

Jewish Experiential Learning Course Reflection

Over the course of the summer, Zehava Shatzkes developed two major initiatives designed to make Jewish learning engaging, social, and deeply integrated into the culture of camp. Each Shabbat, she led an interactive parsha program that combined storytelling and trivia with games and, as the summer progressed, student debates she called “parsha hot takes.” She also created a set of 36 “Rishonim baseball cards,” featuring Rishonim from Ashkenaz and Sefarad. Campers could earn, collect, trade, and learn from the cards throughout the summer, transforming Jewish knowledge into an ongoing part of camp life.

In the reflection that follows, Zehava considers what these experiences taught her about experiential Jewish education, relationships, student ownership, and the intentional design needed to make Jewish learning meaningful.

Excerpt from Zehava’s final paper for the class: What I learned

I learned that experiential Jewish education works best when the content is real, but the format feels natural to the setting. If I had simply sat the campers down and taught them about the parsha or the Rishonim, it probably would not have worked in the same way. But when the parsha became a story, a trivia challenge, a debate, or a game, and when the Rishonim became cards to collect and trade, the learning fit into the language of camp.

I also learned that campers want to be active participants. They do not only want to be entertained, and they do not only want to be spoken to. They want to answer, compete, debate, trade, win, and have opinions. That taught me that designing for impact means designing for ownership. If campers feel like they have a role in the learning, they are more likely to care about it.

Most importantly, I learned that Jewish identity can be shaped through small, repeated, positive experiences. A single parsha peula may not change a camper’s life, and one baseball card may not make them love Rishonim forever. But over a summer, those moments build a culture. They teach campers that Torah is something we talk about, argue about, collect, celebrate, and live with. That is the kind of experiential Jewish education I want to keep building.

Part 2: Final Identity Statement

This summer helped me become more intentional as an experiential Jewish educator. At the beginning of the course, I knew that I wanted to make Judaism feel exciting, real, and personal for my campers. I knew I cared about relationships, and I knew I did not want Jewish education in camp to feel like school. But after actually living it this summer as a

Rosh Eidah, I understand those ideas in a much deeper way. I saw that relationships are not just a helpful part of experiential education. They are the backbone of it. I also saw that fun is not the opposite of learning. When it is designed well, fun can actually become the way learning happens.

The biggest thing that stayed the same for me is that I still believe Jewish education has to reach the whole person. I do not want campers to just know more facts or repeat more ideas. I want them to walk away with a stronger Jewish identity. I want them to feel that Torah, Jewish history, mitzvot, Shabbat, Israel, and Jewish community are not only things adults talk about, but things that can belong to them. I want Judaism to feel alive and joyful, not heavy or forced. That was true for me at the beginning of the summer, and it is still true now.

What shifted is that I now understand how much planning and intentionality it takes to make that happen. Before the summer, I may have thought that if something was fun and had Jewish content in it, it was automatically experiential Jewish education. Now I think it is more than that. Experiential Jewish education needs a real purpose, real content, a strategy that fits the kids, an understanding of who the campers are, and awareness of the setting. It does not have to be formal, but it does have to be intentional.

One example of this was our Shabbat parsha program. At first glance, that might look like just a fun way to keep kids paying attention, and it was, but it was also more than that. It made the parsha feel like something worth knowing. It turned Torah into something that had energy, suspense, competition, and excitement. Furthermore, our shift to debate style shift taught me a lot about my theory of experiential Jewish education. It showed me that you have to watch the campers in front of you and be willing to adjust. The goal was not just to run the activity I planned. The goal was to create a real Jewish learning experience for these specific kids. Once we saw that they loved debating, we used that as the educational tool. The parsha became something they could argue about, defend, apply, and make their own. That is where I saw identity education happening. They were not only hearing the parsha. They were practicing having a voice in Torah.

The Rishonim baseball cards also shaped how I think about experiential Jewish education. The summer theme was Rishonim from Ashkenaz and Sfard, and honestly, that could have been hard to make exciting for campers. It is not always easy to turn Rishonim into clear, active camp programming. But the baseball cards made the theme concrete. That project taught me that experiential Jewish education works when Jewish content becomes part of the culture. The Rishonim were not only something we taught in one program. They became something campers collected, traded, talked about, and wanted. The facts on the back of the cards mattered because the cards mattered socially. The learning became part of

camp life. That is when I saw how fun can become educational. Not because the fun covers up the learning, but because the fun creates a doorway into the learning.

My developing theory is that experiential Jewish education impacts identity when it combines content, relationships, ownership, and positive emotional memory. The content has to be real. I do not think camp education should be empty or only vibes. The parsha mattered. The Rishonim mattered. But the content needed to be translated into the language of camp. For my campers, that language was candy, competition, trading cards, debates, games, teams, and ruach. Through that, Jewish learning became something they participated in instead of something they just received.

Relationships were the piece that held everything together. As a Rosh Eidah, I learned that the program itself is never the whole story. Campers respond because of who is running it, how they feel in the space, and whether they feel seen. A camper who feels known by their counselor or Rosh Eidah is much more willing to buy into a program, answer a question, debate in front of people, or care about the theme. That is why I now think person-to-person education is the heart of this work. The most powerful Jewish education often happens in the small moments: a camper being encouraged to answer, a counselor hyping them up, a kid trading cards with a friend, a quick conversation after a debate, or a counselor noticing that a camper davened well and giving them a card.

This summer also helped me understand the tension between fun and learning. That was probably the biggest tension I had to navigate. Campers come to camp to have fun. They do not want everything to feel like school, and honestly, camp should not feel like school. At the same time, I did not want the Jewish content to be fake or just slapped onto an activity. I wanted the learning to be real. The tension was figuring out how to make something fun enough for camp, but still meaningful enough to impact Jewish identity.

I do not think the answer is to choose one side. I think the answer is design. If the game, debate, or card system is designed around the Jewish idea, then fun and learning can work together. The parsha hot takes were fun because they were competitive and dramatic, but they were also meaningful because the debate had to tie back to the parsha. The Rishonim cards were fun because they felt like collecting baseball cards, but they also made campers learn names, dates, sefarim, and facts about major Torah figures. The fun did not take away from the learning. It carried the learning.

My purpose as an educator fit well with the purpose of Moshava because Moshava is already trying to create a strong Jewish world for campers to live in. It is a setting where Torah, Israel, ruach, community, and religious life are not separate from daily life. My role as Rosh Eidah gave me a chance to help shape that world in small but real ways. I was not

only planning activities. I was helping create a culture where campers could feel that Jewish learning is normal, exciting, social, and worth being part of.

At the same time, this summer made me more realistic. Not every idea works exactly how you imagine. Some themes are harder to program than others. Sometimes what you think will be exciting is not what the kids connect to most. Sometimes the educational moment comes from changing the plan. I learned that being intentional does not mean being rigid. It means knowing your goal clearly enough that you can adjust the method when needed.

So who am I now as an experiential Jewish educator? I think I am someone who believes deeply in joyful, relationship-based, content-rich Jewish education. I want to create spaces where campers feel known and where Jewish learning feels alive. I want to use fun seriously. I want to ask good questions, listen to what campers are actually responding to, and then build from there. I want to give campers strong Jewish content, but in a way that invites them in instead of pushing it onto them.

This summer taught me that Jewish identity is not built only through big inspirational moments. It is built through repeated experiences that tell campers: Torah is yours. Jewish knowledge is exciting. You have a voice. You are part of a community. What you do matters. If I can create more moments like that, then I think I am doing the work I came to camp to do.

About the writer:

Zehava Shatzkes graduated from Stern College in May 2026 with a degree in Jewish Education as a participant in the Legacy Heritage Jewish Educators program. A Sacks-Herenstein Scholar, Zehava spent the summer serving as a Rosh Eidah at Camp Moshava-Wildrose while taking Dr. Benji Davis's course, *Design for Impact*, which gave her the opportunity to put theory into practice.