Back to the Books

Across the country, Jewish adults are returning to the classroom

BY MINDY SCHILLER
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When Florence Zacks Melton turned 70 years old in 1980, she came to a startling realization: she was a woefully undereducated Jew.

Never mind that she had been raised in a Jewish home in Philadelphia by parents who had fled Russia's pogroms and by a grandmother who spoke to her only in Yiddish. Or that she had successfully raised two boys to Jewish adulthood and was an active member of her Conservative synagogue.

Melton felt it wasn't enough. "I knew *how* we did everything as Jews," the white-haired nonagenarian once related, "but I didn't have any clue *why* we did it!"

Melton also suspected that she wasn't alone. In fact, as she looked around at the broader Columbus, Ohio, community where she lived, she saw that more and more Jewish adults were ignorant of their Judaism and spent most of their time just "going through the motions." Moreover, to Melton's way of thinking, there was no one—no person or organization—doing anything about it.

So, she decided, she would just have to do something about it herself.

The ironic part was that Melton had almost no background in education. In fact, she was forced to leave high school before receiving her diploma in order to help pay her family's rent. And, while Melton had always had a strong interest in learning, most of her life had been devoted to the day-to-day affairs of running a home and a business.

Melton was an entrepreneur. Beginning with the invention of removable shoulder pads and foam-insoled Dearfoam® slippers, Melton would establish a total of 19 patents in her lifetime. In 1948 she co-founded the R.G. Barry Corporation, which, in 2006 alone, sold 25 million pairs of Dearfoams®.

After the death of Melton's first husband (and company co-founder) Aaron Zacks, in 1965, the 54-year-old-inventor remarried. Samuel Mendel Melton was a stainless-steel manufacturer and philanthropist whose greatest passion was Jewish education. He was already heavily funding several educational institutions at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

And so it was through Sam, ultimately, that Florence's own interest in Jewish education was renewed. The only problem was, there was nowhere for her to improve it.

That was when Florence had another one of her ideas.

Viewing herself as a test-case, in 1980 Florence hypothesized that there was an underserved market in the United States for quality, pluralistic, text-based adult Jewish learning. If she approached the various educational institutions in her community, she reasoned, surely someone would understand the need for developing such a program. But Melton was turned down by everyone she spoke to. "Nobody believed that anybody would pay money as an adult to go learn about Judaism," says Gordon Zacks, one of Florence's two sons from her first marriage.

It was Sam, however, who finally made the difference. Since no one in the U.S. was willing to put Florence's idea to a test, he decided to try overseas. Soon thereafter, Sam stood in an office in Jerusalem, pleading with the president of Hebrew University. "Look," said Sam, according to Zacks, "you don't believe in this adult Jewish education program … and your people don't believe in it … Frankly, I don't believe in it." But, he added, "You're gonna do this. Because Florence is driving me nuts! You're gonna do this!"

And, as they say, the rest is history. Hebrew University created the Florence Melton Centre for Jewish Education, and, with Sam's and Florence's help, national and local offices were created outside of Israel as well. So, when Florence died in February at 95 years old, along with bequeathing us Dearfoam slippers, she left us the Florence Melton Adult Mini School (FMAMS), a two-year adult Jewish learning school that, since it was established in 1986, has transformed the landscape of adult Jewish education in the United States.

In the last 20 years, FMAMS has grown into the U.S.'s largest pluralistic adult Jewish education program, with sites in 62 cities in North America, 25,000-plus graduates and branches on four other continents—Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. As FMAMS has seen its annual student body expand from an initial class of 73, to 1,510 in 1992, to 6,213 in 2003, a number of other venues for adults seek-

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COURTESY OF THE FLORENCE MELTON ADULT MINI SCHOOL

Courses at the Florence Melton Adult Mini School, like this one in St. Louis, Mo., offer engagement with Jewish texts at a level accessible to most students.

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ing more knowledge about their Judaism have arrived on the scene. While there still is no comprehensive data on adult education enrollment, the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000-01 suggests that there are at least 800,000 adults taking some form of Jewish education class. Compare this to the 1950's—when, according to Diane Tickton Schuster, Director of the Institute for Teaching Jewish Adults at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute, there were hardly any sustained or systematic adult Jewish learning programs in America—and these numbers indicate an explosion.

Moreover, while the Orthodox sector has long been a proponent of adult education—typified by *kollels* or yeshivahs—the recent trend towards Melton and its counterparts is generally within the non-Orthodox community.

"More and more people are taking adult learning seriously," says Betsy Dolgin Katz, director of FMAMS' North American office. "It's not something you do on the side or with the excess funds left over from the synagogue budget."

Perhaps this phenomenon of adult Jewish learning isn't surprising considering the general heritage-seeking movement occurring among today's young Jewish adults—a trend best reflected by the growing *ba'al teshuvah* movement. With a proliferation of new Jewish learning Web sites, such as Aish.com and Chabad.org; hundreds of Jewishly inspired podcasts and *daf yomi* (a page of Talmud a day) classes available in streaming video, audio tapes and, of course, at the local synagogue, the modern-day adult Jew is hard-pressed to *avoid* Jewish learning in one form or another.

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Today's Jews are realizing there is more to their Judaism than the rituals they inherited from their parents. For most, knowledge of that heritage will provide a sense of identity that can, by extension, give greater purpose to their lives. In fact, a brief stroll through a Barnes & Noble "self-help" section suggests that this return-to-the-roots movement reflects a larger societal trend toward spirituality. The difference with *this* movement, however, is that Jewish texts offer something that these other fads do not: a staying power more than 2,000 years in the making.

Feeling 'Energized'

One Thursday in February, in an upwardly mobile, lakeshore neighborhood of Chicago, 25 students gathered at Anshe Emet Synagogue for a 9:15 a.m. FMAMS class. Most appeared to be in their early 40's, but a few were older. In the corner of the room, a man reading the *Chicago Tribune* sported a red-and-white crocheted kippah, but others were bare-headed. Some students wore jeans and ponytails, while others came in high heels and silk scarves. The majority were women.

The teacher, herself a scholar of Judaic studies, introduced the day's topic—Purim—with relish, throwing out questions as though they were candy:

"What's unique about the book of Esther?"

"Is [the Megillah] a way to mirror our theological reality? And if so, what should we do with it?"

As the class progressed, a discussion hovered over the premise that King Achashverosh's restless sleep was a result of God's intervention. One student, wrestling with the theological ramifications, dismissed the notion. After all, does God really play a role in every tiny aspect of life—even one's insomnia?

The question of divine intervention is just one of the issues tacked by Melton students. With a curriculum created at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University, FMAMS courses cover topics such as Jewish theology concepts ("Purposes of Jewish Living"), rituals ("Rhythms of Jewish Living"), issues facing the Jewish people ("Dramas of Jewish Living Through the Ages")—such as pluralism, antisemitism or assimilation—and ethical issues ("Ethics of Jewish Living"), such as family, justice, death and community. Built into these courses is the desire to engage students intimately with the text, so on a typical day, students will trail into the classroom carrying two essentials: a *Tanach* (the Bible, Prophets and Writings) and a coursebook. The Tanach will serve as the primary jumping-off point for all subsequent discussions and the coursebook will include everything else.

In short, a Melton course is both high-level and easily accessible—even to the most novice of learners. "I found more so after each session had ended, and it was time to think back and contemplate … [that] these thoughts were really intriguing," says Mark Mosk, a psychologist from a Chicago suburb who recently completed the Melton program. "It was fulfilling both intellectually and emotionally … after a few weeks it became addictive."

Others feel similarly. Melton's Betsy Katz recalls that one of her students said he only had "little threads" of Jewish education as a child. And while the threads were pretty, what Melton had allowed him to do was "weave these threads together in a tapestry." Once he saw that tapestry, says Katz, he saw there were holes in some areas, brilliant colors that blended together in others and still more that he wanted to focus on.

"That's the key to why adult learning is successful," says Katz. "It's not only giving them permission, but tapping—or touching—something inside of them that says, 'This is mine and my life would be better if I allowed myself to claim this heritage.'"

Keith Kanter, director of Melton's Chicago branch, put it a bit differently. "There's a realization among people that there is more to their Judaism than they are aware of, and it behooves them to find more meaning in a meaningless world. They're concerned about keeping their families together; they see the assimilation rates and want to know why Judaism is worth preserv-

ing." And on a purely practical note, adds Kanter, people have more leisure time now than they did 50 years ago. "What are they going to do with that time? Play bridge? Watch TV?"

For Mosk, it was exactly this spiritual void that he sought to fill. "I was raised Conservative," says Mosk, "and so my Jewish foundation was pretty strong. But I needed something for myself at that point in time ... [The Melton program] fired my thirst for studying more, for my process of Jewish self-discovery, for human and interpersonal self-discovery ... You walk[ed] in tired at the end of the work day, but you [left] energized."

A Movement Toward Learning

According to a 2004 report by Lisa D. Grant and Diane Tickton Schuster titled "The Impact of Adult Jewish Learning in Today's Jewish Community," the movement toward adult education began in the 1980's, when societal shifts—urbanization, mass social mobility and technological advancement—pushed American Jews to reengage their heritage. Professional success and fewer ties to family and community created a sort of mass midlife crisis, forcing adults to question their life choices. Seeking a sense of grounding, they turned to religion. But, according to Grant and Schuster, they soon began to realize the gross discrepancy in their levels of secular and religious knowledge, and began to wonder how they could remedy the situation. And so they turned to adult Jewish learning.

But this is only part of the story. Katz says the adult education movement goes back as far as the 1960's, but that the recent thirst for spirituality and text-based learning is only a product of the last two decades. "Twenty years ago we probably wouldn't have considered texts from the 'Zohar' [an ancient Kabbalistic document], because that whole interest in spirituality is brand new."

A virtual stroll through the Internet suggests she may be correct. Google the term "Kabbalah" and there are over 4 million listings; enter the same word into Amazon.com and there are more than 5,000 listings, including 48 books published after 1993. Beliefnet.com, a Web site dedicated to helping people find spirituality, claims 4.5 million subscribers to their digital newsletters.

In short, people are longing for connection. They may not understand it, may not even know where to find it. Yet they've articulated enough of a question to be able to seek out an answer—one that, for many, lies in Jewish education.

But with such a plethora of less demanding ways to connect with one's spirituality—such as Yoga or Tai Chi—why pick Jewish education?

Well, says Irit Koren, executive director of Alma New York, an interdisciplinary adult Jewish learning program that combines arts, text study and modern scholarship, "A lot of people *do* do Yoga and Tai Chi. [And] yes, Yoga is a great thing, but it doesn't connect you in any way to your heritage, to your traditions, to your people." Moreover, adds Koren, "If you have a Jewish-based text knowledge, regardless if you believe in it or you don't believe in it, it widens the world of your associations ... it gives you a whole new language."

Judaism 101

But what exactly *is* adult Jewish learning? It's a question best answered on a spectrum. Jewish adult learning ranges from occasional attendance at Jewishly themed lectures and films to two-year programs claiming to offer the equivalent of a university-level education in Jewish studies. According to Schuster, there is no national accounting of the thousands of different programs available to Jewish adults, but the diversity of offerings, settings, and instructional approaches reflects the dynamic breadth of opportunities for all types of Jewish learners.

Along the lines of Melton, there is also Me'ah, an adult Jewish learning program that started in 1994 out of Hebrew College in Boston, Mass., offering more than 30 courses across the northeast coast and graduating almost 3,000 students. Literally translated as "100," Me'ah prides itself on its claim that in only 100 hours—spanned across two years—students receive the equivalent of a college education in Judaic studies. Using a curricular approach, Me'ah provides its instructors with a database of hundreds of articles and texts for use in their syllabi, but ultimately, the coursework is left up to the individual instructors.

On the other end of the adult Jewish learning spectrum, nestled in the San Francisco Bay area, is the less formal, more flexible Lerhaus Judaica program. Founded in 1974, Lehrhaus offers roughly 200 courses a year and processes roughly 3,500 registrations. It also has an extensive library of courses on CD-ROM, as well as distance-learning courses, so that students may tackle their studies at their leisure. Executive Director Jehon Grist stresses that Lehrhaus exists within a community of professional adults, most of whom have limited time. "We provide a burden-free gateway to Jewish learning," Grist says.

Similar to Lehrhaus is Alma NY, established roughly four years ago. Seeking to create a community that crosses not only denominational but cultural lines, Koren stresses that Alma is, above all, a haven for those looking to reclaim some part of their identity. "You want knowledge of Judaism, you want history of Judaism—go study 100 hours and you'll get that," Koren says. "[But] that's only a partial answer. Alma is trying to be an answer in a wider and deeper way."

While these are but a few examples of some of the adult Jewish learning programs rapidly making names for themselves on the American Jewish horizon, it's important to note that adult Jewish learning does not always come in the form of a central organization or a specific program. In fact, more often than not, it comes through the back door, like a synagogue board. At such synagogues, congregants can find classes on everything from the weekly Torah portion to the Jewish ramifications of stem cell research.

"Synagogues are picking up on adult learning," says Betsy Katz of the Melton school. "[They're] not relying on community-based programs, but [instead] are saying, 'Hmm, there does seem to be an interest in adult learning and we as a synagogue have not done all that we can to provide the learning these adults want.'"

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What's the Effect?

And yet, one glaring question remains. What, if anything, is the long-term impact of adult Jewish education? Faced with dwindling numbers and an aging membership, Jewish community leaders have invested a great deal of time and resources into investigating how best to stave off assimilation. And, more often than not, the answer seems to lie *not* in the education of adults, but of children.

If adult education programs are primarily reaching an age group whose children are either already enrolled in elementary school or have long since graduated—and whose Jewish identities (or lack thereof) have long been crystallized—is adult Jewish education simply a missed opportunity? Put differently: where does all of this learning go? Can it impact the learner's greater community or does it remain at the individual level, aborted from fulfilling any greater purpose?

PINEWSFOTO/R.G. BARRY CORPORATION

Florence Melton, here with her Dearfoam® slippers, patented 19 inventions. The Mini School was her 20th.

These are all indelicate questions. After all, Jewish education should be an end in itself—its primary purpose not to create more Jews but to create a more educated and engaged Jewry. But in the eyes of many leaders, such an answer is a luxury that modern-day Jewry cannot afford.

"It's a wonderful thing that people can become more Jewishly knowledgeable when they're older," says Joel Einleger, a program officer for the Jewish funding organization, Avi Chai. "But if it's at a point when their kids are already out of the house … in some ways it's a missed opportunity."

It was precisely for this reason that in 2000, Avi Chai contacted the Melton institute to see if they could work together. If Melton could gather a class of younger adults—i.e., ones whose children were still in early childhood programs—Avi Chai would highly subsidize the Melton tuition, hoping it could use the program as a tool to encourage greater day school enrollment. (Interestingly, Grant and Schuster's 2004 study of adult Jewish learners corroborates the Avi Chai hypothesis: over 40 percent of the survey's respondents claimed that they had become "'a more committed advocate of community support for Jewish education,' and 23 percent said they had become 'more in favor of Jewish day school education.'") Together, the two organizations created the Florence Melton Parent Education Program (PEP), which, five years and 12 cities later, has enrolled roughly 500 students.

And Avi Chai is not the only organization thinking this way. The Wexner Heritage Foundation, a two-year adult education program for communal leaders founded in 1985, and the Boston-based Me'ah program have taken up similar tunes, rescheduling their adult education programs around the needs of their students and working to inspire a new generation of community leaders.

Alma NY's Koren believes these programs have an effect both individually and communally. "I don't want to … say, 'Oh yes, we've affected the whole community of New York and the whole U.S.' But there's a saying in Hebrew: '*tippah, od tippah, od tippah t'hiyenah l'yam*,'—a drop and a drop and another drop will become a sea.'"

And perhaps that's really the crux of it. According to Koren, you don't have to transform the entire community. What matters most is that you transform individuals. And, of course, it depends on your definition of the term "transformation." According to a 2004 study by Lisa D. Grant, Diane Tickton Schuster, Meredith Woocher and Steven M. Cohen titled, "A Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood," "the main impact of the Mini-School upon the students' Jewish identities centers around 'meaning-making,' the enhanced ability to derive sense and purpose from every-day Jewish activities." In other words, while these programs may not be churning out more observant Jews, they may in fact be churning out Jewish identity. Take Mark Mosk, for example. "I can't necessarily say my participation in the program has affected my ritual practice," says Mosk when asked about the impact of the program. But by changing the way he thinks and the questions he asks, it has given more meaning to those rituals he does practice.

Judy, a FMAMS student quoted in the Grant study, says the Melton program has given her the identity she lacked. "It's part of knowing who I am," she says. "I mean, I've been trying to understand who I am, forever, in all kinds of ways … it's my history."

These may not be the epiphany moments that shatter demographics, but perhaps they are even better—because they reach deeper and last longer. And maybe that's the way Florence Melton felt about it too. "My mother is 95 going on 40," Gordon Zacks told the *World Jewish Digest* just months before his mother died in February. "She's got the curiosity of a three year old [and] the ability to see around corners. [She sees] emerging trends."

Melton spent the last days of her life surrounded by her friends and family. Together, they read her hundreds of letters of tribute, all written by grateful graduates of a program they claimed had changed their lives. And for those graduates, it had. Whether Melton actually spurred the renewal in Jewish learning or simply sensed it coming, she had her pulse on the next frontier of American Jewry.

And yet, maybe it's even simpler than all that. Perhaps the question of adult Jewish learning can best be summarized by the beige file cabinet in Betsy Katz's office. Off to one side, in black Magic Marker-scribbled handwriting, is a quote from the education guru John Dewey:

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." WJD

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