



## JEWISH LEADERSHIP CASE SERIES

No. 2

# ***ME'AH: THE QUEST FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL TRANSFORMATION***

### INTRODUCTION

Judaism is for grown-ups. But adult learning has always been a tough nut to crack. A program in Boston may have changed all that. Boston's Hebrew College and the local Commission on Jewish Continuity, an arm of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, embarked together in fall 1994 on a new initiative for adult learning called *Me'ah* (literally, 100). Prospective students were asked to commit to one hundred classroom hours of study, over a two-year period. They were also expected to prepare for class by independently studying both primary texts, such as Hebrew Bible and Talmud, and secondary scholarly materials. *Me'ah* began that autumn with two classes of twenty-six students each; by its fifth year, twenty-two classes were running with a total enrollment of close to five hundred.

*Me'ah's* founders hoped that the program would encourage personal and communal transformation. On the communal level, they wanted to foster a new relationship among institutions that were part of Boston's organized Jewish community. And on the personal level, they hoped that the lives of their students would be changed by their exposure to a radically different level of Jewish study than had been available to them before.

### INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

In the early 1990's two of Boston's Jewish institutions—The Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), and Hebrew College—underwent changes in their professional leadership. The new executive of the CJP, Barry Shrage, came from a Federation position in Cleveland. Hebrew College tapped David Gordis, a vice president at the University of Judaism, to be its new president. Each of these men sought to reposition

their respective institutions, by moving them to become leaders in local Jewish community policies and programs. This required a new defining mission for each institution.

Shrage wanted to broaden CJP's role beyond fundraising for the support of existing communal institutions. He aimed to place the Federation squarely at the pivotal point of Boston's Jewish religious and cultural life. This new vision of CJP as a partner in new program initiatives, however, also meant forcing other institutions to develop new visions for themselves.

To guide this process, CJP established a Commission on Jewish Continuity. This umbrella organization worked with local synagogues and agencies to help them become places of learning and social justice. An early program that reflected this new mandate was called *Sha'arim* (literally "gates"). The Commission, working with synagogues and Hebrew College, paid for family educators to be trained and hired. The Commission provided funding; the synagogues provided the venue for the educators to work; and the College provided training. This reflected an unprecedented level of cooperation. The *Sha'arim* program displayed an interdependent and organic model of partnership, in which all partners were heavily involved in various aspects of the program. Following the successful implementation of the family education initiative, Shrage and his associate, Carolyn Keller, Director of the Commission, felt that adult learning would be a natural and important next step for adults who had already benefitted from *Sha'arim* programs in synagogues.

Meanwhile, Hebrew College confronted its own major transition. Founded in 1921 to train Hebrew school teachers, Hebrew College quickly became an institution with a strong commitment to Hebrew language, Zionism and culturally Jewish orientation that taught local high school students and offered undergraduate and graduate degrees. As higher Jewish learning gradually found its place in the American university in the 1970's and 1980's, degree program enrollment at Hebrew College declined. By now there was a need for new directions.

Gordis established four goals in response to this need for change. First, the College (like other institutions of higher education) needed to become more aggressive in marketing in order to compete in a crowded marketplace. Second, it had to reassert the centrality of its academic core programs. This academic foundation would allow it to become a "central address" for new educational initiatives in the community, sponsored by CJP. Third, the College had to become a national institution, recruiting students and delivering programs outside of the Boston area. Finally, the College would commit itself to provide lifelong learning for all ages in the community. These goals meant that Hebrew College, too, was ready to think about an ambitious adult learning project.

Both Shrage and Gordis saw their partnership as natural. The CJP-sponsored commission had created institutional ties to synagogues, where adult learning was most likely to take place, while the College had the academic personnel to develop the curriculum, hire and train teachers and implement the program. Both were intrigued by the success of two national adult educational ventures, the Wexner Heritage Foundation and the Melton Adult Mini-School, and both saw Boston as a community ripe for a program that might draw on its academic resources. The Wexner and Melton programs had a presence in Boston. The Wexner Heritage Foundation's program was successful, but Wexner was a leadership training program; Gordis and Shrage wanted to reach large numbers of Jews, mainly in synagogues, not just leaders. Melton, on the other hand, was curriculum based, but not very academic; Gordis and Shrage both felt that the Jewish studies faculty from Greater Boston's many academic institutions should be involved in the new program, teaching from a curriculum that reflected their strengths and distinctive academic approach to Jewish studies.

Thus the Commission and the College decided jointly to create a new Boston-based adult learning initiative in 1993 that would imitate Wexner and Melton's intensive, two year learning model.

## **TWO KINDS OF SITES**

The program began in the Fall of 1994, with one class in each of two sites, one in Lexington and the other at Hebrew College itself. The Lexington site was itself a cooperation between one Reform and one Conservative synagogue. Each of the two synagogues already had successful family education programs and a history of serious adult learning. Both possessed core constituencies that might be receptive to a newer, more intensive approach to adult Jewish learning. The two institutions also had a tradition of working well together. This Lexington site was limited to members of the two congregations, and in one case was limited to members who had participated in family education programs. Each student paid \$100 plus materials; the remaining costs were covered by the Commission. This reflected the Commission's commitment to use adult learning to transform the culture of synagogues, and to advocate the need for such transformation.

The Lexington class was recruited in the Spring of 1994. The academic team decided to create a maximum class size of 26, reflecting a desire to enable each site to send ten or so students, with the knowledge that there might be an attrition factor as well. (Conservative) Temple Emunah's Educational Director recruited people who had been involved in family education; her counterpart at (Reform) Temple Isaiah, took a less hands-on approach to the recruiting, with the result that Emunah's representatives numbered 18, and Isaiah's 8, in the first Lexington class.

By contrast, the Hebrew College site had “open enrollment”—that is, within the class size limit, it was open to anyone. Less subsidized by the Commission, the College site reflected the idea that adult learning was also desirable and important for Jews outside of synagogue environments. It also reflected the College’s view that adult learning encourages personal Jewish growth and should not be viewed merely as a vehicle for synagogue change.

## WHO WERE THE STUDENTS AND WHAT DID THEY WANT?

All applicants to *Me’ah*, beginning with that first group, needed to submit an application and personal essay to enroll in the program. These essays revealed in often deeply personal ways who these people were, their complex feelings about their Jewish identity, and their Jewish goals. The essays were very important in generating thinking about what curricular materials and structures would speak most effectively to those students. This was especially true of the class that entered in the Fall of 1994, whose essays were being read at the same time that the original curriculum was designed; but this remains true in the present as well. While obviously idiosyncratic, together the almost one thousand essays of students over the years revealed certain patterns in the reasons these people came to *Me’ah* to study. They were “seekers”; they wanted a “framework” of Judaism or Judaic learning; as learners they needed “coherence” and “direction”; their goals were both cognitive and affective; personal growth was important as well as Judaic growth; they wanted to become Jewishly “competent”; they wanted to make their families more Jewish as a result of their learning; they wanted “access” to Judaism, its texts and the like.

“Journey” was a prevalent metaphor used in those essays. *Me’ah* students were spiritual; they saw themselves in the midst of personal change, related to their Jewish identity. Bert, a successful, Ivy League educated physician in his fifties, began his essay, “After fifty, it’s time to get serious. Questions arise; they must be answered. . . . I am Jewish. Does it matter? Not in the easy, assured, ethnic ways, but down deep, in the rugged rag-and-bone shop of the heart? It’s time to tell. The unexamined life is a luxury I can no longer afford. . . . Do I act, as I act, because I am a Jew? I am conscious of no specifically Jewish law that informs my medical decision-making. I may as well be a jolly pagan for all Judaism has affected my conduct. My non-Jewish friends and patients seem no more, and no less, kind/generous/sensitive/humane/decent than their Jewish counterparts. If religion makes no difference in the everyday relation of one human being to another, what then? . . . I need to know what part of my thought is Jewish, and what isn’t, and why and how it matters. Ditto for action. . . . Beyond that I suspect I may have lost something somewhere. I hope to find it. Might *Me’ah* help? We’ll see. . . .”

Often times this journey was initiated in response to an event or ritual experience. Malka described very immediate cause and effect. “Three years ago I began a journey. It started when my father, a man to whom organized religion meant very little, passed away suddenly. In my grief, I decided to say Kaddish every day and I was overwhelmed by the comfort and support I derived from the tradition. . . . The journey continued. My Shabbat attendance increased. I found my answers and a new way-station on my journey when we began observing kashrut this past year. . . . *Me’ah* is the next logical step on my journey . . . I hope this journey never ends.”

Like losses, other more joyous life cycle events, such as the birth of a child, or a child’s Bar Mitzvah, were also common themes. Frequently such events had awakened a desire to consider making some new commitments of one’s own. “Now my daughter is becoming Bat Mitzvah. It seems appropriate that I make time because too many years have passed and too many other commitments have taken priority. . . . As my daughter leads us in the parts of the service and becomes initiated as a Jewish adult, I hope to participate and have it signify an initiation into my own Jewish adult education.”

Many *Me’ah* participants were reaching mid-life, typically their early to mid forties. Several applicants wrote that, having reached a significant age, they were giving themselves *Me’ah* as a birthday present: “Now that I am reaching my fortieth birthday, I embark on this course of study as did the great Rabbi Akiva at age forty.” These statements reflected a truth that mid-life for some was a time of crisis, for others a time of transition and a time for making significant choices, a moment when people reexamined their lives, their pasts and futures, their values and commitments.

*Me’ah* students often mentioned personal spirituality. They had explored other religious traditions too, but were now returning to their Jewish roots to explore their own religion for the spiritual nourishment they craved: “I have an intense passion for Jewish learning. About a year ago I discovered, or perhaps rediscovered, my Judaism. Having always been a very spiritual person, I knew that someday my Judaism and spirituality would connect.”

The search for spirituality and meaning took many forms. Often, it provided a context, a framework for the changing relationships between family members. Applicants frequently cited their sense of responsibility to serve as role models for their children and sometimes to their grandchildren. “I hope to expand my connection to Judaism so that I can impart my love of Judaism to my wife and children.” Another wrote, “I am thrilled that my children are watching and participating in the joyful evolution of my fuller Jewish identity.” Sometimes this growth was about marriage, growing together as a couple. A joint application mentioned “Our invitation to apply

addressed both of us, and we immediately recognized the chance to do something that we have never done: formally study Judaism together. In our daily existence, we have differing points of view on everything from politics to chocolate. What we have in common, though, is our 'big picture' outlook in life which begins with our attachment to Judaism and our efforts to make it an ever-increasing part of our family's life."

Beyond family, students wrote of searching for other sorts of nurturing structures, for community. "My search continues as a longing for community and meaningful participation in that community." That desire for "meaningful participation" for many was bound up with the security that came with knowing Jewish cognitive and ritual contexts; for some it may have been another way of expressing their pain and embarrassment at feeling like Jewish children. "In-depth knowledge received in *Me'ah* will help me be more active in our Jewish community."

## SETTING A CURRICULUM

In August 1994, we created the first stage of a curriculum. One prominent educator told us in the Summer of 1994 that "if you're interested in enabling people to have a sense both of historical evolution as well as the way texts work, choose ten or twenty topics, and trace each one of them historically and textually, so that people will be both drawn into text study, learn some history, as well as some core Jewish concepts." This view reflected Franz Rosenzweig's belief that Jewish learning was about the journey that each adult makes from themselves to the text, not the other way around. According to this understanding of learning, it was the very subjectivity that each adult brought to the text that animated the learning, rather than the structure of the text or the overall course. The curriculum established for the opening in the Fall of 1994 featured Bible and modern Jewish life in the first year and an intensive immersion in rabbinic text and culture in the second year. With subsequent classes (e.g., beginning in the Fall of 1996) this model eventually gave way to a more explicitly sequential and integrative one, which featured Bible and Talmudic texts in year one, and medieval and modern Jewish history and thought in year two, tying the two years together.

This model reflected our perception of the potential students, based on their essays, and of Boston Jewry in general, as well as the identity of Hebrew College. Students were telling us that they wanted a structured approach to learning; that inductive learning that moved from text to text, topic to topic, without a larger framework, frequently left them frustrated that they could not glimpse Judaism as a structure, akin to other "structures" they had studied in the course of their academic careers. This meshed well with the founders' feeling that, in Boston, a community saturated with colleges and universities, academic life and academic structure had an

overwhelmingly positive valence, and that Hebrew College should be playing to its strong suit, namely its academic core. It thereby rejected the view that learning could be either subjective and transformative or objective and academic, but not both. We felt that in order for adult students to take Jewish learning seriously, it had to be rigorous in a format and style they recognized from their general education.

Thus, by the beginning of the third class in 1996, the course acquired its present shape. The one hundred hours of study were now divided into four components: Hebrew Bible and Talmud in year one, medieval and modern Jewish history and thought in year two. Each section consisted of twenty-five hours of class time, taught by a single instructor. This helped foster another important experiential goal of the program, building community through learning and the learning environment; the faculty were an integral part of the community. Each section was organized academic-style, with a syllabus, a reading list and expectations for outside text preparation. Each section featured both primary and secondary sources. In the first year, the two sections met “back to back” for twenty sessions, rather than being divided into separate semesters of ten sessions of Bible followed by ten sessions of Talmud; this way, in the last part of the year, students could study the same “topic” from the perspectives of the two different periods and literary genres. This helped them get a sense of both the sequence of Jewish culture and texts, as well as integrating those eras and texts. While none of the four sections could possibly cover every aspect of any text or era, coverage of large amounts of material remained an organizing principle and goal of the program.

## THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Semi-annual student evaluations shed light on the ways that those philosophical and curricular choices were reflected in the learning environment. The learning environment itself evolved in reaction to the transformation *Me'ah* organizers hoped would occur in some of the participants' lives.

Given the academic structure of the program, the foremost specific goal of the class hours was actually learning text. How best to do that, however, involved several ongoing tensions and balancing acts. One issue for many participants was the tension between moving in an organized way through the curriculum, on the one hand, and responding to the learners' questions on the other. Some students wanted the expertise the teacher brought: “on Tuesday evenings when I'm very tired and I don't want to go and I sit there at the table they unroll their magic carpet and I hop aboard and they take me for a three-hour journey.” But this same student noted approvingly that at other times the same instructor was responsive enough to student interest that he willingly detoured from his syllabus. “. . . my classmates didn't understand that there was actually poetry in the Bible and then [our instructor] suggested it and started

talking about it. He was very happy to spend three sessions on it. . . . We got so much depth out of what he was teaching us. We came away with chunks of knowledge.” Deviations from the syllabus were appreciated when the students perceived them as adding to their grasp of the material.

In a program that attempted to cover as much material as *Me’ah* did, the need for a clear presentation of the material was vital, along with some reflection not only of what the texts said, but of what they meant. Students frequently said, “we want a timeline, a graph, a map”; I feel like I know a lot of trees, but have no clue what forest I’m in;” “I feel like I’ve come in on the second or third floor, and missed the ground level entrance.”

Even when all that was provided, students expressed the need to process, to make meaning out of it all. They often articulated the sense that their earlier, perhaps more juvenile understandings and beliefs had been lost, and they had not been replaced with something as positive. “Our instructor has given us a gift of reading the Torah critically, but we don’t quite know what to do with it. I’d like him to let us take a week off, to have a class in which we evaluate what we’ve been doing, how it affects us, what it means for us in our lives.” Another student put it even more plaintively: “I feel I’ve lost the God of my youth, and I’m not sure what I have now.”

A related issue in student responses to *Me’ah’s* model was the credibility of the instructor. “Know thy stuff,” as one student put it. Some students learned best by discussion, others were there to hear the expert. “I’m in a place where I want to learn a lot. I want facts at my disposal. I don’t care for discussion as a learning method. It hasn’t given me greater comprehension in the past and honestly, I don’t care what others think. . . . I was impressed with the level of scholarship of the teachers and wanted to take in all they had to say.” But the learning environment was heterogeneous: the same student wanted a measure of coverage, mastery, dialogue and meaningful reflection, all in the same class. Some students learned by listening, others by talking. The teacher had to be aware of all those often unstated learning agendas, within the context of his/her educational goals.

Moreover, even before these different learning strategies were addressed, the students needed to feel empowered and made safe by the learning environment itself and by their instructor. Many adult learners told us that they entered the classroom feeling great insecurity about their place in it. Students knew “they didn’t know” and believed that “everyone else had background but me.” Professionals told us “I am reluctant to speak in class. I am an accomplished lawyer but I feel intimidated by my peers. I heard fragments of but never read the Bible.” In such a charged emotional place, the teacher wasn’t just the master of the text, but a part of a much more complicated interplay between students, texts and life experiences. He or she could



contribute to the students' feeling of safety in their journey. "Our instructor, who has her own set of solid beliefs, stopped mid-Exodus when someone spoke up: 'I'm having trouble with this.' She opened the discussion. She said there will be a lot of stuff in the Bible you don't like." Insensitive instructors could sabotage their own expertise by striking a raw nerve, sometimes using an inappropriate term, or an "inside" term that excluded people. "When our instructor referred to non-Jews as 'goyim' I was livid. No matter how he frames it this word has negative connotations for me." "I know I'm not the only one in the class who doesn't understand what 'dialectical revelation' is."

The tension here was real. Was the teacher the Professor, apart from the students, dispenser of crucial information, or a fellow participant in the emerging classroom community? *Me'ah* seemed to involve both roles for the teachers, without necessarily resolving how the two functioned vis a vis one another. One thing was clear: the students valued the instructors as texts themselves, not just for their expertise. The students identified with the instructors when they revealed and reflected upon their own Jewish journeys, their values and struggles. "Someone asked our teacher what she thought of Judith Plaskow's book on women's roles in Judaism. We hadn't wanted to get into personal issues but we were curious in learning more about our highly educated, observant instructor. She said that she herself doesn't go to synagogue. She feels uncomfortable about where she has to sit and with the fact that traditional rabbis don't give enough credence to women's issues." "I didn't know what to make of the fact that our instructor, who wears a kippah, analyzes the Bible in an intellectual, detached way. When he told us he was personally observant, and that he regularly attends an Orthodox synagogue, we wanted to hear about how he makes sense of his religious life." *Me'ah* tried structurally to foster such openness of the personal, by building in introductory and closing sessions of a more personal nature, in which all participants, including faculty, interacted in a non-academic context. They introduced themselves. This included the teacher and his/her life story. The closing enabled the group to linger in a more "social" setting and reflect upon the course—the personal and cognitive dimensions, together with the instructor, in a more freewheeling fashion.

## WHO HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED?

Impressionistic and quantitative evidence gleaned from students and community professionals suggest that observance among individual participants increased. So, apparently, did their synagogue attendance and involvement, including in leadership positions. Many students continued to seek out study opportunities. It was too early to tell how deep these trends were, or what ripple effects they had on participants' spouses, children, or peers. More evident perhaps was the change in community rhetoric. Learning became in vogue, people talked about what adult education they were pursuing, and those who felt outside of those trends reacted defensively, aware

that to be committed Jewishly was to define oneself in part through one's study regimen. If numbers told a story, the program's growth itself suggested that learning was increasingly socially acceptable and desirable, both for intellectual and religious reasons.

This trend put some positive pressure on rabbis and synagogues to be active in adult education. Educational thinking and programming had traditionally been the province of schools, synagogues, bureaus of Jewish education, rabbis and educators. But in the case of *Me'ah*, though the synagogues were apprised, they were not invested in the development of the academic dimension of the program. Under the process that CJP created, a synagogue had to apply to become a *Me'ah* site. As of the Fall of 1999 there were 18 *Me'ah* classes affiliated with synagogues, in addition to the four that were connected directly to Hebrew College and which continued to be open to the entire community.

Some congregants expressed frustration if they felt that their synagogue or rabbi was not taking an active role in teaching adults. Rabbis mostly took a wait-and-see attitude toward *Me'ah*; since it came from an unaccustomed source, they were unsure of how it would affect them or their congregants. Some embraced it and sought it for their congregations, others accepted it because lay people desired it. The program's organization demanded that the rabbi give way to a new kind of leadership represented by community professionals; as teacher, the rabbi had to make room for local academicians, who came into the congregation as "expert" teachers.

This also implied that increasingly, leadership needed to be collaborative. The Federation could not and would not have attempted *Me'ah* on its own; it lacked an academic base to do so. Likewise, although Hebrew College could have created the curriculum and engaged the faculty, to do so successfully it needed access to the larger community that the Commission on Jewish Continuity could provide. Both sought to play leadership roles in the community; each needed the other to create a program that would enable them to play that role. Both learned to deal with more established leaders and models like the rabbi and the synagogue in still more permutations of leadership, collegiality and collaboration.

How deep these changes will prove to be remains to be seen. The first *Me'ah* graduates finished the program only in the Summer of 1996. The number of graduates from the first few years included fewer students than now enter each class. But it is already very clear that attitudes have been affected, itself a significant first transformative step both for individuals and for the community.

## CAN THE SAME TRANSFORMATIONS WORK IN THE WORLD BEYOND BOSTON?

*Me'ah* is now being licensed to other communities. *Me'ah* classes recently began in Stamford, Connecticut (1998), in Cleveland, Ohio (1999) and Orlando, Florida (1999). It is easy enough to export a curriculum, but it will be harder for some communities to procure qualified instructors, and harder still to replicate the culture in which a community program takes root. *Me'ah* is more than just an academic program, and therefore perhaps more importantly, the aspect of *Me'ah* that involves community building—enlisting the support of rabbis, educators, lay leaders—will require a supportive environment on the part of a larger community. *Me'ah's* success in Boston depended on that kind of collaborative communal leadership and also on a lay population that, it turned out, was very eager to commit to serious Jewish study. Other communities that seek to replicate the program will need to find the same, or some local equivalents, in order to do so.

*Me'ah* is also now available on-line: the first on-line *Me'ah* class began its one hundred hours in 1998. Some of the logistical problems that may make it hard to replicate *Me'ah* in other communities are simplified in an Internet format. Many individuals, each living in a community that could not independently support such a program on the physical ground, can come together in a virtual classroom; and teachers, too, can sit at home on the eastern seaboard, or theoretically elsewhere, while teaching students from all over the country.

Other questions, however, apply in that medium. What kinds of communities form virtually, and how are they different from real ones? Early data suggests that faculty/student interaction in the on-line classes is actually greater both in frequency and intensity, which in turn suggests how promising new technologies can be not only for delivering curriculum-based programs but also in creating a variety of rich learning environments. But what happens to virtual communities when the one hundred hours are over? Do they give way to lasting associations that are meaningful?

*Me'ah* has been part of an attempt to help both Jewish individuals and Jewish institutions to speak a language of transformation. Will the students touched on-line find ways to translate that experience into communal life? It is still too early to tell.

Questions for discussion:

1. *Me'ah* grew out of a partnership between the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston and Hebrew College. In what ways were their interests in the program the same? In what ways different but complementary? In what ways might their institutional interests have been in tension? Which institutions in your community might form a similar partnership?
2. What might be an effective means of recruitment in your community to initiate such a program?
3. What direct changes in the community can *Me'ah*-like programs produce?
4. Will personal transformation lead in the development of community institutions that foster Jewish continuity? Has it done so already in your community?
5. In what ways do your institutions and their cultures need to change in order for inter-institutional collaboration to occur?
6. What needs to happen in your community for adult Jewish learning to become a higher communal priority?

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This case study was prepared by Rabbi David Starr, Dean of *Me'ah*, at Hebrew College, Boston, MA.