

The Jewish Learning “Gig Economy”: Empowering Educators and Learners

By Rabbi Ana Bonnheim

More than a third of American workers, or 58 million adults, participate in the “gig economy” through freelance jobs and per-project contracts. For me, the pursuit of independent work was driven by the intersection of my chosen profession – I’m a rabbi – and my family priorities. In the season of raising young children and with a very busy spouse, I sought meaningful work that would also grant me flexibility. But there weren’t a lot of job-openings for flexible rabbinic roles that aligned with my available hours. Frankly, there weren’t any.

I cobbled together some short-term projects and very part-time work in the first few years. But then, I set out to build what I wished had existed: a framework for independent Jewish clergy and educators to reach individual learners and share wisdom and guidance. This gig-economy platform would help others, like me, who wanted to retain their sense of identity as a rabbi or educator after investing so deeply in their education, yet without locking themselves into traditional 9-to-5 jobs.

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Today, that framework has grown into the successful Jewish Learning Collaborative (JLC). JLC matches

freelance Jewish educators with Jewish communal professionals and lay leaders for one-to-one, customized, self-directed Jewish learning. More than 120 educators located across the U.S., Europe, and Israel teach employees and volunteers at twenty-nine (29) Jewish organizations for more than 400 hours every month. Our educators cultivate understanding, connection, and belonging through the exploration of topics as diverse as kabbalah and mysticism, introduction to Jewish ritual and holidays, feminism in the *Talmud*, and Jewish spirituality.

The availability of these flexible teaching opportunities for talented, dedicated Jewish educators help our community retain communal teachers and resources. JLC’s educators are rabbis, rabbinical students, professors, graduate students, and more. They have post-college-level credentials. They are experts in general and esoteric fields, and are warm, relational, and nonjudgmental. They are relatable to learners for diverse reasons. And, perhaps most importantly, they are valuable assets to the Jewish community.

Without the ability to participate in the freelance economy, these educators could drift into other more flexible professions or opt out of the workforce altogether. Post COVID, more jobs offer remote options. Employment at Jewish organizations, however, remains relatively traditional in terms of hours, commitment, and roles, even if remote. Part-time roles in Jewish education are often limited to those who wish to teach children in congregational schools or tutor *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* students. And educators who move abroad and or leave traditional jobs to live a “digital nomad” lifestyle would also be at risk

of leaving the field altogether if it were not for the opportunity JLC provides them to teach over Zoom and earn U.S.-dollar-pegged incomes.

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The freelance economy for Jewish education removes these limitations and empowers educators to stay connected to the Jewish community and to their roles as teachers—on their own terms. It allows them to specialize in their areas of passion. A rabbinic colleague recently explained, “Bruce Springsteen is playing nearly the same concert each night. He’s not rewriting the concert each Shabbat, plus teaching multiple classes, and doing a ton of other things. I may not be Bruce Springsteen, but I want to be amazing at [teaching] prayer, focus on that and make my work around that.” That is a completely different model than the generalist rabbi who can teach a lot of different things, and it empowers phenomenal educators who want to focus on teaching people who share their individual passions.

Like other participants in the gig economy, some JLC educators contract projects on top of their day jobs to fulfill a financial or personal need. Some have administrative roles in Jewish organizations, but love teaching. Some are professional fundraisers who miss exploring rich ideas with a partner. One has a master’s degree in *Talmud* and wants to stay connected to her Jewish professional capabilities while pursuing a PhD in theater. They all appreciate the stability of their jobs but value their “side hustle” that keeps them connected to teaching and learning. Other JLC educators teach learners up to 30 hours each month and earn most of their income from freelance work.

Building a platform that democratizes Jewish teaching also expands possibilities for Jewish learners by opening access to highly skilled educators all around the

world. In the past, an eager learner would have to take their chances on finding a teacher in their town who had the skills, knowledge, and bandwidth to help them untangle a particular piece of Jewish source text. Now, that learner has access to experts everywhere.

Another added value for Jewish learners is that many want to learn with someone who matches their ‘vibe’—someone who shares their background, demographic characteristics, age range, or political leanings. JLC has many kinds of educators on our roster that there’s a good match for every potential learner, even those who might not connect with the teacher assigned in a cohort-based learning program.

The Jewish learning gig economy empowers talented people who love to teach and were underutilized by our community and expands what it means to be part of the field of Jewish education. The large numbers of educators who want to work with us has quickly positioned JLC as one of the largest employers of Jewish educators in the county and demonstrated an existing demand for personalized learning and teaching. Now, the Jewish community needs more avenues for people to access the wisdom and expertise of talented educators. With effective platforms on which to teach, Jewish clergy and teachers are empowered to join the ranks of successful professionals in other sectors who enjoy flexibility and customization in their careers and supplemental income – all while enriching our community.



Rabbi Ana Bonnheim is founding executive director of the Jewish Learning Collaborative. She was previously the director of the Open Dor Project, an accelerator for emerging clergy-led spiritual communities. Rabbi Bonnheim is the chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) Ethics Committee. She lives in Charlotte, NC.