

Pedagogy of Rootedness:

Retrieving Rootedness and Building a Sense of Belonging

OVERVIEW

The Pedagogy of Rootedness is an educational approach designed to ground Jewish youth and individuals joining Jewish communities in the history of their local Jewish community, weaving that local history into the broader tapestry of global Jewish heritage. Its central and distinctive feature is the use of artifacts — tangible objects, photographs, recordings, or descriptions of traditions and historical figures — as entry points into the past. By holding, researching, and reflecting on these objects together, participants are invited to discover their connections to previous generations' knowledge, achievements, and values. The goal is not simply to expand historical knowledge, but to build positive Jewish identity, a sense of pride in one's community, and the self-efficacy that comes from understanding oneself as part of something larger and longer-lived than one's own experience.

A VISION OF JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

When a community has experienced profound tragedy, it is easy for that tragedy to become the dominant lens through which its members understand themselves. The destruction of the physical and non-physical legacy of one's group often leads to disconnection from one's broader history and to an overemphasis on its most recent and most painful chapters. In the case of Polish Jews, the Holocaust and the devastation it brought have caused many to diminish the importance of the remarkable achievements and contributions of Polish Jewry across a thousand years of history. A millennium of vibrant cultural, intellectual, and communal life has been overshadowed by a few years of catastrophe, the trauma of which continues to be passed from generation to generation.

Yet to build self-esteem and self-efficacy and to empower new generations to advocate for themselves and their communities, it is essential to remember and appreciate the achievements of one's ancestors alongside their suffering. Polish Jewry contributed enormously to the development of Polish society: scientists, writers, composers, lawyers, and doctors with Jewish roots formed an important and inseparable part of Poland's cultural and scientific heritage. Recognizing the value of one's own group's history — and particularly how one's local community shaped the world around it — is what allows people to create their own goals and play an active role in building the society of which they are a part. This conviction is the foundation of the Pedagogy of Rootedness.

ROOTS AND RENEWAL: THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

The pedagogy draws deeply on the symbolism of the tree, which is woven throughout Jewish tradition. In the Torah, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge represent the choices at the heart of moral existence. In the book of Jeremiah, Israel itself is depicted as a tree – subject to upheaval but not everlasting destruction: “The Lord called your name, Green Olive Tree, Lovely and of Good Fruit” (Jeremiah 11:16). Educationally, this tree metaphor captures how knowledge nourishes spiritual and communal growth: just as roots sustain a tree through the seasons, the accumulated heritage of a community sustains its members through change and loss. This is inseparable from the concept of *mi dor le dor* – “from generation to generation” – the cornerstone of Jewish tradition that reflects the timeless transmission of knowledge, values, and cultural heritage across time. The pedagogy of rootedness draws on this principle directly: becoming aware of one’s heritage and the achievements of one’s own group creates a feeling of belonging, shapes a connection with and responsibility for one’s community, and empowers participants to be proactive in strengthening Jewish life for future generations.

In pedagogical terms, the approach is grounded in intentional teaching: purposeful, consciously planned, and carefully executed learning that sets clear goals and adjusts both materials and methods to the specific group characteristics. Intentional teaching treats the educator not merely as a transmitter of information but as an educational guide – a creator of conditions in which students can construct meaning for themselves. This approach is especially important in the Pedagogy of Rootedness because the material is not neutral. Topics related to local Jewish history, family heritage, and community identity can carry significant emotional weight. The educator must be attentive not only to the content but to the emotional landscape of the room, calibrating the depth and pace of the work to what participants are ready to hold. Identity, in this framework, is not delivered but constructed – and the teacher’s role is to support and guide that process with care.

THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

The practice can be implemented as a standalone workshop or as part of a longer series of classes and can be applied in a wide range of Jewish educational settings: Jewish schools, community centers, introduction to Judaism courses, and conversion programs. The format is flexible by design. In a one-time workshop, the facilitator selects the artifacts and shapes the discussion around topics that are accessible and emotionally safe for a group that may not yet know each other well. In an extended course, participants can be invited to research and present their own artifacts – objects from local Jewish history or from their own family stories – allowing for deeper engagement with more personally significant and emotionally complex material. This expanded version requires that the educator first build a genuine sense of safety and trust within the group before moving into high-risk territory.



The preparation phase asks the facilitator to clarify the time available, understand the group's dynamics and prior relationships, and set clear goals — whether the primary aim is knowledge building, identity development, or both. Artifacts are then chosen accordingly: they might be actual objects or photographs, descriptions of traditions, images of significant places, works of art, or audio and video recordings. Once chosen, artifacts become the organizing center of the session. Participants encounter each artifact, research its context and meaning, and bring their findings into structured conversation. This can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Where time and setting allow, the practice can extend beyond the classroom into field study — visiting the places and sites connected to the artifacts themselves.

Throughout, the practice moves between the particular and the universal: from the specific artifact and its local story, outward to the broader sweep of Jewish history, and then back inward to what it means for this participant, in this community, today. The aim is that participants leave not only with expanded knowledge but with a strengthened sense of their own place within the Jewish story — a rootedness that is not passive inheritance but active, living connection.

CONCLUSION

The Pedagogy of Rootedness holds significance for Jewish communities wherever they find themselves in the Diaspora, irrespective of their size or the specific contours of their history. The need to reclaim a full and honest relationship with one's communal past — one that encompasses achievement and vitality alongside loss and trauma — is not unique to Polish Jewry. It is a challenge that resonates across Jewish communities that have experienced rupture, displacement, or the erosion of collective memory. By placing artifacts at the center of learning, this practice makes history tangible, personal, and discussable. It builds pride, belonging, and the sense that every participant has a role to play in carrying the Jewish story forward.



To access the full activity guide, including preparation frameworks, artifact selection guidance, and reflection tools, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



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