

Jewish Teaching and (Adult) Identity Formation

by Jane West Walsh

In 2001 CAJE passed the following resolution:

We, the members of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), gathered in Ft. Collins, Colorado, call upon the North American Jewish Community and its leadership to partner with us in our efforts to:

- ♦ *Create a climate in which the role and status of the Jewish educator is valued.*
- ♦ *Attract qualified people to careers in service to the Jewish community by providing competitive salaries and appropriate benefits for both full-time and part-time work.*
- ♦ *Retain talented people in the field by providing a work environment with reasonable expectations for time and task and sufficient support systems in place.*
- ♦ *Bring Jewish career options to the attention of those who are about to choose a profession or to change professions.*
- ♦ *Encourage the mentoring of new personnel entering the field by veteran educators and other techniques proven to aid in retaining, nurturing, and treasuring valued personnel.*

We believe that the personnel crisis in Jewish education must be addressed by all Jewish denominational groups and in all Jewish educational settings.

We call upon the community as a whole to make this a priority issue – by devoting attention and resources to finding creative solutions and by taking meaningful steps to address this crisis for the sake of the next generation and for the future of the Jewish people.

As one response to national resolutions defining a coming personnel crisis in the field of Jewish education, Dr. Jonathan Woocher of JESNA and Rabbi Joshua Elkin, Executive Director of PEJE, helped venture philanthropist and day school parent Laura Heller Lauder bring together Dr. Michael Zeldin, Dr. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Professor Sara Lee, and Dr. Gail Dorph to think about what it would take to create a new program to recruit, prepare, induct, and support a new cadre of Jewish day school teaching professionals. As a result, with the help of a visionary group of donor partners including Michael Steinhardt, Edgar Bronfman, Andrea and Charles Bronfman, Harold Grinspoon, Debbie and Jeffrey Swartz, Howard and Leslie Schultz, the Crown Family Foundation, and the Covenant Foundation, DeLeT: Day School Leadership Through Teaching (www.delet.org), a 13-month full-time day school teaching career-launch fellowship program, offering generous living stipends and graduate credits and scholarships for a select number of qualified candidates, was itself launched, in the fall of 2001.

Initially intended as a way to increase numbers of teachers prepared to support the growing number of students enrolling in Jewish day school classrooms in Reform, Community, and Conservative day schools in North America, DeLeT leaders developed a vision that transcended simply finding more people to serve. Because of the unprecedented challenges and opportunities presented to all North Americans in the 21st century, DeLeT envisioned recruiting and preparing teachers who, because of their own deep commitment to and engagement with Jewish living and learning, could become generative, professional, and proficient in their ability to develop the necessary skills and content knowledge that would enable their students to learn how to learn while successfully negotiating the challenges and opportunities of living in an open society, as Jews. Fostering a strong Jewish identity in children, and helping families to be connected and engaged actively in Jewish living and learning at home, has always been the work of the Jewish educator. Now, more than ever, with competition for the scarce resources of time and attention in a global marketplace of ideas and traditions, this has become the task of Jewish teachers charged with helping Jewish day school children gain confidence and competence in living their lives as Jewish citizens of the world.

As part of the rigorous application process, DeLeT fellows are asked to tell us why they want to be DeLeT fellows and day school teachers, and what about this particular program attracts them. They are asked to describe elements of their own personal their Jewish journey that leads them to this point in time, when they are interested in becoming a Jewish edu-

Since 2001, many Jewish institutions, schools, and organizations have joined CAJE to address a looming personnel crisis in the field of Jewish education. DeLeT: Day School Leadership Through Teaching, a day school teaching career-launch fellowship program, is one response to this challenge that has attracted the attention of early career Jewish adults in Generations X and Y, and some older mid-career Jewish adults, as well. This article highlights some aspects of motivation.

Jane West Walsh, Ed. D. is a Jewish and adult education practitioner, executive, coach, and consultant specializing in Jewish values-based learning, leadership and change processes for individuals, organizations, institutions and schools. As the founding Executive Director of DeLeT, and the current National Director of Program Services, and a JERRI initiative consultant for JESNA, she has had an opportunity to connect her interest in adult Jewish identity development to the Jewish education career agenda while exploring Jewish educator recruitment, preparation, induction, professional development, and retention.

cator and a day school teacher. Anonymous excerpts from a selection of essays written by members of Generations X and Y, are included in the section below.

Five Different Millennial Voices

1) "Throughout my childhood years, I always saw my life as consisting of two separate parts: my secular life and my Jewish life. I would spend the days at public schools, where I learned my basic subjects and sang Christmas carols in music class, and would spend the evenings and weekends at Hebrew School where I learned about my Jewish roots and studied Hebrew. It was my public school teachers I credit with supporting and guiding me through my academic pursuits, and it was my Hebrew teachers that helped give me a love and understanding for my Jewish identity. There was little opportunity for one part to influence the other. Therefore I strived to excel in my academic secular life and religious/Jewish education, separately. I hope to become a Jewish day school teacher to bridge the gap between secular education and religious life, giving students a more holistic, integrated educational experience..."

2) "I am a lover of learning and teaching, as well as a lover of Jewish rituals, lessons, values, and people. Recently I have connected the teaching and Jewish sides of myself, appreciating that I am truly passionate about teaching Jewish rituals, Jewish lessons, and Jewish people In truth, I never would have imagined myself as a day school teacher until I started teaching this year at a day school (as *an assistant teacher*). But now that I have had the unbelievable opportunity to work in this enriching Jewish environment, I have discovered my passions and values, indeed myself, within its walls. I have also found questions, like finding one shell at a time littered across a sparkling beach – about how to be a better day school teacher; how to more effectively manage a class; how to instill Jewish values and lessons of honesty, fairness, and kindness within the dialogue of each day's curriculum. I come upon these questions as I teach and as I observe the more experienced teachers at my school. DeLeT is an amazing opportunity for me to pose and answer these questions, as well as pose and answer many more questions that I have not yet come upon."

3) "There are a few things in life that I know. I am a best friend to a few, a teacher to many, and a classmate of all. I am a partner, a companion, and an individual. I am a team player, a teammate, and a team leader. I appreciate my Reform Jewish upbringing and yet I have developed a deeper connection to traditional Judaism in my personal development in high school and at Brandeis University (as an undergraduate). I love the excitement of probing a Jewish text with my *chevruta*, and I melt in the serenity of *Havdalah* services at the end of the Sabbath. I am a student on weekdays, a Hebrew school teacher on weekends, and an athlete in-between. I am a leader of my peers, and role model to my students. I am a thinker, an analyzer, a doer, and a task completer. I want to learn, and I know there is much more still to come In the transition from college, I am confident that my life is going in the direction that DeLeT offers, and the fellowship provides a structure of professional development, peer support, and educational community unique from any other program that I have found. "

4) "By preparing teachers to integrate Judaic and secular stud-

ies throughout the curriculum, the DeLeT fellowship offers a unique opportunity to show children that Judaism is a part of our daily lives and everything we do. This is possible in a Jewish day school. From saying morning *t'fillah* to reciting *Birkat Hamazon* after lunch to singing *Shalom Chaverim* at the end of the day, Judaism permeates every aspect of the school day. I love how at the day school (where this person observed classes before applying) the general studies teacher applies the concept of *ba'al tashchit* to the first graders' study of the rain forest. Even the teachers' choices of words throughout the day highlight Jewish values, as the teachers remind the children to show *kavod* to one another. Nevertheless, after observing the challenges that the Judaic and general studies teachers have faced in trying to coordinate their lesson plans, I am all the more convinced of the necessity of a program like DeLeT where the teacher can naturally blend Jewish and secular lessons.

5) "As members of an ancient religious tradition living in modern-day America, we as Jews face particular challenges in our everyday lives with respect to the world around us. Many of us are also faced with matters of identity in our private lives. Such personal and spiritual issues arise at a young age, and quite often play out in the classroom, where children are socialized and interact most directly with their peer group and with adults. I am eager to participate in this "search for self" that begins in youth and continues well into adulthood. I anticipate working with young children to encourage them to both discover and develop their personal strengths while helping them to face their intellectual and spiritual challenges with courage and tenacity."

Conclusion

First created as a pilot, DeLeT now continues to operate as a programmatic entity successfully launched into its second phase at Brandeis University's Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education and the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, in the summer of 2004. DeLeT continues to operate as a national collaboration between the two campuses, with administrative support from JESNA, and a national director of program services, until today. DeLeT relies on the Internet; the buzz of networks of friends; and colleagues in the fields of Jewish education, Jewish communal service, and Jewish studies to help connect potential candidates to DeLeT's career-launch opportunity. DeLeT provides a free in-depth career consultation for every potential candidate who calls with an interest in learning more about Jewish education and day school teaching as a career. In these private phone consultation sessions, completely separate from DeLeT interview procedures, potential candidates can talk about their assumptions about Jewish teaching as a career option, and get referrals for day school volunteer opportunities and visits to day schools in their area. Since 2001, over 600 people, most of them members of Generations X and Y, have expressed interest in applying for the 80 DeLeT fellowship openings offered to date (20 per year). Most are looking for a way to connect more deeply to Jewish teaching and learning in the context of a strong community. While not for everyone, DeLeT has opened the door to a passionate career in Jewish day school teaching and leadership for many Gen X and Gen Y Jewish adults. 