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HOT TOPIC: How can we offer adult education that utilizes the skills and connections within your community?

PROJECT NUREMBERG: THE POWER OF ADULT JEWISH LEARNING

by Jessica Spitalnic Brockman

Two things distinguished me from everyone else in the room:

1. I was under 50 years old.
2. I was not a child survivor of the Holocaust.

Frieda Jaffe, a congregant of ours, was, and she had invited me to the annual *Yom HaShoah* Child Survivors memorial service in Boca Raton. What happened at this service allowed me to pursue a philosophy I have had about adult Jewish learning that has surpassed my wildest dreams.

I was ordained ten years ago (HUC-JIR'99), and, over the last several years, I have truly reflected both on my own and with others about the nature of adult Jewish learning and how to make it compelling. How do you get Jewish adults to come to the synagogue for more than their child's *bat* or *bat mitzvah* or, God forbid, their parents' funerals? Over the years, we have had one-off programs at our synagogue that have attempted to provide a more targeted approach – medical ethics programming for physicians and a “Start Up Nation” business luncheon for professionals are just two examples. But what happened at the *Yom HaShoah* service created an opportunity for a more structured, collaborative approach.

What happened is that a speaker didn't show up. And so someone got up to stall until the next speaker arrived and started talking about local resources related to the Holocaust. What caught my attention were the words “Nuremberg Trial Documents at Lynn University.” I had no idea what these were, but wanted to get my hands on them to do something together with lawyers about the Nuremberg trials, the trial of the Nazis after World War II. A few days later, I found myself in the Office of Academic Affairs at our local Lynn University, asking if I could borrow the books. (By the way, this set of books, known as the Blue Series and worth about \$10,000, was sitting in a closet collecting dust and was very close to being thrown away.) Not only did the dean of Academic Affairs at the time allow me to borrow the books, she also instituted THREE classes on the Nuremberg Trials at Lynn that next spring – a pre-law class which I co-teach, a theater class out of which an original theatre piece was produced, and a film class out of which several documentaries have emerged. These classes still are offered each spring. But the “Crown Jewel” of this collaboration is the Project Nuremberg Lawyers Event that brings students from Lynn University to Temple Beth El for a face-to-face with lawyers from the Jewish community and the community-at-large.

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The event begins with a student-led presentation at each table on the Nuremberg Trials, followed by a panel of speakers who address the role of the Nuremberg Trials in today's world. This has turned into an annual event with over 200 in attendance, CLE (Continuing Legal Education Credits) awarded, and congregants (many whom never studied the Nuremberg trials in law school) examining a major post-Holocaust legal event of the 20th century. Robert Jackson, the Supreme Court Justice who headed the Nuremberg trials, declared the importance of these trials in his opening statement at Nuremberg. "That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury, stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to Reason."

And all this is done in conjunction with Lynn University, a relationship that allows access to talented academics who have worked with our synagogue to create what we have come to call "Project Nuremberg."

The lessons of "Project Nuremberg" as they apply to adult Jewish education are multi-faceted. The first is that one must be open to ideas at all times. An off-hand comment, an overheard conversation or the fragment of a sentence can spark an idea with untold consequences.

The second major lesson for me is collaboration. Our synagogue had ties with Lynn University in previous decades, but this was significant as an academic collaboration. I am regularly on the Lynn campus, meeting with professors, helping to teach, and fostering ties between the University and the synagogue. And, in return, I get to bring to my community great scholars in law and media, providing resources I never could have had access to on my own. Highlighting the set of books, a dusty treasure in the Lynn library, conveys an important message of elevating the mundane (and nearly discarded!) to the level of the sacred. Like ripples in a pond, the collaborations have expanded beyond the two organizations to another local university, local public and private schools, and, of course, the many law firms and attorneys taking part in the event.

This year, our third Project Nuremberg Lawyers Event, allowed us to expand beyond the initial intent and have the program serve as a fundraiser for our *Torah* project. At the luncheon, a scribe worked on our *Torah*, attendees got to help write letters, and the dedication of the book of Leviticus, the book of Law, provided yet another teaching opportunity. When one of our speakers, a leading defense attorney from Miami, began his remarks by talking about the moving effect of writing the simple letter "vav" in the *Torah*, the impact of Project Nuremberg truly hit me: that these attorneys, whatever field of law they practiced in, could imagine for themselves the intense passion for justice in the face of horrific genocide and reflect on that in the midst of their busy lives.

The third significant lesson is to always come back to the Jewish. In the search for innovative, engaging adult education, it can be tempting to lose ourselves in the quest to be relevant. By bringing it back to the timeline of Jewish history and where Project Nuremberg fits in to an

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understanding that one isn't just a Jewish lawyer, but a Jew, and by doing it within the walls of the synagogue, we accomplish that.

I still worry about adult Jewish literacy. I worry about what will inspire larger numbers of our congregants to partake in adult Jewish learning. But Project Nuremberg gives me hope that the impact of this program is felt far beyond the annual event.

I recently had a congregant e-mail me during a visit to her *alma mater*, Cornell Law School, which has a large Nuremberg Trials Collection. She never connected with collection during law school. It was only later in life, after attending the Project Nuremberg Lawyers Event, that she engaged with the collection and its curator whom we hope to involve in our event this year.

And as for the viability of the program – Does it have legs to grow and regenerate and continue to inspire? Does it have the impact to make the adult Jewish learner reflect and remain relevant? One of the most brilliant and passionate Jewish lawyers of all time, Alan Dershowitz, seems to think so. He's next year's keynote speaker.

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