

Adult Jewish Learning: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?

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This article describes the emergence of the field of adult Jewish learning and the need for research in this burgeoning aspect of contemporary Jewish life. The authors describe the context in which the upsurge of adult Jewish learning has occurred, drawing attention to the absence of systematic data collection about programs, funding structures, or long-term impacts. They review existing research about adult Jewish learners, learning experiences, and teachers, and identify three categories (and numerous questions) for future research: (1) the purposes of adult Jewish learning; (2) adult Jewish learning settings, subject matter, and methods of instruction; and (3) underrepresented groups in adult Jewish learning programs.

Adult Jewish learning is a flourishing part of the contemporary American Jewish landscape. Even in relatively small Jewish communities 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.

What do we know about this emergent subfield of Jewish education? What research has contributed to our understanding about the individuals

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who populate these adult Jewish learning classrooms? How have we studied their learning experiences, the settings in which they learn, or the content they engage? Do we know how their teachers decide what to teach or how to accommodate the needs of diverse student bodies? And how are we defining success? Indeed, how do we measure the impact of Jewish learning—on the learners, their families, and their communities?

Over the past decade, a handful of scholars and practitioners have begun to explore some of these questions. These inquiries have yielded some valuable data, exposed some gaps in topics covered by research, and pointed to a number of important questions for future research. As the field of adult Jewish learning takes shape, we offer a sketch of its contours and propose ways that researchers and practitioners can help to fill in the evolving picture. We begin by reviewing the context in which adult Jewish learning has emerged as a vibrant and growing dimension of contemporary American Jewish experience. We then summarize findings from a number of recent studies about Jewish adults and their learning experiences. We conclude by identifying some yet-unexplored questions whose answers would foster more informed decisions about adult Jewish learning program planning, marketing, and delivery; curriculum development; and the preparation of adult Jewish learning professionals.

CONTEXT

Jewish study is an essential act of Jewish self-expression. It is embedded in Jewish tradition and even elevated to sacred status. One of the 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.

As noted elsewhere (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, & Cohen, 2004), Jewish study has always been an integral component of Orthodox Jewish life among men, and more recently among women as well. However, over the past century, fewer and fewer American Jewish adults have sustained steady engagement with Jewish texts or systematically studied Jewish philosophy, law, literature, or history. Nonetheless, in recent years a renaissance of interest in Jewish learning has occurred, calling to mind a similar “Great Awakening” that occurred at the turn of the 20th century (Sarna 2004; Woocher & Zachary, 2004). This upsurge of engagement with Jewish study reflects a number of

internal and external societal forces that have pushed many Jewish adults to question how well they understand their religion and whether they are in a position to authentically transmit their heritage to succeeding generations. Their self-doubts have been reinforced by communal leaders who express concern about threats to Jewish continuity and despair that most post-Holocaust Jews have only a “pediatric” understanding of Judaism and Jewish tradition (Cowan, 1994; Hoffman, 1996; Poupko, 1999). In response, increasing numbers of adults across the Jewish communal landscape have considered Jewish learning options and have supported the expansion of Jewish pre-schools, day schools, overnight camps, Israel experience programs, Jewish studies programs on college campuses, and a range of adult Jewish learning activities.

Other factors also have shaped the shift in participation in adult Jewish education. Today, a substantial majority of Jewish adults hold college degrees (National Jewish Population Survey [NJPS] 2000–01 [2003]) and have acquired the critical thinking skills that are refined through higher learning and professional success. Despite their advanced competencies in other domains, many of these individuals find themselves under-educated Jewishly—and feel uneasy about the gap between their secular knowledge and their understanding of their religion and their identities as Jews (see, for example, Hendler, 1998). As they mature, they yearn to achieve Jewish competence and connection and to explore their Jewish heritage in ways that feel relevant and emotionally safe (Schuster, 2003a).

Simultaneously, like other contemporary adults, today’s Jews are faced with a world buffeted by industrialization, urbanization, mass social mobility, and technology. Their lives require them to make more changes more often (in residence, occupation, station in life, family situation, cultural environment, religious affiliation, and so on) and, in the words of Robert Kegan (1994, 10), to adapt to the complex “mental demands of modern life” in more flexible ways. When reacting to such changes and societal instability, it is not unusual for people to ask deep questions about their life choices and to search for a clearer understanding of who they are, where they belong, and what sorts of lives they should lead (Roof, 1993). As they search for meaning, they turn to new learning experiences that they hope will help them to acquire new ways of knowing (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Some of these seekers turn to educational (or religious educational) institutions to find support for their intellectual and/or spiritual growth (Cimino & Lattin, 1998; Roof, 1993).

Over the past 20 years, the number of Jewish adults seeking to expand their Jewish knowledge and to deepen their appreciation for Judaism and Jewish tradition has been on the rise (Cohen & Davidson, 2001). Concurrently, the number of educational institutions that have developed programs to meet their needs also has expanded significantly. Although, to date, no one has conducted a national survey of these learners or their experiences,

the popularity of adult Jewish learning can be inferred from media sources such as Jewish institutional brochures, organizational websites, and announcements in Jewish periodicals. These sources show that adult Jewish learning opportunities are offered by a wide range of providers in diverse venues, including synagogues, Jewish community centers, retreat centers, distance learning programs, “day of learning” events, Elderhostels, museum exhibits, film festivals, and community-based study groups. These varied offerings can be short-or long-term and devoted to a particular topic or more general in 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 experiential in nature and add a distinctly Jewish twist to such topics as meditation, writing, parenting, and cooking. The breadth of content, settings, and program structures is considerable and shows no sign of diminishing, something that poses a great challenge to those trying to systematize knowledge about adult Jewish education.

Funding structures for adult Jewish learning programs also appear to be highly variable, although little has been written about either the budgets or the resources currently devoted to Jewish adult education. With respect to sponsorship, institutional support for Jewish adult education is provided by diverse national organizations and local agencies. For example, at the national level, the different streams of Judaism offers adult study programs and regularly publish adult learning study materials, including introductory and more advanced study materials and curricula. Various universities and the Union for Reform Judaism offer study retreats, as do retreat centers such as Elat Chayyim in Accord, New York, and the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut. On the local level, synagogues run a myriad of adult learning programs including lecture series, ongoing text study groups, Hebrew classes, book groups, adult b’nai mitzvah and conversion classes. Likewise, United Jewish Communities, the national umbrella organization for Jewish community federations, underwrites local adult learning initiatives (such as its new Limudim program that is being “tested” in six southern cities); individual federations also support community-centered adult Jewish learning programs (such as Limmud NW in Seattle, the Dawn Schuman Institute in Chicago, and Me’ah, a two-year study program in Boston). Other national organizations (such as Chabad and Hadassah) provide consultation and study materials to help local sites and chapters engage their constituents in meaningful Jewish learning activities.

In a number of metropolitan areas, independent adult Jewish learning organizations (such as Lehrhaus in the San Francisco Bay area, the Skirball

Center for Adult Jewish Learning in New York, the Foundation for Jewish Studies in Washington, D.C., Kollel in Toronto, and the Beit Midrash in Hartford) offer study activities for both beginners and more advanced learners. Online learning materials and courses from such organizations as www.myjewishlearning.com, www.makor.com, Hebrew College (<http://hebrewcollege.edu/html/hconline.htm>), and the Jewish Theological Seminary (<http://www.Jtsa.edu/progs/distance/index.shtml>) are available to computer-literate adults who seek self-paced, independent learning.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ADULT JEWISH LEARNERS

Research to date about the general topic of adult Jewish learning has focused on the experiences of the learners: their levels of participation, motivations, learning preferences (with respect to content, structure, location), values (with respect to teachers), and impact. Two quantitative studies have examined the practices of a broad cross-section of American Jewish adults, while several qualitative studies have examined practices in the liberal community and newcomers to Jewish study. The adult learning experiences of more traditional, observant populations have not yet been well-reported in the educational research literature.

Adult Jewish Learning in America

In 2000, Steven M. Cohen and Aryeh Davidson surveyed 1,302 American Jewish adults to investigate their interests and learning patterns. Among their findings, Cohen and Davidson (2001) reported that:

- Although most Jewish adults (78%) regularly read about Israel or some aspect of Judaism or Jewish life, a much smaller percentage (25–40%) participates in leisure activities with a Jewish theme (such as going to a movie with Jewish content, playing Jewish music, reading Jewish fiction, or visiting a Jewishly oriented website). Only 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. (p. 10)
- In descending order, the most popular topics for adult Jewish learning are cooking, the Holocaust, Jewish history, Jewish 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.
- Although the major motivation for participation in Jewish learning activities is to “grow as a Jew,” (p. 25) 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.

- Although the majority of Jewish adults express a preference for single-session programs, three-session classes hold considerable appeal. In addition, “structured programs that demand commitment to regular classes over a substantial period of time” (p. 22) are increasingly popular with adult Jewish learners.
- Regardless of employment status, women surpass men in their frequency of participation in Jewish learning activities.
- In-married 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.
- 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 undergraduate or high school degrees.
- There is a strong relationship between denomination and Jewish learning. Orthodox Jews participate in learning activities more than Conservative Jews, with Reform and nondenominational Jews studying less. However, across the denominational spectrum, affiliation with a synagogue increases the likelihood of systematic engagement in learning.

National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 2000–2001

Based on questionnaires with 4,523 Jewish adults in a sample representative of the American Jewish community, the National Jewish Population Survey, 2000–01 concluded that:

- Participation in adult Jewish education is strongly associated with Jewish organizational affiliation.
- Married adults who reside with children are the most frequently involved in adult Jewish education.
- Of adults who participate in adult education programs, 60% do so in a class or program sponsored by a synagogue.
- Among those who have been to college, proportionally more young Jews have taken a Jewish studies course (41%).

Adult Bat Mitzvah Studies

Research on the contemporary phenomenon of adult bat mitzvah shows that women who participate in such programs generally have minimal Jewish educational backgrounds and seek to acquire the skills to master liturgy and feel competent and authentic within their synagogue settings. Several researchers have reported that completing a course of study culminating in

a ceremony of adult bat mitzvah tends to lead participants to (1) feel a stronger sense of Jewish identity; (2) develop a strong, ongoing commitment to Jewish learning; and (3) increase their sense of comfort and connection to ritual and synagogue life (Cousens, 2002; Grant, 2000, 2003, in press; Kotzkin, 2002; Schoenfeld, 1987, 1991, 1992).

“Newcomers to Text Study” Study

In a study of synagogue transformation practices, Isa Aron and Diane Tickton Schuster (1998) investigated the experiences of adults who were newcomers to the study of traditional texts. They found that many of these adults initially were intimidated by what they saw as daunting elements of Jewish learning, but through collaborative learning activities began to feel more confident about entering into “the conversations that generations of Jews had grappled with” (Aron and Schuster, 1998, 49). The learners described a positive impact of studying with facilitative teachers who helped them to find personal meaning in the texts and to develop the capacity to view these texts through multiple lenses. As these adults became more engaged in communities of learners, they tended to bring a more sophisticated understanding to their studies and perceive learning as a regular and integrated part of their lives.

Melton Mini-School Study

In 1999–2001, Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen (2004) conducted a multi-method (interviews, survey, ethnographic observation) study of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, a two-year Jewish literacy program located in over 60 North American communities. They interviewed Mini-School students, teachers, site directors, curriculum writers, and senior administrators. Looking primarily at how participation in the Melton program impacts the learner’s life and Jewish identity, the researchers reported that

- Jewish adults tend to initiate new Jewish learning at times of transition in their personal or professional lives.
- Mini-School learners bring different learning orientations to their Jewish educational experience; some are motivated to acquire new competencies, others are looking to socialize with other Jews, others to find answers to spiritual questions, and still others are driven by the love of learning.
- when reflecting on their learning experience, Mini-School learners say they most value “getting an intellectual framework” about “where things fit in” (p. 53) with respect to Jewish texts, history, law, ethics, and Jewish tradition. They also prize having opportunities to “find meaning” (p. 67) in why they do what they do as Jews and becoming part of a community of learners.
- Mini-School learners highly value the opportunity to study with classmates from diverse backgrounds.

- The Mini-School classroom is characterized by both sociability and serious study. Learners prize learning in environments that feel interpersonally safe and also promote the development of genuine friendships and a sense of community.
- Mini-School students are enthusiastic about learning from knowledgeable and supportive teachers who make complex ideas accessible, make material relevant, answer basic questions without causing embarrassment, and encourage dialogue.
- Mini-School participants particularly value the program's commitment to pluralism, which affords students the opportunity to study with teachers from across the religious spectrum.
- Demographically, Melton Mini-School participants tend to be over age 50, married, female, better-educated, and more affluent than the average American Jew.

Looking across these studies, we note that they confirm observations by adult education or adult religious education scholars that (a) at times of major life transitions adults seek new learning to help them make meaning of their situations (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980; Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman, 1995); (b) adult learners bring diverse life experience and motivations to their learning and expect their teachers to accommodate these differences (Apps, 1991; Houle, 1961; Taylor, et al. 2000); (c) adults prefer content that is relevant to their current lives, equips them with a sense of mastery, and has immediate application (Knowles, 1980); (d) transformative learning experiences encourage adults to engage in dialogue with others, reflect on old assumptions, see learning as continuous throughout the life cycle, and build community through collaborative inquiry and discussion (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, et al., 2000; Vella, 1994); (e) 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 in others (McKenzie, 1986; Vogel, 1991); (f) although initially insecure when entering new learning situations, adults strive to become self-directing rather than dependent (Tough, 1979); (g) the more adults learn, the more they seek additional learning (Cross, 1981); (h) adults appreciate teachers who take a facilitative stance and see themselves as partners in the learning process (Brookfield, 1986, Vella, 1994). It must also be emphasized, however, that the vast majority of these findings are obtained immediately post-program or shortly thereafter, leaving open the long-term impact of the various learning experiences.

These findings also point to a number of issues—about gender, educational background, family composition, Jewish communal affiliation, and learning interests—that require further investigation. As such, they build on insights about adult Jewish learning proffered by a task force convened by the Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) in the early 1990s.

This task force oversaw production of one of the first pieces of literature about contemporary adult Jewish learning: the *Adult Jewish Learning Reader* (1993). Contributors to this volume 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). Collectively these authors commented on the absence of reliable data about adult Jewish learner motivations, patterns of participation, and outcomes, and asserted that the Jewish community needs research that will “describe the adult Jew in terms that would be useful for planning Jewish learning experiences” (*Adult Jewish Learning Reader*, 1993, p. i).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ADULT JEWISH LEARNERS AND THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The aforementioned studies provide insights about the kinds of learning experiences that can have a significant and often positive impact on contemporary Jewish adults. Despite “baggage” that many bring to the adult Jewish learning setting (e.g., negative memories of Hebrew school, being disenfranchised from learning due to gender, being discouraged from Jewish life participation by parents, feeling inauthentic in Jewish observance), positive encounters with effective teachers who skillfully accommodate diverse learners’ needs or expectations can quickly—even dramatically—enable even reluctant learners to shift perspective and become open to Jewish learning experiences.

Studies of secular adult learners reveal that individuals bring different expectations to their learning activities, especially in terms of what they perceive as the value of the learning itself. Accordingly, skilled educators anticipate a spread of backgrounds, learning orientations, and learning styles in the classroom, eschewing a one-size-fits-all model. Drawing on her research about the diversity among adult Jewish learners, Schuster (2003a) proposes that the typology of learning orientations reported by researcher Cyril Houle (1961) is a useful framework for assessing learners and instructional approaches that will facilitate their learning. According to Houle, adult learners bring one of three orientations to their learning:

1. Some learners are *goal-oriented* individuals who look to learning as a means to obtain a specific objective; typically these learners will use their new knowledge in order to gain a change in status in their personal or professional lives.
2. Other learners are more *activity oriented* and participate in learning primarily for the sake of the activity itself; rather than looking to develop a skill or learn content, these people like the social dimensions of education and enjoy having the opportunity to interact with other learners.

3. Some learners are *learning-oriented* individuals who tend to pursue learning for its own sake; they possess a fundamental desire to know and to grow through new inquiry.

A fourth learning orientation that has yet to be established empirically but may be particularly relevant to adults in religious education settings pertains to learners who are *spiritually oriented*, who use learning to deepen their self-understanding and to acquire a sense of meaning or coherence in their lives.

In *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning*, Schuster (2003a) presents a scenario in which an adult educator, Rabbi Ariel Jordan, strives to understand the complexity of meeting the needs and expectations of a group of nine adults who sign up for a class called Making Meaning of Tzedakah. The students range in age (32–78), gender (six women, three men), Jewish background (secular to Orthodox, plus one non-Jew), level of Jewish education (none to cheder), familiarity with Hebrew (none to a native Hebrew speaker), and types of interest in the course topic (nine different agendas) (see Exhibit 1).

Beyond these initial differences, as Rabbi Jordan discovers, within the group there are different classroom behaviors, levels of comfort with course content, values, and learning priorities. In planning her course about *tzedakah*, Rabbi Jordan faces the challenge of trying to balance the learners' needs and expectations with her own strengths and instructional preferences. To be effective, she must take into account the students' diverse learning orientations and select classroom activities that will help the different types of learners find meaning and relevance. Exhibit 2 illustrates the diversity of learning orientations in Rabbi Jordan's class and lists some of the instructional strategies she might employ to be responsive to these adults' differential learning preferences.

This single, small case example illustrates the challenges facing researchers in adult Jewish education. To date, no studies have been conducted about how adult Jewish educators make decisions about course content or classroom process. Nor have adult Jewish educator teaching styles been analyzed. Nonetheless, as discussed below, a number of recent studies are setting the stage for deeper inquiry about the elements of effective teaching in Jewish adult education.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN JEWISH ADULT EDUCATION

The teacher's role is to translate subject matter into meaningful educational experiences. In Jewish adult education, this process of translation requires a complex mix of skills and sensitivities that can be quite different from academic teaching. The best fit comes when adult Jewish educators match their teaching style to the different learner orientations described in Exhibit 2. Excitement about and commitment to Jewish learning thrives when adult learners value

EXHIBIT 1. Rabbi Jordan's Class of Adult Jewish Learners

Name	Age	Jewish Background	Jewish Education	Stated Interests
Annette	32	Christian	None	Wants to learn basic Jewish ideas and practices to help raise Jewish children "authentically"
Bob	45	Conservative	Bar mitzvah; Israel kibbutz experience; Jewish spiritual retreat	Wants to understand <i>tzedakah</i> so that he can find spiritual meaning in the face of life-threatening disease
Cele	78	Reform (Classical)	Has attended classes at this synagogue since childhood	Sees learning as the way to maintain ongoing connection in her synagogue community
Dorit	53	Secular; Israeli	Educated in Israel; ongoing text study	Is a lifelong learner who wants to understand all aspects of Judaism through text and commentaries
Earl	50	Secular	None	Recently divorced; looking for places to meet other Jews
Francine	42	Secular	Introduction to Judaism class; Hebrew and family education workshops	Wants to help her daughter do a <i>tzedakah</i> project for her bat mitzvah
Gina	38	Reconstructionist	Bat mitzvah; confirmation; comparative religion major in college	Is facing new parenting challenges and wonders if Jewish learning can provide a new perspective
Helene	66	Conservative	Religious school; adult bat mitzvah; graduate of a two-year Jewish literacy program for adults	Would like to start a Jewish book group, but wants to get more background about Judaism and Jewish values
Irving	51	Orthodox	Cheder until age 13	Wants to "revisit" Judaism after many years of alienation

From Schuster (2003a, p. 129).

EXHIBIT 2. Accommodating Diversity in the Adult Jewish Learning Classroom.

Rabbi Jordan's Students	Learning Orientation	In Learning, Tends to Prefer:
Annette: Wants to learn basic Jewish ideas and practices to help raise Jewish children. Francine: Wants to understand <i>tzedakah</i> so she can help her daughter with a bat mitzvah project. Irving: Hopes to "reconnect" with Judaism and get a clearer understanding of how to practice <i>tzedakah</i> Cele: Attends Jewish learning programs to maintain involvement in the synagogue and Jewish community. Earl: Looks for group activities that may bring him into social contact with Jewish people.	Goal-oriented learners use learning to gain specific objectives that help them to change their "status" in their personal or professional life. Activity-oriented learners participate in learning primarily for the sake of the activity itself (including the social aspects) rather than to develop a skill or learn a subject.	Demonstrations Hands-on activities Information sessions Action guidelines
Dorit: Studies <i>lishma</i> for the sake of learning. Uses learning to spark further learning, often independently. Helene: Wants to acquire more Jewish knowledge in preparation for bringing adults together to learn.	Learning-oriented learners pursue learning for its own sake and possess a fundamental desire to know and to grow through learning	Personal sharing Group discussions Cooperative learning projects Retreats Field trips Extracurricular activities Text analysis Comparing commentaries Case studies Reflective writing exercises Debates Independent learning projects
Bob: Facing personal losses and medical problems; hopes that learning can help him clarify his Jewish values. Gina: Adjusting to new challenges in parenting and looks to Jewish tradition for spiritual guidance and support.	Spiritually-oriented learners use learning to acquire a sense of meaning or coherence in their lives	Autobiographical exercises Reading spiritual stories Handmade Midrash Bibliodrama Values clarification activities Reflective writing exercises

From Schuster (2003a, p.135).

their teachers' knowledge but also can depend on them to create a safe and inviting environment for exploration.

The Teacher as Facilitator

More than 80 years ago, the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote about the need to create a Jewish adult education movement with "conversation" at the center (Rosenzweig, 1955, 226). 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" and thereby increase the potential for them to internalize the knowledge being conveyed to them (Rosenzweig, 1955, 214). 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 (Belenky et al. 1986; Brookfield 1986; Maher & Tetrault, 2001; Taylor et al. 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 reflect critically 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 et al. 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-center learning experience.

Yet, a more learner-centered 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. As noted earlier, in their analysis of the experiences of synagogue leaders who were newcomers to text study, Aron and Schuster (1998) describe how initially insecure learners benefit from collaborative text study methods that help them 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 increase 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 et al. 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 and colleagues (2000) conclude that adults expect their teachers both to model the process of learning and to establish that they, like the learners, also are engaged in a continual process of making new meaning. Studies of feminist pedagogy (Belenky et al. 1986; Maher & Tetrault, 2001) note that women learners are more likely to take intellectual risks and "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 instructional approaches of Jewish adult educators is just beginning. Schuster's (2003a, 84–86) account of the characteristics of "connected teachers" points to how much 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 et al. 2004).

Teacher Development

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 artfully represent subject matter in a way that is accessible, relevant, and meaningful to students. This means that teachers need ongoing and substantive opportunities for what McDonald (1992, 11) calls "reading teaching" and what others describe as reflective practice (Brookfield, 1991; Palmer, 1998; Schön, 1983, 1990). Providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice is understood as one of the core purposes of educator professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

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 both learners and teachers (Grant et al. 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. Still, even these kinds of valuable efforts are too rarely accompanied by systematic research into their structure and impact.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

As the preceding discussion reveals, we have a good understanding of who the learners are and what motivates them, their various orientations to learning, and how learning may transform the meaning of Judaism in their lives, at least in the short term. We also have some knowledge of what constitutes good teaching and an abundance of anecdotal reports about the range of content offered in a wide variety of programs and settings. However, many philosophical and practical questions about adult Jewish learning remain that would deepen our understanding of the impact adult Jewish learning might play on individuals and their communities. These questions can be grouped into three broad categories. First, there are questions regarding the purposes of adult Jewish learning and the relationship between purposes, instructional philosophy, and methods. Second, there

are questions that explore what might be the best “fit” for various learners in terms of setting, subject matter, and instructional approaches. Third, there are questions about how to attract underserved and new audiences to adult Jewish learning.

Purposes of Adult Jewish Learning

To date, little communal conversation has taken place about the purposes or scope of contemporary adult Jewish learning (Schuster, 2005). Indeed, questions such as “What kinds of changes should adult Jewish learning promote?” or “What constitutes success outcomes in adult Jewish learning?” are infrequently made explicit. Nonetheless, there appears to be a strong communal consensus that more adult Jewish learning will lead to more meaningful involvement in Jewish practices, philanthropy, and communal life (Geber, 2003; Shrager, 1996; Yoffie, 1997). To be sure, Jewish study traditionally is understood as a value in and of itself. However, as communities construct their Jewish learning agendas, they need to consider more carefully what constitutes the range of Jewish adult educational models, the characteristics of quality adult Jewish learning programs, and the role such programs should be expected to have in enhancing Jewish identity and strengthening Jewish communal life. This is especially important as the investment in adult learning continues to increase. Further, as more non-Jewish adults find their way into adult Jewish learning contexts, with and without classmates who are Jewish, refinements in our knowledge base will be increasingly important. Unless we conduct research on outcomes with a much greater focus on the long-term impacts of learning, we stand the risk of wasting precious communal resources.

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, and
- 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 policymakers will help to clarify objectives and values. The research agenda with regard to these multiple purposes should include exploring the relationship between educational purposes, curriculum, and instructional philosophy. Additionally, we need studies that trace adult Jewish learning impacts over time; only with longitudinal data will we be able to make informed judgments about the full process of Jewish community transformation.

Research on Settings, Subject Matter, and Methods of Instruction

There is minimal research that probes the relationship between different types of adult Jewish learning activities, the instructional philosophies, and curricula that support these activities. Research questions in this domain might entail the following questions: (1) What kinds of learning environments most effectively reach a range of Jewish adults who bring different expectations to their learning? (2) What impacts do different forms and approaches to Jewish learning have on participants and their communities? (3) How does adult Jewish learning become embedded in the culture of a synagogue or other Jewish organizations? The latter point is especially compelling; no studies have gone beyond exploring the impact on the individual learners to show how adult Jewish learning may transform or strengthen Jewish religious and communal life, especially over time.

The study of the Melton Mini-School addresses many of these questions with respect to this specific program, but we still do not know to what extent those findings can be generalized to other settings. In particular, no systematic, multisite studies of synagogues, the primary sites for adult Jewish learning, has yet taken place. Using theory and analyses of case examples, Aron provides detailed guidelines for helping synagogues to become “congregations of learners” (2000, 78–266), but the complex process she recommends has not been thoroughly analyzed. A comprehensive mapping of synagogue-based adult Jewish learning would help guide rabbis, program planners, and teachers in planning and designing appropriate curricula and instruction for the multiple audiences within their synagogue communities.

Most congregations strive to offer a range of programs to meet the needs of a variety of learners. However, synagogue leaders frequently complain that enrollments remain low and “the same people come over and over again.” Adult educators (and their adult learning committee counterparts) bemoan the efforts they put into innovative program design and costly marketing activities that yield little return. They ask: What will get more people interested? What does a successful adult Jewish learning program look like? What kinds of planning and leadership are required? Why are

some synagogues able to sustain an intergenerational “culture of learning” while others struggle to “get anyone under 50 in the door?”

At the same time, there *are* some synagogues that are doing what many would consensually proclaim to be exemplary work in Jewish adult education. We believe that there is much to be learned from systematic idiographic study of these congregations, toward delineating context-sensitive patterns describing how synagogues successfully can initiate and sustain dynamic adult learning programs. Research into best practices at a range of such model synagogues would be most useful for uncovering generalizable trends as well as for guiding program planners and teachers of Jewish adults in designing appropriate curricula and instruction for varying contexts and communities of learners.

Underrepresented Groups in Adult Jewish Learning Programs

Most research focuses on adults at midlife or older because they are the most heavily represented demographic in adult Jewish learning classrooms. We know far less about what might motivate younger adults to increase their participation. Also noteworthy is the tendency of women to participate in adult Jewish learning at a much higher rate than men. This is especially true with regard to enrollments in longer-term programs. While single-event programs appear to draw equal numbers of men and women, the longer the course, the higher there is a percentage of women.

Further research is needed to draw out the distinction between 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, and communal institutions.

CONCLUSION

Although 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 the current renaissance in adult Jewish learning. The well-documented turn inward toward individual, personal searches for meaning has prompted a burgeoning adult learning

industry for the broader American society. Within the Jewish community, the current impetus for adult education coincides with a massive shift of communal priorities towards a “continuity” agenda that promotes Jewish education as a key component. Guiding assumptions hold 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; further, as Jewish learning increases, so too will the quality of Jewish life.

Currently, however, efforts to actualize these assumptions are not well guided by research and therefore there is a realistic risk that much effort will yield disappointing returns. Existing research provides us with a sketch of the potential that adult Jewish learning has to transform the lives and outlooks of individual Jews and their families. Additional, context-sensitive research into the three domains described above—the purposes; the settings, subject matter, and methods of instruction; and the underrepresented groups in adult Jewish learning programs—will fill in needed details that are essential to making more informed decisions about how to meet the needs of Jewish adults, how to increase the literacy and intellectual well-being of the contemporary Jewish adult population, and ultimately, how to enrich and strengthen Jewish communities.

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