

A Report to the
UJC Renaissance
and Renewal Pillar

September 2003

The Impact of Adult Jewish Learning in Today's Jewish Community

by

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A Synopsis of
A Journey of Heart and Mind:
Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood

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(New York: JTS Press, 2004)

United
Jewish
Communities



The Federations of North America

Note: The authors would like to thank Steven M. Cohen, Isa Aron, and Marion Blumenthal for their careful review and feedback on this summary.

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The Impact of Adult Jewish Learning in Today's Jewish Community

*A Synopsis of A Journey of Heart and Mind:
Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood*

Lisa D. Grant and Diane Tickton Schuster

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years, the Jewish communal system has invested considerable hopes and substantial resources in the burgeoning phenomenon of Jewish education for adults. Once considered a sidelight, this "industry" has grown to encompass thousands of Jews studying in both isolated and systematic frameworks. What has been the impact of this investment? How are Jewish adults changing as a result of this welcome phenomenon in Jewish life?

Our pioneering study of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, the largest such system in the adult Jewish education pantheon, provides some answers to these and related questions. We found that Mini-School students emerge with greater appreciation for and competence in Jewish text learning, increased and deeper connections with other Jews (their classmates, their families, their communities, and Israel), and a much richer appreciation and meaningfulness for the practice and observance of Judaism. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, these learners do not seem, at least at the early stages, to have altered dramatically their ritual observance or Jewish communal involvement.

How and why we observed these somewhat perplexing findings unfolds in our exploration into the conception, curriculum, and personnel shaping the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School in the United States (and now several other countries as well). The study was the product of a collaborative process of an interdisciplinary research team consisting of four scholars with complementary, but varying, expertise: Lisa D. Grant of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, a specialist in adult Jewish learning; Diane Tickton Schuster, a developmental psychologist who now directs the Institute for Teaching Jewish Adults at HUC-JIR, Los Angeles; Meredith Woocher, now Director of the Jewish

Educator Recruitment/Retention Initiative (JERRI) at the Covenant Foundation; and sociologist of the American Jewish community Steven M. Cohen of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Our primary research focused on the impact of the Mini-School on the participants. What happens to these participants takes place in an institutional context that is shaped by a particular educational philosophy and instructional approach. Accordingly, we investigated how this serious Jewish educational institution makes choices about its philosophy and curriculum, and how it provides direction to and collaborates with the many local coordinators (called Site Directors) and teachers who are involved in carrying out its mission. We asked two core questions that enabled us to zoom in on one program of adult Jewish learning, while also considering larger issues in the field of adult Jewish education: (1) How does this learning experience make a difference in the lives and learning of its students? and (2) How do the program leaders, curriculum planners, and teachers make decisions about what to transmit and how to teach the complex and multi-faceted topics of Judaism to mature adults? Ultimately, our study shed light on critical issues and challenges that the Jewish community must consider as it anticipates the learning needs of Jewish adults and plans programs to meet those needs.

Our analysis drew upon both qualitative and quantitative research methods. We conducted formal and informal interviews in-person and by telephone, undertook document analysis, and performed ethnographic observations of two classrooms over a full year of study. We complemented these qualitative sources with a comprehensive survey of 367 students from the graduating class of 2001, drawn from seventeen sites throughout North America. The questionnaire assessed satisfaction and impact, and collected detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics, Jewish education and socialization experiences, and prior and current patterns of Jewish involvement. Beyond our in-depth analysis of the learners' experiences, we also interviewed teachers, Site Directors, program planners and administrators to gain a broad understanding of the Mini-School philosophy and how that philosophy is translated to practice.

SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The current renaissance of adult Jewish education is shaped by a number of factors that help explain the context in which the Mini-School has evolved. As happened during the "Great Awakening" at the turn of the

twentieth century (Sarna 1995), the 1980s and 1990s were a time when internal and external societal forces pushed American Jews to question how well they understood their religion and whether they were in a position to authentically transmit their heritage to succeeding generations. Increasingly, communal leaders expressed concern about the likelihood of Jewish continuity and also despaired that most post-Holocaust Jews had received only a “pediatric” Jewish education (Cowan 1994; Hoffman 1996; Poupko 1999). In response, in diverse segments of the American Jewish community, increasing numbers of adults supported expanded enrollments in Jewish pre-schools, day schools, overnight camps, Israel Experience programs, Jewish Studies on college campuses, and a range of adult Jewish learning programs.

Other factors shaped the context as well. By the 1980s, a substantial majority of Jewish adults were college graduates. However, as they matured, these well-educated individuals began to discern the gap between their secular knowledge and their understanding of their religion and their identities as Jews. Accustomed to a sense of mastery in other domains, these adults were motivated to use their intellectual capabilities to achieve an authentic knowledge base about their heritage. Moreover, in response to the challenges of modernity—to a society buffeted by industrialization, urbanization, mass social mobility, and technology—contemporary Jewish adults (like others of their generation) underwent several crucial changes. They experienced a loss of social location (not being sure where they belong), a loss of given truths (not being sure of what was right and wrong), and a loss of established norms and purpose (not being sure of what they should do and what they were about) (Cohen and Eisen 2000). Their lives required them to make more changes more often (in residence, occupation, station in life, family situation, cultural environment, religious affiliation, and so on) and to adapt to the multiple demands of modern life in more flexible ways (Kegan 1994).

As sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1999) points out, compared to the past, in today's society, people, goods, and ideas flow more freely and rapidly between and among families, regions, companies, countries, groups, ethnicities, and so forth. When a society becomes more porous and mobile, people find they have more choices. In exercising these choices, they tend to become more individuated, individualized, and individualistic—looking out more for themselves than for their communities (Putnam 2000) and less bound by communal structures and traditions. This freedom impels many adults to embark upon personal journeys, to search for a clearer

understanding of who they are, where they fit in, and what sorts of lives they should lead. These adults are *looking for meaning*: about themselves, their values, their religious commitments, and what gives them a sense of place and connection in a world characterized by upheaval and change.

In many cases, a quest for meaning prompts adults—especially well-educated adults—to look for new learning experiences that can clarify unanswered questions or provide new structures for understanding. Many seekers perceive adult education as a viable avenue for personal and intellectual growth. They are attracted to activities that offer them the opportunity to deliberately explore and struggle with ideas rather than require conformity to any absolute “truth.” Adult learning programs that enable Jewish adults to seriously explore questions about Judaism, reframe meaning about Judaism and Jewish tradition, and encounter Judaism from diverse perspectives, have the potential to powerfully influence how these individuals “make meaning” of their Judaism and their relationship to the Jewish community.

THE FLORENCE MELTON ADULT MINI-SCHOOL: ITS HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

To understand the impact of the Mini-School, it is useful to review how this educational institution has evolved, and to consider the philosophy that the institution promotes through its structure, curriculum, and approaches to Jewish adult education.

In 1980, Florence Melton, an entrepreneur and philanthropist active in Jewish educational initiatives, decided that she needed a better Jewish education. As she related: “I knew *how* we did everything as Jews, but I didn’t have clue *why* we did it!” When looking for a program that would meet her learning needs, she could not find any comprehensive, sequential, sustained programs of Jewish education for adults that answered the *why*. In fact, at the time, in most liberal Jewish communities there were few adult Jewish learning opportunities at all. Melton sensed that she was not alone in her thirst for Jewish knowledge. She surmised that many other Jewish adults, though competent and successful in their personal and professional lives, felt inadequate to transmit even the basic essentials of Jewish history, culture, ideas, and values to their children, or to make much meaning out of Judaism for themselves.

Initially, in trying to market her idea of a sustained course of adult Jewish study to a variety of institutions, she found that most Jewish educational

leaders assumed that adults would refuse to make a long-term commitment to Jewish learning. As she noted:

In 1980, it was unheard of in Jewish education to even consider that adults would participate in formalized education, where they would go to a school on a regular basis and pay tuition and have a pluralist environment in a classroom. But, I knew it was going to fill a human need that was not being met.

Ultimately, the Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem agreed to develop these ideas. In the early 1980s, a team of scholars and educators at The Hebrew University developed a prototype curriculum entailing four courses to be taught over two years, for a total of 120 hours of study. Three pilot sites began operation in Chicago, New York City, and Commack, NY, in 1986. In 1989, the North American Office opened, designed to oversee site development and serve as a liaison between the American sites and the academic resources based at The Hebrew University. Since that time, as the number of sites and students has grown substantially, the curriculum has undergone continual evaluation and revision.

The philosophy of the Mini-School evolved as Florence Melton, together with the school's planners and curriculum writers, resolved to create a program that would serve learners who wish to acquire Jewish literacy, are searching for Jewish meaning and relevance, and are likely to reject traditional "norms" imposed by external authorities. Structurally, the leadership designed a program that would:

1. Promote Jewish literacy through a sequential, systematic study of Jewish sources, over a period of two years;
2. Provide learners with the reading and contextual tools to understand and apply Jewish texts and tradition to their own lives;
3. Employ teachers and staff who endeavor to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where learners can bring and find personal meaning in their study; and
4. Expect teachers and staff to welcome students whatever their Jewish orientation, and avoid in any way appearing judgmental of any learner's choices with regard to belief and practice.

In developing organizational strategies to implement these values, the Mini-School leadership recognized that an adult Jewish learning program involves more than just a curriculum or a group of committed teachers or a pool of eager students. They found that, to grow a successful Jewish adult education institution, they need to continuously consider the interactions among the content of the curriculum, the approaches used by the teachers, and the needs of the learners.

WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS?

Our study revealed that the Mini-School's literacy-focused, pluralistic approach to Jewish study can trigger a diverse array of impacts. The *key* impact we discovered has to do with how the learning enriches and shapes the meaning participants derive from their Jewish lives. While relatively few outward changes in religious behaviors can be observed, learners' inner Jewish lives appear profoundly changed. In other words, learning at the Mini-School influences *how* and *what* participants believe about the Jewish behaviors they perform and connections they make. Jewish learning strengthens commitments and adds depth to practice. Learners attach greater meaning to their ritual practice, prayer, and learning. They sharpen the Jewish lens through which they view their everyday life. They come to new understandings of their relationship with other Jews—whether family members, friends, classmates, Jewish organizations (including synagogues), or the broader Jewish community.

These changes can be observed around seven different areas of impact, as reported in varying degrees by the learners:

1. ***Making new meaning of pre-existing Jewish activity.*** Learners enhance their ability to derive a sense of purpose from their everyday Jewish activities. They acquire a more meaningful understanding of their Jewish practices. As one learner simply put it, "I know why we do what we do." A more specific example helps clarify how meaning is enriched. In our survey, 67% of respondents reported that they lit Sabbath candles prior to enrolling in the Mini-School, yet many in our interviews spoke about how that activity *became more meaningful* as a result of their learning. As Sharon, a homemaker and budding artist, commented:

The practical suddenly has more emotion to it. There are more feelings with it. Lighting the candles like that is not as routine as, "Oh, I know why I do it. I know why I cover my eyes. I know why I cover my head and sing." It just, I think, enhances the practical application, and I think it facilitates it too.

- 2. *Expanding involvement and interest in Jewish learning.*** Although most Mini-School learners are not newcomers to Jewish life, their learning enriches their engagement in Jewish life and their desire to learn more. They attach more meaning to the Jewish practices that they choose to perform and feel more confident in their choices of expression. Our survey results reinforced views expressed by people we interviewed. In fact, the most frequently documented impact emerging from our study was the development of *an enhanced appreciation and passion for Jewish learning*. We asked the respondents, "Listed below are several possible outcomes of studying at the Mini-School. To what extent would you say that you have been affected, if at all, in each of the following ways?" By far the most popular answer was "I have become more comfortable studying Jewish texts (in English)," with 49% answering "to a great extent."

The Mini-School seems to both demystify Jewish learning and also enlarge learners' appreciation for the volume of material that they have yet to master. Personal Jewish intellectual engagement seems to have substantially increased during the years of study. For example, from their recollection of "three years ago" to their reports about "this year," the number of survey respondents who read a Jewish periodical leapt 12 percentage points. In like fashion, the number who had read a Jewish book climbed nine percentage points. Even more striking is the growth of 21 percentage points in interest in participating in an ongoing study group on a Jewish text or theme. Likewise, the study of texts outpaced all other potential changes in beliefs and behaviors, with 23% saying that they are "much more active now" than they were earlier.

- 3. *Connecting ethics and everyday life.*** For Mini-School students, the value of adult Jewish learning appears to extend beyond the domains of ritual observance, synagogue services, and Jewish communal activity—to embrace everyday life. When asked in our

survey about this dimension of their learning experience, 33% of the sample said that, to a great extent, “I more often see ethical implications in a lot of my ordinary activities.” Of our survey list of 26 possible kinds of impact, this item ranked fourth highest with respect to the frequency with which respondents assented.

Arnie Roth, a teacher at one of the sites, made this general observation about the changes he perceived among students who studied with him:

The most amazing change is that students, after about six months or so of class, give up lashon harah (gossip). They become very sensitive to the way they talk. That is the one thing I notice that is almost universal. If you ask my students what they have learned over the years, they will say that they don't like gossip any more.

4. ***Developing appreciation for “traditional” Judaism.*** Through learning about traditional texts and practices, many learners indicated that they became more aware and more appreciative of the diversity of Jewish beliefs. However, in answer to survey items about shifting attitudes, this appreciation favored people who are “more observant” than people who are “less observant.” In effect, the emphasis on pluralism, and its sympathetic treatment of a normative (i.e., traditional) approach to Jewish life, works to reduce alienation from and antagonism toward Orthodox Jewry. In contrast with the 35% who said they felt more tolerant towards those who are more observant, only about half as many (17%) agreed strongly with the statement, “I have developed a greater appreciation for Jews who are less traditional than I.” In addition, although teachers did not appear to dictate normative practice, the students’ understanding and acceptance of traditional Judaism did seem to grow. Pertinent here are these interview remarks by Dana, a human services trainer, and Cindy, a health care administrator:

Dana: *I mean, why is it the rabbis don't get on us for not doing what we're supposed to do and pretend that we're doing everything we're supposed to when we're not?*

Cindy: *I don't observe Shabbat as I should...not as strongly as I should. I do not keep kosher, as I should. I keep kosher-style so that I'm working toward the ideal. I feel that by taking a course like this reminds me of where I should be. And even though I may not be there, I'm not forgetting where I should be and I have something to work toward.*

In both cases, it is noteworthy that these women seemed to relate positively to the idea of “what we’re supposed to do” and the corresponding “shoulds” of Jewish life. This sort of language certainly runs counter to a complete rejection of the very notion of norms or the related concept of the “good Jew.” (Many American Jews deny that one can even speak of a “good Jew.”) At a minimum, these students acknowledged traditional norms as a legitimate part of Judaism, even if they don’t ascribe to them personally.

5. ***Encountering God and spirituality.*** Some survey respondents testified that their learning exerted a positive feeling for God and for spirituality. A quarter of the respondents said that to a great extent they had “become more spiritual” and nearly that many (22%) indicated that they had deepened their “faith in God.” Beyond the survey responses, we heard in interviews and frequently observed in classrooms that the learners especially welcomed discussions about God. As Natalie, a Federation president, commented,

I like when we talk about God...because you don't have that happen in a group very often in your life. For some reason, everyone's a little private about their interpretation of God. And yet, it's interesting to be able to share those thoughts and feelings.

In the context of very little discussion about God and theology among American Jews—even among those who are frequent worshippers—learning at the Mini-School represents something of an innovation. It offers Jewish adults rarely experienced opportunities to seriously encounter Jewish theological teachings and their own feelings about God and spirituality. Apparently, a significant minority is moved by these learning experiences and report some measure of increased interest in matters of faith and the Divine.

6. ***Transmitting meaning to others.*** Consistent with Judaism’s emphasis on home and family as key arenas for Jewish expression, many Mini-School participants pursue learning to enhance their position as Jewish role models and teachers in their families. When asked on the survey about 11 different ways they may have become more Jewishly active, “Teaching Jewish family members about being Jewish” ranked second (56% answered “somewhat” or “much more active now”), just behind “Studying Jewish texts.” A smaller, but still sizable, number (27%) answered likewise with respect to “I see myself more as a Jewish role model for my family or friends.”

In interviews, learners described themselves as nurturers who, through teaching and modeling, encourage their children, spouses, grandchildren, and sometimes even their own parents, toward further Jewish growth. For example, Shelly, a former high school history teacher, spoke of teaching her adult children and grandchildren:

Whenever we get a chance, you know, I will bring up something and say, “Oh, do you remember this from your classes?” so my daughter, and son-in-law and I can discuss it. And sometimes I’ll share some information with my grandchildren.

In a similar vein, Leslie spoke about how her learning influenced both her son and husband:

My older son saw me studying Hebrew, and he came in and he started reading it with me, which just flabbergasted me. I said, “Michael, this is so much fun. I can’t believe you’re doing this with me.”

For the first 8-10 years of our marriage, my husband didn’t care if we had a Passover Seder or not. It didn’t make any difference to him. As he sees that I’m evolving, he encourages me, and he participates much more. We didn’t belong to a synagogue until two-and-a-half years ago, and I pushed us to join. But now he encourages us to go more.

7. ***Increasing connections to the Jewish community.*** Both survey respondents and interviewees reported changes in terms of their

sense of connection to the Jewish community. On the survey, almost one-third (31% answering “a great extent”) reported having “become more attached to the Jewish people.” Slightly fewer (28%) reported having “become more attached to the Jewish community.” Just under a quarter (23%) noted a change in their personal lives, responding that, “to a great extent,” since enrolling, they have “have developed a new set of friends.”

The most significant change in outlook in this area occurred with regard to the learners’ support for Jewish education. Over 40% of survey respondents stated that they had become “a more committed advocate of community support for Jewish education,” and 23% said they had become “more in favor of Jewish day school education.” It appears that, in some instances, participation in the Mini-School is a way for social networking (say, for a group of day school parents who decide to collectively enroll). In other situations, enrollment offers access to communal leaders who advocate adult Jewish learning for anyone who is on “the inside” in the Jewish community. In interviews, teachers and Site Directors mentioned that, after enrolling, many students demonstrated an increased involvement in Jewish communal activities, either as Jewish educators themselves or as more involved lay leaders. For example, one teacher mentioned that three of her former students had become board members of the Jewish Federation. At another site, a director said: “I don’t know exactly how many, but a number of my students have become Sunday School teachers. They now feel that they want to give back some of the things that they’ve learned.”

DOES BEHAVIOR CHANGE?

Even though “behavior change” is not the primary objective of the Mini-School experience, our inquiry revealed that small numbers of students did increase their ritual observance and religious service attendance. At the same time, the majority of the learners reported *stability in their level of observance*. Thus, when we asked respondents to report on several Jewish identity measures in terms of their behaviors “three years ago,” and then again for “this year,” we found only very small increases with respect to specific behaviors. The two points in time were differentiated by no more than six percentage for such items as synagogue membership, fasting on Yom Kippur, lighting Sabbath candles, keeping kosher at home, keeping

kosher outside the home, attending services monthly, and having mostly Jewish friends. These indicators of behavioral change were not statistically significant.

A long line of educational research tells us that learners change their images, beliefs, and attitudes far more often than they change their behaviors. The sorts of changes reported—and not reported—by Mini-School learners comport well with the implicit contract between the institution and its students. For sound reasons connected to its educational philosophy and recruitment policies, the Mini-School eschews a focus on behavioral change. While a central feature of quality adult education programs is the systematic challenging of learners' belief systems (albeit in a respectful and accepting manner), the Mini-School staff refrains from directly addressing matters of practice, or even appearing to question the patterns of practice followed by their students. Moreover, since most learners' families, friends, synagogues, and organizations remain outside of the general purview of the learning experience and provide little incentive for behavioral change, the individual learner may feel little motivation (and receive little external support) for making shifts in practice.

IMPACT ON SITE DIRECTORS AND TEACHERS TOO

While the most evident impact of the Mini-School is on the learner, the impact extends to the staff as well. Regardless of background or experience, the teachers and Site Directors consistently told us how much they enjoyed their association with the organization. Several comments echoed the sentiments of one teacher who mused: "I think this is the thing in the week I enjoy the most." Perhaps one of the reasons these teachers and Site Directors are so enthusiastic about the experience is that they feel they are growing, both in terms of their own Jewish content knowledge and as teachers.

A significant number of people spoke about the joys of continually learning from their colleagues or from their preparations to teach. One teacher said: "Melton has caused me to think about my own practices and has challenged me to want to learn more and know more." Another commented: "My transformation has been from constantly learning in order to teach, to learning as I teach." Similarly, a third noted: "The greatest transformation for me was in observing instructors and incorporating their joy and passion into my own teaching."

Others described how they learned from their students. “Melton has opened my eyes to the whole field of adult Jewish learning—and the power and impact of adults learning Jewishly either for the first time or as a director,” one said. Another stated, “To teach adults encourages me to hone my teaching skills. Adults demand it. Adult learners encourage me to keep learning. I must be sharp to keep their interest and encourage their progress.”

WHO ARE THE LEARNERS?

Understanding what happens to Mini-School learners must be considered in the context of the characteristics of the people who enroll in this two-year program, including their Jewish background and affiliations, their prior experiences with Jewish learning, and their learning goals. Our survey of 367 learners who completed the Mini-School in 2001 provided some indication of the demographic characteristics of the types of people attracted to this kind of Jewish learning experience. These data, combined with our interviews and classroom observations, also provided us with a picture of Jewish adult learner motivations, learning preferences, and goals. These preliminary findings certainly need to be tested against more comprehensive demographic data about the thousands of Mini-School graduates and compared, as well, with findings about students in other adult Jewish learning programs.

Affiliation. Almost all of the Mini-School students are members of synagogues. As many as 87% claimed to belong to a synagogue prior to enrolling. Nearly half of our respondents are members of Conservative congregations; over one-third belong to Reform synagogues; 3% indicated Reconstructionist affiliation and 3% Orthodox. The remaining 11% identified themselves as “Secular” or “Just Jewish.”

Gender and Employment. Women vastly outnumber men in the Mini-School, by a margin of 4-to-1 (80% versus 20%). Our survey revealed that only 37% of our respondents were employed full-time; the rest were almost evenly divided among retirees, part-time employed, and full-time homemakers. Of the male students, 61% were full-time employed, as opposed to just half as many (31%) of the women.

Age. Since its inception, the Mini-School has succeeded in attracting a clientele across the adult age span, achieving a participant age median (53) that is relatively youthful for adult education enrichment programs. The

special appeal to Jewish day school and pre-school parents (who sometimes are recruited as cohorts of learners) leads to a significant proportion of students under age 50 (41%).

Education and Income. Mini-School students are socially upscale, reporting a median income of \$115,000. Compared to “average” Jews (NJPS 1990 data as reported by Kosmin et al. 1991), these learners are more highly educated and more highly affiliated/strongly committed Jews on all measures. Over 45% of our survey respondents reported having a master’s degree or higher, with only 10% lacking a bachelor’s degree. These characteristics may well reflect the Mini-School’s longstanding strategy of recruiting affiliated Jews and Jewish communal leaders into learning experiences that demand confidence in study and discussion of written texts.

“On a Jewish Journey.” Mini-School learners typically characterize themselves as being on a Jewish learning journey. During the five years prior to enrolling, more than a third had studied Hebrew, and a similar number had participated in an ongoing study group on a Jewish text or theme. Fully 60% had taken a class on a Jewish theme. Three quarters or more had read a book on a Jewish theme other than the Torah or Bible. As many as 82% had attended a Jewish-oriented lecture. Within the last year 71% had turned to the Internet for Jewish related information. In short, our study showed that most Mini-School students come to the program already engaged, in varying degrees, in the process of lifelong learning.

WHY THEY ENROLL

Our interviews revealed a range of motivations that prompted the decision to enroll in the Mini-School. In some cases, the individual was in a time of transition: a move to a new community, a change in family status such as divorce or becoming a grandparent, a time of personal loss, or retirement. For others, enrollment came as a response to a “felt need” to make new meaning of one’s Judaism or Jewish identity. As recent research (Cohen and Eisen 2000; Horowitz 2000) shows, Jewish identity ebbs and flows throughout adulthood, and the timing of Jewish identity formation is highly variable (Schuster 2003). Some students enrolled because participation in the Mini-School had achieved “social status” in their community and they were attracted to an opportunity to join in with peers who would offer a social connection. Others felt impelled to gain Jewish literacy that would

enhance their roles as Jewish communal leaders or would enrich their ongoing quest for learning. Regardless of the specific trigger for enrollment, all the learners we interviewed indicated that they were motivated by the need to become more Jewishly informed and thus more authoritative about Judaism, Jewish tradition, and their choices as Jewish adults.

WHAT THE LEARNERS LIKE

Our interviews helped us understand what the learners most valued about their Mini-School education. The students repeatedly said they liked having the opportunity to (1) acquire a systematic intellectual framework about Judaism, (2) find meaning in traditional texts that they could apply to their own lives, (3) participate with other Jews in a learning community, and (4) study with teachers from diverse Jewish backgrounds. Their “voices” give dynamic testimony to their preferences:

Getting a substantive intellectual framework. The learners spoke about how the program provided an intellectual “map” that enabled them to reframe prior knowledge that they had never fully integrated. They said that they liked the rigor of the curriculum and were attracted by the structured opportunities to explore complex texts and issues. A comment by Margaret, a convert, illustrates these points:

It was very organized. And it's like anything else you study. You can be interested in plants and flowers and not really understand anything if you don't study botany. You get an appreciation, but you don't really have an understanding. And I think that's what Melton did. You know, I could read bits and pieces here and there and be fascinated. But Melton took it in a sequence and put it in a fashion that was organized.

Seth, who grew up in a Conservative household, reported that the Mini-School allowed him to get more “perspective on certain things than when I learned them as an 8–15 year old.” He also said that the classes gave him a valuable historical and conceptual overview:

[I liked] finally getting the timeline of Jewish history organized in my head better than I had in the past. I enjoy history, and putting together the pieces...and also understanding the

questions like: “What makes Judaism so special? How is it different from other monotheistic religions?” Approaching it at a different time in my life with a different background was good.

Students consistently commented that the Mini-School “roadmap” handouts the teachers prepared for lessons helped them to clearly comprehend where historical, textual, and philosophical concepts “fit in.”

The opportunity to make meaning from text study. When asked to describe things they had learned, many of our interviewees cited moments of insight sparked by text study. They responded expansively about the pleasure they derived from making connections between the texts and their contemporary lives. Wanda, a speech pathologist, reflected:

I remember a lesson that we did on the use of words and speech and gossip. And the weight that is put upon using words and speech in an appropriate and proper way that is informed by good [deeds]...or God, or love...And I really appreciated that very much. And I’m sure that’s because my life centers so much, in my work, with the proper use of words. And helping others to use words, not only in their relationships with each other, but in relation to themselves. So I thought that was wonderful!

Anna, a retired bookkeeper long active in B’nai B’rith, cited a specific incident where what she learned influenced her ethical behavior. Moreover, she said, she acted with a strong sense of consciousness of Jewish ethics, or, more precisely, of what she believed Jewish ethics demanded:

We had a situation where we had a bad falling out with an employee. We had made her a promise, and a promise is a promise. So, I went back to my thoughts on what I had studied at Melton, and said “We will conduct this in a Jewish ethical way because this is how Jews live.” She got her compensation, etc., so I can really say that in some aspects, the way I think and live has been modified, has been enhanced, or has made me think how I am dealing with a particular issue.

Margaret, the convert to Judaism mentioned earlier, talked about discovering how the texts she was studying applied to her daily life:

I was fascinated to learn that you don't tell a sick person that they're going to die. And you try not to embarrass somebody when you give them charity or tzedakah. And that...giving tzedakah is just what you do. You don't do it to feel better. It was a whole new concept for me. And so it changed my behavior. I mean, when somebody on the street—and I live in the city, so I see a lot of people—I mean, they get money from me, even if it's only a dollar or fifty cents. Now, it's a ritual. It's a part of my life... I'm obligated, 'cause I'm Jewish, to give them something.

Opportunities to participate in a diverse learning community. Our interviews revealed that the students appreciated studying with a mix of people in supportive learning groups. Mindy, a foundation executive, spoke to the diversity that enriched her learning experience:

I look forward to it not only because of the teachers...but because of the make-up of our class and listening to everyone. I think one of the neat things is that there's a lot of discussion and that no question is too stupid to ask. It's a very [diverse group]. There are younger women, and there are older women, and men also. It's a great mix.

Similarly, Linda, a lawyer who became a stay-at-home mom, mentioned the diversity and the communal spirit of her classmates:

We had nice range in the class of people with Reform backgrounds and all the way through to quite Orthodox backgrounds. Everybody was very generous....We might disagree and we might have different points of view, but it was all very loving. We just had so many beautiful discussions.

Anna, the retiree above, described how the combination of social bonding and serious learning contributed to the overall experience:

It's a good balance. I mean we rush to each other at the coffee break. "What happened to you? Are you ok? How are you?" People share the births of their grandchildren, a major trip, and then the teacher calls the class to attention, and then we get down to academics. But we are very sociable, and we interact with people we wouldn't see from one week to the next. Overall, it has been a phenomenal experience—social and learning. I call it my havurah.

Our on-site (ethnographic) observations of friendship patterns among the students in the classroom further illuminated the social dimension of the Mini-School experience. Many participants come to the program with at least one friend and, over the two-year cycle, appear to extend their social networks to include classmates. These adults regularly demonstrate their sociability by *shmoozing* (sociable chatting) before, during, and after the lessons. Moreover, they appear to enjoy sharing personal aspect of their lives, offering one another support and counsel. Community-building occurs as learners exchange photos of family events, discuss care of aging parents, sustain one another through personal upheaval, and converse about shared interests (such as books by Jewish authors or interesting restaurants). In a class where all the students were women, the learners told us that they enjoyed having the opportunity to be in an exclusively female Jewish study group—some for the first time in their lives.

Studying with teachers from diverse Jewish backgrounds. The vast majority of Mini-School students identify with the liberal movements in Judaism. Many told us how they found it stimulating and challenging to hear from teachers who are committed to presenting—and welcoming—diverse points of view. Many students noted how much they appreciated studying with a range of teachers from across the denominational and ideological spectrum. They were particularly enamored, however, with studying with Orthodox teachers, who provided a window into a world that was strange and unknown prior to their studies. For example, Wanda, who is an active member of a Conservative congregation, said she welcomed the chance to learn directly about Orthodox observance:

The person who taught us...was an Orthodox Jew and he was talking about his wife going to the mikvah, you know, which is so totally foreign to my way of life. He really answered questions. He explained the spirituality that comes from it, and how beautiful certain practices are, that I really couldn't understand before.

Natalie, a Federation president, explained how learning about the various movements, and especially the Orthodox, helped her both as a learner and as a leader in the community:

Our teachers are wonderful in expanding on what the various streams [believe], how they would interpret each thing. It's certainly made me so much more cognizant of each stream,

especially Orthodox, I guess, and where they're coming from and how they interpret each thing. And I guess it's just made me more understanding.

Dana, a human services trainer, described how impressed she was with her "traditional" teacher's ability to express her love of Judaism without proselytizing:

She was just so inspiring because she had such a wealth of information and she conveyed it with such love and joy. I never felt she was proselytizing...never...She didn't even talk about stuff like that. It was just teaching...what she knew...To her, this was the living, breathing stuff, it wasn't just curriculum. And if there was something, "Well, the Orthodox do this, the Conservatives do this"...traditional, non-traditional, you know, she would let us know. But one wasn't better than the other.

Site Director Ellen Rosen observed how the Mini-School deliberately works to counter the increasing antagonism and strife that has been observed across denominations in the American Jewish community:

We try to promote the idea that this is really the only place in the community where people are going to come together and study, and listen to one another, and get to know one another, and know that we don't hate one another, and we're not always fighting, and we have so many commonalities. That part, to me, is very, very special.

Clearly, this approach appeared to "pay off" in terms of many students' increased tolerance of Jews more observant than themselves.

NOT FOR EVERY ADULT JEWISH LEARNER

Not all types of learners are attracted to the learning environment offered by the Mini-School. Underrepresented groups include independent learners who prefer to learn in more isolated settings and students who have little patience for dialogue and extensive classroom participation. Also, the Mini-School is not primarily designed for advanced students of Jewish texts who have already encountered the sources, ideas, and text study skills offered in the two-year cycle. Nor does the program attract people seeking highly individualized, self-paced instruction, or mentoring,

or lectures, or a Jewish guru (or *rebbe*) who will definitively guide them in a particular direction. In general, “cultural Jews” and men also are absent from Mini-School rosters.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND CURRICULUM

Our analysis of the impact of the Mini-School on the student would be incomplete without consideration of the overall context that shapes the learning experience. In our inquiry, we looked at the Mini-School’s structure and curriculum, and then assessed how these elements combine to influence the ways the site directors and teachers organize the classroom milieu and deliver the content.

Organizational structure. The Mini-School is a not-for-profit organization, based on a franchise model. Accordingly, it operates as a confederation of sites that function at the local level with central office support and oversight. The organizational structure consists of three layers that form a collaborative partnership

The top level of the organizational structure is the International Office (also called The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School Institute), which is based at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at The Hebrew University. This institute, directed by Jonathan Mirvis, is responsible for the Mini-School’s curriculum development and oversight, as well as site development and expansion outside of North America.

At the second level is the North American Office, located in Chicago, Illinois. Betsy Katz, North American Director, and her staff are responsible for North American site development and expansion, and for providing ongoing organizational support and professional development for Site Directors and faculty. To address the learning needs of its faculty, the Mini-School staff expanded in 1999 to include a professional development director. The North American office also has developed customized Mini-Schools for specific groups, such as Jewish educators, community leaders, and parents of day school children.

The third layer of the organizational structure is the sites themselves. These sites purchase a licensing agreement and curriculum, and are entitled to a variety of benefits including professional development and organizational consultation. A variety of non-denominational local Jewish communal agencies such as Jewish Federations, Jewish Community

Centers, and Bureaus of Jewish Education serve as site sponsors. In a few situations, synagogues serve as a sponsoring site with the stipulation that the congregational rabbis may not teach in the school, so as to maintain an independent institutional identity and to avoid appearances of having a particular denominational orientation.

Sponsoring agencies are responsible for establishing an advisory board and hiring a site director. The director hires and supervises faculty (with guidance from the advisory board and the North American office), and handles the management of the school, including marketing and recruiting students, setting the calendar, budgeting, fundraising in conjunction with the advisory boards, supplying classrooms and study materials, and planning extra-curricular events.

As of Spring 2003, 65 sites are operating in North America, Great Britain, Australia, and Israel. In the United States, Mini-School communities range in size from just a few thousand Jews, as in Des Moines and Akron, to major Jewish population centers such as Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Miami. To date, an estimated 12,000 students have “graduated” from the Mini-School, and approximately 4,500 students were enrolled for the 2002–2003 academic year.

Curriculum. The Mini-School's curriculum consists of four year-long courses designed to inspire students about the intellectual and community-building benefits of Jewish study. Students take two classes at a time, each class meeting an hour a week for 30 weeks per year. Each course includes the phrase “of Jewish living” in its title. As Betsy Katz described: “The intention is to attach learning to life. Sharing this process links people to one another.” As can be seen from the following brief descriptions (drawn from Mini-School publicity), each course focuses on helping learners connect their personal experience to and make meaning from Jewish tradition, Jewish thought, and Jewish history.

Year One

- *The Rhythms of Jewish Living.* This course aims to introduce students to the ideas, beliefs and practices that shape a Jewish life. It covers the Jewish calendar both in terms of the holidays and life cycle events. A fundamental objective is to create awareness of *Kedusha*—separateness, holiness, specialness—of Jewish living.

- ***The Purposes of Jewish Living.*** This course provides an overview of the theological foundations of Jewish life and religious practice. Whereas many adult Jewish education classes answer the questions who, what, where, when, and how, this course is devoted to the question, “Why?” It seeks to identify the ultimate purposes of Judaism as they arose out of the historical experience.

Year Two

- ***The Dramas of Jewish Living Through the Ages.*** This course focuses on specific dramatic events, experiences, and issues from different periods of Jewish history in order to help strengthen the students’ connection to Jewish memory. The curriculum is organized chronologically and includes historical events from the Biblical, Second Temple Rabbinic, Medieval, and Modern, and contemporary periods. Each lesson contains both primary texts from the period in question, as well as a variety of supporting material such as maps, timelines, and a summary of the historical context in which the drama occurred.
- ***The Ethics of Jewish Living.*** This course is a text-centered approach to the study of Jewish ethics. Students learn how rabbinic literature views human behavior and then how to debate and think about practical dilemmas in life. The curriculum contains a noticeable emphasis on God and commandment as the source of Jewish ethics.

Beyond these four courses, which form the common core of the learning experience, many sites offer extracurricular and informal programs. These may include holiday parties, field trips, Shabbat dinners, special workshops, and speakers. Many sites also offer both short-term and ongoing continuing education beyond the two years in areas such as Hebrew language, rabbinic literature, Israel, and modern Jewish thought. Another key component of programming beyond the fixed curriculum is the Israel Seminar, an eleven-day study-tour for students, alumni, and spouses.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AS CULTURAL INTERPRETER

In the context of the Mini-School’s educational philosophy, the teachers are well-positioned to serve as a “cultural bridge” for the learners’ understanding. Their role is to translate and mediate between Jewish tradition and the learners’ lives as Jews today. As one teacher remarked:

“The teacher serves as guide or facilitator, helping people who bring their own ‘human texts’ to an encounter with the multiple written texts of the Jewish tradition.” This guiding process requires several qualities and instructional approaches. Teachers need to be welcoming and inclusive, accepting the diversity of the learners’ experiences and viewpoints. They need to reinforce the students’ sense of competence, while also helping people to move from dependence to independence as learners. And, too, they need to bring a high level of commitment to their work.

The Mini-School curriculum aims to develop Jewish literacy and to foster a commitment to lifelong Jewish learning. Though many teachers largely understand, accept, and embrace this goal, there also appears to be an ongoing dialogue about how they can best strike a balance between building literacy (essentially a cognitive task) and also helping learners find personal meaning and relevance in the texts they are studying (clearly a matter of beliefs and attitudes). In short, the teachers need to navigate between knowledge and relevance, without deliberately advocating change (increases) in the learners’ levels of religious observance or involvement in Jewish communal life.

Whether intentionally built into the curriculum or not, the tension between these two foci is inevitable and natural, as learners negotiate questions of “how-to do Jewish” and “how to think Jewish.” As Lucy Seltzer who has taught at her Mini-School for eight years, observed: “I get some people who need to know *how to* and others who need to know *why* and what it means. I teach somewhere in between.”

Indeed, Mini-School learners seek more than just Jewish knowledge. They want to understand who they are as Jews and how Judaism fits into their lives. Teacher Rich Jones observed that while the majority of his students were strongly connected to the Jewish community, they also were looking for something more. He said, “This is a group of empowered Jews for the most part. But their affiliation has not been that meaningful to them and they want more out of it.” Another teacher, Miriam Goodman, said: “I don’t know if they are looking for meaning in their lives as much as looking for *the meaning of Judaism* in their lives. It’s not the same question. It’s like, ‘I know I’m Jewish and I know that I do all these things, but what more value is there in what I’m doing?’”

Almost all teachers confront the question of where and when to give the sort of religious guidance that might be better suited coming from a rabbi,

or guidance they themselves might otherwise provide if they were not adhering to principles of pluralism. In handling this challenge, teachers exercise considerable independence and creativity. They make selective use of the formal curriculum that is produced in Jerusalem. At times, some forgo the text-centered elements of the lesson to allow students to grapple with ideas and questions of immediate relevance. Others experiment with a wide variety of learning modalities including role-playing, singing, and cooperative learning activities.

HOW THE CURRICULUM IS IMPLEMENTED

The professional leadership, both in Jerusalem and Chicago, has evolved a set of principles to inform the functioning and shape the culture of the Mini-School. Structurally, they emphasize that their endeavor is not a program, but a “school” (albeit a “mini-school,” with its connotation of greater accessibility). A school connotes permanence, planning, institutionalization, and a systematic educational philosophy and program. A school is characterized by a full set of educational services, by directors who assiduously attend to individual students, by the goal of creating learning communities, and by centrally designed curricula, objectives, procedures, and qualifications for directors, teachers, and learners.

The Mini-School curriculum is designed to promote the development of Jewish knowledge through interactive study of Biblical and rabbinic texts. Though overtly directed at increasing Jewish literacy, the organization’s leadership sees text study as the pathway through which Jewish adults will come to increasingly participate in Jewish life at home, at synagogue, and in community. At the same time, Jewish study is held to be a sacred act in and of itself, in accord with the rabbinic emphasis on *torah lishma*—text study for its own sake, worthy of becoming an ongoing and lifelong pursuit.

Over the years, the leadership has come to allow (and even expect) the teachers to use the curriculum as a resource and guide rather than a rigid set of directives. But no matter how the teachers ply their craft, they are expected to adhere to certain principles, providing a safe environment where learners can feel comfortable exploring the texts and their understanding. The teachers are expected to promote respectful interaction and dialogue and to stimulate serious reflection upon the personal meaning of the texts under study. And, in keeping with the Mini-School commitment to pluralism, their teaching must respect not only individual differences, but the different major approaches to Judaism as well.

The Mini-School devotes considerable resources on the support and professional development of its teachers. The faculty handbook begins with an overview of the educational philosophy and commitment to quality adult education. It also provides detailed guidelines for how to work with the curriculum to prepare interactive, text-based, concept-centered lessons. The importance of reflective practice in teaching and the essentiality of teaching Judaism from a pluralistic frame of reference are reinforced throughout the handbook. In addition, North American Office staff, including a Director of Professional Development, work closely with faculty through on-line and telephone consultations and periodic site visits, as well as regional seminars, and an annual faculty seminar in Israel.

THE ROLE OF THE SITE DIRECTOR

The need for leadership is a given in the world of schools. In Jewish education, even the smallest congregational school will have a principal. However, such a leadership role is rarely found in Jewish adult education. In contrast, at the Mini-School every site has a director. These school leaders provide the connective tissue that build relationships and make the Mini-School far more than just a series of classes in adult Jewish learning. Simply put, the Site Directors build communities of learners.

Site Directors fulfill all the key roles of a head of school. They engage in marketing and student recruitment, oversee logistical arrangements, manage budgets, and organize extra-curricular activities. Many work with lay boards on fundraising and strategic planning. They recruit and hire the teachers. They monitor instructional quality and coach the teachers, as needed.

In terms of professional qualifications, directors generally fall into two categories. Some arrive in their position as career Jewish professionals; others are non-professional learners who have grown into Jewish professional roles through their own process of adult learning. Regardless of background, the directors appear to embrace their position with a sense of moral purpose and a deep appreciation, respect, and care for the students. Most define their leadership role in the language of stewardship or caretaker (rather than in organizational or technical terms). Since most of the directors are women, it is not surprising that these values resonate with the core principles of feminist education that focus on the "importance of connection, relationship, and the role of affectivity in learning" (Tisdell 2000, 156). Caring seems to be integral to the directors' commitment to building relationships within and beyond the classroom.

Mini-School Site Directors add value to the learning experience in two ways. First, and most significantly, they care for and support the learners on a personal level. In addition, they actively solicit feedback from students about their learning experiences and then tactfully coach the teachers to enhance their skills as adult educators. Their coaching focuses not on telling teacher *what* to teach, but on guiding them to think more about *how* they teach so that they can apply those approaches that most effectively reach adult learners. To the best of our knowledge, such a feedback loop simply does not exist in other adult Jewish learning settings.

THE POTENTIAL FOR “TRANSFORMATION” THROUGH ADULT JEWISH LEARNING

Helping Jewish adults to become Jewishly informed—even Jewishly literate—is clearly the central mission of the Mini-School enterprise. However, faculty, Site Directors, and students would readily agree that something deeper than the “transfer of information” is taking place. We already have seen that the core impact of the learning experience centers on how participants make meaning through the study of Jewish texts. This might lead to the assumption, or even hope, that participants will use their learning to change their religious lives as Jews. Indeed, our research showed that this kind of change does occur, but in most cases not through overt *behavioral* change. Instead, what happens for the majority of learners is more of an *inner change* that produces stronger Jewish identities, richer feelings of connection to the Jewish community, and a greater depth of understanding and appreciation of those Jewish practices already performed. These kinds of changes, which cannot be fully captured by conventional survey research methods, are manifested more subtly and may not even be fully recognized by the learner who is musing about them in an interview.

Though some Jewish educators, communal leaders, and educational program funders may be disappointed in this lack of evident, outward change, our findings highlight the profound potential that is inherent in what many contemporary writers call *transformative learning*—a process of fundamental change in how individuals “make meaning.” This type of learning is more a function of *how*, rather than *what*, people “know” (Kegan 2000). It relates to the inner experience of knowledge, rather than to outer behaviors or to the quantity of knowledge one attains.

In our assessment, the Mini-School's approach of building Jewish literacy and helping to make personal meaning can and does transform adult Jewish learners by having a significant impact on their inner, spiritual lives. The learners we studied appeared to engage in a process of a reframing of their Jewish narratives, not necessarily in terms of explicit behavioral change, but in terms of developing deeper understandings, new beliefs, and new or strengthened commitments. For some people, this "restorying" (Randall 1996) occurred through a rational process of critical reflection. For others, the restorying occurred in a more emotional or spiritual way (what Robert Boyd [1991] calls a "soul-centered" process of meaning making).

Although Mini-School faculty members are urged to teach both to the "hearts and the minds" of students, many find themselves rushed in their effort to cover course material designated by the curricula. In interviews, some teachers described feeling constrained by the one-hour classes, the focus on texts, and the students' primary need to put the pieces together before being able to think critically about ideas or assumptions. In such cases, the constraints can delimit opportunities for reflective discourse or exploration of the emotional or spiritual dimensions of the learning experience. The teachers told us that while they may ascribe to the ideal of promoting dialogue and employing a range of creative teaching techniques, they often find themselves reverting to "frontal" (lecture format) teaching and/or curtailing conversations that could push the learners both intellectually and emotionally.

It appears that, under optimal conditions, the Mini-School does attempt to encourage its learners to reflect seriously and critically on their Jewish identity, and to feel empowered to make informed choices. However, in our classroom observations and interviews with teachers, we discerned a wide range of teaching approaches and impacts. Similarly, while the Mini-School leadership articulates a goal of increasing Jewish literacy, they do not explicitly promulgate a transformative learning agenda. However such learning does occur with some students, and with some teachers and Site Directors as well. Certainly, some of the key elements of a transformative learning experience—dialogue, respect, and accountability (Vella 1994)—are in place. As more adults are "transformed" by their participation, the Mini-School may endeavor to broaden its commitment to promoting Jewish literacy by deliberately incorporating even more "meaning-making" into the formal classroom experience.

LEARNING AND ACTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING ADULT JEWISH LEARNING PROGRAMS

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper storey of Nithza's house, in Lydda, when this question was raised before them: "Is study greater, or practice?" Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: "Practice is greater." Rabbi Akiba answered, saying: "Study is greater, for it leads to practice." Then they all answered and said: "Study is greater, for it leads to action."
(Kiddushin 40b)

All education aims at eliciting some sort of change. And, in Jewish tradition, study is meant to *lead to action*. Certainly, the leadership and teachers at the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School hope that the two years of study will have a profound impact on the learners' lives. They encourage an open exploration of Judaism, but they also want the students to increase their commitments and connections to Jewish learning *and* to Jewish life.

Our study raises important questions for educators, policy makers, and program funders about what is and what should be the goal of adult Jewish education. Should it be, as we frequently heard from Mini-School officials, "to make people more informed as Jews, *not* to make them more Jewish." Or, should it be, as we also heard, "to use this learning to get them involved in their congregations and Jewish community." How directed or prescriptive should a Jewish educator or educational program be? Can and should adult Jewish education focus exclusively on helping learners to acquire specific knowledge, skills, and competencies? Or, does all Jewish learning inherently require the inculcation of some set of specific cultural norms, values and ideals?

The leadership and teachers at the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School aim to effect change through a process of educating for cultural literacy. They pride themselves on a pluralistic approach towards the study of Jewish texts and tradition. Their educational philosophy fits within Western Jewish cultural values that give primacy to the Jewish self, that put a premium on the search for meaning, and that reject fixed "external norms" that do not resonate "inside" the self. Overall, their principles mesh well with the needs and priorities of the people they serve.

Nonetheless, our inquiry revealed that even within this avowed pluralistic—indeed postmodern—stance, there exists considerable tension between *learning for its own sake* and *learning for a purpose*. It appeared that many Mini-School teachers negotiate a delicate balance between teaching about Judaism and teaching what it means to be a Jew. We regularly heard the phrase, “We teach Jewish literacy through the study of texts.” On the surface, this suggests that the principal focus of the Mini-School is on the transmission of knowledge about Judaism. Indeed, much of what takes place in these classrooms did appear to follow this content-centered approach. However, we also saw that teaching cultural literacy goes beyond teaching for mastery of subject matter. In fact, few students interviewed could remember specific details or content from a lesson. What they did remember was how much better they felt they understood Judaism and how engaged they felt in the conversation. For some, it was an initiation into Jewish thought, though, for most, it was about a deepening of already binding Jewish connections.

We believe these shifts in thinking result in deeply felt changes, but the actual manifestations of these changes are often subtle and difficult to measure. As the literature on adult development and adult learning suggests, such inner reflection and altered meaning making may be necessary prerequisites to genuine behavioral change. Our study captured just one moment-in-time in these learners’ lives. Each Mini-School student is on a particular “Jewish journey,” and we do not yet know what the long-term impacts of their learning will be. Accordingly, to assess measurable behavioral change, it will be necessary to study these learners over time, to evaluate whether their learning is “compartmentalized” and remains within the internal realm, or whether their Judaism becomes expressed through ongoing study and more outward engagement in the Jewish community. It also will be useful to examine whether and how their learning has influenced—even “changed”—their families and immediate social networks.

Although the Mini-School appears to be a successful model in many communities, it is not the only venue in which substantive and meaningful adult Jewish learning takes place. Moreover, as we noted, this kind of sequential, two-year, text-centered program does not appeal to all prospective learners. Accordingly, a systematic comparison of different models of adult Jewish learning would help to clarify a range of questions that our inquiry could not answer, such as:

- What kind of change should adult Jewish learning promote?
- How is literacy defined by learners, teachers, and program planners? Indeed, how should it be defined?
- In what ways do shifts in Jewish meaning-making lead to changes in Jewish behavior? Correspondingly, what kinds of behavioral changes stand to have the greatest impact on individual learners and on the Jewish community? How can these changes be assessed?
- What kinds of learning environments need to be developed to most effectively reach different types of Jewish adults who bring different expectations to their learning?
- Should specific groups of Jewish adults be targeted for particular types of learning? If so, which groups are most important to reach?
- Are different kinds of learning venues and structures needed in order to attract other groups of Jewish adults—including males and younger adults—to Jewish learning?

Beyond the issue of content and the learners' experience are also questions about the design of the curriculum and the quality of the teaching. Our research found that the Mini-School curriculum led learners to a greater understanding of traditional norms and a greater tolerance for traditionally minded contemporary Jews. A question that flows from this insight is: How do the curricular philosophy and orientations of other programs of adult Jewish learning exert an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of their learners?

Our findings also suggest that the quality of instruction is a critically important dimension of the overall experience of learning. Indeed the Mini-School invests considerable resources in selecting and developing teachers who, in addition to their substantive Jewish knowledge, will be sensitive and responsive to the needs of Jewish adult learners. From a policy perspective, this raises several questions about teacher training in adult Jewish education:

- How should educators be prepared to teach Jewish adults?

- What kinds of ongoing professional development should be provided to such educators?
- How can adult Jewish learning programs help teachers to navigate the inevitable tension that arises between teaching about Judaism in a detached and objective sense versus teaching more affectively about what it means to be a Jew and how a Jew should behave?

A Journey of Heart and Mind focused on the impact of one program on contemporary adult Jewish learners. Although we raised the question of how adult Jewish learning might influence the American Jewish community as a whole, a detailed exploration of that issue was beyond the scope of our investigation. As the questions we enumerated above suggest, much is still left to learn about the nature of the adult Jewish learning experience. The Mini-School leadership believes that increasing Jewish literacy is the key to Jewish engagement and, ultimately, to the vitality of the Jewish community. Our findings suggest that they may indeed be correct in this assumption, but other approaches may also prove effective. Further research about the burgeoning renaissance in adult Jewish learning should be a high priority for Jewish educational leaders and all those who promote the intensification of involvement on the part of Jewish adults in the United States and throughout the Jewish world.

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