

Each Person Has a Name: Student Centered Research at the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School

By: **Betsy Dolgin Katz**

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School first opened its doors in 1986. Since then, thousands of adult learners have participated in this two-year school for adult Jewish studies in over 50 communities throughout North America, Australia and England. Students in the Mini-School study one day a week, 30 weeks per year, for two-and-a-half hours each meeting. Strongly shaped by what is known from research in the field of adult learning, the focus of policy and practice has been the individual learner who makes this serious commitment to learn about Judaism.

This paper reports on research about students attending the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. It gathers information on three aspects of the students' experience: 1) motivation for enrolling, 2) what potential learners expect from their teachers, and 3) the impact of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School.

MOTIVATION

Early on in the school's history, reacting to an awareness that FMAMS might be part of a growing educational, cultural and social phenomenon, Dr. Gaby Horenczyk of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, conducted a research project. Its goal was to verify that adult Jewish education programs in general, and the Mini-School in particular, seem to respond to a widespread emerging need among American Jewish adults. His research sought to identify the characteristics of the students and their motivations for joining the program. Its ultimate goal was to use this knowledge for improvement of the school, adapting it to the nature, needs and characteristics of the students (Horenczyk, 1990).

In 1989, two questionnaires were administered to all first-year students in 10 Mini-School sites; in addition, instructors and students were interviewed, and on-site observations of classes and other activities took place. In 1992, as a follow-up to this initial research, more intensive interviews were conducted with 20 additional students in Chicago and Milwaukee.

What was the students' motivation for enrolling in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School? The results of the research were congruent with findings in general education (Houle, 1961). Not surprisingly, the majority of learners attend the Mini-School to gain knowledge of Judaism. "Broadening my Jewish knowledge" was rated as "very important" by 90% of the respondents on the 1989 questionnaire. Further investigation of the survey and the interviews led to refinement of our knowledge of these "goal-oriented" (Houle, 1961) learners. They included individuals with many different levels of Jewish learning.

1. The individual who has never had an opportunity to study Judaism

I think I am the first Hungarian student in the Melton Program...I come from a Jewish family, but typically for the era when I grew up in Hungary, I was told about my identity only after I was 14 years old. The main reason for this revelation was that some of my classmates made remarks which I could not understand Agnes Kilben Tenafly NJ

which I could not understand. Agnes Kilben Tenafly, NJ

2. The student who has an elementary Jewish education or, for those who have converted to Judaism, just an introductory class.

As a child I only had a very basic understanding of the Jewish religion. Sitting in Temple not too long ago during the High Holy Days, I had a desire to delve more deeply into my Jewish heritage and traditions. The Mini-School offered me that opportunity. Elizabeth Henschel Tenafly, NJ

In the years after my formal Jewish training ended with my confirmation, it seemed that most of the expansion of my knowledge of Judaism came from looking up isolated questions that would arise from time to time....It isn't always obvious how these pieces of information fit into the whole puzzle of Judaism. Norm Rosenbaum St. Louis, MO

3. The person who has taken a class here or there, attended periodic lectures, traveled to Israel.

This person has accumulated bits and pieces of learning and is seeking a more systematic, more comprehensive knowledge. He/she wants to know what he/she knows and is seeking deeper ideas.

I thought I knew a lot about Judaism, and then there was the Mini-School. The new was very new and enlightening; the familiar was wonderfully enhanced....Even though I consider myself a person with a strong Jewish identity, the Mini-School has helped me define why I am who I am. Jackie Benis Columbus, OH

We also asked "Why does this individual seeking knowledge come to the Mini-School at this particular time?" The age of a student and the particular stage of life sometimes become the motivating factor. There are times in the life-cycle that can be called teachable moments. A reason for enrollment rated "very important" by 83% of the students interviewed in 1989 was that of "being a more knowledgeable Jewish parent." Some students indicated that they wanted to learn about Judaism so that they would be able to transmit this knowledge to their children; others stated that they wanted to become better "Jewish role models" for their children (Horenczyk, 1990). Many of those who made this statement were parents of children entering the Jewish education system; another large group were parents of bar and bat mitzvah age children.

I had been looking for a class like this since I got married and knew that I wanted my children to grow up being more Jewish than I was growing up. The Mini-School has helped me understand Jewish ways of life as well as the holidays. I was able to learn with my children and answer their questions and share in the meaning and feeling of being Jewish. Gwen Kushnick Ft.Lauderdale, FL

Mini-School students report enrolling in response to other transitional events in their lives as well. It may be the birth of a child, a divorce, or the death of a loved one. Learning related to life-cycle events and transitions is highly significant, to the extent, in some cases, of bringing about a sought-for change in worldview (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991).

Other reasons given for seeking Jewish knowledge were "exploring my identity" and "spiritual searching." Thirty-eight percent of those questioned rated "exploring identity" as very important (Horenczyk, 1990). Those

rating these considerations as high were people of all ages and all levels of educational background.

Dr. Horenczyk analyzed the findings in the following way:

Recently, Professor (Steven) Cohen suggested an interesting distinction between two types of “commitment” related to Jewish attitudes and behavior. “Commitment to continuity” refers to a concern for Jewish survival and to the preservation of Jewish identity, with little emphasis on any specific Judaic content. “Commitment to content” refers to an interest in or dedication to specific ideas or traditions within the Jewish culture and community. Taking the risk of over-generalization, I propose to see the Mini-School student as the kind of Jew who is moving from one type of commitment to the other. Having quite a strong basic Jewish identity, these students have decided to turn to serious Jewish study to find cognitive meaning in their identity (Horenczyk, 1990).

The Mini-School students interviewed gave reasons for enrolling that fell into two additional general categories: Many students were “learning-oriented.” This means that they love to learn. Having heard that the Mini-School is a strong, successful program with good teachers, they chose to make the two-year commitment. Learning oriented students enroll for the sake of study itself and the intellectual rewards that it brings. For some, it becomes a matter of who the teacher is, regardless of any other variable; if he/she is known to be an excellent instructor, the classes will be valuable and pleasurable no matter what subject is being taught.

The final group of learners to emerge from the research is the “social-oriented” learners. Although “meeting Jews” and “meeting people” were found to be relatively unimportant in the 1990 study, these reasons were given frequently during the subsequent interviews. Typical comments were: “I came to be with my husband;” “It was a good thing for us to do as a group;” and “My friends told me I would love it.” New arrivals in a community and older students were among those who demonstrated a strong social orientation.

My friend Candy took it the year before I did and had called me...I said, “Candy, 30 weeks! I can’t do this, I’m too busy. She loved it.” So the next year she quit and I started; then we took Year Two together. Rose Robinson Boca Raton, FL

WHAT LEARNERS EXPECT FROM THEIR TEACHERS

In 1997, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School initiated a new process for the hiring of faculty. It has generated both excellent school faculties and valuable information on learners’ expectations of teachers.

Twenty-two students in three communities—San Francisco, Baltimore, and Miami—participated in 15-20 minute lessons taught by 23 prospective faculty members. Following these lessons, discussions of the students were facilitated by professionals to determine whom they would recommend to become Mini-School faculty. The records of the proceedings in the three communities yield a picture of excellent adult teaching. The qualities described in the students’ discussions have been divided into four categories. Although valuable in its own right, the information has been utilized in subsequent faculty orientation meetings conducted by the staff of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School.

1. “Teach Me Something New Each Week”

By far, the most important quality discussed was the ability of the teacher to impart new information. Although there was a difference in the knowledge level of each prospective student around the tables, it was expected that a teacher would be able to add to the knowledge and understanding of each one. "If I am going to spend an evening away from home, it has to be worthwhile," one student insisted.

In Miami, a student did not place all the responsibility on the teacher. "I liked the discussion the teacher led because we could learn from each other." Students differentiated between directed, meaningful discussions and "rap sessions," which they characterized as "just sharing opinions."

2. "I Want To Feel Respected"

The Mini-School works to increase the faculty's sensitivity to some adult learners who enter our classrooms feeling inadequate or incompetent in the world of Jewish education. Compared with their very high level of knowledge and expertise in the secular world, their Jewish growth has been limited. They sometimes feel they have missed out on something someone their age ought to know. At times, their inadequacy is related to misgivings about their ability to read a difficult text or to be in an environment where they will be exposed to Hebrew.

Many of the students' comments on whether they felt respected related to this issue. They wanted to be taught at a high adult level. They wanted to be challenged. One exchange in Baltimore about the questions a teacher asked led one student to proclaim:

"I felt I was in Hebrew School again. Fill in the blank! Who said to whom?"

On the other hand, they praised highly the teacher who introduced a discussion of creation by scratching out notes on a violin (which she obviously could not play) and then played a tape of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. By asking, "What does this have to do with the story of creation?" she motivated the students to think deeply and creatively. Respect is also seen in how a teacher listens to what students say. Learners like hearing their own words repeated or referred to in discussions. They appreciate teachers who remember what they have said and ask them questions or make comments related to their statements. It is important for learners to know that their questions are welcome, that they are an important part of the class and not an interruption.

How teachers respond to questions is also an indicator of respect. Students want to feel that their questions are not "dumb questions." Understanding that not all questions can be answered, how teachers do not answer them is significant. "He treated my question as if I were joking, and I was not," complained one student.

3. "...To Teach With a Highlighter"

Students can easily determine whether a teacher has given time and attention to planning the lesson. They point to characteristics indicating that what a teacher decides to teach was a last-minute decision. Adult learners want to see indications that the teacher has thought about the class beforehand. They relate this to their desire to learn as much as they can, and the teacher's recognition of this.

It was extremely important to students that a lesson reflect a thoughtful sequence of ideas and activities. Many seemed to prefer a closely chiseled presentation to one that contained stories, particularly those that were not

directly to the point. They were impatient when “the lesson seemed to drag.” Others liked the stories very much and defended the use of stories with a specific purpose to enhance the classes. Obviously, groups were not always unanimous on what they wanted their teachers to do.

A related quality was not mentioned frequently but worthy of attention is reflected in the comment, “The teacher seemed to teach with a highlighter.” This particular teacher had said, “Of all the things I am going to say today, this is going to be the most important.” The students liked teachers who emphasize a point to remember. They appreciate the assistance in prioritizing the information presented.

Also in this category dealing with organization and clarity is the learners’ appreciation of teachers who use timelines, pictures or maps as part of their presentation. Many adult learners want to place new information in the perspective of other information they may know. Some of them display characteristics of visual rather than aural/verbal learners and respond favorably to the use of visual aids. In Miami, students commented favorably on the use of a map to talk about Jewish migration following the Spanish Inquisition. In Baltimore, pictures from the book *The Tabernacle* “made the lesson come alive.”

4. “I Want to Connect With a Teacher”

Frequently students’ statements began with “I liked him (her)” or “I could really connect with her (him).” The definition of what comprises rapport between student and teacher is elusive, but in their conversations, students related it to qualities such as “warmth,” “energy,” “passion,” “sense of humor,” “sincerity,” “commitment.” How each of these qualities is manifest could be a study in itself, but in their simplest expression, they are an important part of students’ expectations. Learners also commented on the willingness of teachers to share themselves with their students. Their ability to bring personal experiences and ideas into a lesson enhanced the learning environment—unless it was done excessively. In Baltimore, someone observed, “If I am going to spend over an hour a week for 30 weeks with a teacher, I have to like him.”

SELECTIONS FROM ACQUIRED HABITS OF THE HEART

To mark the completion of the Mini-School’s first decade of adult Jewish learning, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School Institute commissioned Roberta L. Goodman, Julie Tammivaara and Robert S. Goodman to conduct an impact study to determine, through qualitative research, how the school has affected the lives of its students. In-depth interviews were conducted among 25 Mini-School graduates from Boca Raton, Florida; Cincinnati, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and St. Louis, Missouri, to examine the school’s impact and effectiveness. Three teachers and four site coordinators were also interviewed. Interviews took place in May and June 1996.

The graduates interviewed were diverse in terms of age, synagogue affiliation, marital status, and geographic location. Different factors brought each into the Mini-School, but they all reported real change in various aspects of their lives as a result of their studies. The purpose of the research was to uncover the specific ways in which the impact was felt in their lives. The respondents were also questioned about those elements of the Mini-School which caused these changes. The aspects most frequently cited were the teachers, the curriculum, their fellow students, and the interactive learning environment.

What follows are primarily selections from or summaries of a report written by Nancy Ozeri, titled *Acquired*

Habits of the Heart, which focuses on that part of the research concerning the Mini-School's effect on participants. Responses are in eight categories that were the most prominent areas of change reported by the respondents.

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE

The substantive, systematically developed curriculum of the FMAMS is a significant element of the school. Although it emphasizes the connection knowledge has to how we live, information is presented on a sophisticated conceptual level. Increasing an individual's Jewish knowledge is the Mini-School's primary goal.

[I am] just more knowledgeable, more aware of what is going on...And the more you learn, the more you can tie things together...It is cumulative. You learn this, you learn this, you learn this, but then it is not one plus one plus one. Now it is like four instead of three. Bernie Sirkin St. Louis, MO

Learning the skills to help navigate Jewish sources was mentioned by many as valuable. The ability to know that I can pick up a Tanakh and find passages, know how to read them, know how to look for commentary, know some of the sources to go to, be knowledgeable about what the basic Jewish texts are, what the basis of our lives and our customs are. Jane Klein Boca Raton

Some respondents described FMAMS as a framework for organizing and making sense of their Jewish knowledge.

It has made me more secure about what I know and what I have learned. I have been studying and taking classes for a dozen or so years. But because I never had this sort of comprehensive plan, I didn't know where everything fit. For me it has been an organizing vehicle. Barbara Shuman Pittsburgh, PA

COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

The concept of "making learning a fixed habit" a regular part of one's life as an adult, is one that is noted frequently throughout core Jewish texts. Many extend the commitment to study beyond the 60 weeks of the FMAMS, as they go on to take graduate courses provided by the sites, enter other study frameworks, or do independent reading.

It made me want to seek more. I don't know exactly how I will do that, but it made me feel like there is more to learn, more to question, more to discover. I want to continue. I feel like I have just begun this quest, and I want to continue it. David Kalson Pittsburgh, PA

CHANGING OBSERVANCE

Beyond the habit of learning, the behavioral changes that respondents most often attributed to their studies at the Mini-School were in the area of observance of rituals related to the holidays, Shabbat, prayer services and kashrut. This happens despite the fact that the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School emphasizes the whys and whats of ritual observance rather than how to perform them. Practices are discussed on a conceptual level in

the curriculum, and great emphasis is placed on using a multi-denominational approach.

(FMAMS) has helped me create a focus in my life. Even though Melton doesn't prescribe a specific Jewish perspective, it has helped me create a more specific religious perspective. It has given me the information or has helped me get more information so that I can make decisions that are meaningful for me and for my family in terms of how I express myself Jewishly. Diana Goodman Cincinnati

It seems like I always had wanted to keep kosher. As a child, I remember asking my parents why we didn't keep kosher, and my father would say, "Because we don't and if you choose to keep kosher when you are an adult, do it." I was able to come home and say to my husband, "I want to keep kosher and these are the reasons why." I think I had a better sense of who I was. ...and why I wanted to do it. Karen Rader St. Louis, MO

Other students found that what they studied reinforced what they were already doing. Many reported that they found new meaning in observances that had been part of their entire lives. The new knowledge widened horizons for some respondents, encouraging them to experiment and search for a meaningful religious framework.

AUGMENTING JEWISH IDENTITY

In this study, Jewish identity refers to the ways in which people perceive, experience and feel about themselves as Jews. The following responses reflect changed feelings and self-perceptions. Several spoke of how they now integrate Judaism into their daily lives and have a new understanding of their relationship to the world.

I identify a lot more Jewishly. I start thinking about an issue from what my Jewish ethics teaches me about it. Not that I'll always be able to go along with the Orthodox perspective, but this is as opposed to just sort of...deciding what I would think or do by feeling. My Jewishness in a starting place for me. Laura Horowitz Pittsburgh, PA

Students reported transformation in their identification with Jewish history and the Jewish people. Their studies challenged their belief systems. This sometime led to significant life and career changes.

A year and a half into the Mini-School, I still couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with myself as a lawyer. I started to realize that I was asking the wrong question because the answer wasn't going to be what I wanted to do as a lawyer. I had to ask a more fundamental question. What do you want to do with your life, your time, what is important to you? Jerry Seidler Pittsburgh, PA

INFLUENCE ON THE FAMILY

Attendance in the Mini-School has a ripple effect, touching the family and communal systems of which participants are a part. In addition to shared experiences by spouses, day school and supplementary school parents note changes in their relationships with their children based on the fact that their learning reinforces what their children are learning.

I talked about Melton every week when I came home and reported what I learned. Andy, my

son, in particular was very interested because it was the same thing he was learning in day school. And so it became a family thing. I took them to the Melton events. They were very encouraging. Even if I was tired, [they said] "No, go to class. That is for you." They never competed for my time on Wednesdays. Iris Salsman St. Louis, MO

We are not only studying together, but there is a carryover when we walk out of the classroom. We dialogue and study together, read together, debate together; when we are in the car, we can talk Melton. When we are on the beach, we can talk about the course work. When we celebrate Shabbat, that is a direct reflection of Melton. When we talk about ethical issues or issues in the news, we can relate to them either halakhically or in terms of Jewish morality or Jewish ethics. This experience touches all aspects of our lives and, as a result, has truly enriched us. Michael Dean Cincinnati, OH

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND IMPACT

Interviewees were asked to share their perceptions concerning what differences FMAMS had made in their communities. Several themes emerged: FMAMS normalized participation in adult learning by making adult education accessible. It established a standard for quality adult Jewish education. FMAMS served to help raise people's expectations about the importance of being a learned Jew to live a Jewish life. Finally, the Mini-School fostered a sense of community, bringing together people who normally would not be in touch with one another, yet who shared a commitment to Jewish learning and Jewish life.

I'm not afraid to go into an Orthodox shul. I know Orthodox people. I know Conservative people, Reform people, rabbis of all three. I am not intimidated, and I know that they are accepting, to a point, of me and I of them. It has created a greater understanding here within the community. Martha Ginsburg St. Louis, MO

COMMUNITY AND SYNAGOGUE LEADERSHIP

Participation in the Mini-School has a multilevel effect, extending from personal enrichment, to strengthening organizations and institutions, to influencing the community as a whole. Leaders speak of increased sense of responsibility to the community leading some to take on new positions of leadership. They find new meaning in community work and new approaches to decision making. Having key people participate not only changes individual lives, but it also is successful in changing communal values and expectations regarding Jewish learning and knowledge.

I have had glimpses of...new or renewed commitment to Jewish learning and the importance especially, but not only, for Jewish leaders to be educated. [This] is articulated, you hear it discussed more often, you hear how wonderful it would be if everyone who is involved in the campaign or if everyone who is involved on a board of one of the agencies could be a graduate of Melton...It is an affirmation, confirmation of the need for people who are going to become leaders in the Jewish community to be Jewishly educated. Irv Wise, Rabbi, Teacher Cincinnati, OH

CONNECTION TO ISRAEL

At the end of their two years of study, FMAMS graduates are invited to participate in a two-week Israel Seminar. It combines the text-based approach prevalent throughout the curriculum with experiencing the land, people and State of Israel. It is a meaningful culmination for many participants. They speak of new perceptions of Israel and their relationship to it.

CONCLUSION

None of the research reported above is complete. Many of the issues examined are complex and elusive. We look at our first years as our starting point. Our plans are to examine these questions in greater depth and breadth in the future, adding to our store of knowledge on the Mini-School, on adult Jewish learning and on adult learning in general.

No article summarizing our findings would be complete without an expression of gratitude to those who were the researchers and writers, as well as to those who responded to the surveys and interviews. Each bit of knowledge acquired adds to the effectiveness of adult Jewish learning, a pursuit that is as important today as it was when the Jewish people began.

Dr. Betsy Dolgin Katz is the North American Director of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. Betsy is a past Chair of CAJE and a member of the Board of the Covenant Foundation.