

A Journey of the Mind to Feed the Spirit: Reflections on Adult Jewish Learning

By Lisa D. Grant

The following is a first-person reflection on a personal journey through adult education as well as a delineation of the conclusions the author has drawn from that experience.

Judaism has served as a barometer to my sense of self throughout my life. It has been a constant though ever-changing presence. As I have grown and changed, so too have my Jewish beliefs and expressions grown and changed. About 10 years ago, I fell in love with Judaism with all of the passion of newfound love. It's not that I was discovering something for the first time; rather, I was entering through a new doorway. That doorway was study. Over the past ten years, this passion for study led my family and me on quite an adventure, one that led me to leave a well-paying job as a corporate health care manager to pur-

sue graduate studies that culminated this past May in completing a doctorate in Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

At this point in the journey, the first blush of new love has faded. Like a good marriage, I find myself in the position of having to work at sustaining the relationship. It is a labor I embrace with joy and dedication, but it is work nevertheless. In this article, I want to reflect on what it takes to sustain that love and commitment and perhaps draw some broader lessons about adult Jewish learning from my personal story.

My Jewish life so far can be divided into four periods of time. The first I call "blind faith." This was during my early adolescence when I saw things with the absolute clarity only a teenager could possess. This was my era

of complete devotion. It was shaped by a close-knit family dominated by my immigrant grandfather who never lost his thick Yiddish accent and his delight in all things Jewish. It was shaped by a caring teacher who wove a seamless cloth between the stories of the *humash* and his own stories of a narrow escape from Europe in the dark days of WWII. It was shaped by regular synagogue attendance, Camp Ramah, family holiday observances and parents intensely committed to the State of Israel. I was born deeply embedded into the tribe and I never had to question my allegiance or sense of place.

I'll label stage 2 "reality bites." My parents were so intensely committed to Israel, it seems, that they made *aliyah* in 1971. I was 16 at the time and went with them because I had no choice. I was an unhappy and rebellious teenager, in no frame of mind to be uprooted from a community I was just beginning to claim as my own. I stayed in Israel through high school and then came rushing back to the States. Periodic angst about my decision arose during my college years, but only when I would go to Israel for the summer. The rest of the time, I was fully absorbed in American life.

Stage 3 was the era of "ambivalent complacency." When I left Israel in 1972, I walked away from organized Jewish life for more than 10 years. If I were going to live in America, I would be an American. I became a closet Jew. Israel and Judaism became totally private matters. I rarely spoke about Israel with my friends. I *never* set foot in a synagogue. There were years when I did not even attend a Pesach *seder* or light Hanukah candles, activities that even the majority of unaffiliated Jews typically do.

I suppose my parents would call stage 4 "your just desserts," though I think a more accurate representation might be "the irony of life." After the birth of my children, I began a slow and cautious return to Judaism. It began when I joined an informal interfaith group that would get together every

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education (and Consecration in Reform congregations) and the completion of compulsory religious education (*bar/bat mitzvah*, Confirmation, and/or high-school graduation). As a result, the developmental milestones in the lives of adults have been largely ignored.

Some congregations have begun to respond to the needs of specific cohorts of adults. Family-education programs, which usually involve children in elementary school and their parents, are the most widespread example. Because of the extensive demands on young parents and the priority that parents give to their children's education, it is unlikely that any other format would serve them as well. Some congregations also conduct study programs for the parents of young people approaching *bar/bat mitzvah*.

Both of these programs are directed only toward parents. One new program, presented as a life-cycle ritual for mature adults, is *Simchat Chokhmah* ("Celebration of Wisdom"). Currently offered by only a handful of congregations, it is typically designed for members over a certain age (commonly 50) and entails a year-long study program.

Most congregations have resisted the creation of new life-cycle rituals, but it would be

both theologically consistent and practically advantageous for many to tailor their education programs more specifically to the life-stage needs of adults. In so doing, they could engage adults more fully in the education programs, and increase the relevance of the synagogue to its members' lives. ■

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few weeks to grapple with issues of belief and belonging. It was here I led my first Pesach *seder* and found that I loved the process of creating a *haggadah* and teaching others stories from my tradition. After a few years, I realized I wanted to do something more than talk about my ambivalence and confusion, and experiment on the fringes. So, I joined a synagogue. It turned out to be the right place at the right time. It was a warm and open community that offered just the right mix of tradition and change where I could grow at my own pace. Then, ironically, a few years later, my husband's career brought us to Connecticut where we ended up moving to the town where I grew up. Though I no longer had family there, it was a homecoming nonetheless. By that time, I knew I wanted to lead an integrated Jewish life. To me, that meant more than just joining a synagogue and getting involved in Jewish communal affairs. It also meant engaging in serious study. Fortunately, shortly after we moved to West Hartford, four people who had been Wexner Heritage fellows decided they wanted to share some of their wonderful experiences in Jewish learning with their home community. They established the Greater Hartford *Bet Midrash* Institute of Adult Jewish Studies, a two-year, non-denominational program of adult Jewish learning. I entered the first class. Almost immediately, Monday nights became the highpoint of my week.

I think it was during the second semester that I realized how frustrated I was by how little time we could devote to each topic of study. How could we only spend one hour talking about God and then move onto Torah the next week and redemption the week after that? I wanted to delve deeply, to immerse myself in the texts. I wanted to engage in dialogue and formulate questions, and we barely had time to introduce the key themes before moving on. I was hooked and knew I needed more.

I began to take courses in Hebrew, Bible and rabbinics at the JCC, at the local university and wherever else I could find them. And still, I hungered for more.

Ultimately, I fulfilled the rabbinic dictum *Ha'talmud mavie l'idai ha'maaseh*, study leads to action. Study is the entry point. But, only

through action does one build a relationship. My intense involvement in Jewish study inevitably led me to reflect on and reshape my religious life. I started creating Shabbat rituals at home and attending services more regularly. I learned to *layn* Torah and began to take an active role in the life of my congregation. I also began an active and ongoing process of struggling to understand and define my relationship with God. We reached a family decision to keep kosher as well. These actions brought me comfort and discipline as I sought the means of my transformation. They still do.

...prayer is a form of ... wrestling (with God).

The most obvious change, however, was my decision to leave my job and pursue formal studies so that I could help others create a place for learning and experiencing all the dimensions of Judaism — history, culture, ritual, Torah, and our attempts to find holiness in the face of the unknown. As our rabbis taught, *tikkun olam*, our work to repair the world, begins with learning and ends with teaching.

So, I entered the doctoral program at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Lucky in life and in love, I did this with the unqualified, if a bit bewildered, support of my husband, who gave me the opportunity to turn our lives upside down by significantly reducing our income and disappearing from the family three days each week to pursue my studies in New York. I couldn't have been happier. I took five or six courses a semester and there were always things I regretted not being able to fit in. I quickly realized that the more I learned, the less I knew. This I understood as affirmation that Jewish learning must be a life-long pursuit. The process is more important than the destination. You just have to jump into the stream and keep swimming.

Now I find myself entering a fifth phase of my life. It's so new that I'm not even sure what to label it yet, except maybe "reaching adulthood." As Erikson says, in adulthood, we face a choice between stagnation and

generativity.¹ I have chosen the latter route and my life is filled with blessings and challenges as a result. The path I have chosen is the life of the mind, but I do it to feed my spirit. I achieved my goal of completing my doctorate and am now beginning a new career as a teacher and emerging scholar of Jewish education. It is rather humbling.

As I start this new chapter, I am well aware that the luster and initial urgency of my passion has faded somewhat. The honeymoon is over. I remain firmly committed to the relationship, however. It's the difference between falling in love, a whirlwind of emotion where everything besides the love is inconsequential, and preserving the love, which takes day to day effort, constant communication, give and take, and forgiveness. It is a partnership, a *brit l'olam*, a covenant for all time.

So, how can my story be used to help deepen our understanding of the process of adult Jewish learning? There are three elements that I believe are essential to sustaining the commitment and passion beyond those initial heady days of first love. These are discipline, dissonance and community. I will elaborate on each by example.

DISCIPLINE

Discipline is a category of focused attention that translates into action. I exercise not because I like to do it, but because I know I must. It makes me stronger, healthier, and more energetic. It's the same way I often feel about prayer. In Genesis 32 we read of Jacob wrestling with a man throughout the night until dawn. As the sun is rising, this deliciously ambiguous text says: "And Jacob said, Let me go because the sun is rising. And he said: I will not let you go unless you bless me. And he said to Jacob: What is your name? And he replied: Jacob. And he said: Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel for you have wrestled with God and with men and have prevailed."

To be a part of the community of Israel means wrestling with God. For me, prayer is a form of that process of wrestling. But it extends beyond liturgical or spontaneous expressions. It relates to how we act in the world and with each other in our conversations and our

actions, through our daily routines, and in our celebrations and sorrows. It requires diligence and attention.

Wrestling means struggling to keep constantly aware of God's presence in the world. It should leave a visible mark as it did with when the man/angel touched Jacob's thigh. It's the reason why I *lay tefillin*. It requires discipline. The straps leave a lingering mark on my arm after morning prayers. That's a tangible sign. It's the intangible ones that take the constant work, however, and bring with them the greatest reward.

DISSONANCE

Theorists of adult development suggest that dissonance is an essential ingredient of transformative learning.² We need the irritant of ambiguity to get us thinking, to set us on edge, and to start the process of reframing meaning. Mezirow calls this process "emancipatory learning," which is what impels us, through critical reflection, to identify and challenge the distortions and biases in how we make meaning.³ The process begins when an experience contradicts our expectations or when we encounter something that makes no sense, given our current understanding. Learning occurs only once the problem is redefined through a critical reassessment of the assumptions underlying our current system of meaning.

This philosophy of learning informs my life as a learner and as a teacher. I put it into practice in a number of different ways. I consider myself a strongly identified Conservative Jew. I love my shul and I love to daven there, usually several times a week. Yet, every now and then, I seek out an alternative prayer experience that is far more emotive and physical than my more typically cerebral prayer experience.

Such experiences may include meditation or chanting or "sacred dance." They push me out of complacency. They force me to take risks and they open me up to new ways of thinking and feeling about prayer and being a part of a worship community. It is always a relief to return to the familiar, but I always bring a new insight or perspective back with me.

Transformative learning does not occur through experiences that affirm existing patterns of beliefs and behaviors. It only happens when those pre-existing patterns are challenged or tested. I believe it is my responsibility as a teacher to create opportunities where learners are challenged to recognize the assumptions that support their beliefs and then reshape their perspectives to be more inclusive, flexible and open to other frames of meaning. In religious language, this means remaining open to hearing God's voice in other people's points of view.

COMMUNITY

Rabbi Halafta of Kfar Hananiah taught: Whenever ten people sit together and study Torah, the Shechinah hovers over them as it is written: "God is present in the divine assembly (Psalms 8:2)." (Avot 3.7)

Recently, this saying came alive for me as I was leading an adult *bat mitzvah* class in their first ever *hevrutah* study of text. As the hum of engaged conversation permeated the room, I truly felt God's presence among us and had to interrupt the class to let them know. Their unmediated encounter with the text was, for me, a reaffirmation of my decision to become a teacher and a moment of undisputed holiness. The door opened to God's house and we all entered in joy and reverence for this shared experience.

My passion for Jewish learning is sustained through collaboration and dialogue.⁴ I learn and draw inspiration from others. By engaging in dialogue, by encouraging reflection, and by caring for one another, we have the opportunity to learn and grow together. It is for these reasons that I chose to become a teacher, and it is by these principles that I try to lead my life.

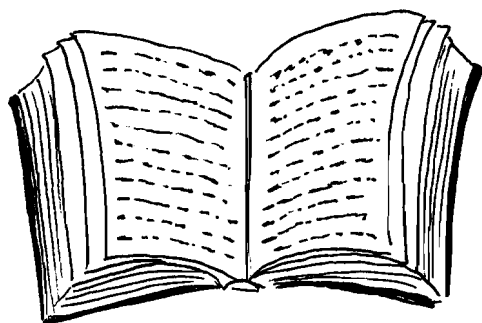
In *Between God and Man*, Heschel writes: "The essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in en-

tertaining a concept of God but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination of His presence."⁵ These moments of illumination are fleeting. For me, their memory is sustained by my own inner discipline; by finding or creating opportunities to introduce a bit of dissonance that challenge assumptions; and through a caring, supportive community that allows and encourages a multitude of voices to be expressed. These are the fundamentals of how I interpret the covenant by which I have chosen to live my life as a Jew. A *midrash* expresses it well: "The seeker is like a tired animal wandering through the forest who suddenly comes upon a pond. He looks down into the pond and thinks he sees another. The other is his reflection of course, but in seeing himself projected outward in the form of another, he is allowed to see himself for the first time."⁶ For me, love of Jewish learning and Jewish living is that reflection, giving me insight into my life and the strength to face uncertainty, and binding me together in a community with the courage to care. ■

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Notes:

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3. Mezirow, p. 88.
4. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Herder and Herder, New York, 1970. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982. Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching - Theory and Practice*, Teachers College Press, New York, 1993. Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*, 1986. Belenky et al, 1986. Nel Noddings, *Caring - A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.
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