

Adult Learning is the Number One Priority for the Jewish Future

ejewishphilanthropy.com/adult-learning-is-the-number-one-priority-for-the-jewish-future/

eJP



Adult learners at a Limmud session; screen capture YouTube

By Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz

At this precarious moment for ensuring a vibrant Jewish future, there are many priorities for sustaining Jewish life. But among the many fine efforts to ensure a sense of continuity of the Jewish experience – Hebrew schools, summer camps, and engagement of young professionals – there is a route of engagement that has perhaps received the least amount of attention, the least amount of funding, and the least prioritization in the greater consciousness of Jewish pedagogy. I am referring to Jewish Adult education.

Before people get up in arms, I acknowledge that nearly every synagogue has adult programming as part of their institutional model. And indeed, virtually every community has some kind of small educational initiative. Furthermore, most large cities have a day (or weekend) committed to Limmud. Yet, these excursions into adult learning do not go

far enough, nor do they provide the continual substance needed to satiate the growing interest of Jewish subjects needed to keep people sustainably rooted in the expanded landscape of intellectual Judaism. Thus, I want to suggest in this space three reasons why Jewish communities should flip priorities to ensure adult education, rather than children's education, is the number one priority for the Jewish future.

1. Adult learning is the pathway to children's Jewish education

One of the most frequently asked questions I receive from Jewish parents across the denominational spectrum is: "Rabbi, how do I get my child (or grandchild) to love Judaism?" My initial answer is always the same: "You must love it!"

The main reason that parents don't engage their children in rigorous intellectual and spiritual Judaism is because they themselves aren't being engaged in their own Jewish journeys. Meaningful Jewish experiences for adults have a profound and enduring effect on the psyche and will have a trickle-down effect to children. Sadly, such spiritual pathways to excellence have been stunted. Yet, if parents found deep meaning in the words of the Talmudic sages, if they were transformed by Hasidic thinkers, if Yiddish poetry spoke to them, if Mussar workshops helped them evolve, if social justice Torah challenged them to rethink their identity and their obligations, if Jewish art, music, and film helped cultivate spiritual and moral imagination, if Jewish meditation brought deeper inner peace, if rethinking about Israel or Hebrew or Biblical stories inspired them, there is no doubt they would want their children engaged in the same forms of learning.

2. Judaism is about adults, not children

There is a telling quote about the prioritization of adult Jewish education for the benefit of the community: "A parent and child must both study Torah. When possibilities exist for only one, the adult's personal needs take precedence to the child's" (*Kiddushin 29b, Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 245:2*). What does this quote mean in context? Indeed, it means that Judaism is not a children's game. The primary goal of Judaism is not engaging children, but in actualizing Jewish values in the world. It is an ever-expanding enterprise about the relevance of business ethics, medical ethics, relationship development, spiritual growth, personal healing, and so much more. Bringing God down to earth requires sophisticated thought and sophisticated minds. Bringing ethics into the workplace and Godliness into the home requires deep spiritual and emotional investment. Many go on to receive advanced secular degrees and it is no wonder they view Judaism as irrelevant and childish when their Jewish education stopped as the teen years began. The Jewish answers they still remember are children's answers. More tragically, the questions are children's questions.

It is true that for Judaism to survive, we must ensure the next generation is engaged and invested. But surviving only matters if the adults who received that education are themselves thriving. Does Judaism have wisdom to offer the twenty-first century human condition? Are Jews a force for moral development, spiritual advancement, and improving the broader society? Judaism will only thrive (and survive) if Jewish adults are learning Jewish wisdom and ensuring that wisdom continues to be applied in nuanced ways to each era.

3. Adult Education has the best potential for engagement

It will always be true that some will not be interested in synagogue participation, in Israel advocacy, Holocaust memory events, or even matzah ball soup! Indeed, some are still shocked why some don't buy in to mainstream establishment Judaism. But rigorous pluralistic Jewish adult learning offers the tool, with the most depth and breadth, for Jewish adult engagement. There are individuals who can be reached through synagogues, federation, and education institutions. Others who actively (or passively) reject engagement with establishments will require post-institutional engagement (often referred to as "Third Spaces") with gatherings in family rooms, coffee shops, the workplace, or bars. No matter where they end up, there is always the potential to engage in meaningful and novel ways if our community has the humility to move beyond institutional walls and establishment programming.

When we talk about “adult Jewish education,” we must be clear that we’re not primarily talking about competency, fluency, and literacy (the *alef-bets* of Jewish knowledge), but rather about *relevancy*. We are not asking others to sacrifice their values or time by learning with us. Rather, we are making the case that they will be able to thrive in life more deeply if Jewish wisdom and learning is a part of their life. They will benefit greatly from this newly-strengthened attention.

Adult Jewish learning need not be relegated as an afterthought, nor does it have to follow a cookie cutter approach into mediocrity and, ultimately, irrelevance. When performed with clarity and vigor, Jewish adult learning is as dynamic and energetic as education for kids or young professionals. In my work as the President and Dean of [Valley Beit Midrash](#), we work hard and bring endless passion to our work to demonstrate that pluralistic adult Jewish learning is a transformative vehicle that is accessible but not watered down, joyful but also challenging, deeply-rooted but also non-dogmatic, traditional and progressive, and respectful of the past but also pursuing a forward-looking agenda. In this manner, we not only challenge old routines of Jewish learning, but we create new communities looking forward to each new opportunity to explore. We expand our identity beyond the confines of our location, spreading out learning efforts out into the ether for those who seek it. We make the richness of Jewish thought accessible to people who believed it was inaccessible. And that’s how learning, especially for adults, should be.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz is the President & Dean of the [Valley Beit Midrash](#) and the author of [ten books on Jewish ethics](#). Newsweek named Rav Shmuly one of the [top 50 rabbis](#) in America and the Forward named him one of the [50 most influential Jews](#).