

# THE FOURTH DECADE OF LIFE

## Some Ideas and Thoughts about Facilitating Adult Jewish Learning

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*To meet the challenge of ensuring Jewish continuity, a model of lifelong Jewish education is proposed that will take into account the special characteristics of adult learners. Only when these characteristics and the life-cycle issues affecting adults are considered can adult Jewish learning be facilitated and functional Jewish literacy achieved.*

American Jewish education is now at a crossroads and will undergo significant changes in the coming decades (Chazan, 1988). In recent years, the challenge of Jewish continuity has occupied the attention of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America (1989-1990), the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' Commission on Jewish Education (1988), and the Jewish Welfare Board's Commission on Jewish Education (1984) on the national scene, as well as numerous local federated community planning efforts. It is this very challenge that the Think Tank of the Jewish Education Forum of the Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc. has been wrestling with for the past several years.

The Jewish Education Forum was established in 1986 by the Syracuse federation as a 3-year community educational planning initiative. The Think Tank was one of the mechanisms by which the Forum could address future educational challenges facing the Central New York Jewish community. It was charged with the responsibility of sorting out and discussing broad issues related to Jewish education and to recommend ways to enhance Jewish education locally. It comprised community representatives and university academicians with a variety of ideologies, Judaic perspectives, practices, and observances. All but two members (both of whom were rabbis) were lay people.

After 18 months of deliberation, the

Think Tank completed its report, *New Directions for Jewish Education Throughout the Lifespan* (Burstyn, 1990). It proposes a model of lifelong Jewish education, taking into account the processes through which independent learners are developed, the settings in which teaching and learning take place, the most desirable ways to deliver such education, and its most appropriate content. This article follows the format of that report based on the six categories for analysis generated by Corinne Smith (Suggested Outline, 1989) and the factors suggested by Allan Yozawitz (Proposed Factors, 1989): knowledge, motivation, strategies, teachers, setting, and organization of instruction.

### FUNCTIONAL JEWISH LITERACY

Central to the challenge of Jewish continuity is the question of what it means to be a functionally literate Jewish person living in the United States in the 1990s. The answer to this question is critical for it is the key that unlocks the door to its corollary question: What are the "basics" that ought to be possessed by adult Jews today?

At one time, there was a "one answer fits all" response to these questions. However, in today's world of limitless diversity, functional literacy can only be considered in the context of many variables, such as neighborhood, ideology, social milieu, profession, and family. Gender is another important variable that affects personal

and communal expectations about Jewish education and influences how adults make meaning of their educational experiences (Belenky et al., 1986).

Functional literacy has communal implications as well (Woocher, 1989, p. 5). Consider these questions: What are the expectations that the community sets for an educated Jew, and what are the realities of the community life in which adult Jews live?

In addressing the issue of functional literacy, what is often overlooked is the most obvious: the special characteristics of the adult learner. Adult learning theory holds that learning can be enhanced by facilitators who understand "where the learner is at," how the adult learner perceives knowledge, and how the learner learns that knowledge.

In addition to these factors, functional literacy cannot be addressed without considering life-cycle issues that affect the adult learner. This article examines some of the life-cycle issues that affect the Jewish learning of adults between ages 30 and 40. The focus is on *how* to educate, rather than the specifics of what the 30- to 40-year-old *should* know.

### KNOWLEDGE

The vocabulary of Jewish life and basic Jewish skills that individuals possess at any given time vary widely. Learners' formal Jewish knowledge bases and experiences differ. How then, given this diversity, do we identify where people are in their Jewish lives and then build on it?

We can start by looking at "where the learner is at" (Lindeman, 1961). Life-cycle phase research is helpful in this respect, although it is somewhat dated. According to Levinson (1978), typical life-cycle issues affecting men in the third decade concern "settling down" and "becoming one's own person." (Levinson is currently completing research on women's life-cycle issues.) Since the late 1970s women and many men have moved beyond the caregiver *or* worker role

to incorporating both roles. Choosing a partner, starting a family, managing a home and a career, and assuming civic responsibilities are therefore central concerns of both men and women in their thirties. Research on the evolution of faith throughout the life cycle shows that little change in this area occurs between ages 30 to 39 (Stokes, 1987).

Despite the different terms used to characterize the third decade—biological clock (Neugarten, 1968) and the deadline decade (Sheehy, 1974)—there is general agreement that most adults aged 30 to 40 face at least one or more of the following life issues:

- parenting issues
- non-parenting issues
- singles issues
- marriage issues
- professional ethics and Jewish life
- Jewish education as a career goal
- community participation

These life issues provide opportunities for a Jewish response, serving as natural entry points for Jewish education. For example, knowledge about becoming a parent, raising a Jewish child, and educating a Jewish child are important parenting issues. Setting up a Jewish home is a marriage issue. Providing education to enable informed choices is relevant to each of these issues.

### MOTIVATION

Houle's typology (1961) of adult learner orientations identifies three types of adult learners based on the motivation for learning; it remains the single most influential motivational study today (Cross, 1982).

1. *Goal-oriented learners* use learning to accomplish a specific goal.
2. *Activity-oriented learners* participate primarily for the sake of the activity surrounding the goal.

3. *Learning-oriented learners* pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake.

Most of the more salient motivations for the 30- to 40-year-old adult Jewish learners are goal oriented:

- finding practical answers to questions
- fulfilling one's personal and communal responsibility
- increasing one's competency
- learning the "how to's," i.e., the specifics of participation
- learning the vocabulary of Jewish life
- learning to live with the particular versus the universal
- teaching children: *Dor L'Dor*
- seeking specific information
- determining the kind of Jewish education to be "purchased"

However, many motivations are *activity oriented*, centering around social or peer-related considerations:

- "keeping up with the Goldbergs": status-related considerations
- social satisfaction
- a way of dealing with guilt feelings
- being part of the adult education community
- affiliating with the Jewish community
- learning for social action

Still other motivations are *learning oriented*:

- finding answers to personal questions
- pursuing the internal quest for meaning
- seeking personal renewal, spiritual growth, inner peace and comfort, and spiritual satisfaction
- commitment to lifelong learning
- Torah L'Shma

In addition, Yozawitz (1989) identifies these other motivations: peer pressure, improved social role functioning (achieving as a spouse, employee, parent, or businessperson), self-esteem, gaining fun/love/

affective lift, mortality issues, spiritual awe, and gaining completeness.

These motivations suggest that curricula that provide appropriate skills to function as a Jew in today's society might contain elements of the following:

- Jewish "cultural literacy"
- vocabulary of Jewish life
- some history and geography
- comparative religions
- Jewish life and the community (communal civics)
- Jewish life and the world
- ritual
- Mitzvot
- Tikkun Olam
- Tzedakah

One cannot talk about motivation without also considering barriers to learning. Cross (1982) identifies three types of barriers to adult learning: situational, institutional, and dispositional.

*Situational barriers* are those arising from one's situation in life at a given time, such as lack of time due to job and home responsibilities, lack of money, lack of child care, lack of parental role models, lack of transportation, lack of a place to study or practice, and lack of support from family or friends.

*Institutional barriers* are all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities. These include inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study, required courses that are not readily available, too much "red tape" to enroll, no information about offerings, conflict with secular education methods, and teacher role models who do not provide reinforcement.

*Dispositional barriers* are those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner. Examples of these include feeling "too old" to learn, lack of interest in learning, low grades in the past, lack of self-confidence in learning, lack of

enjoyment in studying, reluctance to seem too ambitious, and lack of knowledge of what to learn or to what it would lead.

We need to examine these three types of barriers further to understand their relationship to the Jewish educational process for adults in their thirties. Are the barriers the same for Jewish learners as for other learners? For example, attitudes that devalue Jewish education might be a specifically Jewish dispositional barrier. We need to acquire knowledge of other "Jewish" barriers.<sup>1</sup>

### STRATEGIES

According to recent research on adult Jewish learning, only a tiny fraction of Jewish adults are actually enrolled in Jewish-sponsored education. In fact fewer than one in ten adult American Jews is currently enrolled in adult Jewish education classes in most cities (Fishman, 1987). Therefore it is essential to provide more alternative, less formal modes of adult Jewish learning. For Jews aged 30 to 40, most Jewish education takes place outside the classroom.

Lack of time is a very real problem for Jews in the 30 to 40 age span. Their concern with career goals mandates that exposure and access to Jewish education be given through outreach efforts at or near the workplace, such as "downtown lunch

and learn" sessions. Other options for learners include weekend courses, community activity participation, religious services in suburban locations, and travel opportunities. Television, computers, electronic mail, newsletters, newspapers, journals, and magazines can reach learners in their homes.

Strategies using multiple modes of delivery that are currently employed by adult educators in the secular world should be used in the delivery of adult Jewish education.

### TEACHERS

Teachers of adults need to be knowledgeable about adult learners in order to facilitate or create the conditions to support learning. What is appropriate for one group of learners or for one adult learner may or may not be appropriate for others. Jewish educators need to *become smarter* and incorporate those "smarts" into how Jewish education is taught.

For adults, their peers too are teachers. Support groups of all kinds are increasingly popular as a means of informal and formal Jewish learning. These support groups, *chugim* or *bavurot*, form around similar interests, needs, and ritual celebrations.

### SETTING

The definition of setting for adult Jewish learning is that *every situation is an opportunity* for adult learning. The synagogue is no longer *the* normative model for Jewish learning for most age groups. Tough (1979) has found that 80% of all adult learning takes place outside the formal classroom setting. It is not yet known how applicable this finding is to adult Jewish education. Some would argue that the Jewish home is just as effective an educational setting as the classroom. Does that mean that traditional settings, such as synagogue classes, continuing education courses, and Jewish community colleges, are not the most effective means of reaching potential Jewish learners?

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<sup>1</sup>A study of barriers (deterrents) to Jewish education is currently being conducted under the aegis of the Syracuse Jewish Federation and Syracuse University's School of Education. The overall purpose of the research project, "Exploring Adult Education: A Community Perspective," is to gather information on participation in adult Jewish education. One of its specific objectives is to determine the nature and importance of deterrents to participation in formal adult Jewish education. Use of cluster analysis as a statistical procedure will help identify groups of Jewish adults according to similarities and differences in barriers to participation. Background characteristics will be used to develop a detailed profile of each identified group. These data will be used locally to develop better planning strategies to enhance both formal and informal adult Jewish education.

If we agree that is the case, then we must focus more of our attention on non-traditional settings: home study, learning in the car through listening to audio tapes, and worksites. We need to learn more about where and when learning takes place.

### ORGANIZATION OF INSTRUCTION

Instruction should be experientially based; relevant to the stage, age, and phase developmental level of the learner; and relevant to real life settings. In addition it must be collaborative and participatory. It must be organized around specific developmental competencies and use adult-relevant methodology, such as discussion groups, small groups, independent study, field experiences, and contract learning.

Experiential learning must be used. Teaching is done "as if" it were connected to knowledge, but in fact the current practice is to disregard that wisdom. Thus, learning and acting are maintained as separate and distinct categories of knowing. Such a division does not serve Jewish education well since its goal is to have scholarship translated into action.

Organization of instruction is also linked to issues of control. Who has control over the learning? In most *formal learning* settings, instruction is organized so that the learner has little control over means of learning. *Informal learning* affords the opportunity for the learner to have control over the means, but not the learning objectives themselves. In *self-directed learning* the learner controls both the means and the objectives. All these ways of organizing instruction are relevant. The practitioner needs to know how and when to use each.

### SUMMARY

Functional literacy for adult learners between the ages of 30 to 40 needs to be looked at from a number of perspectives. To the *learner*, it means being able to respond Jewishly to real life issues confronting the 30- to 40-year-old. It means

knowing enough to ask questions. It means being able to transmit a heritage from generation to generation.

Much of what we already know about adult learning in general applies to those in their thirties. However this decade of life needs to be examined in more detail. We need to have a better knowledge base of the concerns and issues that are important to the learners.

To the *practitioner*, functional literacy means gaining a better understanding of the adult life cycle phenomenon in order to understand factors that affect learning for the 30- to 40-year-old.

Institutional barriers need to be removed, providing for more flexible scheduling, more outreach efforts, and shorter course modules. Content must be relevant to adult development issues and adults' readiness to learn (Knowles, 1980). Jewish education also needs to value integrated learning over separate learning (Belenky et al., 1986), providing an opportunity for learners to be able to connect their Jewish knowledge with their knowledge in general. This means that instrumental-type learning situations need to be created, along with curricula based on these developmental concerns.

To the *community*, functional literacy means needing to abandon many of the traditional structures of Jewish education. It means looking for new ways to foster a community of Jewish learners: examining our expectations and definitions of what it means to be an educated Jew.

Functional literacy means *continuing* education, not just kindergarten (or its supplementary school equivalent), but going beyond. It means that structures of support for Jewish education in community need to be strengthened, thereby constantly creating and recreating the climate for Jewish education to flourish and be valued. It must be remembered that "education requires a community and a culture from which to draw its mandate and its goals" (Woocher, 1989, p. 4).

In conclusion, facilitating adult Jewish learning is inextricably linked to relevance

—relevance to the individual and the realities of Jewish communal life today. The process of becoming functionally literate is one of ongoing growth and development. If we take Robert Fulghum at his word that “all I really need to know I learned in kindergarten,” then Jewish education is in serious trouble. Many adult Jews never even reach kindergarten in terms of their Jewish learning. Rethinking Jewish education along the lifespan appears to be the most generative approach in drawing the “new map” (Chazan, 1988) of Jewish education and learning.

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