

Lilmod u'Leamed: Elders as Learners and Teachers

by Dayle A. Friedman

What are you doing with the rest of your life? This question was the title of a long-ago film I scarcely remember. The question is also the core of the spiritual challenge of increased longevity. Many of us who are now working adults will likely have two or three decades of good health and vitality post-retirement and some protracted period of frailty and dependency, as well. Although aging presents other profound challenges and opportunities, the questions of meaning-making and meaning-finding are central. With what pursuits will we fill our days? How will we understand who we are when the roles by which we've been identified are no longer ours? What is the purpose of these "bonus years?"

I would like to suggest that engagement with *Torah*, with Jewish learning and teaching, can bring significance to the experience of aging. The connection with *Torah* is life-giving, both for older learners and for those they touch, as we learn from *Kiddushin 82b*:

R. Nehorai said: I abandon every trade in the world and teach my child only *Torah*, for every trade in the world gives a person sustenance only in youth, but in old age, one is exposed to hunger. But it is not so with the *Torah*: it stands by us in our youth and gives us a future and hope in old age.¹

Lilmod: Elders as Students of Torah

The most rewarding course I have ever taught was the weekly *Torah* study group in the nursing home I served as chaplain. One might think that an institution for frail elders would be an unlikely place to find a lively community of *Torah* scholars. Yet that was exactly what I found in a decade of teaching -- and learning -- *Torah* with 35 or more students aged 75 to 100.

Each session opened with the *bracha* for *Torah* study, acknowledging the commandment "to occupy oneself with the study of *Torah*," and framing our work as a sacred pursuit. Each time we met, we explored an issue from *Parashat ha-Shavua* as we read and discussed a large-type text excerpt. Most of my students, who gathered in wheelchairs, on walkers, attached to feeding tubes and other types of apparatus, had not previously studied Jewish text. They might well have felt shy about expressing their views about a tradition they knew from childhood observance more than from intellectual exploration. Over time, however, they became adept at *pilpul* -- dissecting the text, and arguing with it and about it.

The students' life experience was invaluable in our deliberations. They could, for example, understand Jacob and Esau's conflicts from the perspective of parent, child, sibling, and grandparent. They brought a depth of understanding to our investigation of the Israelites' doubts and rebellions during their seemingly endless and directionless wandering in the wilderness. My students knew what it is like to lose track of one's goals, to question one's path, and to feel profoundly insecure.

The students valued the *Torah* study group and grieved when illness, physician appointments, or treatments kept them from attending. We concluded each session with the singing of Debbie Friedman's setting of *Kaddish D'Rabbanan*, praying for peace and lovingkindness for "those who study *Torah*, here and everywhere." However improbable, these elders, who might so easily have been dismissed as dependent, frail, nursing home residents, counted themselves among the scholars of *Torah*.

It is not just my nursing home congregants who are powerfully drawn to Jewish learning in later life. Evidence of the appeal of Jewish study is apparent in the remarkable popularity of Elderhostel courses with Jewish themes, and in the burgeoning of Jewish studies courses at community colleges in areas with large elderly populations. A notable proportion of students in many synagogue adult education programs are 60 and older.

These adult learners are clearly a diverse lot. They include at least two generations, ranging from individuals in their sixties to those in their nineties (and beyond!). Some are individuals who are healthy and vital, while others are quite frail. Though highly educated by American standards, many have not been connected to Jewish learning since childhood. They are motivated not only by a desire for connection to a past, but also by a quest for significance and by a thirst for continued learning and growth.

The Jewish community should enable elders to be both learners and teachers of Torah because engagement with Torah, through Jewish learning and teaching, can bring significance to the experience of aging.

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The benefits of engaging older learners in Jewish study are impressive. Older learners sustain their minds and spirits in the course of Jewish study. Learning together creates community at a time when isolation threatens. In addition, adult education may

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offer a pathway toward new or renewed Jewish connection and affiliation. Conversely, elder learners are a growing, and rewarding, audience for new and existing adult education efforts.

What does it take to foster late-life Jewish learning? It is not necessary to create age-segregated programs to attract and involve elders in Jewish learning. In fact, I would argue that to do so is to miss opportunities for profoundly rich exchange between generations. It is imperative, however, to design programs that will foster and maximize elders' participation.² Attending to the educational approach and to issues of accessibility will help to foster dynamic Jewish learning for those in later life.

Educational Approach: Andragogy

We need to employ a respectful and effective educational approach in engaging older adult learners. While research suggests that older learners are indeed able to extend their knowledge and continue to grow intellectually, they do it best when teaching touches and exploits what they already know. The andragogical approach to teaching any adult involves building from the known to the unknown, and allowing the learner to be self-directed in the educational process.³ Implications of this approach for Jewish teaching of older persons include welcoming (while channeling appropriately) students' sharing of life experience relevant to the topic at hand and inviting students to articulate and evaluate their own learning objectives.⁴

Accessibility

Opening educational opportunities to older persons requires sensitivity to issues of accessibility on a number of levels. Older learners can be seamlessly integrated into general adult education programs if these issues are addressed. First, transportation can be an obstacle for many older people, particularly at night. It may be that younger students would be happy to be matched with elders who are unable to drive themselves. If there is a concentration of older people in one or more apartment complexes or neighborhoods, perhaps volunteer drivers could bring a group of them to the program or class. Alternatively, it might be that local para-transit agencies could transport elders to the program.

Once they have arrived, older learners will benefit from attention to the physical learning environment. Is there a ramp so that those with difficulty walking or in wheelchairs can enter the space? Are the restrooms handicapped-accessible? Is the lighting conducive to looking at texts? Will the conversation be audible to those with hearing limitations, or are amplification devices (or microphones) available? Will learners be able to hear one another when they speak? Are there seats near the front of the room for those with hearing or vision problems?

Finally, a warm social environment will encourage older learners to participate. Simple steps, such as inviting participants to introduce themselves by sharing some key life experience connected to the course's focus, will enhance comfort and community among learners. Serving refreshments, or inviting participants to take turns bringing them, also fosters an invaluable sense of connection among learners. One can never underestimate the power of food in Jewish education. The rabbinic adage in *Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, 3:17* that says *im eyn kemach, eyn Torah*, (if there is no bread, there is no Torah) could not be more vividly borne out than in Jewish education with older learners.

The effort to engage older learners can be transformative for the older learners, and for other students and teachers, as well. The motivation, enthusiasm, and wisdom older students contribute to the learning environment can intensify the experience for all involved. The opportunity to examine course content from multiple life stage perspectives adds depth and nuance to the learning process. Given all of this benefit, if we only engage elders as learners, we might say *dayenu*, that is more than enough. I would suggest, however, that there is yet more to be gained by engaging elders as teachers of Torah.

Lelamed: Elders as Teachers of Torah

One of the great tragedies of our age-segregated society is the deprivation of children, young adults, and even those in midlife, of the wisdom and guidance of elders. Many Jewish children grow up at great distance from grandparents. Occasional visits do not provide a steady stream of the very special love, nurture, and perspective elders might provide. In many congregations, older adults either fall away from membership entirely or are involved more in senior adult clubs than in "mainstream" congregational activity. In communities to which elders have moved in retirement, they may have scant interaction with younger families and individuals in congregations and organizations. I would like to suggest two strategies for exploiting the talent and wisdom of elders in Jewish learning.

Elders as Teachers

The teacher shortage in supplemental schools is widely recognized. Frustrated educators fill the classrooms with well-meaning lay people, Israeli immigrants, and secular schoolteachers. These teachers may lack substantive Jewish background or pedagogical foundations. Retired schoolteachers could be a fruitful resource for the Jewish school.⁵ These individuals commonly retire at a relatively young age and are in search of meaningful roles for the next stage of their lives. They already have both education and experience in pedagogy, often refined through teaching in very challenging contexts. The Jewish education they lack could be provided through participation in community-based or university-based Jewish studies programs. Student teaching and mentorship in the classroom, along with seminars on the particular context of the supplemental religious school, could equip these teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to serve as exemplary Jewish educators. A cadre of these second-career Jewish educators might well enrich the supplemental religious schools.

Elders as Mentors

When the Temple was standing, the leaders would ask the elders for advice, as it is written, "Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will say to you," (*Deuteronomy 32:7*), for whoever takes advice from the elders will not fail.⁶

Elders can be invaluable resources for teens and young adults. There is a natural alignment of the older and younger generations. Both feel at times disenfranchised and disrespected, both eagerly wish to assert their agency and autonomy. Today's Jewish elders have lived through dilemmas about Jewish identity and have made choices about observance, affiliation, and marriage that have shaped their lives. Who better could join with young people in reflecting on these vital issues of Jewish continuity? Thus, linking adolescents with older partners at key moments, such as *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, may be powerful. Linking old and young at other critical life passages, for example, providing foster grandparents as adjuncts to new parents, may also be valuable.

Programs engaging elders as mentors need not be elaborate, but should be diligent in preparation of both young and older participants, and clear about roles, expectations, and parameters. Older partners might be members of a congregation, or residents of a nearby retirement community or assisted-living facility. What is key to this approach is that elders here are not *recipients* of an effort of *gemilut hasadim*, but, rather, are precious repositories of wisdom who can bring *Torah* to individuals and communities. With this animating vision, both young and old will be empowered to find and make meaning.

Conclusion

The words of the *Ahavah Rabbah* prayer from our *Shacharit* liturgy offer a beautiful vision for the place of learning and teaching *Torah* throughout our lives:

<i>Kol Hakavod</i>	<i>Kol Hakavod</i>	<i>Kol Hakavod</i>	<i>Kol Hakavod</i>	<i>Kol Hakavod</i>
Harlene Winnick Appelman has been named executive director of the Covenant Foundation.			Ron Isaacs of Bridgewater, NJ, has just published his 100 th book: <i>Kosher Living: It's More than Just the Food</i> .	
Rivy Poupko Kletenik has been appointed Principal of Judaic Studies at Seattle Hebrew Academy.			Yeshiva University has bestowed honorary degrees upon: Barry Shrage , President of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston Jeffrey Swartz , CEO of the Timberland Company, who also delivered the commencement address.	
This year's distinguished Covenant Award recipients are: Rabbi Elyse Goldstein , Director, Kolel: The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning, of Toronto, ON. Jody Hirsh , Director of Judaic Education, Harold and Rose Samson Family Jewish Community Center, of Milwaukee, WI. Stephanie Rotsky , Social Justice Coordinator, The Rashi School, of North Quincy, MA.			Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion has bestowed the following degrees: Doctor of Jewish Religious Education, <i>honoris causa</i> Jaren Rubin Elson of Worthington, OH Dorey J. Brandt-Finell of Denver, CO Susan Kittner Huntting of Sarasota, FL Doctor of Divinity, <i>honoris causa</i> Debra Rose Hachen of Closter, NJ Thomas J. Friedmann of Columbus, GA Michael Weinberg of Skokie, IL Doctor of Music, <i>honoris causa</i> Irving Neil Spenadel of Croton-on-Hudson, NY	
The Jewish Communal Service Association has presented Melanie Kohler Levav of the Marks Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, NY, with the 2004 Young Professional Award.				
Elliot Dorff has been presented with the Simon Greenberg Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Rabbinate by the Zeigler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.				

...Have compassion upon us, and allow our hearts to understand and discern, to hear, learn and teach (*lilmod u'lelamed*), that we might lovingly observe, uphold and perpetuate all the teachings of Your *Torah*.⁷

I pray that our community will empower and enable the broad range of today's and tomorrow's elders *lilmod u'lelamed*, to be learners and teachers of *Torah*, so that more wisdom, and more love may be present for them, for our people, and for the entire world. ❄️

ENDNOTES:

1. Translation is mine.
2. For rich, ongoing discourse on older adult learning theory and practice, contact the Lifetime Education and Renewal Network (LEARN), a constituent group of the American Society on Aging, <http://www.asaging.org>, 833 Market Street, Suite 511, San Francisco, CA 94103, 800.537.9728.
3. See, for example Knowles, Malcolm and Elwood F. Holton III. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6th edition. Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier, 2005.
4. For ideas about congregational education with older adults, see *Aging and Spirituality*, Volume 17, Number 2, Summer 2005. For information on this issue, contact the American Society for Aging at www.asaging.org.
5. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky suggested this idea in conversation over twenty years ago.
6. *Exodus Rabbah 3:8*.
7. Translation is mine.