

“An Interview with Arthur Kurzweil”

DR. PAUL A. FLEXNER

Adult Jewish learning has become an increasingly popular activity among contemporary American Jews as they seek to gain a better understanding of themselves and their place within society. One individual who has made a major contribution to this resurgence in adult Jewish learning is Arthur Kurzweil. Beginning in the early 1980's, Arthur began examining his own roots through a serious exploration of the Talmud. His personal journey led him into one of New York's most observant communities and to the rich heritage that has been transmitted to the Jewish community for nearly two thousand years. The excitement that he found in learning is quite apparent when he studies with adults in community center and synagogue settings. This conversation focuses on the important role that the instructor has in motivating and facilitating the adult learning experience.

(P.A.F.) Arthur, when we first met more than two decades ago, teaching was one of the furthest things from your mind. Reluctantly, you agreed to teach a class for middle school kids in a congregational religious school. Since then, teaching has become a major part of your life. What brought about this transformation?

(A.K.) The subject of Judaica is something that I came to as an adult. I did not start out thinking that I would become a teacher. Rather, since I learned Judaica as an adult, I gained an understanding of what it means to be an adult learner first, and then I translated that into being a teacher. It is almost like the person who had some kind of a medical problem which required treatments and after successfully regaining full health decides to become actively involved with helping others who have the same condition. I consider myself an adult learner who

feels that my own experience in this role contributes to my ability to teach other adults. I believe that knowing how to learn is half of the success of being a teacher. The other half is that the kind of subjects I teach are very dear to me. I teach for myself; I don't really teach for the students. I always assume that I get more out of it than they do. Since I learned as an adult, I do not think I could ever teach children effectively.

(P.A.F.) When did you learn that you liked teaching and that you would be good at it?

(A.K.) We always remember our first experiences. Mine came as a result of my love for writing. When I was a librarian I was asked to write an article on a Jewish theme for a local publication. One of the local rabbis saw it and invited me to speak to his congregation on the topic at Shabbat services. My first thought was that if only my grandfather were alive to know that his grandson was being invited to a synagogue to speak. What an honor this was for me. But then he asked if a \$100 honoraria would be sufficient. I almost fell of my chair. I told many of my friends and family about the engagement and they all came. That evening I found that I not only enjoyed public speaking, I enjoyed public speaking and teaching people I knew. When there are people in the audience who know me, it gives me an opportunity to show them a side of me that they might not know. This experience taught me that I really enjoyed teaching and it was a real turn on for me.

(P.A.F.) One of your gifts is the ability to reach the learners in a special way. This seems to be an important part of transmitting the message that Judaism touches the soul, touches the person in a really deep manner; it helps them to find meaning

and to understand what their lives are all about. What is it about being a teacher that makes it possible to accomplish this with your students?

(A.K.) My first thought, that it is my enthusiasm, I rejected quickly. Every teacher should bring enthusiasm about the given subject to his or her students, but this is as true for a biology teacher as it is for the teacher of Talmud. My second thought, that it is an inheritance, is a little closer, but I still think there is more. Again the biology teacher has an inheritance which is a volume of knowledge or techniques that has been developed and should be passed along to the learners. For me, the conclusion is that the Jewish people are a family. That is who we are in real genealogical terms. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah; we are their descendants, or we claim to be. We are not a religion, we are not a race, we are not a nation, but we are a family. I think that this bothers some people, but I think it is our uniqueness. When I am studying Talmud with my students or sharing some theological thoughts of Rabbi Steinsaltz, I feel that I am talking enthusiastically with my family about our inheritance. There is something qualitatively different between this type of teaching from when I teach guitar, which I did for a number of years.

(P.A.F.) You are talking about transmitting a heritage, becoming a part of a family. How do you bring people into your orbit? How do you encourage people to become a part of this family so that they will absorb it and make it a part of themselves?

(A.K.) I have learned from both my experience and from my teacher, Rabbi Steinsaltz, that the one thing I have is my enthusiasm. I have to be enthusiastic. This means that I am really there for myself. One of the things that I must communicate to the students is that the reason I am doing this is that I want to. It serves an inner need of mine. And, people respect that. They respect me because they believe that I really am engrossed in the subject.

(P.A.F.) Your enthusiasm is often contagious. People really do love to attend your classes and are often caught up in your teaching. But, how does this differ from attending a Broadway show or a concert where the performers are equally as enthusiastic? Just because we as the teachers are highly invested in our subject, does that mean that the learner will catch "it"?

(A.K.) I agree with you. It is only the first step. But to be really effective, you need to be a role model as someone who takes this very personally. I am teaching because whether you, the learners, are here or not, this is what I like to do. I'm not sure what the theoretical framework is as I do most of this intuitively. I have not thought about the methods of teaching or taken any formal classes in how to be a better teacher. But, I often tell my students about the first time I walked into a Yeshiva and saw Talmud being studied. What they did with the book reflects a remarkable relationship between our people and our sacred text. I saw the students in the Old City of Jerusalem hitting the book and kissing the book. What an interesting relationship we have to the Talmud. We hit it! And we hit it again! We slam it! And then we kiss it, like we would a baby or our mother.

Now in and of itself, this is just a nice idea. But, I tell my students to do the same in our class. Soon we are going to be studying text together. If the student doesn't like what he or she sees and I don't hear it – if I don't hear someone slamming the text – then I assume that they don't have the choreography correct. Because when you don't like something, for example, when someone says "hey, that's sexist," my response is to tell them not to say "that's sexist" – but to slam it!!! And, if you like something, kiss it! If they can't explain why they think that Bet Shamai is right and not Bet Hillel, then they should slam it! I think there is something involving about it. So, I do want to be a role model and I want to get the text in front of them by getting them to participate through the slamming and kissing.

(P.A.F.) So, when you are teaching, you endeavor to get the learners involved in the text, to actually feel the text by responding to it physically and verbally?

(A.K.) That's the beginning. But, I also talk a lot about myself in glowing terms - its my greatest strength as a teacher. I really thought about this part, listened to the compliments I've gotten from people and thought about the kind of student I am when I'm a student. It's a way of drawing the people into the topic when I relate it to my own experience. I draw upon my knowledge to give this person a sense that the point they just made is rooted in tradition. When I spent time in the yeshiva, the Rav would always say, "you know Rashi asks the same question."

And, the student falls for it. It's confirmation to know that Rashi asked the same question. So when the student says "hey this is sexist," I draw on my knowledge to point out where that question itself is an authentic expression of Jewish tradition. It's a way of taking anybody's comments and making them, meaning the student, feel important.

(P.A.F.) You're saying two different things. First, as a facilitator, you need to have knowledge of your subject to be able to connect the text to the history and the students. On the other hand, it is important for the facilitator to know how this impacts on the learner and to help the learner feel good about what they are doing. One is knowing your subject and using that knowledge as a filter to expand the understanding of the learners. The other is to be able to take the learners for who they are and to stroke them with compliments. You want to help them grow and feel comfortable by being open to whatever they have to say.

(A.K.) A good example of this is to remember what the students say. I never see a student glow as much as when I say "you know, two weeks ago, remember when you said such and such?" And the student thinks that not only did I participate, but the teacher remembered what I said. "I felt nervous sitting there thinking about whether I should raise my hand – I finally got the courage to raise my hand, and now it is two weeks later and the teacher is using my point to make another point." The gleam in that student's eyes is so important. I am constantly working on that.

(P.A.F.) This is adding a critical component. You are taking the learning from the students. When the student brings something to the class, you take it and weave it into the whole experience.

(A.K.) I like the way you put it. It has a connection to what I believe, to my theology. I learned this from Rabbi Steinsaltz' teachings and part from the famous midrash in the Gemora about how the study of Torah is not a learning of something new, it's remembering what we've learned and then forgotten. Inherent in each of us is the entire Torah. Our *neshamas* (souls) knew the whole Torah before we were born, and then they forgot it all at birth. They are now trying to remember what they forgot, so that they can shine through us again. I believe that there is something here that is very profound. I want the adult learner

to feel that their life experience, and their intuition and the questions that they have asked all their lives are exactly the questions that the Rambam asked, and that Yehuda Hanassi asked and that Rabbi Akiva asked and that it takes a good teacher to help translate them.

One of the more interesting lessons I taught last year was based on a story from the Talmud about who owns the manure. It goes something like this: Here is this cow who drops manure on the ground, and it is rented property - so who owns the manure, the guy who owns the cow or the guy who rented the land or the guy who owns the land? Then somebody comes up with a contraption that you put under the cow so that when the cow is dropping the manure, it doesn't land on the ground, it gets caught in this little basket. So we're talking about the rights of dung. A very obscure kind of topic. Until you get somebody who understands and can say this is environmental law and it has a lot to do with what you do with the manure – in the neighborhood – some feel manure stinks and other feel manure is their livelihood. The teacher who can make that translation – I think – can then get the student to feel very sophisticated.

(P.A.F.) What do you hope to accomplish by having people talking about dung and other esoteric ideas which have nothing to do with life in the 20th century?

(A.K.) That's just the point. You have to try it to understand why this type of conversation is important. It's like when you go to the gym and it doesn't look very attractive. You know you have to do some work which may or may not excite you. But, believe me, if you do it a couple of times a week for the next ten weeks, you will lose the weight you want to lose and you'll feel better. It's hard to believe but the Talmud is a great place to "work out." It is my role to show people that these great sages who taught about these eternal questions have something to contribute. That, in fact, they are cool people to hang out with; that there is something about their view of life, the way they ask questions and formulate answers, that is quite nourishing.

(P.A.F.) This sounds great. I come to your class and am nourished. I am enriched and feel good. I'm challenged to think and when I leave the class I remember the good conversation. But, have I changed? Am I any

different from when I walked into the room or sat with you over several weeks learning these stories and connecting them to the modern world?

(A.K.) I think it's an important point that you are making. Let me respond with another story. A few years ago there was a birthday party for Buckminster Fuller. I used to be a big fan of his. As an architect, he became a real cult figure, which I was wrapped up in. It was either his 80th or 82nd birthday and his acceptance speech was quoted in the New York Times. He said that at a certain point in his life he came to realize that he was like a bumblebee which goes from flower to flower thinking that what he is doing is picking up nectar, not realizing that what he is actually doing has more to do with the stuff that is inadvertently stuck to his legs that pollinates the flowers. The bumblebee has no idea what he is doing. The process is far bigger than the individual. I think there is something really important here. I'm not exactly sure what it is. But it is like studying the Torah. The study of Torah is supposed to be the greatest *mitzvah* of all. You're supposed to do it for its own sake. Something is going on with our *neshamas* when we study Torah that we really are not aware of.

(P.A.F.) Some people would contend that this happens when we study any outstanding literature, whether it be Shakespeare, John Dunne, Hegel or the poetry of Alan Ginsberg which many of us were touched by in the 1960's.

(A.K.) Let me then take it to the next step in terms of my own experience. I have given many talks about genealogy over the years. And I know darn well that 99.999% of the people who listen to my enthusiastic genealogy lecture don't go out and do what I suggest. Most people don't go out and do what I have done. Most people have no time and are not really interested. So why do I keep doing it? It may not be what I expressed. It may be little more than at the next Pesach Seder when the family gets together, one of the older relatives will be telling a family story that last year was boring but this year they find fascinating. That may be the only thing. Or, when Grandma dies and they find a box of pictures in grandma's closet. Rather than throw them away, they might remember that guy that spoke about genealogy, and ask a few questions of the others present. So I think that I budgeted them a little bit.

Rabbi Steinsaltz said about his Talmud project that his goal is really to change the image of the word Talmud. He has no illusion that everyone is going to start studying Talmud. First, its not for everybody. Second, its tough stuff to begin with. Third, there are all kinds of stumbling blocks. But what he wants to achieve, and I think, darn it, that he's done it, glory halleluyah, is that he has helped, if not single handedly, to change the image of the word. In my lifetime, Talmud was not a nice word. Talmud was what old men in the backroom do while grandma is up front minding the store. Grandpa is in the backroom doing *pilpul* with nonsense about the *Bais Hamigdosh*. Talmud study was "picayune" and the word was often used as a derogatory adjective. But today, when you turn on the television to watch the sitcoms, you hear people quoting Talmud. On the Simpsons, there is an entire episode about the Talmud. Now this is a different perception and I think Rabbi Steinsaltz has made a tremendous contribution to this changed image.

(P.A.F.) Arthur, you are talking about pride, pride in the Talmud and pride in being Jewish. But is this sufficient for maintaining the Jewish people? For many, the experience rarely goes beyond this level. There is not the depth that is required to really develop a sense of Jewish identity. Few adult learners have an opportunity to explore who they are as individuals. We rarely engage the neshama. Instead, we often teach about the text and provide the learner with information and the basic tools of how to open the book. This is what the young adults keep telling us when they are seeking their spiritual selves and not finding it within the traditional Jewish text. You keep talking about touching the soul and finding meaning.

(A.K.) A good point. But not everyone is interested. Many people do not do much of anything and are not really interested in more depth. I am reminded of the poetry of Leonard Cohen from Montreal. He noted that some people like their jar of honey from the local supermarket. But to others, that is not honey. They have to go to the health food store and buy the nectar that's still in the cone. This is the case with adult learning. For many, pride is sufficient while for you and I, it's not enough. We want them to discover that the Talmud is more than a set of books to be proud of. For others, somehow there is a discovery

that it's like a gymnasium that they can work out in. And, it's a health gymnasium; it's a very nourishing place to go. You can roll up your sleeves and talk about your concerns of who am I, where did I come from, where am I going. All of those profound questions. And the best part is that you have the discussion with some of the greatest minds in our history.

As we've noted, many of those who are seeking a spiritual self, do so through the eastern religions. To reach them, we need teachers who are able to translate the information and show that the Dali Lama does have wonderful insights into life, that he draws upon truths that are truly nourishing to the soul. Well, we have that too! Unfortunately, we have become a traumatized people who have been cut off from our sources. Somehow, I believe, this is a mystical belief that because we are a family, when the Jew who is really a Jew is learning Talmud and other Jewish material, there is a qualitative difference. They feel that they are home.

(P.A.F.) You talk about this trauma that faces the Jewish community. How can we help the community? How do we bring the adults back into their own Jewishness? And, let's not forget the young people who are searching. How do we help them discover that Judaism is a wonderful, spiritual place that is ready to welcome them into the community? Your role is to be the teacher. You have said that you do it for yourself, that you love it. You exude this feeling, this love, this warmth, this excitement. It is part of you. But you are only one person, one teacher among many.

(A.K.) It may be that we need to rethink the role of the rabbi in the community. When my family decided to move into the orthodox community, it had something to do with finding that spiritual element that we have spoken about. One of the most important things that attracts me is the whole synagogue/rabbi system. It is so different from the mainstream American community. The rabbi in the orthodox shul is not the hired hand. He is not hired by the board. He is somebody who has the congregation around him, who supports him. And, if you don't like him, you simply go someplace else. There is something special about a Rav who is his own self and does not have to answer to the board or a president. I find that many rabbis in large congregations just

don't have that special quality. It may be because of the system that prepares them or the system where they have to earn a living. Something is missing which we need to look at as a community.

(P.A.F.) I agree. Something does seem to be missing. From my perspective, I believe that most adult Jews have not really been touched in any formal sense by Judaism or spirituality. They are either not interested or simply unable to find a guide who will awaken them. This is the whole purpose of adult Jewish learning. We need to find a way to touch the people in our community, to move them spiritually, to help them grow as Jews and as members of the Jewish community. Your story about the manure speaks volumes to me. It suggests that the Talmud and the sages have much to say to us today, if we could only unlock the text and make it accessible. By reflecting on the text, we will gain a better understanding of the world around us. It will help us understand our own environment so that we will be better people.

(A.K.) Let's return to the trauma idea for a moment. In addition to our need to rebuild a community after the two traumas that our community faces every day, the Holocaust and the breakup of the family, I think one of the most critical problems with adult Jewish learning is the dearth of teachers who have tasted the Talmud and brought it to life. Teachers who don't need to be convinced that the rights of dung from 2,000 years ago could be a nourishing place for you to think through environmental law and how to relate to your neighbors ethically. We don't have enough teachers who know how to build the universe that we feel God wants us to build. I think that Reb Zalman (Schachter Shlomi) is trying to do that. He is trying to produce a generation of Jews who, as Rabbi Steinsaltz puts it, relate to other Jews and to their essence. This is what adult education is all about. When those adults come into my class who do not know *alef* from *bais*, it's imperative that I relate to them as if they are just as Jewish as Rabbi Akiva or Moshe Rabenu. There is no difference because I am relating to their essence. Without more people who can do this, without that critical mass, we lack the role models that will keep our people coming back to us.

(P.A.F.) I think what you are saying is that the teachers that we do have, the rabbis and others, don't

make up that critical mass even though they are teaching many adults. We know that attendance in adult learning programs is up. We know that large numbers of Jews are walking into the classroom. They are learning who they are and yet they are not doing it. The teachers are not bringing them to the level that you are talking about. They are not touching their essence. They are not challenging them. The learners are not changing much, they are not growing spiritually. I think what I am referring to is the lack of dissonance or discomfort which brings about a deeper feeling of learning.

(A.K.) Rabbi Steinsaltz always says that if he gives a lecture and the audience applauds and tells him how great it was, he says “I’m so disappointed. If only you were angry at what I said I’d go home tonight and feel I did something worthwhile.”

(P.A.F.) If that is true, then Rabbi Steinsaltz would want to purposely anger his students. He would want to be provocative, to make them struggle with the ideas and stories. He would want to challenge them. This is happening in some places. But you are suggesting that it is not what normally happens in an adult Jewish education program. To be provocative, the teacher would need to be secure enough to challenge the learners. But, most are too vulnerable to place themselves on the line and risk the possible criticism that might come from adults who are made to feel uncomfortable.

(A.K.) What we are saying is that there are not enough role models of teachers who are seeking for themselves and willing to challenge their students to join them in the search. Part of this may be the nature of our society. We don’t join together often enough to learn and *daven* as Jews. There are not many opportunities for us to be a part of a community for an extended amount of time. Jeff Roth, the director of Eilat Chaim says that the reason he started the program is that he saw the power that summer camp has had on people. So many of the people who attend his sessions and I are products of Camp Ramah or NFTY or Young Judea. It is an environment where we immerse ourselves in living Jewishly. It is an entire experience and is something that the Jewish community rarely provides for its members. We eat together, we *bentch* together, we

sing together, we celebrate *Shabbos* together, and we play games together. For those who don’t attend, they have a deposit here, a deposit there. It’s fractured. It isn’t whole. It is lacking that which makes Judaism so special, the wholeness through which we can thank God and do something together as a community.

I remember when I first became a *Baal T’shuvah* (one who returns to Judaism). I remember saying to my parents that I wouldn’t see them unless they were willing to study Torah with me each time we got together. Rather an obnoxious thing to say to your own parents. But, you know, when I stopped requiring it, my mother asked for it. A page of *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of Our Fathers) became a great place to meet her. We began to have cultural references and to quote Talmud as we experienced cultural things together. In a one and a half hour a week class, this is very hard to accomplish.

(P.A.F.) What I find most interesting about the adult Jewish learning world is that it does happen, even in those hour and a half classes. Given enough time and opportunity to study with an enthusiastic teacher, there will be an impact. But the learners have to stay with us long enough. Then their lives will change. They will become more involved in their own Judaism.

(A.K.) I think you said that word again that I like so much. It’s that enthusiasm which becomes infectious.

(P.A.F.) And, this comes from the teacher being an authentic individual filled with personality, enthusiasm and charisma. There is a certain synergy that develops around the persona of the teacher which is picked up by the learners. But, not all learners will relate to that particular teacher. Each of us has to find our own teacher.

(A.K.) That is another reason why I like the *shtiebel* community. Because to get to my *shtiebl*, I have to walk by 14 others – until I find the right one for me.

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