

Experiential Education is a Pedagogy, Not a Place

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By Leeza Negelev and Amalia Mark

"It looks just like a living room!"

"Oh! The water is warm."

"Is this room for people with disabilities?"

Usually, Mayyim Hayyim's Paula Brody & Family Education Center echoes with voices asking questions and expressing curiosity as participants ages 9-90 engage first-hand with our *mikveh*.

A *mikveh* is the ultimate experiential educational opportunity. At Mayyim Hayyim we go on scavenger hunts, play charades, and act out “clothes-on” demonstrations to explore ancient and modern *mikveh* practices. But what happens when it’s not possible for learners to see and touch the water? Our *mikveh* is currently closed due to COVID-19 and though we are planning for reopening, the lessons we’ve learned during this pandemic will endure.

Experiential doesn’t have to mean in-person. To translate our programs for a virtual platform, we looked beyond the activities themselves to the pedagogies of experiential education.

Multiple modalities

This spring, we piloted a virtual version of our [Introduction to Mikveh program](#) with seventh graders from JCDS, Boston’s Jewish Community Day School. On-site, the program is as experiential as it gets: students stick their hands in the *mikveh* pool and read aloud first-person stories from past guests.

Research suggests our brains work twice as hard to read body language via video. This results in a shorter attention span for adults and youth alike. One way to mitigate fatigue is to vary teaching modalities. Our program used video, discussion, Question and Answer, a group brainstorm, a slideshow with music, and, briefly, frontal teaching.

Putting this together wasn’t a simple translation of in-person to online. Success came in the form of students being visibly engaged and able to integrate what they learned into their Judaic studies in the coming days.

Content flexibility

Amidst the chaos of the early days of the pandemic, our women’s Torah study program, populated by 18 mostly tech-averse women “of a certain age,” moved online without a hitch. But it wasn’t business as usual. There was one particularly noticeable change.

After moving online and shortening each session, about 50% of the [Women’s Voices, Women’s Wisdom](#) class time was spent organically sharing COVID-19’s impact on these women’s lives. Extensive personal sharing like this would usually cause most participants to have *shpilkes* (ants in their pants). But our facilitator understood that the needs of the group had shifted.

The monthly meetings this spring saw participants through socially-distanced funerals, moves, break-ups, and more. The remaining time spent learning, though less than planned, was infused with more honesty, vulnerability, and connection than ever before.

Focus on connections

The pre-teen girls and their moms who had already signed up for our spring session of [Beneath the Surface](#), our *bat mitzvah* program, were wrestling with the question, “What will my *bat mitzvah* look like?” and no one had answers. But the community that was formed by gathering online each Sunday afternoon offered participants a chance to step back and focus on what was in their power: building connections to each another.

The shortened sessions were designed to be a recognition of sacred time together. Moms and daughters were encouraged to wear comfy clothing, find a special place in their home for our video sessions, and bring their favorite snacks and drinks. They also engaged in activities *off-screen* that they then shared when the group came back together.

We assumed a world of quarantine would lead to frustration around being with family 24/7. To our surprise and delight, every single one of the daughters reported afterwards that they appreciated the mom and daughter time more than anything.

Online learning feels, at first, like the opposite of experiential education. But if our successes with these programs are any indication, it is possible to develop meaningful content that promotes deep learning, connection, and community in our virtual world.

These programs, and more, are continuing online and open to the public. [We invite you to join us no matter where you are.](#)

Leeza Negelev has been Mayyim Hayyim’s Associate Director of Education since 2014. She brings with her more than ten years of teaching and developing dynamic arts- and project-based education programs with people of all ages. Leeza holds a Bachelor’s Degree from The Evergreen State College in Washington, with a concentration in education and nonprofit business management. She is a former Arts Fellow at the Drisha Institute and a Combined Jewish Philanthropies Chai in the Hub 2016 honoree.

Amalia Marks is a rising fifth-year student at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School and the Rabbinic Intern at Mayyim Hayyim. She received her B.A. in Theatre with a concentration in Gender and Women’s Studies from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She has previously worked for the University of Arizona Hillel Foundation and Congregation Etz Chaim in Atlanta, GA. A self-professed “mikveh nerd,” Amalia loves learning and teaching about all things mikveh.