

Garden, Build, Dance: A Vision for the Future of Adult Jewish Learning

A 1995 study of U.S. adult participation in Jewish learning published in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* showed that 49% of adults surveyed “did not participate in any formal adult Jewish education during the 12 months prior to the time they completed the survey.”¹ Of the remaining sample, “75% attended lectures offered by Jewish agencies and/or synagogues” and “65% attended non-credit synagogue classes in Jewish culture or history.”² However, the study found that “most respondents reported engaging in some informal Jewish educational learning pursuits.”³ In the area of motivation, of the adults who participated in Jewish learning “more than 90% said *I value knowledge for its own sake* as a reason that was “somewhat to very important” in their learning.”⁴ These numbers speak to an important issue in our synagogues. Our adults value knowledge and want to learn; but what we offer in our synagogues is attracting fewer than half of our adults.

Jump ahead in time five years to 2000, the year of the most recent National Jewish Population Survey. The survey found that nearly one million American Jews were over 65 and 43% of them were synagogue members. Today, 10 years since the study, the first baby boomers have entered their mid-60s and the population of older Jewish adults has continued to rise. Congregations today are full of empty nesters and seniors who are looking for meaningful connections to Judaism at the synagogue. With these growing numbers of older adults, we need to approach engaging them with the same energy as we do our religious school families. We do not ask our religious school

¹ Rohfeld, Rae W. & Zachary, Lois J. (1995). Participation in adult Jewish learning: some implications for strengthening Jewish identity and continuity. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 71(2/3), 237.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 238.

students to sit through a series of speeches or slow-paced text study sessions, not only because of their developmental level, but because not every student can sit still that long and remain engaged in learning. Not to mention, we also have these students captive by virtue of the *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* requirements held over their heads. *B'nai Mitzvah* politics aside, not every student's greatest strength lies in the linguistic intelligence that tends to dominate these text-based modes of learning. So why do we treat adults differently? Just because many adults are advanced developmentally and can sit still for an hour does not mean that we, as educators, should make them do it. When, for example, was the last time an adult education series included projects to be built, sung, drawn or danced?

Common forms of adult education like speaker series and text study sessions reach some learners, but they do not engage the variety of intelligences (Gardner⁵) that Jewish educators are capable of reaching. It is time to push past the use of linguistic intelligence alone, and engage our adult Jewish learners with learning experiences that draw upon the full range of spatial⁶, musical, bodily-kinesthetic⁷, interpersonal⁸ and

⁵ Howard Gardner is the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, which presents a critique of the belief in a single human intelligence that can be adequately assessed by an IQ test, SAT test, etc. Gardner's research has led him to uncover a growing list of human intelligences. For more information, refer to any one of his books on the subject: *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books, 1983), *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (Basic Books, 1993), *The Disciplined Mind* (Penguin Putnam, 2000), *Intelligence Reframed* (Basic Books, 1999), *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (Basic Books, 2006), *Howard Gardner Under Fire* (Open Court, 2006), *Multiple Intelligences Around the World* (Jossey Bass, 2009).

⁶ "Spatial intelligence is the ability to form a mental model of a spatial world and to be able to maneuver and operate using that model." Gardner, Howard. *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. New York: Basic Books, 1993: 9.

⁷ "Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is the ability to solve problems or to fashion products using one's whole body, or parts of the body" (Ibid).

⁸ "Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people: what motivates them, how they work, how to work cooperatively with them" (Ibid).

intrapersonal⁹, spiritual¹⁰, existential¹¹, and naturalist¹² intelligences. By meeting the needs of the few, we lose the many students whom we could have engaged in meaningful Jewish learning. When we only teach the Jewish tradition through one intelligence, we risk exposing our learners to no more than a few of the “70 faces of the Torah.” The Jewish tradition lends itself to more than words. It is time to deepen the study of Judaism for our adult learners through more thoughtful education; for, if we continue to ignore the majority of the types of intelligences in approaches to adult education, we are likely to continue to ignore those 51% of American Jewish adults who have not been drawn to Jewish education in the past. At the same time, with more robust approaches, we may also manage to maintain the interest and engagement of those people who do walk through the doors of adult education from time to time.

Enter now, a different kind of adult Jewish educational experience. This alternative approach focuses on creating activities within a course of study that concentrates on different intelligences and opens up spaces for different learners. Consider the example of a Torah study group, where the class could delve into classical

⁹ “Intrapersonal intelligence involves the capacity to understand oneself, to have an effective working model of oneself—including one’s own desires, fears, and capacities—and to use such information effectively in regulating one’s own life.” Gardner, Howard. *Intelligence Reframed*. New York: Basic Books, 1999: 43.

¹⁰ The spiritual intelligence may include “a desire to know about experiences and cosmic entities that are not readily apprehended in a material sense” (Ibid. 54), being “more skilled than others at meditating, achieving trance states, envisioning the transcendent, or being in touch with psychic, spiritual, or noetic phenomena” (Ibid. 55), and/or exuding “a feeling of spirituality, a sense of being in touch with the cosmos, and a capacity to make those around them feel that they themselves have been touched, made to feel more whole or more themselves, or led toward an enhanced relation to the transcendent” (Ibid. 58).

¹¹ One with existential intelligence has “the capacity to locate oneself with respect to such existential features of the human condition as the significance of life, the meaning of death, the ultimate fate of the physical and the psychological worlds, and such profound experiences as love of another person or total immersion in a work of art” (Ibid. 60).

¹² “A naturalist demonstrates expertise in the recognition and classification of the numerous species – the flora and fauna – of his or her environment” (Ibid. 48). Additionally, “the naturalist is comfortable in the world of organisms and may well possess the talent of caring for, taming, or interacting subtly with various living creatures” (Ibid. 49).

midrash on a particular portion and use paints or clay or movement, in addition to words, to describe and illustrate the interpretations. This variety of expressions could lead to a more intimate understanding of the material.

In portions about the Tabernacle, specifically, the class might draft a design of what is described in the Torah text and then compare it with the congregation's own ark. When studying any passages that lend themselves to music, the group could listen to and/or create music rooted in those Biblical texts. With theophanic portions of the *Torah* and *Haftorah*, in which individuals experience visions of God, the group could experiment with different meditation practices and create journals for writing and sketching to track the "visions" and experiences of the Divine in their own lives. In agricultural passages, the group could examine the connection between the Jewish calendar and farming, especially in the land of Israel. After examining this relationship between plants, people, and God, the class could translate their knowledge to work in a communal or congregational garden. These are just a few ideas, but the possibilities are nearly endless for the intersections of the Jewish Tradition and multiple intelligences. There have always been Jews with strengths in movement (from the Biblical Miriam to Jerome Robbins), music (from King David to Carol King), visual art (from Betzalel to Marc Chagall), building (from King Solomon to Frank Gehry), storytelling (from the prophet Nathan to Isaac Bashevis Singer), tending gardens (from Ruth's Boaz to today's Adamah Fellows), etc. Surely, our sacred tradition is deep and vast enough to support those strengths and interests in our adult Jewish learners today. In fact, the richness of Jewish tradition may even suffer if we limit our teaching styles and instructional designs.

As our congregations age, the drive to learn has not decreased. Remember, more than 90% of Jewish adult learners value knowledge for its own sake. In the words of Rabbi Richard Address of the URJ's Sacred Aging Project, who is himself a wonderfully vibrant and creative adult Jewish educator:

“If you could travel this Shabbat to our 900+ congregations, you will see an abundance of over 65's at services and at Torah study. They are hungry.... The usual monthly seniors' lunch or brown bag dinner with a speaker is fine for many, but, often lacking in depth. There is great room for more.”¹³

As we continue our work educating our communities, if we value these multiple intelligences and invoke them to help us expand and enrich our adult education offerings, the 2020 National Jewish Population Survey could report very different findings about patterns of adult Jewish learning in America.

¹³ Address, Rabbi Richard. “Re: Sacred Aging Question/Request from an HUC Student.” Email to the author. 9 Dec. 2009.