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IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

Cover photo montage created from photo by Joel Jefferies, courtesy of Comedy Central, and image from Dreamstime.

IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The current chapter of the American Jewish story is unique: Never before in Jewish history has a society been so receptive to Jewish culture, ideas and people. Here Jews experience not only tolerance, but celebration. This has engendered a central paradox of the Jewish engagement industry: the effort to entrance American Jews about Jewish experiences might seem superfluous in an era in which America itself affirms Jewish culture and values.

How to respond to the challenges and opportunities of this paradox might determine the success of Jewish engagement efforts. By now it has become clear even to many who work inside the insular Jewish communal world that treating American society as a threat is not only absurd, but out of touch with the experiences of the very Jews they seek to reach. The parallel paradox is that in some cases, American Jews are repelled not by Judaism but by the methods and perspectives of the Jewish engagement industry.

This issue of CONTACT explores this unique period of American Jewish history, and examines the opportunities offered by Judaism's acceptance in the public sphere. Articles consider cultural offerings, community service, Jewish studies classes in universities and Hebrew in public schools as venues for potential Jewish involvement outside the traditional structures of Jewish life. In all, the articles suggest ways we might harness the potential of the public sphere to heighten Jewish connections and involvement in this unprecedented era of celebration in America.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley



A RISING CREDIT RATING, AND THE OPPORTUNITY IT PRESENTS

by BETHAMIE HOROWITZ

These new social conditions have led to new ways for Jews to orient themselves beyond a primary focus of taking care of our own, to the wide array of issues in the world.

From the vantage point of 2009, it's hard to imagine what it was like to be Jewish in America 100 years ago. Jews were overwhelmingly poor and dispossessed, arriving on America's shores along with Irish Catholics, Italians, Poles and others viewed as inferior by the American Anglo-Protestant mainstream of that time.

It was in such a climate that Mordecai Kaplan lamented, more than 70 years ago, that "[t]he average Jew today is conscious of his Judaism as one is conscious of a diseased organ that gives notice of its existence by causing

pain." (Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1937.)

These conditions set the stage for a peculiar psychological dynamic: Jews could either accept the state of separation and otherness or try hard to escape from Jewishness. Out of this environment emerged the well-known phenomenon of "self-hatred," a term coined by the social psychologist and German-Jewish émigré Kurt Lewin. One benign effect was that instead of naming their sons Isaac, Moses or Benjamin, a whole generation of anxious American Jewish parents settled on Irving, Milton or Barry as more promising.

Many of the major American Jewish communal organizations were established during the first half of the 20th Century, a time when America was less hospitable to Jews. Since

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larger American society didn't make the care of Jews a priority, Jews had to make do for themselves. The tremendous Jewish communal infrastructure we have inherited was built during this era to acculturate the new immigrants, care for the sick (and in so doing create jobs for Jewish doctors!), and develop a communal safety-net of services.

Today, now that American Jews have become a "high-end" group in American society, our entire frame of reference has shifted from that earlier time and place. In 2000, Jews ranked highest among religious groups in annual median household income in the U.S. (Kosmin & Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans, Who, What, Why, Where*, 2006.)

The old social barriers that once delimited Jewish activity no longer exist. For example, in December 1999, Harper's Bazaar Magazine published a feature anticipating the festivities around New Year's Eve Millennium celebrations, which happened to fall on a Friday night. The editors asked a number of actresses and socialites about their plans: "Where and how will you be ringing in the year 2000?" Actress Ellen Barkin replied, "What year 2000? I'm a Jew — it's 5760!" It is hard to imagine a comparable actor of the 1950s or 60s trumpeting her Jewish background as part of her public persona.

By 2004, Joseph Lieberman, a self-avowed observant Jew, was the Democratic Party's candidate for Vice President of the United States. Likewise, the number of Jews serving in the U.S. Congress has grown from around 1 percent (5-9 members) in the early 1900s to 8 percent (44) of the 535 members of the current 112th Congress. "Jewish" has become more of a plus, an accepted and even admired status, rather than a social liability.

Along with this integration and acceptance, we would have to say that being Jewish has become unproblematic — or at least normalized — in America. There is no question about the compatibility of being both Jewish and American; people do not feel that they have to tone down their Jewishness in order to make it in America. In the 1930s, a Jew might have attempted to pass as Anglo-Saxon Protestant, whereas 75 years later a person is free to not think about his/her Jewish origins at all.

At home and fully integrated into America, American Jews remain openly and proudly Jewish. When asked about

their feelings about being Jewish, the vast majority feel positive, some are neutral and a small minority are ambivalent or negative. Self-hatred has largely disappeared. Judaism and being Jewish are attractive to many people, not all of them Jews.

The fact that the American mainstream views Jews positively accounts in part for the rise in intermarriage: the rates are high partly because others are willing to marry Jews. Not only is there no shame for Gentiles in such a match, but it may even be an attraction. This is a far cry from the older pattern of Jews intermarrying to break free from the social restrictions Jews experienced in Mordecai Kaplan's time.

These new social conditions have led to new ways for Jews to orient themselves beyond a primary focus of taking care of our own, to the wide array of issues in the world. In recent decades, a slew of new Jewish organizations has been established, many of which address concerns in the larger world from a particularly Jewish orientation. These include the American Jewish World Service, Jewish Funds for Justice, Jewish World Watch, Hazon, Uri L'Tzedek, Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps, and Repair the World.

Each of these organizations was founded out of the conviction that engaging in these various causes and commitments as Jews was a meaningful act and that a Jewish rubric for this kind of work was needed. Together, they represent a growing motivation among American Jews to address the pressing issues of the world around them, and to do so as Jews and through a Jewish lens. Although they were not designed to intensify Jewish commitment, the visibility and growth of these new American Jewish institutions may yield other kinds of collateral benefits aside from the vital work they undertake.

These new organizations may hold special appeal for Jews who have in the past been put off by a communal orientation that seemed overly parochial. Seeing committed Jews engaging effectively in a broader social justice agenda may be especially beckoning. We should not underestimate the power of these efforts as potential exemplars of contemporary American Jewish moral leadership. At a time when Jewishness has become more of an advantage than a stigma, we have a challenge and an opportunity to reflect upon our collective contributions in new ways. ■

THE JEWISH PARTICULAR AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

Towards the end of Aviva Kempner's recently released documentary, *Yoo-hoo Mrs. Goldberg*, we learn that the fictional Goldbergs family of radio and television did not fare well from its move to the suburbs in 1955. Twenty-seven years after Gertrude Berg first presented the Goldbergs of the Jewish Bronx as a mainstay of American popular culture on the radio, the television iteration of the family comedy, first broadcast in 1949, came to an abrupt end scarcely a year after the show's venue was relocated to suburban Haverville, where being Jewish was far more foreign than it had been in the Bronx.

The move to the suburbs was preceded earlier in the decade by a year-and-a-half broadcasting hiatus brought on by the blacklisting of Philip Loeb, the show's co-star who was investigated as a communist sympathizer by the House Un-American Activities Committee. One wonders whether the culture of suspicion and accusation that pervaded American society in the early 1950s put a cold chill on what the early success of the Goldbergs represented — the acceptance of Jewish distinctiveness in the American public sphere as having much to contribute to American notions of family, decency and personal achievement. Through post-1950s lenses, we are surprised to learn how popular the very ethnic Goldbergs were in 1930s and 40s America, especially given what we know about phenomena such as Father Coughlin and the anti-Semitism of his age. Perhaps that surprise is more a function of those lenses than of the history of Jewish life in America.

The move to radical assimilation, with its imperative to be invisible as a Jew in the public sphere, wasn't as direct, broad and immediate as some would have us believe. In fact, through the 20s, 30s and 40s, American Jewish life saw the growth, not decline, of institutional vehicles of Jewish cultural pride that encouraged Jewish Americans to stand in public as Jews. The Workmen's Circle, B'nai B'rith Lodges and a plethora of Jewish

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fraternal organizations proliferated across the United States, giving their members public platforms on which to pronounce cultural and ethnic pride. A Max Baer would be more likely to paint a Star of David on his boxing shorts in 1933 than he would in 1955, 1965 or 1975. The big chill lasted a very long time; the thaw began to become apparent only in the 1990s, as a new celebration of multi-cultural diversity allowed difference to be celebrated in the public sphere in America, in general.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, acceptance of Jewishness in America — both the Jewishness of personal identity and the Jewishness of culture, ideas and wisdom — is unprecedented. Again, this should be seen as an amplification of an earlier trend that was sidetracked rather than something altogether new. In other words, the possibilities of Jewish expression in the public sphere in America, the acceptance of Jewish identity in America, and the potential for affirmation of Jewish wisdom and ideas in America are not the sum of a kind of cultural bubble or aberration but rather speak to general American tendencies for acceptance and to the particular American regard for Jewishness that are authentic

and true to America. It was the era of the 1950s and its precedent in Father Coughlin which were the aberration and which violated the nature of American democracy and understanding.

Also, it may very well be that it was Jewish insecurity and an initial lack of complete trust in the promise of America that moved American Jews to assume that they would be better off as less visible in the public sphere. Jewish leadership was queasy with the notion that Jews would be identified as such on their immigration documents in the first decade of the 20th Century. Between 1906 and 1910, attempts were unsuccessfully made to persuade the U.S. Immigration Commission to consider Jewish immigrants from Russia as not being of Jewish nationality. The argument was made that being Jewish is only a matter of faith and religion; there is no Jewish People, nation or nationality. That was an argument made by a small, elite group of Jews willing to limit Jewishness to a profession of faith in order to secure the protections of the U.S. Constitution, which they perceived as unavailable if Jewishness were defined as anything besides faith. This may very well

have been an accurate reflection of what America was ready for in terms of Jewish visibility in the public sphere, or it may have been an overreaction. Jewish self-censorship, which stood in stark contrast to the inclinations of a Gertrude Berg, took many forms over the decades, from the behavior of the Hollywood moguls to the Eruv wars. Suffice it to say, it is difficult to know to what degree the tendency to limit a Jewish presence in the American public sphere was a function of American general culture and to what degree it was a function of Jewish self-censorship. It is clear, however, that throughout the American Jewish experience, there has always been, to one degree or another, an openness to things Jewish in the general culture that has made America different.

The overarching question is whether we are ready to fully engage this American openness so that both Jewish life and American life can benefit. We have all too often assumed that Jewish ideas and values cannot be brought to the public sphere unless they are decoupled from Jewish particularity, Peoplehood and distinctiveness. This is wrongheaded. As long as Jewishness is not cast in exclusivist or chauvinistic terms, Jewish wisdom, ideas and language can be more deeply and profoundly understood only when contextualized in the medium of Jewish Peoplehood and cultural identity. That is, the notion that only those Jewish ideas stripped of Jewish particularism have any appeal in the public sphere fails to take into account the intrinsic and value-added relationship between the universal and the particular. When we discover the universal through the particular, we are richer for it. When we negate the particular as a requirement of the universal, we arrive at a universalism that is shallow, and we are the lesser for it. America does not require that Jewish ideas be divorced from affirming the value of being in Jewish community any more than the radio audience of the 1930s required Molly Goldberg to shed her Yiddish accent in order for her family values to surface and prevail.

This is a time not only to proudly present Jewish spiritual wisdom, ethics and values of universal appeal in public, but to not shy away from celebrating particular elements of Jewish civilization such as the Hebrew language, the history of the Jewish people and contemporary Israeli culture in the public sphere. To feel obligated to separate the particular from the universal in this endeavor would be to miss a great opportunity. ■

TAKING JEWISH PUBLIC

by BRAD HIRSCHFIELD

Jews have participated in the public sphere since Abraham made his first appearance in the court of a foreign king. The real issue is not whether we should have a public presence, but how. In order to participate successfully we should ask, first, why are we there — only to take from the public sphere or also to contribute to it? Second, are we there simply as individuals who happen to be Jewish, or do we use Judaism, Torah, Jewish thought and practice — whichever term we happen to prefer — to make a genuine contribution to the larger public of which we are a part?

The public sphere is often referred to as the American or global spiritual/cultural marketplace. As in any marketplace, we must consider why we are there. Do we come as buyers, sellers or perhaps as contributors?

Sadly, much of the debate in Jewish life today is between those who fear our entry into the marketplace because it will turn us into indiscriminate

over-buyers of the spiritual and cultural wares of others, and those who are prepared to enter the market as sellers, hawking whatever it takes to get others to join us. Ironically, both sides of this debate are motivated

by fear — either the fear of Judaism's ability to compete successfully in the market, in the case of the former, or the fear of a diminishing people in the case of the latter.

If we look back into the Jewish story, though, we will see that both Jewish wisdom and the Jewish people have flourished most successfully when they lived in cultures and settings that had permeable boundaries and encouraged genuine participation in the public sphere. And it was those people and movements which saw themselves primarily as contributors to the

global marketplace, animated not by fear but by a genuine belief that they had something to say to the world, that emerged as the true heroes of whom we remain most proud. From the early rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, through Maimonides, all the way up to David Ben Gurion and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, it has been those Jews who thought Judaism had a real contribution to make to the entire world who achieved true greatness.

"What is Aristotle, but Moses speaking Greek?" So proclaimed the Neo-Platonists of the Third and Fourth Centuries as rabbis emerged as the leaders who would shape Judaism for the next 1800 years. It's no accident that it was the same teachers who imagined themselves as capable of participating in the global debate about justice, God and the meaning of life who also succeeded in effectively leading their own particular community. The words of the Torah were thought of as a public spiritual resource, and its rabbinic commentators were seen as public intellectuals entering the public square not, for the most part, to defend or recruit, but to contribute.

Back then, the Jewish community and its ideas were not considered to be primarily something to be protected from the larger public. They were the carriers of a teaching that was there for anyone who desired its wisdom. No surprise, then, that in those same centuries, significant numbers of non-Jews attended synagogues — not because they were necessarily interested in converting, but because there was something of personal value to be found in the synagogue for all who wished to access it.

The same trend can be seen in the life and work of the other luminaries, from Maimonides's work as an Aristotelian philosopher to the nationalism of Ben Gurion and Rav Kook. In each case, Jewish thought and practice, engaged in ongoing conversation with the public intellectual culture, made contributions to both the larger culture itself and to the vitality of the Jewish people.

Among Clal's work in taking Jewishness public and empowering a new generation of rabbis to do likewise through our Rabbis Without Borders initiative, my most recent experience with the enormous potential of bringing Judaism to the public square involves the columns I write for Beliefnet.com,

the web's biggest site for faith and spiritual inspiration, and for the *Washington Post's* "On Faith" feature. In each case, one more spiritual and the other more political, the challenge is to take what is Jewish public — i.e., to use Torah as neither a seller nor as a buyer, but as a contributor to the lives of the hundred thousand plus readers a month, many of whom are not Jewish, with whom I share this experiment.

The initial response, especially from some Beliefnet readers, to the understanding of what it means to write a Jewish column, was fascinating to me. There was a combination of great pride in entering the public square, mixed with genuine reticence about the "right" of non-Jews to participate in the conversation and shape its content. Sound familiar?

Responding to that reticence helped me to better appreciate both the challenge and the opportunity of taking Jewish public. Right or wrong, it seems to me that the following understanding continues our oldest and bravest conception of how Judaism can take its rightful place in the global public square: The purpose of being Jewish is not to "be Jewish" per se, but to help us become the human beings we most want to be. In fact, for me, the test of the health of the tradition that I love is not simply whether it helps its own members, but whether or not it also benefits those who are not members. If this sounds radical, look no farther than the biblical story of Abraham's call from God, in which he is told that his mission is both to found a particular nation and also to be a blessing to the entire world.

Being a "light unto the nations" is not some cheap Biblical line meant to provide us endless *nachas*. It is a blessing and a challenge. Are we ready to bring Torah to the public square and see it change the world, alter our own understanding of both the world and Torah, and transform the Jewish people itself? That's what it means to take Jewish public. When we do, great things happen — they always have and they always will. ■

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield is President of Clal-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. His Beliefnet column can be found at blog.beliefnet.com/windowsanddoors. He also writes the "For God's Sake" blog at http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/brad_hirschfield.



JEWISH CULTURE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

by AARON BISMAN

Aaron Bisman, a graduate of New York University's Music Business Program, is President & CEO of JDub Records (www.jdubrecords.org). He is a recipient of the Joshua Venture Fellowship and is a co-creator of the Six Points Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Artists.

When the majority of our families moved to America, they embraced the pursuit of an American dream which dictated that they set aside their uniqueness as Jews and become "American" like everyone else. The very fabric of our communities — traditions, languages, texts — stood in the way of success in this new country, and, whether intentionally or not, we assimilated as far as we could. Today, Jews blend almost seamlessly into the fabric of American life, but like many other immigrant cultures, we are now at a loss for our identity.

Culture has always been a vital part of Jewish life and community. But in the 20th Century, it was downplayed as a valid means of connection to Judaism. Today, though, in an age in which celebrity is king, the opportunity for Jewish role models to emerge in the arts is more than simply good PR for the Jews. It is a chance to relate our values and history to the next generation.

As an NYU student studying Music Business and interested in the intersection of my Jewish life and the rest of my life, I found inherent value in modern, innovative Jewish music. I recognized that for my peers and for myself, lack of involvement in insti-

tutional Jewish life did not indicate a lack of interest. Because we were more comfortable in secular spaces than in Jewish ones, and because our Jewish selves were only one piece of our very complex, multi-faceted identities, the organized community offered us few, if any, meaningful entries into the Jewish lives we wanted to live.

In 2002, I co-founded JDub Records, a nonprofit organization dedicated to innovative Jewish music, community and cross-cultural dialogue. At JDub we create opportunities for young adults to enjoy modern Jewish culture in mainstream, secular spaces. JDub believes in the power of joyous Jewish moments found in inclusive, non-coercive, peer-to-peer environments. JDub artists serve as role models for young Jews who do not have positive, relevant Jewish role models in American society. We engage hundreds of thousands of young Jews every year through CDs, events, online communities and holiday celebrations.

When we started, JDub was a big idea in a void. People laughed at the notion of (and value in) bringing authentic Jewish voices into the mainstream. But when the crowds showed up, when people bought CDs by the thousands and when the content went viral,



We need to shift the communal narrative away from one of crisis and reaction, which doesn't resonate with young Jews, to one of celebration and transformation.

JDub's critics witnessed first-hand the renaissance of a new Jewish creativity.

Fast forward seven years and JDub is bursting at the seams with twelve diverse, professional Jewish artists who have successful careers in a variety of genres. With music ranging from Sephardic Rock, Israeli Hip Hop and Klezmer Punk to Biblical Indie Rock and Jewish Kids music, JDub knows that Jewish life today is bubbling with inspiration, meaning and personal relevance. JDub continues to further its vision through its co-leadership of the Six Points Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Artists (created in partnership with Avoda Arts and the Foundation for Jewish Culture and funded by UJA-Federation of New York), which has just completed its first cohort and is working on an expansion plan on the West Coast.

Before young Jews will choose to participate in a Jewish community, we need to understand why we should. While traditionally, Judaism has stressed obligation, in America today, Judaism exists in a culture of choice. Most of us have not directly experienced anti-Semitism, and, for better or worse, we are not interested in a reactive Judaism that expects our participation for reasons of survival. We need to shift the communal narrative away from one of crisis and reaction, which doesn't resonate with young Jews, to one of celebration and transformation — no less present in Judaism but seemingly given less importance by many of our institutions over the last 50 years.

This understanding comes from leading an organization founded by and working with a peer audience. While many non-profits claim to do this through the use of traditional lay leadership structures, JDub does not lead its constituents where we think they should go; we are actually part of our target demographic and thus understand their needs and how to reach them. We are successful because we understand inherently that high quality, authentic content is integrally linked with effective mar-

keting. You cannot have one without the other and must have mastery of both to achieve your mission today.

JDub is dedicated to consistently presenting high-quality programming with the greatest possible impact. It is not enough to create meaningful experiences for young Jews in a void — they need to know about the opportunities available to them. Towards that end, JDub commits significant staff time to booking, producing and promoting its artists and events; works with publicists to place stories in local secular and Jewish media; and works with savvy graphic designers to create striking postcards, e-flyers and collateral materials for distribution. Unlike typical events geared towards young Jews, JDub concerts and events are not purely social affairs. Our events focus on content in addition to the social aspects. This inspires Jewish journeys and helps develop identity.

Jewish culture in the public sphere is abounding and truly breaking boundaries, one listener at a time. Balkan Beat Box, a unique Israeli-led JDub band, shared this experience with the Jerusalem Post: "After one of our shows in southern France, a 16-year-old Palestinian living there ... told us, 'I never thought Israelis could be so cool and deliver such a message.' Those little moments, and there are tons of them, are what help soothe my burning desire to help achieve peace." (*The Jerusalem Post*, January 29th, 2009). Balkan Beat Box's most popular song, *Adir Adirim*, is a traditional prayer for Shavuot and is downloaded by thousands of people every year.

JDub artists and events have been featured on public radio, late night TV and on hundreds of blogs. They've been covered by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *SPIN Magazine*, among others. A video for Socalled's *You Are Never Alone* — a song about Jewish cowboys with a Hasidic melody at its core and the heartbreakingly choruses "Will they say Kaddish for me?" — has received millions of views and thousands of comments on You-

Tube. *Hidden Melodies Revealed*, an alternative Rosh Hashanah experience created by Six Points Fellow Jeremiah Lockwood of The Sway Machinery, was performed at Angel Orensanz in 2007 and attended by over 500 young Jews on the first night of Rosh Hashanah. It was so successful that JDub brought this event to Los Angeles and San Francisco for the High Holidays in 2009.

Since JDub's inception, and despite its enormous success, the Jewish community and its philanthropic supporters continually challenge us. While there are many who view JDub as a risky investment, and others who doubt the value and importance of culture (even though many studies repeatedly point to how valuable it is to our generation), there are still others who view culture as somehow frivolous in comparison to social service needs. Indeed, young Jews are not immune to a climate of economic hardship and are challenged, like their peers, with limited discretionary dollars. But the arts are not economically exclusive. During the Great Depression, when all other markets were ailing, the arts were flourishing, as they were, and continue to be, a great unifier and a way to bring people into community with one another when they feel most alone. Our community needs the arts, as it does other services, to survive, grow and flourish not only during these difficult times but for many more generations to come.

Instead of dwelling on preserving our numbers, we and our peers are delving into questions of meaning: In a world overrun with choices, ideas and a multitude of escapist options, what does Judaism mean to us and why should we be Jewish? Only when a community addresses these questions will young people stream in and ask for the opportunity to engage. Through their engagement with organizations like JDub, young Jews experience a Judaism that does not stand apart from their everyday lives, but fits perfectly within them, allowing them to walk proudly in the secular world as Jews. ■

JEWISH STUDIES, GENTILE STUDENTS

by JUDITH R. BASKIN

Jewish and Hebraic studies in North America hark back to colonial America, where the first colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale and William and Mary, were established under the auspices of various Protestant denominations with the goal of training ministers and pastors. In the early 1700s, all Harvard undergraduates were required to study Hebrew, because in order to be truly educated, a Christian gentleman had to be able to read the Bible in its original language.

Almost 300 years later, of course, many things have changed. Yet, there are still large numbers of non-Jewish students who remain interested in the academic exploration of the Bible, in Hebrew language and literature, and in the larger Jewish experience. A few years ago, Samuel G. Freedman wrote "Classes in Judaic Studies: Drawing a Non-Jewish Class" in his *New York Times* "On Education" column (November 3, 2004). He was intrigued by a striking trend at City College of New York (CCNY) and in Jewish studies programs nationwide of a growing number of non-Jewish students who not only attended Jewish studies courses but also majored and minored in Jewish studies. It's a trend that we've also experienced at the University of Oregon.

While this phenomenon is obviously affected by the demographics and location of each institution (neither CCNY nor the University of Oregon have large Jewish student populations), it is a noteworthy transformation in an academic field which was in its earlier days very much, as Freedman puts it, "by Jews, about Jews, and for Jews." As endowed programs and positions in Jewish studies continue to be established in institutions without significant Jewish student bodies, and as we shape our courses to fulfill general education and diversity requirements in the hopes of attracting significant student numbers, we are increasingly teaching diverse student populations. Some of these non-Jewish students are intrigued by what they are learning and decide to continue in

the field. I would note that in Europe, most Jewish studies scholars in Germany, Italy, Spain and the Scandinavian countries are not from Jewish backgrounds.

I believe that the full integration of Jewish studies into the academic landscape and the accessibility of the discipline to interested students, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, is a good thing. However, the reality of our appeal to Gentiles requires constant reevaluation of pedagogic approaches — for one thing, it is important not to use materials that were produced with primarily Jewish audiences in mind. Nor can we make assumptions that our students have any prior knowledge about Judaism, the Jewish experience or areas of Jewish sensitivity.

At the University of Oregon, the Harold Schnitzer Family Program in Judaic Studies has limited resources and relatively few Jewish students (at most, 5 percent of undergraduates). Therefore, we have chosen to teach Biblical Hebrew, which appeals to a far larger range of students than Modern Hebrew. Moreover, while few students attain proficiency in speaking, reading or writing after two years of Modern Hebrew, two years of Biblical Hebrew can be highly effective. Our students spend a year absorbing grammar, syntax and vocabulary at the introductory level. They then jump to the intermediate level with courses in Biblical Narrative, Biblical Poetry, and Post-Biblical Texts. Our Hebrew courses are demanding, but they are also extremely stimulating for students and faculty. A number of our students have already mastered Latin and/or Greek and take Hebrew for the challenge of learning another classical language. The students who stick with it feel an enormous sense of mastery. Several students who have gone on to law school have thanked us for the excellent training they received in learning to read meticulously and in helping them to persevere with a difficult challenge. The students who succeed in these courses are ethnically diverse, including people of Asian and Hispanic backgrounds who have chosen Biblical Hebrew purely out of personal interests. Students who go on to study in Israel quickly discover that their excellent background in grammar and basic vocabulary eases their acquisition of Modern Hebrew.

We have also found that Asian and Hispanic students are very interested in Jewish

subject matters. Many of these students, often children of recent immigrants, are curious about how Jews have been able to maintain a distinct cultural identity in the United States while also succeeding professionally and economically. They feel a resonance with their own experiences when they read historical studies, memoirs and fiction, written from a Jewish point of view, that address themes of immigration, ethnic otherness, and gender and generational conflicts in the transition from the Old World to the New. We have a number of Japanese exchange students, and those who take my courses in Women in Judaism or Jews in the Modern World are fascinated with *Fiddler on the Roof* (apparently the most performed musical in Japan) and deeply moved by the transition from the *shtetl* to America. Our students in general are also anxious to learn more about both the Holocaust and the modern Middle East. They come with few preconceptions. Our course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is taught by a Jewish anthropologist who did her field work in a Palestinian village on the West Bank. The course ends with a three week peace conference in which each student is assigned the role of a real person and must learn and represent that individual's point of view (students may request a particular side, if they wish). This is usually a wrenching, deeply painful and highly educational event for all concerned.

Changing demographics in the early 21st Century make clear that the number of Jews in the larger population, including student populations, is already in steady decline. The future of Jewish studies in North American universities will depend on the field's appeal to a larger constituency. Many Jewish donors, in fact, have chosen to endow Jewish studies positions and programs at institutions, both public and private, that do not have a critical mass of Jewish students, including colleges and universities in parts of North America with small Jewish populations and at institutions linked to the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations. These donors have argued that Jewish studies should be integrated into the academic curricula of all institutions of higher education. They hope, as well, that exposing diverse groups of students to the academic study of the Jewish experience will increase understanding and tolerance in American society as a whole. ■

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PUBLIC SPACE JUDAISM

by RABBI KERRY M. OLITZKY

ONLY A SMALL minority of Jews is deeply engaged with the organized community at any given time, yet almost all Jewish programming requires participants to walk through the doors of Jewish institutions before they are served. This represents one of many barriers to participation that outreach seeks to lower.

The notion of Public Space Judaism emerges from the fundamental concept of outreach as we at the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) understand it. Outreach is not about attracting a specific target population. Rather, it is a methodology. Outreach methodology brings Jewish life to a variety of traditionally underserved populations by going to where people are instead of waiting for them to come to us. This includes the metaphysical notion best described as “where people are at.”

Where most Jews are not at is inside the four walls of Jewish institutions. Only a small minority is deeply engaged with the organized community at any given time, yet almost all Jewish programming requires participants to walk through the doors of Jewish institutions before they are served. This represents one of many barriers to participation that outreach seeks to lower. The goal is not to water down Judaism but to remove the cultural obstacles that have developed around it. These obstacles may have had a purpose at one time, but now they repel more people than

they retain. Barriers include high costs; expectations of prior Jewish education; jargon-laden in-speak; cliquishness; demographic biases such as heterocentrism, Ashkenazi-centrism, and endogamy-centrism; as well as the location barrier.

The location barrier is arguably the most important, because even if all other barriers have been lowered, those folks who have been pushed away in the past are often too hesitant to enter Jewish institutions to see what has changed. Through our research, JOI has learned that free or low-cost Jewish programs held in secular venues attract more less-affiliated participants than the exact same programs held in Jewish venues like synagogues or JCCs. Our survey of over 700 participants in outreach programs earlier this decade helped us to group programs that attract the less engaged into a cohesive Public Space Judaism model. While the model is based on location, it also addresses several additional barriers to participation and takes into consideration the best practices of outreach.

As illustrated in the adjacent diagram, the Public Space Judaism model places three layers of programming between deeper institutional involvement (in the center) and the non-participating majority of Jewish households. The outermost ring gives this model its name and is identified

by those events and programs that take place in public spaces. (It is important to note that we are advocating events in the public sphere, not in the public square, in order to avoid any confusion between Church and State issues.) These events allow for participants to stumble over them. They are low-barrier in that they are free and require no prior knowledge or commitment to participate. Chabad pioneered this notion of outreach 30 years ago, and while our approach in these spaces differs considerably, there is much to learn from Chabad's successes. JOI's Passover in the Matzah Aisle program in supermarkets, or our Color-Me Calendar for the Jewish New Year in back-to-school supply stores like Walmart and Staples, are examples of programs in this layer.

The second level of Public Space Judaism is what we call Destination Jewish Culture. These programs are also low barrier and held in secular spaces. However, they usually require some level of planned participation (a set start-time and dedicated location) and may charge a nominal fee (though no more than what would be charged at a secular equivalent). Good examples of programs that might fit in this ring are Jewish Film Festivals held in commercial theaters and Jewish musical events held in concert halls.

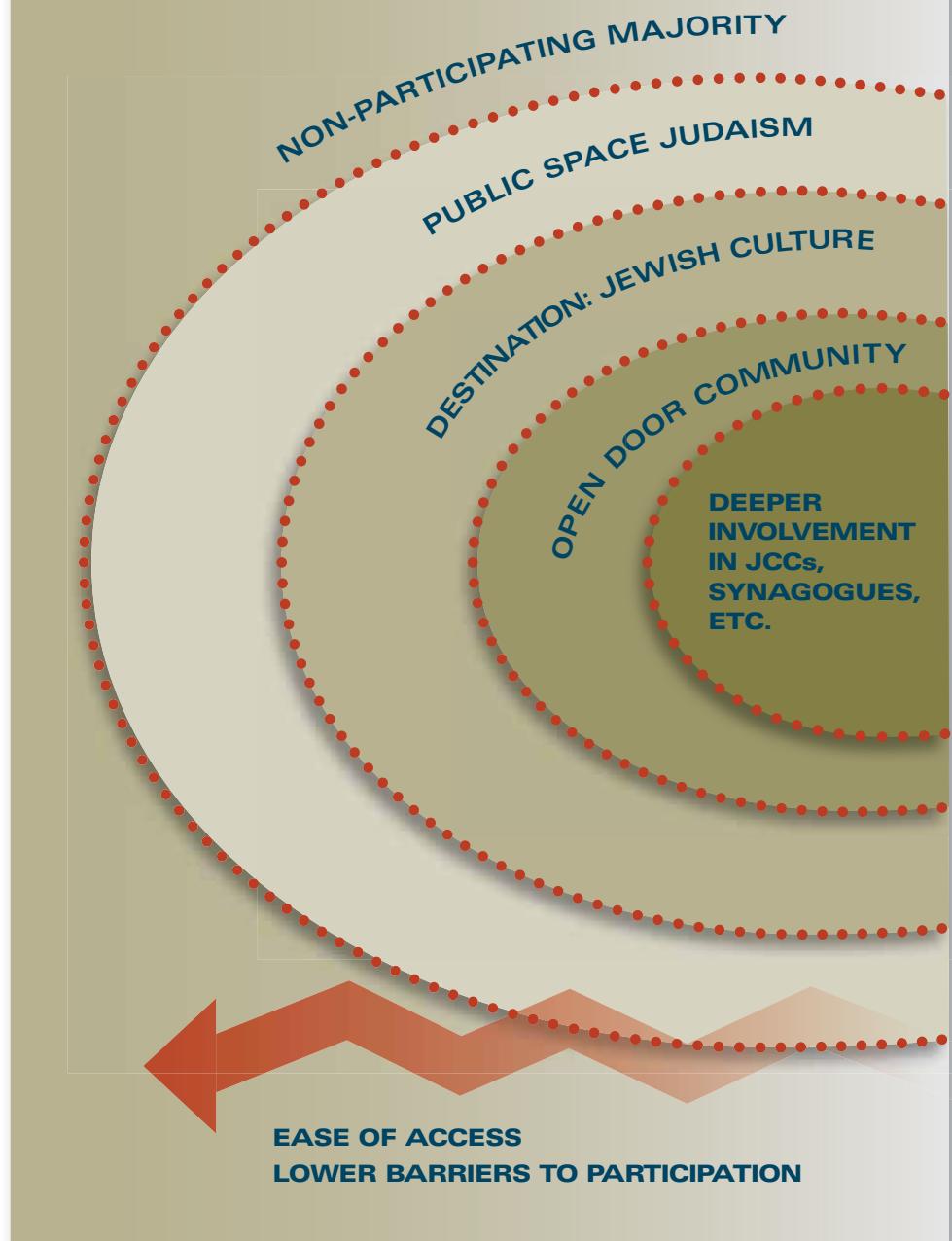
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The third level of Public Space Judaism is Open Door Community programs. These are often held within Jewish communal institutions, but acknowledge the location barrier by lowering all other barriers. A good example is the Reform movement's Taste of Judaism program (usually partnered across denominations), which is free, limits the commitment to three sessions, welcomes all participants regardless of background, and is geared specifically for adult beginner learners.

Taken together, the overall program model could represent an idealized route into deeper engagement with the community: An unaffiliated newcomer happens upon a Public Space Judaism event where she will enjoy participation and begin to feel more comfortable at Jewish community events. While there, she will also learn of an upcoming Destination Jewish Culture event that interests her. Attending destination events increases her interest, and alerts her to an Open Door Community event. Attending that event in turn excites her about the program's host institution. That takes her to core Jewish communal programs, where most of the community's efforts take place.

Through this idealized sequence of "next steps," newcomers are provided with fun, meaningful, multiple contacts with the community and gradually feel drawn deeper into Jewish communal life. In reality, the sequence is much more complex. All stages can serve as entry points and the progression is not necessarily linear. Some folks may hover in the Public Space ring for years, but if they previously had been doing nothing Jewish, this represents successful outreach because the goal is to increase engagement. They will go deeper when it's relevant for them. In many cases, increased engagement will lead to affiliation with an institution, but outreach is not a membership drive. It is the sharing of what we on the inside find beautiful about Judaism with those who might benefit from it, because there's inherent value in sharing it—and not because we have an ulterior motive of membership or campaign growth.

Of course, there already are Jewish programs in secular venues, such as the aforementioned film festivals, but most do not live up to their outreach potential because they do not incorporate outreach best practices, nor are they coordinated with other programs for the purposes of engagement. Public Space Judaism works best as a collaborative effort of a community or of numerous institutions. Multiple programs



on multiple levels should be offered during the same program year. In order for a community to realize the benefits of this effort, there needs to be in place communal professionals or volunteers who are trained in outreach and who can coordinate a name-sharing protocol so that newcomers are not inundated by solicitations from individual institutions. In addition, a name collection and follow-up strategy has to be in place before any program commences. And program B needs to be developed before program A has been implemented so that participants in program A can be invited to program B. Most important, newcomers must be met on a personal basis with their individual interests and needs satisfied, which is labor-intensive but represents the crux of effective outreach.

The Public Space Judaism methodology can be adapted for a small community or for an individual institution. If a local institution is sponsoring an author book reading, for example, it can be moved from the synagogue or JCC to a local Barnes & Noble in order to maximize its potential as an outreach program. And just as this idea transcends limiting programs to Jewish spaces, it also transcends the Jewish calendar and is informed by both the secular calendar and what we call the cultural calendar (which might include seasons such as back-to-school and local or regional events specific to individual locales). This is all just the tip of the Public Space iceberg. We invite you to learn more by joining JOI's free network of communal professionals and lay leaders at <http://joplin.joi.org>. ■

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF JEWISH IDENTITY IN SECULAR SERVICE

by ADAM SIMON

I never connected my work with Teach For America with my religion. However, on this experience I have seen the many ways in which Judaism and Teach For America are linked, and recognizing that my community work and my Judaism are linked makes me want to become more active in my Judaism.

This reflection from a participant in the inaugural Teach For America REALITY Israel Experience points to a powerful opportunity for Jewish engagement, connection and community. It confirms that helping young Jews view and explore their secular service commitments through a Jewish lens is an effective approach to strengthening their Jewish identities.

Teach For America is a hugely successful program that recruits recent college graduates to teach for two years in underserved urban and rural public schools. It attracts our nation's best and brightest,

including a large number of marginally involved or unaffiliated young Jews.

We estimate that at least 10 to 15 percent of Teach For America corps members are Jewish, a statistic we do not believe is unique to this program. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Jews are disproportionately involved in secular service programs ranging from local service activities to federal government involvement, and everything in between. Available data supports this observation, with some studies suggesting that young Jews are twice as likely to volunteer as compared to their peers in the general community.

On the surface, this trend should be no surprise. *Tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is a fundamental Jewish value and an authentic Jewish act, and serving others is both a simple and powerful way to fulfill that responsibility.

And yet, as research is beginning to verify, most Jews involved in secular service typically have minimal involvement in Jewish life. Jews who serve others often do not know the inherent Jewish values that underlie their commitments. And many of those



who make the connection are not involved in the organized Jewish community.

Rather than bemoan this disconnect, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation decided to try to find ways to take advantage of it. Working in partnership with the Samberg Family Foundation and Teach for America, we at the foundation explored ways to create an experience that could simultaneously celebrate the decision of many young Jews to become corps members while also helping them gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the Jewish values undergirding their involvement in Teach For America.

This past summer's REALITY (Renewal, Education, Action, Leadership & Inspiration) program is the product of that vision. Given the historical success of connecting young people to Judaism through Israel experiences, we enabled 40 Teach For America corps members, half on their first trip to Israel and most unaffiliated with organized Jewish life, to spend ten days exploring Israel from a service and education viewpoint.

The program was marketed as a Teach For America opportunity, providing instant

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credibility and trust for people who previously eschewed other Israel experiences. We utilized Teach For America's language and methodology in building the curriculum and itinerary so the experience felt comfortable and was integrated with the overall corps experience.

Participants toured Jerusalem's German Colony in wheelchairs, in order to develop a deeper understanding of how people with disabilities engage with society. They visited Haifa, where they spent time with educators from the Youth Renewal Fund who are working with some of Israel's poorest citizens. And they learned of efforts in Tel Aviv to support at-risk youth through job training and employment opportunities.

At each stop, the trip organizer, the Center for Leadership Initiatives, Inc., created unique opportunities to interact with Israel, to learn from exemplary leaders and to deepen participants' understanding of social issues. Participants reflected upon their service work and their jobs as educators in the context of Jewish texts, history, values and peoplehood.

And it worked.

More than 91 percent of participants reported that the trip positively changed how they view their future involvement in Jewish life. One hundred percent gained a greater connection to Israel, and 100 percent reported a greater understanding and appreciation for pursuing social justice as an inherent Jewish value.

Participants also made powerful linkages between their Teach For America work, their broader commitments to society and their Jewish values. Responses like this were common: "I never thought that the values of Teach For America are the same values that are expressed in Judaism. This trip made me realize that I have an immensely strong devotion to Judaism."

And after the trip, participants organized themselves not only to maintain social connections, but also to increase their knowledge of Israel, to teach about the Middle East in their classrooms and to continue to develop their own Jewish journeys.

We believe programs like REALITY have enormous potential to help young Jews build substantive ties to Jewish life. We successfully reached a population of

Jews previously uninvolved in Jewish life, and we provided them with relevant and high-quality Jewish education that resonated deeply and that was naturally connected to their work and activism in the broader American society. These young Jews are now excited to expand their exploration of and involvement in Jewish life as they forge their paths in the wider world.

The REALITY program could succeed only in an age and in a society in which Jewish values are integrated into the larger culture. This points to a tremendous opportunity: because service is a quintessentially Jewish value and because so many young Jews are active in service, programs such as REALITY can serve as keys to connect unaffiliated and seemingly disinterested young Jews to their Jewish selves and to the Jewish community. By creating programs that honor the secular service work of large numbers of young Jews, and by building relevant, accessible and authentic Jewish conversations around those service programs, our community can reap great dividends. This is a ripe opportunity, and it is high time we seized it. ■



ALEPH BET IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

by LESLEY LITMAN and ANNE LANSKI

With the establishment of Hebrew Language charter schools in recent months, Jewish communal discussion has focused on the appropriateness of teaching Hebrew in public schools. This discussion is not new. Indeed, Hebrew is not at all new to the public sphere in the United States. Upon their arrival in the early 17th Century, the Pilgrims of Massachusetts studied Hebrew and read the Bible in Hebrew. Hebrew was a required subject at both Harvard and Yale, beginning in the later part of the 17th Century and continuing into the 19th Century.

With the emergence of Hebrew as a modern language in the early part of the 20th Century, Jewish leaders and educators, primarily in New York City, were inspired to make Hebrew learning available to Jewish students. These leaders and educators, led by Samson Benderly and his "Benderly boys," were guided by the general educational wisdom of John Dewey and the "Judaism as a civilization" theory of Mordecai Kaplan. Spoken Hebrew, as part of a modern Jewish culture, was central to the educational approach of this group. They sought frameworks in which Hebrew could flourish, the most promising being bi-cultural preschools, Hebrew-speaking camps and public high schools in which the Hebrew language was taught. The Benderly boys embraced the dream of American public education, perceiving it as a venue in which to teach Modern Hebrew, alongside French and Spanish, as a living language and culture.

The efforts to bring Hebrew into the public school sphere may have been aided by the fact that the Jewish day school movement was in its naissance, leaving few options for the study of the Hebrew language outside of the afterschool Talmud Torah. In 1930, a committee of esteemed Jewish leaders including, among others, Benderly, Judge Otto Rosalsky and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, submitted a proposal to the New York City Board of Superintendents to introduce Hebrew courses into New York City public schools. The initial proposal was rejected for reasons ranging from the position that learning Hebrew would provide

students with no particular advantage in their lives to the lack of teachers and to the fear that Hebrew might harm students' English pronunciation. Two highly regarded New York City public high school principals appealed the decision and successfully prevailed upon the New York City Board of Superintendents to recommend that Hebrew be included as a course of study in city high schools. By 1951, Hebrew was taught in 40 high schools in New York City, serving 7000 students. Hebrew was also taught in high schools in seven other major population centers in the United States.

In his 1980 *Journal of Jewish Education* article, "Hebrew in the Public High Schools — A Notable Anniversary," Jewish educator Mordecai H. Lewittes reported that as of that time, Hebrew courses were offered in 18 New York City high schools and in the high schools of 60 other cities across the United States. Between 1930, when the first course was offered, through 1980, more than 150,000 students studied Hebrew in public high schools in the United States. Hebrew language education in public high schools dwindled during the 1990s.

Today, teaching Hebrew in public high schools might be on the verge of a re-birth. The emergence of Hebrew-language elementary charter schools in New York and in Florida and the success in teaching Hebrew in venues like the elite high schools of North Shore Chicago has some envisioning a renewal of interest in Hebrew language instruction.

Why should 21st Century American Jewish educators consider new vistas for teaching Hebrew in public schools? The reasons are many and include:

- Hebrew has been identified by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Post-secondary Education as a "Priority" language in the August 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) (P.L. 110-315).
- Israel is second only to North America in the number of companies listed on NASDAQ.
- There is a demand for Hebrew speakers in high-tech, international relations, marketing and the military.
- At least 140 U.S. colleges offer Hebrew as a modern language.
- With very few exceptions, all of the top 50 ranked colleges and universities offer Hebrew as a language; those that don't

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offer Hebrew directly (MIT and Georgia Tech) have partnerships with other local universities where students can take Hebrew classes for credit.

Finally, quality Hebrew language instruction in good public schools contributes to the status of Hebrew language education as a serious and worthy area of study for Jews and non-Jews alike.

The year 2008 saw a resurgence of interest in Hebrew language learning in public schools on two fronts. The first was the establishment of the Ben Gamla Charter School in Florida and the application for (and granting of, in early 2009) a charter for the Hebrew Language Academy Charter School in Brooklyn. The second front, emerging through a collaboration between two new Jewish non-profits, Hebrew at the Center and the iCenter, has led to an



increased focus on the strengthening and expansion of Hebrew language teaching in public high schools. Based on a recent survey conducted by the iCenter, Hebrew is offered as a course in at least 26 high schools in approximately 18 cities and towns in more than 10 states, including Alabama, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin.

We believe a new frontier of hope, change and success in Hebrew teaching and learning will be, as in the title of a recent Schocken/Nextbook publication, *Resurrecting Hebrew*. This will take great initiative, professional and lay leadership, professional training and local partnerships in quality school districts across North America. The good news is the know-how to achieve outstanding results exists in many educational settings across the U.S., including in the public sphere. The possibilities for expansion, whether through public high schools or Hebrew language charter schools, are almost limitless. Together with university programs and the broad range of Jewish educational settings, successful Hebrew teaching and learning in the public school arena has the potential to raise the status and centrality of Hebrew as a vital language for the 21st Century and beyond. ■

These new organizations may hold special appeal for Jews who have in the past been put off by a communal orientation that seemed overly parochial. Seeing committed Jews engaging effectively in a broader social justice agenda may be especially beckoning. We should not underestimate the power of these efforts as potential exemplars of contemporary American Jewish moral leadership. At a time when Jewishness has become more of an advantage than a stigma, we have a challenge and an opportunity to reflect upon our collective contributions in new ways.

— BETHAMIE HOROWITZ