

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

All too often forgotten or left to the bottom of the Jewish education and communal agenda, Jewish arts and culture are here restored to their rightful place amidst the key domains of Jewish life and expressions of Jewish consciousness. Richard Siegel makes the case for recognizing the wisdom of artists and the potential contribution of creative thinkers and outsiders to a renewed Jewish community.

Jewish Culture and the Jewish Renaissance

RICHARD A. SIEGEL

On the occasion of celebrating our 40th Anniversary, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture convened a “Commission on the Future of Jewish Culture in America” to consider where this enterprise of American Jewish culture is heading and what we can do to move it forward more creatively. We interviewed 32 individuals, including playwrights, novelists, public intellectuals, museum directors, NPR correspondents, choreographers, music industry executives, visual artists, architects, producers, foundation directors, leaders of religious movements, university presidents, scholars of American Jewish history, and journalists.

The conversations yielded rich insight and a wide diversity of perspectives. Yet on the question of whether the American Jewish community is experiencing a cultural renaissance or decline, there was surprising unanimity. Virtually every respondent saw evidence of...both.

The litany of decline is by now all-too-familiar: intermarriage, late marriage, low birth rates, Jewish illiteracy, emotional distancing from Israel, low affiliation rates, low synagogue attendance, and low contribution rates to federations.

The evidence cited for renaissance, however, was quite diverse: the multiplicity of new Jewish musics, the efflorescence of third generation Jewish literature, the mushrooming of Jewish film festivals, the advent of new age Judaism, the explosion of traditional Jewish learning, the impact of Jewish feminism, the proliferation of Jewish educational opportunities both formal and informal, the sophistication of Jewish museums, the acceptance of Jewish Studies on campus, the assertive Jewish presence in film and television, the influence of Jewish political and philanthropic culture, and the mainstreaming of Jewish publishing.

The real question, as was pointed out by many of our respondents, is the relative strength of the competing trends. As Jonathan Sarna, professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, put it: “We have both of these scenarios going on simultaneously and this, in fact, reflects the great cultural battle of our day. We are fighting about something real. Continuity, or whatever we now call it, is really an effort to ensure that the revival wins out and that the other is an epi-phenomenon.”

This finding is in itself significant and can serve as a corrective for the way the organized Jewish community talks about the condition of Jewish life in America. Based on the evidence, we do not have to feel quite so desperate about our plight as a Jewish community. We are doing remarkably well considering the myriad temptations that surround us. We actually have considerable strengths, and many of the long-term trends are actually working in our favor. Unfortunately, the discourse about renaissance implies that our community is under attack and that our job is to mount a desperate effort to revitalize our besieged institutions in order to combat decline. Our study suggests, however, that it is equally important to nurture those forces which are fostering creativity. Aside from its strategic merits, this approach also has the benefit of being a more life-affirming, hopeful way of looking at the Jewish experience.

What does it take to fan the flames of Jewish creativity? Two key strategies proposed by our respondents, and particularly relevant to readers of this publication, are what we have termed *knowledge* and *wisdom*.

Many of the respondents talked passionately and articulately about the need for more and better education,

essentially as the acquisition of knowledge. As Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, remarked, “I don’t think that we can long sustain Jewish culture without serious Jews, and serious Jews come from serious Jewish education. So I think the problem facing the entire American Jewish community is creating the venues for serious Jewish education.”

For the most part, however, the artists and intellectuals didn’t talk about knowledge, but about wisdom, the exercise of creativity. Liz Lerman, a dancer and choreographer who recently received a MacArthur Fellowship, commented: “My experiences have ultimately taught me that if I had measured myself on my Jewish knowledge or if the Jewish community decided to measure me based on my Jewish knowledge, I and they would have been very disappointed. But if they measured me on what I know as a person, as a human being and as an artist, I know a lot and I know how to combine what I know with Jewish knowledge to create incredible things.”

Based on these interviews and on conversations with creative individuals over the years in every discipline of the arts and humanities, we have come to see that we – the organized Jewish community – need more than knowledge to feed a renaissance. We also need wisdom. We need people who are making new combinations of letters, seeing new possibilities, and imagining new ideas for the pure joy of transcendence, *l’shem shamayim*. This is our Research and Development department. We are not going to come up with new products if we only keep playing with the ones we have.

To be sure, some of these imaginers are rabbis, teachers, social workers, and communal professionals. We are lucky that we have such risk-takers working inside our community. However, we also see dozens and dozens of others who are outside the institutions of our community, artists and intellectuals, who by their nature sit somewhat on the periphery in order to get a better look at what’s going on inside. They too possess wisdom.

The challenge is to use these energies from the margins to help us transform the inside. This requires some creative thinking by the people who run our institutions, particularly – in the case of the readers of this publication – our educational institutions. If all we are doing in our educational institutions is conferring knowledge, then all we will succeed in doing is delaying the time when decline overwhelms renaissance.

Our educational institutions also have to be places where wisdom is encountered. The paradox is that wisdom cannot be taught; it can only be experienced. Artists challenge us to confront our orthodoxies. Artists challenge us to feel. Artists challenge us to imagine. If we want a community that challenges, feels and imagines, then we need to create situations where artists can be encountered.

There are many ways to facilitate these encounters, but the easiest approach, particularly for the Jewish educational institution, is to invite them in as artists-in-residence. Let them do what they do; let them be artists in the midst of learning. They will exert an influence, subtly and quietly, that slowly transforms the environment, enlivening the vision, hearing, taste and feel of those on the inside. In every community around the country, there are dozens of artists: writers, painters, actors, musicians, filmmakers and choreographers. Go meet with them. Many of them will have something interesting to say about the Jewish experience and will welcome an opportunity to work in a Jewish context.

The irony is that many artists would love to work in a Jewish environment. First, since most of them are like much of the lay population – fairly uneducated about Jewish life and tradition – they might welcome being able to learn while being part of a learning environment. Second, many of them have thought about applying their creative talents to the Jewish experience, but do not have a clue how to access a sympathetic compatriot on the “inside.” Your invitation could be the incentive, and you may find yourself having been the inspiration for a new work of Jewish imagination. This is an exchange. The artists benefit and the community benefits.

Why doesn’t every school, JCC, and synagogue have at least one artist-in-residence? The issue isn’t money. There are many low-cost ways to do this; there are funders who would find this type of creative collaboration intriguing.

Is it that the realm of the artist is too foreign to educators and institutional leaders? Is it that administrators don’t know how to find the artists in their communities or don’t trust their own aesthetic judgments? Is it that the artists are too unpredictable, that they might say or do something that someone finds offensive? These are real concerns, and I do not want to minimize their complexity. But they can be addressed. There are individuals and organizations – both inside and outside the organized Jewish community – that can help mediate and facilitate these encounters.

We are ready to work with you on this. However, the first move is up to you.

There is a Jewish cultural renaissance going on right now. Let's pay closer attention to it. Let's try to learn from those who are pushing its edges. Let's fan the flames of creativity and help insure that renaissance wins out over decline.

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the cultural preservation, creative renewal and continuing evolution of the American Jewish experience through the arts and humanities.

Richard has written several books and articles on contemporary Jewish life and culture, including the *The Jewish Catalog*, the best-selling publication of the 1960's Jewish counter-culture, *The Writer in the Jewish Community: An Israel-North America Dialogue*, and the recently published *Commission Report on the Future of Jewish Culture in America*.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Siegel defines wisdom as “the exercise of creativity” and argues that creative forces ought to be given more attention and resources in order to nurture a revitalized community. How should the community prioritize between increasing Jewish “knowledge” and bringing to bear the creative wisdom of “what I know as a person?”
- Siegel notes that “those who by their nature sit somewhat on the periphery in order to get a better look at what’s going on inside” possess a particular wisdom. What, if anything, might they know or see that you, in the thick of the action, don’t?
- Siegel asks why all communal institutions do not hire at least one artist-in-residence, asserting that “the issue isn’t money.”
 - Do you agree that the reason for lack of this level of attention to the arts in Jewish communal institutions is not financial? If the issue isn’t money, what is it?
 - Do you believe the institutional concerns that Siegel posits are legitimate? Addressable?
- How convinced are you by Siegel’s argument that your institutions or agencies of interest would benefit from the addition of creative voices and the provision of experiences of wisdom?