New Jewish Development
New Lessons for Educators of Adult Jewish Learners

By: Diane Tickton Schuster

About two millennia ago—in the days of "the fathers"—a sage named Yehuda ben Tema articulated a timetable for human development:

> At five to Scripture, ten to Mishna, 13 to religious duties, 15 to Talmud, 18 to the wedding canopy, 20 to seek a livelihood, 30 to fullness of strength, 40 to understanding, 50 to counsel, 60 to wisdom.... Pirkei Avot 5:24

Never mind that human development was a male-defined paradigm. Or that most people began parenting by 20 and died by age 50. Or that life afforded fewer choices and was constricted by tighter geographical boundaries. The bottom line was that the Jewish life span was defined by a clear set of rituals, obligations, and communal responsibilities. If one followed the rules, one (most surely "he") would be educated "on time" and would achieve honor and a sense of well-being in the Jewish community. While ongoing learning was understood to be a lifelong commitment of the righteous Jew, healthy development in the adult years presumed a grounding in Jewish knowledge acquired early on.

Gone are the days of such clear-cut schedules, outcomes, and presumptions. While the contemporary Jewish life-cycle may give a passing nod to the religious obligations of the 13-year-old and even occasionally celebrate the spiritual wisdom of the 60-year-old woman who creates a simkhat hokhma (Teubal, 1992), few Jewish lives today adhere to the timebound developmental sequence proposed in Pirkei Avot. Nor are the majority of contemporary American Jews equipped with enough basic Jewish knowledge to feel grounded in Jewish wisdom or understanding. Not only have several generations of Jewish men and women bypassed or been deprived of substantive Jewish learning, few have even begun a meaningful Jewish education by age 18. Generally these adults have never engaged in any positive or personally significant dialogue with a rabbi or Jewish educator. Not only do they not know how to get on the path to Jewish adulthood; they frequently do not perceive Jewish professionals as sympathetic resources who might be able to guide them.

Though Yehuda ben Tema's timetable has its limitations, the underlying message of his mishna should not be overlooked. Clearly, our tradition has long recognized that, throughout the human life-cycle, people grow and change, are faced with new challenges, achieve new status in their communities, and periodically reframe their sense of meaning in the world. Adult life, as our sages understood, can provide powerful opportunities for personal development, especially if that life is enriched by Torah, prayer, and mitzvot. Clearly, our forebears believed that when learning is woven into the fabric of life, the effects will be felt throughout one's adult years.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT JEWISH ADULTS IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

But it's not so simple today. The lives of Jewish adults are far more complex, textured with stresses and challenges, than the sages ever imagined (Kegan, 1994). The worlds in which most American Jews live do not require them to have a command of Jewish knowledge or to function from an informed Jewish perspective. The absence of a Jewish education has neither impeded their overall success nor interfered with their development as adults.

Having grown up in the era of "pediatric Judaism," when supplemental schools provided synagogue-going children with a watered-down introduction to Jewish learning, only a small percentage of today's adults have the background to appreciate the nuances and richness of the Jewish learning tradition. Often their memories of Judaism depict rituals that never "spoke" to them or remind them of people they couldn't communicate with. Many have "baggage" about Jewish education, having had too much, too little, or none at all. As a consequence, they cannot fathom how Judaism might now enrich their lives or support their personal or spiritual growth.

And, yet, a significant number want to learn. Over the past ten years, the quest for meaningful Jewish adult learning opportunities has become a passion of thousands of American Jews. These energetic adults flock into lectures and classrooms, ready to inhale the content they never before received, eager to find relevance in a Judaism they hope their teachers might help them to understand. And, confronted with this highly motivated audience, educators hurry to deliver appealing menus of learning choices.

Courses are named, reading lists are constructed, logistics are maneuvered. When budgets permit, marketing strategies are employed to catch the attention of prospective consumers (Shapiro, 1997). Sometimes courses don't fill up, sometimes offerings need to be repackaged, but season after season, the adult learners sign up, sign in, log on. Clearly, in the decade since JESNA's visionary 1989 Conference on Adult Jewish Learning, being a Jewish adult learner has become "in."

SUCCESSFUL PACKAGING BUT LACK OF CONCEPTUALIZED PRAXIS

The success and proliferation of Jewish adult learning programs during the past decade certainly merit celebration. There is much cause for joy about the sheer number of Jewish adults who have embarked on explorations into Jewish texts and have become dedicated pilgrims on the journey to adult Jewish growth. And a number of programs have had impressive successes. However, to date, what has been missing has been a carefully conceptualized praxis in the field. As seasoned educators know, lasting learning involves more than content and packaging. For Jewish adults to really grow Jewishly, they must become involved in a collaborative learning process with the people who teach them. In this collaboration, not only do the students need to understand what their teachers have to offer, the teachers too must learn about the adults who come to learn.

To be effective, Jewish adult educators should be able to answer such questions as:

- What are the backgrounds and concerns of these students, as learners and as Jews?
- What might be their Jewish "developmental tasks?"
- What brings them to learning—and especially to Jewish learning—now?
- How will what I teach—and how I teach—affect their lives?
- Does anything impede their readiness to learn?
- What will help them to grow as adults?
- What will help them to develop Jewishly?

Typically, Jewish professionals have not formally explored such issues. To date, few Jewish educators have been trained to meet the needs or expectations of adult students. They did not plan to teach grown-ups when they began their careers and rarely were offered courses in adult education, let alone adult religious education. Certainly they have never read a textbook on Jewish adult development—one has yet to be published. And while they know that more and more Jewish adults are "seekers," they don't have a framework for

understanding what may be going on developmentally with the learners who come in the door. Fortunately, due to the bold and creative efforts of a number of leaders in the Jewish adult learning field and the emergence of new, if limited, research about Jewish adult learners, the profession now can now begin to answer questions such as: What are the truly significant issues in adulthood today? More specifically, what characterizes Jewish adult development?

ADULT DEVELOPMENT: ISSUES TO CONSIDER

During the past twenty years, the study of adult development has provided a rich literature about what happens to healthy people over the course of the adult life cycle (Kastenbaum, 1993; Bee, 1996). Contrary to earlier beliefs, this new literature consistently points out that adulthood may not be the time of continuity, commitment, stability, or even predictability that earlier conventional wisdom had assumed. Moreover, the parameters of what constitutes a healthy adulthood have been reframed, due to several factors.

First, people are living longer and healthier lives. Whereas, in 1900, the average life expectancy for white men was 46.6 years and for women 48.7 years, projections for midlife adults today anticipate that the majority of both men and women will live well into their seventies (Sheehy, 1995). Moreover, if a population subgroup is affluent and well-educated, the group's members are highly likely to have the resources to obtain effective medical assistance and thus live even longer.

Second, because of a rapidly changing social climate, adults today are expected—even encouraged—to see the adult years as a time when change is both acceptable and beneficial. No longer do adults routinely anticipate having only one career, one employer, one geographic location, a fixed life-style, or even one spouse or family. Transitions are common in contemporary life, and a measure of adult well-being is how able the individual is to cope with the ups and downs of ongoing change (Bridges, 1980; Schlossberg, 1989). Moreover, research has demonstrated that adults are extremely resilient, able to overcome losses and reinvent themselves in the face of major upheaval. Consequently, adulthood is seen as a time of "multiple selves" wherein by necessity or by choice adults may lead several different lives in succession.

Third, in terms of cognitive capacity, researchers have found that, barring health problems, an individual's ability to learn and retain new ideas and information continues throughout the adult years (Tennant and Pogson, 1995). Old dogs can and do learn new tricks. The more an adult is challenged intellectually, the better able he or she is to maintain cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility—considering alternatives, trying new approaches, taking risks —motivates adults to explore learning areas they never before considered. Also, if adults see the relevance and applicability of what they are learning, their motivation to learn increases significantly. Adult learners respond especially well to learning situations that empower them to take what they are learning and make it useful in everyday life.

Fourth, America is a "learning society" in which education is considered beneficial and desirable for every age group (Apps, 1989; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991). Enrollments in adult education and college reentry programs have risen steadily since the 1960's. Technological advances now require retooling in every career field. As adults engage more in new learning activities, they begin to see themselves as lifelong learners. Moreover, it has been found that the more adults learn, the more they want to learn (Cross, 1981).

Fifth, adults who are in the process of ongoing change and learning tend to broaden their sense of purpose and diversify the sources of meaning in their lives. The adult years have been described as a time of generativity—the

diversify the sources of meaning in their lives. The adult years have been described as a time of generativity—the time when an individual passes on what he or she has learned to members of the next generation (Erikson, 1982; McAdams, 1997). Although adults continue to do much of their generative work in occupational and family settings, there is new evidence that people find many ways to "leave their mark," often through creative, altruistic, or spiritual pursuits.

Finally, in recent years, a new appreciation has emerged with respect to the diversity of adult experience within every segment of the population (Kimmel, 1989). Ongoing changes are occurring in the demographic, social and economic realities of the country; increased access to higher education, geographical and occupational mobility, and the longer lifespan have enabled vast numbers of adults to redirect the course of their adult years. Sociologists thus report extraordinary "varieties of human experience" in contemporary American culture. However, concurrent with adults' increased individuality and variability is their renewed attraction to situations that are familiar. Many adults seek a "sense of tribe" and look for homogeneous group experiences in which they can reaffirm personal values, find support, and develop a sense of community (Wuthnow, 1994).

JEWISH ADULT DEVELOPMENT: ISSUES FOR EDUCATORS

So what makes Jewish adulthood different? Is there something that makes adult Jewish growth distinctive? Are there identifiable "tasks" of Jewish adulthood or of developing Jewishly? What promotes learning for Jewish adults who are ready to change? And when such people do "grow," what matters to them along the way?

In the past ten years, Jewish educators have had the opportunity to meet and teach many Jewish adult learners and to encounter firsthand the intricacies of their students' Jewish lives. But, to date, little has been written about the psychological or intellectual development of these adults. Research and theory-building are just beginning to evolve as a new generation of Jewish practitioners and scholars bears witness to the increased involvement of Jewish adults in Jewish learning programs. In my own research with Jewish adults who have returned to study (Schuster, 1995; 1998), four themes have emerged that have increasing salience for Jewish educators and how they work with adult learners.

THEME ONE: HINENI!

One of the most exciting developments on the contemporary American Jewish landscape is the increasing population of adults who report having had a "wake-up call" about themselves as Jews and as learners. These calls are not linked to any one specific developmental experience (such as the death of a parent or the entry of a child into religious school). Rather, they erupt or evolve idiosyncratically—sometimes in conjunction with a transition (such as relocation, becoming a grandparent, retirement) or in reaction to a trauma (such a illness, divorce, job loss) or as the response to gnawing feelings about "loose ends" or "unfinished business" in one's spiritual life.

Each Jewish adult who has opened up to exploring his or her Jewish identity carries into the learning setting a story and a set of questions that have shaped that person's attitudes and expectations about Judaism and Jewish learning. The stories often contain indicators about what the person really wants or needs to learn. Educators who invite Jewish adults to tell their stories signal to them that the individual's "journey" is an important part of Jewish learning and Jewish tradition.

Similarly, educators who share their own stories and are willing to convey to learners that no Jewish journey is

free of questioning and doubt help these seekers to feel less alone in their quest for adult Jewish growth. As Jonathan Woocher (1995) has noted, Jewish adults need to see that their stories matter and are part of the Jewish meta-story; they need to know that the educators who greet them value the steps they are taking and are open to dialogue about the many challenges of Jewish learning and practice.

THEME TWO: FEAR AND TREMBLING

Although many Jewish adults are eager to learn and are excited about the idea of coming in closer to Judaism, many also feel vulnerable and apprehensive about taking steps into Jewish learning experiences. Some may have negative memories of religious education and fear that Jewish learning will once again be boring or superficial or irrelevant to their lives. Others lack a Jewish knowledge base and assume that without rudimentary understanding they cannot even begin to engage Jewish texts. Others are overwhelmed by what they imagine will be an endless set of rules (such as the laws of kashrut) or required skills (such as knowledge of Hebrew) that they believe must be predicated on a lifetime of learning. All these adults, whatever their concerns, resemble schoolchildren who suffer from learning disabilities. They see themselves as incapable of becoming “authentic” Jewish adults. Some feel intimidated by their “illiteracy” and go out of their way to avoid situations in which their Jewish ignorance or other inadequacies might be exposed.

Educators of Jewish adults need to anticipate the anxieties and concerns of these insecure learners. They need to create safe learning environments that support risk-taking, reinforce small gains, and create an atmosphere of collaboration and acceptance. The learning atmosphere does not need to be “touchy-feely,” but it does need to embody a spirit of care and inclusiveness. According to adult literacy expert Jonathan Kozol (1985), cooperative learning strategies (such as learning circles, hevruta study, “hand-made midrash” [Milgrom, 1992], and bibliodrama [Pitzele, 1995]) can generate “a sense of common cause and arouse a sense of optimistic ferment that is seldom present in a one-to-one encounter. [These approaches help to] cut down on the learner’s fear that he or she is different, deficient or unique.” (Kozol, 1985, p. 107)

At the same time, educators must be careful not to “infantilize” Jewish adults, reinforcing their silence and passivity as knowers. Typically, once they feel “known” (Palmer, 1983) by sensitive teachers, these learners rapidly embrace Jewish learning and respond positively to being challenged to think more broadly and reflectively about Judaism and their lives as Jews.

THEME THREE: WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

From Jacob’s angel-wrestling time onward, Jewish adults have struggled with conflicting concerns about Jewish identity and commitment. Today, many Jewish adults are in conflict about how to preserve their individualistic values while developing their lives as Jews. Accustomed to seeing themselves as independent and self-determining in most of their adult roles, they find themselves uncertain and ambivalent when taking on Jewish pursuits. Unable to find simple answers about how to live Jewishly in a postmodern world, they feel torn between the appeal of tradition and the turn-off of dated or obsolete practices. Some of the paradoxes they articulate include:

I want to be part of a Jewish comunity, to share common values and goals with a group.
and
I feel like a stranger with other Jews in diverse Jewish settings.

I want to feel a sense of home and intimacy within a homogeneous community.
and
I want to feel "at home" in a pluralistic world; I resist "ghettoizing" or appearing separate or different from others.

I feel I should be part of something larger than myself
and
I want to maintain my personal
boundaries. I don't want to get too enmeshed or feel a loss of my individual identity.

I feel responsible for the survival of the Jewish community.
and
I feel barely able to meet my personal
obligations and own survival needs.

I hunger for a Jewish spiritual connection and a sense of meaning in Jewish life.
and
I lack a connection to Jewish tradition and prayer; I don't even know if I believe or if what I believe is "Jewish."

As these individuals encounter such paradoxes, they need help from Jewish professionals who are comfortable grappling with complex ethical and developmental dilemmas. Educators need to be prepared for the conflicts and debates that may confound or frustrate Jewish adults who are trying to think in new ways. Rather than offering quick solutions or facile answers to their students' questions (which students sometimes request), teachers must be ready to show these seekers how Judaism has confronted perplexing questions in the past and how Jewish study can provide meaningful opportunities to tackle tough dialectical issues. They must help them to enter into the time-honored debates that have challenged generations of Jews to think critically, make informed decisions, and develop authentic adult Jewish lives.

THEME FOUR: DEVELOPING CONTINUITY

In earlier times, a defining characteristic of Jewish adulthood was the obligation of one generation to pass down to younger people the lessons of Jewish history and experience. Thus, providing for Jewish continuity was a fundamental dimension of an adult Jew's responsibility. Extended families of grandparents and other relatives offered children a range of models for Jewish life and learning. If, by chance, a family was fractured or unstable, the community assumed responsibility for transmitting knowledge to those who lacked personal resources for Jewish education.

Today there are many Jewish adults who are not part of multigenerational families that are connected to Jewish learning or tradition. Some people may be three or four generations removed from active Jewish involvement and do not have Jewish parents or other family members who can given them a sense of positive Jewish identification. Others are Jews-by-choice who do not have a Jewish family to refer back to. Some Jewish adults feel they are "Jewish orphans" who are cut off from their roots because of family migration or other dispersal situations. Some feel they have been rejected by the Jewish community because of their marital choice, sexual orientation, or lifestyle.

Educators who work with such individuals are privileged to be in a position to help these adults work on issues ofJewish continuity. They can motivate them to create their own memories and to engage with others in building meaningful Jewish connections. They can help them to clarify what they wish to pass along to future generations. They can teach them how to learn and can challenge them to teach others what they themselves have learned. By modeling the dynamics of Jewish continuity through their own teaching, educators can help new generations of Jewish adults to find relevance in Judaism and to become strong and vibrant links in the chain of Jewish tradition.

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