

Toward Adult Jewish Literacy

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by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer



What would it take to radically improve adult Jewish literacy in America?

This is a problem long debated, but I believe we face an unprecedented opportunity to make a quantum leap forward during the next decade.

A cursory look at Jewish life in America reveals only the challenges to this goal:

declining engagement, membership and connection. But below are some of the factors that are playing in our favor.

Demand for meaningful education is high. David Brooks [termed](#) the demographic that is post-college, pre-marriage/children (if at all) the “odyssey years.” These people are exploring their identity, and seeking meaningful opportunities to engage with sources of wisdom. Jewish sources and study have a tremendous amount to offer, if they can be opened up beyond platitudes and quotes that affirm existing values. The upcoming [Third Space Conference](#), sponsored by the Jim Joseph Foundation and Hillel International, will no doubt serve to further highlight this opportunity.

Immersion works. Countless studies have demonstrated the ways in which immersive environments have a tremendous impact on people. Jewish camping, one of the darling causes of the past decade, is effective because of its immersive environment. The question is not *if* immersion works, but *how* can we expand immersive educational environments, specifically for those over 18.

A culture of direct engagement. The internet has brought us a world of unfiltered access to information. People don’t want to rely on someone else to translate something for them - they want to engage with the primary source. This means people want the tools to engage with the sources of information directly. Gone are the days when an

“expert” could tell you everything. Now you want to check those opinions, and form your own conclusions. Jewish literacy could ride this wave: people want to delve into the sources themselves, not a summary by the “expert.”

College courses open people up to high-level Jewish studies. One of the quiet Jewish educational revolutions of the past generation is the ubiquitous presence of Jewish studies courses on college campuses. Thousands of Jews who may have previously experienced only pediatric-style Jewish education have come to recognize the depth of Jewish tradition as mediated through college professors. Even if academics often do not engage people on the heart/meaning end of Jewish wisdom, many college grads know there is such a thing as a sophisticated approach to Jewish sources.

Second languages are hot. Parents want their children to acquire a second language, and language courses in colleges are more popular than ever. The biggest barrier to Jewish literacy is knowledge of Hebrew. But Hebrew as a second language is on the rise in a number of new forms: Middlebury Language School now offers Hebrew, Hebrew immersion early childhood programs like at [Kavana](#) in Seattle are on the rise, and (regardless of what you think of them) Hebrew Language charter schools are poised to expand across the United States.

So how can we take advantage of these positive factors to push Jewish literacy to the next level? I propose three theoretical shifts and three practical goals.

Theoretical Shifts

Literacy is not for the elite. We can’t shy away from acknowledging how far we are from a literate Jewish society. We would never accept a similar status quo for knowledge of secular studies. But efforts to push Jewish literacy further are often pegged as elitist. Why is it deemed elitist to know Torah, but not elitist to know calculus and Shakespeare? There is a shame in illiteracy, and we must be aware of the difficulties in overcoming that. But we must make no apologies for demanding a much higher level for our community.

Literacy efforts cannot only focus on children. Education for children is critical for a literate society, but it is not enough. General society has embraced a model of intensive education through age 21 (not to mention grad school). In order to create a literate society, we can’t be satisfied at efforts that end with 8th grade or even high school.

Adult Jewish education has often focused on a tour of Jewish concepts, not a serious engagement with Jewish texts and tradition. But Jewish adults are poised to learn to read and engage directly with our heritage. We must offer them that opportunity.

Stop telling people who study Jewish texts: “You should be a rabbi.” Non-Orthodox culture in American society gives very clear message to those interested in Jewish text study: become a rabbi. But a true culture of literacy must normalize facility with Jewish texts and concepts without devoting one’s career to becoming a rabbi. We must create pathways for people to seriously explore Jewish texts without becoming professional Jews.

Practical Goals

At the recent Jewish Funders Network conference, Mark Charendoff [set lofty goals](#) for Jewish engagement: 51% of Jews should go to day school, camp and Birthright Israel. In that spirit, I offer a challenge to a slightly older cohort.

25% of Jewish adults of all ages experience some form of immersive Jewish learning on the road to deeper literacy. This immersion-learning could take place in multiple forms: a week during college break or vacation, a 2-week trip to Israel, a summer, 6 months or a year. The immersion experience would aim to open up the magic and wonder of Jewish text study and offer tools to allow participants a path toward self-directed study and engagement.

10% of Jewish adults spend two years in service to the Jewish people. The first year would focus on

immersion-learning, giving participants skills and confidence to engage first-hand in Jewish texts. The second year would offer a framework to put that learning into action: in synagogues, schools, camps or communal organizations.

50% of Jewish professionals and top federation/family foundation laypeople spend one month in immersive Jewish learning, a new form of “professional development.” At the recent Jewish Funders Network conference, 68% of funders said that literacy initiatives are insufficiently funded. Ironically, the people who set communal policy and funding priorities also struggle with literacy. Even the professionals in Jewish organizations are often disconnected from Jewish wisdom and heritage. Offer these leaders an opportunity to delve into texts first-hand.

Meeting these goals will take tremendous resources. How will we train the right teachers to carry this out? Where will these efforts take place? How will we fund and replicate the successful learning projects? But the first step is setting the goal to move toward literacy. I believe now is the cultural moment to push forward this effort.

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer is co-founder and executive director of [Mechon Hadar](#). In 2009 Newsweek named him one of the top 50 rabbis in America. He is the author of [Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities](#) (Jewish Lights, 2010).

Selected Comments:

-I’m surprised that Rabbi Kaunfer neglected to mention another group: Middle-aged or older people who are not Jewish professionals. You’re never too old to learn more.

In fact, Mechon Hadar’s Executive Seminar seems designed for that group. I can’t attend this year, but I’m hoping that it is successful enough that it will be offered again in the future.

-Elie - This is a wonderful post, and this conversation is much needed. It dovetails with the “Designing Jewish Education From Scratch” discussion at the Empowered Judaism conference a week ago. There, participants discussed how many adults opt out of participating in Jewish education with the kids (“drop off syndrome”) because they feel like they don’t know enough, or aren’t welcome, or don’t belong. Hebrew literacy (or even just following along), when to stand or bow or sit down, etc.).

We do need to change the culture of Jewish learning from “I don’t know enough so I don’t belong here” to “I don’t know enough so this is exactly where I belong.” This has implications for program design, leadership, language, and the evolving role of a teacher (or coach or guide). And you’re right, we need to model it from the top down, as well as design for it from the bottom up.

-Rabbi Kaunfer is to be applauded for a clear, concise and well-thought out piece on the challenges facing the American Jewish community vis-à-vis Jewish literacy. As the publisher of the New Vilna Review, I have been working hard over the last three years to encourage the expansion of Jewish educational programs for young adults, increase access to Hebrew language learning opportunities and to counter the specious idea that in-depth Jewish learning is solely the province of Rabbis and Orthodox Jews. I strongly agree that every Jew ought to have the opportunity to learn to read, speak and understand Hebrew. Such an effort if carried out effectively, will allow a broader range of members of the Jewish community to engage with foundational texts in Hebrew (the original language in which they were conceived of and committed to the page) and it will also help foster a stronger bond between Israelis and Diaspora Jews. The idea of Jewish education must be liberated from the notion that it can exist only in Jewish day schools, afternoon “Hebrew schools,” and Orthodox yeshivot.

-The expressed ideas in Rabbi Kaunfer’s essay are sure reflected in the minds of so many. Responding to this concern several years ago, we have created a variety of programs of adult learning in the camp\meeting center environment. These range from specialty programs dealing with music, Israeli folk dance all the way to quilting in a Jewish theme to summer long weekend programs teaching adults specifically. Hebrew, one of our keystone values, is the focus of a winter long weekend for adults who have some facility in the language.

All of these are substantial learning events that are different from the ongoing congregational and community kallot. For more information on these and other programs, please go to osrui.org in order to see something of the nature of such events during the summer and all year long.

As a Melton teacher for several years, I maintain that commitment to adult learning expands the community with depth and direction. It is also great for the teacher.

-Jewish learning needs to be marketed like any other product. Most people engaged in Jewish education at all levels are serious people, thinking about deep topics, and wrestling with mighty issues. Even our language is challenging. It’s full of words and long words at that. Often our product is excellent; we just can’t scare off the students before we get them in the door!

-Thank you to Elie for challenging the leaders and potential students of the next decade to take advantage of opportunities to expand adult literacy. The good news is that we have a strong base upon which they can build. In the last 20 hours, I’ve had the pleasure of participation in one way or another in a Spertus College Masters in Jewish Professional Studies course on “Working with Adults,” a Talmud class with fifteen other adults of various ages at NSSBeth El Congregation in Highland Park, a Florence Melton Adult Mini-School class made up of teachers from the Chicago Jewish community, and I met new directors of the expanding Melton program who come literally from one coast to the other! And yet I know these are only sparks reflecting the potential of light that can fill the Jewish world if funding, planning, marketing and passion all come together.

-Kudos to Elie Kaunfer for making the case for adult Jewish literacy. The need is greater than ever, and one “young” audience not yet mentioned deserves special attention: parents. When parents of school-aged children engage in high-quality Jewish study, they are “learning for two.” According to the research, the impact on families when one or more parents is involved in Jewish study is significant. Our new pilot curriculum from the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School called Foundations of Jewish Family Living focuses on teaching parents core Jewish values, with the goal of enabling them to “bring the conversation home.” We hope this and other Melton learning will help Jewish adults go deeper and further on their Jewish journey, and shape the Jewish landscape for the future.

-Good news and information. If you want to attract persons without cars who travel by bus, have events around noon, or early evening, so we can get to the place and home again. Thanks. (Practical suggestions, so as also not disturb family and private time.)