New Conceptions of Community

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Institute for Jewish Policy Research

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Jonathan Boyd

In attempting to convey an idealized version of community, the renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes it as 'a "warm" place, a cosy and comfortable place'. He writes: 'It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day… In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far and, while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best. But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that all the others around us wish us good.'

> **The traditional Jewish community, bounded by a combination of external hostility and limitations and internal comfort and familiarity, has had its walls battered, breached and broken by the winds of sociological change**

However, in his typically insightful analysis, he also points out its downside. 'There is', he writes, 'a price to be paid for the privilege of "being in a community"… The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called "autonomy", "right to self-assertion", "right to be yourself". Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom. Security and freedom are two equally precious and coveted values which could be better or worse balanced, but hardly ever reconciled and without friction.'

There is a clear tension between individual and community, between being a 'sovereign self' where my own needs, concerns, interests and desires are king, and a 'situated self' where we find solace, comfort, power and meaning through our engagement with others and our commitment to something beyond ourselves. This tension is exacerbated by several sociological factors. We live in a multicultural society where we have access to a vast array of different cultural influences and ideas which we are able to encounter and experience in a variety of ways. We live in a country that, viewed from a historical perspective, is extraordinarily tolerant and accepting of multiple religious traditions. Many of us are able to travel widely and experience parts of the world which previous generations could barely imagine. Most of us have access to people and information from all over the world at the click of a mouse. In short, our horizons have broadened dramatically. The traditional Jewish community, bounded by a combination of external hostility and limitations and internal comfort and familiarity, has had it walls battered, breached and broken, not so much by antisemitism but rather by the winds of sociological change. We are now free to come and go as we please. As others have stated, in many respects we are no longer a chosen people, compelled by God, or fate, or history to be part of the Jewish community, but rather a choosing people, deciding day-by-day, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute whether or not we want our Jewishness to inform our lives. And if we want Jews to continue to choose Judaism, we must ensure that the case for doing so, and the ways in which we are able to do so, are exceptionally compelling.

All of these issues form the backdrop to this publication. For over a year now, JPR has been engaged in a conversation involving a small number of the UK's most insightful practitioners and thinkers, in which these issues have been examined and discussed. The participants in that conversation were drawn from as many sections of the Jewish community as possible, and were invited because of their direct involvement in creating a particularly interesting version of Jewish community, their capacity to think reflectively, and their willingness to engage constructively and respectfully in dialogue with others. Over the course of the initiative, we have gathered together periodically – as a single group, in small groups, in one-to-one discussions – to challenge one another, teach one another, and, most importantly, listen to and learn from one another. What has emerged is not a singular position or a shared statement of policy, but rather something that is arguably far more reflective of Jewish tradition – a series of thoughts or ideas that together comprise part of the diversity of opinion that exists, and that can be used to facilitate discussion and debate about our collective future.

The nature of community is changing and a changing reality ought to prompt a wide-ranging discussion about how to sustain, renew and invigorate the Jewish community

Whilst the range of essays presented here is not designed to be representative of the range of opinions that exist across the community, the views expressed raise some central and often quite challenging questions and ideas. There is value in bringing these to a wider audience in the interests of promoting thought and dialogue. In each case, the views expressed are the authors' alone. There is no attempt here to promote a particular change agenda; the common link is simply an overarching view that the nature of community is changing, and that a changing reality ought to prompt a wide-ranging discussion about how to sustain, renew and invigorate the Jewish community so it is best placed to thrive in the future. This publication is far from the final word in that discussion, but rather a contribution to it.

Jewish conceptions of community

Raphael Zarum

A well trodden traditional path to understanding the nature of community is to investigate the context and layered meaning of words such as *kehillah* (gathering) and *edah* (congregation) as they appear in the Torah. With the aid of traditional commentaries, lessons and implications for today can be drawn. But I want to mark out a different path...

In our fast-paced globalized world – where Jewish commitment is more often a choice than an expectation, where synagogue-goers are mostly habitual followers rather than spiritual seekers, where popular culture sets scientific facts against spiritual truths, where the majority of our everyday social interactions occur via wireless networks rather than face to face, where the young do not automatically defer to the old because norms and prospects now change faster than a single generation – can traditional Jewish conceptions of community still have meaning and attraction?

> **Renewal and renaissance of Jewish communal life should be built on foundations that emerge from deep within our tradition, through the engagement of underlying truths and ancient ways of thinking, being and living**

I suspect that attempts to modernize our synagogues by simply aping the latest fads and trends or by conforming to the persuasive PowerPoint presentations of management consultants will have little real and lasting impact. Worse than that, they are not essentially Jewish. Renewal and renaissance of Jewish communal life should be built on foundations that emerge from deep within our tradition, through the engagement of underlying truths and ancient ways of thinking, being and living. That, I think, is what Jewish learning is all about – being marinated in our texts.

My path through the texts has led me to this assertion: *A Jewish community is all about making a home for the Shechinah*. Let me explain. *Shechinah* is a name for God that literally means 'dwelling' or 'settling'. It is a grammatically feminine Hebrew word and is used in our sources to refer to the intimate 'Presence' of God. So now I want to recount the story of how we made a home for the *Shechinah* and how this can underpin our modern ideas about community.

Matan Torah, the Revelation at Sinai, was when our ancestors first collectively experienced the Presence of God. This bound us together as a 'holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). According to the 13th century Spanish biblical scholar, Nachmanides, this moment was concretized through the construction of the Tabernacle (see his commentary on Exodus 25:1). This tent-like structure at the centre of the camp was, effectively, a portable Sinai. At its heart was the Holy of Holies which housed the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments, the stone tablets given on Mount Sinai. Moses would hear the Divine utterance in the Tabernacle, just as he did on Mount Sinai. 'Tabernacle' is a translation of the Hebrew word *Mishkan*, which has the same grammatical root as *Shechinah*, because it was to be the dwelling place for God's Presence. The *Mishkan* also contained the *Menorah*, a seven branched candelabra, which was constantly lit, signifying the continued Presence of God.

The Israelites carried the *Mishkan* throughout their forty years in the wilderness and when they finally entered Israel it was permanently set up in Shiloh. The *Mishkan* was upgraded to a much larger and ornate Temple in 10th century BCE by King Solomon. *On the day it was dedicated he announced, 'I have surely built you a house (bayit) to dwell in, a settled place for you to reside forever' (Kings I 8:13).* This *Beit Hashem*, House of God, was eventually destroyed by invaders in 586 BCE but less than a century later it was rebuilt and remained for another four centuries until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. So for over a thousand years, the *Beit Hashem* in Jerusalem was the central place of worship for the People of Israel. It was the seat of power, the home of the highest court of justice, and the place visited by people from across the country three times a year on the festivals.

Exile could have spelled the end of God's House, but already, during the Second Temple period, early synagogues had begun to emerge in Israel. At first they were small gatherings for communal prayer or study but during the long exile in Babylon they became major centres for Jewish community. Reading into the words of an ancient prophet, the rabbis of the time saw these centres as the continuation of the great Temple in Jerusalem. *'Although I have cast them far off among the nations...' said God, 'yet I have become to them a small sanctuary in the countries they have come to'. (Ezekiel 11:16).* This 'small sanctuary', said Rabbi Yitzchak, 'refers to the synagogues and houses of learning in Babylon' (Talmud: Megillah 29a). So, in the rabbinic perception, the Presence of God spread out to every place of prayer and learning throughout the Jewish Diaspora.

The Rabbis took this even further. Rabbi Yochanan said, 'At the time when the Temple stood, [an offering on] the altar would make atonement for a person [and save them]. Now, a person's dining table makes atonement for them'. (Talmud: Chagigah 27a). How so? The 11th century French commentator, Rashi, explains, 'through the hospitality shown to guests'. When you invite people to share a meal you are, essentially, inviting the Presence of God into your home.

This then is a great tale of Jewish continuity – not of Jews, but of housing the Jewish God. So much talk

of community, I find, lacks a religious feel. God is hardly mentioned in the description of modern multiplexes serving the needs of its members. *But Jewish community was always about building a place in which God would feel at home.* Though this might, at first, appear grandiose, it is, in fact, a powerful and direct way of focusing us on what we should be doing there. God's Presence sanctifies what we do. It literally 'sanctions' our actions.

When we pray we *talk to God*, when we learn *God talks to us* through our great texts, and when we sit down together to eat, then we *talk to each other*. The rabbis understood that all these communications and interactions are interrelated. They connect Heaven and Earth, sages and beginners, past and future, old-timers and newcomers.

An outrageous tale is told of the Baal Shem Tov. This Chasidic master once visited a synagogue community but decided to pray outside. When asked why, he said, 'The synagogue is so filled with the egos of its members that there is no room for God, so I chose to pray outside'. He makes the point clearly: *if there is no room for God in your community then there will be no room for people.*

> **Any conference centre in the country, any long cold hike and any Jew-do can be a place of Jewish community if God is made to feel at home**

The community is better served through serving God because caring for our Creator makes us care for His creations. The incredible idea that all humankind is created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) demands that our commitment to God underpins and directs our commitment to community.

That is why the ancient and eternal desire to make a home for the *Shechinah* is the heart of Jewish community. It is the only real measure of its success and viability. We have carried Sinai with us for three millennia, in our synagogues, schools and Jewish homes. This approach even allows us to think beyond these three essential contexts of Jewish life. Any conference centre in the country, any long

cold hike, and any Jew-do can be a place of Jewish community if God is made to feel at home. Where blessings are said, where words of Torah are spoken and where all are made to feel important and welcome, that is where you will find God's Presence.

A final twist: can the Omnipotent and Omnipresent God really be housed? Solomon himself asked this question way back when he dedicated the first Temple, *'Even the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built'. (Kings I 8:27)*. An intriguing rabbinic midrash explains, 'To what is this matter comparable? To a cave open to the sea. When the sea becomes stormy, it fills the cave. The cave is filled but the sea is undiminished'. (Pesikta Rabbati 5,7). In other words, God's Presence *overflows* into the space we provide, but it does not contain all that is Divine.

I read this *midrash* as a three-part caution to community building. Firstly, unless our communal 'caves' are open nothing holy can enter. Secondly, God's Presence arrives in a storm which is unsettling because it challenges who we are and what we stand for. Thirdly, though we try to build a little home for the *Shechinah*, there is so much more 'out there', so much that remains unknowable and beyond our reach. This should constantly humble us even when we are rightly proud of what we have achieved.

Dr Raphael Zarum is the Chief Executive and Head of Faculty at the London School of Jewish Studies (LSJS). He is a graduate of the Mandel Leadership Institute in Israel, has an MA in Adult Education, and a PhD in theoretical physics.

Post-denominational communities: finding a home for serious Jews

Shoshana Boyd Gelfand

'I can't talk to the people I like to pray with and I can't pray with the people I like to talk to'. Thus lamented my friend recently when I asked him why he belonged to several different synagogues. He explained that he identifies as a 'post-denominational' Jew, one of a new breed of Jews who are seriously committed to Jewish life, but who do not locate themselves within a single institution or ideology. Rather, their affiliation is with multiple communities and multiple ideologies.

Let us not confuse this group's tendency to resist affiliation with a single denomination as a sign of disaffection from Judaism. On the contrary, the post-denominationalists show remarkable engagement with their Jewish lives. A prominent sociologist, Steven M. Cohen, makes a useful distinction between 'non-denominational' and 'post- or trans-denominational' Jews.[1] The first category refers to those who decline to identify with any denominational category, classifying themselves as 'Just Jewish', 'Secular', or 'Something else Jewish' on social surveys that ask about denominational affiliation. This 'non-denominational' group tends to be disengaged from Jewish life, part of intermarried families, and unaffiliated with any synagogue or community. So while they may identify as Jewish on a survey, they do not tend to engage as part of a Jewish community.

There is, however, another group who similarly does not identify with a denomination, but who has not opted out of Jewish communal life. They refer to themselves as 'post-denominational' or 'trans-denominational'. These young people (as most of them are in their twenties and thirties) and institutions refuse a denominational label because part of their philosophy is to consciously transcend denominational labels.

Institutions such as Jerusalem's Pardes Institute, Boston's Hebrew College, Britain's Limmud, or New York City's Minyan Hadar are examples of post-denominational institutions which attract and engage people without drawing strict boundaries around traditional denominational ideologies. The people who are attracted to such institutions, unlike their 'non-denominational' counterparts, are deeply engaged in Jewish life within a community structure; they just do not want to engage with a narrowly-defined institution that is limited to a single denominational ideology.

> **Lack of commitment to a single religious denomination is part of a larger sociological trend where people's social connections are looser and have more permeable boundaries**

What holds together these rich post-denominational communities if they do not have a single religious ideology at their core? While they are a somewhat recent phenomenon and have not yet stood the test of time, it is worth exploring what makes them cohere, even in the short-term, as that may be an important key for helping us uncover future trends in Jewish community structure. (In truth, this post-denominational trend transcends Jewish or even religious affiliation. Social scientists have been writing for over a decade about the decline of people's attachment to political parties, jobs, countries and families. Lack of commitment to a single religious denomination is therefore part of a larger sociological trend where people's social connections are looser and have more permeable boundaries.)

I would like to suggest that there are indeed

core elements that hold together these post-denominational communities. While the bonds are more porous in terms of traditional behaviours and beliefs, there are clear values that pulse at the centre of such communities. In addition, 'membership' structures are less demanding than those of traditional religious denominations. My suggestion is inspired by a well-known article written by Dennis Prager in 1988, before post-denominationalism took off fully in the United States. Although I do not agree with everything Prager writes, this particular article was prescient in terms of understanding both the sociological trend and the deeper religious calling of the post-denominational Jew. He titles his article, 'Beyond Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox: Aspiring to be a Serious Jew'. In it, he claims that 'Jewish life would be immeasurably enriched if, instead of focusing on denominational descriptions and goals, Jews would focus on a distinction that is simpler, more accurate, and far more constructive: *serious* and *non-serious* Jews'.[2]

Prager then continues to define what he means by 'serious Jews':

The serious Jew meets four criteria:

1   This Jew is committed to each of Judaism's three components: God, Torah and Israel.

2   This Jew attempts to implement the higher ideals of each of these components.

3   Whatever Jewish laws this Jew does or does not observe is the product of struggle.

4   This Jew is constantly growing in each of these areas.[3]

While we could quibble with Prager's definition, I would rather focus on the paradigm shift that he offers us by smashing our conventional taxonomy for building community. His definition allows for the possibility of people with different beliefs and behaviours to come together and pursue 'serious Judaism' as a community. Indeed, I would suggest that is what happens within many of these new post-denominational communities such as Limmud. In Prager's words, 'Two Jews equally committed to God, Torah, and Israel can indeed differ – obviously

within certain normative Jewish bounds – on precisely how to translate that commitment into daily life. Indeed, I pray for the day when this is exactly what transpires in Jewish life.'[4]

Prager's suggestion inspires me. I want to create communities where that value is the glue which holds the group together, where people do not necessarily believe the same or behave the same, but they help each other along their own 'serious' Jewish journey.

Twenty years ago, I had the privilege of being present at the beginning of such a community. Leslie Wexner, a major American Jewish philanthropist, created the Wexner Graduate Fellowship program. He offered an extremely generous scholarship to graduate students in Jewish education, Jewish communal service and the rabbinate. I was fortunate to be part of that first class of fellows. We came from different denominations, studied at different institutions, and were committed to different visions of Jewish life. Yet we all shared an understanding that none of us would ever be able to serve the Jewish community as a whole, and therefore we needed to work together. What started as a pragmatic understanding, however, developed over the years into a profound love and respect for one another. The Wexner Fellowship has now been training Jewish professionals for over twenty years. There are several hundred of us who still gather together on an annual basis because we find that our commonalities far outweigh our differences. In our Wexner community, we do not try to convince one another of the 'truth' of our ideology. Rather, we challenge each other to be more 'serious' about our Jewish commitments. I am judged in that community by how effectively I pursue the values I espouse. It is a community of shared integrity as opposed to shared truth, and I find that this group is my *chevre* (group of friends) far more than any ideological group of which I have ever been part.

From my experience of Wexner, as well as Limmud, Pardes, Hadar and other post-denominational communities in which I have participated, I have started to compile a list of principles which seem to be the common factors that I see in all of them. As yet, I do not know which (if any) of these principles are 'essential' and which are coincidental. Perhaps

there simply needs to be a certain number of them present for the community to function well, or perhaps my hypothesis and my list are all wrong. The post-denominational phenomenon is simply too new to make definitive statements about how or why it works (or does not!). All I can hope to offer here is to start a conversation and invite others to add principles to this list and to offer their own analyses of how these principles function.

My initial list includes four principles which seem to be present in the various post-denominational communities that I have experienced:

1. Personal choice
Individuals have the autonomy to navigate their own way through a multiplicity of choices. There is no one pathway that everyone must follow to be authentic. Each person must be true to themselves while engaging with others to form a community of seekers.

2. Egalitarianism
While men and women are not necessarily seen as identical, they are treated equally in terms of access to leadership, learning and engagement. Each person's individuality is acknowledged (with their gender and sexuality being part of that individuality), but no one faces discrimination or limits based on their gender or sexuality.

3. Inclusivity
Instead of raising barriers to participation, the institutional culture invites people in. Efforts are made to welcome people and help them deepen their Jewish commitments and learning, without expending energy on defining the boundaries of who is in and who is out.

4. Engaging deeply with Jewish texts and tradition
While each of these initiatives allows individuals to find their own way, the authentic Jewish voice is maintained through an unmediated engagement with Jewish texts and tradition. Participants are expected to study and grow by engaging with Jewish texts and each other. Different interpretations are welcomed and critical thinking encouraged.

The British Jewish community is the birthplace of one of the most successful post-denominational experiments to-date: Limmud. This experiment has now been exported to over seventy communities around the world. There are more experiments starting to surface in the UK. Moishe House is a recent addition to the scene and will, I hope, teach us more about how 'serious' Judaism can be a locus for building post-denominational communities of the future. While some may view these communities as threats to the established denominations, I welcome them as sparks of light that will move us towards a dynamic future.

It remains to be seen whether fifty years from now these sparks will be living side by side with traditional denominations, will have disappeared as a momentary trend, or will have become so wildly successful that they have taken over the current denominations and become the *status quo*. I welcome this uncertainty as an opportunity to learn from other serious Jews and to dream together about the future. As Dennis Prager ended his prescient article in 1988, 'The vision of millions of Jews grappling with God, Torah and Israel and debating with one another how best to live all of them, based not on comfort but on struggle and learning, is truly messianic'. Maybe one day, the people my friend likes to pray with and the people he likes to talk to will all be part of a community of serious post-denominational Jews who are seeking together. On that day, perhaps the Messiah will indeed come – or maybe we will just find him or her seeking with us.

Shoshana Boyd Gelfand is the Executive Director of the Reform Movement in the UK. Ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, she has served in a variety of rabbinic roles, most recently as Vice-President and Acting Director of the Wexner Heritage Foundation.

1 Steven M. Cohen, 'Non-denominational and Post-denominational: Two tendencies in American Jewry' in *Contact: Beyond Categories: The Future of Denominations*. Summer 2005/Av 5765, Volume 7, Number 4, 7-8.

2 Dennis Prager, 'Beyond Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox: Aspiring to be a Serious Jew' in *Ultimate Issues*, Summer 1988, Volume 4, Number 3, 3.

3 ibid.

4 ibid, p.7.

Learning communities and critical pedagogy

Matt Plen

Jewish community has never been more important than in the current era of neo-liberal consumerism, social atomization and recession. But if Jewish communities are to respond meaningfully to these challenges, they must become learning communities, and learning communities of a particular kind. In this article I shall make the case for putting a Jewish critical pedagogy – a radical, dialogical, text-based approach to learning – at the heart of our communal life.

Jewish communities have two potential roles in relation to contemporary social problems. The first is to function as an analgesic, dulling the pain of loneliness, economic hardship and the rat race by providing support in the form of relationships, social solidarity, financial and practical assistance (*tzedaka* and *gmilut hasadim*), a non-consumerist outlet for personal energies and religious or spiritual sustenance. However, in this form, community runs the risk of becoming a mechanism of adaptation and desensitization, rather than resistance to social evils. In Marxist terms, this kind of community is a social opiate (and not only because of its religious content): a fundamentally conservative institution which militates against radical engagement with social problems.[1] As analgesic communities are essentially inward-looking, they tend to promote insularity, particularism and even racism, all of which run counter to the demands of multi-cultural citizenship. Even when such communities endeavour to affect and interact with wider society, for example, through the provision of social services such as soup kitchens, this does not address the root causes of social evils and, by ameliorating their immediate symptoms, removes any urgency from the search for more profound solutions. Moreover, since it does nothing to counter them, this model of Jewish community will tend to be submerged by the anti-communal tendencies of the world which surrounds it: community life cannot compete with the irresistible economic and social pressures of consumer society.

> **Jewish communities which aim to be activist rather than analgesic must put learning at the centre of their communal life**

The second role of community is as a lever for social change and, through social change, for further communal empowerment. This activist model is exemplified by the movement for broad-based community organizing, initiated by Saul Alinsky in 1930s Chicago, and practised in the UK by organizations such as London Citizens.[2] Community organizing trains members of religious and other local communities to develop relationships with each other based on authentic dialogue around issues which are of genuine importance to their daily lives. Starting from this ability to form relationships and imbued with an awareness of their real social needs, diverse community groups (churches, mosques, synagogues, trades unions, tenants' associations) come together to form coalitions and campaign – often successfully – for better healthcare, a living wage, safer streets and other social issues which directly affect them.

Community organizing is one example of community as an effective response to contemporary social and spiritual ailments. In the remainder of this article, I shall argue that Jewish communities which aim to be activist rather than analgesic must put learning – and a certain kind of learning – at the centre of their communal life.

How do different modes of learning affect the fabric of community life? Brazilian educator and seminal critical pedagogue Paulo Freire answers this question by proposing a distinction between two fundamentally different models of education.[3] Freire terms traditional liberal education which aims to impart a given body of knowledge 'banking education', in reference to the idea of teachers making deposits in the empty minds of receptive students. Freire claims that this model of education dehumanizes its students, while legitimizing and perpetuating unequal and oppressive social conditions. Banking education posits knowledge as an objective description of a static, unchanging reality; it is created by academic experts and conveyed by teachers in pre-packaged form to passive learners. It inhibits creative, critical thinking and insists on habituating human beings to an oppressive reality which is synonymous with the natural order and to which there are therefore no alternatives. Banking education also models authoritarian power relations between teacher and students, while masking its own socially oppressive nature and presenting itself as scientific and ideologically neutral.

> **Freire attributed the success of his literacy programme to the fact that people were learning to 'read the word' by 'reading the world', that is by critically engaging with subject matter that was inherently meaningful for their lives**

Freire developed a radical antidote to banking education in the course of his work with illiterate Brazilian peasants in the 1950s and 60s.[4] Rather than teaching reading and writing in the traditional manner, Freire set about creating 'culture circles' in which participants were encouraged to discuss their day to day reality and to critique the world around them. Participants went on to learn to read and write a core vocabulary, grounded in their immediate experience and formulated so as to contain the basic phonemes of almost every Portuguese word. Within as little as thirty hours, previously illiterate students

were able to articulate thought-out opinions about political and social questions, both orally and in writing. Freire attributed the success of his literacy programme to the fact that people were learning to 'read the word' by 'reading the world,' that is by critically engaging with subject matter that was inherently meaningful for their lives.

This model – 'problem-posing education' – which has since been applied to other curricular areas both in the developing world and in industrialized countries,[5] rests on several guiding principles. Rather than presenting learners with a static picture of a distant reality, it enables them to interpret and reflect critically on their world. Learning is presented not as knowledge transfer but as knowledge creation, as teachers and students participate together in a process of discovery. Problem-posing education humanizes learners, posits current reality as one of a range of possibilities and therefore as amenable to intervention and change, and models democratic, egalitarian social relations. Writing as a democratic-humanist Marxist, Freire claims that problem-posing education is a crucial ingredient in the struggle for human liberation. While conceding that social transformation can only be achieved through political and economic channels, he argues that revolutionary change must be based on praxis – intervention in reality which springs from critical reflection on that reality.

The connection between Freirean critical pedagogy and the activist model of community speaks for itself. However, its correlation with Jewish learning is less straightforward. Traditional Judaism incorporates what Freire would term an authoritarian, banking model of education. Starting with the biblical commandment to study ('Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up' – Deuteronomy 6:7), moving through the laws of Torah study presented in the Talmud and by medieval authorities such as Maimonides, the textual tradition is marked by the assumption that the aim of education is the clear transmission of Torah from teacher to pupils, using coercion, where necessary, to achieve

this goal.[6] But Judaism also reflects pluralistic, anti-fundamentalist views of truth and learning. Torah is considered to be multifaceted, encompassing contradictory positions, all of which have divine status.[7] The typically pluralistic and open-ended structure of Talmudic and midrashic literature forces readers to adopt a dialogical approach, which is also reflected in the centrality of independent *hevruta*, or study-partner learning in the traditional *bet midrash,* or study house. Certain Talmudic texts, as well as Maimonides, resolve this tension by suggesting that, whereas problem-posing education is appropriate for the intellectual and religious elite, the masses are better served by banking education.[8]

> **The only model of Jewish education that people will freely choose is one based on meaningful, critical dialogue**

The decision to adopt one Jewish learning strategy over another should not be informed only by the connection between banking education and the analgesic model of community, but by the fact that an authoritarian pedagogy is inherently unsustainable in a Jewish context. In the modern world, banking education is institutionalized and maintained through coercion (compulsory education laws) and economic necessity (the need for qualifications). In the absence of these factors, why would anyone engage with it, unless habituated by routine or ideology? The only model of Jewish

education that people will freely choose is one based on meaningful, critical dialogue. The contemporary challenge, then, is to develop a Jewish problem-posing education and to use it as the basis for democratic community life. Yet this education must be authentically Jewish as well as genuinely dialogical: if not, we risk abandoning the arena of Judaism to authoritarian educational and analgesic community models. Freire himself taught that there is value in understanding the world through our own prism: being liberated means throwing off cultural alienation too.

I shall conclude by suggesting four core principles for the creation of a Jewish critical pedagogy as the basis for communal life:

1. It must prioritize Jewish literacy – teaching the basic linguistic, textual and conceptual skills needed to read, write and talk Jewishly.

2. This 'vocabulary' has to be taught in a problem-posing, dialogical manner, so as to maintain a constant connection between Jewish concepts and relevant subject matter, as well as modelling democratic relationships between teachers and learners.

3. Learning must be lifelong and motivated by the idea of its own intrinsic worth (*lishma* – for its own sake), as a challenge to the overriding instrumentalism of consumer culture.

4. Finally, a genuinely critical Jewish education must be located within communities which do not seek to shelter themselves from reality, but rather to change it.

Matt Plen is the Movement Director of the Assembly of Masorti Synagogues. He is also pursuing doctoral studies in Jewish Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where his research topic is Critical Pedagogy and Israeli Ideologies of Social Justice.

1 For a recent illustration of this tendency to resort to religion at times of social crisis, see Naftali Brawer, 'Face to Faith,' *Guardian*, 18 April 2009 (www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/18/naftali-brawer-faith-god-destiny). Rabbi Brawer writes that in the context of the credit crunch, '[t]he greatest challenge for a person of faith is to let go and wait for God to act.'

2 Maurice Glasman, 'Abraham, Aristotle and Alinsky: On the Reconciliation of Citizenship and Faith,' published for the Conference on Faith and Citizenship: Friends or Enemies at London Metropolitan University, 2008 (www.lishma.org.uk/index.php/articles/99-abraham-aristotle-and-alinsky-on-the-reconciliation-of-citizenship-and-faith-by-dr-maurice-glasman). For more on Jewish community organizing in the United States see www.urj.org/socialaction/training/justcongregations/vision/.

3 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, 1988, 57-74.

4 On Freire's literacy work in Brazil, see Cynthia Brown, 'Literacy in Thirty Hours: Paulo Freire's Process in Northeast Brazil' in *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching* (ed. Ira Shor), Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987, 215-230.

5 On the relevance of Freirean pedagogy in the developed world see Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*, South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1987, 121-142. For a practical, readable and amusing application of some radical educational ideas, see Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1969.

6 For example Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study 2:2 and 4:4. For a contemporary reflection of this view, see Harvey Belovski, 'JCoSS is non-Orthodox, not "cross-communal"', *Jewish Chronicle*, June 25 2009. Rabbi Belovski comments that pluralism is irreconcilable with orthodoxy and states 'the obvious fact that children need certainty, a sense of imperative and firm ideas to help them build a meaningful connection to their faith.'

7 See, for example, Eruvin 13a ('both these and these are words of the living God')

8 An example is the story of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiyya (Ketubot 103b) in which Hanina advances a view of learning as the intellectual's formulation of Torah by means of dialectical reasoning, and Hiyya prioritizes the dissemination of pre-existing written and oral traditions to a wide, uneducated audience. Similarly, in his introduction to the Guide to the Perplexed, Maimonides makes clear that philosophical speculation is to be restricted to the intellectual elite and kept from the masses, who require an unambiguous presentation of religious doctrine.

What is British Jewish politics?

Keith Kahn-Harris

Politics is an inescapable part of human existence. It concerns the way that humans organize themselves, in particular how they organize themselves within institutions and units of governance. Above all, it concerns the way humans interact with power.

Dating back at least to the ancient Greeks (whose word 'polis', meaning state or city, provides the root of our word politics), political theory has a long tradition of defining and understanding what politics is, how it functions and how it should function. In a modern lay sense though, politics has two principle kinds of definitions: one, a minimal definition, focuses on Politics (with a capital 'P') as a process confined to state and local government. The other, maximal definition, focuses on politics (with a small 'p') as an omnipresent fact of life, bound up in the manifold ways in which power circulates in everyday life ('the personal is political').

British Jewish life is a maze of practices in which power is exercised and resisted

We can find the British Jewish community in both definitions of politics. In the minimal definition, British Jews are involved in national and local politics as individuals, as Jews and as a community. In the maximal definition, British Jewish life is a maze of practices in which power is exercized and resisted.

My concern in this brief essay is not to analyse British Jewish politics according to either definition, or indeed, according to some other definition that draws on both. Rather, I want to question whether and how far the British Jewish community has an *acknowledged* politics. Do British Jews see themselves as being involved in a political process when they interact with other Jews in Jewish contexts? Is there a tacitly or openly agreed understanding of what British Jewish politics might mean?

At one level, such questions are easy to answer. It is likely that most people who have been involved in a Jewish organization at more than a token level will, at some time or other, have reflected on the politics of that organization. In any synagogue there are likely to be factions, personalities, disagreements and controversies, which, even if they are not antagonistic and bitter, will certainly 'feel' political at some time or other. However, the inescapable fact of the politics of communal institutions does not mean that reflection on that politics will be anything more than fleeting. Indeed, in many Jewish contexts, an acknowledgement of politics is something that is actively resisted.

I would argue that in much of the British Jewish community, politics is in 'bad taste'. In synagogues a *macher* (a person with power and influence who gets things done) who is too overt in political scheming is likely to be viewed with suspicion. On a community-wide level inter-denominational politicking is widely practised, but at the same time, in public discourse it tends to be attempts to prevent inter-denominational politics (such as the 'Stanmore Accords') that are emphasized. The Board of Deputies has a quasi-parliamentary structure and its deputies elect a president and vice-president, but there is nothing resembling parties, and deputies rarely face contested election fights in their own communities. When disputes between deputies do break out, they are often all the more bitter for there being no accepted model over how different 'parties' to a dispute should

behave. Even those few organizations that are openly political, such as the UK branches of Israeli political parties, tend to be low-key and poorly supported.

In short, there is a disparity between the *de facto* inevitability and ubiquity of British Jewish communal politics and the degree to which this politics is openly recognized. British Jewish politics is largely a matter for quiet, behind the scenes activity.

This reticence is perhaps a function of a tacit assumption that politics is antithetical to community. To be openly political is seen to be to seek to divide, to create strife and discord that threatens to rupture communal harmony. In part this may derive from long-held feelings of insecurity that, as a minority in British society, the Jewish community must show a united front and that division can only equal weakness.

The assumption that small minorities need to present a united front is not necessarily illegitimate. The problem is that the lack of politics can create problems more serious than those it is designed to combat. If Jewish communal politics is not acknowledged, politics will still continue, but it will continue in ways that can be corrosive. If those who disagree legitimately with a particular direction the community takes can only be seen to disagree if they do so privately, this increases the likelihood that, rather than accept their marginality, they will resort to attacking the community. I am thinking here about the position of those who disagree with communal support for Israel. Contrary to the commonly made accusation that the community 'suppresses' debate, it is more the case that debate is possible if it is done quietly and behind the scenes. The trouble is that some will not accept only being able to disagree privately, while in public maintaining a facade of unity. Without a legitimate political process through which to debate communal policies, those British Jews who are critical of Israel have often resorted to attacking the community from the outside.

It is essential to begin the process of rethinking British Jewish politics. The tacit assumption that politics and community are antithetical needs to be questioned. In any but the tiniest, most homogeneous community, differences of opinion are inevitable and there has to be a way of dealing with these differences without the dissolution of the community. What models might there be for a community whose political system could allow for the mediation of difference? What kind of political language do British Jews need to embrace in order to function without undue rancour?

One source of inspiration might be parliamentary democracy itself. The Board of Deputies is structured as a kind of parliament, but it lacks one crucial element of parliamentary democracy – an official opposition. When a politician who has been democratically elected speaks for a country, region or locality, it is clear that even if they govern for all, they were only elected by some. To be a leader in a democracy is to publicly affirm that not everyone agrees. Indeed, when democracies work best (and admittedly they often do not) the opposition plays an important role in the democratic process, scrutinizing the executive and acting as a constant rebuke to delusions of unanimity. Political opponents may disagree vehemently but in the best parliamentary democracies, this does not stop them respecting each other as individuals; nor does the fact of divided political loyalties necessarily prevent the cohesiveness of the nation.

The parliamentary model is, of course, not applicable in its entirety to the Board of Deputies or other British Jewish communal organizations. The model does suggest, though, that politics need not be antithetical to community and that difference can be managed civilly. British Jewish community organizations should consider how they might create structures within which a wider spectrum of views might be aired than is currently the case. Above all, they should not fear politics but embrace it.

Dr Keith Kahn-Harris is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Religion and Contemporary Society at Birkbeck College and the convenor of New Jewish Thought (www.newjewishthought.org). His book on the contemporary British Jewish community (co-authored with Ben Gidley) will be published by Continuum in 2010.

Towards an open community

Joseph Finlay

We are in the world of fifty per cent Judaism. That is the American intermarriage rate; approximately half of marriages that involve a Jew are mixed marriages. In the UK that rate is somewhat lower, between thirty per cent and forty-five per cent, but there is evidence that we are heading in the same direction. The figure of fifty per cent is not talismanic: it is not massively more significant than a rate of forty per cent or sixty per cent. But it can act as a point of reference, convenient shorthand for looking at contemporary diaspora Jewry. It signifies a Jewish society where half of its practitioners are either not born Jewish or have a parent who is not. It points to a world where people are not just marrying out, but also marrying in. It connects to a world where large numbers of people take part in Jewish culture, whether playing Klezmer music, studying Jewish studies in universities and writing Jewish fiction. It is a world of 'half Jews', Jews by Choice, Jews by osmosis and those who do not wish to consider themselves Jews but are inspired by Jewish ideas, texts and practices. Above all it points towards a post-ethnic Judaism of, and for, adults.

Much Judaism, especially in the UK, is both child-centred and child-like. Child-centred in that it puts all its focus on the young, all its energy, all its focus on he or she who might continue the tradition. From Seders, to synagogue services, to Shabbat rituals, Judaism's adult practitioners disguise their own lack of knowledge and interest in Judaism by concentrating on the young, and pressurize their offspring into upholding the Jewish heritage. Our Judaism is frequently child-like in the sense that Jewish knowledge often remains at the level of a *bar/bat mitzvah* student: simplistic, dogmatic, and designed for continuity rather than renewal. In a world

where Jewishness ceases to rely on the glue of ethnic descent, the quality of our education, conversion programmes, and overall Jewish thought will be paramount.

In a serious, open Judaism for adults, we would devote great energy and thought to the entry points to our tradition, including considering if there ought to be any at all. At present, conversion to Judaism is little discussed, and generally, when it is, it is in terms of bewilderment: why would anyone want to become a Jew? When covered in the Jewish media (for example, in the JFS case), it is often seen as part of a problem, or yet another difficulty of British Jewish life. We need to get serious about conversions. In America there are approximately 400,000 Jews by Choice, around eight per cent of the total Jewish population. Figures are not available for the UK, but anecdotal evidence, especially from non-orthodox synagogues, suggests that the numbers are significant.

> **A Judaism in which large numbers of people are entering will have to raise its game**

But what are the curricula for potential converts? It is not uncommon for *bar* and *bat mitzvah* tutors to be employed, or for GCSE Judaism to be used as a standard, and often a system of 'rolling' courses are utilized in which, if the student is not deemed ready after the year, they sit the course again.

In the growing world of post-ethnic Judaism this is simply not good enough. It might have sufficed when there was only a small number of converts, and when all we really wanted for them was to 'assimilate' into Jewish culture and gain an imagined ethnicity. A Judaism in

which large numbers of people are entering will have to raise its game.

Beyond this, there are many people who are connected to Jewish life, or inspired by Judaism, who are not interested in a formal conversion. When identities are multiple, fluid and complex, it may be anachronistic and dishonest to submit to a process which purports to give one a transformative existence. To understand the position of most interested gentiles, we must acknowledge that most of us seek wisdom in several different traditions, see Judaism as one system of meaning (even if a privileged one) in the market-place of ideas, and have a wide range of cultural and religious practices by which we live. A fully open Judaism would put its energy into teaching its rich textual tradition to all who wanted to learn, open its rituals to all who wanted to engage in them, and strive to make Jewish insights part of the social and political discourse of the countries in which its participants reside. Such a model seems far from the British Jewish synagogue fortressed by security guards, but is not totally unprecedented: Berkeley's Jewish Renewal 'Kehillah' synagogue allows membership and participation in ritual acts to all, regardless of Jewish status. While such a process will not be easy, and will require scrupulous refusal to water down Judaism, it is a utopian model, and one that will become increasingly necessary.

> **A fully open Judaism would put its energy into teaching its rich textual tradition to all who wanted to learn and open its rituals to all who wanted to engage in them**

It might be objected that all of this is a portrait of diaspora Jewish life, in contrast to Israel, where intermarriage is far less of an issue, and where Jewish continuity is assured. In Israel the ethnic dimension of Judaism grows ever stronger, just as its ethical and humanistic dimensions diminish. For some, this all strengthens the need to make *aliyah* (emigrate to Israel), where a traditionally ethnocentric Judaism can continue unchallenged.

The response to this is twofold. Firstly, it is clear that the vast majority of diaspora Jews have no intention of going to Israel: the age of mass *aliyah* is over. Unless we want to write off approximately half of world Jewry, we will have to deal with the reality as we find it. Secondly, the Zionist dream of an entirely Jewish society is under unprecedented threat, both from the inside and out. From the inside, the state of Israel now contains large numbers of citizens (e.g. from the former Soviet Union) not recognized by the state rabbinate as Jewish, and who are actively practising other religions. It also contains large numbers whose conversions are not recognized, non-Jewish spouses who have come under the Law of Return, and large numbers of foreign workers brought in to decrease reliance on Arab labour. Israel herself, then, is not immune to multiculturalism. From the outside, the notion and reality of mono-ethnic states is receiving increased scrutiny and criticism in the world of global opinion. Israel sometimes designs policies to ensure Jewish majorities in key geographical areas, to maintain segregation in the education system and to structurally prevent any form of civil (and thereby possibly interfaith) marriage. In so doing, the doubts grow over how long this kind of ethnocracy and approach to Judaism can survive. As large numbers of Israel make *yeridah* (leaving Israel and re-entering the Jewish diaspora), the issues of how to understand culture and religion in an open, multicultural society are not simply going to be solved by pointing to the Jewish state.

For those who find the model of a radically open Judaism too far fetched and difficult to comprehend, it should be pointed out that it is already happening. Some snapshots:

• Jewdas at Glastonbury, running a Jewish tent for all, with food, art, performances, and even Talmud study for all those who dropped in.

• Independent *minyanim* (prayer services), such as Wandering Jews, who are proudly open to all who wish to attend.

• The New York Band 'The Sway Machinery', putting on *Rosh Hashanah* gigs that draw on *nusach* (traditional prayer melodies) and cantorial music.

• Moishe House London, a Jewish communal house that is a hub for young Jewish adults, that, by focusing on Judaism, rather than on Jews, is able to sustain a genuinely open, inclusive community.

• The work of the Kabbalah Centre, despite being derided in much of the Jewish community, is a real example of Judaism *sans frontières*, opening up the riches of the tradition to the wider world.

• Jewish Lights – an American publishing house whose mission is to publish books that reflect the Jewish wisdom tradition for people of all faiths and all backgrounds.

• The fact that, thanks mostly to the Internet, anyone can learn Torah. The Internet makes it impossible to check out the credentials of a potential new student. From the many *Daf Yomi* sites, to 'Web Yeshiva', to Aish Hatorah, to online halachic responsas, everything is open to everyone. The tools that were created for *kiruv* (outreach) have the effect of opening up the tradition for all.

Other more mainstream organizations can be seen to be part of this trend, such as Jewish Book Week, the Jewish Film Festival, and the Jewish Community Centre. If the American Jewish experience is anything to go by, these cultural Jewish institutions will only grow in prestige and importance.

All of us are already Jews by Choice. In (post-) modern liberal society, where one is free to join and leave groups at will, all notions of affiliation, observance and identity are acts of our own volition, together with the volition of others. A closed Judaism may indeed work well for the *haredi* community, but such a segregated life is simply not viable for the non-*haredi* Jewish world. For the rest of us, self-definition is the only game in town. Closed door Judaism is a recipe for continued decline, fear and pessimism, while open door Judaism is a Judaism that could actually thrive and grow.

> **Closed door Judaism is a recipe for continued decline, fear and pessimism, while open door Judaism is a Judaism that could actually thrive and grow**

In a letter to his congregants, Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel, of Temple Micah in Washington D.C. explained why he was reversing his longstanding policy of refusing to officiate at mixed faith weddings:

I came to realize that in considering the Jewish future, we have to think of Jewish identity not only in terms of our own generation, our children and our grandchildren, but also in terms of Jewish flourishing in America (not survival; flourishing). That meant that we had to think in terms of 10th generation American Jews – Jews who would be living 100 years from now. I believe that means thinking in terms of an American Jewry that is fully rooted in America, not a Jewry living off the powerful resources and memories of European Jewish life – Yiddish culture, European images, Jewish neighborhoods and immigrant parents and grandparents.

This analysis does not apply only in America. If we are serious about sustaining Judaism in the UK (and frequently we are not), a Judaism and Jewish community open to all is a necessary prerequisite. In the past we have focused on what we have to lose; now we need to recognize what we have to gain.

Joseph Finlay is a professional musician and a grassroots Jewish activist. He is a part of the Jewdas collective, a resident of Moishe House London, and a co-founder of both Wandering Jews and the Open Talmud Project.

Navigating the Jewish landscape: how emerging adults are teaching us new conceptions of community

Judith Williams

The last fifty years have seen many changes in our society: the extension of education, especially for women, the postponement of marriage and child-rearing, changing family formation, decreased rates of fertility, the globalization of travel and communication, and technological innovations such as the Internet and home computers. With these changes have come various shifts in values: from the collective to the individual, from a single to a plurality of worldviews, and from a mindset of fatalism to an assumption of choice. These value changes are not negotiable, they simply *are*. We can try and shield ourselves from their impact, but they continue to affect our lives.

> **People are finding friends, partners and meaning outside of the mainstream Jewish community and synagogue**

We discover the effects of this value shift in the Jewish community when we look at the falling synagogue affiliation among 18-35 year olds, the rise in intermarriage and assimilation patterns, the increase in non-synagogue portals of involvement and in cross-communal meeting places, as well as, interestingly, the rise of independent *minyanim* (prayer groups). All of these are signs that people are finding friends, partners and meaning outside of the mainstream Jewish community and synagogue. We are witnessing the decline of deference to the rabbi, the rise of the individual becoming or seeking to become an 'expert,' our own quests for meaning superseding more traditional Jewish sources of authority, and a craving for variety and choice replacing the adoption of a single ideological position.

One particular development is worthy of focused attention: the changing nature of the 18-25 age group. In the United States, academic work on this age cohort conducted by the psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett[1] has identified a new life stage and phenomenon, which he terms 'Emerging Adulthood.'

Emerging Adulthood is the period of psychological and practical transition that occurs after adolescence and before adult roles are established. In the not so distant past the majority of young people left school, entered work, found a spouse and settled into family life all within the space of four or five years. Today that transition is stretched over a longer period and has developed its own characteristics, creating a generation which readily embraces plurality, choice, exploration and individualism.

Emerging Adulthood involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving towards enduring decisions about work, love and outlook. Typically, a variety of venues is explored, and experimentation is part of the identity-building process. For instance, emerging adults are likely to challenge and even discard previously held worldviews, and try out or adopt new worldviews during this period. Examination and reconsideration are characteristic of this life stage. This type of reflection is important, since emerging adults have achieved some degree of independence from their families and formal settings and are attempting to 'find themselves'. What differentiates this period of emerging adulthood from adolescence or adulthood is the lesser role played by tradition and custom in people's decisions; emerging adults are less likely to be regulated or directed by other people saying what they ought to believe and do. This is a life stage characterized by its

heterogeneity; it is a rich, complex, dynamic, and anti-authoritarian stage of life.

It is no surprise that the sociological value shifts I outlined earlier manifest themselves most acutely within the 18-25 age group. The question is: are trends within emerging adulthood and the shift in values from the collective to the individual pointing to a new short-term pragmatic need, or to some deeper and longer lasting shift in the behaviour and perspective of Jews?

> **We need to create activities and avenues for young people's personalized exploration and experimentation of Jewish life**

What this view of the 18-25 age group demonstrates to Jewish leadership is that there is a burning need for a new and pragmatic response to the needs of a new generation. At the very least, we need to create activities and avenues for young people's personalized exploration and experimentation of Jewish life. There may be many young Jews who do not want to engage explicitly with their Judaism during their twenties, but we must open up multiple avenues for them to at least see the possibilities, and hope that they explore one or more of them. In some cases, even this will fail, at which point we can only hope that they will find their way to Jewish partners and synagogue membership at some later stage.

However, the trends associated with emerging adulthood might also reflect a deeper and broader shift. They could signify a generation that will operate in a radically different way in terms of Jewish synagogue membership, parenthood and even grandparenthood. They might even signify a shifting way of viewing Jewish life for other generations of Jews, not just the 18-25 year olds. The implications of Arnett's characterization of 18-25 year-olds could well result in not merely a few years of Jewish educational and cultural experimentation, but the emergence of a new type of Jewish community with an enduring pattern of behaviours and mindsets.

The shifting value set and trends that come from embracing plurality, experimentation,

and the pursuit of meaning have caused much anxiety amongst Jewish leaders. This seems to come from fears that this new generation will not become members of synagogues (and this, in turn, threatens existing funding structures), that communal giving will dwindle, support for major unifying causes, like protecting Israel and combating antisemitism, will go into decline, and, so the theory goes, the number of intermarriages will increase.

However, seeing emerging adulthood trends and the shift in values as an opportunity is likely to produce more constructive responses. Then we could ask: what would a reinvented community look like and feel like if we were to embrace the individual's pursuit of meaning, the desire to explore through and with others, and the plurality of options within our rich Jewish tradition?

I would like to suggest a model for how this conception of community might look which we might call, to borrow a term from Canadian sociologist Barry Wellman, 'networked individualism'.[2]

One way to describe networked individualism visually is by imagining the London Underground, or Tube map. The Tube map represents a number of railway lines, each able to carry trainloads of passengers from station to station, and to help people figure out how to find a route to any destination in London. A Jewish Tube map would similarly enable Jews to navigate their way through their Jewish lives, identify the range of destinations available, and the routes from one destination to another. Applying this metaphor, the stations represent summer camps, synagogues, schools, conferences, workshops, courses, Friday night dinner tables and the vast array of activities and places where Jews come together.

There is no centre, no hierarchy, maybe even no real sense of a defined path, although certain stations would naturally become particularly popular destinations and interchanges. Yet the totality is rich and multifaceted, covering all aspects of Jewish life. The stations are about Jews coming together in a quest to find meaning, or to share a passion or interest. Given a map of possibilities, people could quickly learn to navigate the community as a whole. They

could explore Judaism in a way that works for them at an individual level, yet be involved in a totality that spans our rich tradition.

This would be a community that enabled belonging and opened horizons of knowledge and opportunities. Belonging would be found in the real connections people make with one another in unspecified times and spaces, in discussions and through personal passions and interests. Some stations, activities or communities might be stable and long-lasting; others might be transient and dissolve as quickly as they appeared. It would be about people finding and creating their spaces and communities and finding and creating meaning in their own and others' lives. At its heart are people, interacting in pursuit of higher goals and even, hopefully, holy ambitions.

We need our leaders to embrace the sheer diversity of what our community offers and publicize it widely

Of course, the model will only work if (i) there are many and varied stations; (ii) the tracks between the stations are clearly laid out; and (iii) people are taught how to navigate their way around the community map.

In the UK there are already many ways and activities (stations). We need to encourage and allow room for more of these. Stations will emerge as we allow and celebrate new expressions of Jewishness. Creativity breeds creativity. So we need our main institutions to encourage and support new initiatives within and outside of their own frameworks. The synagogue that allows a small group to establish a new *minyan* alongside the main service, the foundation that sponsors a charismatic young person to establish a new open space in their living room for Jewish learning, the communal organization that funds the Jewish tent at Glastonbury. These are all examples of the more established organizations enabling those who seek to operate outside of the mainstream the means to do that. And they work brilliantly.

Second, the network individualism model suggests we need strong 'tracks between

stations'. Even now, with a variety of synagogues, schools, youth movements, museums, organizations and centres in which one can experience being Jewish, many Jews know little about what exists beyond the small range of possibilities that they have seen personally. The tracks between them are simply not visible. Some tracks have been deliberately destroyed, others have simply been overlooked. Laying the tracks between the stations means acknowledging the contribution that different parts and activities have to play in the whole. We need our leaders to embrace the sheer diversity of what our community offers and publicize it widely. Each station could and should open its lines of communication. We need to let Jews know the full breadth of what is on offer. With the existence of the Internet that seems easily done.

Current Jewish leadership can continue to focus inwardly, with each organization working to strengthen itself. But a model of community that focuses on the needs of a new generation would see us focus on the individuals themselves rather than on our organizations. Various barriers prevent us focusing on individuals and allowing Jews to choose their own Jewish paths and adventures: the fear of irrelevancy, the fear that Jews cannot be loyal to more than one 'place,' and the fear of losing control. Yet what single institution is able to accommodate the full extent of a Jew's spiritual, cultural, religious, educational and social needs? If we see our own part in a greater whole, we actually have a way to meet the complex needs of Jews by suggesting other places and possibilities to enable them to find what they seek. Rather than fear that people will show no loyalty and move on, we should believe that people will thank us for this information, and feel a stronger affinity for what we and others offer.

Admittedly, it feels risky, as if we will lose control of the content we believe ought to be taught, and the loyalty of our constituents. Indeed, this might happen. Yet, we have to trust that each new generation will rebuild Jewish life in ways that feel authentic to them, and that balance the need for both reinvention and tradition.

The Jewish world seems to be split today between those who look at current trends and

feel anxious and those who feel invigorated by them. Between the 'traditionalists' and the 'transformationalists' it is hard to know whether the community is really under threat or simply undergoing a moment of transformation.

I would advocate an agenda of transformation, in which we create a different conception of community and take a different perspective on structuring communal relations, agendas, funding and education. Now might be the time to focus not on organizational agendas and synagogue membership as our goals, but rather on confronting our fears of irrelevancy and creating an empowering community-wide network of Jewish possibilities and opportunities.

Judith Williams is Director of the Jeneration project. Judith worked as a Jewish educator in Israel and holds an MA in Contemporary Jewry from Hebrew University, Jeursalem. She is also a former Jersualem Fellow of the Mandel Institute, Jerusalem.

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Jewish community 2.0: how the Internet may be changing the face of Jewish life

Jonathan Boyd

It must have been in the early or mid-1990s. I was sitting in my eighty-something great-uncle's kitchen chatting with him over a cup of tea, when he asked me a question that completely stumped me. 'What's the Internet?'

I seem to recall that I mumbled something about it being a kind of online magazine with lots of information about more or less everything, but the truth was I really did not know. I had never surfed the net, had no idea what a search engine was, and had only very recently been introduced to the wonders of email. Trying to imagine a similar conversation in 2010, it is difficult enough to conjure up an image of an eighty year-old who is not at least vaguely familiar with the rudiments of the technology, never mind someone in their mid-twenties as I was at the time.

> **While there is plenty of evidence of the Jewish community's embrace of technology, scant attention has been paid to how the Internet may be altering its contours, shape and nature**

The organized Jewish community may not be known for being at the cutting edge of technological innovation, but it has embraced much of it. Email use has become all-pervasive, organizational websites are a community-wide norm, and there is increasing use of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. However, while there is plenty of evidence of the Jewish community's embrace of technology, scant attention has been paid to how the Internet may be altering its contours, shape and nature.

Nevertheless, the growing literature on how the Internet may be impacting society as a whole raises some challenging questions for the Jewish community. Regardless of whether analysts ultimately see new technologies as a force for good or bad, they do appear to agree on one key point: the widespread use of the Internet has a profoundly significant impact on our lives. Indeed, two leading commentators with dramatically different views – Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, and Don Tapscott, researcher, best-selling author and teacher at the University of Toronto – have gone so far as to suggest that the generation born after the late 1970s/early 1980s that grew up with the Internet, should actually be labelled the 'iGeneration' or 'Net Generation' because of its influence on them. Twenge is a pessimist: her research leads her to conclude that the iGeneration can be characterized by its narcissistic, disrespectful and miserable nature.[1] Tapscott, in contrast, paints a highly optimistic portrait of youthful tolerance, wisdom and collaboration. Nevertheless, the two commentators find common ground in a shared belief that the Internet has changed the very way in which people function, interact, think and learn.[2]

Consider one of Tapscott's most intriguing insights. In previous generations, education was linear. We worked our way through a prescribed curriculum in a highly ordered fashion, beginning with the first lesson and ending with the last, referring at all times to a set textbook, and deferring at all times to the classroom authority – the teacher. Today, children do more and more of their learning online, and, driven by their personal preferences, interests and needs, explore the vast world of cyberspace on their own terms. In seeking to complete a given task, they do not follow a set pathway; they blaze their own trail, clicking at will on the links that appear

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most intriguing or compelling. Tapscott's claim is that learning thus becomes non-linear; there is an inevitable shift away from content-driven education to student-centred learning, and the role of the teacher shifts away from being the authority and towards becoming the enabler. In essence, one of the main debates of educational philosophy – whether to locate content or the student at the heart of the enterprise – has been resolved in favour of the student simply by the existence and pervasiveness of the Internet.

> **Far from the dystopian vision of a world comprised of socially-inept recluses, the Internet is actually building connections between people in new and highly imaginative and intriguing ways**

There is also clear evidence that the Net Generation increasingly collaborates online. The image of the loner sitting in front of the computer screen for hours on end may have been true before the advent of Web 2.0, but is not any more. In the past few years, the Internet has shifted from being a platform capable mainly of broadcasting information to individual users to becoming an interactive facility capable of engaging with and responding to user-choice and opinion. As a result, all sorts of shared activities are happening on the Internet: from multi-user video games, through chat groups and file-sharing, all the way to product analysis and creation. Brands are being discussed, opinions are being shared, and articles, activities, music and video are being assessed. Far from the dystopian vision of a world comprised of socially-inept recluses, the Internet is actually building connections between people in new and highly imaginative and intriguing ways.

Indeed, Web 2.0 alters the nature of community. Traditional communities were geographically bound. We mixed with people in our immediate vicinity and whilst we may have encountered others through business or travel, a combination of internal familiarity and external distrust tended to buttress the real or metaphorical walls that surrounded us. The world was opened up in new ways as a

result of the Enlightenment, Emancipation and Industrial Revolution, but it is only as a result of the Internet that we have become able to create forms of community that ignore both natural and man-made boundaries. Today, social networking platforms such as Facebook and MySpace create, sustain and deepen ties across continents and oceans in ways that allow us to remain as up-to-date with someone we have not seen for twenty years as we might be with someone who lives across the road. Other sites create other communities: Mumsnet allows mothers to ask questions of one another and share wisdom; Beliefnet brings people together from one faith group or many to discuss religious issues and share personal or spiritual concerns; Care2 builds connections between social activists, organizations and responsible businesses from around the world in order to affect social change. Each of these examples and countless others, build online communities, and in so doing, redefine the very concept of community.

What might all of this mean for the Jewish community? Educationally, it would appear that the shift Tapscott describes – from content-focused education to student-centred learning – means that it is increasingly difficult to teach an established, formalized curriculum controlled by a centralized authority. Because Jewish students are, and will continue to be able to explore multiple ideas from multiple sources, any attempt to control or limit that which is 'kosher' and that which is not is likely to fail. Any attempt to protect young people from alternative versions of Jewish life and existence (not to mention non-Jewish life and existence), becomes largely impossible. The Internet allows Judaism, in all its various forms and styles, to become freely available and accessible in ways that were completely unimaginable until very recently. It simultaneously locates Judaism alongside every other cultural and religious lifestyle option and demands that it stand up and be counted in that broad context. It is difficult to predict what the consequences of this will be, but it is clear that, if Judaism is to continue to be a serious choice, the quality, integrity and creativity of the Jewish product will be critical in the ever-expanding marketplace of ideas.

The collaborative culture that Web 2.0 has

engendered may also be highly significant from a Jewish perspective. Consumer assessment of products and services is becoming more and more commonplace; applied to Jewish products and services, only the best and most valuable are likely to survive and thrive. We will have to become far more attuned to the needs and wishes of our members or participants, particularly in densely-populated Jewish areas where numerous other educational, spiritual and cultural options exist. Mistakes – particularly those that indicate inconsistency between values and practices – are likely to be costly. Whereas in the past there was a strong sense that individual behaviours were being judged by those in positions of communal authority, the existence of Web 2.0 turns that power balance on its head, enabling individuals to judge the behaviours of communal authorities and institutions, and then share those opinions with the widest possible audience. When the judged become the judges, the world inevitably becomes a very different place.

The result is that new Jewish organizations and initiatives are becoming ever more commonplace. Feeling coerced, bored or alienated by the offerings of the mainstream, more and more committed young Jews are simply bypassing it and setting up on their own. Recent research conducted by the New York-based Jewish innovation research institute *Jumpstart* identifies more than 300 new initiatives of this type that have been established in the USA over the past decade, reaching in excess of 400,000 Jews. There is evidence to suggest that the UK is following suit – LimmudFest, Grassroots Jews, Wandering Jews, Moishe House, Jeneration are just a handful of examples of new initiatives

that have appeared on the British Jewish communal landscape in the last few years. New *minyanim* are being formed, new educational programmes developed, new social causes highlighted, new websites set up and new cultural forms created. It is difficult to know where this type of activity is heading – whether it is simply a fad or represents the beginning of a fundamental change in the way the Jewish community functions – but there is little doubt that Net Generation Jews feel more empowered than any previous generation to redefine the shape and contours of Jewish life.

Mark Twain is quoted as once saying that 'The art of prophecy is very difficult, especially with respect to the future'. Yet several commentators are claiming that the Internet Age may be compared to the Renaissance or the Industrial Revolution, and has already changed human society in ways that we are only beginning to comprehend. As two of these commentators write: 'For the first time, human beings can act in mass collaboration, using the kind of collective intelligence once reserved for ants and bees, but now with the human IQ driving the mix. The result is a quantum increase in the world's ability to conceive, create, compute, and connect'.[3] Whether or not this is a good thing depends, of course, on how we use that intelligence.[4] Tapscott argues that the 'companies able to adapt to the new demands of the Net Generation will gain a tremendous source of competitive advantage'. His warning, however, is stark: 'Those that don't will be left on the sidelines, unable to refresh their workforces as the Net Generation flows to other opportunities'. Applying these sentiments to the Jewish community, the message is clear: adapt, or face the consequences.

Jonathan Boyd is Executive Director of JPR/The Institute for Jewish Policy Research. A former Jerusalem Fellow at the Mandel Institute in Jerusalem, he is the editor of 'The Sovereign and the Situated Self: Jewish Identity and Community in the 21st Century' (Profile Books, 2003).

1 Twenge, J. *Generation Me. Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

2 See: Tapscott, D. *Growing Up Digital. The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), and Tapscott, D., and Williams, Anthony D. *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

3 Libert, B., and Spector, J. *We Are Smarter Than Me. How to Unleash the Power of Crowds in Your Business* (New Jersey: Wharton, 2008).

4 See: Shirky, C. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

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