

Adult Jewish Learning – Ten Years of Returning: 1989-1999

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The 1989 Conference on Adult Jewish Learning in Chicago was a turning point in my professional life. I gave a brief presentation on our first efforts to establish the Florence Melton Adult Mini-Schools in Chicago, New York, Columbus and San Francisco, and I did a lot of listening and observing. Something very significant was happening.

The momentum of the conference led to the publication and distribution of a report of the newly organized JESNA Adult Jewish Learning Task Force entitled “Adult Jewish Learning: Reshaping the Future.” It documented a marked increase in the number of programs and in participation in adult study since 1985. That growth, however, was not considered to be an indication of a long-term phenomenon. The new adult learning experiences were described as “a window of opportunity that might soon close.”

But it was not a passing moment in Twentieth Century Jewish educational history. It was the beginning of a turning Back to the Sources, to quote the title of a now well-known, well-used book written by Barry Holtz in 1984. The book and the JESNA study were indications of things to come. In 1993, in the introduction to its “Adult Jewish Learning Reader,” JESNA’s Adult Jewish Learning Task Force observed that the trend appeared to be continuing.

Communities that completed the two-year Wexner Heritage Program find study groups continuing at their own expense. The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School opens new community classes while maintaining classes in participating communities. CLAL extends itself to meet demands for its unique programming and the National Jewish Outreach Program continues to draw large audiences. The National Hebrew Literacy Campaign and similar programs are finding new audiences as well.

These national efforts combined with the ongoing work of synagogues, departments of Judaic Studies, and Colleges of Jewish Studies around the country. Organizations like Jewish Community Centers, Union of American Hebrew Congregations and women’s membership organizations began to make adult learning a more important part of their missions. As the trend continues, more and more homegrown institutions have been developed in individual communities: Boston’s *Me’ah* expanding now to Cleveland and Stanford; Chicago’s Dawn Schuman Institute, New York’s *Drisha* Institute, Philadelphia’s *Aleph* and the Jewish and American Project, The Foundation for Jewish Studies in Rockville, MD, Lehrhaus Judaica in San Francisco, and The *Kolel* in Toronto. Indicating another trend, some of these institutions are supported by the resources of family foundations.

A discussion of indicators of growth in adult Jewish learning would be incomplete without a comment on the plethora of excellent opportunities to learn on the Internet. One can study *parashat ha-shavua*, learn about holidays, enter chat rooms to discuss almost any aspect of Judaism, or participate in credit and non-credit classes. Almost every organization has a webpage that not only facilitates study but also directs learners to other resources according to specific Jewish interests. Book vendors on-line join the providers of audio tapes and fax subscriptions in making learning accessible. Never in history has it been so easy to bring Jewish literature into your home.

Understanding The Renaissance in Learning

Why? Concern For Continuity

In 1990, the Jewish community was able to shift its attention from rescuing hostage Jewish communities around the world and guarding the security of Israel to

looking at what was happening in our own institutions and homes. The Council of Jewish Federations conducted a population study of our Jewish community that, among other things, pointed out increasing patterns of assimilation and intermarriage. It served to call attention to something that community leaders had observed, but had not yet felt to be an urgent problem.

The study has been criticized on many grounds, but all admit that it changed the atmosphere in which federated communities operate. There were discussions on intermarriage; is it good or bad for the Jews? How can we bring people into the affiliated community from the periphery of Jewish life? What should be our focus, inreach or outreach? What do we do about the fact that assimilation, intermarriage and a shrinking birthrate are decreasing the percentage of Jews in the general population of America? The population study gave birth to a new language, including that word CONTINUITY. Will the Jewish people in North America survive in the next century? Will there be a continuation of all that we have inherited from the last 3000 years?

One answer to the question of why there has been a growth in adult Jewish learning may be that the concerns reflected in the discussions of continuity have begun to affect behavior. Individuals see Jewish learning as something they can do to contribute to the continuation and vitality of the Jewish people. This response is reflected in the numbers of community leaders who are involved in serious Jewish study. It may be part of the motivation of participation in parent and family education. It is an aspect of the motivation of over 3,500 people who this year alone are fulfilling a two-year commitment to study in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. There is a growing sense of responsibility for the Jewishness of this generation and the next which is expressed through learning. The sometimes oppressive concerns of continuity and its ties to assimilation and intermarriage are presently being reframed with a new initiative of the federated world directed toward a Jewish Renaissance. RENAISSANCE with its rich connotations of excitement, creativity, and discovery urge us toward a renewed, energized commitment to Jewish learning and support of learning institutions.

Why? New Population Groups

There are other factors that may be influencing the growth of adult Jewish learning. There are new populations within the Jewish community with high motivation for learning.

Women: Women were not a significant part of the Jewish learning community until the 60's. It was not considered important for women to know more than what they learned from their mothers about keeping a Jewish home and from their teachers in Sunday school. It wasn't until the late 50's that growing numbers became *bnot mitzvah*. Today, women who grew up before *bat mitzvah* became popular, are making up for what they missed in classes, *tefillah* groups, *Rosh Hodesh* groups, and women's retreats. In the Orthodox community, it is only within the last five years that schools for adult women have flourished. Feminism has increased women's sense of Jewish entitlement and involvement. Jewish leadership in synagogues and in institutions of higher learning now includes women who are models of learned and learning Jews.

Intermarried: Those who are choosing Judaism in increasing numbers are among our most highly motivated learners. A course or process accompanying conversion is not sufficient. Many of us know spouses converted to Judaism who are bringing their Jewish-born partner to synagogue and to other forums for learning and who take the responsibility to teach children very seriously.

Older Adults: The percentage of older adults within the Jewish community is growing each year. Many people are retiring early, leaving them with more discretionary time. They are healthy, intellectually curious, and want to devote their time to meaningful pursuits. They seek out like-minded people with whom they can share Jewish learning and Jewish experiences. Elderhostel is thriving. Classes for seniors are filled to the brim.

Babyboomers: The Babyboomers are a powerful generation who have changed the American scene each decade as they have matured. They too are filling Jewish classrooms. Unlike other generations before them who have tolerated a certain amount of inaccessible knowledge, these people moving into their 50's want to know it all. They will not tolerate their own ignorance and are not embarrassed to admit not knowing – as long as they are in the process of remedying the situation. It isn't enough just to learn from being in the community or in the family. They want the whole detailed picture of Judaism, and they are seeking high quality educational opportunities to fill that need. They attend classes because they are a group that takes life seriously and wants to find meaning in their day to day lives. They have been referred to as a generation of seekers, of searchers.

Why? Search for Spirituality

This relates to another strong motivating force in our community represented by new book titles such as: When All You Wanted is Not Enough; Spiritual Judaism; Jewish Spiritual Guidance: Finding Our Way to God; God Whispers. There is a yearning for connecting with the transcendent. There is a longing for discovering something sacred that permeates our everyday existence and extends beyond its limits. Some Jews study texts to hear the voice of God. They examine those aspects of observance and belief that enable them to relate to something beyond. They look at Jewish history to find models of living and coping from other centuries. They study ethics to uncover the spirituality found in relationships. Jewish learning allows these seekers to discover their own soul and that of the Jewish people. In the process, people realize the joy and the spirituality of study itself.

Why? Accessibility of Text

Back to the Sources was the first, contemporary book dedicated to introducing the sea of Jewish literature to the novice. Other publications have joined in bridging the gulf between classical Jewish texts and the new learner. There are more English translations of texts, texts on computer software, and more vocalized sources that have made it possible for more and more learners to approach and understand classical texts. It invites the beginning mature student, the non-reader of Hebrew to participate in the 3000-year conversation that has been the core of Jewish life and Jewish survival. Students can examine the literature from which Jewish life today has developed. They can touch the source of who we are and what we will become. As Jewish texts become available to the learner, more people seeking authentic Jewish learning can participate in it.

Why? Development of the Field of Adult Jewish Learning

Finally, there are factors emerging in the field of adult Jewish learning that stimulate interest and participation. As indicated, there are now more providers of adult learning. That fact in itself would not be sufficient to explain the growth in the number of people studying. Adult learners are self-directed, voluntary students. They vote with their feet. It is not enough for learning opportunities to exist; they have to be good. We are witnessing the raising of the standards for adult learning. There is a growing professionalism among providers and teachers. A provider has to give people what they want, and it has to be excellent. It requires

knowledge of the nature of the adult Jewish student. The field of adult development and learning is a relatively new one, and the specific characteristics of Jewish adult development are just beginning to be explored. There is a growing body of knowledge on the nature of adulthood. No longer merely the end product of childhood and adolescence, the adult experiences many forms of development that influence who he/she is in a classroom. Additionally, it is not enough for teachers to know Jewish history, they must also know how to teach it to adults. And knowing how to teach history is different from knowing how to teach Bible, or ethics, or literature.

All this has led to the need for professional development experiences for teachers of adults and to the establishment of classes in our training institutions for the study of adult learning and development. Research and experimentation in the field is growing, and a literature of theory and practice is slowly being developed. The new Alliance for Adult Jewish Learning, an association for providers and teachers of adults has gotten off to a modest beginning. Its website and conferences bring professionals together to exchange expertise and to solve problems together.

Why? Community Support

Communities are responding to the growing interest in adult learning. Full-time Jewish educators are being hired by Federations, Education Agencies, and Jewish Community Centers to service the growing numbers of adult learners. Some of these individuals are specialists in adult education who oversee the creation and quality of a variety of community and synagogue learning experiences. Other individuals being hired are outstanding scholars and teachers who attract even more people to Jewish study. There is a new paradigm emerging that can only strengthen Jewish life. Funds are being directed to programs and services that further adult learning. Commitment, energy and creativity are being invested in education for adults. Schools for adults, like schools for children, are claiming their share of community resources. The results just may assure a renaissance in Jewish life and secure a vital, dynamic, God-filled future for all of us.

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