

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

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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 diverse learning environments. What has been the impact of this investment? How are Jewish adults changing as a result of this welcome phenomenon in Jewish life? *A Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood* reports on a pioneering study of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-



School, a highly successful, text-based adult Jewish learning program with more than 15,000 alumni. This research constitutes the first systematic inquiry about the conceptual frameworks and personnel that shape contemporary adult Jewish learning activities, as well as an analysis of how learning “transforms” the lives of learners.

“The Impact of Jewish Learning and Its Impact on Jewish Identity”

How does an intensive experience of adult Jewish learning affect the hearts and minds of its students? To what extent and in what ways does this learning experience deepen and enrich their Jewish identities? How are they different, as Jews, than when they started this learning process two or more years prior to our survey and interviews? These questions go to the very heart of this study. As seen by its founders, leaders, and supporters, the mission of the Melton Mini-School is to provide thou-

sands of Jews worldwide with access to comprehensive Jewish literacy through the study of classic Jewish texts. They tacitly assume that through study, students will grapple with the meaning of being Jewish.

As we shall see, the evidence – from the in-person interviews, the survey responses, and the answers to the open-end survey questions – points to diverse areas of change, varying in terms of nature, extent, and pace.

Sociological investigations of religious commitment often distinguish three dimensions: belief, behavior, and belonging. The adult Jewish learning experience apparently engenders effects that cut across these dimensions, even if it may do little to effect profound change in religious beliefs, or large modifications of behavior, or significant expansion of ties to Jewish community, both organized and informal.

Rather, as we shall demonstrate, learning at the Mini-School appears to influence beliefs about

behavior, that is, the meaning that learners attach to their ritual practice, prayer, and learning, as well as the Jewish lens through which they view their everyday life. Additionally, learners come to a new understanding of their relationship with other Jews – whether family members, friends, classmates, Jewish organizations (including synagogues), or the broader Jewish community. Thus, it is not beliefs alone, or behavior alone, or belonging alone that undergoes change. Rather, it is in the nexus of all three. In this chapter, we review seven dimensions of impact reported in varying degrees by the Mini-School learners we surveyed and interviewed:

1. Making new meaning of preexisting Jewish activity.
2. Expanding involvement and interest in Jewish learning.
3. Connecting ethics and everyday life.
4. Developing appreciation for “traditional” Judaism.
5. Encountering God and spirituality.

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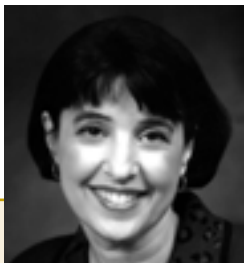
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6. Transmitting meaning to others.
7. Building belonging through Jewish networks and community involvement.

Later we will review some less evident patterns of behavioral change, the challenges inherent in measuring such change, and the social constraints that may inhibit how contemporary Jewish adults manifest changes in their “practice.” We also consider the kinds of impacts that may occur subtly, over time – changes that sometimes are more immediately evident to teachers than learners or changes in perspective that learners note only gradually as their lives take new turns. Finally, we explore how the experience of making new meaning and forming new connections through learning at the Mini-School appears to strengthen adult Jewish identity.

1. Making New Meaning of Preexisting Jewish Activity

As we noted in the introduction, many American Jews, like other Americans, have embarked upon a search for enhanced meaning in their lives. Contemporary adults feel freer to choose their religious denomination, their level of involvement, and the nature of their involvement.



Jews have been feeling and behaving in similar fashion. As “sovereign selves” who pick and choose their religious options and practices rather than accommodate to conventional patterns of observance and affiliation, they seek to understand in highly personal ways whatever religious traditions they pursue. Hence, it follows that the core impact of the Mini-School upon learners’ Jewish identities centers on “meaning-making,” the enhanced ability to derive sense and purpose from one’s everyday Jewish activities (activities already existing in one’s life). We believe that here, the main story of the impact is to be told. As we shall see, while the extent to which Mini-School learners reported changes in behavior were relatively limited, the extent to which they indicated the acquisition of a more meaningful understanding of their Jewish practices was widespread and significant.

Therefore, even when these adults reported little or no change in practice or communal involvement, they expressed pleasure in how their learning provided them with greater understanding and meaning connected with their preexisting Jewish activities. For example, Sharon, a homemaker and budding artist, commented on the greater meaningfulness of lighting Sabbath candles, which, we have every reason to suspect,

was something she had been doing well before enrolling in the two-year program of study:

“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.’ Knowing enhances the practical application, and I think it facilitates it, too.”

For Sharon, her studies probably made little difference with respect to the likelihood of her lighting Sabbath candles (according to our survey, 67% of the sample lit Shabbat candles before attending the Mini-School, and just 6% more did so when they were graduating). But the experience was important for enhancing her appreciation of a preexisting and continuing ritual practice.

In like fashion, Marina, a retired Jewish communal worker raised in an Orthodox home, only hinted at more attendance at religious services; but she was very explicit in crediting the Mini-School with enhancing the meaningfulness of her experience with services: “I’m a *Shabbes shul*-goer. I get so much more out of the service because of Melton. Everything has so much more meaning.”

Leslie, the Jewish community leader we met in chapter 1, was

clearer about attending synagogue more often, and was also quite explicit about the benefit of obtaining more meaning from her service attendance:

“Everything seemed much more meaningful. Melton helped me get over that feeling of inferiority I had when I spoke with my rabbi sixteen years ago. We as a family go to synagogue much more often now. ... part of what happened is that we finally found a synagogue that met our needs. ... at our Reform synagogue, I feel I can participate and know what is going on.”

In these comments, Leslie also intertwined references about how learning had affected her beliefs, her sense of belonging, and her behaviors:

“I am involved in many Jewish organizations. It used to be so meaningless for me to sit in so many meetings and listen to a *dvar Torah*. It was meaningless because I didn’t make a connection. ... I was always thinking, ‘Come on, hurry up, we have things to do.’ Melton pulls so much of it together. There is so much more to learn, but now I have pieces of understanding. I can participate in many more conversations. I can celebrate with my family. I really feel a connection.” ■

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