# Continuity and Change in Contemporary Jewish Life: The Case of Me'ah.

## "Why Is This Program Different From All Other Programs?"

**by David Starr**

*Me'ah, a two-year curriculum-based program, teaches adults texts, history, and ideas. It also creates a framework for understanding Jewish culture and civilization; encourages adults to internalize and manifest the Jewish predilection for dialogue, dialectic, and questioning; and provides adults with "answers" to questions of fact and meaning.*

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> Traditions are not only given, they are made.... A tradition that is transmitted more or less as it is received will not live long.
>
> Leon Wieseltier, *Against Identity*

I have spent the past eleven years thinking about, talking about, and creating adult Jewish education, specifically through the program called Me'ah, created by Hebrew College and the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston. A two-year, curriculum-based program featuring high level academic practitioners teaching adults texts, history, and ideas, Me'ah creates a framework for understanding Jewish culture and civilization. At the same time, it encourages adults to internalize and manifest the Jewish predilection for dialogue, dialectic, and questioning as much as it provides adults with "answers" to questions of fact and meaning.

From modest beginnings -- two classes and fifty people -- today we reach over one thousand students a year in dozens of communities in Boston, New York, and beyond. In this article, I want to reflect a bit on Me'ah's own learning curve, using the rubrics called for in the charge to contributors for this issue: How do we think about change, collaboration, and what it means to build sacred community. I agree that these three rubrics rely upon a host of collaborations between different sorts of people, skills, contexts, and approaches. I would argue that Me'ah involves embracing continuity and change in Jewish life. It also involved a commitment to community and culture, as well as to the personal autonomy of the adult learner, a confrontation that places the text at the center, while inviting the student into the conversation of Jewish study as receiver, shaper, and transmitter of the text's meaning.

Consider the issue of change. Me'ah saw itself as a change agent, affecting methods and content, practitioners and students, and, most importantly, educational and existential outcomes emerging from a class or program. To take the congregational venue as an example, most rabbis think of themselves significantly, if not primarily, as educators, when, in fact, their jobs prevent them from spending much time in a classroom, even less in designing courses and curricula, for any age group, especially adults. We wanted to change the assumptions about adult learners, which included the failure to invest money in programs for them, and a lack of curricula that would take their learning needs seriously. Participants would need to spend hundreds of dollars a year to study, and more for materials. Congregations needed to invest their funds in allocating staff resources, as well as in some cases subsidizing the program. We were willing to challenge rabbis, asking them to "share" their congregants with us, to let us become important teachers in their lives, to allow us to spend two years in learning, in their congregations, most often. We asked rabbis to bracket their intellectual and ideological agendas, and be receptive to our methodology, which involves critical inquiry as opposed to more ideologically committed frameworks. In that sense, Me'ah depended upon change, and the willingness of its various partners to tolerate and embrace changes in personnel, outlook, approach, and potential impact upon adult learners.

Me'ah takes change seriously; in fact, one might argue that change constitutes the core of the program's vision, substance, and methodology. I want to *drash* a bit here on the rubrics set forth in the recent August CAJE Conference on Excellence in Communal and Congregational Learning, words like Vision, Reflection, Planning, Collaboration, and consider them through ideas and labels found in empirical reality. Rabbis, educators, scholars, executives, lay leaders, students, ideas, and texts -- these comprise the components of Me'ah. These items contributed to manifold changes in the participants themselves, and in their "sacred communities."

### Vision

This is an easy one. Most adult education lacks vision: a clear sense of goals and justification for those goals. Some of that reflects a lack of clarity in Jewish education generally about vision. For the past two hundred years, the Jewish world divided into two camps, those who

saw Jewishness through an ideological lens, and those who sought more romantic, unifying strands that might successfully replace the loss of the traditional. Ideology connoted vision, which included some, excited some, excluded and repelled others. The romantic vision, powerful emotionally, suffered by its lack of philosophical coherence.

Many of these ideologies, like the movements, are in a state of flux. The loss of the covenantal narrative, a sense of collective destiny and purpose, plagues Jewish life and contributes to a hollowness at the core of the contemporary. Jews should study *Torah,* should pray, some plead. Why? For what? Me'ah's vision of Jewish life suggests that study is not tantamount to a purposeful life, but that it is close to that. It connects Jews in time and place; it confronts them with the ideas and values with which they have to struggle in order to build Jewish lives, whatever form that may take in the end. There can be no serious Jewish life, or community, or culture, where learning remains off to the side, neglected by the many and seen as the affect of the few. Learning must not just be claimed *by* the many, but it must occur *between* the many, that is, it must connect people to one another and to the texts and ideas, both critically and dialogically, the traditional Jewish mode of learning. I would hope that this sort of vision changes everyone in its midst, but, in particular, the students themselves, now no longer passive or uninitiated in Jewish life.

## Reflection

Me'ah changed teachers, I think dramatically. Historically, a precious and underutilized resource, Jewish studies professionals now teach serious classes in a curricular environment, setting goals, mindful of larger communal goals. They teach differently, knowing they teach students, not just texts. They have to think about the affective and not just the cognitive. They must develop and execute course narratives that will guide the learners, both in how they learn and what they learn. In so many ways ,the teacher learns with and from the students and from the experience. Marc Brettler, distinguished professor of Bible at Brandeis, recently edited and wrote two texts, *The Jewish Study Bible* and *How to Read the Bible.* A consummate lecturer, Brettler acknowledges Me'ah's impact upon his teaching, his awareness of student needs regarding materials, format of the class, their existential concerns. He changed the lives of his students; they changed his life.

## Planning

Me'ah changed, or should change, the world of rabbis and their lay leaders. Items that they often lacked the time to plan, such as visions of congregational change, or specific programs like adult education, now benefit from the existence of Me'ah. It brings them a program with its own rhythm that they utilize rather than having to invent. In turn, it sets in motion creative energies that spark deeper reflection on the purposes of Jewish living within a structure like a congregation. This should happen, and it should be encouraged and capitalized upon, as difficult as the process may be and as stressful as it may be to realize that vision may take an institution into uncharted waters. So be it. Leadership needs to commit not just to the idea of vision, but a plan for developing that vision, and executing it. Me'ah sometimes reflects that sort of vision and plan, sometimes it leads to it. Either way, it creates an atmosphere of Jewish engagement that validates prior planning and will strengthen the hands of those who now feel emboldened to plan for the future.

## Collaboration

This made all other things possible. Me'ah grew out of a new vision for collaboration, fostered by two remarkable executives, David Gordis of Hebrew College and Barry Shrage of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies. Each wanted to strengthen their own institutions. More important, each saw a higher good in terms of process and result. The idea that institutions could collaborate closely sadly reflects a change unto itself, as obvious as it might be to the rational observer. Each believed that Me'ah was important because it was the right thing to do, regardless of whether, how, and when their own institutions would derive benefit.

Within that framework, other collaborations occurred, between staffers from the two institutions who divided up academic, management, marketing, and community building functions. The collaboration with rabbis and educators at the sites relied upon rabbis learning to divest themselves of being oftentimes the sole teacher of their congregants, sharing the classroom space with academics, sharing one kind of learning with another kind. All parties to these collaborations changed one another and changed in the process.

## Sacred Community

Collaboration of the sort mentioned above describes nicely what developed in many places that we might term sacred community, one animated by a vision, and by a more empowering process that brought all sorts of new people and energies into those communities, sacralizing them in the process. It involved all of the elements we've discussed here — vision, reflection, planning.

I think of one lay leader, named Terri. She wanted to learn, to grow Jewishly, to change even though she didn't know what that meant or where it might take her. It brought her into collaboration with other Jews, mostly her peers, who felt similarly. They created the basis for Me'ah in their congregation. Along the way, they reengineered their relationship with their rabbi via their empowerment, changing understandings of what laity could do, and what rabbis could do. They began to develop a vision for the congregation with learning and spirituality at the center, closely yoked together. They became more reflective about what they wanted in education, and in congregational life. They began to see that, for all of the excitement of change, that change required planning to take themselves and their community to a higher, more sacred level.

Me'ah didn't make all of this happen, but it made it all possible. There will never be a substitute for vision, for goals and purposes, and for educating people toward that. In some ways a delicate balance exists, between the constancy of a vision with *Torah* at the center, and the willingness to change how we teach, how we collaborate, how we plan, how we learn. In Judaism, that learning will always foster interdependence, connecting Jews to one another, to Jewish history and culture, to Jewish ideas, to some notion of the sacred. There are many Terris out there, waiting to change. The *Mishnah* teaches that one shouldn't think that one naturally acquires *Torah* via inheritance; one must study, one must change, to become a *ben Torah.* Once a person commits to that change, he or she can change the world.