



***Reflections on the Death of a Mentor, a Unique Jewish Leader, and a Woman Whose Legacy will Forever Inspire the Jewish World:  
Florence Zacks Melton (z"l)***

***By Larry Moses***

*Larry Moses, President of The Wexner Foundation, developed a long-standing and close personal relationship with Florence Melton, who recently died at the age of 95. Mrs. Melton was one of the pioneering leaders in Jewish education whose influence has touched thousands throughout the world. Mr. Moses reflected upon her life in a keynote presentation delivered at the Fall Retreat of the professional leaders of New York's UJA-Federation on the day prior to Mrs. Melton's death. The following comments were adapted from that presentation, and completed after her death.*

Over the past two years, usually on Wednesday mornings, I regularly made something of a pilgrimage up to Florence Melton's apartment, in Columbus' Grandview Heights neighborhood. Florence had reached the ripe young age of 95 years old. With her husband, Sam Melton, who unfortunately passed away some years ago, Florence made the Melton name a high-level brand for Jewish education. A number of universities and seminaries bear the Melton name for various programs and initiatives, as do Jewish curriculum projects and other educational ventures. When Sam died, few might have imagined that Florence's most prolific years as a Jewish thinker and leader were yet to come. In these years, she invented and then spread throughout the world the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, one of the most significant innovations in adult Jewish learning of our time. Approximately 25,000 students have graduated from the Mini-School in 60 cities throughout the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia. Some 5,500 students study weekly at the current time. More recently, Florence developed a prototype for an entirely new approach to educating Jewish teenagers, called Communiten, first piloted in Columbus, and now spreading to the first grouping of North American cities.

**When visiting with a 95 year old, you might expect to feel younger.** But when I visited Florence, I inevitably felt older, even outdated. Throughout her entire life, she was graced with total recall and a near-perfect memory. Recently, after not having visited for close to a month, she chided me for forgetting to follow-up on a small point that was made two conversations ago.

Florence was disappointed in the very Jewish community she loved so much. She was disappointed because our volunteer and professional leaders, to her mind, are not curious and inquisitive, not attuned or particularly responsive to the



## THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

Strengthening Jewish Leadership

rapid changes simply exploding upon and within Jewish life. She was disappointed because she believed that our institutions tend to be over-managed and under-led, formulaic and outmoded.

Florence was an old woman but a young thinker. She was brassy and, to the very end, simply took no prisoners in discussion. On my last visit, and I sadly note my final encounter with her, she spoke passionately about how the vast majority of our Jewish teens after bar/bat mitzvah vanish before our very eyes – simply disappear from meaningful Jewish engagement, leaving it up to Hillel, years later, to try to pick up the pieces. She resolutely could not comprehend why massive community resources are not concentrated on Jewish teen age engagement. And of course, this was only one of the many changes she advocated. Her visions of change were countless, and her mind never stopped with the “givens” but always went directly to the “possibilities.”

I know that I am in good company when I say how blessed I felt to have Florence Melton as one of my mentors and heroes. Personal mentors are not easy to find in Jewish life, likewise personal heroes. After almost a century of life, Florence still embraced change, had the courage to challenge our sluggishness as innovators, and pushed so many of us to think differently, to ask the hard questions, and to not treat our organizational assumptions of yesterday as necessarily relevant to tomorrow.

Over the past twenty years, my professional work has been within The Wexner Foundation – a philanthropy devoted to a very specific focus: developing Jewish leaders. We have done our best to understand the meaning and promise of leadership, and to translate it in Jewish terms to new generations of North American professional and volunteer, and Israeli public leaders. Leslie Wexner, another mentor and hero to so many of us, has charted the course of our work with extraordinary vision, generosity, and wisdom. Leslie and Abigail Wexner’s fundamental belief in the power of leadership to transform Jewish life has been the central motif of our efforts. Most of the time, I feel that our programs are having significant impact – making a demonstrable difference in Jewish life. But there are occasional moments when, in the grand complexity of Jewish history, I have wondered if even these efforts are too little, too late. Then I would have another encounter with Florence Melton, and her towering presence and relentless life force would remind me that it is never too late.

There will be no more visits with Mrs. Melton. She passed away on Thursday, February 8 and was buried in Columbus on Monday, February 12. My physical place in shul has always been in the row and seat directly behind Florence. Her seat was aching empty that Shabbat, no twinkling eyes glancing back at me from time to time as if to say “we have so much to do.” On the Shabbat between her death and her funeral, we read of the Midian high priest Yitro’s mentoring of his son-in-law Moses. The Torah portion reminded us that even the most



experienced leaders need mentors – those who care for us, who lend perspective and improve us with a loving touch.

How fitting, it seemed, that the thousands of Jewish learners who had graduated from the Mini-School, and those otherwise graced by Florence's mentoring, would sit in synagogue that Shabbat and learn how leaders need to guide each other, to take care of each other. I grew to love Florence Melton, plain and simple. She gave so much to me as my mentor, and she gave much to my wife as well (Susan is a graduate of the Mini-School) and to our younger daughter (Danielle graduated from the first pilot class of Communiten). Florence broke all of the molds, and there will never be another like her. But her influence lingers in the lives of so many of us, who are now challenged, in turn, to live up to her courage as a Jewish leader, and her love for Jewish learning, and to imbue our own communities with these special qualities. May we be worthy, and may her memory forever inspire us and be a blessing.