Rebekah knows the Ten Commandments by heart. She can recite the months of the Jewish calendar in order and can explain the laws of kashrut verbatim. She became a Bat Mitzvah and celebrated her Confirmation, yet she remains lost and frustrated with Judaism, pondering what any of this has to do with her life. Now meet Sarah. Sarah bonded with the Israeli soldier on her Birthright bus and danced with Miriam and her timbrels at NFTY conventions, but wonders: where does this song come from? What is the foundation on which these rituals are built? Unfortunately, the vast majority of the Rebekahs and the Sarahs of the Jewish world have yet to meet. Will the lover of Judaism ever interact with the knower of Judaism? In Jewish education, educational leaders must create a synthesis of Rebekah’s knowledge of the canon and Sarah’s Jewish attachment.

Imagine for a moment that Rebekah and Sarah did meet. In their integration lies a rich possibility for deep understanding; an understanding that integrates knowledge of facts with emotional relevance and meaning. Together, the combination is capable of producing nothing less than an empowered Jew who enjoys a sense of mastery and belonging of her Jewish identity formation. Instead, today’s field of Jewish education faces a troubling, but unnecessary dichotomy: a false choice of teaching for attachment versus teaching for canon. Educators seem to teach Jews for what they need to feel (attachment) or teach Jews for what they need to know (canon).
Only rarely, do we see attachment and canon intersect in informal or formal Jewish education settings. Jewish historian, Jack Wertheimer, articulates the need for this melding:

There has been a sea change in how supplementary education is defined. When the mission was mainly the acquisition of *skills and knowledge* [canon], supplementary education was always found wanting. Today the rules of the game have changed. Schools are valued not only for the cognitive knowledge they impart, but also for the *good experiences* children have, the Jewish memories schools create, how much good fun parents and children have in the school preparing for celebrations and the like (emphasis added).¹

Rather than split the field into two false polarities of canon and attachment, Jewish educators must, as Wertheimer proposes, synthesize these two philosophical approaches to Jewish education and establish a new ideology: Teaching for Understanding. To be sure, calling for something as quotidian sounding as “understanding,” may not at first sound radical. However, do not be deceived. While it may sound commonplace enough, its existence in lived educational settings is as rare and elusive as the sighting of an endangered bird. According to scholars of curricular design, Wiggins and McTighe, this deeper, technical notion of Understanding represents a “mental construct” created by learners to “make sense of many distinct pieces of knowledge.” (emphasis added).² They provide a paradigm for implementing a teaching model based on Understanding through six facets: explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self knowledge.³ Put another way, the classic philosopher of education, John Dewey, asserts that “Understanding is the result of facts acquiring meaning for the learner: to grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or a situation is to see it in its relation

---

³ Wiggins and McTighe, 84.
to other things: to see how it operates or functions, what consequences follow from it, what causes it, what uses it can be put to” (emphasis added). 4 We learn from these definitions that knowledge of the canon is not enough to reach Understanding. Education must also instill a sense of meaning evidenced by learners’ abilities to make connections and use knowledge to create and imagine new possibilities and configurations of distinct pieces of data. These learners would be proud and eager to attend camp, walk into the doors of a religious school and proclaim their Judaism to the world, and at the same time explain their favorite Torah portion and the significance of why we celebrate Passover as modern Jews today. They would be able to envision what their Jewish home could look like and compare the ancient rabbis’ vision of Jewish law with our contemporary conception. Moreover, cognitive theorist, Benjamin Bloom, expresses the notion of Understanding through his taxonomy of thinking tasks that learners should demonstrate. In his now classic taxonomy, he presents a hierarchy of tasks that increase in sophistication from knowledge and comprehension to analysis and application, culminating in synthesis and the ability to evaluate. 5 Therefore, educationally speaking, Understanding requires both the knowledge and the meaning-making of this knowledge, along with the ability to connect the knowledge and determine what patterns exist within it. 6 Jewish educators cannot limit their teaching to canon, where the larger context remains absent. They also cannot rely solely on creating a “feel good” atmosphere for learners without rooting this kind of learning in basic constructs of knowledge. Understanding unifies these two methods and brings learners to a heightened place of empowerment and ownership of their Jewish identity.

4 Wiggins and McTighe, 38.
5 Wiggins and McTighe, 39.
Jewish educational institutions have placed much emphasis on teaching for attachment in response to numerous supplementary school models that failed to infuse the students with a sense of ownership or love of the Jewish tradition. Sociologists of American Jewish life, Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe seem to walk right into the attachment trap when they say, “The fundamental educational theory of Jewish summer camping is simple: If children associate Jewish life with sweetness… what they practice and learn at camp will remain with them for a lifetime.” Surely, association with “sweetness” is not a sufficient Jewish educational goal. In order to create competent, empowered learners, it is the job of educators to teach the corpus of tradition in ways that Jews can communicate and interact with mastery, belonging, and inspiration. Nevertheless, as a result of this newfound emphasis on the attachment model, alternative experiential education programs seek eagerly to socialize the learners and instill in them a sense of love for Judaism. The important question remains: what are they being attached to? If we have Jews who love Judaism, but who cannot articulate what Judaism is or what it stands for, then we have deficient Understanding, and by extension, limited or partial identity formation. These learners both deserve to, and can wrestle with, new insights and have a Jewish context for their exploration to emotionally connect to the Jewish tradition.

In her ethnographic study of a Jewish day school, sociologist of Jewish education, Tali Zelkowicz, discovered her own version of this unsuccessful dichotomy. She observed tensions among teachers over what constitutes Jewish literacy. On the one hand, one group of teachers believed that creating Jewish identity requires teaching learners to “internalize the content, use it,

---

8 Tali Zelkowicz, “The Liberal Jewish Day School As Laboratory For Dissonance in American Jewish Identity-Formation” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2008), 139.
make it meaningful, and bring it to life.”

9 Zelkowicz explains how this educational approach manifested in the classroom:

According to [one camp of teachers], these skills include how to read text, more than covering a particular set of Jewish texts, narratives, or select canonical passages. Hence, process, or the methods of meaning-making become central to proponents of this camp. For they believe that the skills of application, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation are infinitely more valuable and engaging to students than any individual facts, vocabulary, or translating-drills could ever be (emphasis in original).  

Conversely, another group represents what teachers at this particular Jewish day school called “content mongers:”

The second camp of teachers emphasizes, for example, the use of Hebrew, the act of translating from Hebrew to English and from Aramaic to English, the extensive use of dictionaries, and the knowledge and comprehension of specific terminology related to the organization and development of classical rabbinic literature.  

This tension at a Jewish day school parallels the larger juxtaposition between teaching for attachment and teaching for knowledge of canon. Rather than teach one or the other, Jewish educators must embrace a new paradigm that synthesizes both poles, into the holistic human phenomenon that is thinking and feeling, knowing and attaching, otherwise known as Understanding. Imagine a religious school classroom where seventh graders create a guide for sixth graders to help them when they study to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Imagine at Jewish summer camp, the CITs teaching campers the textual origins of the songs they sing daily at breakfast and explaining their personal connections with the words and music. By teaching for

---

9 Zelkowicz, 139.
10 Zelkowicz, 139.
11 Zelkowicz, 141.
Understanding, learners gain knowledge of the canon of Judaism and build attachment through the development of critical thinking skills.

If we teach solely for attachment, we risk producing only “Jewish cheerleaders” who love Judaism and “feel good” about their Jewish experiences and connections. However, they will constantly have to acknowledge feelings of ignorance and incompetence within the larger Jewish community and Jewish world. The role of Jewish educators is to instill a sense of empowerment of our learners and to provide them with enough content knowledge to feel competent in various Jewish settings. Educating for attachment links Jewish learners to specific environments and settings where they experience positive feelings, such as in camp, in youth group or on a Birthright trip. Yet, attachment lacks the deep content that propels the learners forward in their growth as empowered Jews who can communicate and interact adeptly and confidently in a variety of Jewish settings. On the other hand, teaching solely for canon can create “Jewish robots” who fail to internalize the meaning behind what they learn and make an emotional attachment to Judaism. These learners may later find Judaism stale. Their conception of Judaism lacks any compelling reason for ongoing engagement because it fails to be relevant in their lives. Jewish education must be relevant in order to speak to the learners and to provide a guide for answering life’s big questions, such as “what is the purpose of life?”12 Teaching for Understanding develops sophisticated learners who can translate their knowledge into a bigger picture and use it to make connections and interact with the world around them.

Unless Rebekah finds meaning and experiences passion for Judaism and Sarah finds knowledge and articulates where all of these practices come from, we will be doomed to Jewish communities filled with cheerleaders or robots.

12 Sara S. Lee (personal communication, December 5, 2011).