

The Mosaic of the Jewish People: A Pedagogy of Relational Sense-Making

OVERVIEW

A pedagogy of relational sense-making is an approach to Jewish peoplehood education that supports meaning-making through exploration of Jewish connection, diversity, and demography. Learning aligned with this approach centers on the relationships among identities, values, practices, and narratives. Learners are invited to notice patterns of overlap, difference, and tension, and to locate themselves within the complex mosaic of the Jewish people. The learning arc moves from identification (“Who is this? Who am I?”), through comparison (“How do these differ from one another? From myself?”), and toward connection (“How do these belong together? How do I belong among them?”).

At the center of this pedagogy is The Mosaic of the Jewish People — a deck of fifty square tiles, each depicting a fictional, archetypal Jewish child with a name, hometown, four core identities, and a short biography. Together, the children are designed to be approximately representative of the global Jewish people today, reflecting diversity across geography, religious denomination, ethnicity, language, and lived experience. Learners work with these tiles to build, arrange, and reflect on connections, discovering that meaning emerges through adjacency, context, and interaction. Ambiguity is treated not as a problem to be resolved but as a productive space for inquiry, and learners’ own lived experiences are welcomed as essential resources that shape how connections are noticed and understood.



A VISION OF JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

This pedagogy emerges in response to persistent challenges of engagement, disagreement, and understanding within the Jewish people. In the wake of October 7, 2023, public discourse around questions of Jewish safety and flourishing has often fractured into echo chambers, moral absolutism, and performative signaling. Interlocutors are too often dismissed as either misled or malicious, leaving little room for nuanced understanding or constructive reflection. While these dynamics are not unique to Jewish life, they strike particularly at the heart of a community that prizes covenantal connection and collective responsibility.

My own commitment to this approach is rooted in my lived experience as an immigrant twice over and as the subject of personal Jewish transformation. This (ongoing) transformation might be described through three shifts in worldview — away from judgment, individualism, and a form of communal isolationism; toward curiosity, collectivism, and a broader, global perspective — which a pedagogy of relational sense-making seeks to cultivate in learners. Critically, the pedagogy is grounded in the assumptions that every Jewish child is part of the Jewish people, that this belonging matters, and that it is best deepened through an attitude of curiosity rather than certainty.

THESE AND THESE: THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

One Jewish text that has profoundly shaped this pedagogy is a short passage from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Eiruvim 13b: *Eilu va-eilu divrei Elokim Hayyim hen* — “These and these are the words of the living God.” Often cited as a foundational statement of Jewish pluralism, the passage affirms the legitimacy of multiple perspectives within a shared framework. Less frequently emphasized is its conclusion: *va-halakhah ke-Veit Hillel* — “and the law follows the school of Hillel.” The weight of these nine words — six plural terms expressing enduring tension, three singular resolving — encapsulates the rabbinic approach of prizing relationship over resolution. The pedagogy draws three lessons from this: that principled disagreement may be rooted in multiple valid perspectives; that collective decisions implicate those whose positions do not prevail, creating an ethical imperative to hold minority voices rather than allow disagreement to harden into fracture; and that a robust sense of belonging to the Jewish people is fundamental, non-negotiable, even divinely ordained.

This pedagogy is also informed by R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik's distinction, in “Kol Dodi Dofek,” between the *brit goral* (covenant of fate) — the inescapable shared condition of being Jewish in the world — and the *brit y'ud* (covenant of destiny) — the creative, aspirational dimension of Jewish life. Soloveitchik insists that destiny cannot be pursued without first embracing fate: meaningful Jewish life can only be built upon the foundational acknowledgment of shared belonging.



Contemporary scholarship reinforces this foundation. Dr. Sivan Zakai's longitudinal research on how Jewish children think about Israel revealed that the questions that most sustained children's interest over time were "prism questions" — questions with many possible answers that highlight differences among people, which children wondered about year after year, rethinking and refining their emerging ideas. Zakai observed that children's deep questions about the relationships among self, family, community, and nation are too often set aside in favor of transmitting factual information (*My Second-Favorite Country*, 2022). A pedagogy of relational sense-making takes these findings seriously: children deserve educational experiences that allow them to ask and investigate the questions that capture and hold their attention, including contested questions about identity and belonging.

"A Pedagogy of Play" (2023), from Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, offers a complementary foundation. Their framework demonstrates that play is not merely recreational but a powerful vehicle for curiosity, agency, collaboration, and critical thinking. Meaningful learning emerges when learners actively explore, experiment, take risks, and construct understanding through interaction with peers, materials, and experiences. This orientation aligns directly with relational sense-making: both approaches invite learners to notice patterns, make connections, and situate themselves within complex webs of meaning rather than absorb predetermined conclusions. Together, these sources support a pedagogy in which Jewish peoplehood education is not the study of fixed identities but an invitation for learners to locate themselves — actively, curiously, playfully — within the global Jewish community.

A PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

The Mosaic of the Jewish People is a deck of fifty square tiles — designed to function as a provocation, a game, a resource for standalone learning activities, and a tool for embedding Jewish peoplehood in existing learning units.

Used as a provocation, The Mosaic invites learners to surface existing assumptions, curiosities, and questions about who Jews are and how Jewish identities take shape. Simply exploring the deck — noticing names, places, identity markers, and narrative elements — reveals points of interest ripe for further learning. Used as a game, learners build a shared mosaic by placing tiles adjacent to one another so that shared core identities touch. This mechanic requires close reading, comparison, and negotiation, prompting discussion about why certain connections feel intuitive, surprising, or difficult to sustain. With no single correct solution, the game privileges experimentation and reinterpretation. Used in standalone activities, the tiles can prompt categorization, discussion, roleplay, and reflection — or learners can design their own personal tiles. Finally, the deck is organized into twelve thematic clusters, each featuring four or five characters with varied experiences of a Jewish practice, or on a question of Jewish civics. Each cluster can be deployed to enhance a learning unit (on, say, eating Jewishly, or the meaning of Zionism) with the rich diversity of Jewish peoplehood.

The cards' vibrant images and narratives quickly capture and hold learners' attention. Their square shape enables mosaic-building, and the color coding of identities supports recognition and collaborative play, expanding opportunities for noticing adjacency, overlap, and emerging patterns. These features reflect a core insight of relational sense-making: learning deepens when relationships are made visible, navigable, and open to reinterpretation. For this pedagogy to function as intended, educators should resist the impulse to resolve ambiguity too quickly, and instead adopt a facilitative stance that privileges curiosity over coverage and interpretation over conclusion, and allows learners the time and space to explore difference without the pressure of persuasion or self-disclosure.

CONCLUSION

In a field grappling with polarization, fragmentation, and the pressure to simplify, a pedagogy of relational sense-making offers something genuinely different: an approach that helps learners first perceive the underlying web of identities, values, and narratives in which encounter and disagreement take place, before they are asked to navigate either. By noticing patterns, grappling with difference, and situating themselves within a mosaic of Jewish lives, learners develop not only knowledge but the relational and ethical capacities that make more demanding forms of dialogue possible later. Jewish education becomes an invitation to inhabit complexity, embrace pluralism, and cultivate a sense of belonging that is both deeply personal and collectively sustained.



To access the full practice guide, including the Mosaic character deck (in printable and digital engagement versions), game instructions, and activity resources, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



Mikhael Keshner is a curator of educational experiences and resources, whose professional passion is supporting Jewish educators and learners in building informed, constructive, and committed relationships with *am yisrael* (the Jewish people) and *medinat yisrael* (the Jewish state). As a British-born Israeli-by-choice and new American, he cares deeply about strengthening each Jew's connection to global Jewry. Before joining The Jewish Education Project as Director, Israel Education, Mikhael worked at Harvard Hillel, MIT Hillel, and Hebrew College. He holds Master's degrees in Philosophy (University of Cambridge), Near Eastern & Judaic Studies (Brandeis University), and Jewish professional leadership (Brandeis University). At home, Mikhael is an avid reader, *hevruta* enthusiast, and devoted *abba* to two young children.