

WITHIN AND BEYOND THE SYNAGOGUE

According to the 2000-2001 United Jewish Communities' National Jewish Population Study, fewer than half of American Jews belong to a synagogue, and the affiliated number further drops when studying single Jews in their twenties and thirties. Statistically there is a 'twenty year gap' between *b'nai mitzvah* and a return to organized Judaism – these Jews often only return to synagogue life when they themselves become parents. And with Jews having fewer children and waiting longer to have them, Jews in their twenties and thirties may remain uninvolved in synagogues or Jewish organizations for years. Traditional Jewish institutions frequently hold little appeal or relevance to Generation X and Y Jews.

However, studies also show that younger Jews are connecting to their religion and heritage in their own ways and on their own terms. While they may not feel attached to institutionalized Judaism, they often are inclined to participate in their religion if it is made pertinent to their lifestyles. Dr. Steven M. Cohen, Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at HUC-JIR, recently completed a study with Dr. Ari Kelman from the University of California - Davis. The study, "The Continuity of Discontinuity," found "young Jews, who remain single later in life, comprise a population for which traditional 'family-oriented' institutions have little appeal." But they "are inventing new communal outlets and projects that reflect their individuality."

During their years at the Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and New York campuses of HUC-JIR, future rabbis and cantors take on student pulpits that allow them to prepare for the leadership roles they will assume after ordination and investiture. Outreach is a primary issue that all HUC-JIR students reflect upon in their classes, when working with mentors, and through innovative programs and curricula. Students participate in 'Adventure Rabbi' training to create spiritual experiences in the outdoors, and in the Gerech Family Institute for Outreach and Conversion program. The Gerech program, run with the Union for Reform Judaism's Outreach Department, helps rabbinical and cantorial students learn how to create a welcoming community for those interested in learning about Jewish life. HUC-JIR students also have had the opportunity to participate in four-day intensive programs at Congregation Emanuel in Denver and Temple Israel in Boston to learn about those synagogues' great and tangible successes through strategic outreach.

Most HUC-JIR alumni face the problem of the 'twenty year gap' wherever their pulpit or organization, and many are drawing from their leadership training at HUC-JIR to develop new outreach strategies. Young alumni are making it their mission to reach out to

Generations X and Y on new terms, while still retaining core Reform Jewish values and traditions. HUC-JIR alumni are pursuing connections to unaffiliated young Jews and are engaging them through innovative cultural, spiritual, and educational programs, groups, and activities.



Dave Friedman

Congregation Beth Elohim's Shabbat Picnic led by Rabbi Andy Bachman, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY

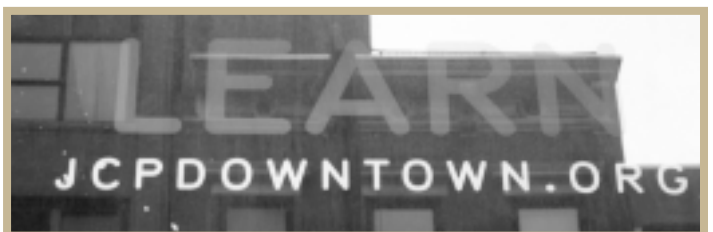
Rabbi Andy Bachman, N '96, founded Brooklyn Jews in 2003 along with his wife, attorney Rachel Altstein. Brooklyn Jews' core beliefs include "forging a meaningful connection to Jewish life through spirituality and community." They reach out to unaffiliated Jews through social justice activities, classes, 'indie-minyans,' and 'Jewltide' – their annual Christmas Eve party. Often, these events are situated in settings like art galleries, parks, and wine bars, away from the traditional synagogue or community center.

A year ago, Rabbi Bachman took on the position of Senior Rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, a formerly aging congregation that he has helped revitalize by reaching out to the changing Brooklyn community and through his connections from Brooklyn Jews. The synagogue has seen a significant increase in membership and activity since Rabbi Bachman joined.



Rabbi Darren Levine, Executive Director, Jewish Community Project Downtown, New York, NY

Rabbi Darren Levine, N '03, is Executive Director of Manhattan's Jewish Community Project Downtown (JCP), whose community is "as diverse as this city: individuals, families, kids, adults, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, observant, secular, straight, GLBTQ, spiritually connected, single-faith, multifaith, interfaith, journeying, searching, and everything in between." Rabbi Levine says, "JCP community



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Elizabeth
McNamara
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members come from all backgrounds and have one thing in common: we want to create a Jewish experience that is meaningful and relevant to our lives and the lives of our families.” JCP founded the first Jewish preschool below Canal Street to serve families living in downtown Manhattan neighborhoods and 70 children currently attend. JCP recently opened a 10,000 square foot space in TriBeCa that holds Shabbat potlucks, holiday celebrations, lectures, the preschool, and



Rabbi Erica Greenbaum,
*Director of Jewish Life,
Jewish Community
Project Downtown,
New York, NY*

adult education classes. This year, Rabbi Levine brought Rabbi Erica Greenbaum, N '07, on staff as the inaugural Director of Jewish Life. Rabbi Greenbaum, who also earned her Master of Arts in Religious Education, NYSOE '03, sees “Jewish learning as its own access point for a rapidly changing population.” JCP offers adult education classes that include Hebrew, ‘Judaism 101’, and *Rosh Chodesh* groups, all designed to encourage adults to “re-embrace Judaism from a more sophisticated place.”

Like Rabbi Bachman’s neighborhood-centric model that made Brooklyn Jews a success, Rabbi Levine is “a big believer in foot-traffic Judaism.” He sees JCP’s success in “engaging people where they are currently in their lives.” He says, “People want to take charge of their Jewish lives. We engage them in leadership and have a deep volunteer structure. A traditional spoon-fed style of Jewish life creates a lay leadership vacuum.”

JCP’s new building, on a busy downtown Manhattan street, allows them to attract a diverse group of Jews. One enters the building into the café and the space can hold many different types of programs and events. The building is open for families to drop by to have coffee with other adults and to let their children socialize in the play-area. JCP also holds more formal worship events and their inaugural High Holy Day services drew a sell-out crowd of 300.

Rabbi Levine asks, “How do unaffiliated Jews connect with a Jewish community today and at the same time how do we give people who are already engaged in Jewish life the feeling that what’s going on in this space is really deeply meaningful?” He says, “That tension is what we think about all the time in terms of how we program. We have music classes and intense Jewish study for children, so we will get families who are interested in Jewish culture and also families who want serious Jewish training for their child. You have many entry points.”

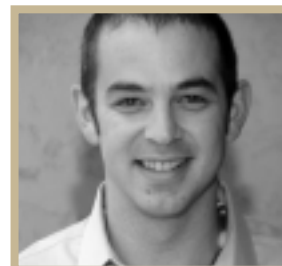
HUC-JIR alumni are facing “a population of young Jews who are very sophisticated,” according to Rabbi Levine. “They’re not going to the synagogue first so we need to meet people where they are.”

Rabbi Howard Goldsmith, N '07, serves as the Assistant Rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan and has been charged with reinvigorating the younger Jewish population in the area. He also believes younger Jews are urbane and do not respond to traditional institutions. Rabbi Goldsmith says, “Generation X distrusts institutions and Generation Y sees institutions as completely irrelevant. They are different from the Baby Boomers in that they don’t get everything they want from one place – especially the synagogue.” He believes that this demographic craves authenticity and does not want to feel that an institution is dictating religion. He says, “People in this group have a spiritual yearning but they are currently unaffiliated.” His target group includes Jews in their twenties and thirties, interfaith partners, the GLBTQ community, singles, and couples. He thinks the customary ‘Jewish singles group’ that synagogues often offer is not inclusive enough or relevant to this group.



Rabbi Howard Goldsmith,
*Temple Emanu-El, New
York, New York*

These younger adult Jews are looking for a community and Rabbi Goldsmith is in the planning stages of how to engage them. He is organizing study sessions in homes, Shabbat services in a park, a monthly participatory service, and other activities that, he says, “have a low risk and only ask people to commit to one night.” He believes that “people in this group have a spiritual yearning, they have a calling for something greater, but they do not have the tools. If your last Jewish experience was your *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, you are like a lawyer practicing with the Social Studies education of an eighth grader.”



Rabbi Evon Yakar,
*Temple
Chai, Phoenix, Arizona*

Another group in development is at Temple Chai in Phoenix, Arizona. Rabbi Evon Yakar, C '07, is responsible for developing a “twenties and thirties group of single, committed, married, and married-with-young-children Jews.” The staff at Temple Chai sees the development of this group as the “gateway to synagogue life for this

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community.” Yakar says, “Our vision is that this community is about relationships built on many and varied ongoing conversations.”



Sarah Cohen, Temple Chai, Phoenix, Arizona

Sarah Cohen, SJCS '02, interned at Stephen S. Wise Temple during her years at HUC-JIR and, after receiving her Master's in Jewish Communal Service, was hired as the Director of Membership there. She was the coordinator of their twenties and thirties 'W Group' and, at the 2005 biennial, was awarded URJ's Belin Award for her programming work.

Cohen brings her experience to her current position as Membership Director of Temple Chai, where she is “concentrating on recruiting and integrating new members and evaluating and creating new community-building programs.” Cohen is working with Yakar to develop the twenties and thirties group and they hope to help younger community members “engage, or in some cases, re-engage, with Judaism, all in a fun, warm, welcoming, low-key environment.”

HUC-JIR alumni who are developing young adults groups in synagogues can look to the successes at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas. After his ordination, Rabbi Oren Hayon, C '04, joined the clergy there. With a membership of over 2,700 families, each of Emanu-El's four rabbis acts as liaison to specific demographic groups. Rabbi Hayon works with the young adults group – congregants aged 21 through 39 who are married, single, with or without children. Prior to Rabbi Hayon's tenure, the congregation had been an aging one, with a small number of unaffiliated young adults only occasionally attending services or the 'singles' and 'married' young adult groups. With encouragement from the Board of Trustees, Rabbi Hayon began expanding programming and running aggressive marketing campaigns targeting this group. The Temple used age-appropriate advertising in Starbucks, local gyms, and independent movie theaters. There was an early positive response to edgier activities and the merging of singles and married young adult groups. Rabbi Hayon led a Jewish poetry study session in a beer garden, a study of the Scroll of Esther in a Mexican restaurant, and multimedia comparisons of rock and roll and hip hop's relationships to scripture. These outside access points attracted hundreds of young Jews from the Dallas community.

Since the early events, the congregation has hired a part time Young Adults Coordinator and has introduced a significant dues reduction for this group. Jews aged 21 through 39 are now the fastest-growing demographic at the temple. Rabbi Hayon says, “The Board of Trustees was very supportive and willing to be really bold to invest so much in this group. The young adults group has acted as an escalator to move people back into congregational life.”

Rabbi Hayon credits the early targeted marketing, creative and relevant programming, and electronic communication with much of the success. “If you have a friend of a friend who is Jewish, it's so easy to forward on the materials. We put a lot of time and energy into elec-

tronic marketing and have reached many new members this way.” The synagogue has added podcasts of its rabbis' sermons, available on their website for current and prospective members.

The young adults group has expanded and now draws over 400 people to its annual Rosh Hashanah service, which is followed by an 'apple martini and honey cake' reception. Members also attend social justice programs, service activities, and monthly themed Shabbat dinners. Subgroups, such as young adults with children, business networking groups, and *chavurot* have also stemmed from the group.

“Generation X and Y don't build relationships with organizations, we build them with people,” says Rabbi Hayon. “Our programs are relevant, cool, and interesting, and attendees stick around and realize the benefit of Temple membership. We have lowered the barriers to entry.”

HUC-JIR continues to work with current students on outreach and is implementing a comprehensive leadership preparation program into the curriculum. This program will help students continue to envision their post-graduation, ordination, and investiture leadership positions, and to consider their great potential for outreach, within and beyond the synagogue. ■



Temple Chai's twenties and thirties group, Phoenix, Arizona



Electronic marketing materials for 'Burgers and Beer,' young adults group membership cultivation event, Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas



Rabbi Oren Hayon and young adults group members at Rosh Hashanah 'apple martini and honey cake' reception, Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas