

# THE FEDERATION AS AN EDUCATIONAL CATALYST

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*"Have compassion on us and put into our hearts to understand and to be intellectually creative, to listen, to learn and to teach."*

From the benediction preceding the *Sh'ma*

More than thirty years ago, a scholar of education predicted an increase in the number of adults continuing their educational development and an increase in an awareness of how adults learn (Knowles, 1962, p. 271).

There will be a rapid expansion in the body of knowledge about the education of adults. Research resources will be increasingly focused on the developmental processes of the adult years, the nature of adult learning, environmental factors affecting adult learning, characteristics of adults as learners, and institutional arrangements for the education of adults. It is probable that an enormous untapped potential for human growth and achievement will soon be discovered.

Indeed, the treasure of adult study has been discovered, and in the Jewish community today is enjoying a renaissance. Yet, there still lies an "enormous untapped potential," not so much in what Jewish adults are studying but in where they are studying. Formal educational institutions and synagogues have traditionally been the center for adult classes. However, an infectious enthusiasm to study has penetrated some of the most unlikely communal institutions. One such institution, the federation, is just beginning to explore this potential. This article examines the possibilities for effective adult study in federations across North America through the employment of a local scholar-in-residence.

Traditionally, federations have supported

Jewish study—mostly on an elementary and secondary school level—by funding educational programs in their respective communities. Now, many federations are actually initiating adult Jewish education. Rather than engaging in fund raising and consciousness raising alone, federations are now raising the level of Jewish literacy of their staff and their constituents, often by contracting with a "teaching company" to consult and to run text-study sessions in-house or out in the field. Few federations actually employ staff to do the teaching. The Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston is one such federation that employs two consultants on a part-time basis as scholars-in-residence. The programs run through CJP have been an effective catalyst in promoting study in local educational institutions, in reaching out to young professionals in the corporate world who are unaffiliated with the Jewish community, and, in keeping with its philanthropic goals, in promoting an increase in campaign revenue.

## THE GROWING INTEREST IN ADULT JEWISH STUDY

Decades ago, the noted Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (1955, p. 44), bemoaned the absence of a "Jewish intelligentsia, corresponding to a secular one.... This lack is painfully conspicuous. Specific Jewish interests are no longer the concern of all, but the specialty of a very few." Rosenzweig (1955, p. 96) attributed this move away from a Jewishly educated public to the impact of Enlightenment culture.

Then came the Modern Age. At one blow it vastly enlarged our intellectual horizons and our very lives. The teaching of Judaism struggled to keep pace with this rapid expansion. What was new was not so much the ghetto wall; even previously the Jew moved

beyond the bounds of the ghetto. What was new was not that the Jew's feet could not take him farther than ever before. The new feature was that the wanderer no longer returned at dusk. The gates of the ghetto no longer closed behind him, allowing him to spend the night in solitary learning. And gradually, the wanderer found his spiritual and intellectual home outside the Jewish world... We are the children of those wanderers.

The children of those wanderers are now wandering back, realizing that a satisfying intellectual and spiritual experience can be found in their own ancestral home. Rosenzweig attributed the wandering to a matter of choice. When Jews were free to wander out of the ghetto, they walked away and did not return. Sociologist Peter Berger (1974) in *The Homeless Mind* advanced another argument for wandering. As we become a more pluralistic society, he argued, religion has become more private. As it becomes more private it becomes less influential. The less influential it becomes, the less we use it as one of the means to determine truths about humanity. Without the anchor of the communal language of religion we begin to wander, searching for a place of meaning: "Pluralization has a secularizing effect... pluralization weakens the hold of religion on society and on the individual" (Berger, 1974, p. 80). Along with this privatization, religion has become marginalized. Without broad social confirmation, religion has become only one of many paths to meaning. "Modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness'" (p. 82). Whether we call it wandering or homelessness, the relationship of the Jew to tradition has been severed in the wake of so many new possibilities of achieving spiritual and intellectual fulfillment.

This abyss between the Jew and tradition was only widened by the poor schooling that so many in previous generations received about Judaism. Impoverished after-school Jewish education programs that lacked creativity or spiritual depth often had the oppo-

site impact than was intended—they turned young minds away. Today, one of the main reasons why people are wandering back is that the instruction of Judaism is on a more sophisticated level, sensitive to the life experience and secular competency of adult students and more attuned to the "hunger for wonder" (Roszak, 1981) with which modernity has left us.

Imagine, against this backdrop, the power of coming home, of realizing that despite mental trips to the East and to the university, to classic literature and pagan art, that Judaism can also have a sophisticated and meaningful hold on the Jewish mind. That the search, while still in its infant stages, had a familiarity about it—of family Passover Seders, the pages of an old prayer book, the resonance of a Bible proverb. The old and hackneyed was becoming new and creative, and rituals, once mocked, were becoming the bedrock of a new generation. A Jewish renaissance is ultimately nothing more than a return. But for this return to take place, Judaism had to appeal to the sophisticated Jewish mind. Boring Hebrew school afternoons, unengaging rabbis, and unenlightening worship services would have no place in this new scaffolding of old tradition. The sometimes pernicious effects of pluralism and of life outside the ghetto had an ironically good twist. They forced Jewish leaders and educators to make their product and themselves better.

Many federations are now aware that they play a critical role in this wave of interest. The federation has traditionally been the financial centerpiece of any active Jewish community, taking care of a host of needs from education to social welfare. For some Jews, it is their only connection to the Jewish community. Making the educational connection direct—learning oneself instead of only giving money to support the learning of others—can put federations on the cutting edge of current trends in Judaism. Yet, this investment requires minimal funding. In many cases, it relies on the work of only one or two individuals working closely with a committed staff.

### THE SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE

There are currently two models for a scholar-in-residence position in the federation. The first model, in fact the first position of its kind, was created by the Montreal federation, the Combined Jewish Appeal (CJA). In this model, in addition to teaching, the scholar-in-residence appears at committee meetings to present—through the use of Jewish texts—a position for consideration on issues as varied as social welfare and resource allocation. While the “Jewish” position presented is not always the one advanced, the scholar is able, through the post, to bring a uniquely Jewish perspective to the table. In addition, the scholar-in-residence is responsible for teaching in the federation and outside.

The other model is that used in the Boston federation, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), in which two individuals, a rabbi and an educator, are employed to handle the joint tasks of teaching the staff and leading classes at law, accounting, and investment firms, universities and hospitals in the community. The scholars are only one piece of a broad agenda on Jewish literacy that includes several educational initiatives. This article focuses on the model used in the Boston federation.

One of the most important functions of the scholar-in-residence is to teach staff and assist them in a consulting capacity to arrange programs with Jewish content. At a time when federations are insisting on heightened Jewish literacy, it is crucial that the staff of federations be literate themselves. Staff classes take place in CJP on a weekly basis. In addition to attracting Jewish students, many non-Jewish staff persons have an opportunity to ask questions about Jewish life, rituals, and the holiday calendar. One unexpected but important service that scholars-in-residence fill is pastoral counseling for staff members. Staff who have suffered a personal loss, are getting married, or have problems in their work and/or home lives—in addition to broader theological questions—have made use of the counseling background of the rabbi

on staff to seek advice in confidence.

In their work, federation staff must deal with Jewish issues for which they may personally find themselves poorly equipped. When staff need to present a *Dvar Torah* to start a meeting, find a meaningful Jewish quote for a report, or put together a book of Jewish articles for a project on social justice, the scholar-in-residence has an important consulting role. Often a donor will have a question on Jewish life that can best be answered by someone with a more advanced knowledge of Jewish history and ritual. Sometimes a donor who does not have a synagogue affiliation or does not enjoy a relationship with a local rabbi will feel more comfortable talking with a scholar-in-residence at a federation than with someone from the community.

In this model, that of scholar-in-resident as essentially an educator and as a consultant to staff, the scope of influence is limited to the one-on-one or classroom encounter. The goal is not for the federation to supplant current adult education programs but to serve as a catalyst to get people to attend such programs. By going to offices, hospitals, and educational institutions, the scholar-in-residence is able to gain access to hundreds of people who have never been exposed to serious Jewish study and to help them find programs in which to continue that study, should they so choose. Since the scholars are part of a community-wide push to strengthen educational initiatives, they are working toward the same agenda as synagogues, educational institutions, and the federation itself.

In contrast, in the Montreal model, the scholar uses Jewish text to influence policy, as well as serving as an educator. This makes an important statement about the ability of Jewish texts to influence Jewish life.

A combination of the two approaches is the model that federations should be employing. It is not primarily because the scope of influence is greater in the first model, but because teaching about Judaism and its texts without allowing them to influence how we construct our Jewish communities is a bifur-

cation of Jewish life that we cannot afford. The second model sends the message that it is important to be Jewishly literate but that we cannot use our Judaic literacy to inform policy. When the scholar-in-residence presents a Jewish position at a board meeting on outreach to the intermarried, helping the inner-city poor, resource allocation, or on an abortion law passed in Congress, he or she inspires confidence that the Jewish tradition has much to say about contemporary issues.

The concern raised most frequently by either model is that, by employing such an individual, the federation is becoming "too Jewish." Such grumbling is not infrequent among staff and lay people. Yet, what does this statement really mean? It may demonstrate an anxiety that the federation is becoming "too religious." Teaching texts may seem to some to be an admission of the authoritativeness of these sacred texts. Employing an educator, especially a rabbi, may appear to be an attempt to impose behavioral changes of a religious nature on the staff or adult students. Here, an important distinction must be drawn between education and indoctrination, or being a pedagogue rather than an ideologue. Responsible educators know, especially in the instruction of adults, that texts are there to add meaning to a pre-existing Jewish life. They add new layers in a student's worldview. Bill Moyers (1996, p. 351), in justifying biblical exegesis as the focus of his television series, wrote poignantly about the addition of such layers:

We hear a lot these days about "dialogue and democracy." Concerned about falling voter participation, nasty political campaigns, and a declining sense of community, various organizations are convening thinkers and doers to address issues of civic renewal. Surely religion belongs in that conversation—religion as a wellspring of values and ideas reflecting different aspirations for a moral and political order, religion as the exercise of men and women to bring form to their lives from chaos around them; religion as the interpretation of experience itself.

How texts or teachers influence an individual is entirely up to the student. The transition from "interpretation" to "experience" is a very personal one. However, to deny adults access to ways to make Judaism more meaningful on an intellectual or spiritual plane would be to think of Judaism in the narrowest of terms—as an affiliation that allows us to ask for money but absolves federations from giving little outside of a financial structure for the continuation of Jewish life. In worrying for so long about being "too Jewish" we may have not been Jewish enough. Federations may not have provided a substantive enough connection to Jewish tradition to create meaningful reasons for Jewish giving.

One educational experiment promoted at CJP demonstrates the importance of such a substantive connection between the Jewish public and the federation. One of our most successful teaching settings is the Genesis Forum, classes that take place during lunch time at the federation. The Forum classes have maintained an attendance of between 60 to 120 for the twelve-part series that is now entering its fourth year. Having classes in the federation building allows individuals who have never been inside a federation to see some of its inner workings and to associate the federation with more than fund-raising activities. In in-depth surveys of the participants, we found that most people were extremely enthusiastic about spending their lunch-time doing something meaningful and connecting socially to other Jews working in their area. Many said that their work required such a specific type of thinking that it was a mental challenge to think differently, a challenge they found stimulating. For some it was a reconnection to the Jewish community after more than a decade-long hiatus. Others were surprised that subjects taught to them as youngsters had so much to say to them now when they spoke to them so little as children. An additional element of surprise was that they were making this powerful connection to Jewish texts through a federation.

### **THE SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE AND THE PHILANTHROPIC GOALS OF THE FEDERATION**

Some might argue that the last thing we need to do as a Jewish community is to create another job in a bureaucratic organization. However, a scholar-in-residence position can yield some highly profitable outcomes. The scholar-in-residence can teach high-profile groups of donors or potential donors and provide one-on-one teaching encounters with them. Individuals who attend a class offered by our federation have often given a new gift or increased their last gift. Only after a significant period of time employing such an individual would we be able to assess through more formal means the correlation between a worthwhile teaching encounter and a rise in annual gift or endowment. However, on an intuitive level and in individual cases, it has already proven worthwhile for the federation to employ a scholar-in-residence. Even campaign staff who have been skeptical in the past and seen the federation's role as more narrowly, financially defined have admitted that the scholar has had a beneficial impact on the campaign.

Many federations have noted the general and financial benefit of offering adult Jewish study but have not taken the next step of hiring someone to work as a staff member. While there are organizations that hire teachers out to offer classes through the federation, they are not necessarily working with staff on a consulting basis or providing for the pastoral needs of donors and staff. No teaching company, however skilled, can know as intimately or work as closely with the staff and community as a person on staff.

While relatively few federations currently hire scholars-in-residence, many Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) do. Yet, even when a JCC has its own scholar, that does not obviate the need for a person of similar training and skills to work in the local federation. Generally, the two institutions do not serve the same clientele. The federation scholar usually works with groups in the corporate world, whereas the JCC offers programs for people

studying outside their professional context. However, some job sharing is possible. Although this may ultimately lead to some competition, the Talmud states that one of the few types of envy permitted is that between scholars since the outcome—enhanced study—is a positive one.

One of the potential problems of a federation scholar-in-residence is that he or she may be taking potential students away from already existing educational programs in the community. For example, although most series run through the Boston federation are limited to between three to five classes and should be a supplement rather than a substitute for extended study, some students find that they would rather study in this less demanding structure. In addition, few classes run by the federation require tuition. If the classes meet infrequently, take place near to one's place of work, and do not cost anything, then adult students may not support their local institutions and instead join a course offered by a federation. This problem can only be resolved when educational institutions, synagogues, and federations work together with sensitivity. Ideally, the student who enjoys three classes in a downtown setting will be more likely to find out what is available for long-term study locally.

### **TRAINING SCHOLARS-IN-RESIDENCE**

Were we to come to the conclusion that every federation across North America should have a scholar-in-residence tomorrow, we would not have enough instructors to staff all 189 positions. The scholar's position requires very specific training, and a one- or two-year program should be designed specifically to advance this purpose. Classes in education, pastoral counseling, Jewish history, and Jewish texts could be combined with an internship at a local federation where the intern could teach several staff classes and be mentored by a scholar-in-residence. The intern would be responsible for a research presentation on the educational needs and opportunities of a particular community and preparing a position paper on Judaism's ap-

proach to a contemporary communal concern. As a group, the students could analyze trends in federations across America and participate in the General Assembly. Learning the inner mechanisms of the federation would assist the scholar in meeting the demands of the job. Most important, however, is the textual training of these students and establishing their confidence in working with Jewish primary texts. In addition, they would have to understand the needs of adult learners for which there is a widening body of secular and Jewish literature. Joel Reimer (1990, p. 22), in "Toward a Theory of Adult Jewish Education," shares the concern that adult classes be truly geared for adults and sensitive to their unique learning needs: "As much as we love our children and invest hopes in them, we are no longer willing to be cast into a premature obsolescence as adults. We've come to believe that adults too are learners, that we are not simply mature but maturing."

Creating "inspired communities," to use the term coined by John Ruskay (1995), seems to drive participation in adult study. As Reimer (p. 23) further notes, "Most adult education in our society is oriented to either vocation or recreation and health, but Jewish adult education has a spiritual or cultural orientation. Furthermore learning Jewish materials often is simultaneously more personally integrative and anxiety producing than most other forms of adult education."

Understanding that anxiety is central to this kind of teaching endeavor. The anxiety may be experienced as a consequence of trying to internalize the message of a text. This kind of influence is frightening, given a set of circumstances that may not be open to transformation and change—the choice of job, religious outlook, partner, or geographic location. The teacher must be gentle with this anxiety and direct it to internal rather than external changes.

In discussing Martin Buber's beliefs on adult education, Joshua Weinstein argues (1975, pp. 64–65) for the formation of a moral character.

Ironically, what the adult needs in many cases is precisely what he does not want—character education. He needs character because during adolescence the character of youth is frequently shaped hastily and haphazardly, and their self-confidence to handle the realities of life is often false. The task of adult education is to weaken and uproot this false self-confidence in absolutes and unfounded truisms. Adult education must arouse in the pupil the desire for independent research for truth and the readiness and willingness to serve the society in which he lives.

As adults, in the process of review, we need to subject our character formation to the crucible of reality. The end product is not always the same, hence, the anxiety. Education is the means by which adults engage in re-formation.

Therefore, the role of the teacher in a Jewish setting changes from the bearer of information to the bearer of tradition. The teacher must present material that provokes serious independent and reflective thinking in the adult learner and then provide the space for the adult learner to continue the exploration. Stephen Brookfield (1991) calls this "grounded teaching: While grounded teachers have an organizing vision of where the educational effort should be going, they are flexible and adaptive, responding to learners' needs and interests, and perceptions as they emerge." What is being sought when these methods are applied to Jewish life is not necessarily the mastery of Jewish texts but a relationship to those texts. This idea is perhaps best encapsulated in a term coined by Abraham Joshua Heschel (1966, p. 237) in *The Insecurity of Freedom*. There he argued for the creation of "textpeople": "What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but textpeople. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget."

Kimberly Patton (1997, p. 847) argues that, even if the teacher of religion views him or herself as an "impassive conveyor of information," the students do not. "Whether or

not students acknowledge it, in their response to any professor, but particularly a professor of religion, they are searching for an understanding of what the world is about and how to live in it. To pretend that things are otherwise is simply disingenuous."

The more familiar the student is with text, the more that a scholar-in-residence will have to rely upon a rich stock of materials. But as Heschel so wisely points out, it is not enough to read material; one must have the personal dynamism and spiritual drive to inspire others. One must live the text. Barry Holtz and Eduardo Rauch (1988, pp. 62-63) argue that those who train teachers have not been sufficiently sensitive to issues of personality formation. While the teacher trainee has a specific body of knowledge to master, other aspects of teacher influence have been ignored:

The fundamental personality and character of the trainee is considered almost completely irrelevant to the successful accomplishment of the goals of the program, as long as the person remains within the broad ethical and legal framework of society and the specific profession. Thus, issues such as sensitivity to other people, dedication to shared community values, generosity or self-sacrifice are considered irrelevant as questions to be discussed or standards to be applied in evaluating qualification of trainees.

Because the scholar serves as a role model, there are certain areas of personal behavior and traits that require reflection and cultivation. The fact that these very areas have been neglected for so long may have contributed, argue Holtz and Rauch, to the inability of the teacher to reach the Jewish public thus far.

In preparing for the position of scholar-in-residence at a federation, it is not enough to master knowledge of text, psychology, or information on adult study or the inner workings of the federation. There must be an ability to inspire, to satisfy the "hunger for wonder."

## NEW POSSIBILITIES

Imagine for a moment that every federation employed a scholar-in-residence and that for every post there was a well-trained scholar. Imagine that across North America, the federation was able to actualize the dream of Jewish literacy. People alienated from the system who view the federation as an out-of-date bureaucracy would find that it is able to inspire a new, searching generation to seek meaning in their Jewish heritage. Federations would serve as catalysts for hundreds of adults to move from a taste of Jewish study to a lifetime of Jewish study.

Transformational efforts fail when they are not effectively communicated or when the sound bites and slogans are not matched by substance. Federations have been using, with increasing frequency, the term "Jewish literacy." There is a vision there, but not enough active solicitation of the goal. In explaining why transformational efforts fail in a business setting, John Kotter (1995) writes that it is common for an organization to come up with a reasonable vision of the future but fail to implement it effectively: "A group actually does develop a pretty good transformation vision and then proceeds to communicate it by holding a single meeting or sending out a single communication." In other words, the failure to reinforce vision and support vision with behavioral changes and effective communication will undermine the most creative vision. The term "Jewish literacy" cannot be bandied about unless it communicates a vision that is actively supported.

The federation is arguably one of the largest webs that connects the Jewish community in the world. The ability to influence and to help people reconnect to Judaism through this web is far-reaching. Although it is only a small contribution to a much larger vision, a scholar-in-residence position in most major federations would support the goal of national Jewish literacy. The next steps are more a matter of extension than invention. It is those steps, translating the slogan into

an overarching educational vision with a commitment to adding a new position to the federation staff, that are the most challenging.

In the book of Joel 3:1, the prophet says, "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." In this verse both the old and the young think abstractly. Here, the abstract vision is one step closer to reality than a dream. A commitment to the vision is one step closer to reality than the vision itself. Translating the commitment into existence is one step closer still.

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