Young Adults On Their Own Terms
Young Adults On Their Own Terms

In recent years, the American Jewish community has expressed growing alarm over the lack of involvement among young adult Jews. There have been many explanations. Parents haven’t given their children a sufficient Jewish education. We are experiencing a generational shift away from the roots of Yiddishkeit. The infrastructure of Jewish life doesn’t speak the language of young adults. Judaism isn’t “cool.”

What is rarely discussed is the possibility that young adults seek Jewish involvement, but feel disenfranchised from the American Jewish community. On a range of issues, there exists enormous dissonance between the policies of the Jewish community and the needs and views of its young adult population. Young Jewish adults in America generally do not live in fear of anti-Semitism — yet major institutions of the Jewish community continue to be structured around a culture of victimization.

Young Jewish adults are supportive of Israel but often critical of Israeli policies — yet the American Jewish leadership offers almost no latitude for criticism of Israel. Young Jews are more tolerant of interfaith relationships — yet the American Jewish community sends a message that if one marries outside the faith, he or she will be cut off from the Jewish people. Young Jewish adults are more receptive to life in today’s multi-ethnic American society — yet Jewish programs are often geared towards tribalism and ethnic isolation. Young Jews are known to be concerned about the environment — yet environmental activism is so far from the agenda of the mainstream Jewish community that one of its leaders recently offered tacit support for oil drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. Is it any wonder that young Jewish adults feel they have no voice in their own community?

Given the current state of community affairs, it is possible that if young adults are to find a gateway into increased Jewish involvement, it will have to be through initiatives launched on their own terms. Several programs have recently emerged to tap into the unique needs and independent spirit of young adults. Some programs have arisen from the grass roots, among visionary young adults disillusioned by the status quo. Other programs have been initiated and supported by major Jewish organizations that were willing to think outside the box and listen to the needs of young adults. This issue of Contact will examine several new programs that tap into the creative potential of the next generation. Whether cultural, spiritual or environmental in content, they offer exciting new opportunities for young Jews to participate in Jewish life. What the programs share is a willingness to dispense with preconceptions and to cater programming to young adults themselves.

By now it is clear that today’s generation of young adults is brimming with creative potential. In various pursuits, from social activism to philanthropy to the arts, a new generation is already leaving its mark on the Jewish and secular worlds. If the Jewish community opens itself more fully to this generation, the benefits will be enormous. Jewish life will be enriched by new voices; more young adult Jews will feel compelled to live Jewish lives; and the community will be reinvigorated more effectively towards the Jewish future.

Authenticity Versus Outreach: The Case of Jewish Environmentalism

by MARK X. JACOBS

Like many North American Jews, after my Bar Mitzvah I became an increasingly reluctant participant in Jewish life. And like many North American young adults, I also became deeply committed to environmental causes. It was not until college that I discovered rather accidentally that environmentalism and Judaism are profoundly complimentary. Intrigued by the connection, I embarked on what has become a rewarding journey into Jewish thought and life.

A few years later, when the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) was founded in 1993 by, among others, then-Senator Al Gore, the late cosmologist Carl Sagan, Dr. Isamar Schorsch, Rabbi David Saperstein, Dr. John Ruskay and Paul Gorman (now the executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment). The primary impetus of COEJL was to create a Jewishly-rooted culture of environmental responsibility within the Jewish community and to mobilize Jewish institutions and individuals to take practical and political action to address mounting environmental challenges.

COEJL’s founders recognized at the outset that this endeavor would likely attract young Jews who might not otherwise be involved in the Jewish community. They intended that Judaism’s encounter with the historical reality of a global environmental crisis would help to provoke a renewal of Jewish thought and life. COEJL’s mission is environmental protection, not outreach. Perhaps this is why it has been so successful in creating models for engaging young adults.

The reason for this is authenticity. COEJL seeks to accomplish a purpose with which young adults identify: to protect the environment. We pursue this mission not to attract young adults but because we believe it is good and right. COEJL articulates a vital universal mission for the Jewish community and the Jewish people — to protect and preserve all of creation and all of humankind — in a manner that is distinctively Jewish. As a result, young adults who otherwise feel left out of the Jewish community are drawn to our commitment to the environment and to Jewish ethics.

Another dimension of authenticity is
Young Adults On Their Own Terms

In recent years, the American Jewish community has expressed growing alarm over the lack of involvement among young adult Jews. There have been many explanations. Parents haven’t given their children a sufficient Jewish education. We are experiencing a generational shift away from the roots of Yiddishkeit. The infrastructure of Jewish life doesn’t speak the language of young adults. Judaism isn’t “cool.”

What is rarely discussed is the possibility that young adults seek Jewish involvement, but feel disenfranchised from the American Jewish community. On a range of issues, there exists enormous dissonance between the policies of the Jewish community and the needs and views of its young adult population. Young Jewish adults in America generally do not live in fear of anti-Semitism — yet major institutions of the Jewish community continue to be structured around a culture of victimization. Young Jewish adults are supportive of Israel but often critical of Israeli policies — yet the American Jewish leadership offers almost no latitude for criticism of Israel. Young Jews are more tolerant of interfaith relationships — yet the American Jewish community sends a message that if one marries outside the faith, he or she will be cut off from the Jewish people. Young Jewish adults are more receptive to life in today’s multi-ethnic American society — yet Jewish programs are often geared towards tribalism and ethnic isolation. Young Jews are known to be concerned about the environment — yet environmental activism is so far from the agenda of the mainstream Jewish community that one of its leaders recently offered tacit support for oil drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. Is it any wonder that young Jewish adults feel they have no voice in their own community?

Given the current state of community affairs, it is possible that if young adults are to find a gateway into increased Jewish involvement, it will have to be through initiatives launched on their own terms. Several programs have recently emerged to tap into the unique needs and independent spirit of young adults. Some programs have arisen from the grass roots, among visionary young adults disillusioned by the status quo. Other programs have been initiated and supported by major Jewish organizations that were willing to think outside the box and listen to the needs of young adults. This issue of Contact will examine several new programs that tap into the creative potential of the next generation. Whether cultural, spiritual or environmental in content, they offer exciting new opportunities for young Jews to participate in Jewish life. What the programs share is a willingness to dispense with preconceptions and to cater programming to young adults themselves.

By now it is clear that today’s generation of young adults is brimming with creative potential. In various pursuits, from social activism to philanthropy to the arts, a new generation is already leaving its mark on the Jewish and secular worlds. If the Jewish community opens itself more fully to this generation, the benefits will be enormous. Jewish life will be enriched by new voices; more young adult Jews will feel compelled to live Jewish lives; and the community will be reoriented more effectively towards the Jewish future.

Mark X. Jacobs has served as executive director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) since 1993. For more information on COEJL, please go to www.coejl.org.

Contact: 2000 Adelphi Road, NW Washington, DC 20036 Phone: 202-785-1616 Fax: 202-785-1550
E-mail: info@jewishlife.org

Authenticity Versus Outreach: The Case of Jewish Environmentalism by Mark X. Jacobs

Like many North American Jews, after my Bar Mitzvah I became an increasingly reluctant participant in Jewish life. And like many North American young adults, I also became deeply committed to environmental causes.

It was not until college that I discovered rather accidentally that environmentalism and Judaism are profoundly complimentary. Intrigued by the connection, I embarked on what has become a rewarding journey into Jewish thought and life.

A few years later, when the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) was established, I learned that there were hundreds, and maybe thousands, of other young Jews like me across North America, people building our lives around the values and commitments we understood to be at the center of both Judaism and environmentalism. We sought to live according to a Jewish environmental ethic that we were both discovering and defining ourselves, and to integrate this ethic into our Jewish communities.

Now, a little more than ten years later, I have had the privilege of serving as the executive director of COEJL, for the past seven years. COEJL was founded in 1993 by among others, then-Senator Al Gore, the late cosmologist Carl Sagan, Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Rabbi David Saperstein, Dr. John Ruskay and Paul Gorman (now the executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment). The primary impetus of COEJL was to create a Jewishly-rooted culture of environmental responsibility within the Jewish community and to mobilize Jewish institutions and individuals to take practical and political action to address mounting environmental challenges.

COEJL’s founders recognized at the outset that this endeavor would likely attract young Jews who might not otherwise be involved in the Jewish community. And they intuited that Judaism’s encounter with the historical reality of a global environmental crisis would help to provoke a renewal of Jewish thought and life.

COEJL’s mission is environmental protection, not outreach. Perhaps this is why it has been so successful in creating models for engaging young adults.

The reason for this authenticity is COEJL seeks to accomplish a purpose with which young adults identify: to protect the environment. We pursue this mission not to attract young adults but because we believe it is good and right. COEJL articulates a vital universal mission for the Jewish community and the Jewish people — to protect and preserve all of creation and all of humankind — in a manner that is distinctively Jewish. As a result, young adults who otherwise feel left out of the Jewish community are drawn to our commitment to the environment and to Jewish ethics.

Another dimension of authenticity is
The more deeply their values, vision and leadership are affirmed, the deeper their Jewish roots will grow.
S
ometimes, young people are truly creative. Rather than replicate what already exists, they innovate. Rather than do politely as they are told, they surprise people with the curious and unexpected. This is a “problem” all identity-building programs should have. Consider birthright israel, a ten-day peer educational encounter with the Jewish state. The program does not so much tap the creative resources of the young generation as unleash them. Between the two is the difference between co-optation and empowerment, between a mechanistic view of identity-development and a humanist view. This is a story about what some men on birthright israel did when the program gave them the resources and freedom to create for themselves. It does not follow the standard paradigms of Jewish identity stories that tries to fit things into established categories of “Jewishness.” Instead, it demonstrates just how creative creativity can be.

It took me several days to realize that the shofar belonged to Evan.* I rarely saw him with it. It was always being used by someone else in the group. Nor had I pegged Evan as the type who would shell out cash for a religious artifact. I should have known that his street tough look was just a look. But, then again, the Judacan souvenir he decided to purchase was no do-gooder’s tsedakah box. It was a two-and-a-half-foot horn hewn from the head of a ram. Streaked charcoal gray and curved in a single-helix like a strand of DNA that had been twisted apart, it sat raw and monumental, especially if you nosed around inside.

The shofar often came down from its storage space in the overhead rack when people were waiting outside the tour bus. On the curb beside the rear door, a group of men would gather, usually about a half-dozen at least, each taking turns trying to coax a sound out of the horn. A man’s status in the group was reflected in control of the shofar, and skill with the shofar was reflected in status in the group, though the two were not identical. The more one could elicit a resonant blast, the less hands grabbed for the next try. Likewise, some who could hardly eke out a squeak might claim extended time on the shofar if they were seen as leaders in the group.

*Confidentiality was promised to all participants in the birthright israel evaluation research. In this article, all names have been changed and no photos depict members of the group being described.

A woman’s place in this fellowship was about the same as a man’s place in his or her own Rosh HaShanah group. There would be other opportunities for men and women to come together as one and for women’s voices to take center stage. Caryn’s performance of her original songs on the hotel piano was one. The horn-blowing contest over who was the “alpha male” was not. Once the shofar became a tool for boys to be boys, it left women with little stake in it. The shofar was eventually redefined as a communal possession of men and women alike, but this happened in a way that ironically reinforced rather than subverted the dynamics that had earlier emerged.

Evan may have owned the shofar, but Sam was its master. As the only person able to sound strong blasts with any consistency, he took control of Evan’s horn. It was his decision to carry it up the Roman ramp to Masada, where we had gone to watch the sunrise. When the sun burst out of its hiding place, a piercing blast shattered the silence. Heads snapped left to see Sam standing on a stone wall with the two-and-a-half-foot ram’s horn to his lips. He struck another similar note, then a string of medium-length shevarim blasts. When the sun had risen fully, Sam let out one final tekiah gedolah.

Isabelle, one of my key informants, pulled me aside and said, “That was definitely a moment!” Days later, she confessed over a plate of hummus, “When I heard the shofar, I cried.” Josh made a similar comment in a group discussion, echoing Lauren, who described it as one of the most spiritual moments of their birthright israel trip.

No longer a primal yell from man to man, the shofar call became the call of tradition informing experience and experience reinforcing tradition. If the act of blowing the shofar had brought the men together, the act of listening helped unify the entire group. The blasts were not only moving, they seemed appropriate, as if all sunrises in biblical days had been so marked. By wrenching the shofar out of the synagogue ritual to which it had been narrowly confined for centuries, the men of birthright israel had restored the shofar to functional use. Conventional uses, to be sure, but, at first to the men and then also to the women, ultimately meaningful.

When birthright israel was conceived, few imagined that one of the ways it would influence identity would be by enabling men to express masculinity through Jewish artifacts, or that the gender dynamics that would emerge around a shofar would heighten the spiritual experience on Masada. But the creative resources the program unleashed led to precisely this. The implications are profound. It encourages us not to treat Jewish identity as a separate box in a person’s head, but to explore the ways that an integrated holistic identity might be informed and influenced Jewishly. It reminds that, in spite of the pressures to plan, plan, the success of programs to empower young adults depends as much on a willingness to relinquish control. And finally, the creativity of the program participants breaks down any hard and fast distinction between the programmers and the subjects. People shape their own experiences. The best identity-building programs help them to do so.
S

ometimes, young people are truly creative. Rather than replicate what already exists, they innovate. Rather than do politely as they are told, they surprise people with the curious and unexpected. This is a “problem” all identity-building programs should have. Consider birthright israel, a ten-day peer educational encounter with the Jewish state. The program does not so much tap the creative resources of the young generation as unleash them. Between the two is the difference between co-option and empowerment, between a mechanistic view of identity-development and a humanist view. This is a story about what some men on birthright israel did when the program gave them the resources and freedom to create for themselves. It does not follow the standard paradigm of Jewish identity stories that tries to fit things into established categories of “Jewishness.” Instead, it demonstrates just how creative creativity can be.

It took me several days to realize that the shofar belonged to Evan.* I rarely saw him with it. It was always being used by other men in the group. Nor had I pegged Evan as the type to Evan.* I rarely saw him with it. It was always being used by other men in the group. Nor had I pegged Evan as the type to have known that his street tough look was just a look. But, who would shell out cash for a religious artifact. I should other men in the group. Nor had I pegged Evan as the type to Evan.* I rarely saw him with it. It was always being used by other men in the group. Nor had I pegged Evan as the type

**Confidentiality was promised to all participants in the birthright israel evaluation research. In this article, all names have been changed and no photos depict members of the group being described.**
I t is 1996. Four women in their thirties are sitting in a room together eating sushi. One woman is a rabbi, one dropped out of rabbinical school, one was accepted to rabbinical school but never received her certification, and the other was a faculty member at a rabbinical school. They are deeply engaged in conversation about the experiences of their respective teachers and their personal and communal understanding of the Jewish community.

One of the women, a rabbinical student, explains how her teacher, a professor of Jewish history, taught her about the significance of the tekiah g’dolah, the moment when the shofar is blown to signal the end of the Jewish War. She describes how the shofar became a symbol of Jewish resistance and how its sound echoed throughout the centuries, from the ancient past to the present day.

Another woman, who dropped out of rabbinical school, shares her story of how she left the program to pursue a different path. She explains how the decision to leave was not easy, but it was necessary for her personal growth. She is now working in a field related to Jewish studies and feels fulfilled in her new role.

A third woman, a faculty member, talks about the role of academia in shaping Jewish identity. She explains how the study of Jewish texts and traditions can lead to a deeper understanding of the religion and its place in the world.

The fourth woman, a rabbinical student, talks about the importance of community in Jewish life. She describes how being part of a supportive community has been crucial to her personal development and her understanding of the Jewish faith.

So, yes, it can be done. Young philanthropists can change the landscape of our Jewish community.
JEWISH INNOVATORS WANTED

Joshua Venture Launches the Next Generation of Jewish Leaders by BRIAN GAINES

History Lessons

Jewish history shows us that Jews in their 20's and 30's are the drivers of social change. Institutions and ideas such as the Jewish Theological Seminary, the havash movement, and free public school lunch programs were all products of Jews in this age group. Today’s young Jews are no exception. Many are envisioning and creating projects that hold promise for a more vibrant and enriched Jewish life, below the traditional Jewish community's radar. Many are unsure how to access the resources offered by established organizations. Many others do not even try.

Who Are They?

Eighteen months ago, Jennifer Bleyer, 26, a freelance writer covering Green Party Presidential candidate Ralph Nader’s campaign, decided to put her budding writing career on hold to take a shot at a dream. She had a vision of publishing a magazine that would host “a dynamic, inclusive conversation about the nature of politics, art, culture and spirituality in our evolving community” and that would encapsulate the perspectives of Jews in her generation. Although Ms. Bleyer possessed natural leadership skills and had published several underground zines (small press magazines) during her years as a student, she required the experience, resources and skills needed to manifest her idea.

In late 2000, Ms. Bleyer, along with nearly one hundred other aspiring Jewish social entrepreneurs, replied to a call for Jewish innovators. The request came from San Francisco-based Joshua Venture: A Fellowship for Social Entrepreneur, a newly formed fellowship program in search of a first cohort of fellows. The program offered Bleyer and others like her a chance to obtain the training and resources critical to launching her initiative. In February 2001, Ms. Bleyer and seven other emerging innovators under 35 years of age were selected as Joshua Venture fellows. These young entrepreneurs’ projects serve a variety of sectors within the Jewish community, and range from working with Jewish children with learning disabilities to establishing houses of study for women and Jews of Latin American descent, to encouraging secular teens to explore their Jewish identity through filmmaking.

Expanding the Landscape

We must acknowledge that this generation grew up in an age of identity politics, mixed marriages and multiculturalism, and that young Jews often choose “Jewish” as only one adjective with which to describe themselves. The Jewish community faces the crisis of losing its best and brightest if we do not create venues for younger Jews to express their own manifestations of Judaism.

Joshua Venture believes that in order to accept the mantle of leadership, future leaders must be steeped both in their own experience and in a deep understanding of Jewish history and values. The organization encourages emerging social entrepreneurs to bring Jewish values to their work. Joshua Venture promotes excellence by assuring that Jews in their 20's and 30's have the business, nonprofit management and leadership skills they require in order to succeed.

The two-year-old organization is based upon a model that invites entrepreneurs to explore innovative solutions to social concerns. Joshua Venture is creating a network of emerging social entrepreneurs, and hopes to inspire young Jews to drive the community forward in this and future generations. The more we encourage the next generation to dedicate its talents and creativity to the Jewish community and to participate in programs like Joshua Venture, the greater the opportunity for Judaism to flourish in the 21st century.

THE HUB: Building Community Through Arts

by AMY TOBIN

We have always come together through story and music. This is one of the guiding principles of The Hub, a new arts program designed to build community among Jews in their 20's and 30's through the performing arts. With the support of Joshua Venture, I established The Hub to present theater, music and spoken word events that reflect, explore and represent the diversity of Jewish life. These arts events spark honest dialogue about being Jewish today. Rather than creating programs that isolate Jewish identity, The Hub appeals to young Jews in their totality, as people who are multi-layered and have a universal perspective. We present artists from Jewish and other ethnic backgrounds to help foster intercultural dialogue. We also help develop new works by Jewish artists that interpret Jewish stories and traditions through personal experiences and contemporary perspectives.

Most recently, The Hub presented Home for Sukkot, an evening of solo performance, music and spoken word by Jewish, African-American, Sicilian, Sri Lankan, and Cantonese artists. Each performer explored themes of home, displacement and wandering from their unique cultural perspectives. Over 80 people attended the show. The audience response was overwhelmingly positive. Upcoming programs include a new cabaret show that interprets the Book of Esther, a world-music band that features both Sufi and Israeli musicians, and a one-man show that uses traditional Hassidic storytelling and experimental hip-hop flute techniques.

The Hub is housed at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, whose support and infrastructure has enabled the program to hit the ground running. As the JCC builds a new facility, The Hub is cultivating audiences of Jews in their 20's and 30's, producing shows at venues throughout the city to appeal to those who might not ordinarily attend an event at a Jewish organization. While Joshua Venture has provided seed money and the JCC has helped subsidize its first year, The Hub is seeking program support so that it can grow, hopefully to become a model program that can be replicated in communities throughout America.

Amy Tobin is a performer and Artistic Director of The Hub at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco.
Joshua Venture Launches the Next Generation of Jewish Leaders

by BRIAN GAINES

History Lessons

Jewish history shows us that Jews in their 20s and 30s are the drivers of social change. Institutions and ideas such as the Jewish Theological Seminary, the havarah movement, and free public school lunch programs were all products of Jews in this age group. Today’s young Jews are no exception. Many are envisioning and creating projects that hold promise for a more vibrant and enriched Jewish community. However, these innovators often work outside of mainstream Jewish life, below the traditional Jewish community’s radar. Many are unsure how to access the resources offered by established organizations. Many others do not even try.

Who Are They?

Eighteen months ago, Jennifer Bleyer, 26, a freelance writer covering Green Party Presidential candidate Ralph Nader’s campaign, decided to put her budding writing career on hold to take a shot at a dream. She had a vision of publishing a magazine that would host “a dynamic, inclusive conversation about the nature of politics, art, culture and spirituality in our evolving community” and that would encapsulate the perspectives of Jews in her generation. Although Ms. Bleyer possessed natural leadership skills and had published several underground zines (small press magazines) during her years as a student, she required the experience, resources and skills needed to manifest her idea.

In late 2000, Ms. Bleyer, along with nearly one hundred other aspiring Jewish social entrepreneurs, replied to a call for Jewish innovators. The request came from San Francisco-based Joshua Venture: A Fellowship for Jewish Social Entrepreneurs, a newly formed fellowship program in search of a first cohort of fellows. The program offered Bleyer and others like her a chance to obtain the training and resources critical to launching her initiative. In February 2001, Ms. Bleyer and seven other emerging innovators under 35 years of age were selected as Joshua Venture fellows. These young entrepreneurs’ projects serve a variety of sectors within the Jewish community, and range from working with Jewish children with learning disabilities to establishing houses of study for women and Jews of Latin American descent, to encouraging secular teens to explore their Jewish identity through filmmaking.

Expanding the Landscape

We must acknowledge that this generation grew up in an age of identity politics, mixed marriages and multiculturalism, and that young Jews often choose “Jewish” as only one adjective with which to describe themselves.

The Hub

We have always come together through story and music. This is one of the guiding principles of The Hub, a new arts program designed to build community among Jews in their 20’s and 30’s through the performing arts. With the support of Joshua Venture, I established The Hub to present theater, music and spoken word events that reflect, explore and represent the diversity of Jewish life. These arts events spark honest dialogue about being Jewish today. Rather than creating programs that isolate Jewish identity, The Hub appeals to young jews in their totality, as people who are multi-layered and have a universal perspective. We present artists from Jewish and other ethnic backgrounds to help foster intercultural dialogue. We also help develop new works by Jewish artists that interpret Jewish stories and traditions through personal experiences and contemporary perspectives.

Most recently, The Hub presented Home for Sukkot, an evening of solo performance, music and spoken word by Jewish, African-American, Sicilian, Sri Lankan, and Can tonese artists. Each performer explored themes of home, displacement and wandering from their unique cultural perspectives. Over 80 people attended the show. The audience response was overwhelmingly positive. Upcoming programs include a new cabaret show that interprets the Book of Esther, a world-music band that features both Sufi and Israeli musicians, and a one-man show that uses traditional Hassidic storytelling and experimental hip-hop Batte technique.

The Hub is housed at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, whose support and infrastructure has enabled the program to hit the ground running. As the JCC builds a new facility, The Hub is cultivating audiences of Jews in their 20’s and 30’s, producing shows at venues throughout the city to appeal to those who might not ordinarily attend an event at a Jewish organization. While Joshua Venture has provided seed money and the JCC has helped subsidize its first year, The Hub is seeking program support so that it can grow, hopefully to become a model program that can be replicated in communities throughout America.
Bikkurim: A Hothouse For The First Fruits Of A Burgeoning Judaism

by AMY AMIEL and MARTIN KAMINER

The inspiration for Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas was very simple and not particularly revolutionary — a big empty space in the middle of the new United Jewish Communities office in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. That empty space, and two oft-heard mandates: we must narrow the gap between the older generation of great Jewish institutions and the emerging wave of new Jewish organizations, and we must inject vitality and innovation into the Jewish community.

The goal of Bikkurim is succinct, inex- pensive and modest in its aims — to give the most promising young Jewish organization the space, facilities, and technical assistance in such areas as how to create a website, how to develop a board, how to write a grant proposal and how to find out who’s who in the Jewish world. There is little organized programming. Those who seek, find. There’s no spoon-feeding.

Will every project turn out right? Will the entire batch be perfect? Certainly not. If even one project from the first cohort succeeds, it will be well worth the investment. If two go on to have a positive impact on their communities, we will have seen the investment returned many times over.

Is it working? Too soon to tell. On cooking shows, no sooner does the chef put the dish in the oven than he pulls out another one and declares the recipe a success. At this point, a little more than halfway through the first two-year residency, there are positive indications from initial evaluations, but no guarantees.

Several of the groups have succeeded in attracting funding during their residency, guaranteeing that they can continue to grow and advance their vision. Would they have won these grants had they not been Bikkurim residents? They might very well have.

The First Fruits

Bikkurim

Martin Kaminer

Of A Burgeoning

The First Fruits

A Hothouse For

Bikkurim:

The goal of Bikkurim is succinct, inexpensive and modest in its aims — to give the most promising young Jewish organization the space, facilities, and technical assistance in such areas as how to create a website, how to develop a board, how to write a grant proposal and how to find out who’s who in the Jewish world. There is little organized programming. Those who seek, find. There’s no spoon-feeding.

Will every project turn out right? Will the entire batch be perfect? Certainly not. If even one project from the first cohort succeeds, it will be well worth the investment. If two go on to have a positive impact on their communities, we will have seen the investment returned many times over.

Is it working? Too soon to tell. On cooking shows, no sooner does the chef put the dish in the oven than he pulls out another one and declares the recipe a success. At this point, a little more than halfway through the first two-year residency, there are positive indications from initial evaluations, but no guarantees.

Several of the groups have succeeded in attracting funding during their residency, guaranteeing that they can continue to grow and advance their vision. Would they have won these grants had they not been Bikkurim residents? They might very well have. But we know from experience that at their stage, every bit of assistance is priceless.

We would be remiss not to name those groups that are toiling away on the UJC floor to make their dream a reality. Currently resident at Bikkurim are:

Srorahstelling – Jewish Ritual Theater Revived

Matan – The Gift Of Jewish Learning For Every Child

Heeb – A Sweaty Prizefight Between Hip-Hop And Sushi

Keren Machar – The Fund For Tomorrow

If Bikkurim is successful, each partner will benefit — the UJC will be rejuvenated by the best ideas of young Jewish activists, and new Jewish organizations will be mentored and nurtured by the rich resources of the organized Jewish community. We all are already benefiting from the steady stream of vibrant new ways of being Jewish that insures that our traditions, though ever-changing, will endure.

If every project from the first cohort succeeds, it will be well worth the investment.

by NIGEL SAVAGE

Hazon means vision. It was founded to be a catalyst for a new Jewish vision, defined fairly broadly: projects rooted in Jewish tradition. In the present, focused on the future and spanning denominational and other differences within the Jewish community.

Hazon’s first major project was the summer 2000 Cross-USA Jewish Environmental Bike Ride. As Hazon’s founder, I led a pluralistic Jewish group in cycling 3000 miles from Seattle to Washington DC to raise environmental awareness in the Jewish community, to raise money for Jewish environmental causes and, in a broader sense, to be a paradigm of a new Jewish vision.

There were 12 riders, ranging in age from 20 to 47, of every Jewish background and denomination, straight and gay, married and single, American and Israeli. They taught in 47 Jewish communities along the way, were featured in the press, on TV and on the radio, and ended at the White House, where they received a national award from the EPA.

The Ride spawned a New York Ride, held in October 2001, which is now to be an annual event, and a second Cross-USA Ride is being planned for summer 2003. Ride alumni staffed this winter’s first-ever Birthright Israel “Israel by Bike” tour.

Why have these Rides struck a chord? Perhaps because they’re ultimately physical rather than intellectual. They are rooted in Jewish teaching — about the planet, about community, about giving thanks and about tikkun olam — yet they are deceptively new. This is not our grandparent’s Judaism. Most important, they inherently bring people together, across considerable differences, in a spirit of shared endeavor and ultimately of achievement and celebration.
Bikkurim: A Hothouse For The First Fruits Of A Burgeoning Judaism

by AMY AMIEL and MARTIN KAMINER

The inspiration for bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas was very simple and not particularly revolutionary — a big empty space in the middle of the new United Jewish Communities office in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. That empty space, and two oft-heard mandates: we must narrow the gap between the older generation of great Jewish institutions and the emerging wave of new Jewish organizations, and we must inject vitality and innovation into the Jewish community. The goal of bikkurim is succinct, inexpensive and modest in its aims — to give the most promising young Jewish organizations access to the accumulated expertise and resources that fill the halls of UJC and its Renaissance

What is a young Jewish organization? An organization started by young adults? Intended to serve young people? Simply a new idea that wasn’t around in the hoary days of yore? We don’t really define it, but for our groups the answer seems to be all three. Although none of the current resident groups serve young adults exclusively, all were created by young adults and their programs are aimed at areas of Jewish life important to young adults.

Through a competitive application process, bikkurim finds the brightest people with the best ideas; puts them in a confined space under pressure; mixes in heaping quantities of office supplies, telecommunications services and computer equipment; sprinkles in some consultation, advice and networking; adds a pinch of money; turns up the heat; stirs regularly. A hothouse for innovation into the Jewish community. That empty space, the Kaminer Family Foundation, which funds bikkurim, represents the Kaminer Family Foundation, which funds bikkurim.

If every one project from the first cohort succeeds, it will be well worth the investment.
Who Comes to the Source? The People Who Make Makor

by STEVEN M. COHEN

To be Autumn of 1990 marked the opening of Makor ("The Source"), a multi-purpose Jewish facility housed in a five-story townhouse on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. In February 2001, Makor became a part of New York’s 92nd Street Y through a gift from Makor founder Michael Steinhardt and a subsequent merger of the two organizations. Makor has continued to focus on the growth of young adults. Its diverse spaces include a street-level café offering food, beer and wine, among other things. The upper floors contain a state-of-the-art screening room, areas designated for public discussions, seminar rooms, an art gallery and more.

According to its website, Makor seeks itself as “a place of expression where Jewish New York’s backgrounds and currents can feel comfortable. Makor promises to be the most desirable place for New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s.” In particular, Makor seeks to facilitate exposure to Jewish educational experiences, from cultural threats, non-belting and belting a culturally sophisticated and upscale clientele in large numbers. It is important to young people’s relationships with each other and, by extension, with being Jewish.

In part to examine how well it is performing that mission, Makor — with the support of The Nathan Cummings Foundation — asked to undertake a random sample study of Makor attendees. By interviewing 789 visitors in the building over three days from period January 25 to April 24, 2001, interviewers collected information on Makor constituents’ socio-demographic characteristics, their Jewish involvement (among the large majority who are Jewish), their use of Makor and the Makor community, the institution. Following are some of the main findings of this study.

• The results suggest a certain institutional inertia to Makor. It is not merely a building housing a series of events, appealing programs. Rather, it constitutes an organic system, with programmatic by nature in each of the threads that crisscross and intersect one another, leading visitors from one point to another. Many Gateways, Diverse Destinations Few Jewish institutions currently serve this population, which is not particularly well targeted or well served. Their first visits to Makor makes them more heavily enticed into entertainment-oriented programs, such as music in the Café and films. Their subsequent visits lead more in the direction of programs with explicit Jewish cultural content. In fact, most participants in Jewish education classes, to take a key example, first came to Makor for the entertainment programs.

The results suggest a certain institutional inertia to Makor. It is not merely a building housing a series of events, appealing programs. Rather, it constitutes an organic system, with programmatic by nature in each of the threads that crisscross and intersect one another, leading visitors from one point to another. Many Gateways, Diverse Destinations Few Jewish institutions currently serve this population, which is not particularly well targeted or well served. Their first visits to Makor makes them more heavily enticed into entertainment-oriented programs, such as music in the Café and films. Their subsequent visits lead more in the direction of programs with explicit Jewish cultural content. In fact, most participants in Jewish education classes, to take a key example, first came to Makor for the entertainment programs.

The results suggest a certain institutional inertia to Makor. It is not merely a building housing a series of events, appealing programs. Rather, it constitutes an organic system, with programmatic by nature in each of the threads that crisscross and intersect one another, leading visitors from one point to another. Many Gateways, Diverse Destinations Few Jewish institutions currently serve this population, which is not particularly well targeted or well served. Their first visits to Makor makes them more heavily enticed into entertainment-oriented programs, such as music in the Café and films. Their subsequent visits lead more in the direction of programs with explicit Jewish cultural content. In fact, most participants in Jewish education classes, to take a key example, first came to Makor for the entertainment programs.

The results suggest a certain institutional inertia to Makor. It is not merely a building housing a series of events, appealing programs. Rather, it constitutes an organic system, with programmatic by nature in each of the threads that crisscross and intersect one another, leading visitors from one point to another. Many Gateways, Diverse Destinations Few Jewish institutions currently serve this population, which is not particularly well targeted or well served. Their first visits to Makor makes them more heavily enticed into entertainment-oriented programs, such as music in the Café and films. Their subsequent visits lead more in the direction of programs with explicit Jewish cultural content. In fact, most participants in Jewish education classes, to take a key example, first came to Makor for the entertainment programs.

The results suggest a certain institutional inertia to Makor. It is not merely a building housing a series of events, appealing programs. Rather, it constitutes an organic system, with programmatic by nature in each of the threads that crisscross and intersect one another, leading visitors from one point to another. Many Gateways, Diverse Destinations Few Jewish institutions currently serve this population, which is not particularly well targeted or well served. Their first visits to Makor makes them more heavily enticed into entertainment-oriented programs, such as music in the Café and films. Their subsequent visits lead more in the direction of programs with explicit Jewish cultural content. In fact, most participants in Jewish education classes, to take a key example, first came to Makor for the entertainment programs.
E
very age group within the American Jewish community poses unique challenges and opportunities, but are more complex than those facing today's newest adult generation. Where do these recent college graduates and assorted twenty-somethings stand today? What are they thinking, feeling, and changing as we continue to experiment with the vast array of questions, interests, hopes and fears. Third, that we must listen openly to their passions, interests, and needs. And that we must demonstrate that Judaism adds value to their lives.

This challenge — and, indeed, this population — is not unfamiliar to Hillel. Over the last few years, Hillel has pioneered its Engagement Methodology, a results-oriented approach to working with young adults that is catered to their needs and tastes. Engagement techniques change every year as the campus population changes. The twenty-somethings of today are the engagement students of yesterday.

Recognizing our expertise with this group, the Belfer Family Foundation offered to support a new Hillel initiative to engage twenty-somethings. The pilot project, located in Seattle, New York City, and Chicago, is called Jconnect. Jconnect's engagement approach makes a number of assumptions. First, that Jewish and secular institutions must form partnerships to address twenty-somethings' interests of this generation. Second, that the Jewish community must meet twenty-somethings where they are and that we must listen openly to their passions, interests, hopes and fears. Third, that twenty-somethings' Jewish experiences must be created as vehicles for them to succeed and lead, and that we must be the ones to offer them opportunities to succeed and lead, and that they must be unleashed as we continue to experiment and learn.

Currently in its second year, Jconnect is headquartered at the University of Illinois in Chicago. The Hillel Foundation in Seattle, the Florida Hillel, and the Belfer Family Foundation are all Jconnect partners. By RHODA A. WEISMAN

SPRING 2002

Who Comes to the Source? The People Who Make Makor

by STEVEN M. COHEN

be Autumn of 1999 marked the opening of Makor (“The Source”), a multi-cultural, multi-faceted Jewish community center for New Yorkers of all backgrounds. Makor’s location was inspired by RHODA A. WEISMAN

The number who have visited Israel is indicative. Only about a third of all respondents have been to Israel, as have about 42% of New York area Jews in their 30s and 40s. In sharp contrast with these numbers, 73% of the Jews who have visited Israel are largely under 40 years of age and are unmarried; correlatively, they lack institutional ties to organized Jewry. However, they are connected to something larger, and to more people. In terms of Jewish identity and the importance they place on their Jewishness, the ability of Makor to attract non-Jews is actually a positive feature for the success of Makor. In focus groups prior to the opening of Makor, many young adult Jews did say, “I don’t hang out with non-Jews outside of work.” The researcher concluded, “a significant segment felt uncomfortable about frequenting a place that, by its very nature, would exclude their non-Jewish friends.”

Jewish Diverse

In the words of a recent Makor participant, the Makor population doesn’t quite fit preconceived categories of involvement. Moreover, it is a Jewishly diverse group with a broad range of backgrounds and current involvements. As many as 28% reported that day school constituted their main form of Jewish involvement among twenty-somethings. As an example of Jewish involvement among twenty-somethings, we can look at Geshercity, a multi-jewish youth organization that provides a number of social, cultural, and educational activities for Jewish young adults. Geshercity’s goal is that Jewish young adults can travel and socialize with other Jewish young adults. In a recent survey conducted by Geshercity, 50% of its members were not Jewish. Geshercity is an organization that is creating events for Jewish young adults. In this way, Geshercity is creating events for Jewish young adults that are not only relevant to Jewish young adults, but are also relevant to non-Jewish young adults.

Jewish Identity

In the words of a recent Makor participant, the Makor population doesn’t quite fit preconceived categories of involvement. Moreover, it is a Jewishly diverse group with a broad range of backgrounds and current involvements. As many as 28% reported that day school constituted their main form of Jewish involvement among twenty-somethings. As an example of Jewish involvement among twenty-somethings, we can look at Geshercity, a multi-jewish youth organization that provides a number of social, cultural, and educational activities for Jewish young adults. Geshercity’s goal is that Jewish young adults can travel and socialize with other Jewish young adults. In a recent survey conducted by Geshercity, 50% of its members were not Jewish. Geshercity is an organization that is creating events for Jewish young adults. In this way, Geshercity is creating events for Jewish young adults that are not only relevant to Jewish young adults, but are also relevant to non-Jewish young adults.

In the words of a recent Makor participant, the Makor population doesn’t quite fit preconceived categories of involvement. Moreover, it is a Jewishly diverse group with a broad range of backgrounds and current involvements. As many as 28% reported that day school constituted their main form of Jewish involvement among twenty-somethings. As an example of Jewish involvement among twenty-somethings, we can look at Geshercity, a multi-jewish youth organization that provides a number of social, cultural, and educational activities for Jewish young adults. Geshercity’s goal is that Jewish young adults can travel and socialize with other Jewish young adults. In a recent survey conducted by Geshercity, 50% of its members were not Jewish. Geshercity is an organization that is creating events for Jewish young adults. In this way, Geshercity is creating events for Jewish young adults that are not only relevant to Jewish young adults, but are also relevant to non-Jewish young adults.
A Meaningful Young Jewish Adulthood: Looking Beyond the Singles Event

by SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW

The span of contemporary life—post-college, unmarried, childless adults (SINKs — single income no kids) — is often about proving oneself and seeking connection and stature. Often, people feel that they are still play-acting at adulthood until close to 35, when identity is often more established. For some, there is a feeling of being anchored. These are the years of finding voice for a personal narrative. Judaism can serve as an anchor and a backdrop for identity.

Traditional texts and teachings can be intimidating during this time of questioning — not as pedantic rule books, but as co-constructors on the path to meaning. Many have responded by creating interesting possibilities for connection with others. They are seeking spirituality. As Jewish professionals and lay leaders, we have the opportunity to help create meaningful content in our places of worship, so that people can seek meaning in it.

The Jewish community needs to speak to the deeper questions if it is going to compete with other compelling spiritual traditions that are popular in America. Biblical texts can serve as templates for the spiritual and ethical impact in the future. The Jewish people, and they include several stories of God conferring identity on individuals and communities. Through the receiving of land, names and a destiny, the Jewish people grew into maturity. Biblical texts can serve as templates for finding voice for personal identity.

The key questions for this age cohort, such as: What is the journey that you feel you have taken? Have you left much behind? What is your life trajectory? What spiritual or moral legacy will the Jewish people grow into maturity. Biblical texts can serve as templates for finding voice for personal identity. The Jewish community needs to speak to the deeper questions if it is going to compete with other compelling spiritual traditions that are popular in America.

The key questions for this age cohort, such as: What is the journey that you feel you have taken? Have you left much behind? What is your life trajectory? What spiritual or moral legacy will the Jewish people grow into maturity. Biblical texts can serve as templates for finding voice for personal identity. The Jewish community needs to speak to the deeper questions if it is going to compete with other compelling spiritual traditions that are popular in America.
The spin of contemporary life — constant electronic communication, text messaging, cell phones, social networking sites (SINs) — single income kids — is often about proving oneself and seeking constant validation. Or, as Rabbi Orlow said, if we feel that they are still playing at acting-student until adulthood and no identity is more. For some there is a feeling of being anchored. These are the years of finding a personal narrative. Judaism can serve as an anchor and a backdrop for identity.

Traditional texts and teachings can be reimagining during this for pedantic rule books, but as co-conspirators on meaningful experiences for the New Israel Fund — each of these programs. YAD in Atlanta, Makor in NYC, PIRKEI AVOT teaches the classical Rab- have taken? Have you left much behind? Our community can have taken? Have you left much behind? making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.

Pirkei Avot teaches the classical Rab- making meaningful and creative Jewish experiences for young adults that form the basis of lifelong Jewish affiliation. Unfortunately, there are so many issues to consider: a congregation that is too old and family demographics and generations in our community. Perhaps what we need to do is think con- concert, for increasing the numbers of Jewish in the short run, but it does nothing to ensure Judaism’s vibrancy and ethical impact in the future.
ike many North American Jews, after my Bar Mitzvah I became an increasingly reluctant participant in Jewish life. And like many North American young adults, I also became deeply committed to environmental causes.

It was not until college that I discovered rather accidentally that environmentalism and Judaism are profoundly complimentary. Intrigued by the connection, I embarked on what has become a rewarding journey into Jewish thought and life.

—MARK X. JACOBS