

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, his parents did everything they could to keep him in the fold. There was Hebrew school and Jewish summer camp, trips to Israel and a bacon-free kitchen. When he graduated from college and moved to New York, he said, his father called him up one day and gently prodded him to become involved with UJA-Federation of New York.

"He said it was important to be an active member of the community," said Goodman, now 27 and living in Queens. "But the UJA seemed too, I guess, clinical."

Turned off by the size, hierarchy and facelessness of the existing Jewish organizations, Goodman got together with a few college friends and started an informal salon, the first Friday of every month at a different member's apartment and discussing everything, he said, from that week's Torah portion to the Iranian threat to Israel.

"It's a great group," he said, "and we talk about things that actually concern us."

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 culture," both as participating observers and through in-depth interviews with 20 young leaders. The organizations examined included Ikar, 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 that "young Jews, who remain single later in life, comprise a population for which traditional 'family-oriented' institutions have little

appeal." Instead, such individuals "are inventing new communal outlets and projects that reflect their individuality."

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



Innovations like JDub Records, Guilt and Pleasure magazine and Storahelling are key to engaging younger Jews in the community, says sociologist Steven M. Cohen, co-author of the recent continuity study.

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 only 5 percent paid dues to a JCC — 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

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Overselling Camps

About fifteen years ago, I read "The Ramah Experience," a collection of essays on the camps that since the 1950s have been a key activity of Conservative Jewry. I learned that as the movement was growing in the post-war period, priority was given to camping over day schools in preparing young persons for active roles in Conservative life and also that research conducted on the impact of Ramah by Charles Liebman, the eminent sociologist, had been suppressed because it did not demonstrate that these camps were as effective in strengthening Jewish commitment as had been claimed. Ramah attendees were more Jewishly involved than Conservatives who did not have this camping experience, yet by not too wide a margin. Apparently, the benefits brought by camping tended to wear off in adulthood as powerful assimilatory forces eroded earlier attitudes and behavior.

With the stunning revelations of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the Conservative movement embraced more warmly the notion of day school education. Additional Solomon Schechter schools were opened and some existing schools added grades. Unfortunately for Conservatism and American Jewry, the shift came too late, as by the 1990s a significant number of those who had identified themselves as Conservative were walking away from the movement or defining downwards their commitment to the traditions still adhered to in Conservative theology. A mid-1990 study that I believe was not published showed far greater enthusiasm among Conservatives for Ramah than for Solomon Schechter.

Camping is now in favor in Jewish communal life. It has become the darling of certain philanthropists. There is a highly successful, at least in attracting publicity and funding, Foundation for Jewish Camping that markets the product as an effective way to promote Jewish commitment. In addition to a lack of intellectual curiosity as to whether the activity it promotes yields the benefits that it claims, FJC is guilty of intellectual dishonesty in its stubborn refusal to include in the list of American Jewish camps that it publishes

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

There are other question 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 decidedly 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 camps?

Why is camping now an in-thing in Jewish communal life? The key talking point is 24/7, the fact that sleep-away camps are a full-time experience and therefore they afford an opportunity to influence youngsters toward a greater Jewish commitment. 24/7 has a nice sound but it has become a cliché, a self-serving and self-fulfilling slogan that requires no proof of its validity. It is, at least as often as not, a non-sequitur whose implicit claim is contradicted by abundant experience. When Jewish camps look at their mission as enhancing Jewish identity, the outcome can be impressive. However, this is not often the case. Kids are not sent to camp to become more Jewish. They are there to be away from home and parents and, as likely, for parents to be away from them. They are there to have a good time, to establish friendship relationships that often last well into adulthood, to be outdoors, to enjoy sports and other activi-

ties, 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. This is borne out by 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.

The current love affair is an escape from reality, an effort to evade the obligation to give communal priority to meaningful Jewish education. By preferring camps, we give the appearance of caring about the Jewish future without doing much to provide for a better Jewish future. Far more than is being acknowledged, the new emphasis on camping reflects the needs of American Jews and not the needs of the Jewish people.

Yet, 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 modest instrumentalities for Judaic improvement. There is, accordingly, a place for camps in our planning and philanthropy, provided that the experience not be oversold, that it be imbued with some sense of religious purposefulness, that it be linked to other activities, that the camp leadership is willing to invest in Judaic enhancement and that support for camping encompass those camps that have a distinctive religious mission. It also needs to be underscored that support for camping must not come at the expense of support for day schools.

Marvin Schick

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emergence of innovative organizations that break away with 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 Brith — 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 there are aplenty, from intellectual salons to light-hearted Web sites, all focused on renegotiating the ways in which young Jews engage and define their community.

Faced with an influx of new organizations created by social entrepreneurs, Shama Goldseker, vice president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies and the director of 21/64 — a division specializing in "next generation" and multigenerational strategic philanthropy — sought an adequate response to what she described as in a sea change in the way young Jews engage communal life. The result was "Slingshot," a Zagat-style guide that helps, she said, "map the landscape of Jewish innovation."

With the third edition scheduled for publication in September, the guide selects a list of 50 outstanding organizations each year. The selections, said Goldseker, are made by a panel of 25 foundation professionals from across the country, who rank Jewish organizations, both veteran and newcomers, according to innovation, impact, leadership and effectiveness.

But the organizations featured in "Slingshot," Goldseker said, are not necessarily replacements for federations.

"It seems that we are able to highlight the experiments happening in the field of Jewish social innovation," she said. "The UJAs are then able to go to organizations like those in the 'Slingshot' book, and invest in a few of them, possibly helping to build the institutions of the future."

Cohen, too, agreed that while more young Jews are finding their own path into Judaism and redefining the meaning and the shape of the Jewish community, this does not necessarily ring the death knell for the existing, centralized structure represented

by federations, denominations and the like.

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."



Shama Goldseker helped develop "Slingshot," a Zagat-style guide, in response to a more diverse Jewish generation.

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 organized Jewry will respond, and there will be change and diversity and growth."

Such changes, he said, are already underway, as more and more traditional institutions seek to redefine themselves to suit the changing needs of the community. Cohen 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.

"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 has been responsive," said Paul Kane, vice president of the UJA Federation in New York.

"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." ■

These new initiatives by Jewish adults under the age of 35 reflect the shift in American community structures.

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