
CONNECTION AND CARING: THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ADULT JEWISH LEARNING

Lisa D. Grant

Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion

Abstract

This article explores how the role of educational leadership can significantly enhance adult Jewish learning experiences through an in-depth examination of the position of site director at the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, a two-year program of adult Jewish learning operating at more than sixty sites across North America. Applying the literature on moral leadership that is shaped by an ethic of caring, the author shows how these site directors care for their learners and build learning communities. The article explores how the site directors shape, support, and sustain the learning process at this particular program and considers how the role of educational leadership can enhance and enrich adult Jewish learning in other venues.

School leadership literature and practice tell us that successful schools need strong leaders to achieve excellence. School leaders inspire, motivate, coordinate, supervise, and support teachers. They develop and implement curriculum, guide teachers in developing skills and instructional strategies, and monitor student learning and well-being. Effective school leaders also build a sense of shared purpose and community. The need for such leadership is a given in Jewish education as well, at least in schools that serve children. Even the smallest congregational school will have a principal. However, the assumption that such a leadership role is essential has not yet taken hold in the burgeoning world of adult Jewish learning.

This article explores a leadership model that appears to significantly enhance adult Jewish learning and suggests general principles for effective practice in adult religious education as well. The model is based upon Nel Noddings' (1984) notion of an ethic of caring, which she developed by observing how women shape their moral attitudes and behaviors. Such an orientation to moral decision making is rooted in our natural inclination to want to do good, particularly for others. Interestingly, the great majority of site directors are women. I will

argue that the relational way in which women work together and understand community (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986) is a significant factor in how leadership norms and cultural values are constructed. At the heart of what these school leaders do is build relationships with and care for their students. This is a particularly feminine style of leadership. As Noddings wrote:

An ethic built on caring is, I think, characteristically and essentially feminine—which is not to say, of course, that it cannot be shared by men, any more that we should care to say that traditional moral systems cannot be embraced by women. But an ethic of care arises, I believe, out of our experience as women, just as the traditional logical approach to ethical problems arises more obviously from masculine experience. (8)

The approach to leadership of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School (FMAMS), a two-year, 120-hour program of adult Jewish literacy, was studied as part of a larger inquiry about the impact of this successful program. Established in 1986, the Mini-School operates in more than sixty sites in North America. It defines itself as a “school,” meaning a permanent institution rather than a short-term program, informal class, or study group. Each site not only has teachers who teach a sequential, structured curriculum, but also a site director who is responsible for providing administrative and support services to the students both within and outside of the classroom. The site directors provide the connective tissue that build relationships, hold the community together, and make the Mini-School far more than just a series of classes in adult Jewish learning.

In *Moral Leadership*, Sergiovanni (1992) writes, “transforming schools from organizations to communities may be a key to school improvement” (xiv). Although his focus is on the public school system, the parallel to the Melton Mini-School is striking. The bonds participants build between the texts, their teachers, Jewish tradition, the process of learning, and each other belies the two short hours a week that they meet. How the Mini-School transforms itself from a program into a school, and from a school to a learning community rests largely in the hands of the site directors. As we explore how these site directors support and sustain the learning process at their schools, we also can consider how the role of educational leadership can enhance and enrich adult Jewish learning in other venues as well.

Data for this article come from in-depth interviews with four directors from Mini-School sites of varying age, size, and geographic location, and with Dr. Betsy Katz, North American Director, as well

as from three days of participant observation at the international conference for Florence Melton Adult Mini-School directors in February 2001. Individuals who were formally interviewed are cited by a pseudonym. Occasionally, informal conversations are reported which are not attributed to a specific individual. Also, at one of the conference sessions, directors were asked to reflect in writing about how their experiences have changed them, if at all. These were submitted anonymously and are cited as such.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MINI-SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

The Mini-School is a not-for-profit organization, based on a franchise model. Core services such as the written curriculum, as well as site development and expansion outside of North America, are overseen by the international office, directed by Dr. Jonathan Mirvis at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The North American Office develops program guidelines, and provides staff support and professional development services. All other aspects of the program, including recruiting students, hiring faculty, setting the calendar, planning extracurricular programs, and general marketing, are performed by the site director at the local level. Each Mini-School, therefore, has a somewhat different flavor, based on its location, the make-up of its teachers and students, and how the teachers adapt the curriculum to their own instructional strengths and orientation.

As of Spring 2002, sixty-three sites operated in North America, Great Britain, Australia, and Israel. These sites purchase a licensing agreement and curriculum from the central office, and are entitled to a variety of benefits including professional development and organizational consultation. Sites are sponsored by a variety of nondenominational local Jewish communal agencies such as Jewish Federations, Jewish Community Centers, and Bureaus of Jewish Education. In a few situations, synagogues serve as a sponsoring site with the stipulation that the congregational Rabbis may not teach in the school so as to preserve an independent institutional identity. Communities range in size from just a few thousand Jews, such as Des Moines, Iowa and Akron, Ohio, to major Jewish population centers such as Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Miami. To date, an estimated 15,000 students have participated in the Mini-School, and approximately 5,000 students were enrolled for the 2001–2 academic year.

Director Qualifications and Motivations

Curiously, in contrast to a chronic shortage of qualified day and congregational school leaders (Council on Initiatives in Jewish Education 1999), few sites report any difficulty filling this position. Site directors are responsible for recruiting and hiring faculty. They monitor instructional quality through ongoing coaching and mentoring teachers. Their administrative tasks include marketing and student recruitment, making logistical arrangements around classrooms, meeting dates and time, budgeting, and organizing extracurricular activities. Directors frequently work with a lay led advisory board on fundraising and strategic planning.

As noted, most of the site directors are women. In fact, of the fifty-seven directors listed in the 2001 FMAMS site directory, only six were men. In terms of professional qualifications, they fall into two general categories. One group consists of a sizable number of lay people who were attracted to the position because of their own personal involvement and excitement about adult Jewish learning, either in a Florence Melton Adult Mini-School or other venue. Some of these people may have had training in general education or other types of program administration, but like many secular educators who have become Jewish day school leaders over the past several years, the main factor that drew these lay people to the position was the product itself, namely a comprehensive, quality experience in adult Jewish learning. A strong secondary attraction for this group appears to be the flexibility that allows many directors to work on a part-time basis. This is likely one reason why the majority of directors are women, as they are more often than men, interested in or willing to take part-time positions.

Career Jewish professionals constitute the second group of site directors. These directors are more likely to work full-time; though often, the site director role is only one of many that they fill in their communities. They include Rabbis, educators, and Jewish communal service professionals. Again, women more often than men, are likely to piece together several positions to create a full-time job in the Jewish community (Hartman and Hartman 1996). Many people in this group serve both as director and teacher at their site.

Directors share several qualities that are consistent with what the literature describes as essential for effective school leaders. The preponderance of women in the director positions plays a significant factor in how these leadership qualities are shaped. Research on women as school leaders (Shakeshaft 1987), suggests that three leadership

characteristics are far more prevalent among women than men. All reflect an ethic of caring. They include: (1) the emphasis on building relationships and connections with people; (2) a commitment to teaching and learning as a core component of their job; and (3) the attention paid to building community. Though both the International Director and the Director of Professional Development are men, the qualities they look for and hope to cultivate in site directors are consistent with these “feminine” characteristics. There is no evidence to suggest that the male site directors are any different in their philosophy or approach to the job than their female counterparts. Whether they are predisposed to these leadership qualities or whether they adapt to them as a result of their involvement in the Mini-School is an open question that is beyond the scope of this article to address.

SITE DIRECTOR AS SCHOOL LEADER: MORAL AUTHORITY, CARING, AND STEWARDSHIP

Three characteristics from the literature on school leadership emerge as salient factors for how site directors approach their job. First and immediately apparent is their passion about and commitment to adult Jewish learning. This passion translates into a sense of moral authority about what they do. Here, moral authority should be understood as something that needs to be done for someone else. As Nodding (1984) wrote, “it is our longing for caring—to be in that special relation—that provides the motivation for us to be moral” (5). This means that decisions and actions are driven primarily by a sense of how to best serve their students. Second, directors consistently spoke and wrote about how they are emotionally attached to their students. Customer service has been identified as a widely accepted competitive strategy in the business world that effectively differentiates one product or company from another (Albrecht and Bradford 1990; Peters and Waterman 1982; Zemke and Bell 1989). Site directors appear to embrace this attitude about service, not only because it is an effective management tool, but also because they truly care about their students. This is reflected in the attention and support they provide to ensure that students have a positive learning experience. Lastly, site directors typically define their leadership role in the language of stewardship rather than as visionary or hero. They see their job as being a caretaker, tending to learners’ needs and concerns, and to serving them as well as possible. Through this service, they build community.

Moral Authority

The literature on leadership distinguishes between several forces that contribute or detract from school effectiveness. Sergiovanni (1992) wrote that school leaders typically rely on a combination of five possible sources of authority: bureaucratic, psychological, technical, professional, and moral. Each is important in the smooth management of any school, but the professional and moral sources, he argued, are those that separate simply well managed schools from those most often identified as excellent.

The will to follow leaders whose source of authority comes from these bureaucratic, psychological, and technical sources, is extrinsically motivated. Compliance and cooperation are obtained through the leader's management without necessarily creating a commitment to the enterprise itself. Sergiovanni's two other sources of authority engender desire and commitment that are intrinsically motivated; that is, based on a sense of doing what is good and right. These sources are professional and moral authority.

Professional authority relates to the leader's expertise and practice. Here, power is not derived from rules, or research findings, or anticipation of psychological rewards. Rather, professional authority is rooted in the knowledge base of teachers that is the combination of many factors including, but not limited to scientific and procedural knowledge as well as personal experience.

Moral authority is based on a sense of obligation and responsibility derived from shared values, ideas, and ideals. As Noddings (1984) wrote, the source of obligation is the value placed on the "relatedness of caring. This value itself arises as a product of actual caring and being cared-for and my reflection on the goodness of these concrete caring situations" (84). This sense of obligation is governed by the potential for growth in relationships, including as Noddings pointed out "the potential for increased reciprocity and, perhaps, mutuality" (86).

Moral authority is conveyed largely through what Sergiovanni (1991) described as symbolic and cultural forces of leadership. Here, the school leader instills a sense of purpose and commitment to the principles and values of the school. While bureaucratic, psychological, and technical aspects of leadership are important for managing the structures and substance of the school, symbolic and cultural forces affect the faith people have in the school and in each other as collaborators in the building and sustaining of the enterprise (Sergiovanni 1991).

These principles of moral leadership based on caring seem to be particularly well suited to an enterprise of religious education. A broad read of the literature on adult religious education suggests that many adults enter programs like the Mini-School as part of a quest for increased understanding of religious teachings and the desire for greater personal meaning (English and Gillen 2000; McKenzie 1986; Roof 1999; Vella, 2000; Vogel 1991; Wuthnow 1999). As English and Gillen noted, three components of spiritual development can be fostered through religious education: "a strong sense of self, care, concern, and outreach to others; and the continuous construction of meaning and knowledge" (30).

These principles appear to be actualized by site directors through their interactions and relationships with faculty and students. Many site directors spoke with enthusiasm and sincerity about the opportunity their role affords them to help others grow more confident and comfortable as Jews. They spoke of the pride they share in their connection to the endeavor to bring pluralistic, literacy-based, comprehensive Jewish learning to adults around the world. They conveyed a shared sense of purpose, and a conviction that they were involved in something right and good, and essential to the future of the Jewish people.

Site directors make concerted efforts to recruit faculty who demonstrate an active commitment to creating an open atmosphere for pluralistic, nonjudgmental exploration of Judaism. As site director Ellen Rosen said: "This is the only place in the community where people can come together and study, and listen to one another, and get to know one another, and know that we don't hate one another and that we have far more that we share in common than what makes us different." Later, she elaborated on how she emphasizes this pluralistic approach: "One of the things we have to keep explaining to them over and over again is that the classical sources are for everyone. We all go back to the same place, regardless of what movement we situate ourselves in. It's what we make of it as we widen the circle."

Sergiovanni (1991) wrote "important messages and high ideas" are often communicated through "simple routines and humble actions properly orchestrated" (107). Much of what the site directors do can be seen as these small actions that create a powerful sense of culture, again reflecting an ethic of care. These activities certainly could be easily adapted by other programs of adult religious education. For example, many of the supposedly administrative tasks the director performs support the creation of a warm and welcoming environment for adult

learners. This includes small, but significant things such as putting tablecloths on the tables where the students study, making table-cards with students' names, tape recording each session for students who may have to miss a class, and providing or organizing snacks during the break between classes. Each of these actions transform what might otherwise be an elementary school class or a meeting room into an adult learning environment where the learners are made to feel comfortable and respected.

Site directors add value to the educational experience by attending to the whole experience of the learners, not just what occurs inside the classroom. Most people who teach in adult religious education have many other responsibilities. They may be clergy and/or teachers in other settings. Some may have "day jobs" that are quite different from teaching adults. Mini-School teachers, for example, include a mix of men and women who are professional Jewish educators and Jewish communal service professionals as well as avocational teachers with other professions such as physicians, lawyers, and academics from non-Jewish disciplines. For the most part, teachers focus on the classroom interaction, as they should. However, the text-based, literacy focused, pluralistic curriculum affords minimal opportunity for exploring the more experiential side of Jewish practice. In many sites, directors help students build connections and relationships to one another by offering a variety of extracurricular programs that may range from a Friday night dinner, to a field trip to a ritual bath or funeral home, a model Seder or a Purim feast. The most extensive and far-reaching of these programs is the Israel seminar, a two-week study tour that attracts students, graduates, and their spouses/significant others. These kinds of programs give students an opportunity to explore other avenues of Jewish expression outside of the text-based classroom study that makes up the bulk of their learning experience. They also give the students a sense of the school as a community.

Site director Denise Feldman gave an example of how community is growing at her site both through activities outside of the classroom and additional learning.

We've tried to do other events with them. Holiday celebrations. We met in someone's home once. We bring in outside speakers and we encourage Mini-School people to go, and many do. We do a Thursday Parashat Hashavuah (study of the weekly Torah portion) get together. Now, groups also are meeting separately from the class, little havurot (groups formed around shared interests). They're studying together.

Not only is the creation of a learning community central to the experience, but it also appears to be one of the most personally rewarding aspects of the site director's job. The written comments of one director reflect a general sentiment expressed by many about how gratifying it was to be part of a process that facilitates the formation of a community of adult Jewish learners.

What Melton has shown me is that it transforms a group of strangers into a community of learners. I take great pride in the fact that I have been able to bring that group of learners together and start them on a road that allows them to take a very special Jewish educational journey. It further delights me when they graduate and tell me they want to continue this journey. I give them lots of options and encourage them to continue seeking and searching.

Caring for the Students

The ethic of care that appears to drive site directors in their interactions and attention to students has similarities to what is described in management literature as the language of customer service. Companies most frequently lauded for excellence in customer service are among the most financially successful and enduring in the marketplace. In the commercial market, satisfied customers naturally lead to more customers. This principle works in the Mini-School as well, as the most effective form of new student recruitment appears to be word of mouth endorsement by current and former students.

Few directors have a significant background in management theory, and yet, they seem to intuitively know that customer service is at the heart of the enterprise. For them, this seems to go beyond application of management theory to something more integral to their commitment to building relationships. Since most of the directors are women, it is not surprising that this value clearly resonates with the core principles of feminist pedagogy, which focus on the "importance of connection, relationship, and the role of affectivity in learning" (Tisdell 2000, 156). This orientation also fits with Gilligan's (1982) description of caring, "where building and nurturing relationships are integral to women's sense of integrity" (171).

Perhaps the most essential role the site director serves is that of "Dean of Students" or guidance counselor. This role is absent in most adult religious education settings that are typically church or synagogue-based and are run by clergy or educators who have multiple responsibilities and frequently little direct training in adult education.

Most adult Jewish learners have been away from formal classroom learning for a long time. While they may be quite expert in most areas of their lives, many come to adult Jewish learning settings, feeling inadequate, if not illiterate as Jews. Adults want to be challenged intellectually in their learning, but they also want and need a safe environment where they feel their background and experiences are respected and valued (Appes 1994; Knox 1986; Vella 1994). Good adult education of any kind must take this into account.

While teachers themselves are primarily responsible for creating a positive learning environment, the caring role that Mini-School site directors perform, appears to greatly enhance the experiences of the learners. Starratt (1994) noted that an ethic of caring “implies fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness of encountering them in their authentic individuality, a loyalty to the relationship . . .” (52). We see this fidelity, acceptance, and loyalty to their relationships reflected in the remarks of students who praised how their site director helped allay their anxieties about not knowing enough and helped them adjust to a sustained effort at academic learning. Many students commented about how directors often offered a sympathetic ear to the complexities of lives that may impinge on regular attendance, which made the learners feel more valued and respected.

Site directors make an effort to get to know each and every student. They speak directly with each prospective student to hear the reasons why they want to enroll and what they hope to attain. They sit in on classes, they phone students at home, and chat with them during the breaks. They work deliberately with faculty to foster a culture where students can learn from each other as well as from their teachers. Marcia Jacobsen stated, “part of the success, beyond the curriculum and the teachers—both of which are very, very important—is the *chevra* (friendships) that are formed in class.” In an essay published in the Mini-School newsletter, a director wrote about how her school became a community:

When the first graduating class of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School held its commencement ceremony in June of 1997, it was clear that we had built more than a school. We had built a community: A community grounded in meaningful Jewish study. A community, which has promoted deep, personal and abiding friendships. A community where we will always feel safe asking questions about our Jewish traditions, rituals, ethics, history, and thought. A community that has brought us closer to ourselves, to each other, our Jewish community, and our faith. (Lederman 1997)

The site director role provides the integrating thread that weaves separate classes together into a whole cloth. These efforts transform what otherwise might be occasional and independent learning experiences into a cohesive unit, which results in a more powerful and positive learning experience. The task is somewhat seamless for directors who teach as well. Ellen Rosen described how she makes sure that she gets to know all of the first year students by teaching them.

Even those who do not teach, routinely sit in on classes to remain visible and accessible to students. At small sites, directors may become a regular participant in the class. At larger sites where multiple classes are held, the director more typically makes rounds, visiting different classes at various points in the year. At the February 2001 conference, several newly appointed directors mentioned how important it was for them to sit and study with the students, both as the site directors and as learners themselves. Site directors with both lay and professional backgrounds noted how they were continually learning themselves through their own class participation.

The ethic of caring pervades directors' descriptions of relationships with students. Many mentioned receiving regular email and phone calls from students and former students with book reviews or comments about an experience. Beth Jarret who is both a site director and teacher, noted: "What I love most is when students stop me in the parking lot and ask me questions. I have a lot of students who don't ask questions because they're ambivalent or shy. I try to take note of that dynamic. I do follow-up with people."

The site directors described many proactive measures they take to ensure that students remain comfortable and excited about learning. These tasks enrich the sense of community and could not be performed directly by the teachers. This included soliciting periodic written evaluations on the teachers, as well as making routine phone calls or emails to ask students for more general impressions and feedback. Marcia Jacobsen, a director at an established medium-sized site, stated:

I want to be able to communicate to people who have some hesitance. . . . [If] they feel somewhat tentative, or very hesitant, or insecure, or threatened, or whatever, I would like to be able to communicate, that you know, people are there for you. It's not a test. I have to do a better job to reach these people and then urge them to come and try.

Students come to see the director as an enthusiastic supporter of their learning. Louise Milstein, noted how often current students and

graduates call her since they are anxious to share news about their lives and learning activities. Often this news is about how their learning has changed them. She said:

I happen to be in a wonderful position where people want to come back and tell me how Melton has affected their lives. It has changed the lives of so many people on personal levels. Many of them did become members of synagogues as a result of this. We have had several students become Jews by choice as a result of this program (they were not Jewish to begin with).

Site directors also recounted how they help students actively reflect on their growth in informal conversations throughout the learning, and through more formal exercises as well. Ellen Rosen described how she developed an idea suggested at a directors' conference that asks the students to write a short essay entitled "My thoughts as I begin" at the start of their first year. Students put their essays into a sealed envelope that Ellen collected and held. At the end of their second year of studies, when students are asked to write a closing reflection about their learning experience, she returned the earlier piece to give students a basis for comparing their growth. She noted:

Last year's class was the first class that had done it and I returned their materials to them. It's very interesting for them to see their reactions. Most of them had forgotten they'd even done this. Some of the responses are very, very emotional. My secretary is in Melton. She's graduating this year and she's converting. Often she'll cry. It's very, very moving.

One clear sign of how important the director is to the students' well-being came during an interview with a student who dropped out of the school after the first year. Before she would begin to speak, she wanted assurance that her real name would not appear in any documents associated with the study. She said this was because she wanted to speak freely about her experiences but would be mortified if anything she said hurt her site director who had been so wonderful to her.

Another example of the bond directors establish with the students came during an interview with Sharon, a second-year student as she described her first trip to Israel the summer before. She reported how she regularly related what she was seeing to something she learned in her classes. She said to her father-in-law, "Every time the guide turned around I'd be, 'Oh my God! Ellen told me about that! Oh my God!

Wait until I tell Ellen.’ And he’d be, ‘Oh, I just gotta meet this Ellen one of these days.’”

STEWARDSHIP: TRUE TO PURPOSE

The leadership that site directors practice is subtle and understated. They are more likely to describe their role as facilitative rather than directive, which again is consistent with Shakeshaft’s (1987) observations on women’s leadership style of building community through relationships. They seem to understand that their job is to serve their students through supporting the values and ideas that shape the culture and content of the learning experience. This type of leadership is described as a form of stewardship (Bolman and Deal 1993; Kofman and Senge 1993; Sergiovanni 1992). Such leaders focus on remaining true to the purposes that are at the heart of their mission. They work hard at developing, nurturing, and protecting community. They build relationships with faculty and students that are based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to the values and principles defining their school. In a sense, they work together through a “morally based contractual relationship that can bond people together as a covenantal community” (Sergiovanni 1992, 102). As Sergiovanni wrote: “The leadership that counts, in the end, is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections in other people. It is a morally based leadership—a form of stewardship” (1992, 120).

Site directors seemed to be reflecting a form of leadership, where motivation comes not from self-aggrandizement, but rather through a sense of service to something larger than themselves. This value is clearly conveyed in these written remarks:

To be in a small community and be able to have a program that is so welcoming of our entire Jewish community is exciting. Our program is small and I’m relatively new. Students don’t see me as the one who makes it happen, but they are enthralled with the teachers. (I’m also a student.) It’s a wonderful feeling to know the joy and sense of satisfaction various students and graduates have expressed for taking the time for Jewish learning.

Several site directors reflected on how they felt personally and professionally enriched by the experience of watching and helping others grow. One director conveyed a sense of her job as a sacred task, writing: “I certainly feel my work has a spiritual value because I’m

involved with people's souls. I feel a fluctuating but growing sense of my own capacity to impart both information and enthusiasm when I see students getting excited about a Jewish idea." Another wrote about the joy of observing the professional growth among her teachers:

I've had the remarkable opportunity to watch my teachers grow as educators of adults right before my eyes from week to week whether because they are "growing" with the curriculum or because they are becoming so connected to their students' changes and changing needs. What a joy to be the third point on this relationship triangle and to know that what I do as a Melton director is so pivotal to this shared Jewish journey. As I pursue personal growth, how lucky I am to part of the growth of so many others.

Marcia Jacobsen's description of who should consider enrolling reflected the sense of a covenantal relationship inherent in the Mini-School approach to learning. Time and interest are the two main criteria, she said. She then stressed the sense of partnership that is built between the learner and learning.

Nobody's going to, you know, pull it out of you. You have to express that interest. You have to walk part of the way by yourself but we'll walk down that path and take you by the hand and pull you back. It offers such a variety of learning possibilities within that setting. And that camaraderie builds as you're in that class. So all of that works just really beautifully.

Lessons for Leadership

The site directors function as a head of school in all its roles, as chief administrative officer, as Dean of Students, and as conveyer of the vision of what the Mini-School can and should be. Whether professional Jewish educator or lay leader turned professional, directors appear to embrace their position with a sense of moral purpose strongly rooted in caring for their students and their school. Most define their leadership role in language of stewardship or caretaker rather than in organizational or technical terms. They demonstrate a deep commitment to building relationships and building community. They do not have to "buy in" to this approach to leadership because it makes good business sense. Rather, it seems emanate from deep within their nature as women and as Jews committed to Jewish education and the Jewish people.

When the first three pilot sites of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School opened in 1986, there were few, if any, serious programs of adult Jewish study in North America. Today, Jewish adults engage in Jewish

study at synagogues, Jewish community centers, downtown offices, Bureaus of Jewish Education, independent schools and retreat centers, movement-sponsored programs, museums, informal networks such as book groups, *havurot*, *Rosh hodesh*¹ groups, and other study circles, and mostly recently, in cyberspace. Such offerings vary greatly in length and venue, in topic and instruction. They may be text-based, such as a weekly Torah study group or a class on the Jewish calendar, or they may focus on developing specific skills such as learning to read Hebrew or learning the service liturgy. They may be thematic in nature such as a course on Jewish ethics or Jewish mysticism, or they may have a more ideological focus, such as an Introduction to Reform Judaism class.

This proliferation of adult Jewish study programs can be understood as part of a general trend in American society. Over the past twenty years, Americans of all religions have increasingly turned to various forms of adult education, both religious and otherwise, in response to an ardent search for meaning in their lives (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985; Cohen and Eisen 2000; Roof 1993, 1999; Wuthnow 1994, 1999, 2002). These adults seek out learning opportunities that combine social interaction with intellectual stimulation and that address their personal agendas as developing adults. The wide spread growth of the Mini-School suggests that it delivers a product that fits well within this cultural context.

Aside from the cultural context, however, what makes the Mini-School succeed? And, what lessons can other organizations and programs of adult religious education take from their experience? While not the direct focus of this study, both the sequential, nonjudgmental, literacy-focused approach to Jewish learning and the teachers who interact most closely with the students, are both significant factors in the Mini-School's broad appeal. The teachers play a critical role in creating safe, supportive, inclusive, and engaging learning environments. Without excellent teachers, who are both subject matter experts and sensitive to the needs of adult learners, the educational experience cannot be sustained. However, the culture of the school extends far beyond what takes place in each individual teacher's classroom. We understand this intuitively in schools for children, but this assumption is not yet embedded in our understanding of what makes for a successful adult Jewish learning experience.

Mini-School Site Directors play a pivotal role by providing the leadership that creates and sustains a learning community. Specifically,

¹*Rosh Hodesh* groups are typically women's groups that meet monthly.

they add value to the learning experience in three ways. Most significant is the work they do to care for and support the learners in a personal way. Teachers focus on making content relevant and meaningful to their learners. Certainly this requires meeting learners' needs, but within the context of the course of study. The site directors attend to individual learner's needs in a more holistic fashion that would be inappropriate for teachers to do within the limited time frame of a group class.

Site directors also add value to the learning by actively soliciting feedback from students about their learning experiences and then gently coaching the teachers to enhance their skills as adult educators. There was ample evidence that students were more likely to tell the site director something they might not feel comfortable talking with their teachers about. Most Rabbis and other Jewish educators have no formal training in teaching adults which means they operate without a theoretical framework for designing a quality adult education experience. The site directors provide this framework, not by telling teacher *what* to teach, but by guiding them to think more about *how* they teach so that they can learn principles and strategies for effectively reaching adult learners. Such a feedback loop simply does not exist in most adult Jewish learning settings.

The final way that site directors add value to the adult Jewish learning is by expanding opportunities to help to grow the field and to provide a much-needed career ladder for existing Jewish educators. Interestingly, the potential for adapting this role to other educational settings may be enhanced because the job can be performed part-time. This makes it feasible in terms of funding and may actually expand the pool of those interested in the position. Jewish educators, who are mostly women, frequently work two or more part-time jobs in order to make a living. One of the great challenges in the field of Jewish education is a lack opportunities for advancement into administrative and leadership positions, which are still held by a greater proportion of men than those in the teaching ranks. Clearly, many female educators are interested and suitable for a leadership role. In addition, as suggested by the Mini-School experience, many skilled and passionate lay people who are committed to Jewish learning may be attracted to this role both because it is part-time and because of its mission.

There is also potential to combine this role with others at the same institution to build a full-time job. For instance, the position of program director at many synagogues, which is typically an administrative function, could be redesigned to incorporate many of the qualities and

features that site directors perform to enhance the learning and create community.

Such a role is neither feasible, nor perhaps desirable in all kinds of adult religious education settings. Activities such as informal networks, short programs, scholar-in-residence weekends, advanced study groups probably may not need more than logistical support to schedule and promote. Such activities meet significant needs, but they are not the same as a sustained initiative where learners are looking for sequence, structure, and increasing depth to their learning.

The success of the Mini-School demonstrates that the learners engaged in adult religious education are supported and enriched by the services that the site director performs. Serious learning programs need educational leadership, regardless of whether they are for children or adults. The model of educational leadership embodied by the many site directors who believe that what they are doing is right and good, and who care deeply for their learners and the organization they serve, appears to have tremendous potential for creating a commitment to and culture of lifelong learning. Any synagogue, Jewish community center, or other communal institution that wants to move beyond the typical smorgasbord of adult education offerings and create such a learning community would be well advised to learn from this example.

Lisa D. Grant is assistant professor of Jewish education at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, New York. E-mail: lgrant@huc.edu

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