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**“AN INTIMATE SPECTATOR”:  
JEWISH WOMEN REFLECT ON ADULT STUDY**

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***Abstract***

Jewish adult women increasingly are taking advantage of unique study opportunities previously closed to them. This article is the result of a survey directed at adult Jewish women in every denomination who came back to the classroom as adults. It aims to assess why they returned, what their educational expectations are, and how those expectations have been met. The results should prove instructive to institutions catering to the unique needs of this population.

The Babylonian Talmud records a conversation between two ancient sages on the Jewish woman's role in education, "With what do women earn merit? By making their sons go to the house of assembly to learn scripture, and their husbands to the house of study to learn *mishna*, and waiting for their husbands until they return from the house of study" (BT *Berkahot* 191). A Jewish woman's reward was in the vicarious pleasure she received from facilitating and nurturing the study of others; she was an intimate spectator in the learning arena.<sup>1</sup> There is a long and interesting history of how the Talmud opened

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<sup>1</sup>Exceptions to this rule, such as Beruria, a female scholar cited in the Talmud or Rayna Batya Berlin, both wife and daughter of illustrious scholars of the nineteenth century who was herself a scholar, reinforce rather than deny this role as nurturer. They studied without female companionship or community and, in Rayna Batya's case, were consciously aware of their exclusion from study opportunities exclusively for men. For more on these women, see Adler and Seeman 1995-1996. A literary exploration of such a female anomaly is presented in Rachel Goldstein's novel, *Mazal*, where the young and intelligent Freydl is described by her father as an ostrich: ". . . it was a pity that, with such a head, the child has not been born a boy, destined for a life of study. A girl with such a head, he once said, when the child was yet very young, is like the ostrich. The ostrich, dear husband? Yes. Like a bird that's been given wings but will never fly" (128). For more on reflections of female exclusion in male dominated Jewish life, see Adler 1993 and Kaufman 1996.

both literally and figuratively for Jewish women (Zolty 1993; Ellinson 1986, 240–268). However, today's women are breaking the glass ceiling of Jewish education. Paralleling their intellectual and professional accomplishments in the secular domain, is their entrance—sometimes forceful, sometimes coy—into the traditionally male-dominated house of study. But while we proudly pick up the broken glass, we also realize that the needs of this highly articulate group of adult women have gone largely unarticulated in educational research. This article seeks to present the voices of this highly diverse, educated population within the framework of existing research on adult education and to challenge Jewish adult educators to better service their needs.

In seeking to know more about the inner workings of this group, this author constructed a survey of fifteen questions posed to transdenominational Jewish adult women learners. Of the thirty-two respondents, seventeen described their “formal religious affiliation” as Orthodox, many qualified this with Centrist or Modern. Ten participants affiliated with the Conservative Movement, three with Reform and one as Reconstructionist. One woman wrote that she had no affiliation and several others mentioned an affiliation but felt uncomfortable labeling themselves with any particular movement. The average age of the respondents was 47.5, with 20 as the youngest in age and 71 as the oldest. All of the women were college graduates; many listed graduate school accomplishments such as doctorates and medical degrees. The survey attempted to assess their motives for returning to Jewish study, how study impacted their social and spiritual lives and how their educational expectations had matured into adulthood.

### **EDUCATION COMES OF AGE**

The first component of the survey addressed the respondents' study “history” and how it evolved using the following:

- Describe and evaluate your Jewish education during childhood.
- Describe your Jewish educational experiences as an adult (at what age did you resume study; how many months/years have you pursued study; at what type of institutions and with what frequency, i.e., once a week, once a month did you study?)
- What motivated you to begin or resume Jewish studies as an adult?

- How has the experience of Jewish studies changed for you from childhood to adulthood?
- Are you a college graduate? If so, would you describe the study you are currently undertaking as similar in content and method to university studies? Please explain.

Few of the women surveyed had a Jewish day school background. The women who had attended day schools shared an Orthodox affiliation and while some had described their teachers as “warm and caring” many acutely felt the discrepancies between what was offered to Jewish girls and their male counterparts. One woman critiqued the all women’s Jewish college she attended decades earlier.

Most of the women were day school graduates who disdained the less learned women. They were seeking husbands and not spiritual and intellectual development. One area of respect remained beyond our grasps: the respect of the majority of the rabbis towards their students. Most of the religious department faculty made us feel like an unwanted burden. Women were not deemed worthy of superior teaching. Lessons were hastily prepared; class participation was not welcome. Intellectual curiosity squelched.

Another woman described classes typically given for women, as “catering to the lowest common denominator.” Afternoon Hebrew school was typically described using negative language: “horrific,” “scattered and inconsistent,” “repetitive,” “too long.” Several women wrote of the inadequacy, “Weekdays we learned to read simple Hebrew stories preferably as fast as possible. In the upper grades there was an emphasis on ethical behavior as a Jewish value. I don’t remember a spiritual component. We seemed to learn about Judaism almost as a curiosity, not as an integral part of our lives. I always felt like an outsider.” Many women quit at some point.

I quit Hebrew school at 10—I hated it.

I was greatly disillusioned. Two years after my bat-mitzvah I dropped out of confirmation classes since I couldn’t see what I was confirming.

I began to feel that as a woman I was on the periphery of the community—that I couldn’t do things I wanted to do (wear a *tallit*, lead prayers, speak to God in gender neutral terms). I felt hurt and angry but I didn’t want to assume that Judaism required these inequities, but rather that the interpretation of Judaism was unfair. So I started reading on my own. The more

I read by women who both loved Judaism and were alienated by the patriarchy, the more I began to feel a part of this community and an obligation to wrestle with the way Judaism is sometimes understood and practiced.

The women with a nurturing day school background saw their adult studies as a continuation of an intellectual life cultivated earlier. This commitment to Jewish study at an early age presents a compelling reason to encourage the growth of the Jewish day school; it sets both a foundation and a desire to continue Jewish learning throughout later life. But the reflection of some women on their sense of inequality in such settings creates an important caveat in promoting day school attendance: Only when women were challenged and respected as equals in the classroom, did they make positive associations with study that stayed with them through their adult years. Not one woman described an uplifting or educationally satisfying after-day school experience. The only Jewish experience as a youth that redeemed this gloomy picture was participation in a youth group, a Jewish camp, a trip to Israel, or a stint in the synagogue choir. The women who were able to transform a negative Hebrew school experience did so by supplementing it with some kind of extracurricular Jewish experience that impressed upon them the importance of their Jewish identity.

In spite of an overwhelmingly inconsistent and uninformative youth experience, all of the women surveyed were in Jewish studies as adults: two were attending a class in Jewish studies for the first time since childhood. Most of the respondents described a fairly regular attendance at weekly classes with one woman attending “five classes per week in an academic or *shul* (synagogue) setting.” Some women connected in college through classes or Hillel but most came back to study after having families. “I flirted with study in college taking classes on the Old Testament and Holocaust literature. But I began in earnest at 38.”

What brought these women back to the classroom? Many described returning to the classroom in their mid-thirties, largely motivated by the desire to educate themselves Jewishly as they educated their children. “When we sent our first child to Jewish school that’s when I began my reentry into Jewish study.” “I wanted to support my kids and I wanted to become reacquainted with my heritage. As we were bringing more ritual and observance into the house I wanted to feel comfortable with it—to derive maximum enjoyment.” “I wanted to share stories with my grandchildren.” For one woman, her studies

were an opportunity to do something for herself away from her children. "I needed an intellectual and social setting outside of the home while raising three young children." Others had desired a shared language of Jewish heritage. "I did not like being part of a community and not being able to communicate." "I began with beginner's Hebrew. I was determined to participate in services and to obliterate the feeling of being a guest in my own home." "I saw that an ability to examine Jewish texts was indispensable for being the kind of informed, thoughtful, participating Jew that I desire to be." One woman was stimulated to study Judaism seriously upon her return to graduate school, feeling that a return to general study put her back in an educational phase of life. "Now I knew I could do it." Three factors seemed to repeat themselves in the responses: 1) the need to connect with or to educate their children, 2) the need for spiritual edification that they did not receive as children, and 3) the desire to communicate as a full participant in the Jewish community.

The motivation to return to adult study, one educational researcher, Diane Schuster, contends, has to do with a need for crisis resolution: adult Jewish learners are "contending with developmental experiences for which they may feel unprepared: mid-life career change, new models of family and partnering, cross-cultural and cross-religion intermarriage, early or forced retirement, downward mobility of adult offspring, extended care giving of elderly parents and so on." Study of Judaism in these cases may be "of special benefit to adults whose lives and sense of personal coherence have been dislodged" (Schuster *in press*, 13). This, however, was not the case with the respondents in this study. Not one woman described a personal life crisis that needed resolution within an educational setting. The sentiments of one woman, who described herself as "an upside-down Jew" seemed to ring true for most: "I spent my childhood with my nose pressed against the glass, envious of the feast my friends were enjoying. . . Judaism. I began learning when my son was bar-mitzvahed. As I approached 40, I was also searching for ways to develop my spiritual life. . .having never grappled with religious issues, I began to do so, particularly of course, with the most fundamental, God."

### INSECURITY IN ADULT STUDY

Schuster mentions the need to be actively welcomed into the learning community. Many respondents described the invitation from a

friend or rabbi to a warm educational setting as being motivating factors in returning. Although several women described their return as adults to be one of choice—"to approach Judaism as an adult, by my own choice"—nevertheless, the sense of warmth and welcome from others encouraged that choice or sustained their decision to remain. It would appear that the learners own inadequacies or feelings of intimidation made them hesitate to join a class but that the welcome they received cushioned those apprehensions. Finding an environment in which it was safe and nonthreatening to question or to display, on occasion, their own ignorance was an extension of the need for welcoming. One contemporary leader in the field of Jewish education confirms this sense of inadequacy:

Jewish relearning can be very exciting because an adult may feel reconnected with his or her tradition in ways that allow one to feel more whole. At the same time relearning, and especially unlearning [ridding oneself of negative feelings about what one has been taught in the past], may be threatening because it involves admitting how much one does not know, facing how unpleasant our initial Jewish education may have been and revising what may feel like some of our basic assumptions about Judaism. Adult learning is rarely an emotional neutral event. (Reiner 1990, 23)

This need for an environment in which apprehensions could safely surface was a major theme in the response to question four: how has the experience of Jewish studies changed for you from childhood to adulthood? "I can ask my own questions. There's more 'play' in the discussion." "I was taught not to challenge certain ideas or ideologies. . .since then everywhere I've studied has encouraged me to think more creatively and question the text in a deeper way." "I am no longer afraid to have a wrong answer." "In childhood the difficult passages were just glossed over or justified—people admit to the male nature of the text and don't just agree because it's holy." "Our heroes and heroines were actually human beings with human foibles." As an adult, one woman writes, there, "are more layers of meaning and it's [Jewish study] is a richer, more emotional experience. The study is also more political now because I won't accept marginalization again. I can knowledgeably respond." "As an adult the world is mostly shades of grey. . .I am better able to relate to and understand human emotions and actions." "I am able to make connections between different areas of learning—a kind of cross referencing which I find very exciting." The freedom to choose teachers, to choose or to create an educa-

tional setting in which to study, and to question openly coupled with the breaking down of previously held myths or misconceptions, gave these adult learners the knowledge and confidence to embrace Judaism again. "Jewish study for me now is alive and vibrant. I am amazed at how the Torah, a once ancient and irrelevant text, has become a mirror reflecting my life—the ultimate self-help book. It became clear to me that when I am engaged in study, I am the most integrated, the most whole I can be as a person."

For most respondents, the fact that there were no grades, academic demands, or evaluations of their competence was a welcome change from their education as children. Several women used the word "interactive" to differentiate between college and current courses. "I do not think I could learn in a university style any more; it's too passive and does not allow for real depth." Some women, however, found college intellectually more stimulating precisely because there was an external demand to know the material, one which forced them to gain a competency they were not achieving in their adult study. "Here we're not called upon to do any real work of our own. I'd like more of a historical background." "Now there is much less of an effort to master the text." "Here there is an absence of pressure of tests, performance and need for independent study—all of which lead to a more intense educational experience." Others commented on the lack of direction their studies were taking. "It's topical, thematic and as a result there's difficulty in acquiring new skills." Ironically, the more intensively some women were pursuing adult Jewish study, the less satisfying it was becoming since their courses were in diverse areas over a limited period of time with little independent work. Discussion with several women who had been taking classes for years yielded a growing sense that they needed more direction and more independent mastery of the material but often could not find the venue to accommodate those needs (Brown 1996, 63–77).

Long-range planning of adult study for women should factor this need for personal mastery, accountability and independence while maintaining what is appreciated: passionate, usually spiritual and intellectually rigorous classes where women are treated as equal partners in the learning process. What needs more fine-tuning is ensuring there is a calculated direction for adult learners who sustain a commitment to study over an extended period. The needs of "goal-oriented" rather than "activity-oriented" learners (Houle 1962) may be getting neglected.

### LEARNING MOMENTS

The second section of the survey examined learning experiences through the following questions:

- Describe your most powerful learning experience and where and when it took place?
- What had been your most negative educational experience in childhood? In adulthood?
- What do you look for in a teacher? Has your perception of good teaching changed since childhood or not? If so, how?

There was a surprising level of homogeneity among the respondents, summed up in the words of one woman: "My perception of good teaching has changed insofar as my tolerance for ego and self-aggrandizement has diminished significantly over the years." Negative experiences as a child, often at the hands of a punitive teacher, could still be vividly recalled, in one instance nearly sixty years later. Teachers who were harsh and dogmatic, authoritative, or self-righteous may have been forced upon these learners as children but would not be tolerated as adults. "My most negative experience in childhood involved male teachers who publicly ridiculed my dreams to become a doctor because I was female . . . at M.I.T. I also found the culture very macho and developed a disturbing inability to voice opinions in class or in public. Writing became a major vehicle for expression."

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of research on the efficacy of the traditional student/teacher relationship and a move towards an egalitarian model. Innovations in student-centered approaches highlight the students' educational needs above the teacher's personal research, transforming the pedagogue from mentor to facilitator. Paulo Freire compared the traditional educational approach to banking. The teacher regularly makes "deposits" of information into the students heads, "The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher" (Freire 1971, 68) In response to this model of teaching, the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* created a teacher-midwife model, where both teacher and student are partners in the stimulation and creation of ideas. "While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives

draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (Belenky et al. 1986, 217). The facilitator shares with rather than imposes his or her knowledge on the group.

The yields of this research have not yet comfortably translated into new paradigms for Jewish adult education (Zackary 1991, 337–342; Frankel 1992, 167–171). As one contemporary researcher bemoans, "To date, although there has been a proliferation of new, innovative adult education programs designed for American Jews, relatively little has been written about the learners or their needs. Moreover, few rabbis or educators are familiar with the psychological and educational literature on adult development and learning and thus may not be adequately prepared to respond to new learners in the most effective way" (Schuster in press, 4). This does not only have to do with the educators being uninformed but has to do with the structure of study in traditional Jewish communities. The teacher has always occupied a place of reverence in active Jewish life. Maimonides, in codifying the Talmud, outlines in detail, the pains the scholar should undertake to make an adequate separation between himself and the community, particularly the ignorant (Maimonides 1–14). Elsewhere he writes that the respect owed one's personal teacher/rabbi is akin to that of one's parents and in certain circumstances, takes precedence (Maimonides 1). The teacher/rabbi was traditionally set off from the rest of the community by virtue of personal piety and knowledge. The Talmud even recommends certain posturing by scholars to maintain this distance, seeing the chasm between student and mentor as valuable in maintaining the authority of the rabbinate.<sup>2</sup> While we should be cautious in tampering with this ancient tradition of reverence (Brown 1996, 63–77), especially since so much of Jewish education is based on the study of sacred texts, we also have to find a means to incorporate new research with time-worn traditions. Contemporary adult learners may have the same texts in common with their ancient

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<sup>2</sup>As an example, see BT *Brakhot*, 43b where it states: "Our rabbis taught that six things are unbecoming for a scholar. He should not go out scented. He should not go out by night alone. He should not go out in patched sandals. He should not go out with a woman in the street. He should not eat regularly in the company of ignoramus', and he should not be the last to enter the house of study. Some say that he should not take long strides or carry himself stiffly." These recommendations would put the scholar above suspicion and criticism from the noneducated and preserve the dignity and aura of scholarship.

predecessors but their educational needs, their religious affiliations and the settings in which they study differ.

Women used words like “warm,” “prepared,” “nurturing,” “humorous,” “encourages questioning,” “must make me think,” “humble,” “personal religious commitment,” and “enjoys the material” to describe what they look for in a teacher. While personal energy and warmth were important, they took second place to an individual who had a good command of the material and was able to stretch learners intellectually. “I look for someone who brings to the material a sense of reverence and a sense of humor. She or he corrects students gently while challenging them rigorously.” Being inclusive of students was also a major component of good teaching. “Someone who values the contributions of learners—whose style is accepting.” “I used to understand teachers as fountains of knowledge whose task it was to impart huge reservoirs of facts down the narrow tube of my throat. Now I see teachers who can enable and engage a student into the learning process.” Several women wrote that they did not expect anything different from their teachers as children, but that as children they were less able to articulate their needs and far less likely to have those needs accommodated. “My perception hasn’t changed, unfortunately neither have most educators.”

### **STUDY, RELATIONSHIPS, AND GENDER**

An important component of learning for these women was the impact it had on their relationships. The following questions were used to assess this aspect of study.

- Have your studies affected your relationships with friends, partner/spouse, children?
- Do you feel any differently about your role as a woman as a result of your adult Jewish studies?
- Do you prefer learning in a co-educational environment or with other women exclusively? Please explain your answer. Has this changed since childhood?
- Do you think that as a woman you have different educational needs from men or a different way of learning? Please explain your answer.

Study did spill into interpersonal relationships for almost all of the respondents. Expressions that came up repeatedly were, “I feel more valued,” “I am more empowered,” “I am less marginalized, I am more respected,” “I feel more confident Jewishly.” One woman wrote of a change in her peer group as a result of her intensified study. Another wrote that it influenced her choice of life partner. Several felt that it enhanced their marriage. Respondents who were mothers commented on the sense of pride their children felt to have Jewishly-educated mothers and the way in which these women were able to bring their newly learned ideas to dinner table discussions and family decision making. “My husband is proud of me, my children impressed.” One researcher observed that while many women she interviewed studied Talmud in order to help their children do homework, she writes that generations earlier, women were, “fit to run Jewish households and raise Jewish children without either knowing Hebrew or Aramaic, much less opening the legal texts and codes themselves” (BT *Berakhot*, 7) The changing perception of what it means to run a Jewish home has changed to include not only what is ritually important but what is intellectually satisfying.

In families and partnerships where study and/or observance was valued, the increased study of the respondent helped to solidify and to deepen relationships. In partnerships where study was not deemed valuable the respondent’s pursuit of knowledge created conflict. “My family is not interested—nor are my friends, so it has potential for conflict.”

To some I have become threatening, especially those who rail against organized religion and those who see my shift as a criticism of their own lives. Even with, I should say particularly with, my spouse my awakening has produced some tension although he’s beginning to open his mind to what I feel. Many think it’s wonderful and have encouraged me. Others roll their eyes and ask me if I’m going to become a rabbi . . . They wonder what I’m going ‘to do’ with it.

An educational writer shared an interesting irony that occurs the more women enter a man’s world of study:

The women who study Talmud lose some of the flexibility inherent in women’s informal traditions as they become more familiar with the formal, written texts of Orthodox Judaism. What is religiously acceptable to them becomes more and more determined by the texts they study, thus curbing the possibility for creative ritual exploration. Yet their sense of confidence as religious women increases as they are more and more able

to argue or discuss the texts with each other and with their husbands, male friends or rabbis. (Granite 1993)

Several women felt it was important to study female characters in the Bible and to have female teachers but were more conflicted on the question of whether to study in an exclusively female setting and whether women had unique learning needs. The majority of respondents, even those who had always felt comfortable studying with males as children, felt that women-only classes provided a safe and comfortable learning environment that had the warmth and interaction that they felt co-educational settings lacked. The continual appearance of the word “comfortable” was striking. “Even though I don’t mind a mixed class, I sense that some of the women are more comfortable in an all women’s group. They are more apt to speak out and also don’t want male domination of the material.” “It is just more comfortable. I am more likely to actively participate in this setting and even though I wouldn’t have chosen an all girls school as a child, it is clear to me now that since my own college experience (co-ed) and that of one of my daughters that there are many advantages to attending school only with other women.” “I know about research on co-education showing that women speak less when men are in the group. I saw this in action in my classes.” Nevertheless, most respondents did not specifically seek female settings in which to study and some shied away from them because of the “strident feminism” they felt to exist in these settings. Most felt that women did not have unique learning needs but did, because of the history of study in Jewish life, occupy a unique learning situation: “No one takes us too seriously. For men learning is a commandment and taken seriously with great respect—a boy’s lack of learning is a cause for much grief in a religious family. I don’t think it is a matter of learning style but of expectations.” One respondent was adamant about not driving a gender wedge into Jewish adult education. “No. No. No. No. No. I yearn for the same opportunities with the same discipline and demands. I don’t believe I learn differently from men—I believe I learn differently as an individual and ultimately it is up to me—not my gender group—to find the path that is most spiritually satisfying.”

K. Patricia Cross in *Adults as Learners* writes about the problem of self-confidence and its negative affect on class participation and suggests “educational opportunities with low levels of risk and threat” (Cross 1981, 133). She claims that “adults with high self-evaluations

are likely to participate in whatever form of education meets their needs, whereas those with low self-confidence are limited by a need to protect themselves from the threat of future failure, which too many have already experienced . . ." (Cross 1981, 137). How either could be achieved is challenging, but the more aware educators are of the discrepancies and women's sensitivities to intellectual safety, the more likely they are to create successful educational settings.

The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* assessed the educational differences that gender may provoke. "Women pose questions more than men, they listen to others, and they refrain from speaking out—these have long been considered signs of powerlessness, subjugation, and inadequacy of women. When women's talk is assessed against standards established by men's behavior, it is seen as tentative, vacillating and diminutive." They encouraged using uniquely female modes of interchange as "a model for all who are interested in promoting human development" (Belenky et al. 1986, 188–189). Discussions of gender influences on education are controversial and inconclusive, with new theories appearing regularly. Whether or not men and women process information differently, veer toward different fields of study and use different models of classroom interaction is a matter of scholarly and nonscholarly conjecture. More significant for our study is the *perception* of the respondents based on their experience and intuition. As one woman detailed: "I prefer learning with those who are gender sensitive, use inclusive language, include study of biblical women as central rather than supportive characters, are aware of gender politics in Judaism, study from an emotional, spiritual and intellectual place and want a connection with others in the class. If a man or a woman fits this description, that's fine with me."

### STUDY AND SPIRITUALITY

The last section of this survey dealt with the influence of study over the inner life:

- What is the most spiritual activity you engage in, Jewish or secular and explain what makes it spiritual?
- Have your intellectual pursuits as an adult changed your spiritual experience of Judaism. If so, how would you describe this development?

The answers were not monolithic and for many, their most spiritual experiences did not involve study if they involved the practice of Judaism at all. For those whose spiritual heights were found within their religion, it was usually synagogue based rather than intellectually proscribed. Shabbat services and Torah chanting were a spiritual apex for many. The crowning ritual was lighting the Sabbath candles which numerous respondents cited as the ongoing spiritual high-point of their lives. "Blessing the candles and blessing my children connect me with God."

Outside of the strictly religious realm, several respondents mentioned the impact of nature, the discipline of meditation, and the aural experience of a classical piece of music.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, the singular most spiritual experience outside of Judaism (but often, in some way connected to it) mentioned by over half the respondents was a connection to children from "holding babies" to a woman blessed with long life to enjoy her grandchildren and watch them study. From preparing for the birth of a first child to blessing children, the majority of women expressed part of their spirituality through their maternal instincts. "I love being with children, listening to their words, perspectives and experience of events." "My role as a parent is a very spiritual endeavor for me."

Study did not occupy the primal place in the spiritual ladder that might have been expected. Only three women mentioned Jewish study as their spiritual focus. "Torah study becomes spiritual to me because it envelops my whole self. I am no longer compartmentalized; all my facets become integrated and I feel balanced." Spirituality was loosely defined as a sense of completeness after an identity struggle. Spirituality is not goal oriented in these reflections but rather understood as a process that leads to mental or emotional well-being.

Surprisingly, several women wrote that their adult study did not contribute to their spiritual development and some wrote that their intellectual development actually impaired their spiritual growth: Intensive adult study led them to be more critical and experience less

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<sup>3</sup>Scheidlin (1999) discusses the role of nature in creating situations of wonder. His four-pronged approach to preparing children for spirituality by helping children value their inner lives, enhance their curiosity, develop a language for articulating feelings and heightening their aesthetic and interpersonal sensitivities is good readiness for adult spirituality as well.

religious connection. “Learning has made me very skeptical of Judaism as practiced in a traditional way. . . the more I learn, in a sense, the more removed I am from my given religious heritage and tradition.” “I suspect I have become somewhat more critical and less open-minded about issues which do not fit within the framework of my personal religious outlook.” “I think they [my studies] have made me more demanding and critical of what truly constitutes authentic Jewish experience.” While not representative of the majority of respondents, the three comments bear a striking similarity to each other that is worthy of further investigation. If we define “spirituality” in the loose way the respondents did—namely a sense of inner integration and wholeness with tradition—then the casuistry, the analytical/critical examination of texts which creates critical thinkers, may tamper with this holistic worldview. When denominationalism is emphasized or increased ritual observance in the classroom, it may highlight the demarcating line between one group of Jews and another, enhancing fissures instead of enforcing communal unity. When text study is most effective it is able to create a sense of integration between an individual’s inner and outer world and the community at large; it is able to transcend denominational boundaries. When it is not able to do so, it can create schisms. Educators must be able to advance intellectual development without depleting spiritual reservoirs, a task that may be unique to the study of sacred texts for adults.

These adult learners experienced disappointment when a spiritual component of their study was missing since their choice to study usually reflected a desire to reconnect with tradition. In a secular climate, where courses of instruction for adults are available through their local art and music schools and community colleges, a return to the synagogue for instruction represents more than an intellectual quest but a desire for a long neglected emotional reconnection. Samuel Heilman makes a useful distinction between “learning” and “*lernen*,” the colloquial term used to describe traditional text study.

. . . *lernen* is much closer to ritual than to intellectual activity. Its sound, format, the resulting communion with others and the implicit steadfast attachment to Judaism that it generates takes religious precedence over comprehension. . . comprehension is hoped for—but is not the *sine qua non* of *lernen* for the religious person. (p. 246)

## CONCLUSION

One of the gifts of teaching adults is their ability to articulate coherently and with the benefit of life-experience their needs in the classroom. Educators need to make more room for these voices and more avenues for female Jewish learners to express their apprehensions, satisfactions and reflections. Educators have to be particularly sensitive to setting up “comfortable” classrooms where women can present their ideas to teachers and fellow students who are receptive and questioning but not intimidating or judgmental. Most women observed that their increased knowledge of Judaism did not diminish but enhanced their confidence in Judaism to be inclusive intellectually if not ritually. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the survey, is the disappointment many respondents felt when their study of Judaism was spiritually arid. Making them more critical thinkers about Jewish texts sometimes made these women more rather than less critical of Judaism. These adult learners were searching for the vocabulary to feel fully empowered in the Jewish community but inspiration needed to accompany information for a satisfying educational encounter. This “hunger for wonder” (Roszak 1980) motivated the return to Jewish studies for this sampling of adult Jewish women and remained a consistent need throughout their studies. Educators who can hear the “still small voice” (this expression is from the prayer “*U-netaneh Tokef* read on the high holidays) of these learners can better create study opportunities to accommodate their journeys.

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