

Key Issues in Adult Jewish Learning and Application in Educational Settings

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By Dr. Jane S. Shapiro

One of a [series of articles](#) about lifelong Jewish learning

The observations that follow were presented to a group of adult Jewish learning professionals and educators as part of the Chicago Adult Jewish Learning Initiative convened by Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership.

Aspirational by nature, professionals in the field of adult Jewish learning often speak in lofty terms. We claim that our work can transform lives, change communities, and impact the Jewish future – and we believe this absolutely. And in truth, we also secretly hope that the world will listen to us and invest more in our efforts.

We know that so much is at stake in our work. Whatever Jewish education the adults of today did or did not receive as youngsters, we identify a connection to their lives as Jewish adults and the impact on the larger community. Hopeful that adult learning can affect the future, and sometimes rewrite the script, we strive to encourage and engage adults to be like Rabbi Akiva and come to the table to learn at the age of forty. Please share our passion. This will change your life.

In response, we can drive ourselves a little crazy. If making up for the past and shaping elements of the Jewish future are in our hands, then we have to get it right. And many of us seem to believe that if only – *if only* – we were inclusive enough, passionate enough, welcoming enough, pluralistic enough, *chevruta*-based, replete with texts and interpretations, that perhaps our learners will accept what we are trying to “give over” and be inspired to observe more, study more, and make Jewish practice a bigger part of their lives.

In some ways, I believe this is the biggest issue we face as adult Jewish educators. In our attempts to link study to conventional types of Jewish practice, however, we may be missing the moments when our learners make connections for themselves. Can we open ourselves instead to remove expectations and simply notice what transformative moments are like for our students? Can we teach without prescriptive communal outcomes in mind?

Applying this to our practice shifts our roles and our work in all the educational settings where we might meet our learners: whether online, in a class, or in an individual encounter. It means that our role is to do more curating and witnessing than directing as we teach. Contracting of ourselves invites the authentic Jewish selves of the learners to emerge. This can be accomplished in some simple and practical ways. Instead of jumping from the gate with a well-articulated introduction to a text and why it matters, and even before asking people to comment on why something Jewish relates to them, what about:

1. **“Talk less, smile more.”** Become a student of your students’ faces and hand gestures. Cognitive science has shown us that when the brain is working hard, the focus of the eyes change. You can figure out what tasks or types of questions really get people engaged deeply if you watch them carefully as you teach.
2. **Less is more.** To watch the students you cannot be in your book or text that inspires you personally. How much material are you trying to cover in class? Is it too rich a diet? Could you accomplish more deep thought and meaning-making if you used one or two texts and allowed them to be in conversation with your learners?
3. **Slow down.** My students have taught me that class time is their real *Shabbat*; when they set aside all the plates their brains are spinning and nourish their souls. They may be attending synagogue every week, but class may well be their spiritual practice. Any practice that invites slowing down, making space between the outside world and the world of the class is teaching Jewish ideas about time, holiness, and community more implicitly and powerfully than even the famed Abraham Joshua Heschel could do. Is that heretical? Don’t read about it. Let them know it in their hearts and bodies. There are so many techniques to accomplish this: breathing, music, mindful meditation, body movement, creative writing, just silence. Gift the class with an ensouling moment before

- you dive in.
4. **Support decoding.** Think of yourself as a curator in an art museum. What facts, or points, or clarifications will make it possible for your learners to appreciate the materials you have chosen? Are there other works of art that speak to your text? I tend to use music, art, and poetry as prompts to get people going. Master the art of asking really good questions, which enable your learners to probe, examine, explain, compare, and contrast.
 5. **Use Hebrew.** Read it aloud so students can hear beautiful cadences and rhythms. Point to those words that carry so much history and significance. *Tzedakah* is more than giving money. *Ayekah* is more than just “where are you?” Help them build a personal Jewish vocabulary and they will be motivated to learn more.
 6. **Collect meanings.** Encourage students to build upon their own personal meaning-making and create a group effort. Holy meaning is a *Mishkan*. Go around and ask people to articulate their point of view. Encourage them to notice how one text can prismatically mean so many things. Point out discrepancies. Ask students to try to reconcile them, or not. Add your own voice as a group member. Where will your collective journey take you?
 7. **Ask them the Saul Wachs question and then listen for their responses.** The great educator Saul Wachs would say, “If you were (notice the conditional) to take this text seriously, how would it affect you?” Student responses will let you know what is reaching them, what they are setting aside that you might really really want them to take up, but most important, will point you to what they need. Nurturance, challenge with support, can be the best step forward to make sense of life and this world today and the role that Jewish wisdom can play in it.

I want to encourage my colleagues to continue their own lifelong learning of Judaism, to remain excited and passionate about all things theoretical, aesthetic, and legal recorded in our Jewish tradition, and to be bold and confident that this wisdom will be transmitted to yet another generation in powerful ways.

Dr. Jane Shapiro is co-founder of Orot: Center for New Jewish Learning and one of three outstanding Jewish educators to receive the 2017 Covenant Award.