience and Judaism can be utilized as a vehicle to promote well-being and human flourishing.

The positive Jewish movement created by Rabbi Darren Levine at congregation Tamid in New York City combines positive psychology and Judaism in innovative ways. During Levine's (2017) doctoral studies he focused on how positive psychology could help ignite the connection between Jewish values and well-being, serving as a guide to live a flourishing life. Levine felt that Judaism in the 20th century was focused more on survival because of the holocaust, pressure and guilt to carry on Jewish traditions, and threats due to rising anti-Semitism. This created a negative association with Judaism and did not provide a compelling answer to the critical question of *why be Jewish* in the 21st century. Levine wanted to instead help his congregants find the optimism, joy, and wisdom in ancient Jewish values and celebrations that can be used as a guide to help us live a flourishing and meaningful life. By pairing positive psychology themes with Jewish practices of gratitude, repairing the world (tikkun olam), virtues, and resilience, Levine's creation of positive Judaism is centered around

how Judaism can be used as a vehicle to stimulate meaning and purpose. Levine uses the science of positive psychology to turn into the heart of traditional Jewish values and ethics. His entire congregational school curriculum is focused on a strengths-based approach (Levine, 2017).

### **Positive Jewish Education**

While positive psychology has been embraced by many school psychologists and educators, Jewish schools have been slower to jump on the bandwagon (Schnall & Schnall, 2017). Despite compelling research on the benefits of incorporating a positive education curriculum, so far secular schools have been the primary area of focus (Schnall & Schnall, 2017). While many positive psychology themes have been explored through Jewish research, implementing positive education is still uncharted territory in the field of Jewish research. Dr. Jeffrey Kress and Dr. Carol Ingall (2008) of the Jewish Theological Seminary have laid foundational groundwork for prioritizing a Jewish values-based curriculum that focuses on social and emotional education. Dr. Ron Wolfson's (2013) work on relational Judaism has helped institutions and schools prioritize relational engagement and connection as the key to thriving Jewish communities. A few Jewish schools and educators are starting to plant the seeds for implementing a positive psychology curriculum and thriving has become a buzz word within Jewish educational circles. The Jewish Education Project recently hosted a retreat called *The Why and How of Thriving in Jewish Education* (Weinstein, 2019). Clearly, there is a growing interest and need for more research and implementation within the field. While significant progress has been made in revitalizing Jewish education, there is still a long way to go. A positive Jewish education framework can serve as the next step.

The Milken School, a Jewish day school in Los Angeles, is currently embracing positive psychology and hopes to be a Jewish day school leader in the world of positive education

(Milken School, 2018). Their efforts are being led by Dr. Nick Holton who serves as their Positive Education chair. Dr. Holton has taught positive psychology courses on campus to staff, parents, alumni, and alumni parents which has been a tremendous success in building a base of enthusiasm and support for their efforts. They hope to translate this enthusiasm into fundraising to bring in The University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center and Dr. Karen Reivich to fully train the staff (N. Holton, personal communication, June, 28, 2019). In regards to the intersection between positive psychology and Judaism, Dr. Holton (personal communication, June, 28, 2019) shared:

At their core, positive psychology and Jewish education seek Tikkun Olam. Positive Psychology does so through research and applications meant to help individuals and communities flourish, thereby helping these entities become their best selves and contribute their unique gifts to a greater purpose, such as repairing the world. Likewise, Jewish education seeks to help students actualize their best selves while simultaneously understanding their place within the various communities and contexts to which they belong. The goals of each movement are quite similar. Additionally, both positive psychology and Judaism emphasize similar paths and behaviors.

Milken has the benefit of being in a day school setting where positive education can be implemented throughout the day and across interdisciplinary curriculum. However, congregational schools can still utilize these same themes and positive Jewish education concepts within their organizations and curriculums in a meaningful way. Congregational schools can focus on a strengths-based approach in everything from strengths spotting in the Torah, to strength spotting in the classroom with classmates and peers, and writing a Dvar Torah (speech on the Torah portion) that relates to the student's strength in action.

Jewish education strives to influence character, shape values and life-style, cultivate wisdom and understanding, responsibility, independence, and ethical work (Donin, 1977). While schools may try to take on this tall order it is essential that these values and principles are instilled at home as well for full embedment. At its core, Jewish education “addresses itself to the intellect, touches the emotions, and affects behavior” (Donin, 1977, pp.49). Incorporating positive education into the holistic Jewish education curriculum can help achieve this goal of full mind, body, spiritual transformation. In addition to day schools and congregational programs, positive Jewish education can also take place in innovative experiential communities, outside the traditional walls of the classroom. Community programs and experiential Jewish learning programs provide an additional platform for a unique Jewish educational experience. Identifying traits and programs that already connect positive education and Judaism can help staff and students discover the natural overlap and expand upon areas that are already working.

### **J-GLOW: Positive Jewish Education Framework**

There is a growing trend in Jewish education that is focused on thriving or educating for *shelmut*, the Hebrew word for wholeness (Robinson, 2018). Positive Jewish education is the logical and most compelling next step to help students develop a deeper connection with their Judaism. As we have learned from Shipley and Geelong establishing a framework for positive education helps introduce the core goals and principles of these positive education programs (Tassoni, 2018). I have created a model for positive Jewish education that connects positive education and Jewish values called J-GLOW. This will serve as a framework to implement positive Jewish education trainings, curriculum, and positive interventions. J-GLOW represents Jewish Based values of: Gratitude, love of learning, optimism, and well-being (individually and communally).

These themes are integral to Jewish values, traditions, and prayer and are key principles in positive education. It was important for me to include the symbol and metaphor of light within the framework as light has served as a positive motif throughout Judaism. In the first book of the Torah, Genesis (1:3), God says “Let there be light” and this first act of creation powerfully separates light from darkness and serves as the symbol of “the good and beautiful, of all that is positive” (Even-Israel Steinsaltz, 2018). In the Hanukkah story we see the miracle of light as a symbol of hope and resilience as the Jews defeated the Syrians and the oil that should have only lasted for one night, lasted for eight nights, allowing the candles and future of Jewish fate to shine bright. In addition, Hanukkah teaches us to be like the shamash candle, the helper candle that lights the other candles, spreading light and illuminating those around us. The shamash reminds us how easy it is to light up the darkness in our lives and in this world, especially when we spread light to others, we grow in collective union and bring hope into our dark world.

### **J-GLOW: Gratitude**

Gratitude is a thread throughout positive education and the Torah, and in both platforms it is shown to be a primary ingredient in influencing well-being. Gratitude is not just a feeling. A core component of gratitude is the desire to respond (Held, 2017), spreading light to others. While gratitude at first may be felt, it is a “moral emotion” that leads to “behavior intended to benefit others” (Held, 2017, pp. 16), like paying acts of kindness forward. Despite all the suffering the Jews have endured throughout history, gratitude provides the Jewish people with a grounding sense of perspective to never take their fortune or love from God for granted. As Ben Zoma says in Pirket Avot (4:1), “Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has.” In addition, gratitude is meant to be shared with others which creates a ripple effect of spreading light. From Jewish prayers to Jewish obligations, gratitude is viewed as a blessing to be shared. In

Deuteronomy (16:41) we are told to rejoice in the pilgrimage festivals with family, strangers, and even with slaves, allowing everyone to share in the abundant harvest despite status. At Passover we are taught “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” God teaches the Jewish people to not just be recipients of God’s gifts but also channels of giving, as we see with Abraham. In Genesis (Gen 12:2) God tells Abraham that “I will bless you and I will make you a blessing,” instilling the responsibility to pass on blessings to others and give of ourselves. The Torah teaches us that “our purpose is twofold: to flourish and to help others flourish” (Held, 2017, pp. 18). Gratitude is instilled in Jewish prayer and ritual.

*Modeh Ani* is the morning prayer that Jews are commanded to recite each morning upon waking up, expressing their gratitude for the new day. When I went to Jewish day school this was a prayer we recited each morning, which helped us recognize the importance of the gift of each new day. *Modeh Ani* is a short prayer with only 12 words in Hebrew below.

מוֹדָה/מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִּים. שְׁהַחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי נֶשְׁמָתִי, בְּחַמְלָה. רַבָּה אֲמִינָתְךָ

The prayer translates to: I give thanks to You, living and enduring Ruler, that You have restored my soul to me, with mercy. Your steadfastness is great. While students often don’t take the time to process all that these prayers mean, it is important to take the time to slow down and really be mindful of these words and what meaning they indicate for students and children on a daily basis. If students do or don’t attend a Jewish day school, this prayer can still be expressed at home and a morning ritual for parents, students, friends, and teachers to partake in to be mindful and grateful of the present moment. This prayer makes waking up a *Jewish act* and creates a spiritual tone to set the day (Gordis, 1999).

Parents and teachers can take *Modeh Ani* one step further and have children share three things they are grateful for upon starting the day. Counting one’s blessings is known as the “what



went well” exercise is a tested positive intervention to look for three things that went well in the day and research shows that this exercise improves well-being and positive emotions (Seligman, 2011). Gratitude takes many forms and can range from appreciation, to “looking at the bright side of a setback, thanking someone in your life, thanking God, and counting one’s blessing” (Lyubomirsky, 2007, pp.89). Gratitude requires a focus on the present, to be mindful of life’s blessings, and aware of all the good things in our life. People who are grateful are found to be: happier, more energized, more hopeful, and they experience more frequent positive emotions (Lyubomirsky, 2007), which impacts physical and mental health. Simply put, gratitude is one of the easiest, most accessible, instantaneous, and free resources to bolster well-being and Judaism provides a natural guide of gratitude that can be extended and deepened for students to find greater meaning in prayer and relevance with their own lives.

To incorporate *Modeh Ani* and Jewish gratitude into the secular curriculum, students could write a gratitude letter in English class to someone who has made an impact on their life that they hadn’t fully expressed their gratitude to, thanking them for their impact. Gratitude letters are another scientifically proven positive intervention and well-being has been shown to improve for up to six months, even if the letter was never delivered (Lyubomorsky, 2007).

Gratitude is essentially a super-vitamin for well-being, so how exactly does it impact us so profoundly? Lyubomorsky (2007) identifies three main gratitude pathways: (1) Savoring in the pleasure of the gifts of life enables us to “extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from your current circumstances” which facilitates grateful thinking (pp. 92); (2) expressing gratitude improves self-worth and self-esteem by helping people feel more confident and aware of how many people have impacted their lives, along with the realization that their life circumstances could be much worse; and (3) gratitude helps people cope with stress and trauma

even after negative events. Gratitude helps us move on and begin anew, or to celebrate life's blessings and fragility despite trauma and hardship (Lyubomorsky, 2007).

Gratitude interventions can align with Jewish holidays such as Sukkot where students can express their gratitude for the fall harvest and their food by volunteering at a foodbank to give back to those in need, helping plant a community garden, or inviting over a friend or teacher who may not have a Sukkah or meal invitation to celebrate the holiday with others. During Shabbat, the weekly Jewish Sabbath, families can each share what they are grateful for at the Shabbat dinner table at home or Judaic studies teachers could incorporate a *gratitude popcorn* tradition into the weekly Friday curriculum heading into Shabbat. Students would each shout out what they are grateful for until everyone has shared, going back and forth as a ball is passed. Gratitude can also be woven into a school community through creating gratitude walls and shout-outs as a place to express gratitude to teachers, students, and staff.

Gratitude can be spoken about as a theme to help students deal with stress and anxiety and should be discussed when students' face set-backs as well, making sure students don't downward spiral into a cycle of negativity. Gratitude can be adapted in countless ways to integrate unique interventions and curriculum ideas into a Jewish Education curriculum. I would encourage rabbis and educators to dissect Jewish texts together about gratitude to weave gratitude into weekly Judaic and secular studies and conversations, ensuring that gratitude is fully embedded into the school culture so students and staff can reap the full benefits of this well-being superpower.

### **J-GLOW: Love of Learning**

Love of learning is one of the 24 character strengths in Peterson and Seligman's classifications of strengths and virtues (Peterson, 2006), and it is also a core value of the Jewish

people. Jewish education may begin in early childhood yet it never has a true end, learning is a lifelong pursuit in Jewish culture and it is an on-going activity to engage in Jewish learning for life (Donin, 1977). Hillel, a notable Jewish sage taught, “He who does not increase his knowledge, decreases it” (Pirket Avot, chapter 2). From studying weekly Torah portions, to expanding one’s knowledge on Jewish ethics, character, Israel, Jewish politics, and the Hebrew language, Jewish learning truly has no end and should be embraced as a joyful journey of exploration and curiosity. Jewish educators should instill a love for lifelong learning in children early on so that they embrace Jewish education as part of the cultural pride and traditions. Reframing Hebrew education from going to Hebrew school to become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah would instead be framed as going to Hebrew school “because it is incumbent on Jewish people to study their heritage” (Donin, 1977, pp.43). Even after engaging in Hebrew school and Jewish programs in college, students should be encouraged to embrace a lifelong journey of continual learning, both religiously and secularly. Jewish learning takes many forms and life-long learners embrace the Jewish saying from Pirket Avot (4:1), “Who is wise? He who learns from every person.”

Peterson (2006) describes love of learning as “mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one’s own or formally...the tendency to add systematically to what one knows” (pp. 142). Love of learning is related to other strengths of wisdom and knowledge, especially curiosity, creativity, and perspective (Peterson, 2006). To help students cultivate a love of learning, it is important to allow them to have autonomy and choice in the process. Instead of forcing a student to read a certain book or essay, allow them the freedom to roam the library until they find a book that calls to them. Teachers should allow creativity and independent research and interests to help guide academic work, enabling the student to have the chance to develop their own passions and read for pleasure. Teachers could create assignments where

students have to read a book that relates to one of their strengths, fostering a deeper sense of curiosity about their own strengths and then write an essay about their findings.

In Judaic classes, students should be taught about having a growth mindset where they embrace challenges with an open-mind important when learning Hebrew or any foreign language. A growth mindset means viewing intelligence as a trait that can be developed instead of a fixed statistic (Dweck, 2016). Cultivating a growth-mindset means trying again and again, learning from failures, and embracing the journey and not just the end result. A growth mindset is essential in the pursuit of accomplishment and in life-long learning (Dweck, 2016).

Students can draw their own growth mindsets and fill in the picture with all of their interests, mantras, and areas they want to further develop and explore. Love of learning is a core value for educating future Jewish leaders and engaged citizens, and schools should train teachers in embracing experiential education to help promote flexibility in the classroom while satiating young minds. There are a growing number of innovative Jewish education programs who strive to make Jewish education engaging, relevant, and a lifelong pursuit.

### **JGLOW- Optimism**

Optimism is a fundamental theme in Judaism and is a driving force that helps the Jewish people survive periods of darkness and defeat. Optimism can be described as “looking at the bright side, finding the silver lining, noticing what’s right, giving yourself the benefit of the doubt, feeling good about your future, and trusting that you will get through the day (Lyubomirsky, 2007, pp. 101). Optimism and gratitude have some overlapping themes, yet optimism is less focused on the present or past and more focused on “anticipating a bright future” (Lyubomirsky, 2007). The Jewish people are often looking towards the future from reciting “next year in Jerusalem” at the end of every Passover seder, to the belief that God is

always present, even when we are doubtful, and the Jewish national anthem *Hatikvah* is even centered around hope. As the Jews marched through the desert in Egypt after escaping slavery they are plagued with anxiety and in the book of Exodus they ask if God is present among us or not, and the Israelites are answered with a resounding yes (Exodus 19:7-8). Belief in God and God's presence can provide a sense of comfort and optimism for the Jewish people to persevere no matter the obstacle.

Optimism is a factor that helps promote resilience as optimists believe circumstances can change for the better and have hope for a better future (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Optimism is linked to better well-being on all levels. Optimism is linked to better relationships, improved physical health and healing, increased engagement, and optimism helps us bounce back quicker from adversity (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009). Optimism is also a key ingredient in religious education. In a research study that examined religious practices during times of stress, students who had high optimism and a positive view of God and Judaism were more likely to engage in religious actions and beliefs over their peers who received negative religious beliefs from friends and family. Optimism was a more powerful predictor of religious engagement than all other variables. (Pelcovitz & Pelcovitz, 2014). To cultivate optimism, students can be asked to write about and envision their best possible selves, writing a narrative where they describe and visualize what their ideal life looks like (Lyubomirsky, 2007). This exercise helps students optimistically visualize their ideal goals, wishes, and dreams. Studies show that writing about your best possible self leads to an increase in positive moods and motivation to work towards attainable goals (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Jewish educators can modify this exercise to relate to the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. Instead of creating resolutions for the year ahead, students can optimistically goal-set

by writing out what the best version of themselves would look like in the year ahead. This can help students positively connect with the holiday, find relevance with their own life, and the connection between Judaic values and their own hopes and wishes. In addition, creating a culture of optimism in a school can spread light throughout the community as optimists usually can inspire others to also be hopeful for a brighter future.

### **J-GLOW: Well-Being (Individual and Communal)**

A strong sense of community is one of the most influential components in developing positive Jewish institutions. This is vital for every Jewish school to flourish. Nearly two thousand years ago the Talmud (central text of rabbinic Judaism) describes the needs of a community. In addition to a synagogue, courthouse, and charity fund, it mentions a school master, as schools and education have also served as an integral piece of the fabric of the community (Gordis, 1999). While American myth stories are centered around the wilderness being conquered by individuals, Jewish myths are characterized by large groups of a cohesive community embarking on journeys to the promised land. Today, communities serve as a place for positive relationships, regardless of size the most important factors to look for are warmth and dedication from the community, a place where people look out for one another (Gordis, 1999). This applies to creating a positive Jewish school and Jewish schools reflect the dedication of the surrounding community from inviting members over for holidays, to showing up for lifecycle events, and helping families in need. The inclusion of communal well-being is important along with teaching about Jewish responsibility and Tikkun Olam. PERMA provides an important initial foundation to teach positive education concepts but Jewish figures have expressed that PERMA's limitations are centered around PERMA caring about individual well-being without much mention to the societal world the individual lives in (Robinson, 2018).

Issac Prilleltensky (2016) takes a more holistic approach as he describes well-being as a positive state of affairs across six domains called I COPPE: Interpersonal, Communal, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic. Schools can help students and staff foster these domains through creating interventions that target meaning and mattering, enabling staff and students to feel valued and add value to their community. This can be done through random acts of kindness challenges during Hanukkah, through creating a gratitude letter writing campaign during Thanksgiving or Sukkot, and in creating a culture where everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinion and viewpoint. Student and staff members can be identified in a newsletter for exhibiting certain character strengths or middot, helping people strength-spot within the community and recognize the best in one another. In addition, it is important for people from different backgrounds and titles to have a say in implementing a positive education program. Additionally, positive Jewish education includes creating a well-being curriculum that covers the core themes of positive psychology, resilience, grit, character strengths, and spirituality. It is clear that Jewish education today needs to be revitalized to be student-centered and serve as a pathway to promote flourishing.

Dr. David Bryfman (2016), CEO of the Jewish Education Project, shared his vision, “The purpose of Jewish education today is to ensure that Jewish tradition empowers people to thrive in today’s world (para. 2). Bryfman (2016), believes that the most critical component of the Jewish educational experience today is not the curriculum, Torah, educators, or the school, but the learners. He states that Jewish tradition should help individuals answer life’s key questions: “Who am I? Where do I fit in to this world? How can I live a more fulfilling life? How can I make the world a better place” (Bryfman, 2016). A Jewish education that helps students answer these questions will enable Jewish schools and students to flourish.

J-GLOW can serve as a guiding framework for a values-based curriculum to highlight many of these core practices and theories, to help Jewish schools launch positive Jewish education programs.

### **Incorporating Positive Education into Jewish schools**

Jewish schools can incorporate themes of grit, resilience, meaning, and flow into their curriculum. Angela Duckworth (2016), the leading researcher on grit has dedicated her career to answering the question of who succeeds in the most rigorous environments. Duckworth (2016) defines grit as passion and perseverance for long term goals. Grit is what set these individuals apart from their competitors. Duckworth quickly discovered that “Our potential is one thing. What we do with it is quite another” (Duckworth, 2016, pp.14). Grit can be nurtured through having a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2016), which means trying again and again, learning from failures, and embracing the journey and not just the end result. Positive education schools incorporate positive interventions and activities that help foster grit and a growth-mindset. Jewish schools can encourage students to develop a growth mindset when learning Hebrew and other hard subjects, when tackling new challenges from signing up for a leadership role to trying a new club or leading a mindfulness exercise in prayer.

Jewish schools can also help students work towards achieving gritty goals in their academics, Judaic studies, and personal lives. Whether that be through organizing a city-wide Jewish event for teens, Tikkun Olam project, speaking out even when your opinion is not the popular one, giving your all on the athletic field, in class, and lifting up your teammates, grit and a growth-mindset can be woven into multiple layers of the curriculum. Having students participate in goal-setting exercises in the beginning of the year and during Rosh Hashanah (the



Jewish New Year) can help frame the conversation and provide a built-in cyclic system to prioritize these themes.

### **Cultivating Meaning**

Meaning can often be found in positive relationships, activism, hobbies, *Tikkun Olam* (community service), and through utilizing character strengths. When discussing meaning with students it is often helpful to ask them what makes them want to get up in the morning or what they are excited about each night before bed. Whether it be a morning swim, seeing their best friend at school, helping their sibling, or a robotics project, having a sense of purpose is essential for human happiness. Baumeister and Vohs (2002) describe a meaningful life as one that is rich with values, purpose, self-worth and efficacy. A positive Jewish education and community can enrich our lives with meaning, purpose, and sacred rituals to guide us through life's obstacles.

Meaning can be fostered through belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence (Smith, 2017), and all of these channels can be easily activated within a Jewish educational experience. Students can write stories about what adds meaning and purpose to their life, create a book or portfolio of rituals that reflect their family values and traditions, and prayer should be encouraged as a chance for mindfulness and reflection. Educators should discuss meaning and mattering within both secular and religious texts, conversations, and assignments, helping students understand and cultivate the key role it plays in fostering well-being and purpose.

### **Finding Flow in Judaism**

Jewish schools and congregational programs can help students foster engagement by offering a wide-range of electives from Jewish cooking classes, to creative writing, Israeli dancing, Jewish filmmakers, yoga and sports, and spiritual meditation, to name a few. While flow is often thought of as an individual experience, flow can be powerful when activated in a

group setting. Potential outlets for group flow in a Jewish context include: a group of students chanting and *davening* (praying) together, a *Havdalah* ceremony that ignites all the senses to symbolize the closing of the weekly Sabbath with songs, candles, and group huddled together swaying and singing harmoniously in a circle. Flow can happen when a team is synchronized in a basketball tournament, or when friends literally lift one another up on chairs for the special *hora* (a celebratory dance) during a bar mitzvah celebration. Judaism has many built in rituals that activate group flow experiences and joyful sparks of meaning. In flow, time stands still and you are fully engaged in the present. This is increasingly important for students today to help achieve more mindfulness and Jewish schools should capitalize on these experiences and discuss the benefits.

### **The Roots of Resilience**

It is through challenges where we cultivate resilience which is the key ingredient to help us push forward during setbacks and challenges. It is what distinguishes those who flourish versus those who languish. Simply put, resilience is “the ability to persevere and adapt when things go awry” (Reivich & Shatte, 2002 pp.1).

Resilience impacts one’s academic and job performance, physical and mental health, and relationships. Key factors that help build resilience include: optimism, emotional awareness, flexible thinking, connection and support, and self-efficacy beliefs (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Schools provide one of the most influential developmental environments in children’s lives and can be a key place where students learn these skills of resilience and successful coping skills to promote well-being (Noorish, Williams, O’Connor, Robinson, 2013). Positive relationships at school that are supportive have been associated with adolescent resilience and are a predictor of well-being (Noorish., et al, 2013).

Judaism teaches us how to use the protective factors of resilience during a hard time. Connection and support are foundational values in the Jewish community and during a tough time like the death of a family member, people from the community come to mourn together and sit *Shiva* to keep the individual or family company for an entire week after the loss, ensuring they are not alone. Community members bring food, pray and express hope and gratitude, and share stories to reminisce and savor their memories of a loved one. To apply these concepts of resilience in positive Jewish education, educators can have students draw their own circle of resilience, identifying the pillars within their community, social network, and other resources that will help them during a challenging time.

### **Character Strengths and Judaism**

One of the pillars of both positive psychology and Judaism is ethical behavior and parallels between the two can be drawn in a Positive Jewish Education curriculum. Cultivating ethical virtues can be traced back to the Mussar movement which is a Jewish spiritual practice of character development and transformative discipline (Morinis, 2007). Mussar gained popularity in the 19th century under the leadership of Rabbi Israel Salanter (Marcus, 2016). Mussar in Hebrew translates to instruction, correction, and ethics, yet it is best described as an applied guide on how to live a good or meaningful life through guided practices that shape character (Morinis, 2007). Similarly, the Torah provides the Jewish people with an ethical code of conduct and the rules for how to live a life with high moral character, often referred to as *chukei chaim* or *derek eretz* (Pelcovitz & Pelcovitz, 2014). The Torah is deeply rooted in human responsibility and *mitzvot*, known as good deeds. There are 613 *mitzvot* or commandments in the Torah that address themes from the importance of fairness, speaking out to injustice, and treating others with kindness and respect.

The heart of Torah is known as *hesed* and focuses on love, kindness and compassionate character traits (Held, 2017). These ancient virtues naturally relate to the 24 character strengths that serve as positive psychology's counterpart to the *DSM-V*, or their version of the Torah. These character strengths represent an individual's values and actions, the core of their identity. "We are all a unique constellation of many different character strengths" (R. M. Niemiec, personal communication, February 8, 2019). We all have strengths in various levels and that these represent a unique makeup of who we are and what we do. The VIA Survey is a powerful tool that provides us with a common language to help us identify our character strengths and the traits that make us unique (Niemiec, 2017). This can serve as a guide to accessing key pathways for growth, connection, communication, relationships, and accomplishment (Niemiec, 2017).

Character strengths can be taught to students through identifying the qualities that they would look for in a *mensch*, a person with exemplar character who always knows how to act with moral integrity. Students can use their strength of curiosity and love of learning to create a strengths-based family tree where they identify character strengths of members in their own family along with traits that have been passed down across generations in the Jewish people. Students can practice strength spotting as they read the weekly Torah portion, helping them engage more deeply with the text. Appreciating and recognizing strengths amongst staff, co-workers, and students can lead to increased relationship satisfaction (Kashdan, 2017), and relationships are the driving force of positive education and Jewish identity.

### **Jewish Experiential Education: The Magic of Summer Camp**

It is clear that one of the most positive Jewish community experiences for kids exists on the fields, in the cabins, and under the stars of summer camps. Jewish camps play an instrumental role as, "Jewish camp experiences help Jewish youth to grow into spirited and

engaged adults, laying the groundwork for strong Jewish communities” (Benor, Krasner, Avni, 2016, pp.2). Many Jewish educators believe Jewish summer camps are the most effective Jewish educational institutions that we have created as they represent a fully immersive experience (Gordis, 1999). At camp, deep relationships are formed, strengths of courage are developed at color wars and the camp play, and Judaism becomes a sacred practice. Students relish in welcoming Shabbat in their one nice outfit, sing bunk cheers in Hebrew and compete over who has the most *ruach* (spirit). Israeli counselors educate campers on what life is like in Israel and students marvel at the fact that they would be enlisted in the army if they were raised in Israel. Israeli pride, history, and culture is often best taught at summer camp because of the access to Israeli counselors who are close in age. The joy of the country comes alive much more than it can in a classroom book. Camp also represents a place where adolescents can engage in positive risk taking and parents believe these environments are a safer ground for experimentation as other campers will be coming from similar homes and background, (Gordis, 1999). I attended sleepaway camp at Camp Ramah in Ojai, California for many summers and the Ramah songs, gaga tournaments, challah baking lessons, and *Havdalah* (end of Shabbat ceremony) are still deeply ingrained as positive Jewish memories. My brother even met his wife when they were counselors at Camp Ramah. Camps are also a popular alternative for families who want a Jewish education experience for their children but may not be able to prioritize or afford a day school experience.

What can Jewish schools learn from camps about positive Jewish education? I believe that they can learn the value of encouraging teamwork and collaboration, strengths-based activities, the power of tradition and ritual, and a joyful and outside the box approach to learning about Judaism and Israel. Jewish educators should not keep the curriculum confined to the

classroom. Incorporating spirit-based activities such as Israeli dancing, color wars, an outside class for Sukkot, and even a Jewish camping trip, can help bring part of the *ruach* and magic of camp to the school year.

### **Positive Jewish Interventions**

Given the cyclical nature of Jewish schools which operate based on the Jewish calendar, positive interventions can relate to Jewish holidays and provide innovative ways to embrace the true nature of the holiday while bolstering well-being. For instance, during the holiday of Sukkot which is focused on gratitude for the fall harvest, students can write a gratitude letter to their parents or teachers expressing gratitude for their abundant support. Students who are looking to engage more directly with the harvest aspect of the holiday, can help plant a local garden, volunteer at a food bank, or welcome classmates into their Sukkah to share in their bountiful feast.

During Hanukkah students can take time in English class to reflect on the miracles in their own life, creating an essay about what they view as both daily miracles and milestone miracles both personally and in their family or community. In Judaic studies when they learn about the Shamash which provides light to other candles on the menorah, students can come up with a random acts of kindness challenge where they are encouraged to act like the shamash, spreading light to others. This can lead to a discussion on the chain reaction of positivity, encouraging students to think about ways to create a ripple effect of light in their own social circles both in person and through social-media.

Students can participate in weekly strength spotting challenges where they identify strengths in weekly Torah portions, and then look for strengths in their classmates and within themselves to discuss in relation to the text. During Jewish prayer which is often incorporated

into the daily or weekly curriculum at a Jewish school, students can participate in or lead mindfulness prayers to compliment the Jewish prayers. Engaging students in meaningful Jewish texts about light, miracles, gratitude, and savoring is a way to get them to rethink their own relationships, outlook, and life perspective.

### **Next Steps and Call to Action**

As we have learned with Geelong (Robinson, 2019) and Shipley (Tassoni, 2018), making the commitment to embrace a positive education curriculum requires a multi-layer process of immersion. In order for a school or congregational program to reap the benefits of a positive education program, it is important to start by having conversations with staff, rabbis, and school leadership about positive education research, positive Judaism, and how positive Jewish education can help advance academic, personal, and spiritual goals for a Jewish education community. In order for positive Jewish education to successfully launch, it is important to first train staff and teachers on the guiding principles so they can model the core values and incorporate these learnings into the Jewish learning community.

Ideally, schools can create a formalized training program led by professionals in the field who are knowledgeable about positive education and who can collaborate with rabbis and Jewish educators to make these themes relate to Judaism. If a school has the budget and resources to do so, bringing in a team of trainers on positive education who can implement a curriculum and convey the material to all staff in a compelling and applicable manner, is an ideal start. In addition, a team of trainers or an on-site team should be sure to survey students, staff, and parents about well-being questions and Jewish identity, engagement, and pride, in order to measure how positive Jewish education impacts personal and Judaic well-being. Psychologists, rabbis, and researchers can also test how applying positive education differs in religious schools

versus secular schools, providing new ways to study the impact of spirituality and well-being. Positive interventions can be developed and tailored for this population as well, providing fertile ground for new research studies and experimentation in these interdisciplinary fields.

### **Conclusion**

The future of Jewish education depends upon creating relevance, meaning, and engagement for young adults. In our modern world with so many distractions, it can be challenging to engage young adults in positive, practical, and relevant learning that will resonate with our 21st century world. Judaism provides a light to guide students on the path of character development. It can ignite a sense of curiosity and a love of learning, and can spark meaning, purpose, and spirituality through positive relationships in the community. It is on Jewish holidays, during Hebrew day school, and Jewish community events that teens can silence their phones, engage mindfully in the present moment, and feel moments of gratitude, awe, and optimism. When enriched, innovative, and relevant, Jewish education can provide fertile ground to nurture personal and religious well-being. Secular schools have been quick to embrace positive education and have seen powerful academic and personal benefits from nurturing well-being and cultivating strengths of character. The next step for the field of both positive education and Jewish education is blending the two. This will benefit Jewish students personally, academically, spiritually, and Jewishly. In addition, it will have the added benefit of making a Jewish education a more appealing option for parents because of the positive impact it has on individual growth and well-being. A positive Jewish education can provide students with the gifts of gratitude, optimism, lifelong learning, and well-being. This is my ultimate wish for my students and children everywhere.



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