JEWISH BELIEF, THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

Understanding Jewish connections to action research requires a return to the roots of both Judaism and action research. Thus, this entry looks at both the legacy of Kurt Lewin, a key architect of action research, as well as ancient Jewish texts (e.g. the Torah and Talmud). It explores Jewish conceptions of text study, tikkanolam (‘repairing the world’) and na’aseh v’nishma (‘we will practice and understand’). In addition, examples of action research in scholarship on Jewish life and culture are offered.

Kurt Lewin, Jewish Life and Action Research

The connections between Jewish religion, culture and history and action research have their historical origins in the work of Lewin, social psychologist, theoretician, activist and practitioner. Martin Gold, an anthologizer of Lewin’s work described Lewin’s roots as a Jewish young man in early-twentieth-century Germany, where he experienced anti-Semitism and marginalization. These forces contributed to Lewin’s first-hand understanding of social problems and helped drive his passion to alleviate human suffering. Lewin attended to questions of Jewish life in his scholarship, such as writing about Jewish education. In addition, in 1947, he helped establish the Commission on Community Interrelations of the American Jewish Congress, which Frances Cherry and Catherine Borshuk have described as one of the first action research organizations to be created with the express purpose of implementing community-based research to fight discrimination. The commitment that Lewin dedicated to this organization is reflected by his frequent reference to the quote by Rabbi Hillel (first century): ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?’ (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14). Lewin’s reference to traditional Jewish texts alerts us to the possibility that the connections between Jewish culture and action research may have other textual sources.

Jewish Conceptions of Text Study and Action Research

A primary aspect of Jewish life is that of communal text study. Traditional Jewish text study is rooted in a tradition of multiple interpretations, oral and written discussion and debate. This is most evident in the Talmud (a homiletic compilation produced by rabbis and sages during the Premodern Era). In this tradition, multiple interpretations from across time and space are invited to debate and discuss the meaning of Jewish law. The physical page of the Talmud reveals this hermeneutic orientation in that the focus of discussion is printed in the middle of the page, while different rabbinic interpretations surround the central text. This hermeneutic stance assumes that one interpretation is not sufficient to build a deep understanding, but rather, it is in deep discussion, debate, challenging and questioning that the learner constructs knowledge. The traditional physical space of Jewish learning, thebeit midrash (‘house of study’), is distinctive for the pairs of learners spread throughout, studying a central text, under the guidance of a teacher. While libraries are defined by their silence, thebeitmidrash is noted for its din of discussion and learning. In contemporary Jewish life thebeitmidrash is still alive across the denominations of Jewish culture and across continents and age groups. In addition, debates and questions of Jewish law and ethics are still published today in the form ofresponse—rabbinic responses to contemporary ritual, ethical and spiritual concerns, which are then codified.

It is such a critical stance on text, the necessity of multiple interpretations and the tradition of communal study that connect this aspect of Jewish culture with action research. As action research invites the communal construction of meaning, so too does Jewish text study.
Two Core Jewish Concepts Connected to Action Research

*Na'asehn'ishma*

This biblical phrase, meaning 'we will do, and we will listen/understand' (Exodus 24:7) was the Israelites' response to receiving the Decalogue and is often referred to as the root of Jewish commitment to and celebration of ritual and the primacy of ritual in Jewish life. Many interpretations of this phrase suggest that, in Jewish tradition, engaging in ritual often leads to understanding. It is an action that can lead to spiritual connection, community building and deep learning. This Jewish call to action is a direct link to action research and reminds the community that while study is a fundamental aspect of Jewish life, action is also necessary.

*Tikkunolam*

This idea, which means 'repairing the world', of biblical and mystical origins, teaches that the world is broken and must be repaired. Strongly linked with *na'asehn'ishma*, tikkunolam teaches about a specific form of action—that of social change. Tikkunolam stresses the importance of taking positive social steps to improve the lives of people in one's community and/or the larger world. In contemporary Jewish culture, tikkunolam projects are ubiquitous as part of the coming-of-age ritual of bar/bat mitzvah, synagogue/temple programmes and school missions and programmes. A well-known publication, *Tikkun (Repair)*, dedicated to the mission of social change, has been part of the Jewish periodical world for over two decades. Additionally, many Jewish service-oriented organizations and high school and college programmes have been created in North America to galvanize youth towards community service.

**Action Research and Contemporary Jewish Scholarship**

In considering the historical and textual connections between Jewish culture and action research, we conclude with a brief comment on the place of action research in contemporary Jewish scholarship. Practitioner action research (also called teacher research, educational action research or design research) has had a strong presence in the scholarship on Jewish education and Jewish communal service, including organizational life, social work and pastoral care. Recently, scholarship on Jewish identity, Jewish issues connected to community psychology and rabbinic education has engaged in practitioner and community-based action research. Similarly, service learning has also become a centrepiece in Jewish educational contexts—from elementary; supplementary and high school settings to rabbinical seminaries. Perhaps, it is from these settings that we may see the next generation of Jewish action research emerge.

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**See also** identity; Lewin, Kurt; practical knowing; practitioner inquiry; social justice

**Further Readings**


**JIPEMOYO PROJECT**

Jipemoyo was a Participatory Action Research project carried out in the Western Bagamoyo District in Tanzania in 1975–9 as a co-operative endeavour between Tanzanian and Finnish scholars as part of the programme of the Research and Planning Department of the Ministry of National Culture and Youth and the Academy of Finland's Department of Humanities. Two Tanzanian and four Finnish doctoral candidates formed the interdisciplinary core of researchers representing sociology, anthropology/ethnology, ethnomusicology and geography. Marja-Liisa Swantz, a lecturer in the University of Helsinki, and Odhiambo Anacleto, Director of Research in the Ministry of National Culture and Youth, shared the leadership of the project under the general theme 'The Role of Culture in the Restructuring Process of Rural Tanzania'. The aim was to enable the villagers to realize the development potential within their cultural context while utilizing the available resources.

The participatory approach was in line with the community-based *Ujamaa* politics of the nation, in which development of people by the people was spelt out. The concepts development, *maendeleo*, and culture, *utamaduni*, were being worked out in the country under