

# The New Jewish Organizing

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The last ten years have seen an efflorescence of “new Jewish organizing.” Led primarily by Jews in their 20s and 30s, this phenomenon encompasses five domains: spiritual communities (independent minyanim, rabbi-led emergent communities); culture (film-making, magazines, music, drama, etc.); learning (e.g., Limmud); social justice (many areas); and new media (Jewish-oriented pages on the Web; social networking; etc.).

Structurally and culturally, new Jewish organizing breaks with prior patterns of Jewish communal life as embodied in the “system,” the long-standing complex of federations, Jewish Community Centers, congregations, defense organizations, and human service agencies.

These new forms of organizing consist of small-scale projects and communities. They tend to center around energetic social and cultural entrepreneurs who recruit small circles of staff and volunteers who, in turn, reach out to specialized constituencies. All are still low-budget operations with small paid staffs. Their funds derive in large measure from third parties, often from well-known philanthropists in Jewish life. Many benefitted from association with the likes of Bikkurim, Six Points Fellowship, and Upstart Bay Area (incubators for innovative projects and people), or Slingshot (the guide to Jewish innovation), or Joshua Venture Group (the initiative to identify and support talented innovators).

With all its variety, this “innovative ecosystem” contrasts vividly with its established predecessor. It highly privileges purpose: high quality davening, self-empowered Jewish learning, creative Jewish music, Jewish environmentalism, and a meaningful Judaism that authentically serves the developing world. In contrast with their parents and grandparents, few of the new Jewish endeavors deal directly with the animating issues on the 20th-century Jewish communal agenda: intermarriage and demographic continuity, the Holocaust, antisemitism, and, significantly, Israel. Of the scores of American-based young-adult initiatives, hardly any focus on Israel (the David Project and Encounter are two notable exceptions).

Younger adult activists (they abjure the title “leaders”) focus on delivering Jewish meaning and purpose to niche constituencies — those sharing common concerns and cultural styles. In this objective, today’s social entrepreneurs contrast with the radical Zionists, Jewish feminists, and havurah activists of a previous generation. Boomer activists confronted “the establishment” of their day, demanding changes in power and priorities — to change the “system.” Today’s change agents seek primarily to create opportunities for like-minded people to express their Jewish commitments in their own way — outside the “system.” They generally carry a socially and culturally progressive sensibility, but without the ideological stridency of an earlier era. While both sought/seek a better Jewish world, today’s activists are engaged more in building alternatives than in changing the “system.”

The newer forms of Jewish community transcend traditional divisions of function in that they blur the boundaries between such realms as education and entertainment, prayer and social justice, learning and spirituality. Social justice advocacy, text study, passionate prayer, and good music can, and should be, interwoven in a single experience.

To many innovators, the established Jewish world is overly preoccupied with sustaining divisions. It is seen as stressing boundaries between Jews and non-Jews, or between Jews and Jews (by denomination, gender, age, class, etc.). Jews under 40 see these distinctions as exclusive, judgmental, and coercive. Accordingly, the innovators maintain relaxed stances on intermarriage, patrilineality, denominational identities, and institutional loyalties, thereby softening the putatively artificial and dysfunctional boundaries.

One wonders: Why now? Why are we in the midst of this period of innovative organizing, dating back only to the late 1990s? Several answers come to mind.

On the broadest scale, nongovernmental organizations worldwide have exploded in number. In 2000, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* charted declining numbers of national organizations with local chapters. About the same time, massively increased small-scale organizing hit the entire world, partly propelled by the Internet. Jewish start-ups are part of that development, one in which major entities are being challenged by smaller, more nimble, and niche-specific start-ups (Christopher Anderson's "long-tail" phenomenon).

Educational and demographic factors also came into play. The last 30 years have seen expanded participation in day schools, Jewish camps, Hillels, Jewish studies, and Israel travel. At the same time, philanthropists launched numerous initiatives for young adults. This expanded educational infrastructure substantially enriched the Jewish cultural and social capital of those in their 20s and 30s.

Meanwhile, this generation postponed marriage. Today, most non-Orthodox Jews ages 25 to 39 are nonmarried, differentiating them from those who typically join conventional Jewish institutions. The combination of strong sociocultural capital along with the demographic disconnect created a vast potential market for innovations and alternatives to prevailing communal offerings.

Looking forward, caution and experience demand resisting the temptation to engage in "straight-line" forecasting. We cannot tell what the future will bring. We only know for sure that the first decade of the 21st century has brought a new wave of Jewish organizing, one that simultaneously challenges, augments, enriches, and draws upon the long-standing Jewish communal establishment.

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