

# How We Engaged Older Adults and Transformed Temple Life

By Rhoda Wald, 3/09/2016



More than 90 people, all aged 60 and older, gathered on May 21, 2015, to celebrate the eighth year of **Temple Israel’s Lifelong Learning Initiative (TILLI)**, a program at **Temple Israel** in Boston.

“Up until last year,” commented one woman, “I only came for High Holiday services because I didn’t know anyone, and no one ever spoke to me. Now, whenever I go to temple, I meet people I know. I’m never alone, and I’ve made so many new friends.”

There are 550 programs like ours across the country, but what sets us apart is that all the others, to the best of our knowledge, are attached to a college or university. TILLI may be the first one connected to a religious institution.

The idea of lifelong learning was championed by Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909, who said, “It has been too much the custom to think of education as an affair of youth, and even of the earlier years of youth; but it really should be the work of the whole of life.”

TILLI embraces Eliot’s philosophy, adding the idea of peer teaching – participants act both as learners and instructors. In this way, any learner who wishes has the opportunity to share his or her knowledge, enthusiasms, and expertise. Consequently, the range of topics is both diverse and ever-widening, as more and more people enroll in our two six-week fall and spring sessions each year. In our catalogues, you’ll find basic Jewish literacy courses, such as Bible, Holocaust Literature, and Jewish Philosophy, along with more idiosyncratic offerings, such as Jewish Vienna, 1900, JFK Through a Jewish Lens, and The Genius of Woody Allen. Members pay a fee of \$50 per semester and \$25 for the monthly film series, all subsidized by a financial legacy.

As TILLI evolved, it became clear to its organizers that it is as much about making friends and building community as it is about learning and empowerment. Many members get together for the lunch-and-learn activity (often with our highly supportive clergy as speakers), as well as film series, Sunday afternoon salons, field trips, and informal social gatherings.

“At this stage of life,” said one participant, “my world has opened up, not only with learning but with the people I have met through TILLI, some of whom have become close friends.”

A few years ago, the TILLI members were barely visible, not only to the larger temple membership but to each other. Now, Temple Israel boasts a strong voice representing older adults. TILLI members are asked to serve on other committees in the congregation and are invited to a range of events. “For me,” a newly retired member said, “the best part of TILLI is the professionalism, warmth, and positive spirit I now find at all levels of temple life.”

The vigor of the intellectual program and the number of people attending are testimony that the TILLI program has changed not only the lives of the members but also the image of older people in the wider temple community.

Members both in and outside TILLI understand that the older constituency is a vital group. Conversations about aging are now temple-wide, and everyone is learning to talk openly and honestly about difficult issues such as the culture of aging, death and dying, long-term illness, hospice care, ethical wills, and legacies.

Beginning in 2007, with the strong support of Rabbi Ronne Friedman and Rabbi Jeremy Morrison, TILLI has re-invigorated continuing education at Temple Israel and has revitalized connections to the temple among people who had become marginalized with age. Now that's something to celebrate.

Footnotes:

1. 2007 Planning Committee: Rabbi Jeremy Morrison, Esther Kosofsky, Coordinator, Naomi Gordon, Carol Kur, Peggy Morrison, Myra Teitlebaum, Rhoda Wald
2. The Gale L. Raphael TILLI legacy is an important financial resource.



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