

CLASS CALLS

The joys of adult Jewish education.

By Hillel Kuttler



Were Glenn Paskow to shop for a new television, he wouldn't first quiz showroom salespeople on the features of various models, only to make his purchase online. Doing so would violate what the 58-year-old dentist called the Talmud's "shopkeeper law," because he would be "stealing their time."

That rule impressed Paskow during an adult-education course on Jewish business ethics he took at his synagogue, West Chester's Keshet Israel Congregation.

That, and other courses he's attended there, have "changed my behavior and practice," Paskow said. "It's amazing that Judaism has something to say about almost every aspect of human behavior. The more I delve into it, the more I find."

Traditional Jewish teachings often represent a revelation to adults participating in such classes as Keshet Israel's, particularly for those who, like Paskow, never received a formal Jewish education as children.

Students interviewed for this article concurred in their positive feelings of grabbing opportunities to increase their Jewish awareness through education. Their enrollment, they said, has provided a critical entrée into

Judaism, exposing them as adults to the breadth of Jewish thought and tradition and whetting their appetite for more.

"I have a love of learning and of Judaism, and I was looking to improve myself," Paskow said. "Why not look to what Judaism has to say about how I can improve myself? If you're not improving, you're getting worse, in dentistry and in life. You always have something to learn to be a better person."

The students interviewed have followed their own personal paths back to the classroom. Some were prompted by their own children's enrollment in Hebrew school or Jewish day school, with the parents reluctant to be left behind. Others found time suddenly available once their kids left home. Several sought Jewish growth, intellectual stimulation and the social dynamism that comes from encountering others who also seek more.

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learning

For Mattea LeWitt, it's the beer.

The Center City social worker, who is 27, attends Topics on Tap, a program of Monday discussions and lectures on Jewish themes held at the Raven Lounge in Center City. In summer, the program moves outdoors to Rittenhouse Square and morphs into Topics on Turf.

The unorthodox settings “drew me in, and I really enjoy it,” said LeWitt, who has attended discussions on Zionism, environmentalism, weddings, prayer — “basically, anytime I’m available and am interested in the program,” she said.

“I like the idea of doing informal learning. [The] informal setting can be more comfortable for people, and you’ll draw people who might be intimidated if it were held in a synagogue. To do something that is outside a denomination or institution is a nice way to meet people where they are.”

The Topics programs represent the culmination of a re-evaluation over the last generation on how institutions of Jewish learning can better engage adults. The programs are run jointly by Moishe House Philadelphia and by The Collaborative, an organization that arranges social events for young Jews.

The Collaborative was inspired in part by England’s Limmud (“learning” in Hebrew) initiative, which spread throughout the Jewish world on the belief that learning “should be more than sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture” and should spur people to learn and to “seek out additional opportunities to keep learning,” said Ross Berkowitz, executive director of both The Collaborative and Limmud Philly.

Philadelphia boasts abundant Jewish education options for adults, notably Gratz College’s Samuel Netzkky Institute of Continuing Education and a branch of the groundbreaking Florence Melton Adult Mini-School Program that is based at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University and has franchises in Australia, England, South Africa, Canada and the United States. (The Melton program was hosted at Gratz for many years; it has relocated to the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy in Bryn Mawr.)

Placing Philadelphia’s offerings in context is difficult. The numbers of adult-education programs and students across the country remain unknown, with no central organization to compile such data, said Diane Tickton Schuster, a visiting senior research fellow at Los Angeles’s Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and an expert on Jewish adult education.

Melton aside, adult-education programs generally lack criteria for certifying or evaluating instructors, she said. Most synagogue-based programs are organized and taught by a congregation’s rabbi, who may not be a trained educator, she added.

Programs like Melton and Limmud have charted a new course for adult Jewish education. Schuster explained that the traditional teaching model of “the frontal presentation, of putting the audience in a passive mode [in which] you came and sat at the feet of the expert,

who told you what you need to know,” has evolved into “the constructionist approach,” with the instructor serving more as guide than lecturer, stimulating students’ questions and active participation and devising provocative assignments.

So, instead of the expert “being a sage on the stage, one becomes a guide on the side,” Schuster quipped. “Learning occurs when people can find meaning in whatever the content is and can understand how it applies to their own experience.”

Elkins Park’s Debra Strauss is struck each week by the relevance of structured Jewish learning to her life. Strauss, 59, was raised in the Reform movement and attended Hebrew school, but felt her Jewish knowledge deficient. As an adult, she once attended a study group at her synagogue, Elkins Park’s Congregation Adath Jeshurun, but “I saw that everyone was so much smarter than me, and I was so uncomfortable. They used words like Chumash that I didn’t know,” she said, referring to the Hebrew word for Bible.

Strauss said that “the open door” to Jewish learning “was held by my children” when they were still in preschool and she was in her mid-30s. She thought, “How can I tell them they have to do this — a Jewish life that’s informed by religion? I have to do it, too.” With the Melton program’s launch in the late 1990s, Strauss signed up and took steps along her “slow path” to greater Jewish literacy.

“At the beginning, it was an intellectual pursuit,” she explained. “But it really informs what I do. When I light candles on Friday night, I feel I’m a member of a circle of people around the world lighting a candle for generations. It means something. When I held my son at his bris, I felt I was at the head of the line of people who had done this for generations.”

Betsy Segal travelled an even longer path than Strauss. A convert to Judaism, Segal said she “always wanted to learn more” than what was covered in her conversion class. She attended the Melton program from 1999 to 2001, and then returned to work as an obstetrician-gynecologist. After leaving her job, Segal entered Melton’s graduate program, where she has studied the past six years.

“Having kids at that point who were in Hebrew school — they knew more than I did,” Segal, 53, said when asked what prompted her to pursue Jewish learning. “I wanted to be able to answer their questions, to show that Judaism was important and that it is not just for little kids, but that adults do it, too.

“I didn’t want to be a do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do parent. I wanted to know a little more than they did. I didn’t want them to think, ‘Well, Mom’s not really Jewish because she just converted.’ And I realized that the more I knew, the more I realized I didn’t know. That’s why I keep going to classes.”

Segal described her love of Jewish study by saying, “I’m hooked. I’m hard-core. I find something to take all the time. The courses are so interesting, and the teachers are so good ... My husband jokes that I know more about Judaism than he does.”

Hillel Kuttler is a Baltimore-based freelance writer.



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