

# Gauge and Engage: Adapting Adult Jewish Education

by Eli Gewirtz

*There is growing recognition today of the centrality of Jewish education for shaping one's Jewish identity. Judaism has survived through the generations as the models for the transmission of Jewish wisdom have adapted according to the needs of the times. The premise of the article is that modern Jewish education programs must combine both flexibility and adherence to tradition, along with a well-crafted marketing plan to appeal to a variety of demographic groups.*

Just as we were starting to understand how to relate to Generation X, along comes Generation Y. Much of the resources dedicated to fine-tuning our methodology for reaching and teaching one generation of Jews is suddenly shifted to another. Because the population groups have significantly different needs from the generations before them, we encounter greater pressure to adapt, perfect, and adapt again, and greater flexibility is demanded from us to ensure that specific programs and approaches are developed exclusively for each target group.

As a result of the changing demographic landscape, insufficient attention has been given to the specific needs of 25-to-35-year-old Jewish men and women, particularly those whose interest in Jewish learning is relatively new. Trends indicate that, in ever-increasing numbers, Jewish adults are seeking to start or to continue their Jewish education. On-line programs, growing numbers of university level Jewish studies courses, and more community programs than ever before offer an abundance of access points.

While these options are certainly a positive start, a closer examination of the adult Jewish education arena today illustrates that most programs (and their marketing efforts) do not specifically target Gen X-ers and Y-ers. This directly contrasts with research that indicates that each age group expects (and needs) a tailor-made approach. To properly prepare programs for these participants, it is important to understand what we are already doing right and what we could be doing better.

While intermarriage is still a hot topic, more important to Jewish educators is not the numbers of those who intermarry, but the shifting attitudes about it. A study by the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism showed a 7% decline between 1999 and 2004 among college students who felt it is "very important" to marry a Jew; and only 18% responded that they dated Jewish partners exclusively. Optimism in the face of these statistics comes from various studies, such as the National Jewish Population Survey (2000-2001) that "the greater one's Jewish education, the less likely one is to intermarry." With proper educational programming, it seems that we have the potential to make a positive impact on the grim intermarriage statistics.

Reports like Ratner's propel parents of young children to give greater consideration to sending their children to day schools that offer a solid Jewish foundation. Yet often without a Jewish education of their own, parents can have a hard time relating to their children's learning and feel unprepared to teach the children themselves. In recent years, this has been recognized by Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, which emphasizes that "adult and parental education is critical for the success of Jewish education."

An Australian researcher points to the lack of transmission of religion from parent to child, noting that "the breakdown of the socialization process...leaves religion behind as a memory in the past for the Baby Boomer and not even a memory for the Gen X-er."<sup>1</sup> But Generation Y offers optimism for the future, as that generation's character indicates stronger and more positive feelings towards religion than the two previous generations.

## Considerations for programming

The young adult of today lives in a world of community diffusion, while those of us who are responsible for much of the planning and programming for today's emerging adults might be described as living in a state of "community confusion." Preferring the evolving virtual community, Generation X and Y are extremely resistant to anything they see as reminiscent of the European *shtetl* and to other limitations they may define as "organized religion." In stark contrast to previous generations of Jews, access to professional opportunities figures prominently in deciding where to live, while access to Jewish institutions figures nominally, if at all. With emerging technologies bringing the world to our computer screens, our sense of community is at risk. Organizational adaptation, therefore, must be paramount in planning for today's Jewish adult.

Further, young Jews who live close to Jewish institutions are under-represented and uninvolved in their local Federations and in other community organizations. Resistance to

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getting involved in the local Jewish community may be rooted in the perception that “individuals” lead these communities. And Generation X’s well documented rejection of authority pales in comparison to the Generation Y’s great resistance to anything perceived as representing authority. As these generations mature, they have broadly redefined authority to include synagogues, organized community groups, and any affiliated movements. So while they may seek to connect with other Jews, most reject coordinated efforts to get involved organizationally.

Federations, Sisterhoods, and Brotherhoods are comprised mostly of people from the “old guard” and attempts to include the younger generations have by and large failed. An increasing number of Jewish professional or networking groups have been created by 25-to-35-year-olds who are suspicious of organized efforts to involve them in communal networking. David Borowich, Chairman and co-Founder of the *J2J Network*, which has branches in cities around the country, explained that the organization “was conceived as an independent non-profit networking hub for Jewish business professionals. We know affinity models work (in forums such as alumni clubs, ethnic clubs, and so forth). We felt there should be a centralized (agenda-neutral) place for Jewish professionals to connect with one another.”<sup>2</sup>

Offering the benefits of being part of a community without infringing on their sense of independence is an effective way to engage these generations. Today’s virtual communities are quickly replacing the static, more intimate communities of yesterday, propelling educational programs to double as opportunities for personal connectivity. That may explain why one-to-one programs such as *Partners in Torah’s* telephone study program (*TelePartners*), which offer flexible programming and human (rather than digital) connections, have been growing in popularity.

### Current challenges and future caseloads

While such programs have been enthusiastically well-received by both educators and students, insufficient resources exist to educate and train enough volunteer teachers and to ensure that they have the materials needed for the wide audience they aim to service. This challenge will only increase when Gen Y, whose population is even greater than Generation X, reaches adulthood. Studies show that by the year 2015, within the broader all-inclusive population, 6.4 million 16-to-24-year-olds will be entering high school or college, a daunting number that includes many thousands of Jews. Efforts must be made to ensure that adult Jewish educational programs are equipped to meet the challenges of the current generation, as well as handle the future caseload. Utilizing non-professional educators – those who have already acquired a strong Jewish educational foundation -- may be vital in meeting these needs, and we need to recruit and train these potential para-professionals.

The NJPS indicated that “most Jews do not engage in communal or religious pursuits,” yet at the same time noted that “Jewish education is booming.” The Ratner study showed that Generation Y has positive feelings about being Jewish, yet “when it comes to ritual observance and attending synagogue services, they have been in decline.” Such reports illustrate that Jewish educational programming must find a way to excite through teaching and to promote not just the study of Judaism, but also

the internalization of its teachings. Disseminating knowledge is insufficient; we must consider how the knowledge can be assimilated into actual practice and involvement.

### Necessary characteristics of any program

To meaningfully engage the interest of Generations X and Y, a number of characteristics must be included in any adult learning program, including:

- ♦ *Non-discriminatory opportunities:* Generations X and Y have great concern about perceived inequality. Prior to participating in any program, they will verify that there is no gender discrimination among teachers and students. Because of their distrust of leadership, they tend to prefer non-hierarchical programs, such as those where teachers and students are on relatively equal footing.
- ♦ *Creating Peer Networks:* Gen Y’s are turning inward, preferring to be with people of the same age, background and outlook. This has been apparent with the birthright Israel program, which has demonstrated that peer learning is strongly preferred over the typical classroom setting.
- ♦ *Follow-up:* Another important lesson from birthright is the importance of follow-up; Jewish educational programs must step-in where programs such as birthright leave off, utilizing the peer-learning concept to continue participants’ Jewish journey.
- ♦ *Greater Evaluation:* What works today may not work tomorrow. Monitoring and evaluating educational programming must be an ongoing process. Even when something “works,” there may be a need to shift direction or emphasis to cater to the Gen Y need for constant change. Marketing materials also need to be regularly refreshed to attract new participants and retain existing ones.
- ♦ *Affordability:* “Affordable” programs may be too expensive. These generations, so concerned with socio-economic inequality, agree with the American Jewish Committee perspective that “quality Jewish education must be regarded as a matter of right rather than privilege.”<sup>3</sup> Adult Jewish education programs must be greatly subsidized or even free of charge for an audience that not only resents the division between “haves” and “have nots,” but also has come to expect something for nothing. We cannot continue to fail to provide free Judaism when so much else is freely available today.
- ♦ *Flexibility:* Generations X and Y are comprised of those who view their individuality as an integral part of their being. Programs that allow individuals to study what they want and when they want will be more welcoming to young adults than traditional programs. Today’s Jewish adult wants Jewish education in an easy-to-assemble package delivered to their “doorstep.” The appeal of *Partners in Torah’s* “study if you want, what you want, when you want” model demonstrates the need to offer quality Jewish learning without the need to cancel a yoga class, arrange for a babysitter, find parking, or even get dressed and leave the house.
- ♦ *Coordinated Programming:* Joint (cooperative) programs between various adult educational programs may appeal to this audience that doesn’t want to affiliate with one group. Five organizations sponsoring a program may be more

appealing to a population that veers away from organized Jewish activity.

### Considerations for marketing

The overall need for increased adult Jewish education is undisputed, but the challenge is in reaching out. With

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Generations X and Y, it is not an overnight process but rather requires cultivating a long-term relationship. Just as important as crafting a message that they want to hear is the method of delivering that message.

### The message – what is it they need to hear?

In a recent *Jewish Week* article, editor Gary Rosenblatt writes that one of the common themes that emerged from a roundtable discussion of Jewish educators was the need to tell the story of the Jewish people — its history, traditions and values — to American Jews who are uninterested in and/or ignorant of their roots. The article reports that the participants “asserted that American Jewry is moving in two very different directions: Vital pockets are seeking more engagement, education, and spirituality while large numbers are silently slipping away.”<sup>4</sup>

So how do we engage the younger Jews who “are looking for meaning, not membership”? Communicating with today’s Jewish adult may not be easy, but the first step is to replace traditional marketing efforts with creative, modern campaigns. Trends today are extremely short-lived and our message needs to be personal, current, and tailor-made for each specific demographic market.

Marketing must reinforce a message that says that individuality and uniqueness are valued. This approach encourages them to “Be who you want to be” and “Do what you want to do,” but, at the same time, “Be Jewish” and “Do Jewish.” More important, the “one-size-fits-all” model that was effective for previous generations does not appeal to the individualistic attitudes of today’s young adults who seek products with flexibility - some like it hot, some like it cold, some like it fast, and some like it slow. With a strong message and vibrant visuals, a marketing campaign must convey that the Jewish educational programs being offered can cater to individual needs and sensitivities.

### The medium – how do we get our message to them?

Generations X and Y demand customized packaging – different messages to different people through different media. Marketing campaigns should incorporate a variety of media, including Internet, outdoor advertising, print, SMS, and video-on-demand. These efforts must incorporate immersion marketing, which invites the consumer to become part of the marketing campaign. Perhaps the cynicism and pessimism that characterize so

many young adults today would decline if they were involved in the marketing process.

Moreover, traditional advertising is a poor choice for men and women who prefer peer recommendations. When Pepsi sought to target this market for a new product, it created a successful grass-roots campaign that distributed free samples all over college campuses. The tangible, personal experience encouraged people to tell friends, who, in turn, told other friends. Jewish adult educators must find unique ways of packaging our product so as to provide similar tangible and more personal experiences.

Programs that do not utilize modern media will not reach their maximum potential. However, we are missing the point if we reduce the message to the technological medium. Adults will not be engaged by Internet learning alone, but this medium must be used to disseminate the message. One growing advertising medium is the use of ads in video games, but this may be inappropriate for Jewish educational programs. But while we may not be able to compete with the stimulus-driven array of fast-paced video games, we can find other creative and personal marketing methods that will offer stimulating learning experiences whose value will become obvious to even the most jaded among us.

### Conclusion: rejoining the Jewish community

*Partners in Torah* offers two unique *chavruta* (learning partner) opportunities: one over the phone, the other face-to-face. While these programs meet the need to approach individuals with tailored learning opportunities on their terms, we have realized that they need to undergo slight adaptations to better accommodate Gen Y, whose mantra is “think locally, act globally.” We have therefore started to take our national-based program out on the road this year, creating stronger community components through partnerships with local Jewish organizations in select cities.

Our aim is to encourage participants in individual learning programs to join with others who are engaged in a similar learning process to see how Judaism is lived. Generations X and Y demand to be treated as individuals, but for their growth and the future viability of the Jewish community, they must be encouraged to join a community – whether it is physical, technological, or fiber-optic.

Judaism cannot be studied or lived in a vacuum, and our goal is to help Jews not only learn about Judaism, but also to rejoin the Jewish community by connecting with local Jewish educational structures that encompass and understand their needs. By engaging young adults on their terms, they can become more comfortable with the Judaism we teach on ours. ❁

### ENDNOTES:

1. Ward, Kevin. “Believing without Belonging”, in *Reality Magazine*, 2002, issue 43.
2. Personal communication.
3. AJC Policy Statement on Jewish Education see: <http://www.ajc.org/JewishLife/EducationAndIdentity.asp>
4. Rosenblatt, Gary. “*Learning Together, to Teach and Bind Us*” in *The Jewish Week*, February 25, 2005.