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Membership or Motivation: Exploring Reform Jewish Women's Participation in Religious Education

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Keywords: Adult education participation, adult Jewish education, women

Abstract: Members of Reform Judaism believe that as Jews they must study Jewish tradition. Reform Jewish Temples, national organizations and community centers have a long track record of offering adult learning opportunities. This study explored what motivates or deters women from participating in Reform Jewish adult education.

Background

Although Jews have been pursuing adult Jewish education for over 3000 years, there has not been definitive research conducted in the field of adult Jewish education that documents their participation or their motivation to participate (Beckerman, 1973; Cohen, 1976; Schuster & Grant, 2005). Cohen (1976) noted, "there simply are not enough valid data available on the size, scope, or logistics of the emerging field of adult Jewish education" (p. 144). When examining Reform Jewish women in religious education, the literature becomes even more limited.

Reform Judaism is the largest and fastest growing Jewish movement in North America, with 42% of the Jewish population observing the traditions of Reform Judaism (Kertzer, 1993). The very history of the Jewish religion promotes adult Jewish learning through the study of the Torah. According to Beckerman (1973), adult Jewish education is "a process of learning about things Jewish; a set of organized programs or activities sponsored by a variety of Jewish institutions with Jewish educational objectives; a movement concerned with the Jewish education of adults" (p. 84-85).

In response to the level of adult educational activity in synagogues, national Jewish organizations began to develop adult education departments and targeted activities. These organizations provide a variety of programs and curriculum assistance which include discussion and study guides, pamphlets, books, courses, workshops, and exhibits. In addition, local community groups such as the Jewish Federations and Jewish Community Centers sponsor individual programs and offer classes through synagogues. The purpose of this research study was to examine Reform Jewish women's participation in adult Jewish education.

Using convenience sampling, five Reform Jewish women were asked about their participation in adult Jewish education. Specifically they were asked to describe what motivates and deters them when deciding to pursue adult Jewish education. The women ranged in age from 32-60. All of the women are single, with the majority having never been married. The youngest woman, Micah, is employed part-time and is completing the student teaching portion of a master's degree in elementary education. Hope is in her mid 40s, employed full-time in adult education, and converted to Reform Judaism six years ago. Leah and Rachel are both in their early 50s and have been members of the same Temple since childhood. Leah works in customer service at a bank. Rachel is the receptionist at her Temple and a religious school art teacher. Susan is in her early 60s, retired, and volunteers at her Temple.

Findings

The preliminary results of the study indicate that the women's motivations vary depending on their age and stage in life. The majority of the respondents valued the opportunity to meet with other like-minded individuals with common interests. The deterrents to participation were very similar among the women.

Micah, the youngest respondent, indicated that although adult education classes are not necessarily designed to enhance one's social life, since she is single, she does consider classes to be a means of finding someone to date. She also stated that other people such as educators and previous supervisors "have inspired her to want to know more." According to Hope, the woman who recently converted to Reform Judaism, "I participate to extend the knowledge base gained through the conversion process." Leah noted that she participates in adult education to share her knowledge about and enthusiasm for a topic and hopes that it motivates other learners in the course as well. In addition, she enjoys learning about and sharing "Israeli and Jewish history – not just current events – [which can] bring Jews around the world closer together." Rachel indicated that as an art teacher for the religious school at her Temple, she felt she was "lacking in Jewish history education and wanted to feel more competent teaching the children." She went on to say the courses brought her closer to her heritage. She also stated, "The more I learn, the more I want to turn it around and teach [it] to the kids so they know it too." At first Susan had trouble identifying her adult education participation because according to her, she is "more into social action and helping people." However, once she began describing her volunteer activities she realized that she has attended adult education programs too. She currently is a member of an interfaith learning group called "Confluence of Faith" comprised of Reform Jews and Muslims. They are studying and discussing passages from the Torah and Koran to develop a better understanding of each faith.

As stated earlier, the research subjects identified some deterrents to participating in adult Jewish education. They include the time of day and day of the week that the classes are offered, lack of relevance, and cost. Micah stated "I know a lot is being offered, but I don't know what is offered for those who are young and single." In addition, Leah and Rachel indicated that programs offered by the Sisterhood tend to be for those in their 60s and older. Hope and Susan both indicated that instructors and their style of teaching can be a deterrent. According to Leah "course fees can be prohibitive at times."

Much of the findings from this pilot study espoused what has been found in the adult education participation literature. For example, Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) found that adults participate in church-based education for social reasons as well as for a love of learning. Isaac and Rowland (2002) identified the instructor and programming as possible barriers to participation within religious institutions. Understanding Reform Jewish women's motivations for participation in the Reform Jewish Temples will contribute to the adult education participation literature in general and adult Jewish education in particular. Furthermore, it will broaden our understanding of women's motivations for learning.

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