# PARTICIPATION IN ADULT JEWISH LEARNING
## Some Implications for Strengthening Jewish Identity and Continuity

RAE W. ROHFELD, PH.D.
*Florida International University, Miami, Florida*
*and*
LOIS J. ZACHARY, ED.D.
*Director, Leadership Development Services, Inc., Fayetteville, New York*

*A survey of adult Jewish education conducted by the Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc. found that adults are much more likely to engage in informal than formal learning and that insufficient time was the greatest deterrent to participation in formal learning experiences. Focusing on adult learners and their needs, rather than on the institutions of adult education, may produce new ways to strengthen Jewish identity and continuity.*

Since the issuance of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), interest in Jewish education has increased. Although historically Jewish education for children and youth has been emphasized, attention is now being focused on adult Jewish education because of its potential communal impact. Jewish communities are looking to adult Jewish education as a means of strengthening Jewish identity and continuity.

This article rests on the premise that focusing on adult Jewish *learners*, rather than on adult Jewish *education*, may produce new ways to strengthen Jewish identity and continuity. This distinction is important to make. Adult learning is what people do for themselves to make better meaning of their experiences. Educators can facilitate this learning by recognizing the variety of adult learning needs and creating resources and environments that learners can use to meet their needs. When we focus on education, we are centered on the teacher or educator and the educational institution, rather than on the learner.

Despite recognition of Jewish learning as central to identity and continuity, little systematic investigation of adult participation in Jewish learning has occurred. Fishman (1989) found that approximately 5% of adults participate in formal adult Jewish education classes. Findings from the NJPS indicate that "15% of American Jewish adults report having engaged in some type of adult Jewish learning in the past year." Little comparison can be made between these two statistics because the definitions of adult Jewish learning are not comparable.

No one has gathered information about the reasons for either of these relatively low participation levels. Further, although many believe that informal education might be a significant source of learning, no systematic study of adults' participation in such learning activities related to Jewish life has taken place.

The paucity of such information was a concern for the Syracuse Jewish community. In 1989 the community concluded a major three-year educational planning effort led by the Jewish Education Forum of the Syracuse Jewish Federation. The goals of the Forum, begun in 1986, were to heighten the Jewish education consciousness of the community, to foster excitement and involvement about Jewish learning throughout the life span, to identify the range and scope of the current education scene, to

---

Copies of the *Survey of Adult Jewish Learning* are available on request from Barry Silverberg, Executive Vice President, Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc., P.O. Box 510, Dewitt, New York 13214-0510.

specify and prioritize education issues, and to design and recommend strategies for the implementation of a program in Jewish education to meet the considerable challenges facing the Central New York Jewish community both in the present and the future. Under the guidance of the Jewish Education Forum, work groups, composed of lay and Jewish educators, analyzed specific issues and developed recommendations for future action. These recommendations identified adult education as a priority planning area. To accomplish this goal, the community needed more information about current participation in both formal and informal learning activities, barriers to participation in existing programs, and differences in participation and barriers among groups within the adult Jewish population. Community leaders believed such information would assist them in developing more effective adult Jewish education programs.

## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

As an initial step in addressing this need, volunteer and professional leaders from the Syracuse federation and faculty from the Syracuse University School of Education, with the endorsement of the Syracuse Rabbinical Council, conducted a community-wide study of adult Jewish learning. The original study team was composed of two faculty members from the School of Education and the chair of the Jewish Education Forum. The overall purpose of the study project was to gather information about local participation in adult Jewish education. Specific objectives were (1) to determine the nature and importance of formal and informal learning activities as a means of adult Jewish education, (2) to determine the nature and importance of various deterrents to participation in formal adult Jewish education, and (3) to provide the Syracuse Jewish community with information that could be used in planning strategies to enhance both formal and informal adult Jewish learning.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the findings and key ideas related to Jewish identity and continuity that emerged from analysis of the data. Although the results pertain directly to the Syracuse Jewish community, the ideas that surfaced have application to other communities.

## DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

### Survey Development

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, it was critical that the survey encompass the perceptions of a diverse group of Jewish adults. We therefore conducted interviews and focus groups with a representative sample of Jewish adults in the Syracuse area to obtain descriptions of their formal and informal education activities related to Jewish living, along with information about their motivation for involvement and deterrents to their participation in various activities. This information served as a basis for questions included in the survey.

The study team designed the *Survey of Adult Jewish Learning* to reflect knowledge about participation and deterrents to participation derived from current research in the field of adult education (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hayes, 1988). Questions bearing on general findings from other adult populations were adapted to fit the Jewish population and educational opportunities in the local community.

The final survey, based on information from interviews and previous research, had four sections. The first contained 54 questions about respondents' participation in formal and informal adult Jewish learning activities, the second had 41 questions about reasons for participating in the activities identified, the third included 50 questions about deterrents to participation in formal adult programs, and the fourth asked for 10 items of background information. These last ten demographic items were based on the questions used by the NJPS.

### Pilot Study

The researchers pilot-tested the survey using a sample of 100 adults. In addition,

sections of the instrument were piloted at several national conferences with both Jewish educators and lay leaders. A panel of experts also examined the instrument to determine face validity. Several focus groups of respondents were formed to provide the researchers with feedback on survey items and the format of the instrument. This information together with analysis of the completed surveys gave the researchers sufficient information to modify the survey format so that it was easier to follow, repetitive questions were eliminated, and items that were confusing or unclear were clarified.

### Data Collection

The master federation list, which contains all known Jews in the Greater Syracuse area sorted by affiliation, was the basis for sample selection. The sorted components included membership lists from the six local synagogues and one list of unaffiliated community members.[1] The research team drew a modified stratified random sample of 600 local residents from each of the seven lists, with special care to balance for gender and to ensure that only one survey was sent to each household.

Careful planning went into the survey distribution. Timing of the mailing and publicity was coordinated to encourage a good rate of return. Each congregational rabbi signed the cover letter addressed to his synagogue members in the sample. "Unaffiliated" persons received a cover letter on federation stationary, signed by one of the researchers. Self-addressed stamped envelopes accompanied the survey and cover letter. Immediately before and after the mailing, the Jewish newspaper featured an article describing the survey. Several weeks later all 600 individuals received a follow-up postcard, urging prompt return of the surveys. One final reminder appeared on the front page of the Jewish newspaper, with the headline, "Education Survey Response Crucial in Deciding Needs."

### Data Analysis: Plan and Reality

The study team originally designed the research to consider multiple factors affecting participation and deterrents to participation in Jewish adult education. The intention was to conduct a survey of Jewish adults focusing on the educational activities in which they engaged, the reasons they engaged in particular activities, and the barriers to their involvement in various activities. The team intended to apply factor analysis to help derive meaning from the data collected and to identify subgroups of Jewish adults based on the identified deterrents to participation.

In order to factor analyze each section of the questionnaire as planned, it would have been necessary to have a minimum of 270 returned surveys from the 600 distributed to achieve valid and reliable results. The response to the survey was considerably less, yielding 156 usable forms. With such a small sample, we could not be sure that the factors were "real," rather than the result of random response errors. However, we decided to run a factor analysis as a guide to identifying types of learning activities and barriers for heuristic purposes. We do not claim that these types have statistical validity.

Despite these limitations, the frequency distributions and the identified factors, combined with our experience in adult education, provided some useful ideas about strengthening educational resources and activities in the community. The research was helpful in confirming our ideas about participation and barriers and in identifying some of those activities that adults do engage in that could serve as a basis for a stronger educational program. Therefore, the research findings presented are sugges-

[1]Since we have six synagogues, we had six individual congregational lists and one unaffiliated list (N = 7). One hundred and fifty "unaffiliated" names were drawn off the top before names were selected from each congregational listing. Selection was proportional to the membership size (as compared with the total number of synagogue memberships).

tive and useful as a way to explore ideas for expanding the educational resources that adults can and will use to enhance their knowledge base about Judaism and their sense of Jewish identity.

## FINDINGS

### Demographics

One hundred fifty-six adults (a return rate of 26%), aged 26 and older, responded to the survey. The majority of these respondents were female (58%). This figure corresponds closely to the gender breakdown of the known adult Jewish population, which according to the most recent records of the Syracuse federation is 43% male and 57% female. Most were married and between 40 and 50 years old. The highest level of educational attainment for 60% of the respondents was a graduate degree. Fifty-two percent of those responding considered themselves to be Conservative, 35% to be Reform, and the remaining 13% identified themselves as Orthodox, Reconstructionist or "Other."[2] Ninety-one percent of the respondents were synagogue members. This finding is not surprising, since survey cover letters went out over the signature of the individual congregational rabbi, and announcement reminders were made by each rabbi prior to the return deadline. More than half did not have children under the age of 18 living at home. A little over half of the sample indicated that they were board members of synagogues, federation, or other Jewish organizational boards. Thus, the sample tended to be older, more highly educated, and more representative of Jewish leadership than the overall Syracuse Jewish community, and more or less similar to local demographic trends.

[2]The Analysis of The Central New York Area Congregational Affiliation by Household and Individual conducted by the Syracuse federation reveals that 56% of the known Jewish households are affiliated as follows: 16% Orthodox, 35% Reform, 43% Conservative, and 6% "Other." Note that some individuals and households have multiple congregational affiliations.

### Participation in Education

More than one half (49%) did ***not*** participate in any formal adult Jewish education during the 12 months prior to the time they completed the survey. Of those who did participate, almost 75% attended lectures offered by Jewish agencies and/or synagogues. Almost 65% attended non-credit synagogue classes in Jewish culture or history. The least important formal adult education activities indicated by these respondents were taking credit courses related to Judaism offered by a university or college, studying for an adult Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or one-on-one tutoring on a self-selected topic.

On the other hand, most respondents reported engaging in some informal Jewish educational learning pursuits on their own or with friends and family. The activities included some that do not have education as a primary goal, but that lead to new learning. Four factors that emerged in the data analysis suggest important sets of informal learning that adult education planners could build on.

**Working as a member of a Jewish leadership group, such as a board**[3] was "somewhat to very important" for about 55% of this group. Related to that, **reading information related to my participation as a Jewish community board member** was also rated as a "somewhat to very important" factor in adult Jewish learning by 50% of respondents.

A second set of activities related to synagogue and religious participation. Among those activities were the following:

- attending Shabbat services
- taking responsibility for a project or task
- reading the Bible or other religious texts
- participating in a prayer group
- attending High Holiday services
- participating in customs and observances related to daily living

[3]Items in boldface are direct quotes from survey items.

Over 90% of these respondents ranked **High Holiday attendance** as "somewhat to very important."

A third group of activities centered around the home. More than 90% indicated that **participating in holiday rituals in the home (such as the seder)** was "somewhat to very important" in their learning. Indeed, this was the only item among all the informal learning activities in the survey that more than half rated as "very important."

Many home activities rated as "somewhat to very important" involved children. More than 80% indicated that **discussions with my children** and **teaching my children about Jewish traditions** were "somewhat to very important." Other experiences related to children included learning from my children, helping them with school or scouting projects, telling them stories, and **participating in holiday rituals in the home, such as the seder.**

The fourth factor dealt with reading and watching news media as "somewhat to very important" in respondents' Jewish learning. More than 90% said **reading articles related to Jewish issues in the newspaper** was "somewhat to very important." Just under 90% similarly mentioned **reading articles related to Jewish issues in magazines of general interest, watching television programs of general interest, such as documentaries about Israel or Jewish history,** and **reading local Jewish newspapers and newsletters.**

Two items that were not associated with the above groupings stood out as important to many respondents. These were: (1) **informal discussion with friends,** which more than 90% indicated as "somewhat to very important" and (2) **explaining Judaism to non-Jews,** to which 80% answered similarly. Both items reflect the importance of informal social activity at home or with friends as a means of adult Jewish learning.

### Reasons for Participation

Not only do adults learn in many different ways, but they also have many different reasons for learning. The survey asked respondents to give reasons for becoming involved in any Jewish learning during the past year and to indicate the relative importance of a variety of reasons for their involvement.

One factor that emerged was the *idea* of learning itself. More than 90% said **I value knowledge for its own sake** as a reason that was "somewhat to very important" in their learning. There were similar responses to the statements, **I enjoy learning of any kind** and **I fell that it is important to continually engage in learning.**

Another important factor was to build a Jewish home. Over 60% gave **I wanted to be able to answer my children's questions about Judaism** as a "somewhat to very important" reason for learning. Other reasons important for 50% or more were **I wanted to help my children understand Jewish religion and traditions, I wanted to make holiday celebrations more meaningful,** and **I wanted to be more informed about Jewish rituals that I do in the home.**

Other factors that are worthy of note include community service and spiritual and personal growth. However, they were not activities that large numbers of people rated as important.

### Barriers

Section III of the survey, which asked about barriers to participation, addressed only formal learning activities. Factor analysis was not very helpful in analyzing these barriers. Only one factor seemed to represent an important barrier for many respondents: the inability to make commitments and devote time to formal adult Jewish learning.

Of a list of 50 potential barriers only 5 items received responses of "somewhat important to very important" from more than half the respondents, and many more items were identified as "not important" (Table 1).

### Significance

Although the literature on adult education

participation is limited, it is growing. To date, however, there has been little direct attention to adult Jewish education and/or adult Jewish learning. The results of this study hold promise for enhancing the educational planning efforts of the Syracuse Jewish community. We anticipate that dissemination of this information will help guide efforts to eliminate or minimize barriers and increase participation in formal and informal adult Jewish education in our local community and that perhaps efforts can be made to meet the needs of specific groups of adult Jewish learners. This study has the potential to serve as a model for other communities concerned with enhancement of adult Jewish education to assess the needs of their own adult learners. We encourage replication of this study to enhance our collective understanding of adult Jewish involvement in formal and informal learning activities.

## IMPLICATIONS

Those interested in strengthening Jewish education would benefit from focusing on learners and understanding their motivations, the deterrents to their learning, and their learning interests. Although the study had many limitations, it suggested possibilities for creating more Jewish learning opportunities for adults in the community.

Although some people will participate in formal learning activities, respondents in this study were far more likely to engage in informal learning. Based on other research in adult education this finding is not surprising (Tough, 1978). Informal learning may serve several functions. It may be an entry point for learning that helps participants expand their interests and build self-confidence. It also supports and enriches formal learning. However, on its own, it is a valid process to expand knowledge and understanding.

Many people gave reasons for learning that reflected love of learning for its own sake. Given the high degree of educational attainment of this sample, this finding is probably not surprising. Respondents valued education and have been successful at it. That does not mean that they will engage in every opportunity available, however. As a group, they are busy and selective about how they spend their time. Their learning relates to the concerns and issues of their current lives.

One area of informal learning that was

*Table 1. Items that are Considered and Not Considered to be Barriers to Participation in Adult Jewish Education*

| Not Considered Barriers[a] | Barriers[b] |
|---|---|
| Classes held in an unsafe area | Didn't want an ongoing commitment |
| Not confident in learning ability | Can't attend classes regularly |
| Too old to take the course | Wasn't willing to give up free time |
| Teacher had poor reputation | Learning activities not a priority |
| Jewish education is for children | Classes don't meet my needs |
| Others don't want me to attend | |
| Uncomfortable with group situations | |
| Physically unable to participate | |
| Other people would be judgmental | |
| Negative experiences with education | |
| Thought subject would be difficult | |
| No transportation | |

[a]As identified by more than 90% of the respondents.

[b]As identified by more than 50% of the respondents.

rated highly by the respondents in this study was the learning that accompanied leadership positions—that is, board and committee memberships—in Jewish organizations in the community. Learning continually occurs through dialogue that takes place around board and committee decision making. Another way that learning takes place is through meeting preparation activities, such as reading, site visits, interviews, and presentation of information.

The Jewish communal professional, regardless of agency setting, becomes an educator in this case, matching resources to committee members and drawing on materials from a variety of sources to enable individuals to carry out their leadership roles. Therefore, Jewish communal professionals need to incorporate Jewish knowledge and learning, as well as the facilitation of learning into their professional repertoire. When viewed this way, every communication becomes an opportunity to stimulate the learner and facilitate the learning process. Learning and facilitating learning become an essential part of the portfolio of every leader and Jewish communal worker. Being involved in satisfying learning experiences also stimulates participants to take on leadership experiences. In this sense, they can satisfy their enjoyment of learning and their need for personal growth while fulfilling a desire to give something to the community.

It is not common to think about adult Jewish learners as teachers, but that is precisely what these data seem to imply takes place implicitly. Leadership positions open possibilities for helping others in the community to learn; everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a learner. The parenting role is also a teaching role, giving many a strong desire to learn how to create a Jewish home and how to help children learn about Judaism. Simply as neighbors and friends, respondents reported that explaining Judaism to others was an important source of their own learning. Educators frequently say that teaching something is the best way of learning it. Our respondents bear this out.

This information about how and why people learn can be mined for ideas about meaningful activities to incorporate into programs. Since helping children (and perhaps grandchildren) understand their Jewish heritage is important to adults, intergenerational learning experiences may be very attractive. Such family education programs provide a special challenge because they have to address the interests and concerns of people at several stages of life simultaneously. However, when successful, they generate exciting learning, motivate further learning, and strengthen bonds between people.

Since the respondents perceived insufficient time as a deterrent to participation in formal Jewish learning, it may be possible to increase involvement by providing shortened, concentrated educational opportunities incorporating as much active learning as possible. Modules, workshops, or minicourses are examples of such learning opportunities. Short, preparatory reading assignments could accompany registration; perhaps each registrant would receive an article or a short book chapter. In some cases, a program could end by having each participant write a next step for learning in the area under consideration. This next step could be a project the learner would do independently, or it could be a decision to attend another program. The facilitator might plan a closing discussion to obtain some feedback from participants, as well as input on future programs they might attend. Each program would have merit on its own, but these short concentrated programs might also serve as motivators for adults to engage in more extensive formal and informal learning.

Knowledge about adult development can be helpful to programmers and facilitators. People in their thirties are likely to be intensely concerned with raising children and establishing careers. They may not be interested in exploring Buber's philosophy, for example, but they might be enticed to consider some aspect of Buber's thought if it were connected to their major life con-

cerns. Older people, on the other hand, might want to spend time in a significant philosophical or literary study that could help them in their efforts to reconsider the meaning of their lives. Many personal circumstances affect peoples' learning priorities, but life stages and life crises are important considerations.

Although numerous Jewish agencies provide adult Jewish learning, for many people the synagogue is the center of Jewish identity. Thus, synagogues have the opportunity to develop new and creative ways to facilitate learning. Generally, members look to the rabbi and the cantor as the teachers of the congregation; certainly these professionals can use the pulpit to meet the learning needs of the members. However, the rabbi, educational staff, and volunteer leaders can look for other ways to facilitate learning. Knowing that parents are interested in helping their children learn about Judaism, synagogues can assist parents in that process. Although mini-courses and intergenerational activities could be valuable, so could special booklets, interesting practical articles in the synagogue bulletin, a telephone information service, and a computer discussion group. Synagogues might also do more to identify learning interests within their congregations and involve more members in planning learning activities or gathering and distributing learning resources.

This research suggests that the media (particularly the press) are a powerful Jewish educational delivery tool. The press is not usually thought of as a vehicle for educating adults, and yet that is how many adults report they go about learning. Reading Jewish newspapers and magazines is a way for learners to acquire more information and to think about life experiences in a Jewish context.

To really strengthen Jewish identity and continuity, however, the community must provide learning resources in many settings. There are many ways of being a Jew, just as there are many ways of being a Jewish learner. Jews are religious and secular, affiliated with synagogues and not, more observant and less observant, politically astute and politically naive, closely entwined in Jewish family life and on their own. *If we want to strengthen participation in Jewish life, we must find* ***multiple*** *ways to address the diverse needs of Jews in our community.* We need to know who the learners are and to understand something about their interests, roles in life, levels of insight, and possible learning styles. Most important, however, as program planners, educators, leaders, and co-learners, we need to stop projecting our reasons for participating in adult education onto learners and learn to talk to people about their learning needs and activities. Based on those perceived needs, we need to work to expand opportunities for adult Jewish learning in the community. Strengthening Jewish identity and continuity is a matter of creating a community ethic and environment that support adult learning in the multiplicity of settings and modalities in which it takes place.

It is important to open our thinking to learning rather than just to education. People control their own learning. No person makes another person learn. But we can *facilitate* others' learning if we design learning activities and provide learning resources that reach learners at their level of interest and understanding.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Developing the design protocols for this study was a two-year process. Data were collected in February and March 1991. During the time frame from inception to data analysis, the composition of the study team changed. We wish to acknowledge the major contribution of our colleague, Elisabeth Hayes, University of Wisconsin (Madison), whose vision and direction guided the project during its initial and most critical stages. We also wish to acknowledge the support and assistance of the executive vice president of the Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc., Barry Silverberg.

## REFERENCES

Burstyn, Joan. (Ed.) (1990). *New directions for Jewish education throughout the lifespan: Report of the Think Tank of the Jewish Education Committee of the Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc.* Syracuse: Syracuse Jewish Federation.

Chazan, Barry. (1988). *The state of Jewish education.* New York: Jewish Education Service of North America.

Council of Jewish Federations. (1990). *National Jewish Population Survey.* New York: Author.

Darkenwald, Gordon G., & Valentine, Thomas. (1985, Summer). Factor structure of deterrents to public participation in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 35*(4), 177-193.

Fishman, Sylvia Barack. (1987, December). *Learning about learning: Insights on contemporary Jewish education from Jewish population studies. Research Report 2.* Waltham, MA: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University.

Hayes, Elisabeth R. (1988, Fall). A typology of low-literate adults based on perceptions of deterrents to participation in adult basic education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 39*(1), 1-10.

Jewish Education Service of North America. (1991, November). *Adult Jewish learning: Reshaping the future.* New York: Author.

Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc. (1990, June). *Creating the climate for educational change: A final report.* Syracuse: Author.

Tough, Allen. (1968). *Why adults learn. A study of the major reasons for beginning and continuing a learning project.* Monograph in Adult Education (3). Ontario: Institute for Studies in Education.

Zachary, Lois J. (1991, Summer). The fourth decade of life. Some ideas and thoughts about facilitating adult Jewish learning. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service.*

Zachary, Lois J. (1992, Fall). Adult Jewish learning. *Agenda: Jewish Education, 1*(1).

Zachary, Lois J., Bellos, Neal, & Silverberg, Barry. (1990, Summer). Creating the climate for Jewish educational change: One community's experience. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service, 67*(4), 205-212.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Burstyn, Joan. (Ed.) (1990). *New directions for Jewish education throughout the lifespan: Report of the Think Tank of the Jewish Education Committee of the Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc.* Syracuse: Syracuse Jewish Federation.

Chazan, Barry. (1988). *The state of Jewish education.* New York: Jewish Education Service of North America.

Council of Jewish Federations. (1990). *National Jewish Population Survey.* New York: Author.

Hayes, Elisabeth R. (1988, Fall). A typology of low-literate adults based on perceptions of deterrents to participation in adult basic education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 39*(1), 1-10.

Jewish Education Service of North America. (1991, November). *Adult Jewish learning: Reshaping the future.* New York: Author.

Syracuse Jewish Federation, Inc. (1990, June). *Creating the climate for educational change: A final report.* Syracuse: Author.

Zachary, Lois J. (1991, Summer). The fourth decade of life. Some ideas and thoughts about facilitating adult Jewish learning. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service.*

Zachary, Lois J. (1992, Fall). Adult Jewish learning. *Agenda: Jewish Education, 1*(1).

Zachary, Lois J., Bellos, Neal, & Silverberg, Barry. (1990, Summer). Creating the climate for Jewish educational change: One community's experience. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service, 67*(4), 205-212.