

# THE CONTINUITY OF DISCONTINUITY

How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating,  
and Organizing Their Own Jewish Lives

**Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman**

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2003, *Time Out New York* proclaimed in a cover story “The New Super Jew” that “edgy young tastemakers are forging a new Jewish identity.” The article was the first of many trend pieces to appear in the universal media portraying a cultural scene in which young Jews were “trailblazing and redefining what it means to be Jewish” via “an explosion” of self-confident, de-institutional, culturally based organizing from record labels, to new forms of synagogue, using festivals, books, and films to build a vibrant Jewish life, created by and for young Jews examining identity, community, and meaning on their own terms.

At first, most of us in the organized Jewish community wrote this “New Jewish Identity” off as a fad, lacking in depth that, like any trend, would prove to be a temporary phenomenon. This organizing, even if it was “an explosion” was taking place outside of the walls of the organizations and institutions we had dedicated our lives to building. The young people who flocked to these new formats were not joining the Young Leadership Programs we had funded. And the medium, and the messages of these forms of Jewish life were different from the ones we were familiar with. Four years on, and the projects have proven to be anything but a fad. The field has grown more crowded to the point that the only thing that has stalled is the ability of the media to find a fresh angle on the “Jewish Cool” story which has passed from a trend to an established reality.

From a philanthropist’s perspective, this established new reality is a new Jewish world that presents a set of unique challenges. We are caught in a generational hex, knowing the traditional organizations we love are not engaging young Jews despite our most steadfast support, yet these new Jewish forms of organizing are not in our vernacular and many of us find them borderline uncomfortable. Which path are we to pursue? Do we fund what we understand even though we know it does not work? Or fund what works, even though we do not fully understand it?

We commissioned Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman to undertake this study in the belief that there is a third way. As funders, we work off a supposition that this new Jewish world is serious and is going nowhere. If we are to grapple strategically with this new reality, our first need is to understand it, and the more we understand it, the more we can determine what we connect to, emotionally and strategically, as these new forms of organizing run the gamut from the ritual based, to the cultural. Upon reading this study, we believe that the one thing they all share is the ability to engage young audiences in remarkable ways that can only serve to make one optimistic about the Jewish future.

In this pursuit, we gave this report a title stolen from the work of historian Jonathan Sarna. His analysis of how Judaism has consistently transformed itself in America, *A Great Awakening*, ends with the following conclusion to serve as our inspiration:

Continuity may depend on discontinuity. New historical conditions created new movements, new emphases and new paradigms—the very opposite of the tried and true. Today, we too must be willing to challenge some of our most basic assumptions. Even as we support, and must support, the so-called “continuity agenda” it bears remembering that discontinuities—at least of the right sort—may have a greater impact still.



Jeffrey R. Solomon



Roger Bennett

## PAST IS PROLOGUE

*On a cold winter evening, a group of young, single Jews in New York gathered together in a local community center to figure out a way to increase Jewish pride. In partnership with the YMHA, they organized a cultural “festival” held at a fashionable venue. Countering both the popularity of Christmas and the allure of universalism, the group tried to offer an alternative to the trends that they understood to be weakening Jewish life in America. The festival, which included popular entertainment and a full-scale publicity campaign, was an attempt to recreate a form of Jewish culture that would attract a younger generation while remaining faithful to its roots. “Jewishness must be whatever its children make it,” wrote one of the young organizers.*

*A single Jewish woman, recognizing the paucity of Jewish educational opportunities in Philadelphia and observing the success of non-Jewish institutions, created her own venue for study, learning, and literacy. She and her sisters conducted weekly lessons on Jewish texts and values in English at a synagogue to a group of children, creating a model that was quickly adopted by women in other communities.*

*A group of Jewish men, most of whom were in their 20s, gathered together in a New York bar one evening to share their misery after failing to be accepted into a local social club. Hoping to create a Jewish alternative where they could be Jews without all of the burdensome trappings of religious worship and life, they formed their own club, invited “brothers” to join them, and created a new form of community “to provide service to their own people and to humanity at large.” Outside of the synagogue system, without religious or formal political leadership, the club continued to grow, attracting members through its regular meetings, dances, parties, and social and political activities.*

*A group of younger Jews could not figure out how to build a Sukkah. What tools did they need? What did a Sukkah look like? How big did it have to be? And where could one go to get the leaves and branches needed to cover the roof? Finding no “how-to” manual that reflected their cultural perspectives, they set down to create their own “do-it-yourself” catalog of resources to guide them through Jewish practices, inviting readers to “plug in wherever you want.”*

Any or all of these four examples could be found in Jewish life today, but in actuality, each is drawn from American Jewish history, in some cases over a century ago. The first is the story of the American Hebrews, a group of young men who single-handedly reclaimed the festival of Hanukkah, which until the 1870s had languished as an obscure and widely unobserved minor Jewish holiday. The second example features Rebecca Gratz, who in 1838 founded the first Jewish Sunday school which she led for 25 years. The third retells the genesis of B'nai B'rith in 1843, and the fourth explains the story behind *The Jewish Catalog*, first published in 1973, which remains one of the Jewish Publication Society's best-selling titles, second only to the Bible.

Each of these vignettes captures a moment of transition in American Jewish life, and each speaks to innovations that, for reasons particular to their historical moments, captured contemporaneous Jewish sensibilities and addressed apparent needs. Although often considered controversial in the moment, each became successful alternatives for engaging Jewishly. The relative influences of these innovations have waxed and waned historically, but each represented a thoughtful, creative, innovative response to contemporaneous cultural conditions that their creators saw as unattractive, unsuccessful, or simply lacking. And, perhaps most critically, in their time, nobody knew whether these endeavors would succeed.

We choose to begin this report with these examples as a way of introducing the concept that Jewish communal and cultural innovation is nothing new. In fact, change is a constant of Jewish history. Jewish life has always changed because that's what living things do—they adapt to their surroundings without abandoning what makes them unique. All communities exist in relationship with other communities, and Jewish communities are no different. They are constantly interacting with the larger societies and cultures outside their borders, inevitably adopting new ideas that they incorporate and come to see as authentically their own. The revival of Hanukkah responded to the allures of Christmas (itself an exercise in invention). Rebecca Gratz observed successful Protestant schools. B'nai B'rith modeled itself on existing secular fraternal organizations, and *The Jewish Catalog* appeared alongside similar efforts by environmentalists, feminists, and other student and social justice activists and was explicitly modeled on the successful countercultural publication, *The Whole Earth Catalog*. These “outside” influences provided some of the raw materials that became cornerstones for Jewish life.

At this moment, in the opening decade of the 21st century, we are experiencing widespread social and cultural change. Whether we want to understand it in terms of information technology, communications, changes in labor and economic relations, global politics, or gender, the terrain of the social world is changing rapidly, and Jewish communities are in the process of inventing and reinventing themselves in order to continue contributing to the conversations of their members. Everything from synagogue websites to “shas-Pods”—specially loaded i-Pods with 20 gigabytes of Talmud *shiurim* (lessons) instead of music—represent contemporary attempts in almost every corner of Jewish communities to utilize contemporary resources to revitalize Jewish connections.

Indeed, over the past five years there has been a veritable outbreak of new organizations, projects, programs—both de-institutional, and occasionally within the confines of more traditional settings—participating in this “invention and re-invention.” In the fall of 2003, this trend was featured on the front cover of *Time Out New York* and branded as a movement to “make Judaism cool.” As a result, it was dismissed by many as a fad, not



serious or worthy of time, analysis, or communal resources. But let's not accept the media coverage and ignore the inner workings of the phenomenon itself, which offer much richer and more thoughtful examples of emergent Jewish cultures and conversations.

Indeed, in interviews with Jewish communal leaders and philanthropists we learned of several sources of skepticism regarding what seems to us to be a new cultural efflorescence spanning prayer groups, music, journalism, social justice, politics, Jewish learning, scholarship, information technology, and more. We found several levels of skepticism. The leaders with whom we spoke asked whether these people stand only for themselves and a small number of like-minded souls, or if they represented broader constituencies. These leaders questioned the seriousness of the endeavors they have been creating. One asked whether we were seeing education or entertainment, implying that entertainment has little inherent value or enduring impact. They also questioned the import of the discontent with prevailing options for Jewish engagement, suggesting that the alienation from synagogues, JCCs, and federations would evaporate when the younger adults would marry and bear children. On more than one occasion we heard: "Leave 'em alone and they'll come home." They also wondered about the durability of this cultural moment, seeing it at best as only the latest passing fad, and at worst a credible distraction from things more "seriously Jewish." Some, generally more traditional observers (but not only them), saw all the innovations, with the possible exception of the new congregations and *minyanim* (informal prayer groups), as only marginally Jewish, reflecting and sometimes promoting the blurring of lines between real Judaism and the forces of assimilation.

These concerns are serious and emerge out of a deep commitment to the perpetuation of Jewish life in America—a commitment we share. Yet, our fieldwork and interviews indicate that their skepticism diverts our common conversation in its assumption that Jewish communal policies must choose between synagogues and salons, religious schools and record labels. In fact the truth is both more interesting and more compelling, as the increasing diversity of the American Jewish community is thirsting for a greater diversity of opportunities to engage seriously in Jewish life. These endeavors, like their predecessors in the 1830s, 1870s, and 1970s, are experiments in the Jewish future—a future that includes synagogues, JCCs, and other institutions alongside alternative publications, concerts, or other, unforeseen institutions—and skepticism, while healthy, ought to contribute to our curiosity, not foreclose it.

Learning about these new endeavors is critical, if not urgent, for several reasons. Understanding how younger Jews manage to take control of their Jewish lives provides a window into their view of their Jewishness. This perspective can in turn enable established leaders to recognize, evaluate, and perhaps come to confidently support these self-initiated ventures in Jewish organizing. Furthermore, a greater appreciation of these patterns may even stimulate more rapid adaptation of conventional institutions to the preferences and mores of younger constituents who very well may (or may not) present themselves as potential

members of congregations, JCCs, and other such institutions. By examining several of these initiatives in greater detail, we can begin to answer some of the more urgent questions confronting policymakers concerned with what they often call the Next Generation. Specifically:

*What do these innovative phenomena reveal about the impediments to Jewish engagement in conventional terms among younger adult Jews in North America?*

*What do they find lacking in, or objectionable about, conventional Jewish involvement? What does lack of such affiliation say about their Jewish concerns?*

*How, why, and when do they connect with others to engage in Jewish life and activity?*

*What organizing principles characterize these start-up initiatives?*

*How can potential funders and supportive institutions work wisely and effectively to selectively nurture the more interesting, creative, and significant new ventures?*

*Are conventional institutions ill-suited for this cohort, and, insofar as they are, how can they be altered to accommodate the tastes, values, and preferences of this generation?*

## APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

With these framing questions in mind, this paper closely examines four North American sites that are involved, each in its own way, in the creation of communities around culture. Of the four, one is a congregation that meets in a JCC; one is a record label that promotes musicians and cultural events; one is a theater company that performs in synagogues, schools, and entertainment spaces; and one is a salon that invites a select and shifting network of individuals to gather periodically and converse communally. Each is very much the product of a single creative individual, supported by Jewish philanthropies and a talented, committed cast of engaged participants and other organizers. Each has its own vision of community, version of culture, rules of conversation, and claim to ultimate meaning, transcendence and authenticity—the markers of successful prayer experiences. Each attracts young Jews in their 20s and 30s and draws them into an ongoing conversation about what it means to be Jewish at the beginning of the 21st century.

Our field research on these four initiatives is drawn from participant observation, interviews, and documents produced by the organizations, both for the press and for prospective funding sources. We interviewed a total of twenty individuals, including the founding personalities, members of the leadership core who work with them, and

participants in the events and activities they create and produce. We taped the interviews, which lasted about a half an hour to an hour, and produced verbatim transcripts for analysis.

The four organizations that we chose are not a random sample, nor could they be. Rather, they are a selection of the more innovative and engaging attempts to provide Jewish experiences and foster community among Jews under the age of 35. Each organization has a particular goal, each has a target audience, and none replicates the work of any other. They are geographically and organizationally diverse, and taken together, they represent the vanguard of a phenomenon in which informal communities, shifting connections, creative culture, and episodic engagement are primary characteristics of new forms of Jewish life in North America.

## A SHUL, A TELLER OF TORAH, A RECORD LABEL, AND A SALON

The four sites on which this research is based are as follows:

### I. Ikar, Los Angeles, California.

This spiritual community takes its name from the Hebrew word for “the essential core,” a reference to the purity of its mission. According to the website ([www.ikar-la.org](http://www.ikar-la.org)), Ikar views itself as a “Jewish spiritual community that stands at the intersection of spirituality and social justice.” Ikar’s leadership takes great pains to differentiate the “spiritual community” from “synagogues” and “congregations,” both in terms of nomenclature and defining characteristics.

Ikar began as a conversation among friends who were searching for a teacher for their children, after having been unimpressed with a variety of local synagogues and schools. They were introduced to Rabbi Sharon Brous, then a 32-year-old graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who countered with her vision of building a spiritual community passionately committed to social justice, learning, prayer, and observance. Brous, who reports that she had “been brewing over” an alternative to the conventional synagogue, drew upon her involvement with human rights work, her connection with Reboot, and her stint as a rabbinic intern at the well-known Congregation B’nai Jeshurun on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.

At Ikar’s first Friday night service in late spring, 2004, more than 100 people crammed into a space into which they had hoped would attract 25. A few months later, 520 people made their way to the West Side JCC for Ikar’s High Holiday services. The turnout far exceeded the organizers’ expectations, even though the only publicity for this event was a small advertisement in a Los Angeles Jewish newspaper that read simply, “It doesn’t have to hurt”—an appeal to those who generally find synagogue services painfully boring. Since then, Ikar has established “limmudim,” a new approach to religious school, celebrated its

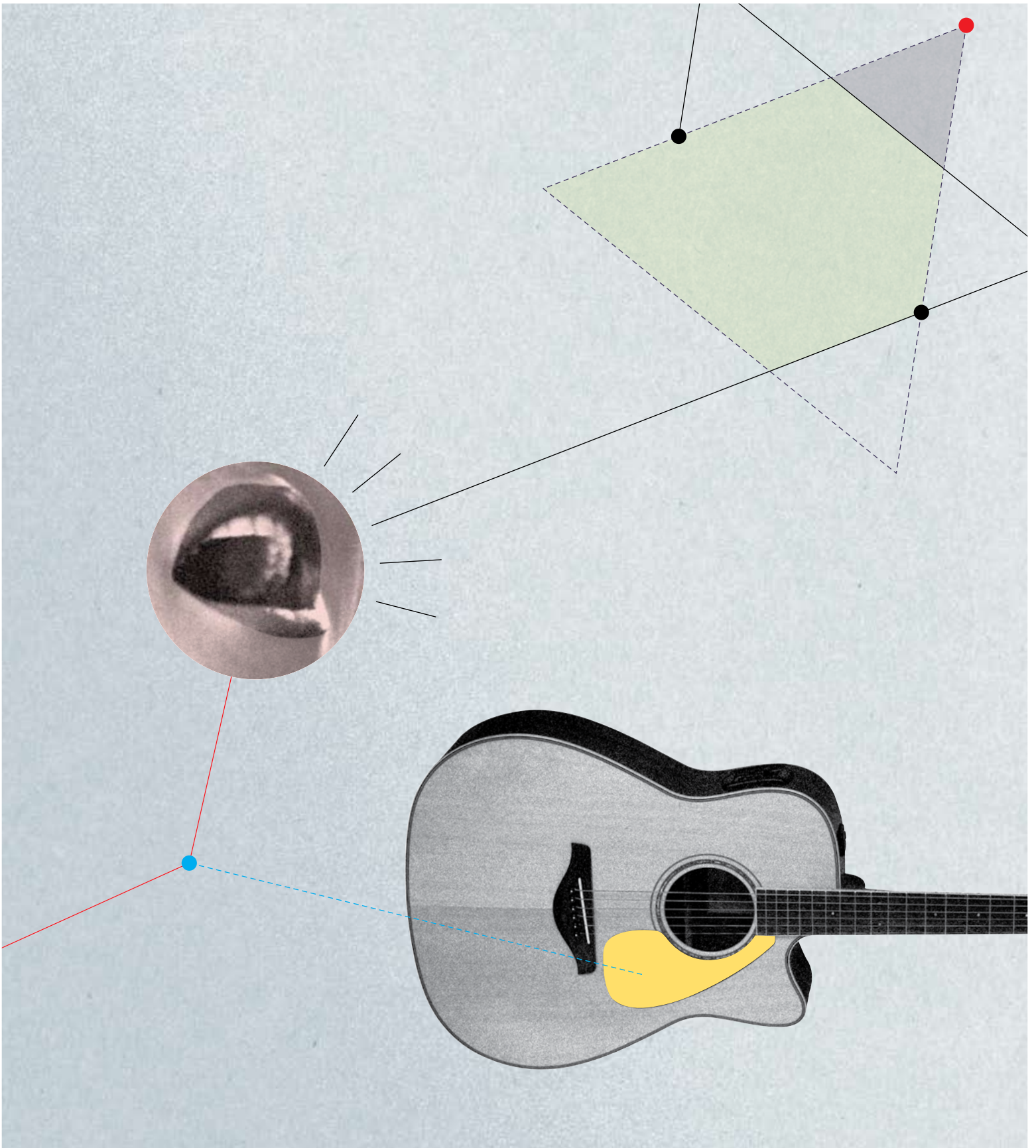
first anniversary, moved to a larger location, hired a full-time administrative assistant and generated envy, excitement, skepticism, and even a healthy dose of fear among some segments of the Los Angeles Jewish community.

Rabbi Brous and her board are trying to re-imagine and reconfigure an essential institution of Jewish life. Many synagogues aspire to build caring and compassionate communities, and some, as well, convey a passionate intentionality toward prayer and worship. Some (particularly on the more traditional side of the denominational spectrum) emphasize Torah study. Others—particularly, but not only, Reform congregations—aver a deep commitment to a social justice engagement in the larger society. Ikar, at least in its projection of itself, proclaims its simultaneous commitment to the central classic Jewish rationales for community—Torah learning, prayer, and social justice engagement. As the website declares, “We believe that matters of the spirit are intimately linked to matters of the world, and that the Jewish community has a distinct responsibility to participate in social justice and tikkun [healing].”

## II. Storahtelling

Founded in 1998, Storahtelling is a nonprofit musical and dramatic company dedicated to “promoting relevant and dynamic Jewish cultural literacy through theatrical performances and educational programs for multi-generational audiences,” ([www.storahtelling.org](http://www.storahtelling.org)). Storahtelling performances feature traditional Hebrew chanting, non-traditional English translation, original and ethnic music, modern stagecraft, and audience participation. Interweaving dramatization, a traditional Torah reading, contemporaneous translation, and a healthy dose of research and interpretation, members of Storahtelling invite their audience to reconsider their relationship to Torah, ritual, and tradition, and teach congregations how to do their own versions of “radical ritual theater.”

Storahtelling is the brainchild of Amichai Lau-Lavie, Israeli-born former yeshiva student and a member of one of Israel’s most prominent rabbinic families. Lau-Lavie’s rediscovery, the “meturgeman,” an ancient member of the religious leadership, whose responsibility lay in offering a simultaneous translation of Biblical text into the current vernacular, inspired him to begin performing this forsaken role in today’s synagogues, sometimes accompanied by a musician. Eventually, with the addition of more actors and musicians, improvisations gave way to full-scale productions. The company grew from a one-man operation to include nearly 40 actors, artists and musicians. From “Shultime,” the synagogue residency program that remains central to Storahtelling’s mission, the organization has expanded its mandate to include educational efforts, lavish theatrical productions for the holidays, and, most recently, an ongoing experiment in the ritual of worship known as “Ritualab.”



In addition to “Shultime” and “Ritualab,” the Storahtelling project also includes an educational component (“Schooltime”) and a commitment to staging public events that blend ritual and theater in a party-like environment (think Purim or its “Sabbath Queen” series of melave malkes on Saturday nights) (“Showtime”). Taken together, Storahtelling portrays itself as a living laboratory for transforming text, tradition, and ritual from the sometimes stolid artifacts they have become into dynamic, engaging practices. Whether “hijacking” the Torah service in a synagogue in the Midwest, or improvising words and melodies of prayer on a Saturday morning in New York, each aspect of Storahtelling approaches the overall mission with a deep commitment to tradition and a deeper commitment to subverting it.

### **III. JDub Records, New York, New York.**

JDub is a non-profit Jewish record label that has been in operation since 2002. Unlike other Jewish music producers, JDub is actively trying to produce music with a Jewish “sensibility” that can compete in the broader marketplace. In a sense, JDub is seeking acceptance among as wide an audience as possible, even as it remains committed to strengthening social bonds among members of its Jewish audience.

JDub’s president, Aaron Bisman graduated from New York University’s Music Department with a degree in Music Business. Armed with his knowledge of music and his commitment to Judaism, Bisman teamed up with friend and now-business partner, Jacob Harris, to form JDub ([www.jdubrecords.org](http://www.jdubrecords.org)). An orthodox day-school product, Bisman’s father is a Conservative congregational rabbi and mother is also a graduate of Conservative Judaism’s Jewish Theological Seminary. Both Bisman and Harris identify primarily as music professionals, yet they operate JDub with a keen sensitivity toward cultivating an unapologetically Jewish environment at their live events, and they are well aware of their profile within the Jewish community.

JDub’s featured artists have included Matisyahu (who left in 2005), Balkan Beat Box, The Leevees, and DJ SoCalled. The Leevees have been featured on the television program, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and Balkan Beat Box have performed at numerous world music festivals around the world. But Bisman’s biggest success is Matisyahu, a Hasidic reggae singer who has toured Israel, America, and Europe, where he performs to sold-out crowds of adults, teens, and families of all backgrounds and ways of life. Dressed in a black suit and a white shirt, and sporting a full beard and tzitzit, he offers a lively two-hour concert that includes his original songs “Aish Tamid” and “King Without a Crown,” a version of the “shema.” Matisyahu’s success landed him in the Top Five of the 2005 “Forward 50,” as well as the Billboard reggae chart and live performance during MTVU’s “Woody Awards” program, and the cover of *The Village Voice’s* holiday issue, accompanying a story entitled, *Hanukkah Outrocks Christmas*.



As noted, Matisyahu, JDub's most spectacular artist, left the label in 2005. For JDub, this unsettling development presented both a loss and an opportunity. Matisyahu's remarkable success in the mainstream proved the viability of JDub's mission. At the same time, his out-sized success challenged the label because, as Bisman remarked to us, "Matisyahu was an anomaly." JDub's founder understood that he was not going to find "another Matisyahu," and with the artist's departure, Bisman turned focus more intensively to cultivating new artists, developing those already on the JDub roster, raising the label's profile in other cities.

Both Bisman and Harris make a distinction between "events" and "concerts." The former, generally tied to holidays like Purim or Hanukkah, is a more developed event in which JDub plans an entire evening of entertainment for a larger-than-normal audience. These events—such as a karaoke contest at a Purim event—appeal primarily to, but are not exclusive to, younger Jews. JDub's now-annual Hanukkah party, Jewltide, has been taking place in New York for a few years, and this year will also take place in Boston and Chicago. Concerts, in contrast, follow a more "traditional" format, and look like any other concert at any other club.

Both, however, are integral to JDub's mission. As Bisman explained, "It's very clear that we are Jewish and that these are artists who define themselves as Jewish." And this does not contradict the label's commitment to place those artists in cross-cultural dialogue, including serving as opening bands for mainstream artists, means exposing them to non-Jewish audiences.

Rather than defining community as a phenomenon that occurs between a relatively fixed group of people gathering on a regular basis, Bisman and Harris prefer to create events and concerts that provide opportunities for gathering and identification.

As Bisman explained, both JDub's events and their concerts do not provide community in the conventional sense. Rather, they create "moments of community" in which audiences can experience "something proud and Jewish," whether the artist is playing a concert of their own, opening for a mainstream performer, or playing at a JDub holiday event. This observation can be true for JDub's Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike, as the positive Jewish performances can and do attract both. For Bisman, this openness and commitment to the production of quality music is inherent to the "feelings of community [that] happen in those spaces."

#### **IV. Salon. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.**

The Salon began as a place for open and honest discussion among a small group of interested, young, culturally savvy Jews in Toronto. Founded in 2003 by journalist Mireille Silcoff, these salons were monthly affairs held in Silcoff's living room, with about twenty guests

talking about Jewish issues. Silcoff conceived the events as a platform for young Jews who, as one salon member put it, “don’t generally set foot in a synagogue or anything barely resembling one.” The salons grew and soon were regularly attracting more than fifty people, Jewish and non-Jewish, all connected by their love of discussion and drink. The Toronto salon now takes place in a small French restaurant in Toronto’s Kensington Market.

Silcoff, 35, grew up in a Hebrew-speaking home as the daughter of an Israeli mother and a Bundist-oriented father. She spent two months a year in Israel during her childhood, and attended a non-Orthodox day school in Montreal where she studied Yiddish for five years. In her early adult years, Silcoff herself had been a member of a well-known Montreal Salon called “The Wednesday Night.” When she began her own salon, Silcoff had recently relocated to Toronto from Montreal. In coming to Toronto, she felt like she was thirsting for a place where she could engage both issues and people. With a small grant from Reboot, and a limited social network, Silcoff organized the first salon in her living room. She sent out a package of readings on a pre-selected topic, and invited people to come ready to talk. After a few months, she outgrew her apartment and relocated to a hotel. The salon soon settled in a restaurant in Toronto’s old Jewish quarter and employed a strict policy of “crowd rotation,” in order to keep things fresh, while also retaining a critical mass of people who already knew each other.

The explosive growth of the Toronto Salon, as well as the prominent coverage that the project received from the media encouraged young Jews to develop their own Salons in other cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Montreal, New York (where there are now four) and Chicago. This in turn gave Mireille the idea of developing a regular mechanism that could supply anyone, anywhere with a raw supply of the materials necessary to start their own salon, and so she resigned from her job as Senior Editor of Toronto’s *National Post* and became the founding editor of *Guilt & Pleasure* magazine, a quarterly periodical, engaging young writers, academics, journalists, and rabbis to write on Jewish themes. With its debut early in 2006 and published quarterly, each issue of G&P explores a single theme (“home and away,” “fights” and “magic” were the themes for issues 1 – 3) and features art, journalistic articles, fiction, graphic fiction, and archival material and bears a subtitle that sums up its mission: Making Jews talk more.

The idea of the quarterly is that it become a forum not only for readers to share in high quality Jewish cultural production, but that they take issue with the issues themselves and organize their own salons in their own cities. The magazine’s website includes some starter questions for people who want to begin their own salons, and offers a discounted subscription rate for those purchasing six or more subscriptions at once. The idea is that the magazine can become a forum and a reason for people to gather in small, autonomous groups, eat, and discuss some of the issues raised by the texts in the journal. Salons of younger people in



cities across the country have taken the magazine up on its offer, and while it does not quite qualify as a “movement,” *Guilt & Pleasure* is making its mark.

## DOES UNAFFILIATED MEAN UNENGAGED?

These four initiatives, and the wider phenomena they illustrate, take place in a particular context. It is context in which relatively few adult Jews under the age of 35—those born since 1970—choose to affiliate with the mainstream established institutions of Jewish life in North America, suggesting to some, that the entire next generation of Jews has in effect disengaged from Jewish life. The figures below derive from the 2000/01 *National Jewish Population Study*.

Of unmarried Jews 25-39 in the United States:

- 22% belong to congregations.
- 5% pay dues to Jewish Community Centers.
- 7% are members of other Jewish organizations.
- 5% contributed \$100 or more to their local Jewish federation campaign.
- 47% of them, if they marry, will marry non-Jews, if past behavior is any guide to the future.

We may compare those patterns to what may be considered the “gold standard” of Jewish affiliation: parents of school-age children (6-17) who were both born Jewish.

- Rates of belonging to congregations reach 82%.
- 38% pay dues to JCCs.
- 42% belong to other Jewish organizations.
- 23% donate \$100 or more to their Jewish federations.

It is figures such as these which have triggered the well known “continuity debates” over the past fifteen years in the Jewish communal world. This problem is not entirely novel, as Jews have been fretting about sustaining community and identity for time immemorial. However, the matter of community formation and sustenance has taken on new urgency, at least among the leadership of Jewish institutional life. The urgency has arisen in part because of reports of high rates of intermarriage and disaffiliation from (or non-affiliation with) established Jewish institutions, and in part because of reports of deep-seated cultural change (most critically, the declining attraction of civic engagement, formal institutions, and “loyalty” to brand, party, church, or family) that seemed to undermine the traditional Jewish penchant for community, or at least its more conventional forms.

But, these sub-groups aside, for large groups of Jewish young adults, the organizational culture of much of Jewish life seems alien, if not alienating. For the most part, few express serious reservations about the mission and objectives of the institutions they eschew. Rather, their feelings of discomfort derive from matters of social culture and aesthetics, and all the subtle yet meaningful elements that point to a way of being Jewish that, while admirable in many ways, is not quite theirs.

Yet despite their diminished interest in such institutions, or perhaps because of their very lack of interest in available options for collective involvement, Jews under the age of 35 have been initiating a diversity of organizing endeavors. And so while the inference of lack-of-engagement from lack-of-affiliation may have some merit for middle-aged, middle-class, married Jewish parents, the same inference does not apply to younger adults, especially those who are non-married.

The development of new organizing endeavors is analyzed in works such as Ethan Watters' *Urban Tribes* and Robert Wuthnow's *Loose Connections*. Watters and Wuthnow have countered Putnam's claim that weaker institutions also means weaker community by citing for the rise of informal communities outside the places, and different from the forms, observed by Putnam. In other words, people might no longer join bowling leagues, but they are getting together in other venues, and participating in communities that look different than those which preceded them, such as through book clubs, or popular social networking websites such as MySpace. Membership and its dues, cards and privileges, formal positions and hierarchies, have taken a back seat to other less institutional forms of identification and affiliation. In *Loose Connections*, Wuthnow, like Putnam, also notes the widespread disengagement from such institutions; but in contrast with Putnam's conclusions, he attributes great significance to the emergence of new types of connections and identities, providing more fluid, episodic, and highly personalized opportunities for experiencing community. For Putnam, community life in America has clearly weakened; for Wuthnow it has taken on new form in less formal and less visible expressions. Finally, we think it important to mention Wuthnow's most recent work, *All in Sync*, which explores the pivotal place of art and music in the spiritual lives of American religious communities. We see this as an extension of his previous work, one that presciently explains some of the stories uncovered by our research. For Wuthnow, culture is critical to communities, and provides communities and organizations a broader vocabulary with which to engage, enact, and expand communal connections.

Putnam's analysis of declines in formal organizations certainly applies to American Jews, who have experienced shrinkage in Jewish fraternal organizations (such as B'nai B'rith and Hadassah) as well as in federation donors (declining from 39% of Jewish adults in 1990 to 26% in 2000). Wuthnow's highlighting of the rise of non-formal modes of community may apply as well to American Jews. The extent of the phenomenon is, at this

point, indeterminate. But whatever its magnitude, it is against this background, and in the context of all these considerations, that the lack of interest of younger adults in established Jewish institutions needs to be understood.

## FEATURES OF THE NEW JEWISH ORGANIZING

### FILLING A FELT NEED—PRODUCING EARLY RESULTS

The decreasing level of engagement with existing Jewish institutions, particularly among young Jewish adults under 35, served as a major impetus for the founding of each of the four organizations we study in this paper. The key founders of all four endeavors under study told remarkably similar tales about the genesis of their initiatives, driven as much by their own personal needs for connection and community as by a mission to provide alternative opportunities for others to do so as well. Seeking to fulfill and express their Jewish interests and passions, these change agents-to-be examined the available options and found them wanting. The decision to establish new entities followed upon a strong sense of deficiency in the then-current possibilities for combinations of prayer, culture, discussion, music, and social action.

Aaron Bisman recalled his initial motivation in founding JDub Records as the latest in a series of attempts to contend with a string of disappointing encounters with available Jewish possibilities:

There wasn't much that was fully meeting my own personal—or my friends'—interests Jewishly, for those of us who were observant and wanted to have a Shabbat experience. Nothing. No synagogue, no Hillel building was enough of what we wanted. We could go to those places and pull out of them what we wanted, but in the end we always ended up doing it ourselves because we could create exactly the environment we wanted and the experience we wanted.

Ikar owes its success in part to the disappointment with many extant synagogues in and around Los Angeles. Rabbi Brous, as well as members of the Ikar board with whom we spoke, all told stories about seeking a synagogue that they felt served their needs, and failing to do so, were moved to establish their own. As Brous explained:

When I came out here [to Los Angeles] for a job interview 3-4 years ago, the congregation's rabbi said to me, "This shul is about Talmud Torah [learning]. If

you want social action, you go down the street. That shul is about social action.”  
And I thought, “You’re both missing the point—what’s torah without justice?”

Likewise, Amichai Lau-Lavie rooted the genesis of Storahtelling in the failure of the Torah Service on Saturday morning to engage its audience, and Mireille Silcoff simply could not find an engaging venue for intelligent conversation about Jewish issues in Toronto, so she created her own.

In their dissatisfaction, the founders were able to articulate a sensibility shared by many in their generation. Common to each of these efforts was a story of initial success that followed the same basic narrative arc: the founders worried about whether anyone would pay them any mind, only to be overwhelmed by the initial and ongoing responses to their efforts. Perhaps the most common sentiment among the founders (apart from dissatisfaction) was the surprise they felt in the size and enthusiasm of their participants.

Silcoff’s comments about the initial enthusiasm for the Salon could just as easily been recounted for Ikar, Storahtelling, or JDub Records. After a few less-than successful salons at the Drake, a downtown Toronto hotel, Silcoff recalibrated her efforts with remarkable results:

I think I was a little bit overwhelmed by the amount of people who wanted to come to the thing, and in retrospect the Drake may have been a bit of an odd move, but I think it needed to teach me and the regulars a lesson. And the regulars stuck through it, and then when it was reborn, it was reborn at La Palette a small French restaurant in Kensington Market (the old Jewish quarter, but you’d never know it, but you can kind of feel that maybe this was the Jewish area). So I put a cap on the guest list—no more than 30 people—and it worked amazingly.

## ORGANIZATION AND DISCONTENT

Motivating the founders, organizers, and supporters of the new ventures in Jewish organizers, then, are elements of dissatisfaction, frustration, and discontent with prevailing options for their Jewish engagement. If existing synagogues, JCCs, and other institutions presented satisfying options, then the initiators of the new Jewish ventures would have no reason to establish new entities, and they would find no constituency eager to engage in them. This being the case, what is the source of young adults’ discontent with established institutions?

On one level, young adults feel “**demographically disenfranchised.**” Synagogues and other institutions typically attract married people with children. American Jews marry relatively late. As a consequence, members of synagogues and other institutions are also generally

older than most of the younger adults involved in these new initiatives. This simple demographic divide suggests that established institutions are not just demographically inappropriate, but generationally and culturally unappealing for Jews under the age of 35.

Beyond feeling demographically disenfranchised, young Jews often experience synagogues and other institutions as **socially exclusionary and overly bounded**. Words such as “claustrophobic,” “constricting,” and “closed” sprinkle their conversation. They are responding to three different kinds of boundaries: between social classes, between Jews and non-Jews, and between the various denominations within Judaism. These boundaries, though informal, are real. Although often unstated, they are generally obvious. For example, it takes no great cultural acumen for someone “shul shopping” to conclude that a certain Reform temple is better suited for upper-middle-class parents, and that another might be more comfortable for non-married adults, spiritual seekers, intermarried couples, or those with more traditional Jewish inclinations. Jewish institutions, programs, and activities tend to appeal to specific population segments as defined by social class, age, family life cycle stage, sexual identity, politics, and Jewish cultural preferences.

Social boundaries are a defining feature of all communities. However, they can be troubling or alienating to outsiders, even those who expect to become insiders in due course. For example, marking and maintaining a boundary between Jews and non-Jews is an inherent feature of Jewish institutions (after all, they do appeal primarily to Jews). But for younger adults living highly integrated lives where most of their friends, and about half of their romantic relationships, are with non-Jews, the mere assertion of difference smacks of prejudice if not racism. For people whose lives and worldview value freedom of association and fluidity of identity, the world of synagogues, JCCs, and other Jewish organizations seems to run in the contrary direction.

Younger adults also resist and reject the **normative conformism or normative advocacy** that they see as widely characterizing the Jewish institutional world and culture. They speak of Jewish institutions as having an “agenda,” referring to their interest in advocating specific beliefs or behaviors, in particular those centered around matters of “Jewish continuity” or group survival. Agendas, by their nature, are not subtle and younger adults are savvy consumers, able to spot an agenda at a distance, especially in which they themselves are the prime targets, and are being told to marry (each other) and the contemporary version of “be fruitful and multiply” for the good of the Jewish People. Consequently, they prefer to avoid being subject to the manipulation of those who, in effect, represent their parents. They claim to “see through” ill-conceived or awkward attempts by established institutions to bring them together as singles, to meet and marry one another in some cases, or to become more observant in others. These sentiments emerged in our interview with DK, who moved to Ikar from another congregation:

People [at Ikar] are really friendly, and not because it's like their week to be friendly or because sometimes you go to a frum [religiously observant] place [congregation]

and they're really friendly. I think it's sincere, but they [frum congregants] also have goals for you in mind. And at Ikar it just felt like they were truly so glad you had come. Really sincere, genuine, wherever you were coming in from, that's where they were greeting you. It wasn't about what are you going to do now, or what can you do for us.

To be clear, in this fierce devotion to their autonomy and resistance to “judgmentalism,” younger Jewish adults are not much different from their parents (even as both generations abide their own forms of judgmentalism, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding). Baby Boomer Jews are also uneasy with rabbis, educators, fund-raisers, and communal leaders using normative language, urging them to comply with classic Jewish norms because “Jews should” or “Jews are expected,” or “Jews are obligated,” to undertake one or another activity.

With all this said, Ikar does represent something of an anomaly. It does manage to project a respect for autonomy, diversity, and voluntarism. Yet, at the same time, one would be hard put to say that Ikar lacks an agenda. Its leadership, both lay and rabbinic, publications, and website all quite vigorously articulate aspirational norms, promoting a combination of spiritual experience, Jewish learning, and social justice engagement. But unlike the real or imagined tendencies of more conventional communal leadership, Ikar's leadership conveys its messages more through persuasion than through chastisement, and by modeling certain behavior more than explicitly demanding it.

## A NEW AESTHETIC FOR A NEW GENERATION

Feelings of demographic disenfranchisement give rise to attempts to reclaim spaces and experiences that enable them to be Jewish on their own terms. Those involved in these new initiatives seek “to make Judaism mine.” Their efforts are marked by the **empowerment of a generationally distinctive leadership**, where Jews in their 20s and 30s take responsibility for organizing instead of joining institutions headed by their elders. Their involvement as founders, leaders, and participants lend the events and communities they establish a **contemporary aesthetic** in subtle ways that are enacted without contrivance. In other words, they not only speak the language of their audience, they identify with their audience.

Endemic to endeavors such as JDub is the **urge to differentiate participants' Jewish involvement from that of their parents' generation**. They send the message that, in effect, “This is not your father's (or mother's) Jewishness.” This differentiation can be effected in many ways. One way they do is a subtle and sometimes very blatant, **iconoclasm**, as exemplified by

Amichai Lau-Lavie's character Hadassah Gross, a 70-year-old widowed Holocaust survivor. Lau-Lavie plays this character in drag, using this to offer unconventional and deeply literate interpretations of traditional Jewish life. These organizers also engage in exercises in **quasi-nostalgic cultural archaeology**, in which Jews raised in the 1980s express admiration and yearning for the modes of identity and community prevalent among Jews in the 1940s and 1950s. They refer to the Jewishness of the immigrant generation and their children, embrace Chassidic melodies, look to (romanticized) life in Catskills summer resorts, and claim proudly a legacy of radical politics from the labor movement to civil rights. This can be seen as an attempt to leap over the apparently stale Jewishness of their parents' generation to a seemingly richer (and not problematically, more "authentic") culture of their grandparents or great grandparents.

Another way of distinguishing themselves from their parents is through **music**. With musical tastes shifting every few years, musical style becomes associated with successive birth cohorts. More than any other form of cultural engagement, music provides the most accessible and visible means of distinguishing generations. Accordingly, **music** is used to mark events from worship services to concerts as belonging to one or another generation. In these and other ways, younger adult Jews construct a way of being Jewish that is clearly and obviously set off from that of their elders.

Yet for all the boundaries they construct between their Judaism and that of their parents, when it comes to differences between religions, denominations, and social classes, younger adults seek to cross boundaries and emphasize inclusiveness. Ikar, for example, falls clearly within the religio-cultural style of the Conservative camp, even as it eschews any denominational identification. Its services are conducted predominantly in Hebrew (in contrast with Reform) and women exercise liturgical leadership (in contrast with Orthodoxy). Its highly observant rabbi, Sharon Brous, was trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the flagship of the Conservative Movement, and most of her collegial contacts are with local Conservative rabbis. Nevertheless, Ikar has, to this day resisted formally affiliating with the Conservative movement, in part out of a **discomfort with social boundaries** in general and intra-Jewish boundaries in particular. In this sense, it is not alone: Ikar is but one of at least a dozen start-up congregations of young adults in Jerusalem, New York, London, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere that have resisted denominational affiliation.

In part, the rejection of denominational boundaries, along with efforts to mute the appearance of class differences, may be seen as yet another act of generational differentiation. After all, these Jews under 35 are struggling with and rejecting the very boundaries (of denomination, class, etc.) to characterize the Jewish institutional life of their parents' generation.

Like Ikar, the Toronto Salon also crosses denomination lines, and even goes so far as to include non-Jews and "half-Jews" among its participants. Matisyahu, too, is a living embodiment of boundary-crossing: he is a Hasid who came from a non-observant past and

who now sings religious lyrics to reggae music. And Storahtelling intentionally violates the boundaries and norms of conventional Torah reading to introduce dramatic translation where both drama and understanding are normally and notably absent.

Consistent with boundary-crossing, these organizing efforts aim for **social diversity**, seeking the participation of Jews (and non-Jews) of varying backgrounds, ideological positions, and life contexts. The appreciation for diversity is evident in the remarks of DK about Ikar:

One thing that we really liked was that there was a big range of ages—it didn't feel like everyone had a baby or everyone was married. It felt like no matter where you were—or we know where we are but its fun to feel like everyone's not like you or everyone is waiting for you to have a baby and then we got excited about going for the High Holidays and once we went, we joined and we've felt committed to it since.

## ENGAGING JEWS WITH ATTENTION TO QUALITY, KEEPING THEM WITH A REPUTATION FOR QUALITY

The producers of Jewish events and the organizers of Jewish experience who target the younger adult generation make claims to attending carefully to **cultural quality**, however quality is defined. As our interviews underscored, the founders of the innovations, and presumably their participants as well, view much conventional Jewish programming and performance as decidedly second-rate. Their insistence upon quality, an elusive and ambiguous notion to be sure, then, is also an expression of generationally based differentiation. Silcoff's notion of quality encompasses her Salon, in an attempt to engage people her age both personally and intellectually:

[The salon about “sin”] was a good salon because people had a bit of structure to it because we had this goal, and you had the element of Jewish ritual in there and it was refreshing because I really don't touch the Torah too often in this thing. I sent out all these readings; philosophical things about sin, and a chapter from *Portnoy's Complaint*. A crazy hodge-podge. And it ended up being a really interesting discussion. It was really emotionally tinged but it was based in certain readings by certain thinkers. The ones that are most successful have a good helping of smarty-pants school stuff and emotional stuff that people can't get elsewhere.

Silcoff, who admittedly spent a great deal of energy on making sure that her participants were well-fed and otherwise satisfied, always judged the success of the salon on the content of



the discussion. Anything too “Oprah-tastic,” she found, at the end, unsatisfying, preferring instead the writings of people like Amos Elon, Mordechai Richler, and Christopher Hitchens, or texts like the “Al Chet” litany from Yom Kippur liturgy, or the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

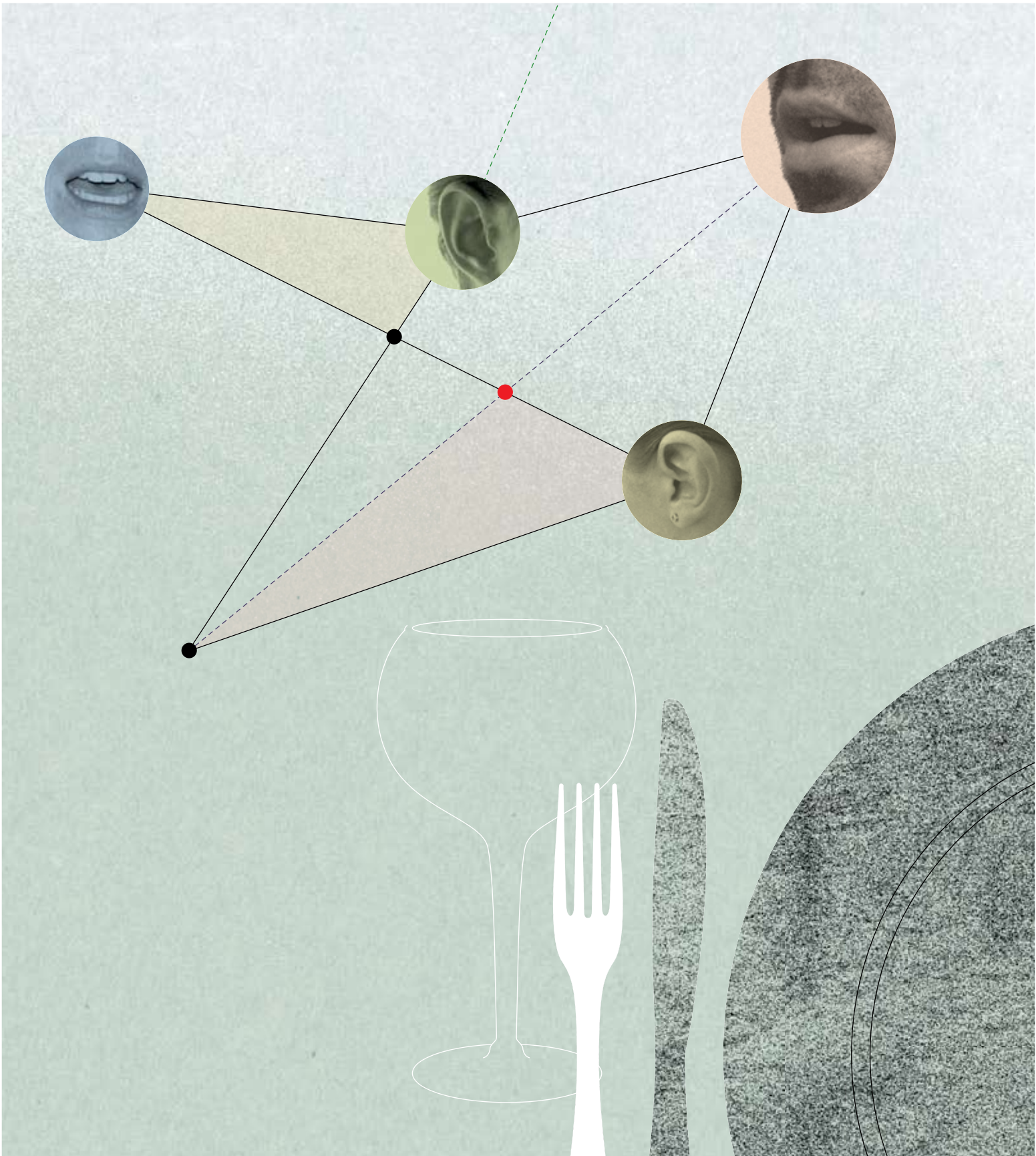
Both Brous and Lau-Lavie expressed a similar commitment to ensuring the quality of their work, insisting that it has to be both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually engaging. Lau-Lavie explained that he would always like to “do more,” both in terms of the quality of his dramatic approach and the power of the engagement of his work:

And, what I hear a lot from people is that they feel empowered. “I can open the Bible and read...” They want the light touch without reducing it. And its culture but we’re talking about religion, we’re talking about soul, we’re talking about spiritual. We’re talking about for real, but it’s user friendly. It’s not aggressive and scary.

Brous, too, explained that for her, the measure of quality is the extent to which she can create experiences that are “really intellectually stimulating” without either allowing the experience of worship to ossify or taking it out of an enriching, viable, vibrant traditional framework:

We’ll try new things all the time, but all within the traditional framework. I’m a halachic Jew and I take that seriously and the davening is in Hebrew. And I want anyone who is a non-Orthodox and traditional Jew to feel comfortable davening at Ikar. So there is a structure; but, the question is, how can we innovate from within that structure?

Not long ago, perhaps as late as the mid-20th century, synagogues and other Jewish institutions could rely upon Jews’ need for each other’s company to guarantee belonging and affiliation. Jews had no choice but to go to Jewish organizations for their socializing, synagogues for their group life, and Jewish charities with their donations. They were captive audiences simply because they had no other place to turn. In sharp contrast, Jews today enjoy access to the full gamut of American life. Organized Jewish endeavors can no longer rely on the larger society to bring Jews together in Jewish institutions. Rather, in a competitive marketplace for what is essentially people’s leisure time, these endeavors must offer diverse elements of attraction, and they must do so in a way that connotes quality and sophistication.



In this context, it is not at all surprising that the four organizations we studied have been quite careful about delivering high-quality experiences and tending to the reputation for doing so, a function referred to by marketers as “branding.” They seek to establish a recognizable identity, and to have their participants-audience-congregants-listeners come to associate the “brand” with high quality. The dissatisfaction expressed by each of the four founders with prevailing options in Jewish life was tempered by their own belief that Jewish experiences and products could be both Jewish and of high quality. As Silcoff explained to her early guests to the Toronto Salon, “It’s a Jewish event, but not that kind of Jewish event.” And, she added “I also had to convey that it wasn’t going to be shitty.”

For Storahtelling’s Jonathan Ross, the question arose around his commitment to theater and his sense that Storahtelling could evolve from its amateurish early stages to offer a more professional-quality product without in any way diminishing its content. He recalled an argument he had with Lau-Lavie about six months after founding Storahtelling:

After the first 6-7 months I was in Storahtelling, we got in a big fight. And I told him, “I can’t do this. I want to act, I want to be challenged, I want a script, I want a role, I want to try things, I want to make choices. Here I’m doing shtick.” We were creating the scripts the day before, and it’s shtick. I said, “I cannot be a part of this.” So his response was, “Let’s create ‘Showtime.’ This will be great—we’ll do this Purim show, there’s a script, you’ll be Mordechai, ten rehearsals, and a real process.” He brought in the next year Franny Silverman, and she got his ass in gear. And [she] said, “You can’t do Shultime with one rehearsal.” Now Shultime has 5-7 rehearsals over 5 weeks, with a lot of homework, and it’s a real process.

At issue in these comments, was not just the perceived low quality of available options, but also the conviction that one could create Jewish experiences that sacrificed neither their Jewishness nor their professionalism for the sake of their audience. For Bisman, Lau-Lavie, and Silcoff, the issue remained centrally one of creating a space that was unapologetically Jewish, and one that offered a product of comparable quality to those available within the broader cultural marketplace. Aaron Bisman explained:

I knew that if we could find the best of it, and help develop it, and put it out there, and market it for what it was without trying to kitsch it up, or just let it be what it was and name it for what it was, and spend as much time on our marketing as we do on our content, that we could reach all kinds of people—Jews and non-Jews.

For Silcoff, a large part of branding her Salon meant making clear to her target audience that her program was independent of traditional institutions. She recalled an offer from a Toronto-based Jewish cultural festival:

*A large communal festival called me and asked me to do a salon, but they wanted it to be “come one come all” and they wanted it to be in the daytime, and I was like—not like I’m thinking like a brander—but I’ve got my thing and I didn’t want to fuck with its reputation.*

Although Silcoff winces at calling herself a “brander,” she is clearly quite conscious of the Salon’s reputation, and she is earnestly concerned about keeping it not only independent, but also in line with her ideals of where, when, and how it ought to operate.

Branding, then, serves at least two functions. First, it is intrinsic to the effort to provide, sustain, and deliver high-quality “product,” be it worship, music, conversation, or entertaining learning. Second, it serves to differentiate these organizing endeavors from the older generation’s semi-discredited institutions. Each is saying something analogous to, “Yes we’re a shul, but we’re not like the ones you know or have experienced in your childhood.” Branding reflects an aspiration for intrinsic goals, and serves as a means of differentiating from prevailing options, as if to say, “Just because we’re Jewish, that doesn’t mean we’re less than excellent; and just because we’re Jewish, we’re different from the Jewishness with which you are accustomed.”

## **IT’S ABOUT BUILDING JEWISH COMMUNITY, NOT SELLING CULTURAL PRODUCT**

In a manner of speaking, the four organizers of the innovative organizations we studied are all Jewish cultural impresarios. Aaron Bisman manages a Jewish record label and markets his performers. Silcoff produces her own show in which she acts simultaneously as performer, writer, director, and marketer. Amichai Lau-Lavie got his start as a Jewish educational entertainer and moved on to establish a highly professional Jewish theater company that happens to perform in Sabbath services, schools, congregations, and other venues. Sharon Brous, as a pulpit rabbi, like other clergy-people is an accomplished performer on stage (“bimah,” the center of liturgical action in a synagogue is, after all, the Hebrew word for “stage”). She exhibits a commanding stage presence; she carefully attends to the orchestration and choreography of the liturgy; and she successfully engages with the worshippers. So, in a sense, all four

organizers are successfully producing and marketing Jewish cultural products and experiences to an appreciative (and growing) clientele. But in the end, their overarching mission is not about the product; **it's about connecting Jews**, as Bisman states explicitly:

Our market likes product. They do connect things through what they have tangibly, what they can share with friends. If it's on someone's i-Pod they can play it for friends. It's the same with *Heeb* magazine. Products are good because there's that pass-along. These are all products that work toward Jewish identity. If you give people something that they take home, yes, you don't control in the same way what they're going to do with it. But I don't care what they're going to do with it. This is not kiruv in that sense of making or bringing people into Judaism and religion. I could care less. What I do care about is that people give a damn about their Judaism and their relationship to it, and I don't care to control that at all. But I think if we can give them some really interesting and positive ways to hear, understand, connect with their Judaism, like that's good enough for me.

Each of the organizers views his/her products and experiences as vehicles for Jews to come together, and each of them is quite explicit about the desire to create community, or at least the strong social networks that underlay and give rise to more recognizable forms of community. For Silcoff, this means maintaining a carefully regulated roster of participants, some of whom gather together once a month for the salon. For JDub, it means creating some bond between the people who gather together for live events. For Ikar, it means creating a community around the synagogue that operates along the triple dimension of social justice, prayer, and Jewish learning. For Lau-Lavie, it's about reconnecting Jews to the drama of Torah and reviving desultory worship and languid congregations.

The centrality of the community experience can be seen in the remarks of the participants. When asked which of the Salons they remembered the best, Silcoff's participants couldn't name more than one or two. Nonetheless, they all cited the opportunity for intelligent conversation with like-minded others in a community-like setting as the reason they keep going back. Ben Leczcz, a journalist and editor explained, "It's a fun night. I go because I've thought a lot and I think a lot about my Jewish identity. It's an opportunity to talk about it, which is great, and to talk about it with some like-minded people." Julia Rosenberg, a filmmaker, offered the following reaction: "What I liked both about the Salon and this class was that it is an opportunity for me to think about things that aren't so directly related to my field of work. There aren't a lot of occasions for people to get together to just talk about ideas. I think I went to the Salon as a Jew, and when I



realized that the content of the Salon was intellectually stimulating, I was happier.” The opportunity for intelligent conversation overshadowed the content of the conversation yet that, too, strengthens Jewish relationships.

This community-oriented sentiment was echoed by members of Storahtelling, who emphasize their role as facilitators for the congregations in which they perform. Sara Socolic, a company member, recalled her experience in helping members of a congregation to engage with the text and with one another:

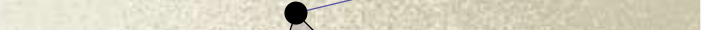
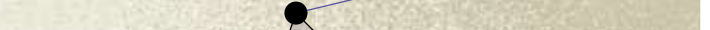
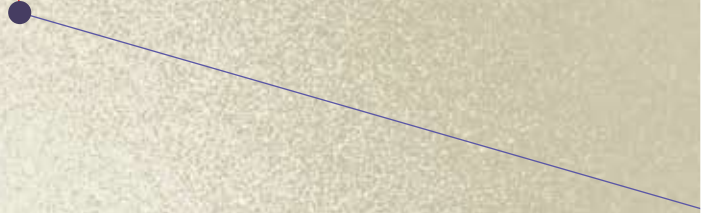
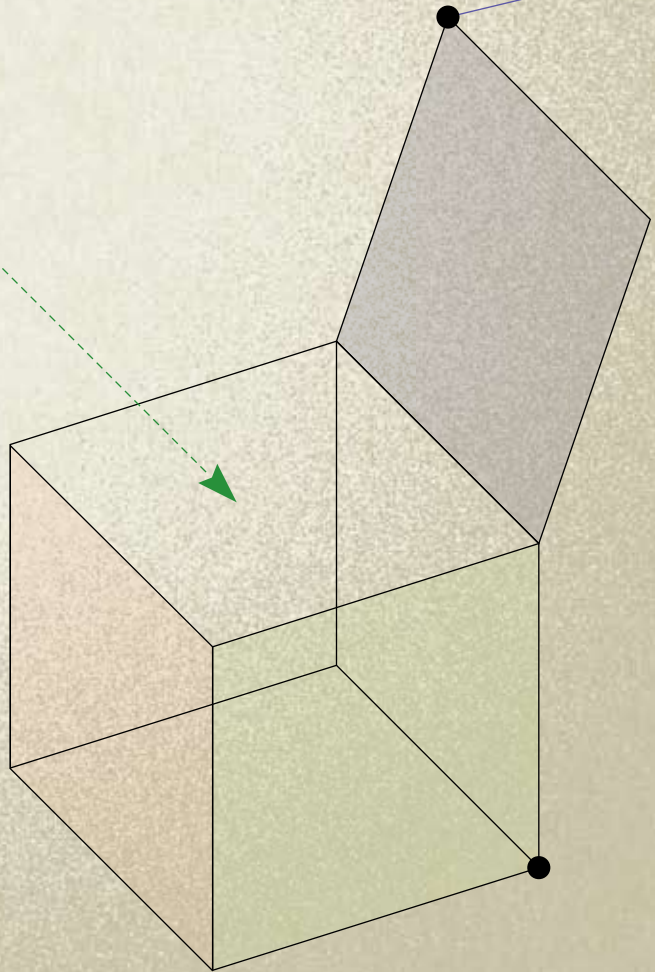
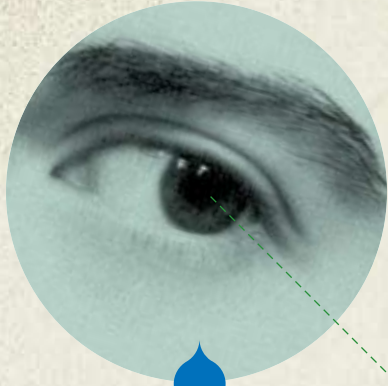
It’s been really transformational for people. Because people go from feeling isolated to feeling included and feel like they matter and what they think matters. One thing I’ve learned—and I’ve been really spoiled by my Jewish education—I realized most people don’t have that and many people want it. And people feel stupid in services because they don’t know what the hell anything means. No one gives them an opportunity to jump inside the page and live our story and that’s what we do.

Storahtelling’s Ross sees his mission in similar terms. He views his work in Storahtelling as a means of reviving a sense of engaged community among the congregants for whom he performs:

They’re just sitting there waiting to be turned on. If you go to synagogue on a Saturday morning at 9:00 a.m., you want to be turned on. You do. Even if you think you’re going because of who you’re going to see. And 90% of those shuls that have the dead audiences full of people who want to be turned on. It’s like flipping a switch. It’s what we do for a living—turning them on by letting them see the life lived through us in front of their lives.

Brous recollected the first bar mitzvah at Ikar in terms of an opportunity she almost missed:

We had a bar mitzvah and I was terrified because I was like, “This is when we become a bar mitzvah shul” and all these people show up who don’t know Ikar. And Greg, a board member, said, “Look, whatever you do, please do not give this kid a Kiddush cup. Do something ‘Ikar.’” I love that—I had not even thought about a gift for a kid. So we thought, what would we give the kid for the bar mitzvah at Ikar? And a kid—this kid. We realized that this was a tough kid. He was not into the process. So we bought him this beautiful wooden box and I asked him to open it up



in front of everyone. As I gave him this gift I said, “Open it up and see what’s inside.” And he said, “It’s empty.” And I said, “Yeah. You have three choices. You can either say that this box is meaningless and throw it in the closet and forget about it. You can fill it with crap, like things that don’t mean anything to you and never will. Or you can put the most precious gems of your life in this box, and really collect stories of love and pain, and the things that matter to you most in the world, and then the box has meaning. The box is just like you—it’s an empty vessel right now, and you have to choose what you’re going to put inside.” And this kid was crying. I just thought, “Wow, Greg! That’s awesome.” I would have just given him a Kiddush cup. That’s a partnership—it’s so holy.

The organizers remain committed to an engaging communal experience, even at the expense of distraction from directly appreciating the cultural product in which they understandably invest much of themselves. Even Bisman, a music professional, understands that the emphasis in all these efforts is on the community rather than the music. He explained his emphasis on events in the following way:

It’s not as much about the performance as it is about the scene and like knowing that behind the bar we have slivovitz for free, and once your friends tell you that.... So there are just little fun things. I don’t care if people are talking the whole night and it’s not the kind of scene where the artists are going to tell you to shut up. It’s a scene as much as it is a performance by the artist.

For Silcoff, the whole idea of the Salon is about creating connections among people through intellectual engagement, as opposed to just schmoozing. It’s not networking for networking’s sake, but a chance to create meaningful bonds based on conversations and interpersonal relationships within a bounded context. Adam Wergeles, a member of Ikar’s Board, explained his connection to Ikar in similar terms:

But to be completely honest, going to services is not fundamentally what it’s about for me. It’s about participating in the creation of a community, and having friends, and common interests, and getting involved in projects that are of interest. And see if we can create an environment that brings more Jews in.

Frannie Silverman sees her role as a *Storahteller* as a conscious part of a broader attempt to crack open the rigid behaviors that typically define synagogue services. In a story about a



performance in Virginia, Silverman recalled the Torah service opening up into a much broader conversation:

[The weekly Torah portion] was Parshat Metzorah, which is about many things. One small part of it is the leprosy thing, but it is the leprosy of a house. So during the “Second aliya stretch,” the point in which we have audience interaction, we ask, “What are the stains on our world, that may or may not need fixing?” And there was a guy that was like, “Bush!” And then there was a whole thing that erupted. It was sort of a joke, like [President] Bush is a stain on our home. And we were in Virginia and there were definitely Bush supporters there. And then an argument—they sort of hijacked it. But again, we’re in the middle of the Torah service and it became a political discussion.

## LIMITED CLAIMS, AMBITIOUS ASPIRATIONS

In the past, more traditional communities, Jewish and otherwise, would lay claim to comprehensiveness. A single community aspired to satisfy the maximal number of communal needs, be it prayer, culture, politics, education, or the celebration of life cycle events. And the “good” community member could live out most of his/her entire religious life within the confines of the single community. Many synagogues today, out of the desire to attract and retain members, still harbor such aspirations in what may be deemed a congregational strategy of “one-stop shopping.”

In contrast, adjusting to a new reality in which younger Jewish adults generally resist the claims of “greedy institutions,” these newer organizing endeavors are intentionally more modest. They (or at least their founders) see themselves as providing just one of many foci of community experience, expecting their members-participants-audience-congregants to assemble supplementary experiences and affiliations. Underlying their community-building philosophy is the notion that the congregation, the salon, the prayer service or the concert provide a single segment of community that interlocks with other segments, albeit with different combinations for each individual. If traditional communities saw themselves as **comprehensive** (providing for the full sweep of communal needs), the communities we observed see themselves as **collaborative** (providing one element in the community experience, to be augmented by other associations and communities).

In accord with their limited aspirations, these communities issue more **limited normative claims**. Each of these organizations is in the business of creating powerful Jewish

experiences, but they do not purport to provide total Jewish lifestyles. They see themselves more as responding to unmet passions than as proselytizing to the Jewishly unengaged. They invest little rhetoric or overt effort in convincing their participants that they ought to change the way they live their lives outside the confines of the experience itself. **We create space for conversation to happen.**

Perhaps paradoxically, the communities they lead abide by some traditional or conventional norms that they feel no need to impart to, let alone impose upon, those sharing in the experiences they stage. They could be saying, “Here and now, we follow Jewish law, but what you do afterwards really is your business.” So, Ikar bars musical instruments (other than a drum) in its worship services because, in the view of Rabbi Brous, the playing of musical instruments during the service would violate the laws of Shabbat. Similarly, JDub Records does not permit its artists to perform on Shabbat, even if they’re playing at a club or a bar. (And, to be clear, JDub Records engages in no explicit advocacy for observing traditional Shabbat prohibitions.) Storahtelling utilizes live music, although the company can adapt to synagogues that do not permit instrumentation on Shabbat. Likewise, while Silcoff distributes Jewish readings to her participants, she hardly expects them to read or be versed in traditional Jewish texts, or to take up the study of these texts on their own.

The key personalities here certainly do seek impact in the world. They do hope for change in the views and behavior of the individuals they touch directly, as well as in the larger world around them. However, they voice no aspiration for immediately changing people’s behavior outside the time and space of the experiences they are providing. Ultimately, the organizers hope their efforts pay off in some larger way, perhaps by serving as an inspirational model to others, or perhaps by provoking a sea-change in their own constituents and in those beyond their immediate circle of influence.

The central players in these endeavors are all committed to broad visions of the world, and they bring these visions to bear on the events they organize. They endeavor to provide the richest possible experiences to the largest number of people, in the hope of effecting some of the change they envision for the world at large. Amichai Lau-Lavie says so directly:

My real ambition: I want to have a community of informed and personally engaged brothers and sisters who, together with me, will challenge the status quo. So to have that, I want people who will get the bug from us, and will say, “Damn. I like this shit. I’m going to start doing Shabbat. I’m going to start studying more. I’m going to start doing more.” Then I’ll have a real community of real activists who care. [But] the buy-in is very incremental and very gradual. You can’t even tell them at the beginning “This is why we’re doing it.”

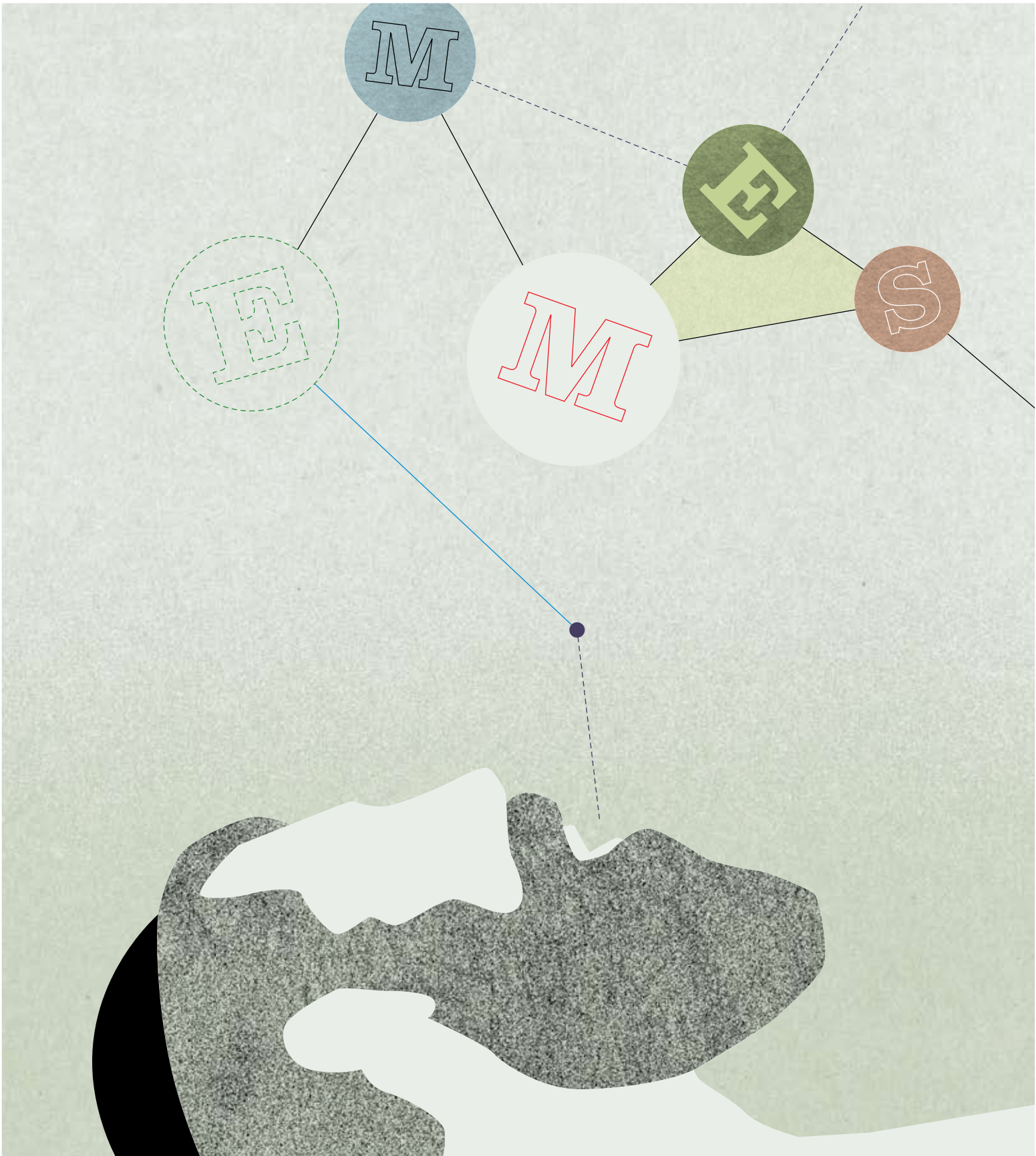
Even Matisyahu, JDub Record's biggest artist, who is, himself, a member of Chabad of the Lubavitch movement, understands his limited educational potential as a Jew within a wider social world:

The basic idea is trying to introduce people to Judaism and truth within Judaism. And that should be done in a way that people can relate to it [so that] people can make the decisions for themselves. Obviously I myself believe that there's one God and we all have a personal relationship to that God, but I'm not trying to cram that down anyone's throat. History has shown us time and time again that anyone that tries to do that is missing the picture—isn't getting it themselves. It's not about trying to prove that you're right and other people are wrong. It's about trying to open up and share your experience and then if people find that they also are searching for something and they also are looking for *emmes* [truth], then they'll search for that themselves.

Matisyahu's sold-out show at Webster Hall in New York is a case in point. The crowd of 1,400 included a number of small groups of Yeshiva boys and denim-skirt-wearing Orthodox girls alongside other people whose manner of dress clearly marked them as non-religious. Non-Orthodox attendees accounted for over 80% of the audience, and without the aid of visual signifiers, it was impossible to tell who among them was Jewish and who was not. Yet when Matisyahu lay down on the stage at one point and sang the "shema" (to a reggae melody), the crowd roared in approval, suggesting more than passing familiarity with Judaism's best-known and most evocative prayer. One couple standing nearby turned to their friends to explain what the "shema" was, in the context of the crowd's reaction. Backed by a large tapestry that looked like a cross between a tie-dye and a stained glass window with a Jewish star in the middle, Matisyahu offered an unabashedly, publicly Jewish performance without any overt didacticism, leaving that, too, to his audience.

Bisman, too, explained his ultimate vision of JDub Records's potential impact as having more to do with provoking emotional engagement with being Jewish than in urging conformity with traditional norms:

I want people to care or to think. I want the Judaism piece to matter on some level. On one level, that's all I want. I don't care about the other pieces. It's not my place. I don't want people to tell me how to be Jewish. I just want the opportunities. If people marry other Jews, great. If they go to Israel, great. I'm not going to say those things aren't important, but this isn't the space in which I want to measure. I meant really talking about measuring success about strengthening Jewish identity? I meant that is the end. But does a strong



Jewish identity mean you marry another Jew? Or does it mean you care about your Judaism and you want to keep it alive and you want to investigate it or explore it because it's important?

Rabbi Brous is more observant than most in her community. Yet she does not claim that her level of observance is right for everybody, and does not seek (at least overtly) to make Ikar a place where increased observance is the central objective. Rather, the emphasis is on a passionate engagement with prayer, learning, and social justice:

There's a real authentic Jewish traditional spiritual life, [and that is] also being really serious and deliberate about being engaged in the pursuit of justice in the city and in the world. And if you come to shul and Congress just declared that we should call what's happening in Sudan, "genocide"—something's got to be done in synagogue to reflect that. Davening should be integrated into this political and social reality that we're living in.

And that was an idea: That davening can be soulful and profound and impactful. Like our davening can impact the world, and the world will impact the way our davening looks.

For Brous, the experience of Ikar ought to inspire one's behavior and politics outside the synagogue. While the congregation's vision of social justice is informed and motivated by a connection to Jewish tradition, she maintains no explicit aspiration that it will manifest in immediate changes in Jewish observance.

Mireille Silcoff's motivation for creating the salon was no less explicit than those of Brous or Lau-Lavie. She hoped to create a forum for Jewish conversations that people could not have elsewhere:

If every salon was built on these very emotional conversations, I think it would go kablooey very quickly, and people would start seeing it as a kind of yiddified *Dr. Phil Show*. But at the same time, there's an intense need for young Jews to get this stuff out, and I don't think they've had a venue where they can do it. What are you going to do? Talk about your questions with your parents at the Passover table? Or at synagogue? Or in Jewish school? No, you can't. But you can do it at the Salon because there are loads of people like you and there are no wagging fingers in the room. So, in a way, it's really important for the Salon to be a platform for people to expunge these demons.

Silcoff sought to create a Jewish experience that is not tied to “suburban Thornhill Yerushalayim architecture synagogue” [Thornhill is a growing Toronto suburb that is home to a large Orthodox population] or to “the infantilizing [Jewish] Community Center.” She hoped the Salon would illustrate that, “You can be an urban intellectual Jew. You can be a Jew through your reading. You can be a Jew through the kinds of conversation you have. You do not need to go to synagogue.”

## INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES IN THE SERVICE OF BUILDING COMMUNITY

The specter of American Jews’ individualism-run-rampant has caused understandable consternation and concern among Jewish communal leaders. At first blush, individualism seems at variance with a commitment to community. The maintenance of strong boundaries, compliance with shared norms, and the support of strong formal institutions all lay at the heart of Jewish identities and communities through much of the 20th century. The impact of modernity and post-modernity challenged, subverted, and undermined all these components, and the youngest generation of adult American Jews has taken these processes further along than their predecessors. Perhaps more than their parents’ generation, they are uncomfortable with the assertion of boundaries, the advocacy of norms, and the culture of formal institutions. If all this is so, then one may ask (and, indeed, many communal observers have been asking): How can these Jews—with all their aversion to boundaries, norms, and institutions—form well-functioning communities?

One response is to try to change the individuals by convincing them of the value of boundaries, norms, and institutions. Another is to change the available possibilities for community, which is the path chosen by the organizations we have studied and the others that have sprung up in just the last half dozen years. In ways we are only beginning to understand, these new collective entities are managing not simply to accommodate to the ethos of Jews under 35, but to actually harness for communal purpose the “individualist” preferences and energies they seem to abide.

The attention to the individual-in-community occurs, as we have seen, in a number of ways and places. One way is that these organizations seek to deliver individual and individualized Jewish experiences that touch and move people individually. Storahteller Frannie Silverman explains her ideal performance:

Ideally, expectations are broken for what they expect to see—certainly what they expect to see in synagogue and experience in synagogue. And regardless



of where on the scale of 'Jewish' you consider yourself, there's a place where this collective Jewish story [that Storahtelling portrays] coincides with your personal story. Hopefully in the experience of participating in one of our performances, one of these intersections happen, and it's a moment of realization for that person.

For Silverman, the individual experience is the crux of Storahtelling's effectiveness. She sees that Storahtelling's pointed interventions contain within them the opportunities for individual reflection and engagement that might, eventually have broader social and communal effects.

For Brous, too, the crux of her mission is the individual experience. Her comments reveal the tremendous attention she pays to the individual and to the value of reaching and engaging individuals in personal terms:

There's a moment, an opportunity, and a mandate to build a community [and to] do it in a way that Jews would feel intellectually stimulated, validated as individuals. Like where you come from matters. I don't want everyone to be the same. We're all on spiritual journeys and we all have to learn from each other. It's not like I'm preaching and you're listening. Really intellectually stimulating. Really valuing the dignity and the worth of every person—and their journey—who comes into this room.

Silcoff explained that, at the time she started the Salon, she was trying to create “something you'd go to anyway, but you can be there because you're a Jew.” Silcoff explained that she herself was searching for such a place, which further emphasizes the significance of the individual experience. Here were four motivated, bright young Jews looking for engagement and a for place to express their relationships with Jewishness who created these arenas on their own.

Notwithstanding all the emphasis on individualized experiences and the individuals who created them, everyone we interviewed spoke positively about **the power and importance of community**. For them, the attention to the individual was a necessary precondition for the love of (Jewish) communities. In their view, their organizations are providing opportunities for individuals to make meaning out of Jewish life and culture for themselves—not as an isolated meditative experience, but in the context of interaction with the group. The creation of Jewish experience that is “meaningful” and individualized requires the dynamism of a community to generate the energy necessary for these encounters.

The power of individual experiences, rather than detracting from the collective experience, actually became a powerful integrative moment in the ritual life of the synagogue. For

Silcoff, the salon she recalled as being “the worst ever” in terms of the acrimony it engendered, turned out to be one of the most memorable sessions for her participants.

Social commentators since the 1980s have been portraying American society and American religion as increasingly individualist and decreasingly communitarian. The massively influential *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert Bellah and associates, published in 1985, proposed that American society has historically moved as a pendulum, swinging between the poles of social solidarity and rampant individualism. One of the book’s more famous characters, “Sheila,” spoke of “Sheilaism,” a religious system with one adherent. Works on American ethnicity, such as Mary Water’s *Ethnic Options* (a very telling title) spoke of how descendants of various immigrant groups had not only detached themselves from the social life of those groups, but felt free to choose their ethnic affiliations, and to invent the content and meaning of their selected ethnicity. Other works, such as Wade Clark Roof’s *Spiritual Marketplace* and Robert Wuthnow’s, *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith* underscored the increasingly individualistic tendencies in American religious life.

In *The Jew Within*, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen made similar observations for American Jews, emphasizing the increasing role of voluntarism, autonomy, “personalism” (the search for personal meaning), and the rejection of judgmentalism in American Jews’ understanding of being Jewish. They also charted declines in Jewish ethnic informal association (in terms of marriage, friendship, and neighborhood) and investment in Jewish organizations and institutions, arriving at the conclusion that the contemporary American Jewish self sees him/herself as sovereign. The individual feels entitled, with little guilt or hesitation, to decide what to observe Jewishly, and insists on a personal meaning for every observance. Since their arrival in the New World, Jews have felt free to pick and choose their practices; but now they are justifying their choices in terms of personal meaning, and insisting upon the provision of personal meaning as a pre-condition to observance and engagement. To be sure, the self is not as fully sovereign as it could be, but it is far more sovereign than it was just two or three decades ago.

The challenge of building community among people with highly diverse and idiosyncratic histories and widely differing values, interests, and preferences have been recognized and explored in the sociological literature. In *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, Putnam and Feldstein write about the power of dialogue to build solidarity despite diversity. The etymology of the Greek word “dialogue” [two meanings] suggests a way for those with a different sense of “logos” to nevertheless feel valued by the very process of sharing tales with individual meaning in a collective setting. By extension, we see these sorts of congregations, salons, prayer events, and concerts as ways of addressing the individual search for meaning in a community context that appreciates and values individuality. In their emphasis on individuality, these new attempts at community building may well contain lessons for Jewish institutions at large.



## STRUGGLING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

These organizations are unconventional. They cross numerous boundaries, not least of which are between education and entertainment, between charitable mission and start-up business. They spread leadership functions over several engaged individuals (although this is probably more applicable to Ikar, JDub, and Storahtelling than to the Salon, the least organizationally complex operation of the four). Yet with all the innovativeness in style, structure, and content, the creative genius and the drive to found these organizations and advance them in all cases comes down to a single individual. Without Brous there would be no Ikar; without Bisman no JDub; without Lau-Lavie no Storahtelling; and without Silcoff no Salon. Not only are these individuals primarily responsible for founding these organizations and bringing them through the early stages of development; our sense is that their leaving or incapacitation would fatally cripple the still-infant creative entities they established.

Lau-Lavie, Bisman, Brous, and Silcoff, are at times, indistinguishable from their organizations. Our interviews have shown that people attend JDub events “to support Aaron,” and members of Storahtelling and the Jewish press talk about Lau-Lavie as the “sage,” the “creative force,” or the “genius” behind the organization. Brous’ board members talk about her “old soul” and her charisma, but qualify it with statements like, “Sharon does not lead services like any rabbi I’ve ever seen.” Similarly, Salon participants are not short on praise for Silcoff and her ability to select reading materials, participants and locales.

While they certainly hear these words of praise, the creators themselves have a slightly different view of the organizations and what it takes to make them function. Their professional identities are bound up in the organizations that they founded. Bisman explained some of his concerns as a music professional who works in the Jewish world. “Someone at a conference was like, ‘you’re a Jewish professional.’ And I said, ‘No I’m not. I’m a music professional.’” He continued:

And I guess there’s a little bit of a fear of messing up our personal reputations in whichever world. I have to be able to succeed beyond the life of this organization. I have to be respected, not so much in the Jewish world, in the music world—I need to have a name for myself. If the Jewish world thinks we’re super special and the music world doesn’t give two shits about us, then we couldn’t do anything.

Brous, too, finds herself bound up in the identity of her organization as she identifies strongly with Ikar and takes its successes and failures personally. When the Ikar services we came to observe one Friday night turned out a bit “sleepy,” Brous called us two days later

because she felt badly that services had not been as inspiring as they could have been. She herself felt a personal responsibility for the quality of her product.

Silcoff, a professional journalist who now runs a Jewish magazine, takes the Salons seriously, gravely recounting the story of what she described as “the worst salon ever in the history of salons.” Although she meticulously plans the events and is a careful student of her successes and her failures, adjusting where she needs to, she still takes failures personally:

I do worry about the events sucking. And there have been Salons that have not been so great, and the next morning, I wake up in the greatest depression, and I think, “Forty people came and it was a really dark night.”

Silcoff estimated that each salon required about eight days of work, from making phone calls to taking care of logistics to researching, and assembling readings and sending them out.

Lau-Lavie, a brilliant teacher with a wicked sense of humor, began by hiring himself out solo. Only later did he hire actors who brought their professionalism to the table. Jonathan Ross explained the beginning of Storahtelling in terms of Lau-Lavie’s talent:

It was Amichai [Lau-Lavie] and musicians – or just Amichai, if it was an Orthodox or Conservative shul. It was *meturgeman*—it was shticky. It was Amichai translating verse by verse with musicians. He’s so smart and knowledgeable about everything textual about the Torah and its related texts, that he can get up there and wing it and kick ass. And we said, “That looks so cool, can we do it too?” And he ran into the problem of realizing—more and more people wanted him to do it in more and more cities, so he needed more people to do it with him and help. Number one. Number two, he couldn’t send those people out on their own to do it, because they didn’t have the [depth] that he did in terms of the knowledge. So there ended up having to be a team of people—which changes the dynamic.

Expanding an organization from a one-person show to a more professional production not only takes patience, but requires financial resources. None of these people brought the resources with them, and all of them had to seek it out. Both Bisman and Lau-Lavie were Joshua Venture and Bikkurim Fellows (philanthropically funded programs to support Jewish social entrepreneurs). Lau-Lavie has received a STAR grant (a program for supporting synagogue transformation), among others, and Silcoff’s Salon started on \$5,000 from Reboot. According to Lau-Lavie, Storahtelling’s revenue flow is

“1/3 revenue, 1/3 grants, 1/3 personal contributions. We’re moving toward 40% revenue and moving toward 50%.” Bisman likewise recognizes the importance of philanthropic support. Reflecting on “Slivovitz and Soul,” a very successful four-month-long residency at The Slipper Room, a Lower East Side club, Bisman commented on his hesitation to try a similar effort. “It was a \$5 ticket on a Thursday night. I have to have a \$12 ticket if I can even hope to make it a sustainable thing. It was totally underwritten. So it’s the kind of thing I could only really do with grant support.”

While these people are not in it for the money, they each express some level of concern for the financial stability of their organization, as well as their own ability to explain to themselves and others why they work so hard. The strain could be heard in Bisman’s reflections:

There is a threat of burnout in those thoughts, that my work is utterly absurd and I bend over backward to make all these things work, and like at some point, am I going to be tired of that. Look, if I could get out of the lowest income bracket and feel like I can be personally successful in the same way that I can be successful at the organization, then it helps. It’s a little easier to justify working the crazy hours.

For Brous, too, the demands on her time are significant. In addition to Brous, Ikar employs one other person, an administrator, and they work out of two simple offices that they rent from the West Side Jewish Community Center. Brous works closely with her administrator; on the Friday when we met for our interview, she interrupted a few times to ask Brous for feedback or for copyediting on announcements in the e-mail update. Melissa Balaban, chair of the Ikar Board explained just how much work was demanded of so few people:

Right after the Hagim, we were saying that we should rename it however you say, “smoke and mirrors” in Hebrew. Because we transformed this hideous JCC space and we made it really beautiful. Sharon created this gorgeous book. But it was this amazing thing and people had this sense that we were more together than we were. The Ikar telephone used to be our second line, and one of our board members called and I answered the phone. And she said, “Melissa, what are you doing answering the Ikar phone.” And I said, “Who is it that you think is going to answer this phone? You’re on the board!” So, even our own board had this sense that we were this real operation, while we’re flying by the seat of our pants.

On a practical level, much of Ikar's operating funds for the first year were supplied by a Los Angeles-based Jewish family foundation. The donor, Greg Podell recalled some of the early board meetings as part of his justification for supporting the synagogue:

Everybody got a sheet of paper that said, "One more month to go." You know, "Two more months to go," because that's all the money we had. So I wanted her (Rabbi Brous) to be comfortable for a year and really try to really develop this place.

To address the financial realities of operating a synagogue, Ikar developed a dues-based membership structure which, to a degree, epitomizes the struggle between its desire to be an "un-synagogue," and the financial realities of operating such an institution. Dues are scaled for students (\$210), individuals (\$613) and families (\$1,380), and High Holiday tickets for non-members cost \$180. These rates are still well below those of other congregations in the Los Angeles area and are designed as an incentive to join. Meanwhile, Ikar also offers reduced-rate memberships to anyone who inquires about them. So, while Ikar has membership like a traditional synagogue, the organization is aware of the financial standing of their target demographic and provides alternative avenues for people to join the community.

In short, as talented, dedicated, energetic, effective, and appreciated as they may be, the key leadership personalities who created and drive these innovative endeavors remain woefully under-funded, under-assisted, and under-recognized. The reasons for the creative success and financial hardship are not hard to fathom. As with any start-up operations, these efforts need to develop a track record to attract the confidence of prospective philanthropists. They are further burdened because they are appealing to a constituency with both limited financial means and a limited experience with philanthropically supporting even those causes which directly serve their own needs. And, not least, as young professionals whose counterparts (if there are any) would still be working as the protégés or understudies of established professionals in established institutions, they lack the reputation and social networks to tap into some of the usual and more likely sources of funding.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is too soon to tell whether we are in the midst of a middle-sized blip in Jewish communal creativity, or the beginning of a major revival. But something is surely afoot, with activity in such diverse quarters as congregational life, social justice activism, experimental philanthropy, music, filmmaking, and other cultural endeavors.

As suggested by the four case studies undertaken here, this nascent movement of creativity in Jewish life both reflects and shapes certain distinguishing features in the Jewishness of Jews under 35, with respect to congregations, JCCs, federations, and other Jewish organizations, the most salient features of this cohort's preferences are as follows:

*Most Jews under 35 choose not to affiliate with synagogues and other established institutions in large part because they feel “**demographically disenfranchised,**” in that the existing institutions appeal to, and are heavily shaped by, in-married parents of school-age children.*

*Their lack of affiliation cannot be taken automatically as evidence of a lack of engagement in Jewish life, as many do, in fact, care deeply about being Jewish. Hence, it is fair to say that many are, “**institutionally unaffiliated, but Jewishly engaged.**”*

*Young adults maintain some very critical views of established Jewish institutions. They see them, at times, as **overly bounded, socially exclusionary, normatively coercive, culturally bland, and institutionally focused** in their governance, ethos, and programs. In contrast, young adults prefer engagement that is fluid and episodic, inclusive, non-coercive, engaging, and socially focused.*

With respect to the new and emerging forms of innovative endeavor by and for Jewish younger adults, we find the following:

*They approach prevailing Jewish life—the culture and institutions of their childhood and adolescent years—with **iconoclasm and irony.** They maintain a contemporaneous aesthetic, and establish other cultural markers to **differentiate their ways of being Jewish** from those associated with their parents' and grandparents' generations, preferring older and alternative points of identification through nostalgic archaeology and musical choices.*

*They **cross social and cultural boundaries** that divide Jews from non-Jews, Jews from each other, Jewish space from other space, and Jewish culture from other cultures. By striving for **social diversity** in their constituencies, they seek to effect a more **inclusive** stance toward the world.*

*They view their primary objective as strengthening Jewish social networks and creating **communities that deliver personal meaning,** not selling cultural products. The latter are the means to achieve the former.*

*Rather than seeking to create comprehensive communities that aspire to being the exclusive locus of Jewish engagement, they see their endeavors as **collaborative communities,** one of the many ways in which participants and constituents will Jewishly connect. Their leaders and organizations make only **limited normative demands,** affirming constituents' freedom of individual choice and autonomy.*

*They provide for **meaningful individual experiences,** and allow for individual expressions of Jewish engagement, emphasizing the power of the social experience, dialogue, and conversation.*

*They are **performance-oriented**, blurring the lines between education, engagement, and entertainment.*

*They cite **individualist impulses as the genesis of community engagement**, in effect answering the question, “How can people with such a strong individualist bent be engaged in a common effort to create Jewish connection and build Jewish community?”*

*These nascent organizations are led by highly trained, motivated, generally overworked and under-paid **creative leaders**, whose relative **lack of visibility** in organized Jewish life and **lack of funding**, deriving from their youthfulness and recency of prominence, belies their extraordinary success.*

This phenomenon is still in its early stages, and so it is difficult to draw conclusions with any real confidence. Nevertheless, we have enough evidence to know that the intriguing signs of Jewish life and creativity are too numerous to be considered isolated aberrations, or simply dismissed as either a fad or a distraction. They are too distinctive from the institutional models that preceded them to be considered merely derivative, and too much in keeping with emerging shifts and tendencies in American society, religion, and community life to be dismissed as insignificant. In some form, then, these changes are here to stay, and may well serve as a harbinger of emerging trends in American Jewish life as this younger cohort ages, and takes its place as the demographic center of American Jewry.

In the meantime, hopes for engaging this young cohort, for developing its creative potential to its fullest, and for nurturing the laboratories of Jewish cultural growth and development as embodied in their innovative approaches, rests not only with the struggling Jewish social entrepreneurs and their constituents. It also rests with enterprising philanthropists and sophisticated Jewish communal leaders who come to understand that the quality of Jewish life in America, now and in the future, depends in large part upon the quality of Jewish leadership in a younger generation that is already making its mark and demonstrating its creativity.

Each of these scenes is certainly valuable and intriguing in its own right. But taken together, they also represent a new wave of creativity taking place among, and by, North American Jewish young adults. They reflect new and emerging modes of Jewish identity and community. These modes derive from earlier patterns exemplified by their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, while departing from them in important and significant ways. These endeavors serve as functioning social laboratories of Jewish cultural change. They identify and incubate new Jewish communal talent; they serve to engage young adults in Jewish life, connecting them to one another and to causes and enterprises in the wider Jewish community. As such, they have the potential for providing useful guidance and modeling for established institutions, even though such institutions may be limited in their ability to successfully and effectively adopt the innovations and culture of this generation.

A mounting array of news reports from far and wide, and a recent catalogue of fifty new Jewish organizing endeavors (Slingshot), testify to a new wave of innovation that appears to have emerged in just the last half dozen years, or less. These changes have taken place largely “under the radar screen” of organized Jewry. Their dimensions, significance, and ultimate staying-power remain to be determined.

To the middle-aged and established policymakers and practitioners of organized Jewry, the assorted collection of traditionalist-feminist minyanim, irreverent magazines, passionate social justice endeavors, off-beat web-based communication and organizing, and unnamed gatherings of ill-defined Jewish social networks seem both reassuring and mystifying. They are reassuring insofar as they suggest that the apparent lack of interest of Jews under 35 in synagogues, JCCs, federations, and long-standing Jewish fraternal and defense organizations may not, actually, indicate a lack of interest in all things Jewish. But they are mystifying as well, in that these new expressions of Jewish engagement are playing by a different set of rules, reflecting a different way of viewing being Jewish and being American (or Canadian), as well as a different way of connecting, organizing, and identifying.

Part of the mystification lies in the new forms of communities these innovations represent. Ikar, in all its distinctiveness, certainly comports with prevailing notions of community. It is the latest in a tradition of sacred Jewish community stretching back over two millennia. Although it looks the most similar to extant communal organizations, it is certainly not the only one of these recent efforts to have historical precedents. Innovative ways of engaging the Torah reading have roots in the lost character of the “meturgeman” and in the now conventional reading of the Haftarah. The use of contemporary music that crosses cultural boundaries has a complex network of roots and routes that knows practically no bounds. Semi-structured Jewish conversations that use as their texts some very non-traditional sources have a deep lineage tracing to the Jewish salons of Europe in late 19th century, the subject of a recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York.

While these innovations, in and of themselves, may not constitute communities *per se*, they certainly facilitate Jewish connections and provide new spaces where younger Jewish adults can connect with each other and with prevailing forms of Jewish community. At their heart, innovations such as Ikar, Storahelling, JDub Records, and the Toronto Jewish Salon, **enrich the ecology of contemporary Jewish life**, allowing connections to be formed and communities to grow. Just as rich ecosystems require plentiful water, nourishing soil, abundant vegetation, and bio-diversity, so too is the American Jewish environment in need of care, attention, replenishment, and variety. The ongoing creation and nourishment of new and adaptive forms of Jewish life depends in large part upon the richness of this Jewish ecosystem, and on its ability to accommodate and sustain the innovation and diversity that has characterized vital Jewish periods in the past, and that is essential for a rich Jewish life in the future.



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