

CAJM Retreat
March 24, 2014 • Marriottsville, Maryland

Changing Jewish Communities
The Efflorescence of Jewish Renewal Organizations and
Their Impact on the Community and Traditional Institutions

Thank you to CAJM and Avi for including me in this discussion with my very distinguished colleagues, Steven Cohen and Rabbi Daniel Zemel. Thank you for taking this serious focus on how Jewish museums, like all Jewish institutions, need to adapt to the changing realities of Jewish life. This is an important conversation, and I am honored to be part of it.

BEST OF TIMES, WORST OF TIMES

- I don't know about you but I am a big fan of Charles Dickens. And I believe what we are looking at in American Jewish life today is a Tale of Two Cities. It is the best of times, and it is the worst of times.
- On the one hand, the Pew study tells us that intermarriage is pervasive, that Jewish religious observance is declining and that young Jews have no interest in or connection to traditional institutions. Most federations are failing to meet their financial goals, JCCs are struggling and many, like in my home community of Louisville, KY, are populated primarily by non-Jews. Synagogues are no longer the central focus of community for the majority of American Jews.
- On the other hand, over the past decade plus, there has been an **efflorescence—a virtual blossoming**-- of innovative Jewish organizations and initiatives that are engaging young Jews in exciting and meaningful ways. These programs are reshaping what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century and transforming the Jewish landscape in indelible ways.
- They are involving tens of thousands of young Jewish teens, college students and young adults and enabling them to shape Jewish life on their own terms.
- The reverberations are and will be felt throughout traditional Jewish institutions and the organized Jewish community. In some, they are sending **shock waves**. In some, they are inspiring **positive change**. But what is clear is that mainstream Jewish institutions will have to change to remain relevant and sustainable for the future.
- All of this **creative disruption is great news!** As Jonathan Sarna has so insightfully observed, **Jewish continuity is secured through discontinuity**. Through moments of decline or crisis in Jewish life, it was the disruptive responses such as Zionism, and Chasidism and non-Orthodox Judaism, as well as the experimentation that came from the outside and eventually permeated the center, that "saved" Judaism, renewing it for new generations and keeping it going in ways that more closely fit the needs and interests of contemporary Jews.
- **So, my headline is this: I am incredibly optimistic about the Jewish future. Jewish innovation is indeed flourishing, and this positive, disruptive change is ultimately what will save us and make us a stronger, more vibrant community in the future.** But we cannot be passive passengers on this journey. We must be active partners. We have to continue to focus on what works, including ways to help "legacy" institutions of Jewish life adapt to serve the needs of the upcoming generations. If we are successful, we will **not only survive but thrive**.
- In my role with the Schusterman Foundation for the past 13 years, I have **the pleasure and privilege of sitting at the nexus of multiplicity of Jewish organizations and Jewish foundations shaping Jewish life, gaining a bird's eye view** of the Jewish landscape.

- For those of you who are not familiar with us, for the past 25 years, Schusterman family has been devoting their time and resources to ensuring a vibrant future for the Jewish people, the State of Israel and their hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. **Believe that investing in young people would pay the highest dividends** over time and has remained our focus.
- Virtually everything we do at Schusterman is about **igniting the passion and unleashing the power in young people to create positive change for themselves, the Jewish community and the broader world**. We both support and create initiatives that enable young people to lead, to create programs that are relevant to them and to shape their communities in their own image.
- In the course of doing our work, we have noticed the following trends taking place which have spurred the creation of the Jewish renewal and innovation ecosystem.

TRENDS SHAPING JEWISH FUTURE:

#1: Democratization of Jewish Life

- Used to be relatively few ways to express Jewishness: join a youth group, go to synagogue, give to local federation and to Israel.
- **One-size-fits all Judaism is a thing of the past**. Does not fit in a “customized” world (think iPods and Starbucks) defined by change and choice and in which being Jewish is only one component of increasingly multi-faceted identities.

#2: Increased Focus on Young Jews

- Until a decade or so ago, most Jewish organizations failed to realize that the **rules of the game had changed**. Chose not to address intergenerational differences and operated on the assumption that future generations would ultimately turn out to look like their predecessors.
- **Rise of Jewish innovation ecosystem** in response to lack of interesting and relevant opportunities offered to them within the established Jewish world. Independent organizations began to reach young Jewish adults in a way the established Jewish community could not conceive and were ill-structured to attempt.
- Clear that **young people actually are interested in Jewish life—very much so, in fact**. They’re just not interested in the traditional institutionalized paradigm of the 20th century. What they want and will demand from us in return for their time and commitment are unique, personally meaningful experiences.

#3: Technology democratizing engagement and creating new networks and global connectivity

- New technologies have expanded our sense of community beyond the physical to include the virtual. As a result, traditional methods of engagement are proving less effective at best—and entirely irrelevant at worst. Facebook, Skype, etc., have made it as easy to connect with people in the next room as with people on another continent. Therefore, we don’t need to find community in synagogue or a Jewish community center. We can find it online. True of everything from Jewish learning to Jewish philanthropy, crowdsourcing and online giving circles.
- Idea of networks is nothing new. Long been a people that have leveraged our collective social capital to sustain ourselves from generation to generation, transcending geography and language. But new technologies and a greater sense of connectivity has enabled us to leverage our global networks in high impact ways.
- Creating a flatter, more connected global world, where people are more loyal to relationships and networks than they are to institutions.

RENEWAL AND INNOVATION

All of these trends are the backdrop for -- and reflections of -- the rise of Jewish renewal institutions and the flourishing of the Innovation Ecosystem. Over the past decade, we have witnessed three primary paths to renewing Jewish life and sparking Jewish innovation.

- 1) First is the **transformation of Jewish organizations** that serve younger generations of Jews. **BBYO, Hillel, camping** – all of these institutions have long histories but all have been completely reimagined, reinvented and expanded over the past decade to meet the needs and interests of today's young people.

They are creating new peer-driven means of engagement and attracting young people in increasing numbers, with steady growth and increasing penetration of the market for their age cohorts.

- 2) The development of **new large-scale movements**, which have created common but customizable platforms for Jewish engagement. **Birthright, Limmud, Moishe House**

- These highly successful initiatives are creating new universal languages: scaling up of shared experiences upon which strong relationships can be made and from which communities can develop.
- In each case, Jews who were previously not connected before meeting each other in these shared experiences come away with the same sense of connection as youngsters who live in the same communities, go to day schools or attend Jewish camps.
- Each is a unique reflection of its individual community, culture and history but with an eye toward the bigger picture: vibrant Jewish life that transcends sobering demographics, the breakdown of institutions and the emergence of multiple identities.

- 3) **New institutions and initiatives customized** to empower young people as creators in order to meet their diverse interests, needs and skills. Focused on an "Innovation Ecosystem."

- Service and social justice: **Repair the World, Challah for Hunger, JDC Entwine, AVODAH**—Generation's dominant Passion for social justice and tikkun olam and commitment to Global Jewish Service
- Arts and Culture: **JDub, Asylum, Reboot, Film festivals**, magazines like Heeb
- Spirituality: Indie minyans, spiritual communities like IKAR and Mechon Hadar, Jewish meditation center
- JOFEE—**Hazon, Wilderness Torah, Urban Adamah**—commitment to environment, sustainability, Jewish food movement
- Peer based networks—**Jewish giving circles**, REALITY network, **Tamid**-students interested in Israeli business
- Social entrepreneurship: **Present Tense, Joshua Venture, ROI community, Bikkurim, Jumpstart and Upstart** – all created to nurture, support and expand the Jewish innovation ecosystem

In each of these three models, the **Key is authenticity. What is offered has to be real, relevant and for sake of the experience itself, not for an ulterior goal like fundraising.**

- **Young Jews want to be connected and involved.** They want a sense of belonging to something transcendent, to be a part of a higher vision of making the world better. Spirituality, service, justice, philanthropy. Purposeful lives. With all of these new initiatives and organizations, we are helping them understand that Judaism can be the driver for that. And we are providing them with the tools, resources, framing and opportunities, to create the most empowered generation of Jews ever.

SO WHAT SHOULD TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS DO? A FEW PIECES OF ADVICE:

1. Put people first—consumer-centric

- Old model: created programs and then tried to get young people to participate in those programs. Have to flip that equation. It's not "build and they will come."
- Understand your audience—eg if want to engage younger generations have to understand that they want to make an impact on the world as much as they want to make a living, see themselves as global citizens, are more loyal to relationships than institutions, want to use their unique skills sets to create.
- If we start by understanding our audience, we can build and support experiences, relationships and networks with their needs and interests in mind.

2. Make it Relevant and Offer Multiple Pathways In

- Our global community needs to figure out how to **make relevant ideas—and not institutions for institutions sake—the dominant value proposition of Jewish life**. These ideas need to directly address the questions on young people's minds, like how to treat others, how to create relationships, how to extend justice in the world, how to have nuanced conversations about Israel, how to just relax and rejuvenate.
- **Nurture the individual Jewish journey by enabling young people to cultivate a personally meaningful connection** to Judaism, be it thorough the arts, through service, through Israel, Hebrew or religious practice.
- Message is that Judaism is about being a part of a people, but also about finding your place in our collective narrative.

3. Empower young people to create, not just consume

- Reach young Jews who are actively interested in and connected to Jewish life, and help them create programs and activities that they are excited about and that they will inspire their peers to join.
- Invest in dynamic young Jewish innovators who have the ideas for programs and organizations that have the potential to inspire young Jews to shape Jewish lives on their own terms and in their own images.
- In other words, it is Jewish life shaped by young Jews for young Jews. Organizations like BBYO and Moishe House, which now has 46 houses in 14 countries, have seen explosive growth because they are doing this successfully.

4. Embrace technology

- Have to utilize technology as part of every effort: listening to what consumers want and participating in their conversations, marketing, social networking, in-house programming, follow up experiences and ongoing relationships
- Need to be amongst the masses, listening to and taking part in the conversations
 - Create the virtual experience between the in-person experience
 - Reticence to put money into these efforts—just because the tools are free doesn't mean using them
 - Invest in technology, in recognition that it has changed both the way people communicate and how we define community

5. Create Bridges

- Starting to see more collaboration between institutionalized Jewish community and innovation ecosystem. Example: federation partnership with Presentense and with our recent Make It Happen Campaign. This is important: bring innovation into the mainstream where it can be adopted, adapted, replicated and scaled.

- Create intergenerational opportunities and conversations where newer ideas and those things that have worked in the past can cross-pollinate, learn from one another and increasingly intersect
- National-local partnerships that bring national innovation into local institutions

CONCLUSION:

- It may be a challenging time, but it is also one filled with tremendous opportunities. The young generation, and the renewal and innovation ecosystem springing up around it, bring a great wellspring of vitality and creativity.
- We can forge a new paradigm of Jewish engagement if we put people at the center of the experiences, networks and institutions we are supporting and if we embrace the creative disruption and positive change and enable it to make our organizations and communities more dynamic, relevant and responsive to contemporary needs.
- As I shared at the outset, I am convinced that the future of Jewish community is bright. The road ahead of us requires nimble, entrepreneurial approaches, adaptive, resilient leadership and strong resolve.
- I am optimistic we will see the kind of Jewish community we all seek, one that is vibrant and enduring, rooted in openness and purpose, and one in which all Jews are inspired to take part.
- **Our community is up to the task, and our future depends on it.**