The Cyclical History of Adult Jewish Learning in the United States: Peer's Law and its Implications*

JONATHAN D. SARNA

No one has championed the importance of "vision" in Jewish education more strongly than Seymour Fox; and no vision has been more central to Jewish education than that of lifelong learning (Fox, with Novak, 1997). Yet, as in so many other areas of Jewish education, we have only a hazy idea of what lifelong Jewish learning has meant historically, much less how it has been achieved. This problem is especially acute in the United States where, as I have argued elsewhere, the history of Jewish education has been far-too-little studied and all-too-inadequately analyzed. (Sarna, 1998).

Here I focus on adult Jewish learning, which has undergone a dramatic revitalization over the past decade, spurred by programs like Wexner Heritage, Me'ah, and the Melton Mini-Schools. Throughout the United States in recent years, the quality of adult Jewish education programs has markedly improved and the number of those participating in such programs has multiplied. We know almost nothing, however, about how to contextualize these developments historically. What, for example, did adult Jewish learning mean to earlier generations of American Jews? How and why have programs of adult Jewish learning changed over time? Most

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Brandeis University conference on Adult Jewish Learning, cosponsored by the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women.

importantly, what can we learn from history about the conditions under which programs of adult Jewish learning have succeeded or failed?

None of these questions can be answered in any definitive way given the current state of our knowledge. The standard histories of American Jewish education ignore adult Jewish learning. And the best one-volume study that we do have — Israel Goldman's *Lifelong Learning Among Jews* (1975) — devotes only about 5 percent of its pages to the United States. Most of these deal with the period commencing in the late 1930s.[1]

Rather than be comprehensive, this discussion will therefore be selective and suggestive. Starting from a law articulated by Robert Peers concerning the relationship between interest in adult education and eras of rapid change, this examination aims to shed light on a few significant moments in the history of adult Jewish learning in the United States, in hopes of gleaning insights that may prove relevant to contemporary developments in the field as well.

* * *

Adult Jewish learning in the United States builds on a tradition dating all the way back to Moses in the wilderness. The well-known biblical commandment (Deut. 31:9–12) declared that the Torah was to be read aloud "in the presence of all Israel," including "men, women, children and the strangers in your communities." All were required to gather, so that they might "learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Torah." Without exaggerating the impact of this biblical commandment on modern Jews who scarcely know of its existence, one can nevertheless discern some important values from the text that may have helped to shape programs of adult Jewish learning, even unconsciously.

Thus, for example, the text makes clear that *Torah* (in this case Deuteronomy, but by extension all Jewish learning) is not the private preserve of priests, elders or teachers, but must instead be shared with everyone. This democratization of learning — the idea that Jewish learning belongs to the Jewish people as a whole, not just to the elite — has underlaid Jewish attitudes toward learning throughout the centuries. It helps to explain both widespread Jewish literacy and the idea that Jewish learning should continue throughout life.

1 More historical details may be found in Elkin, 1955. For additional sources, see Drachler, 1996, pp. 390–397, 647–648.

Interestingly, the biblical text placed adults *before* children in the performance of this commandment: old and young alike were required to hear and to learn. Louis Ginzberg believed that this reflected the priorities of antiquity. "In the olden time," he wrote, "the opinion prevailed that the fathers were to be educated first and then the children, not in the reverse order." (Ginzberg, 1928/1958, p. 87). According to this view, adult Jewish learning was once even more important than the education of children. While rarely the case in the United States, or for that matter in any other modern Diaspora Jewish community, the antiquity of this idea may nevertheless have contributed some added measure of legitimacy to adult Jewish learning. Even if, over time, adult Jewish learning became a stepchild in the field of Jewish education, practitioners could recall that it had once been the favorite child.

Finally, it should not escape our attention that the biblical text specifically mentioned women in the list of those told to gather to "hear and...learn" Torah. While the Talmudic rabbis, perhaps influenced by Hellenistic views, debated the issue of women's learning, the Deuteronomist was quite clear that the commandment of gathering to hear the Torah read aloud applied to women no less than to men.

For our purposes, the importance of this biblical text lies in the scriptural basis it provided, and the values it may have imparted, to those engaged in adult Jewish learning. Details of how the field developed between the biblical period and the present may be found in Israel Goldman's *Lifelong Learning Among Jews.* We will focus here on what happened when the tradition of adult Jewish learning crossed the Atlantic and came to the New World.

Before turning to this question, however, a critical point of terminology must be clarified.[2] Contemporary educators prefer the term "adult Jewish learning" to "adult Jewish education." This is no accident. By current definition, "adult Jewish education" refers only to what takes place in formal "instructional settings" where the teacher defines the process and the student is relatively passive (as in a university classroom). Adult Jewish learning, by contrast, "often occurs outside of such settings and is more determined by the individual's own purposes." It includes informal learning — what adults learn from family and friends, from lectures and libraries, from television and travel. The distinction, to be sure, is not always clear-cut. But the conceptual point is very important. *Adult Jewish*

2 On this point, Peterson and Associates, 1980, pp. 7–8, 16–17.

learning is not and was not confined to the classroom. In many places where we find no record of formal adult Jewish education — no classes, no Talmud study, not even a regular discussion of *parashat hashavua* (the weekly Torah portion) — a great deal of Jewish learning may nevertheless have taken place.

So it was, I think, in early America. Until the time of the American Revolution no more than a few thousand Jews lived in all of the colonies put together, and only five communities boasted synagogues that assumed responsibility for providing the essential features of Jewish life. None of these synagogues, so far as we know, offered any formal program of adult Jewish education. Nevertheless, a considerable degree of adult Jewish learning took place informally, in at least three different ways. First, adults learned from one another through regular conversations in the course of which they shared accumulated wisdom. A more learned Jew like Joseph Carpeles or Hayman Levy would impart information to those who were less learned, and the information would then be passed on. Second, adults gained information by reading books, which could be imported freely, and in some cases were even printed in America. The works of Josephus, for example, were printed in America as early as 1719. Abigail Franks' letters are filled with references to books that she read, many of them sent to her from England by her son, Naftali. By the early 19th century, New England religious historian Hannah Adams, a proponent of evangelization, wrote extensively about Jews and Judaism simply on the basis of books available to her in Boston and her correspondence with Jewish informants. Jews learned about their faith in similar ways. Finally, synagogue sermons served as vehicles for transmitting Jewish learning. Sermons were only delivered infrequently in the colonial synagogues, but they inevitably contained textual and spiritual messages designed to educate as well as to edify. Haham Isaac Carigal delivered a particularly famous sermon entitled "The Salvation of Israel" in Newport on Shavuot 1773. It is hard to know whether those in attendance listened to the sermon, delivered in Spanish, or simply marveled at the exotic speaker adorned in a "fur cap, scarlet robe, green silk damask vest, and a chintz undervest — girt with a sash or Turkish girdle," as well as dangling *tzitzit.* (Chyet, 1966, p. iii). But the sermon was subsequently published in English and contained many learned references. The point is that periodic opportunities for enhancing an adult Jew's learning existed even in the far off wilderness that was early America. Those early American Jews who thirsted for Jewish knowledge had some wells from which to draw, even in the absence of formal classes and study groups.

New Immigrants and New Technologies

More comprehensive programs of adult Jewish learning appeared in America in the 1840s. The obvious question is why? The answer brings us to an extraordinarily important finding articulated first, to my knowledge, by Robert Peers in his *Adult Education: A Comparative Study*, published in 1958. "The most active periods in the history of adult education," Peers declared, "have always been those in which there has been the greatest rapidity of change." (p. 3). The history of adult learning, according to this discovery — Peers' Law — is neither static nor linear; it is cyclical and responds directly to the pace of change. Among Jews, as among non-Jews, there have been periods of greater and lesser interest in adult learning. Eras of heightened social, cultural and technological change stimulate interest in adult education; eras of stagnation stifle it.

The 1840s offer a case in point. During this decade of change, Jewish immigration to the United States mushroomed. An estimated 6,000 Jews were in the country in 1830, 15,000 in 1840 and 50,000 in 1850. This enormous population growth, principally from Central Europe, transformed American Jewish life. It was then, for example, that the first ordained rabbis came to the United States, beginning with Rabbi Abraham Rice, who arrived from Bavaria in 1840 and settled in Baltimore. The changes wrought by immigration — upon new Jewish immigrants and long-time residents alike — stimulated Jewish learning at every level. In addition, this era witnessed a great democratization of print culture. Printing technology improved, the price of printing and paper fell, and so there was a tremendous growth of religious journalism, and of books, tracts and publications of all kinds (the mass-market newspaper, the so-called penny press, also dates to this era.)[3]

For Jews, this "media explosion" — the sudden availability of books, newspapers, magazines and so forth, many of them explicitly evangelical — represented both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge came from their need to defend themselves not just from hired missionaries, but more seriously from their religiously awakened neighbors, who asked difficult questions of them (or, even worse, of their children). The opportunity, of course, was to use this stimulus — plus the same printing technology employed by their Christian neighbors — to strengthen American Judaism through enhanced Jewish learning.

The two foremost American Jewish religious leaders of the 19th

3 My thinking on these matters has been influenced by Hatch, 1983.

century, Isaac Leeser (1806–1868) of Philadelphia, and Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati (1819–1900), understood the challenge and the opportunity. Concerned about the lack of quality Jewish education and eager to strengthen Jewish religious life — one as a proponent of Americanized Orthodoxy and the other of Americanized Reform — both men mounted vigorous programs to upgrade Jewish learning, largely through print media such as books, pamphlets, and newspapers. Between them, they produced almost 150 different works, and edited three of the community's foremost periodicals: Leeser's *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (1843–1869), and Wise's *Israelite (*founded in 1854 and renamed the *American Israelite* in 1874) as well as *Die Deborah* (1855–1902), a German newspaper aimed especially at women (Sarna, 1995; Goren, 1987; Singerman, 1984).

Both men looked to the printed word to promote Jewish learning. Their objectives, as Leeser explained in 1845 when he founded America's first, rather short-lived Jewish Publication Society, were twofold. First, to provide American Jews with "a knowledge of their faith" and second, to arm them with the "proper weapons to defend...against the assaults of proselyte-makers on the one side and of infidels on the other."(Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, pp. 461–63).[4] These same two objectives — Jewish education and communal defense — would remain central themes of programs aimed at strengthening American Jewish learning forever after.

Jewish newspapers and books were the primary vehicles for disseminating Jewish learning in the 1840s, and for at least a generation thereafter. They reached into hundreds of communities, some of them places where only a single Jew resided (Glanz, 1972/73; Glanz, 1974). They transmitted a broad range of news and learning — everything from serious scholarship to popular fiction and helpful advice. They aimed to educate men and women alike. And they promoted among their far-flung readers a sense of community and group identity — feelings of fellowship, mutuality and interdependence.

While all of this was accomplished without any formal classes, adult Jewish education was not totally solitary. In fact, there are references to formal classes and lectures beginning in the 1840s in big cities like New York and Philadelphia.[5] We also know from Jewish newspapers that

4 Isaac Leeser, "Address of the Jewish Publication Committee to the Israelites of America," preface to *Caleb Asher*, no. 1 of the series *The Jewish Miscellany*; (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 5605 [1845]): pp. 1–4, reprinted in part in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, 1995.

5 Goldman, 1975, p. 282 provides a few examples.

Jewish men and women, usually separately, organized literary discussion groups. Most importantly, the Jewish Sunday School movement, pioneered by Rebecca Gratz in Philadelphia in 1838, also spurred adult Jewish learning, especially as the movement spread in the 1840s and 1850s. Gratz had specified that Sunday School teachers were to be "young ladies." As a result, the Jewish Sunday School movement, like its Protestant counterpart, was a women's movement. Women founded the schools, directed them, taught in them and insisted that their daughters be free to attend them on a par with boys. What is important for our purposes is that these "young ladies" (some of whom were only young in spirit: Rebecca Gratz was 57 at the time and continued to be active in the movement until she was a "young lady" of 84) needed to be adequately educated in order to teach. Indeed, women spurred adult Jewish learning, formal and informal, in this period. They wanted to learn in order provide their children with proper religious nurturing which, in America, was part of the women's domain. In some cases, they also wanted to learn in order to teach in the Jewish Sunday School system (Ashton, 1997).

This first spurt in adult Jewish learning in the United States thus took place amid an era of enormous social and economic change. Taking full advantage of new technologies and new media, America's first Jewish educational activists introduced the Jewish newspaper and the cheaply produced book or tract as vehicles for promoting adult Jewish learning. They also devoted significant efforts to the education of Jewish women. Just as the Peers' Law predicted, an era of rapid change correlated directly with a boon in adult learning.

The Great Awakening

The second period of heightened activity in adult Jewish learning took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This era witnessed a great awakening of young native-born American Jews, and many remarkable strides in organized adult Jewish educational activities for American-born and East European immigrant Jews alike.

Not surprisingly, given Peers' Law, this was also a period of massive social and economic transformation. More than two million Jews, mainly from Eastern Europe, migrated to America's shores along with about 20 million non-Jewish immigrants. Electricity came into widespread use during this era. The railroad and the steamship tied distant regions together, and urban transportation systems like the subway and the trolley-car bound

the big cities. The telegraph and the telephone revolutionized business and personal communications during these years. This is the period, in short, when America experienced what historians call "the second industrial revolution." (Chandler, 1977 and 1991).

This is also the period when forward-looking American Jews, especially young people, became deeply worried about Judaism's future prospects. Beginning in the late 1870s, young Jews lost confidence in the liberal assumptions of their day — the hope for a "new era" of universal brotherhood — and concluded that Judaism and Jewish education needed to be revitalized in order for the community to be saved. This was based on their concerns about assimilation, intermarriage, the growth of Ethical Culture (the liberal non-Jewish religious movement founded by Felix Adler, son of a prominent Reform rabbi), and a sharp rise in anti-Semitism. The subsequent onrush of East European Jewish immigrants only heightened American Jewry's sense of crisis and foreboding.

I have described the resulting "great awakening" in American Jewish life at length elsewhere.[6] What is important here is the fact that this revitalization movement resulted in the strengthening of Jewish education, particularly among young adults (in their late teens and twenties) and older adults. Raising the level of adult Jewish knowledge became a prime objective of those who concerned themselves with the era's crisis of continuity. Their response was to create an unprecedented array of new and carefully targeted educational undertakings. These included the establishment of:

- educational programs for Jewish singles at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Associations;
- institutions such as the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886), the Jewish Publication Society (1888), Henrietta Szold's Baltimore Night School for Russian immigrants (1889), the American Jewish Historical Society (1892), the Jewish Chautauqua Society (1893), the National Council of Jewish Women (1893) and Gratz College (1893);
- publications such as the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–6);
- organizations such as Hadassah (1912);
- Jewish library collections across the United States for native Jews and immigrants alike.

All of these developments — and this list is by no means complete — reflect

6 For what follows, see Sarna, 1995a.

an extraordinary moment, perhaps unmatched until the present, when adult Jewish education stood near the top of American Jewry's communal agenda and was considered vital to its future.

Some general observations about this exciting and formative era in adult Jewish education may be in order:

First, to a considerable extent, it was institutionally driven. The Jewish community had become larger and much better organized in a country that itself had become an organizational society. In addition, modern communications and transportation systems enabled national institutions to function much more easily and efficiently than before. As a result, unlike the 1840s, new developments in adult Jewish learning took place primarily at the institutional level. In many cases, developments were centrally directed, distributed by leaders at a central office to affiliates nationwide. Such was the case, for example, with the Hebrew Sunday School Union, the National Council of Jewish Women and later Hadassah.

Second, adult Jewish learning during this period again involved women as well as men. Although we have no precise figures, women probably played a more active educational role than did men. This is not surprising. Late 19th century Jews looked to women as the "saviors of Jewish life," and believed that women were more innately religious and spiritual than men (who, in any case, were supposedly working too hard to take time off to study). In its early years, the National Council of Jewish Women maintained a vigorous Jewish education program. In the 20th century, Hadassah became the Jewish women's organization most committed to adult Jewish learning, as the Council moved onto immigrant work. It is also important to recall that the new teachers' colleges — Gratz, the Teacher's Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew Teachers College in Boston and the like — were all open to, and often dominated by, women. In these institutions, women achieved, for the first time, access to *advanced* Jewish learning. It was through these colleges that women gained the knowledge and skills that would, in time, enable them to claim an equal place in Jewish life. More than is generally recognized, these teachers colleges were the crucible of the Jewish feminist movement.

Third, adult Jewish learning during this period was divided institutionally and educationally into various levels, from rarefied scholarly learning to the education of beginners. In the earlier era, adult Jewish learning was more individualized. Now, clear demarcations developed among both men

and women between those who knew more and those who knew less, and especially between those who knew Hebrew and those who did not. American Jewish life as a whole became much more socially and culturally stratified during these years, and Jewish education followed suit.

Finally, adult Jewish learning existed largely outside the world of the synagogue. Synagogues, especially those following East European traditions in the larger East Coast cities, continued to house traditional *hevrot* (associations) that met for the purpose of studying Talmud, Mishna or *Ein Yaakov*. Most of these associations were exclusively male preserves; only a few admitted women, and even fewer consisted only of women.

The revolution in adult Jewish learning that we are discussing took place in national or communal institutions that explicitly were *not* synagogue centered. Partly this is because the idea of the institutional synagogue, the synagogue-center committed to a range of educational and social functions beyond prayer, was still in its infancy (see Kaufman, 1999). But it is also important to realize that, at this time, Jews viewed education as a *communal* responsibility. Thus Talmud Torah schools and, later, bureaus of Jewish education were communal rather than congregational. Moreover, Jews traditionally believed that Jewish learning was a unifying factor in Jewish life, the heritage of all Jews. While synagogues divided Jews from one another and fostered communal fragmentation, Jewish learning, it was hoped, could unite Jews and show them what they all held in common.

One of the organizations that developed during this period deserves special notice because its mission, in terms of advancing adult Jewish learning, was particularly ambitious and innovative. This was the Jewish Chautauqua Society, founded in 1893 by Rabbi Henry Berkowitz of Philadelphia, and now largely forgotten (today it is part of the Reform movement's National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods and does somewhat different work). Both its objectives and its failure are illuminating.[7]

As its name implies, the Jewish Chautauqua Society was modeled on the Protestant Chautauqua movement, founded by the Methodist Episcopal Bishop John H. Vincent in 1874. Originally, the aim of Chautauqua was to bring together and educate Sunday school teachers, but it soon broadened

7 For what follows, I have drawn upon Henry Berkowitz's history of the Jewish Chautauqua Society in Berkowitz, 1932, pp. 123–196; Berrol, 1986, pp. 206–212; and Pearlstein, 1993.

into a much wider and more popular agency for the diffusion of knowledge, especially through summer assemblies on Lake Chautauqua that combined learning and upscale entertainment. The idea was "to make of study a pleasant pastime, and of pleasure a wise pursuit." In addition, Chautauqua created home study groups, which it supplied with educational texts, and sent lecturers on a circuit to isolated communities.[8]

Jewish Chautauqua emulated all three prongs of this great adult education program: (1) It created curricula for "reading circles" which it operated in conjunction with the National Council of Jewish Women and B'nai B'rith, and later expanded into correspondence courses. (2) It provided lecturers who traveled to far-flung communities in an effort to bring Jewish education to all corners of the country. (3) It ran summer assemblies in Atlantic City and elsewhere, bringing together the leading minds of the American Jewish community as well as liberal non-Jews. Even Theodore Roosevelt once addressed the Jewish Chautauqua Society Assembly. Indeed, the Jewish Chautauqua programs read like a forerunner to the modern-day programs of CAJE in that they combined Jewish learning at various levels with displays of new pedagogic material and impressive cultural activities. Throughout its history, the rhetoric of Jewish Chautauqua was rousingly democratic and pluralistic. It spoke of the "Democratic idea in Jewish education," described itself as "an educational agency of, for and by the people," and boasted of how it welcomed to its platform "laymen and rabbis, women and men, Gentiles as well as Jews... It has believed in and acted upon the dictum '*Kol Yisroel Achim,*' All Israelites are brethren." (Berkowitz, 1932, pp.189–191).

Yet, notwithstanding this lofty rhetoric, and notwithstanding Jewish Chautauqua's far-reaching contributions, by the 1920s it had largely abandoned the field of adult Jewish learning. Instead, it became an organization devoted to sending Jewish lecturers to speak about Judaism to non-Jews, particularly on college campuses where Jewish teachers, at that time, were scarce. Its bold and far-reaching program for promoting Jewish learning among Jewish adults was quietly forgotten — so much so that Israel Goldman, in his aforementioned history of *Lifelong Learning Among Jews*, makes no mention of this organization at all.

Yet, its efforts richly deserve to be recalled for a least two reasons. First, the history of the Jewish Chautauqua Society underscores the cyclical

8 Chautauqua still exists today in upstate New York, and for all of its White Anglo-Saxon Protestant character, it continues to attract a surprisingly large and impressive Jewish attendance.

nature of adult Jewish learning. Success (as Seymour Fox knows from experience) should never lull Jewish educators into complacency. The record of the past is strewn with programs, like Jewish Chautauqua's, that succeeded for a while and then disappeared when popular interest waned. Second, the collapse of the Jewish Chautauqua Society seems to have been brought about primarily by lack of funds. As the priorities of the Jewish community changed, and fighting antisemitism became the community's number one priority, adult Jewish learning returned to the status of community stepchild. The Jewish Chautauqua Society could only stay alive by abandoning its mission to educate Jews in favor of educating non-Jews, an enterprise that was connected with the battle against anti-Semitism and could therefore win funding. Had the Jewish Chautauqua Society built up a strong endowment, perhaps things would have been different. Whatever the case, the society's failure serves as a sober reminder that adult Jewish learning can only succeed when it has community backing and proper funding. Otherwise even the most exciting programs inevitably collapse.

Revival of Jewish Learning

Adult Jewish education began to crest for the third time in American Jewish history beginning in the late 1930s. In response to Nazism, domestic anti-Semitism and the waning of the Great Depression, interest in Jewish learning revived among American Jews. This grew partly as a form of spiritual resistance against the forces of anti-Jewish hatred, and partly (and increasingly, after the Shoah) in recognition of American Jewry's new responsibility for preserving and promoting Jewish culture in the face of the destruction of the European centers of Jewish learning. The Conservative movement's National Academy for Adult Jewish Studies was founded in 1940; Shlomo Bardin's Brandeis Camp Institute for college-aged young adults was established in 1941; and the Department of Continuing Education of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations came into being in 1948, the same year that B'nai B'rith began its Adult Institutes of Judaism (Goldman, 1975, p. 308; Dash Moore, 1981, pp. 230–233).[9] The Jewish Publication Society, which promoted Jewish education and culture through books rather than formal instruction, also roared back to life with the waning of the Depression. Its total income increased five-

9 B'nai Brith's Committee on Adult Jewish Education was founded in 1950.

fold between 1935 and 1945, and the number of books it distributed tripled (Sarna, 1989, pp. 183–184). Other publishers of Judaica, including university presses, experienced similar increases in Jewish book sales (Madison, 1967–68; Zipin, 1984–85). Finally, Jewish organizational life as a whole surged during this period. In 1945, the *American Jewish Year Book* reported that "a larger number of new organizations... formed during the past five years than in any previous five-year period, forty seven new organizations having been established since 1940." (*American Jewish Year Book, 47.* 1945–46, p. 559)

Adult Jewish education promised to prepare the community for the new responsibilities that it faced in the wake of the European Jewish catastrophe. "American Jews," the *American Jewish Year Book* reported as early as 1941, "are realizing that they have been spared for a sacred task — to preserve Judaism and its cultural, social and moral values." That same year, Hebrew Union College historian Jacob Rader Marcus, who would himself soon shift the central focus of his scholarship from Europe to America, also pointed to the American Jewish community's new historic role. "The burden is solely ours to carry," he declared: "Jewish culture and civilization and leadership are shifting rapidly to these shores." (*American Jewish Year Book, 43.* 1941–42, pp. 28, 780, 789).

The establishment of the State of Israel and the postwar move to the suburbs furthered the new interest in Jewish learning, particularly on the part of synagogues, which in this period were deeply involved in fostering adult Jewish learning activities as part of their mission. Major Jewish organizations like Hadassah and B'nai B'rith also showed new interest in adult Jewish learning, and made strong commitments to their promotion.

Of course, the postwar era also witnessed a great deal of interest in adult education among Americans generally. It was estimated in the 1940s that some 60 million American men and women were enrolled in one or another study program for adults. As before, the larger culture's support for adult learning was closely related to developments inside the Jewish community (Goldman, 1975. See also Cohen, 1965).

By the 1960s, the third era in adult Jewish learning in America had run its course. A study published in the *American Jewish Year Book* served, unconsciously, as the obituary for innovations introduced 25 years earlier. While the study confirmed that adult Jewish education had "grown into an effort of major proportions and national impact," it noted that new methodologies developed in the general field of adult Jewish learning had not been employed by Jewish educators "to any great extent." The five most frequent activities that synagogues and organizations did employ —

"the lecture, formal class, study group, discussion group and forum" — were "not truly efficacious." (Cohen, 1965, pp. 287–90). The great social and cultural changes of the 1930s and 1940s stagnated in the 1950s and, just as Peers' Law predicted, adult Jewish education stagnated as well.

* * *

The American Jewish community today stands in the midst of its fourth great era of adult Jewish learning.[10] Seymour Fox and his disciples have helped make this era happen, and have contributed to the excitement that surrounds adult Jewish study programs in many communities, including where I live in Boston. How long this will last and what its final legacy will be cannot yet be predicted. What is clear is that this new era of adult Jewish learning, however much it is about "getting adults, from recent college graduates to retirees, to recognize the gaps in their Jewish learning and get excited about filling them in," (Tye, 2001, p. 129) is also much more than that. It is, in addition, closely tied to the pace of social, cultural and technological change in recent decades, and represents another confirmation of Peers' Law: "The most active periods in the history of adult education, have always been those in which there has been the greatest rapidity of change."

Looking back at the whole history of adult Jewish learning in America, we might describe it as a very moving and inspiring saga. Adapting conclusions drawn from the general history of adult learning, we could even characterize our story in heroic terms as:

> "... the epic struggle of ordinary Jews to catch up with the knowledge necessary to enable them to live useful Jewish lives, to understand the Jewish world about them, to appreciate the Jewish ideas which are significant to the situations in which they find themselves, and above all to break through the barriers which previously cut them off from their fellow Jews and walled them about with spiritual loneliness."[11]

But a closer look suggests that this history is better described in cyclical terms: as the periodic recognition on the part of American Jews that they need to deepen their Jewish knowledge in order to face the looming challenges posed by contemporary Jewish life. The most successful

10 On the recent proliferation of adult Jewish learning, see Wertheimer, 1999.
11 Adapted from Peers, 1958, p. 335.

programs, through the years, have taken cognizance of these challenges. To meet them, they have taken advantage of new conditions, new media, and new technologies. They have shamelessly borrowed successful ideas from other faiths and from the general field of adult learning. And they have employed diverse and eclectic means of achieving their aims, not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Yet, as Peers' Law reminds us, the long-term success of these programs is by no means guaranteed. Indeed, even as Jewish educators work to sustain the many exciting programs that have been developed in recent years, it behooves them to look back and learn from previous eras in adult Jewish learning. Both past successes and past failures suggest lessons for the future.

References

American Jewish Year Book, 43. (1941–42).

American Jewish Year Book, 47. (1945–46).

Ashton, Dianne. (1997). *Unsubdued spirits: Rebecca Gratz and women's Judaism in America.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Berkowitz, Max E. (1932). *The beloved Rabbi.* New York: Macmillan

Berrol, Selma. (1986). Jewish Chautauqua Society. In Michael Dobkowski (Ed.). *Jewish American voluntary organizations.* New York: Greenwood, pp. 206–212.

Chandler, Alfred D. (1977). *The visible hand: The management revolution in American business.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Chandler, Alfred D. (1991). Industrial revolution. In Eric Foner and John A. Garraty. (Eds.). *The reader's companion to American history.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 559–563.

Chyet, Stanley F. (Ed.). (1966). *Rabbi Carigal preaches in Newport.* Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives.

Cohen, Samuel I. (1965). Adult Jewish education. *American Jewish Year Book, 66*, pp. 279–290.

Dash Moore, Deborah. (1981) *B'nai B'rith and the challenge of ethnic leadership.* Albany: SUNY.

Drachler, Norman. (1996). *A bibliography of Jewish education in the United States.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Elkin, Harry. (1955). Adult Jewish education developments in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. *Jewish Education 26* (Summer). pp. 40–54.

Ginzberg, Louis. (1928/1958). *Students, scholars and saints.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Glanz, Rudolf. (1974). The spread of Jewish communities through America before the Civil War. *Yivo annual of Jewish Social Science, 15*, pp. 7–45.

Glanz, Rudolf. (1972/73). Where the Jewish press was distributed in pre-Civil War America. *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly, 5*, pp. 1–14.

Goldman, Israel. (1975). *Lifelong learning among Jews*. New York: Ktav.

Goren, Arthur A. (1987). The Jewish press. In Sally M. Miller. (Ed.). *The ethnic press in the United States*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 203–228.

Hatch, Nathan. (1983). Elias Smith and the rise of religious journalism in the early Republic. In William L. Joyce, et al., (Eds.) *Printing and society in early America*. Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, pp. 250–277.

Kaufman, David. (1999). *Shul with a pool: The "Synagogue-center" in American Jewish history*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England.

Pearlstein, Peggy Kronsberg. (1993). Understanding through education: One hundred years of the Jewish Chautauqua Society, 1893–1993. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University.

Madison, Charles A. (1967–68). The rise of the Jewish book in American publishing. *Jewish Book Annual, 25*, pp. 81–86.

Mendes-Flohr, Paul and Reinharz, Jehuda. (1995). *The Jew in the modern world: A documentary history*. Second edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Peers, Robert. (1958) *Adult education: A comparative study*. London & New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul/Humanities Press.

Peterson, Richard E. and Associates. (1980). *Lifelong learning in America*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Sarna, Jonathan D. (1998). American Jewish Education in historical perspective. *Journal of Jewish Education 64*. (Winter/Spring) pp. 8–21.

Sarna, Jonathan D. (1989). *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish culture*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Sarna, Jonathan D. (1995). The history of the Jewish press in North America. *The North American Jewish press: The 1994 Alexander Brin Forum*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies of Brandeis University.

Sarna, Jonathan D. (1995). *A great awakening: The transformation that shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and its implications for today*. New York: CIJE.

Singerman, Robert. (1984). The American Jewish press, 1823–1983: A bibliographic survey of research and studies. *American Jewish History, 73* (June). pp. 422–444.

Tye, Larry. (2001). *Home lands: Portraits of the new Jewish Diaspora*. New York: Henry Holt.

Wertheimer, Jack. (1999). Jewish education in the United States: Recent trends and issues. *American Jewish Year Book, 99*, pp. 82–84.

Zipin, Amnon. (1984–85). Judaica from American University Presses. *Jewish Book Annual. 42*, pp. 172–182.