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Engaging the Next Generation: Challenges & Promise

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Despite a host of challenges unique to engaging young adults, the last decade has witnessed some highly successful initiatives by the mainstream Jewish community and others outside the core. Though the efforts of the latter may at times appear bolder than traditional outreach efforts, established communal institutions are often better equipped to ensure long term commitment. These institutions are uniquely situated to engage the next generation and integrate them into the community by channeling existing resources, obtaining additional targeted funding, and partnering with a wide variety of organizations. A brief look at some of the challenges and one community's response sheds light on the power of the institutional Jewish community to successfully reach out to and develop the next generation.

Generational Challenges

Generational challenges are those particular to engaging young adults. One of the first such challenges is the diversity of the target audience. *Next Generation* has described groups ranging from students in day schools to people in their 40s, although it is generally understood to include only adults in their 20s through their late 30s. Thus, the next generation includes a diverse group, ranging from people with their first jobs, apartments, and cars through married couples with children and who own a home. Any engagement effort toward this generation should either have a very broad appeal or else consciously target a subset of the larger group.

Other generational challenges include the limited resources available to the target population. Even if young adults have a strong desire to get involved in institutional life, many have limited time and money as they are beginning their careers and families. They might not know how to get on a non-profit board, or how to make their voices heard by decision-makers; they may be unaware of the significance of fund-raising campaigns or the expectation of being involved in these campaigns.

Conversations young leaders have had with unaffiliated peers indicate that some young adults hesitate to participate in traditional institutional life. Some seem to be suspicious of the established community's willingness to include their generation. Additionally, while they respect the notion of fundraising to save and enrich Jewish lives, and the efforts to strengthen the Jewish community, they are not sure how it directly benefits them. Despite this, many have a strong desire to volunteer or be active in their community, whether it is their broad, civic community or their local Jewish community. The challenge is to channel their desire to be active into involvement in the organized Jewish community.

Institutional Challenges

Institutional challenges emanate from the existing community structure and include issues of resource allocation and access to the communal decision-making process. Be it staff time, funds for programming, subsidies, or leadership development, sufficient resources are generally not allocated specifically for engaging young adults.

Many community members assume that once Jews marry and have children they will rejoin institutional life. In a world of limited resources, some think it is better to wait for this inevitable return to the community rather than divert resources from other vital areas. Unfortunately, if they conclude that there is no place for them in the Jewish community, young adults may turn elsewhere for structure during their formative years after college.

Furthermore, board members of any given institution tend to be older and have a different set of Jewish priorities, whether it is healthcare for aging parents or educating their children. The concerns of young adults may not even be on their radar screens, a fact compounded by the general lack of representation by young adults among decision-makers.

Cleveland's Response

The Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland (JCF), through its Young Leadership Division (YLD), and in partnership with local synagogues and other institutions, has responded to many of these challenges by creatively engaging and developing tomorrow's leaders.

- *Developing Leadership:* YLD dedicates itself to educating leaders and newcomers about the broad Jewish communal structure and today's most pressing issues. For example, a Leadership Education & Development Series (LEADS, modeled after a similar program in Chicago and replicated in many cities) offers people interested in getting involved in the community an in-depth orientation to Jewish life in Cleveland. The Federation also offers extensive leadership courses for more established young adult community members who have shown promise as future leaders. In general, substantial time is dedicated to interaction with experts on contemporary issues at monthly YLD board meetings.
- *Increasing Allocations:* JCF continues to provide resources for new initiatives. By cultivating long time donors who are dedicated to fostering the next generation, JCF has been able to subsidize intense engagement opportunities, such as missions and conferences. Two new programs that JCF is funding this year are the advanced development of the Ben Gurion Society (YLD members who make a minimum gift of \$1,000 to the annual campaign) and a young women's initiative that engages women from their late 20s through early 40s who would otherwise not connect to the community.
- *Sharing Resources:* The Young Adult Initiative (YAI) brings together two dozen community groups that work with Jewish young adults to exchange ideas and expertise, share resources, co-sponsor and jointly publicize programs and offer funding for innovative ideas. The result is a monthly community offering of social, religious, educational, and volunteer events appealing to a wider audience than programs any individual organization could create.
- *Providing Community Opportunities:* The Federation is committed to including young adults in as many community roles as possible, continually identifying young adults who can serve on institutional boards. JCF's by-laws require a minimum number of YLD members to serve on the Federation board as well as on various Federation committees. YLD leadership is invited to

forums for community leaders. In addition, a YLD board member has co-chaired each of Cleveland's community missions to Israel over the last two years.

- *Remaining Inclusive:* YLD addresses the limited availability of some young adults by scheduling meetings before or after work, holding them in participants' homes, and offering babysitting when appropriate. It also creates events specifically targeted towards families and other affinity groups. By creating social, educational, and volunteer events targeted toward specific subgroups in addition to broader programs, YLD aims to be as inclusive as possible.

The result of this communal commitment to the next generation is a core group of young adults who feel they can participate in a vibrant community and are empowered as ambassadors to their own peer group. Equipped with knowledge and a sense of purpose, they are the ones who engage other young adults. One measure of success in Cleveland is that during the annual campaign, there is a commitment by YLD to solicit every young adult in the community, preferably face-to-face. This goal is supported by the Federation's leadership, which has offered "Face-to-Face Solicitation" and "New Donor" Challenges providing financial incentives to bolster the YLD campaign. The result was an average 26% increase in dollars raised and an impressive 722 new donors over the last two years, one third of all YLD gifts. YLD not only succeeded in engaging a large number of people previously disconnected from the community, but they educated their peers, who responded by substantially increasing their commitment.

At the National Level

Perhaps most exciting is that similar efforts and results are transpiring in communities throughout North America. Local communities have national partners, in particular United Jewish Communities (UJC) and its Renaissance and Renewal Pillar (R&R). R&R has been empowered to address the challenges of the next generation, and continues to work with various national partners on this agenda. In addition to offering advanced leadership development, most notably through Young Leadership Cabinet, UJC's most important role continues to be offering or facilitating unique experiences requiring large outlays of resources that cannot be replicated or created locally. This includes organizing national missions and conferences; offering subsidies to reduce barriers to participation; fostering professional development, networking and idea exchange;

and offering exposure to broad, national trends.

Conclusion

The Young Leadership Division of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, in partnership with institutions throughout the community, has taken steps to create future communal leadership by fostering a dedicated young adult population for whom Jewish communal life is vibrant and very much relative today. YLD does not expect to engage everyone in this broad target group, and to that end organizations that cater to people with different sets of interests and needs are important partners. But whereas many newer, selectively targeted initiatives are equipped to engage but not necessarily to follow up, YLD and other

institutional organizations are creating the next generation of leaders who are grounded in vital communal institutions and committed to their well-being for years to come. By engaging them via these institutions, we are creating a cadre of dedicated Jews today and equipping them with the knowledge and expertise to lead our community tomorrow.

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Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- These articles advance very different models for engaging the next generation of Jews.
 - In your community, are both models available for young people to take advantage of? If not, how might this happen?
 - In your view, what were the strongest arguments made by each article?
 - Do you imagine that different groups or types of young adults would resonate to one or the other of these approaches?
- To what extent would you agree that the approach of Cash & Gaines focuses on an individualistic approach to engaging young adults, while Schupper presents an approach that maintains the primacy of communal needs?
 - What would you say is the goal of “engaging the next generation?” By what criteria would you measure success?
- In your viewpoint, to what extent is the organized Jewish community ready or eager for the visions, voices, and transformative ideas of the next generation? How do you know this?
- How do Schupper and Cash & Gaines each define “leadership?”
- Can you think of examples in your own community of young adults with creative ideas and passion for *tikkun olam* who may feel “marginalized and isolated?” What could you do to ameliorate this? How could you bring these voices to the table in constructive ways?
- The authors of these pieces have each been hearing the voices of particular subsets of the “next generation.”
 - To which voices have you been exposed?
 - To which voices have you not been exposed?