



Spotlight on: *Adult Jewish Learning*

I. A Brief History and Rationale for Adult Jewish Learning

Lifelong learning has long been valued as one of the cornerstones of Jewish life. From the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the institutionalization of the reading of the Torah three times a week, the importance of learning our traditions and history has guided and sustained our community. For centuries Jewish people (mostly men) learned primary and secondary Jewish texts and sources as a part of their weekly or even daily routine. For an adult, learning was the highest calling and greatest privilege. The education of children was only a stepping-stone on the way to a lifelong encounter with Torah.

With the rise of modernity, and especially in the wake of ongoing assimilation, regularized learning of Jewish sources and texts, as well as observance of Jewish tradition, has become less of a priority for many Jews, if it remains one at all. This is particularly noticeable in the large number of Jewish adults who have had no formal Jewish education or affiliation beyond the age of Bar Mitzvah. Although adult Jewish study never disappeared, certainly among the Orthodox, for much of the 20th century it was eclipsed by the focus on educating children and the numbers of adult Jews engaged in regular Jewish learning — even listening to occasional lectures — was comparatively small.

Happily, in recent years adult Jewish learning has experienced something of a revival. Although there is no single moment which can be identified as marking the emergence of this renaissance in adult Jewish learning, the Havurah movement and the growing attention to Jewish identity and education in the 1970s may serve as a useful marker. The field gained momentum from the coming of age of the baby-boom generation and their

recognition that they lacked the knowledge and ability to effectively transmit Judaism to their children. The emergence at the end of the 20th century of elite Jewish learning programs and organizations targeted at under-educated Jewish leadership (e.g., CLAL, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, Me’ah, and the Melton Adult-Mini Schools) tapped into and simultaneously fed the growing market.

II. Models and Approaches

Adult Jewish learning can be found today in a wide variety of local and national settings including synagogues, federations, JCCs, colleges of Jewish studies, Hillel and other communal agencies. Some cities even boast entire institutions or departments devoted to adult Jewish learning (e.g., the Skirball Center in New York, HUC’s Kollel, the Lehrhaus Judaica in the San Francisco Bay area, and the Brandeis-Bardin Institute outside Los Angeles). In addition, national organizations frequently sponsor local discussion and learning groups, including in private homes. Adult Jewish learning opportunities range from the formal to the informal, and in most major Jewish population centers are available in every conceivable configuration of frequency, length, content and intensity, reflecting the wide range of adult learner interest, knowledge and educational background. Today adult Jewish learning takes the form of:

A. Weekly, Ongoing Classes

These are perhaps the largest single setting for adult Jewish learning (they are offered primarily through the synagogue but elsewhere as well). Class format varies from a series of 4–10 weeks on a particular theme or topic to brief experiential activities surrounding holidays or other important lifecycle/congregational events. Classes may be taught by a local rabbi, synagogue educator or knowledgeable congregant. Synagogue sub-groups such as the Sisterhood or Men’s Club may also sponsor their own learning opportunities.

B. Lunch-n-Learn

Developed during the second half of the 20th century in an effort to combat suburban sprawl and competing evening activities as well as to “meet congregants where they are at,” this format allows the synagogue or other sponsoring agency to bring Jewish learning to the workplace during the busy workweek. These courses are taught by a synagogue professional, knowledgeable congregant or “visiting scholar.”

C. Scholar in Residence Programs

These intensive learning opportunities offer Adult Jewish Learners a series of lectures and events around a chosen theme. It is also an opportunity for the hosting agency to showcase an (often) out of town lecturer to whom the community has not previously been exposed. Most commonly hosted by a local congregation, scholar in residence programs are also offered by programs such as Elderhostel, providing week-long formal and informal programming in a hotel or retreat setting.

D. Shabbat Retreats

Synagogues and other agencies may offer an annual Shabbaton giving adult Jewish learners the opportunity to incorporate both formal and informal learning into their experience. Usually held at a campsite or hotel a Shabbaton offers the adult Jewish learner experiential insight into Shabbat as well as the theme of the weekend.

E. Trips and Tours

Adult Jewish Learning is certainly not confined to the classroom as evidenced by the explosion of travel opportunities for adult learners of all ages, levels and cohorts. Tours to Israel and many other countries of Jewish interest are available year-round and while some boast more significant educational content than others these informal learning experiences are an increasingly popular way for adults to explore the depth and richness of Jewish life and history.

F. Technology

1. Adult Jewish learners have a menu of options to choose from on line including distance learning, for-credit courses offered by leading universities and seminaries that engage the learner through highly interactive online discussions that can be conducted from the learner’s own home. Using distance learning the student has direct contact with both the instructor

and other students with students registering for such classes from around the globe. Today, an extensive catalogue of courses is available for credit or general interest. Increasingly, the technology includes video conferencing and video streaming to further enhance the learning opportunities. Such courses are especially useful for Jewish learners in remote locations where more traditional courses are less readily available.

2. Adult Jewish learners can also select from an ever-growing collection of audio and video tapes, Jewish CD-ROMs and on-line resources offering self-paced Jewish learning.

III. Planning for Effective Adult Jewish Learning on an Institutional Level

Institutions seeking to provide programs of adult Jewish learning that meet the needs of local constituents should follow a number of guidelines derived from experience:

A. Conduct a needs assessment focusing on the educational interests and aspirations of adults in your community.

Learn what it is that potential participants are interested in learning and what formats and arrangements will best address their needs.

B. Hire skilled instructors who understand how adults learn best.

One of the challenges of quality adult Jewish learning is identifying instructors who understand the methodologies which enable effective learning for adults. A growing literature in the general and Jewish communities focuses on the wide array of techniques, goals and approaches for engaging adult learners in the content and building greater commitment through the learning process. One such example is the use of the chevruta method in adult Jewish learning. Traditionally used on Talmud study, this methodology defies time and remains an effective tool for adult engagement and attention.

C. Address financial concerns.

Adult Jewish learning opportunities should be accessible to everyone in the community. While it is appropriate to charge a fee for the cost of running such a course, care should be taken not to exclude those who are unable to pay.

D. Seek opportunities for collaboration.

No single institution can meet the learning needs of all

community members. Planning and coordinating adult Jewish learning programs in cooperation with other congregations and institutions in the community is an effective means of broadening the scope of opportunities available in a given community.

IV. Intensive Community Based Learning Opportunities

With the increased interest in adult Jewish learning during the 1980s and 90s, foundations, local communities, and national organizations began to create and replicate program models aimed at providing a core of Jewish literacy for adults at a university-like level. While the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, Wexner Heritage Program, and Me'ah, three of the best known of these programs, differ in approach and content, they are all programs that have achieved recognition in the North American Jewish community for using quality educators, sophisticated, academic-based, yet personally relevant curricula, and intensive formats that involve regular study over a period of two or more years. These adult Jewish learning programs, and other similar ones, have set a new standard for what adults can expect from Jewish learning and how those expectations can be met. Although each of the programs was designed as a time-bound learning experience, history has taught that many of the learners develop deeper appetites for Jewish learning and continue their Jewish study both with their cohort and through the exploration of other educational venues.

The federation system and all of the congregational movements have now joined forces to create a new framework, called the Ezra Initiative, to make this type of intensive, high-quality adult Jewish learning experience

available in as many communities as possible through local synagogues.

V. Conclusion

While there has been a proliferation of quality adult Jewish learning opportunities across North America in the past 40 years, no comprehensive statistics exist on how many Jewish adults actually participate in any form of ongoing Jewish learning. The Alliance for Adult Jewish Learning, an organization of professional and lay leaders in the field, maintain and advocate for the cause of adult Jewish learning and provides an annual forum for leaders in the field to dialogue and explore current issues. The religious movements also offer some educational and programmatic support to their affiliates, but to date no overarching entity has yet taken on the challenge of networking, building an infra-structure of support for, and exploring best practice in adult Jewish learning. As the North American Jewish community considers its sizeable educational challenges and funding priorities, adult Jewish learning should not be left behind. It is an area deserving of more attention and research in order to both verify and learn from its effectiveness and model its best practices.

For additional information on how JESNA can help you make a difference in adult Jewish learning, please contact JESNA's Information Solutions Hotline 212-284-6897 or email questions@jesna.org.

These Spotlight papers have been prepared by JESNA to provide funders and other community leaders with a brief overview of important areas in Jewish education.