

To entice young Jews to cast their life stories in Jewish terms, we need to engage them in experiences that integrate all three dimensions of a human being—the emotional, the cognitive, and the behavioral. Here are four proven ways.

The 1,2,3 Principle

In early June 2006, birthright israel marked an important milestone: its 100 thousandth participant arrived in Israel. Nearly 6,000 young adult Jews from North America and Israel gathered at sunset to mark the event at a huge amphitheater midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. From the opening reverberations of the drums and a *shofar* blast to the melody and words of *Hatikva* that closed the evening, youthful and joyful exuberance abounded. For many of these 18–26-year-old Jews who had ventured to Israel on a ten-day educational birthright israel experience, it was an unprecedented opportunity to celebrate both their individual Jewish identity and their sense of belonging to worldwide Jewry.

by Leonard Saxe and Fern Chertok
Illustration by Tim Hussey

KISHIKES

KORTELX

KINES+HETICS



What made this event a watershed of Jewish connection for so many birthright participants? To understand why certain programs, more than others, turn on the “Jewish light” for young adults, we, along with colleagues at Brandeis University, observed a broad range of settings in which Jewish young adults congregate—all the while interviewing and surveying tens of thousands of young adults to better understand how they view their lives and their Jewish identities.

We found that when offered the opportunity, Jewish young adults want to be part of the Jewish community, but will not explore mainstream affiliation options on their own. Therefore, after bar/bat mitzvah, their Jewish involvement often becomes limited to Yom Kippur fasting and Pesach feasting. These occasions serve as important soul-searching and family-bonding experiences, but are inadequate to make Judaism personally meaningful or help build a sense of Jewish peoplehood.

Young Jews have to be reached in new ways—ways which, as Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching president Lee S. Shulman describes, weave together multiple strands of emotional, intellectual, and hands-on experience that entice young Jews to cast their life stories in Jewish terms. We call this the “*kishkes, kortex, and kinesthetics*” principle, because all three dimensions of the human being—the emotional, the cognitive, and the behavioral—are engaged as one.

Birthright Israel is a perfect model. Our five years of research demonstrates that program participants leave Israel feeling they have journeyed to their Jewish roots and developed a deep sense of Jewish peoplehood. Comparing participants (three years after the birthright Israel experience) with their peers who applied for but did not go on a birthright trip, we found that these alumni are significantly more likely to express strong connections to the Jewish people (71% vs. 59%) and to Israel (61% vs. 45%). They are also significantly more likely

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to report participation in Hillel (41% vs. 13%) or other Jewish social and cultural activities (38% vs. 19%).

And Birthright Israel is not the only program to effectively encourage meaningful immersion in our heritage while offering opportunities for active Jewish participation.

JEWISH CAMPING



Since 1952, when the first UAHC (now URJ) camp opened its doors in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, summer camps have played a powerful role in shaping the Jewish identity of young people. In the summer of 2000, we studied nearly twenty Jewish camps around the country. Trying our best to be objective, we found it difficult not to be captivated by the *ruach* (joyful spirit) of each of the camps. Regardless of setting, affiliation, or even the length of time spent at camp, each site seemed to generate positive emotional, intellectual, and experiential Jewish connections.

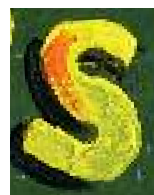
At one Reform Movement summer camp, for example, we witnessed this Friday night scene: Everywhere we went, guitar notes and chords resounded as song-leaders, their instruments draped over their shoulders, played and walked from all ends of camp. As they passed each bunk, groups of campers joined them, singing and walking together until the whole community had gathered together for *Kabbalat Shabbat*.

Here, as at virtually every other camp we visited, staffers and campers were engaging in traditional Jewish rituals that had been uniquely reenvisioned and handed down from one generation to the next.

Perhaps more than any other factor, the success of these camps lies in their ability to create an environment where living in Jewish time feels natural. Singing is often at the heart of this experience, serving as a natural gateway to emotional expression; campers joyfully voice their enthusiasm and sense of camaraderie as a camp community.

Long after these young people have returned home, singing camp songs alone and with friends continues to evoke a sense of pride in being part of *Klal Yisrael*, the Jewish people.

STUDENTS AND SURVIVORS



Since the early 1970s, Holocaust education has been incorporated into the curricula of most Jewish schools. The challenge for educators has been to incorporate

this tragic historical event into the personal lives of Jewish young people. One successful approach began two years ago, when the International Commission for Holocaust Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC) started pairing undergraduate students (“friendly visitors”) with Shoah survivors in Miami and New York City. In 2006, we interviewed and surveyed more than three-quarters of the 108 students in the ICHEIC Service Corps.

Emily (her name is fictional) shared with us how she learned about her friend Edith’s Shoah experience. Sensing that her older friend was a reserved and private person, Emily felt it would be intrusive and insensitive to just come out and ask about what she and her family experienced during the Holocaust. Instead, Emily waited until one visit when the two were talking about a quilt they wanted to make together. In the midst of discussing fabric colors and quilt designs, Emily asked her friend how she had learned to sew—a gentle opening to talk about her childhood and the Holocaust. They spent the rest of the visit conversing about how Edith had learned to sew at her mother’s side—and then about how she lost her mother and the rest of her family in the Holocaust. For Emily, the Holocaust now has a personal face, tied to her friendship with Edith.

Before meeting the survivors, all participants had seen Holocaust films, discussed the Shoah in school, and/or visited a Holocaust memorial. Slightly more than half had a family member with a connection to the Holocaust, and well over half knew someone outside their family who had been personally touched—as a victim, survivor, or member of the armed services stationed in Europe.

Yet, before ICHEIC, most of the young people viewed the Holocaust as a disturbing event that was distant from their lives. Some admitted they’d become inured to the horrors of the Holocaust and were turned off by education focusing on

the victimization of Jews. This changed when the students' understanding of the Shoah became imbued with personal meaning—when the elderly survivors became their dear friends. Far from feeling that they were once again being told about Jews as victims, many students described how struck they were by the resilience and courage of survivors in the face of overwhelming loss. Eighty-seven percent of the ICHEIC Service Corps participants told us that their relationship with a survivor helped them make a personal connection to the Holocaust. And 88% said they now felt a passionate commitment to preserving and sharing the legacy with which they felt entrusted. As one student said, “Now it is *my* memory of the Holocaust.”

For these students, the Jewish aspect of their identity has taken on a new salience. Eighty-three percent reported that being a friendly visitor had led to a stronger connection to the Jewish people, and 82% expressed increased concern with Jewish continuity issues.

THE RIVERWAY PROJECT



he “*kishkes, kortex, and kinesthetics*” principle also works for Jews in their twenties and thirties. Five years ago, Boston’s largest Reform synagogue, Temple

Israel, created the Riverway Project, targeting this age group, both singles

and marrieds, with or without children. Today, 1,300 individuals are actively involved.

What makes this outreach program unique is its concept of Neighborhood Circles, local gatherings which allow small groups of young adults to develop a peer community by sharing Shabbat dinners and services as well as weekly Torah study in the living rooms of their Jewish neighbors.

Beth Cousens, who researched the Riverway Project as part of her doctoral work at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, attributes its success to the unique combination of emotionally welcoming and intimate home-based gatherings along with the explicit goal of deepening participants’ authentic expressions of their Judaism. As one participant told us, the project “doesn’t assume that people in their twenties are not interested in the Jewish stuff.... Instead, Riverway puts Jewish tradition at the core of what it’s about and not at the periphery.”

The Riverway Project also demonstrates the importance of integrating multiple avenues of experience. Its participants don’t come just for the friendships, although these undoubtedly become important connections. Neither is text study alone a draw. Combined, all of these elements have empowered young Jewish adults to develop a sense of ownership over their Jewish identities.

A HOPEFUL FUTURE



contemporary youth see Jewish identification as just one among many self-definitions. Jewish identity, in the language of desktop computing, is but one of a myriad of identity “windows” that a young person can have “open.” However, like “windows” on our computers, Jewish identity often does not influence a person’s other identity “windows.” Our challenge, then, is to help young people connect their Jewish “identity window” with other segments of their concepts of self.

The data we have amassed about a range of programs that touch the next generation make us hopeful about the future. Summer camps, birthright israel, ICHEIC Holocaust education, and neighborhood circles in Boston demonstrate that the Jewish community *can* engage children, youth, and young adults in group experiences with substantive Jewish content while also providing emotional experiences and opportunities to be part of *Klal Yisrael*. These programs also offer the social network connections needed to launch young people onto trajectories of increasing and lasting Jewish engagement. And when the whole person is reached—through emotional, intellectual, and hands-on experience—there is great potential for lasting and transformative change. □

REFORM JEWISH IDENTITY BUILDERS

CAMPING

The Union’s twelve summer camp institutes throughout the U.S. and Canada offer creative Jewish learning, worship, and more. <http://urjcamp.org/>

YOUTH PROGRAMS

All youth programs combine community building, worship, social action, and experiential youth-led Jewish educational programming. The North American Federation of Temple Youth

(NFTY) is a Reform community for high school students; the NFTY Mitzvah Corps combines hands-on teen involvement in needy areas with a curriculum focused on Jewish social/ethical issues; and a three-year Reform Jewish High School honors program provides in-depth Jewish study and leadership training. <http://urj.org/youth/programs/>

ISRAEL PROGRAMS

Jewish teen programs in Israel range

from voyages of discovery to the four-and-a-half-week NFTY Adventure to the four-month accredited high school and Hebrew learning program nestled in the Judean Mountains. Visit <http://www.nftyisrael.org>. In addition, 18–26-year-olds who have never been on an educational study program or organized peer group tour of Israel can apply for a free ten-day Israel experience through the Taglit-birthright israel: KESHER Israel Connection. <http://keshernet.com/birthright/>

