

Educators consider Jewish peoplehood at PD day

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About 800 Toronto day school educators gathered over two days during winter break to ponder an issue that has beguiled Jewish thinkers for millennia – what exactly is Jewish peoplehood?

The educators – drawn from eight day schools as well as supplementary schools, youth groups and community organizations – also considered an element of the problem unique to their profession: how do you incorporate questions about peoplehood into classrooms to better equip children to wrestle with their Jewish identity.

Helping the educators get a grip on the issue – teaching the teachers, so to speak – were eight representatives of Beit Hatfutsot – The Museum of the Jewish People, located in Tel Aviv.

For Lesley Cohen, a Grade 6 teacher at the Toronto Heschel School, the professional development (PD) day presented “a really important conversation about Jewish identity.”

The middle school children in her class are starting to struggle with questions of identity, she said. They’re asking wide-ranging questions, from why we say



From left are Raquel Binder, Cindy Opler, Rabbi Noam Katz, Ryla Braemer and Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benvenisti. PAUL LUNGEN PHOTO

Birkat Hamazon (a prayer after a meal) to questions about God and prayer, she said.

The PD discussions presented useful tools “for me to be able to answer those questions by opening a dialogue rather than by presenting a singular truth.”

Jews don’t all do things the same way, so discussions about different ways of being Jewish are important for kids, she said.

“They learn that Jewish identity is complex and varied and I think they’re looking for direction from us,” Cohen said.

Participants at the get-together learned there are a wide range of ways to identify as Jews, whether its through historical ties,

shared memories, a common language, or through culture and art, she noted.

“It’s a multi-dimensional tradition that we are part of,” Cohen added.

Cindy Opler, a math teacher at Leo Baeck Day School, said she experienced an “a-ha moment” during one of the presentations at the event. Even as a math teacher, she’s always looking at how to incorporate things Jewish into the classroom, such as students examining their family tree to determine which fraction might be of a certain nationality. The confab made her realize “I could make it richer for the kids and incorporate their Judaism into the classroom,” she said.

Rabbi Noam Katz, dean of Jewish living at Leo Baeck, said bringing together so many educators from different schools created an opportunity to hear unique and diverse perspectives.

That variety of views shows there is no one singular monolithic perspective in the Jewish community, Rabbi Katz said. “We need to evolve and listen to the voice of our students and families and their experience of Judaism.”

Ryla Braemer, director of Israel engagement for UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, said the question of Jewish peoplehood is one Jewish educators are grappling with

today.

The two-day gathering allowed the educators to exchange ideas, learn from each other, receive Beit Hatfutsot educational materials that can be adapted for local classrooms, all while experiencing intellectual and spiritual growth, she said.

The PD event can be traced back to a January 2016 Israel mission convened by the federation’s Israel engagement committee, which brought 54 community professionals and volunteers to the Jewish state. As part of the mission, several community educators participated in a day-long professional development program with senior educators from Beit Hatfutsot. Afterward, the Israel engagement committee, Beit Hatfutsot and Shana Harris, head of school at Bialik Hebrew Day School, and Claire Summerlus, head of school at Robbins Hebrew Academy, collaborated to bring the Beit Hatfutsot educational experience to Toronto.

The participating schools included Bialik, Leo Baeck, Robbins, Heschel, Montessori Jewish Day School, Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School, the Anne & Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto and Associated Hebrew Schools of Toronto. ■