## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ADULT JEWISH LEARNING

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# **Part I: Key Framing Questions**

Adult Jewish learning is a flourishing part of the contemporary American Jewish landscape. When we enter into even a relatively small Jewish community today, we are likely to see and hear about a wide variety of learning opportunities. Some of these programs and classes are led by rabbis and other teachers while some are independent groups that meet without a professional Jewish educator. Some take place in synagogues, and others at retreat centers, downtown offices, Jewish community centers, through travel, and even in cyberspace. Programs range in length and venue. Some are linked to holidays or specific topics; others are geared to a particular audience, such as women, parents of young children, or senior citizens.

Consider just a sampling of potential offerings:

- On a Shabbat morning, seventeen adults gather to study the weekly Torah portion. Each session is led by a fellow layperson who shares a range of classical and contemporary commentaries to explore the deeper meaning of the text.
- On a Monday evening, twenty-three adults come together to study the Jewish calendar as part of a two-year program of adult Jewish literacy.
- Tuesdays at noon ten attorneys gather in a colleague's conference room to study Talmud with a rabbi.
- Every other Wednesday, six men meet to study Mussar, a contemplative practice in Jewish ethics aimed at self-improvement.
- Thursday nights, an adult b'nai mitzvah class of eleven women and two men meets to study Hebrew and learn about the Shabbat morning service.
- Sunday mornings, a group of parents meet with a teacher to study the same curriculum as their children in religious school, but at an adult level.
- Once a month, a dozen women join together for a hands-on "Cooking with the Rabbi" study program about Jewish food.

- Each year, after spending several weeks studying the book of Kohelet, twenty senior adults write a wisdom text that they share with fellow congregants during Sukkot services. This same congregation holds an annual Shabbat retreat for parents and their school-age children at an area Jewish summer camp.
- Every other year, twenty to thirty congregants travel to Israel with their rabbi for a tenday study tour.

This sampler opens us to considering a series of questions about the purposes, processes, and programs that fall within the broad rubric of what we call adult Jewish learning. Who are the adults who populate these adult Jewish learning classrooms and other settings? What do they expect of their learning? How does the learning affect their lives and the lives of their families? Do different types of learning programs and experiences have different impacts? Why don't more people join in on this exciting enterprise?

For the past dozen years, Grant and Schuster have been exploring these questions.

Together and separately, we have conducted much of the contemporary research on adult Jewish learning Schuster and Grant, 2005). We also have a broad range of experience in professional development for Jewish adult education and directly as teachers of Jewish adults. In this chapter, we review what we know about the learners, the pedagogy, the content, and the impact of adult Jewish learning programs. But, first we begin by setting the context for the current popularity and excitement about adult Jewish learning.

## Part II

## A. Context

Adult Jewish learning is valued as normative Jewish behavior. It is embedded in Jewish tradition and even elevated to sacred status. One of first prayers of the daily liturgy is the blessing for the commandment to study Torah. This is followed shortly thereafter by passages of rabbinic texts, including the familiar dictum that enumerates the deeds for which we are to benefit from in this world and the world to come—with the study of Torah being greater than

them all (Shabbat 127a). Jewish study deepens the meaning and understanding of Jewish beliefs and practices. It provides the language of Jewish discourse, which in turn, allows learners of all types to shape a personal "Jewish narrative." Without study, Jews lack the ability to teach the next generation, which is a central obligation of the tradition. Indeed, without study, Judaism's meaning becomes diluted and practice remains shallow.

While Jewish study has been a consistent and integral component of Orthodox Jewish life among men, and more recently among women as well, the engagement in Jewish learning among the liberal strands of American Judaism follows a more cyclical pattern (Sarna 2005). For most of the twentieth century, adult study was a low priority on the communal agenda that was more focused on rescue and resettlement of immigrants and refugees, supporting Israel, and other "civic" expressions of Jewish belonging. Over the last twenty-five years, however, as concerns about Jewish "continuity" grew, there has been a surge in interest in adult Jewish learning. Starting in the 1980's and increasing at a dramatic rate after the "wake-up" call of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study, adult Jewish learning emerged at the center of the religious and communal agenda for the revitalization of contemporary American Jewry. This is manifest both in the widening variety of learning venues and programs and in the integration of Jewish study into organizational life within the Jewish communal world. Today, there is a widespread belief among Jewish communal leaders that increasing Jewish literacy and learning will lead to more meaningful involvement in Jewish practices, philanthropy, and communal life. Indeed, many communal leaders appear to have implicit faith in the Talmudic pronouncement that "study leads to action" (Kiddushin 40b).

This communal support and attention has led to the burgeoning growth of the adult

Jewish learning opportunities throughout the Jewish community. Educators and communal

leaders celebrate the creativity of program development and are excited about the learners who

participate in this enterprise. Yet, they also express increasing concern that enrollments remain relatively low and that the same people "come over and over again." Scholarship about adult development and adult Jewish learning provides insights into why this dichotomy may exist and also suggests new directions for program planners who wish to enhance the quality and expand the reach adult Jewish learning activities.

## B. Review of research

The need for research about adult Jewish learning was established in the early 1990s by a task force of the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA). The task force published the *Adult Jewish Learning Reader*, a series of papers about adult Jewish learners, their learning needs, and strategies practitioners might use to more effectively reach Jews at midlife. Individual contributors to that collection noted that all too often Jewish educational programs focus on children (Sylvia Barack Fishman), overlook the distinctive characteristics of adult learners (Penina Frankel, Michael Wasserman), fail to empower learners to become self-directing (Deborah Lipstadt), and lack appropriate curricula and experiential learning components (Deborah Lipstadt, Lois Zachary). In the introduction to these papers, the volume editors acknowledged the absence of reliable data about adult Jewish learner motivations and outcomes and asserted that the community needed research that would "describe the adult Jew in terms that would be useful for planning Jewish learning experiences" (JESNA, 1993, i.)

During the past decade, a number of researchers have endeavored to address questions about adult Jewish learning patterns and interests, adult learner characteristics, the qualities of effective Jewish adult educators, and the scope of contemporary adult Jewish learning programs.

## **Adult Jewish Learning Patterns and Interests**

The first broad-scale survey of Jewish adult learning patterns and interests was conducted in 2000. Based on questionnaires from 1302 households, Cohen and Davidson reported that:

- 1. Although most Jewish adults (78%) regularly read about Israel or some aspect of Judaism or Jewish life, a much smaller percentage (25-40%) participate in leisure activities with a Jewish theme (such as going to a movie with Jewish content, playing Jewish music, reading Jewish fiction, visiting a Jewishly oriented website or chat room). Even fewer (10-20%) engage in "structured Jewish learning activities" (such as attending a lecture, taking a class, going to a study group, or studying Jewish texts).
- Regardless of employment status, women surpass men in their frequency of participation in Jewish learning activities.
- 3. Jewish learning activity rises with increases in education. Thus, Jewish adults who have post-graduate degrees participate in Jewish adult education with significantly greater frequency than do those with BA or high school degrees. Correspondingly, Jewish adults who feel competent as learners over all are disposed to seek out educational activities throughout their lives.
- 4. In-married Jews (Jews married to other Jews) who have children at home have the highest rate of participation in some form of Jewish learning. Correspondingly, intermarried Jews have the lowest level of adult Jewish learning participation.
- 5. There is a strong relationship between denomination and Jewish learning. Orthodox

  Jews participate in learning activities more than Conservative Jews, with Reform and
  non-denominational Jews studying less. However, across the denominational

- spectrum, affiliation with a synagogue increases the likelihood of systematic engagement in learning.
- 6. The most popular topics for adult Jewish learning are (in descending order): cooking, the Holocaust, Jewish history, holidays, Jewish values and ethics, and Israel. The study of texts, Hebrew, and prayer attract fewer people. However, an interest in the full range of Jewish topics increases when an individual becomes involved in Jewish learning activities. In other words, the more a Jewish adult learns, the more she or he wants to learn about more aspects of Judaism and Jewish life.
- 7. Although the major motivation for participation in Jewish learning activities is to "grow as a Jew," the appeal of Jewish learning frequently derives from the opportunity the learner has to come together with other Jews and to feel socially connected to a Jewish community.
- 8. Jewish learning programs range in length from one-time lectures and workshops to multi-session classes to longer-term structured study programs. The most preferred format for enrollment is the three-session class. However, formal long-term study programs have become increasingly popular in recent years.

## What Characterizes Contemporary Adult Jewish Learners?

In many ways, adult Jewish learners are quite similar to their non-Jewish counterparts, as demonstrated by the literature on adult development, adult learning, and adult religious education. Studies in these domains are useful for contextualizing the analyses of the most salient aspects of the adult Jewish learning experience.

Adulthood as a time of change and new learning. Contemporary adults understand adulthood as a time of change and transitions, rather than continuity and sameness (Sheehy,

1996; Tennant and Pogson, 1995). Many expect their lives to be marked by geographical relocations, career changes, new family configurations, shifts in lifestyle, and periodic acquisition of new skills or world views (Schlossberg, 1989; Kegan, 1994). They adapt to the reality that adult life may compel them to live in diverse settings, develop several "possible selves," and cultivate more than one "identity" (Markus and Nurius, 1986). As members of a society in which participation in lifelong learning has become normative, they regard education as a resource for helping them to adapt to change and to achieve successful self-reinvention (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980; Tennant and Pogson, 1995).

Adult Jewish repeatedly describe how changes and transitions lead them to seek new Jewish learning and to redefine the meaning of Judaism in their lives (Schuster 1995; Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004). They associate Jewish learning with times of personal growth and personal loss. Their narratives reveal shifts in Jewish identity as they negotiate varying life demands and move in and out of Jewish learning experiences. In this respect, adult Jewish learners likely mirror other Jewish adults (such as those studied by Horowitz [2001] and Cohen and Eisen [2001]) for whom Jewish identity tends to "ebb and flow" throughout adult life.

Self-direction and generativity. Adult learners tend to bring an intrinsic motivation to decrease their dependence on teachers and to become "self-directing" in the acquisition of knowledge (Knowles, 1980; Brookfield, 1986). They regularly initiate independent learning projects and seek a range of teachers who support their growth toward mature Jewish thinking (Tough, 1979). Such learners report that the more they learn, the more they want to learn (Cross, 1981). As adults increase the scope of their knowledge and become critical consumers of what they are studying, some develop the confidence to teach what they have learned to others (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986). Such motivation to transmit knowledge and

wisdom to others conforms with Erik Erikson's description of adult life as a time of "generativity" (Erikson, 1963; McAdams and de St. Aubin, 1998).

In her review of adult Jewish learning in theory and practice, Schuster (2003a) describes many such self-directed learners and shows how teachers who support learner growth are especially valued by contemporary Jewish adults. Teutsch (2004) reports that learners in an advanced class for "alumni" of a two-year study program are motivated to build on their growing Jewish knowledge and to make connections between their "learning and doing." To date no studies have focused on the long-term developmental experiences of adult Jewish learners, but there is anecdotal evidence (Jewish Education News, 2002; Grant, In Press; Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004) that, once engaged, learners become eager to continue their Jewish education and to share their knowledge and insights with others.

Learning orientations. Studies of learner motivation show that adults bring diverse attitudes and expectations to their learning experiences. Houle (1961) points to three "orientations": a goal-orientation in which education is seen as leading to a change in work or personal status; an activity-orientation in which participants' social interactions are especially valued; and a learning-orientation in which a love of learning underlies the learner's engagement and participation.

Recent research on participants in adult Jewish learning programs (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004; Grant, 2003; Schuster, 2003a) identifies learners whose motivations conformed to Houle's typology, as well as a fourth group: *spiritually-oriented* learners who seek new meaning and perceive education as the starting point for thinking in new ways. When describing their experiences as learners, students consistently express appreciation for teachers who anticipate the needs of learners who bring differing learning orientations.

*Women as learners*. Research on women as learners (Hayes and Flannery, 2000; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) shows that when women are helped to know their own histories as learners and are validated for their subjective wisdom, their self-esteem increases and their confidence to develop their authority as knowers improves.

Studies of women who become adult b'not mitzvah consistently demonstrate that this adult Jewish learning experience not only helps women to affirm their connection and commitment to Judaism, but also enables them to claim what they perceive to be their legitimate place in public ritual expression (Cousens, 2002; Grant, 1999/2000, 2003; Schoenfeld, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1992). Furthermore, while their educational preparation is largely a process of mastering normative ritual practice, for many adult b'not mitzvah the experience leads to a profound transformation in their personal definition, as well as changes in participation and leadership in their synagogue communities (Grant 2003; In Press).

Learning as perspective transformation. Transformational learning occurs when adults are guided to critically reflect on the assumptions, values, feelings, and cultural paradigms that have shaped their sense of self and the world (Mezirow 1991, 2000; Brooks 2000). This critical reflection, generally deepened through dialogue with others, results in a reframing and expansion of meanings. The "transformation" that occurs is frequently seen as a change in perspective, in which learners describe shifts in their "inner experience of knowledge" rather than in terms of specific changes in outward behaviors or amount of information acquired.

In a study of adults who attended the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, a two-year Jewish literacy program that has served upwards of 20,000 adults in 65 locations (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004), participants report that learning leads to significant changes in their inner Jewish lives. Through a broadened understanding of Jewish texts, history, and values they *make new meaning* about the Jewish behaviors they already perform. Their

learning sharpens the Jewish lens through which they view their everyday Jewish lives and increases their overall commitment to Jewish education for themselves and others in the Jewish community. At the same time, few Mini-School learners report specific, immediate changes in behavior; because most of these learners are already active participants in Jewish communal life, they tend to seek learning more as a means for personal understanding than as a vehicle for change.

Communal responsibility and the toleration of difference. According to adult religious education experts, when adults join together to probe issues of meaning and religious faith, their collaborative learning leads to an increased sense of communal responsibility and a greater willingness to tolerate difference (Vogel, 1991; English and Gillen, 2000).

The aforementioned study of the Melton Mini-School learners (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004), confirms these insights. Melton students especially value the opportunity to study with classmates from diverse backgrounds and to build a safe community within which to explore serious Jewish questions and cultivate meaningful friendships. For example, after studying together about Jewish mourning rituals, Mini-School learners typically feel responsible for one another at times of loss and strive to provide sensitive support during *shiva* visits. Because they study together over a period of time, many are inclined, as well, to include one another in Jewish holiday celebrations and family *simchas*.

With respect to tolerating difference, the Mini-School learners report that learning from diverse teachers who encourage a pluralistic view of Judaism results in their appreciating Jews whose approach and theologies differ from their own. This finding parallels Brown's (2003) observations about a group of women from across the denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and unaffiliated) who study together in a non-judgmental, respectful, intellectually rich

learning environment. Their collaborative learning experiences enables this diverse sample to interact openly and to develop a sense of community both inside and outside the classroom.

#### What Characterizes Effective Adult Jewish Educators?

**The teacher as facilitator.** More than eighty years ago, the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote about the need to create a Jewish adult education movement with "conversation" at the center. By this, he meant that teachers must be both masters and learners. They must listen carefully to their learners spoken and unspoken needs, because it is through such conversation that people become conscious of being a "Jewish human being" (Rosenzweig, 1955). More contemporary scholars of adult learning also recognize that adult learners thrive in educational settings in which the teacher creates a democratic atmosphere that is enlivened by discussion, experiential learning, and collaborative inquiry (Brookfield, 1986; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986; Maher and Tetrault, 2001; Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler, 2000). In this type of adult learning classroom, teachers see themselves as facilitators who help others to acquire mastery and find their own authority as knowers. Such teachers encourage learners to critically reflect on their ideas and to engage in dialogue with other learners (Brookfield, 1987). They understand that dialogic learning includes not only discourse with others, but also internal dialogue and reflection that lead to greater self-awareness and, ultimately to more independent decision making (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler, 2000).

By no means do all successful teachers of adults follow this dialogical approach, nor do all adult Jewish learners prefer it. Indeed, the teacher-centered lecture model is a common feature of a great many adult Jewish learning experiences, both for beginning learners who may feel too much outside the Jewish textual "conversation," to be legitimate participants, and even for more knowledgeable learners who feel more substantive and authentic learning can be

obtained by sitting "at the feet of a master." Likewise, those learners who seek to develop skills and competencies such as Hebrew language or tools to enhance their abilities to interpret classical texts may benefit from a more teacher-directed learning experience.

Yet, a more learner-center approach that encourages dialogue and reflection has profound potential to enhance the learner's sense of personal mastery and authority. Two studies of adult Jewish learners illustrate the importance of this approach. In an analysis of the experiences of synagogue leaders who were newcomers to text study, Aron and Schuster (1998) report that, despite their high levels of competence in other domains, many newcomers initially believe themselves to be inadequate and even unauthentic as knowledgeable Jews; however, once such learners are exposed to collaborative text study methods, many aspire to develop skills for engagement in thoughtful analysis and discourse. Similarly, in her ethnographic study of students in the Melton Mini-School classroom, Woocher (2004) observes that dialogue and social connection dramatically affect the learners' ability to make meaning of the texts under consideration, and also increases students' commitment to support one another both intellectually and spiritually.

The teacher as mentor and guide. As adults redefine themselves, their goals, and their meaning structures, they benefit from the support of mentors who can provide information and insights appropriate to their new challenges or life situations (Daloz, 1999; Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler, 2000).

Schuster (2003a) explores the impact of mentors on adult Jewish learners, noting that contemporary students seek coaches and tutors who can help them to compensate for inadequate Jewish educational background information. In studying adults on synagogue-sponsored family trips to Israel, Grant (2001) reports that a form of mentoring called spiritual direction greatly enhances how the participants critically reflect on their Israel experiences and how they reshape

their Jewish beliefs and behaviors upon returning home. Likewise, there are countless anecdotal reports of rabbis, cantors, and other Jewish educators who fill such mentoring roles on adults' spiritual and learning journeys.

Teacher credibility and authenticity. Brookfield (1991) argues that adult learners attach great importance to how their teachers demonstrate subject matter expertise (credibility), as well as trustworthy behaviors that show that they are "human" and respectful of the learners' experience (authenticity). Based on their extensive action research about how teachers "develop" learners, Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler (2000) conclude that adults expect their teachers both to model the process of learning and to establish that, like the learners, they also are engaged in a continual process of making new meaning. Studies of feminist pedagogy (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Maher and Tetrault, 2001) show that women students "come to voice" when they are helped by educators who value interpersonal connection and help learners to see how their lives and learning are interrelated.

Research about the competencies and pedagogical approaches of Jewish adult educators is just beginning. Schuster's (2003a) account of the characteristics of "connected teachers" points to how adult Jewish learners value educators who understand their insecurities and questions and yet encourage their capacity to grow intellectually as individuals and as groups. The characteristics of Melton Mini-School teachers conform to the desiderata of credibility-plus-authenticity described by Brookfield and others; Mini-School hiring policies reflect a commitment to selecting teachers who understand how to create a supportive and nurturing atmosphere while still providing substance and intellectual challenge (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004).

**Teacher development.** Providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice is understood as one of the core purposes of professional development (Feiman-Nemser 2001). As

Shulman (1987) argues, content knowledge alone does not make for good teaching practice. The knowledge base of teaching is a complex combination of subject matter expertise, understanding of learners' needs and interests, and the ability to the artfully represent subject matter in a way that is accessible, relevant, and meaningful to students. This means teachers need ongoing and substantive opportunities for what McDonald calls "reading teaching" and what others describe as reflective practice (Schön 1983, 1987; Brookfield, 1991; Palmer, 1998).

As Schuster (2003b) points out, the need for well-prepared Jewish adult educators is pressing. While we have reports of what constitutes good teaching of Jewish adults from the perspective of the learners and teachers (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, 2004; Goodman and Katz, 2004, Schuster, 2003a), there is virtually no research that explores this topic. To date, there are no doctoral programs that offer a specialization in adult Jewish learning, although several seminaries and universities are beginning to recognize the need for systematic training in this area. More often than not, adult education is not the primary occupation of the scholars, rabbis, and other educators who teach adult Jewish education. Many of these teachers are superb subject matter experts but may lack a substantive understanding of the developmental needs of the Jewish adults who attend their classes. Programs such as the Melton Mini-Schools and Me'ah have recognized this shortcoming and offer faculty development opportunities through seminars, coaching and other forms of ongoing support.

## The "Where" and "What" of Adult Jewish Learning

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, adult Jewish learning can take place in a wide variety of settings. However, the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Study reports that the predominant locale remains the synagogue, with 63% of adult Jewish learning occurring there.

The many other settings for adult Jewish learning include Jewish community centers, national

programs such as the Wexner Heritage Institute and the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, community-based initiatives such as the Lehrhaus Judaica in the San Francisco-Bay Area, Limmud Northwest in Seattle, the Foundation for Jewish Studies in Washington, D.C., and the Dawn Schuman Institute of Metropolitan Chicago. In addition, there are movement-based programs such as the Union for Reform Judaism's summer Kallah, the Wagner Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Chabad Lubavitch's Jewish Learning Institute, and Eilat Chayim, a retreat center associated with the Jewish Renewal movement. We also see a range of exciting partnership initiatives, such as Me'ah, a two-year program of Jewish literacy developed by the Hebrew College in cooperation with the Boston federation, that partners with over 50 different synagogues, or Limmud NY, an organization started by six lay people and supported substantially by the New York federation, that has the goal of bringing over 500 participants together for three days of Jewish learning and culture.

One area of adult Jewish learning that may not be fully captured by survey research is the amount of time individuals spend reading, listening to taped lectures, taking distance learning classes, or exploring the Internet in the pursuit of Jewish knowledge. In addition, there are many informal venues such as book groups, study circles, and retreats that are privately organized outside of any Jewish institutional auspices that may attract a different group of people than those more likely to attend a synagogue or community-based program.

The content of learning offered in this rich array of settings is diverse and ever-expanding. As we have seen, adults are looking for meaning in Jewish study and they most often find meaning by connecting their own life experience to the texts and content of Jewish study. While some beginning learners are attracted by the intellectual challenge of text study, for many the relevance of Jewish texts to their lives is not immediately apparent. As Rosenzweig (1955) noted, Jewish educators must teach from "life to Torah and then back to life again." Even as

advanced learners grow more comfortable with text study, they too still look to find personal relevance in these ancient sources. For example, Cohen's (2002) account of a long-established Talmud study learning circle shows that members engage in meaning making through rigorous study of the text but almost always "contemporize" the text by contextualizing it through analogies drawn from their own life experiences.

Programs can be short or long-term, devoted to a particular topic or of a more general nature. They can focus on building skills such as learning to chant Torah or write a d'var Torah, or they can be more open-ended discussions such as a weekly parshat hashavuah class or a monthly Rosh Hodesh group. Some programs have a seasonal focus such as spiritual preparation for the high holidays or deepening one's knowledge of the haggadah before Pesach. Some programs deal with contemporary and cultural issues; others consider how ancient texts or practices relate to modern lives. Many programs are also more experiential in nature such as Jewish meditation, writing workshops, Jewish parenting programs and Jewish cooking. The list of topics and venues seems virtually endless!

# C. Future Directions for Research and Policy

As the preceding discussion reveals, we do indeed know much about adult Jewish learning. We have a good understanding of who the learners are, what motivates them, and how learning may transform the meaning of Judaism in their lives. We also have some knowledge of what constitutes good teaching and the range of content offered in a wide variety of programs and settings.

However, many philosophical and practical questions about adult Jewish learning remain.

To date, Jewish communal leaders have not articulated what the *purposes* of adult Jewish learning should be. Moreover, we are still lacking an overview of Jewish adult education

offerings or of participation rates in different kinds of learning activities. We do not know whether learning impacts behavior or leads to change in Jewish communal life, although Aron's (1995, 2000, 2002) discussions of "congregations of learners" helps to frame many issues about the role adult learning potentially can play in the transformation of synagogue practice. And while thousands of contemporary Jewish adults now seek to acquire Jewish literacy and participate in meaningful learning experiences, as yet there are inadequate data on which to base program planning or policy.

Presently, research is needed about specific learning populations (e.g., parents, young adults, study group participants, converts and non-Jewish partners, Jewish communal leaders); synagogue initiatives (e.g., study groups, learning retreats, scholars-in-residence, family education); community-based adult education programs; informal Jewish education events (e.g., book and film festivals, travel programs, museum activities, retreats); and the long-term impact of adult Jewish learning on learners, family members, or communal institutions. Such information will assist communal leaders in making more informed decisions about how to meet the needs of Jewish adults and how to increase the literacy and intellectual well-being of the contemporary Jewish adult population.

Program planners, communal leaders, rabbis, and teachers of Jewish adults articulate many different goals for a vast array of programs that are described as adult Jewish learning. They hope such programs will:

- Build Jewish community through strengthening synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions
- Enhance Jewish literacy by developing the competencies of those already engaged in Jewish life and Jewish learning
- Strengthen Jewish identity

- Increase Jewish practice
- Inspire more people to take on leadership roles within the Jewish community
- Infuse more Jewish content in how communal leaders set priorities and make decisions
- Increase philanthropic giving to the Jewish community in general and Jewish education in particular
- Inspire ongoing Jewish study

Currently, we can only speculate about how these community leaders should determine the best means for achieving these laudable goals. Dialogue among scholars, practitioners, curriculum writers, program planners, and policy makers will help to clarify objectives and values. Ongoing evaluation and research that probes the relationship between different types of adult Jewish learning activities, the instructional philosophies and curricula that support these activities, and the long-term impacts on learners and communities will provide much-needed information to guide responsible planning.

## D. Highlights

- Adult Jewish learning is valued as a normative Jewish behavior.
- Since the 1980s, adult Jewish learning has increased at a dramatic rate throughout the Jewish community.
- A 2000 survey of adult Jewish learning patterns and interests found a high correlation between Jewish communal affiliation and Jewish learning. Jewish adults participate in a plethora of activities including classes, lectures, reading books and magazines or watching films with Jewish content, and visiting Jewish sites and museums. Only about 16% of Jewish adults indicate they participate in formal classroom learning, and their

- preferred duration is three sessions or less. These adults are attracted to classes that help them "grow" as Jews and interact with other Jews.
- Other research reports that adult Jewish learners are motivated by changes in their
  personal lives and shifts in Jewish identity; seek to increase their knowledge and selfdirection as learners and teachers of others; prize opportunities for meaning making about
  Judaism and themselves as Jews.
- Studies of high quality adult Jewish learning programs indicate that participants increase their sense of communal responsibility to other learners and become tolerant of ideas and people different from their own. Such programs accommodate a range of learning orientations and expectations and empower learners to feel more authoritative as Jews.
- Effective Jewish adult educators facilitate learners' development through dialogue,
   mentoring, and authentic engagement with learners. To become and remain effective,
   such teachers need professional development opportunities to help them understand the
   learners, plan appropriate content, develop a range of pedagogical approaches, and
   reflect on their practice.
- Venues and formats for adult Jewish learning are highly varied. In addition to formal
  programs offered by Jewish communal institutions, many Jewish adults learn
  independently and informally. Research is needed to document the full range of program
  offerings, learner preferences, and rates of participation.
- The content of adult Jewish learning is wide-ranging and must be designed to reach learners from diverse backgrounds, levels of preparation, learning styles and interests.
- Many questions remain about the purposes and goals of adult Jewish learning, the
   populations that should be served, and what the impact of learning will be on the Jewish

community.

# E. The Larger Context

Jewish study is an essential act of Jewish self-expression. While there is an unbroken chain of lifelong learners from the Rabbinic era until today, most American Jews do not make Jewish study a regular part of their lives. Over the past several decades, however, increasing numbers of Jewish adults have been engaged in a seemingly ever-growing variety of Jewish learning – in classrooms, on their own, with other family members, and in the company of other Jews. Both internal and external influences on the Jewish community account for this current renaissance in adult Jewish learning. The well-documented turn inward towards individual, personal searches for meaning has prompted a burgeoning adult learning industry for the broader American society. Within the Jewish community, the "wake-up" call of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study that pointed to an unprecedented high rate of intermarriage, pushed a massive shift of communal priorities towards a "continuity" agenda that had and continues to promote Jewish education as a key component. The assumption holds that as more and more people engage in quality Jewish education, learning will become a normative aspect of Jewish life for more and more Jews. And, as Jewish learning increases, so too will the quality of Jewish life. What we know from the current research is that adult Jewish learning holds the possibility to transform the lives and outlooks of individual Jews and to have a positive impact on the Jewish community overall.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Aron, Isa, Lee, Sara, and Rossel, Seymour, (Eds.). (1995). A Congregation of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue into a Learning Community. New York: UAHC Press,

This is the first of Isa Aron's three books on how Jewish education can transform the synagogue. The essays in this volume show the conceptual framework implemented by the Experiment in Congregational Education (a project of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at the Hebrew Union College) and guides congregations in planning and implementing transformative learning communities.

Aron, Isa, and Schuster, Diane. (1998, Winter/Spring). Extending the Chain of Tradition: Reflections on the Goals of Adult Text Study. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 64 (Nos. 1 & 2), 44-56.

Based on a study of newcomers to text study, this article sets forth five goals for teaching text: making it enjoyable, helping adults to find personal meaning, stimulating adults to think about the role of Torah in their lives, promoting textual literacy and familiarity with multiple interpretive lenses, and encouraging participation in communities of learners.

Cohen, Steven M., and Davidson, Aryeh. (2001). *Adult Jewish Learning in America:* Current Patterns and Prospects for Growth. New York: Heller/JCCA Research Center.

To date, this is the only national survey that focuses exclusively on adult Jewish learning patterns among American Jews. The report profiles demographics, motivations, interests, and activities of contemporary Jewish adults.

Cohen, Steven M., and Eisen, Arnold. (2000). *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Cohen and Eisen document the increasingly "inward turn" found among moderately affiliated American Jews, in which authority and meaning come from the "sovereign self" far more often than from any external sense of commitment to normative Jewish tradition.

Grant, Lisa D., Schuster, Diane Tickton, Woocher, Meredith, and Cohen, Steven M. (2004). A Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood. New York: JTS Press.

This book provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of learning at the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, a two-year program of adult Jewish literacy. How and why this impact occurs is contextualized by an examination of the program's philosophy, curriculum, and teaching methods. The authors also consider the broader social and educational context for adult Jewish

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learning. An executive summary of the book is available at http://ujc.org/content\_display.html?ArticleID=95891

# Goodman, Roberta Louis and Katz, Betsy. (2004). *The Adult Education Handbook: Planning, Practice and Theory.* Denver: A.R.E. Publications.

This guide to the practice of adult Jewish education addresses theories of adult development and learning, the professional development of adult educators, curriculum planning, program design, and the use of technology in adult Jewish learning. Also included is an historical overview of adult Jewish learning in America.

# Hendler, Lee Meyerhoff. (1998). *The Year Mom Got Religion*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights.

In this first-person account of an adult Jewish learner's experience of overcoming personal resistance to learning about Jewish texts and traditions, Hendler describes the challenges adults face when they embark on learning journeys. She encourages Jewish adults to become more informed about their heritage, while also acknowledging how learning may disrupt personal relationships and trigger new life changes.

# Horowitz, Bethamie. (2000). Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity. New York: UJA-Federation.

Citing research on Jewish young adults, Horowitz explores the meaning of being Jewish in America today and considers the complex ways in which people currently identify with Judaism. She concludes that Jewish identification is much more fluid than earlier studies presumed and argues that new measures of Jewish identification need to be constructed.

# Jewish Education News. (2001, Winter). New York: Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education.

This special issue on adult education brings together insights from eighteen leaders in the field of adult Jewish learning. Topics include text study as a religious experience, rabbinic models of lifelong learning, new adult learning program initiatives and models in synagogues and communities, teaching Hebrew to adults, guidelines for adult educators, and personal journeys of adult learners.

# Schuster, Diane Tickton. (2003). Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice. New York: UAHC Press.

Using stories of learners and teachers, as well as theories of adult development and learning, this book guides teachers and planners to design meaningful learning opportunities for contemporary

Jewish adults. Included are practical tips and guidelines for structuring, teaching, and evaluating adult Jewish learning activities.

# Schuster, Diane Tickton, and Grant, Lisa D. Teaching Jewish Adults. In Nachama Moscowitz (Ed.), *The Ultimate Jewish Teachers Handbook*, 140-159. Denver: ARE Publishing.

Drawing on Jane Vella's twelve principles of effective adult education practice and themes in adult development, the authors offer guidelines for teachers of Jewish adults. Included is a discussion of the many venues in which today's Jewish educators find themselves and a "theory-to-practice" chart that outlines key findings about what helps Jewish adults to learn.

# Schuster, Diane Tickton, and Grant, Lisa D. Adult Jewish Learning: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know? *Journal of Jewish Education*, 71, 179-200.

This article describes the emergence of the field of adult Jewish learning and the need for research on this burgeoning aspect of contemporary Jewish life. The authors review existing research about adult Jewish learners, learning experiences, and teachers, and identify questions for future research.

# Teutsch, David. (2004, Summer/Fall). Building Bridges: From Learning to Living. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 180-188.

This paper assesses the structure and impact of a year-long program for "graduates" of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School that was designed specifically to promote change in the participants spiritual lives and personal Jewish practices. The author discusses how the program helped learners to grow without disrupting their relationships with family members who were not as engaged with learning.

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