The Kids Are Alright

A new study shows young Jews connect to Judaism on their own terms.

Liel Leibovitz
Staff Writer

When Matt Goodman was growing up in Florida, B'notfman Philanthropies, and written by size diversity, "and place strong resistance in "the creation of communities around -identities, and pemleable boundaries."

A new study released last month confirms that Goodman and his friends represent "a fundamental shift in the ethos of young American Jewry," a shift away from traditional institutions and towards smaller, more innovative and more personalized communal structures.

The new study, entitled "The Continuity of Discontinuity," was commissioned by The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, and written by Ari Kelman, assistant professor of American studies at University of California, Davis, and Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist of American Jewry who teaches at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Manhattan. The two focused on four leading organizations engaged in "the creation of communities around identities, and permeable boundaries," both as participating observers and through in-depth interviews with 20 young leaders. The organizations examined included Ibar, a spiritual community dedicated to social justice; Storahelling, a nonprofit that promotes Jewish cultural literacy through theatrical and educational programs; JDub Records, a record label; and Guilt & Pleasure, a literary magazine.

The study presented three main findings. First, the authors found "young Jews, who remain single later in life, comprise a population for which traditional 'family-oriented' institutions have little appeal," instead, such individuals "are investing new communal outlets and projects that reflect their individuality."

These new communal outlets, the authors say, emphasize diversity, "and place strong resistance to anything hierarchical, denominational, exclusionary, or judgmental." Finally, the authors state, "young Jews, especially those who are not married, see traditional institutions as homogenizing and maintain strong boundaries between Jews and non-Jews; their endeavors, in contrast, value diversity, fluid identities, and permission to pursue different paths.

The authors based their work on the figures provided by the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey, which showed that while traditional forms of communal participation for young, unmarried Jews were in decline — only 22 percent, for example, belonged to a congregation, and 45 percent went on a Jewish summer camp — the importance of less traditional organizations has increased significantly.

As a result, Kelman and Cohen's study argues, continuity may depend on discontinuity, namely the Continued on next page

Overselling Camps

A large majority of the camps under Orthodox auspices, in my census of day schools, do not exclude institutions that are not consistent with my religious preferences. There is no excuse for FJC's narrow approach to camping.

There are other questions marks. The line separating private camps that are profit making from those that are allegedly nonprofit is exceedingly thin, as is evident when camp fees are compared. Many nonprofit camps are actually profit centers that exploit young women and men who serve on staff and are paid less than paltry salaries. There is a decided upper middle class bias in much of Jewish camping, in that the fees are beyond the reach of families of limited means, including middle class families. Since camping is optional, the word scholarship is rarely included in the camping lexicon. We should at least be curious as to why an activity that strongly favors affluent families is regarded as a legitimate recipient of financial support.

Interestingly, the non-profit Orthodox camps excluded by FJC from its world view are less costly, provide scholarship assistance and are more effective in their Judaic mission. Is this why they are considered not fit company for upscale Jewish people?

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Yes, because overwhelmingly American Jews will not provide their children with a meaningful Jewish education, it has become necessary to focus on weaker activities that produce weaker results and to see whether they can become more meaningful. Jewish camps are often last well into adulthood, to be outdoors, to enjoy sports and other activities, to spend time doing little of consequence.

Even in non-Orthodox camps with a distinctive Jewish mission, the leadership rarely has a sufficient commitment to religious purposefulness. They do not regard their institution as an instrumentality for meaningful Jewish education. For example, a home run research showing that as an independent variable, camping adds little to Jewish commitment. Even when linked to other experiences, such as participation in youth groups and Israel trips, camps are far less effective than day school.

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emergence of innovative organizations that break away from the existing, stagnant patterns and find new ways to engage young Jews.

"The truth is, all of American organized life has become much less hierarchal and more self-initiated," said Cohen, one of the leading scholars of American Jewish identity. "These new initiatives by Jewish adults under the age of 35 reflect the shift in American community structures."

Whereas, he added, the American organizational landscape of the 20th century was governed by national organizations with local chapters — such as Hadassah and B"nai B'rith — the 21st century is "a much more fluid age, where people have overlapping and distinctive networks, and these new organizations reflect this new model."

And new, innovative and specialized organizations under the age of 35 were represented by federations, denominations and the like. By the study's findings, he said, suggest that "new types of organizations will grow up alongside the ones that already exist. We won't see the end of big organizations, but we'll see and are seeing a dispersal of Jewish energy in lots of directions. So that the major organizations may decline in influence, but they won't disappear, at least not immediately."

But a structural transformation as large as this, experts acknowledge, is no simple affair; while the new models of engagement allow more and more young Jews to become active members of the community, the increasing individualization and the disdain for centralization might also lead to a process of communal erosion. The Jewish community, Cohen added, is facing major adjustments.

"I think [the study's findings] represent one more challenge that provokes another set of adjustments," he said. "Obviously, if the community didn't respond, it would mean decline, but I'm confident enough that organizations will respond, and there will be change and diversity and growth."

"Those are new developments. They're welcome and I expect more of them," Cohen said. "There isn't an established Jewish organization that hasn't noticed these changes and taken them seriously."

Others at UJA-Federation, however, are calling into question the study's findings. "I actually believe that the next generation gave as an example JCCs; once focused on providing their members services such as physical fitness classes, summer camps and early childhood programs, the centers, in recent years, have evolved to offer cultural exchanges, social justice and volunteering programs and other fare infinitely more appealing to their increasingly young, childless and broad-minded patrons."

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"I feel there's an upsurge of activity, an upsurge of commitment, an upsurge of giving, and an upsurge of involvement. So, I disagree with those who feel there's a lack of involvement in organizations."

Goldseker agreed, striking another conciliatory note between old and new. "Just as the UJA was an innovation of its time, in the late 1800s," she said, "it can help foster the innovations of today."