INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

With an energizing dose of clarity and optimism, Diane Tickton Schuster presents a comprehensive description of the diversity and challenges in the domain of adult Jewish learning. She explains the lessons she draws from her observations of this field, drawing useful connections to existing research on adult learning and pointing out the continuing need for more knowledge to inform policy.

Placing Adult Jewish Learning at the Center

Diane Tickton Schuster, Ph.D.

Moses charged us with the Teaching, As the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.
– Deuteronomy 33:4

From the very beginning…the Jewish ideal has been to enlighten and inform the mind of every Jew at every stage of his life in the teachings and observances of his religious culture.
– Israel M. Goldman, Lifelong Learning Among Jews, 1975

The Jewish Renaissance and Renewal Pillar has placed adult Jewish learning at the center of its agenda for the revitalization of the contemporary Jewish community. That adult Jewish learning has taken on special salience comes as no surprise to the thousands of adults for whom learning has been transformative and empowering. Nor is there surprise among the hundreds of rabbis, college professors, and adult educators who are greeted with excitement and gratitude by the "hungry hordes" who fill the seats of adult Jewish learning programs throughout North America. Nor do scores of program administrators find this news startling: whether at JCCs (where *Derekh Torah* classes meet the needs of Jewish adults who are "looking for a way in"), at Melton Mini-Schools (where lifelong learners find the Jewish learning "roadmaps" they'd long been seeking), at Elderhostels (where mature learners energetically tap into the mysteries of *Kabbalah* or the Jews of the Southwest or Contemporary Mideast Debates), or at meditation retreats (where Jews discover the joy of finding spiritual sustenance through their own tradition). Even the small handful of researchers who are trying to document the current Jewish learning "phenomenon" finds the high rates of participation consistent with more universal patterns of lifelong learning among highly educated adults (Cross, 1981; Apps, 1988).

Moreover, as Israel Goldman (1975) pointed out more than a quarter century ago, lifelong learning is what Jewish adults are supposed to do. Learning has sustained the Jewish people for millennia, and today's learner comes to the study table, or to other "places of assembly," with the same kinds of questions, interests, and "need to know" as earlier generations.

Nonetheless, restoring learning to the center of adult Jewish life is no simple feat. Defining the parameters of Jewish learning is a complex challenge. And preparing a generation of leaders to understand how quality adult learning can lead to genuine and meaningful change in the Jewish community requires careful articulation. As "movers and shakers" in the Jewish community strive to develop a communal adult learning agenda, there are several lessons – derived from the varying experiences of existing programs and from the maturing field of adult education – that should guide program development and priority setting.

Lesson 1: Define adult Jewish learning broadly.

As Lisa Grant and I have observed elsewhere (Schuster and Grant, 2003), the scope of adult Jewish learning is broad and complex. When we recently asked a group of seminary students to imagine the venues in which they might provide education to adults, they quickly brain-

stormed more than 30 situations, ranging from introduction to Judaism courses to interfaith symposia to spirituality retreats to *Talmud* study groups to talks at nursing homes. Most of the activities they envisioned were "teacher-driven" and placed the learner in a position that is dependent on information or direction from a Jewish professional. However, vast numbers of Jewish adult learners today are also *self-directed* and function independently: they "study" Judaism by reading books and periodicals, exploring Jewish sites on the internet, attending Jewish films, plays, and musical events, visiting Jewish exhibits or museums, renting Jewish audiotapes and videotapes, learning Hebrew using interactive computer programs, and the like. Accordingly, the array of places where Jewish adults look for learning extends far beyond formal or institutional settings. And the ways they become involved in Jewish study may range from "occasional" contact by individuals who intermittently attend a Jewish book group at a local bookstore to committed lay text scholars who spend hours each week exchanging views with study partners, writing commentaries, or even teaching.

Lesson 2: Anticipate learner diversity *and* homogeneity.

Walk into any adult education setting in any Jewish community and informally survey audience members about their backgrounds, level of Jewish education, country of origin, familiarity with Hebrew, affiliation with synagogues or Jewish organizations, and level of observance. The variety in the results will be stunning. Diversity within the contemporary Jewish community reflects the great social mobility available to most American adults. Because Jews today can *choose* their level of identification with and involvement in Judaism, the ways they define their Jewishness and their engagement with Judaism are highly varied and complex.

At the same time, whenever a group of Jewish adults come together to learn in the non-Orthodox community, they typically will hold some characteristics in common: two-thirds (or more) will be female, three-quarters will be over age 50, and the great majority will be involved in more than one activity in the Jewish community (cf., Cohen and Davidson, 2001). Even in parent education classes at synagogues and day schools, which draw a younger crowd, the learners are primarily mothers.

When we shift the venue of learning to a different setting – say, an early morning text study group in a downtown law office – the "learner variability" is evident in different ways. In this hypothetical case, the teacher finds that some learners have come to the group to acquire literacy about Jewish texts. Others are eager for social contact with fellow Jews, while yet others are seeking spiritual nurture. Some individuals are looking for ways to link Jewish learning to specific legal cases. While the teacher correctly anticipates some homogeneity in terms of group members' social class and education level, she is surprised by the differences in learner expectations: some learners ask for formal presentations, whereas others hope to study text with partners, and still others prefer group discussions of case examples drawing on Jewish sources. The teacher aspires to respect the learners' needs, but wonders how to create a curriculum and milieu that will accommodate such diverse learning preferences.

Lesson 3: Understand transitions and transformation.

Adulthood is filled with transitions: geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, unanticipated illness, divorce, and the loss of loved ones. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to "finish unfinished business" or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive *educational institutions* as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help them regain "order and stability" in their lives (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980; McKenzie, 1986; Mezirow, 1997).

Jewish adult education activities that address the needs of people in transition provide important opportunities for Jewish learning and adult Jewish growth. Rather than merely providing information *about* Judaism, these activities (a) encourage learners to probe the meaning of their Jewish heritage in a systematic, intellectually compelling way, and (b) recognize that adult meaning-making does not occur in "one-shot" educational events, but rather evolves when people participate in sustained discourse. Transformative learning programs offer Jewish adults a community for dialogue, teachers who help to frame relevant questions, and an atmosphere that supports ongoing meaning-making and engagement in Jewish life.

Lesson 4: Support the development of teachers.

When Jewish adult learners describe what they value in

their teachers (Schuster, forthcoming; Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen, forthcoming), they consistently talk about how much they appreciate the depth of their teachers' knowledge and admire their ability to raise thought-provoking questions. They like teachers who create "safe spaces" in which learners can take risks without fear of embarrassment. They are pleased with teachers who share personal experiences and show how Judaism has shaped their own world view. And they remember most favorably those teachers who have put the *growth of the learner* at the center of the Jewish educational process. Their comments are consistent with what is reported about quality teaching in the general literature on adult learning (cf., Merriam and Caffarella, 2000; Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler, 2001). However, these learners' comments are often laced with remarks about how rare it is to find "a really good teacher" in their Jewish community. They decry the dearth of sensitive Jewish adult educators and are critical of Jewish professionals who do not understand how to work effectively with the adult Jewish learning population.

The need for well-prepared Jewish adult educators is pressing. To date, there have been few opportunities for Jewish professionals to learn about Jewish adult development and learning or to receive training for work with adults who tend to be college-educated, professionally trained, and rich with life experience. Although *Agenda: Jewish Education* (1999) and *Jewish Education News* (2001) have published a handful of articles about several successful adult Jewish learning programs, the "literature" about Jewish adult education is still in its infancy. And while a few courses on adult learning are now being offered in rabbinical or graduate education programs, these do not reach the hundreds of rabbis, educators, and lay teachers in our communities who would like to become more effective teachers of adults.

Regrettably, many Jewish adult educators (including rabbis) function in isolation. They aspire to create quality programs, but stumble for lack of preparation or understanding of how to meet adult learners' needs. Or, because of low enrollments in their adult education activities, they feel frustrated and ineffectual, unable to hone their skills as teachers or as authentic mentors to others. The Alliance for Adult Jewish Learning (AAJL), a coalition of program administrators, educators, researchers and policymakers, represents a significant first step toward the "formalization" of the adult Jewish learning field. With support from the Renaissance and Renewal Pillar of the UJC, the AAJL has begun to identify resources that can help Jewish adult educators to serve more learners in more substantive ways.

Lesson 5: Diminish territoriality.

Although the synagogue was historically the primary address for adult Jewish learning, today's Jewish adults are "consumers" who insist on their right to select where, when, and how they learn. Their loyalty will be to educational experiences that meet their idiosyncratic needs or preferences. Accordingly, some people choose personalized study packages. Others select learning activities specifically because they are *not* housed in a synagogue (where they may feel uncomfortable) or, conversely, because they are held in *their* synagogue (and they won't study elsewhere). Some adults are too busy to utilize local resources on a regular basis, but will gladly sign up for a study retreat that enables them to get away from routine and immerse themselves in a Jewish living-and-learning experience (cf., UAHC, 2000). And some learners will enroll in every learning event offered in a community but will participate only as "listeners" rather than as active members of discourse about Jewish issues.

Increasingly, Jewish communities are recognizing the importance of planning for the many "varieties of Jewish learning experiences" that Jewish adults now seek. Communities also are discovering that Jewish learning programs need to be offered universally – not just to an elite corps of community leaders – and they are beginning to come to terms with the challenges inherent in envisioning programs and infrastructures that can give the greatest number of learners access to the greatest number of meaningful learning opportunities. Community organizations are now forming coalitions that recognize the value of pooling resources, sharing costs, and presenting a united front about the importance of Jewish learning throughout a Jewish community (cf. Amy Hirshberg Lederman's [2001] insightful commentary of the evolution of the LIMUD organization in Tucson, AZ).

In some communities, adult Jewish learning programs have been supported by local federations (such as Boston's Me'ah program) or by synagogues that host "outside" educational groups (such as Baltimore's Chizuk Amuno that hosts a Melton Mini-School or various Los Angeles synagogues that host the two-year Yesod program). In others, interdenominational rabbinic programs (such as the Adult Institute of Jewish Studies in St. Louis)

have helped both professionals and laypeople to acquire pluralistic perspectives. At the national level, retreat programs have recruited learners who might not otherwise have opportunities to study in depth with prominent Jewish scholars (such as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' study kallot) or have offered residential experiences for adults who seek to combine learning and spiritual development (such as Elat Chayyim). In each of these "success stories," learners have been enlivened and adult Jewish learning has taken on new cachet.

Informing the Work

The need for quality adult Jewish learning programs *across* the contemporary Jewish community is well-established. So, too, is the need for better-prepared Jewish adult educators. However, because the field of adult Jewish learning is still in its formative years, the Renaissance and Renewal Pillar has rightly recognized that more information is needed about what kinds of programs effectively "grow" communities of educated Jewish adults. To date, virtually no data have been gathered about the kinds of programs now being offered, the experiences of people attending these programs, the characteristics or approaches of teachers, the long-term impact of the content being taught, or the factors that contribute to an ongoing commitment to Jewish learning. Evaluations of existing programs have been episodic and often are conducted "in-house." Currently there are no studies that compare different types of adult Jewish learning experiences or the kinds of learners who thrive in different Jewish learning environments.

To make responsible decisions about how to develop an agenda for quality adult learning in a community, communal leaders must make a commitment to becoming more fully informed. Before "growing" more and more programs, the community needs to look more closely at the impacts of the adult Jewish learning phenomenon and what factors contribute to success.

Diane Tickton Schuster, Ph.D., is Director of the Institute for Teaching Jewish Adults at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. With Lisa Grant, Meredith Woocher, and Steven M. Cohen, she has studied the impact of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School on adult Jewish learners. Her forthcoming book, *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice*, will be published in Summer 2003 by UAHC Press.

The author wishes to thank Andrew Berner, Paul Flexner, Lisa Grant, Betsy Katz, Jack Schuster, and Linda Thal for their helpful insights in the preparation of this article.

References

Agenda: Jewish Education (Summer, 1999). Adult Jewish Learning. (whole issue).

Apps, Jerold W. (1988). *Higher Education in a Learning Society*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Aslanian, Carol, and Brickell, Henry. (1980). *Americans in Transition*. New York: College Board.

Cohen, Steven M., and Davidson, Aryeh. (2001). *Adult Jewish Learning in America: Current Patterns and Prospects for Growth*. New York: The Florence G. Heller/JCC Association Research Center.

Cross, K. Patricia. (1981). *Adults as Learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Goldman, Israel M. (1975). *Lifelong Learning Among Jews*. New York: Ktav.

Grant, Lisa D.; Schuster, Diane Tickton; Woocher, Meredith; and Cohen, Steven M. (forthcoming). *A Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood* (tentative title). New York: JTS Press.

Jewish Education News (Winter, 2001). Adult Education: Making Jewish Learning Life-long. (whole issue).

Lederman, Amy Hirshberg. (Winter, 2001). "LIMUD: The Creation of a Community Institute for Adult Jewish Education." *Jewish Education News* 22 (1), 36-37.

McKenzie, Leon. (1986). "The Purposes and Scope of Adult Religious Education." In Nancy T. Foltz (Ed.), *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, pp. 7-23. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.

Merriam, Sharan and Caffarella, Rosemary. (2000). *Learning in Adulthood* (2nd Edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, Jack. (1997). "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice." In Patricia Cranton (Ed.), *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice*, pp. 5-12. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schuster, Diane Tickton. (forthcoming). *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice*. New York: UAHC Press.

Schuster, Diane Tickton, and Grant, Lisa D. (2003). "Teaching Jewish Adults." In Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz (Ed.), *The Ultimate Jewish Teachers Handbook*. Denver: ARE.

Taylor, Kathleen; Marienau, Catherine; and Fiddler, Morris. (2001). *Developing Adult Learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Union of American Hebrew Congregations. (2000). *Live Together, Learn Together: A Congregational Kallah/Retreat Manual*. New York: UAHC Press.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Schuster makes a strong case for the value and authenticity of Jewish learning for adults. To what extent is your community making purposive efforts to support and increase Jewish learning among adults? Do you believe it is a communal responsibility to do so?
- What might be the policy implications in your community of the author's recommendation to adopt a broad definition of adult Jewish learning?
- Are there potential "coalitions" in your community that could pool resources, share costs, and raise the profile of adult Jewish learning community-wide?