

The New Jewish Scene

There are many new alternatives to the synagogue based Jewish experience that is arising in cities across the United States. There are Jewish organizations that are being formed by the once thought (and in some places still thought) abominable sexual deviants, a.k.a. Homosexuals, and there are communities that have opened their gates to interfaith couples. Young Jews are deeply involved in the process of keeping the Jewish community alive and fresh. We are seeing a pronounced trend in the Jewish world of an affirmation of people coming together to purposefully blend individual needs into supportive structures.

Let's begin our exploration with the phenomenon known as Jews in the Woods, affectionately abbreviated JITW (pronounced Jitwa). As the legend goes, JITW was started by a small group of wonderfully spirited friends, all students in the New England area. Put simply, they wanted a way for "fruity" Jews to have Shabbat together. They wanted communal space where young Jews can explore a reality where denomination was not a boundary between Jews, but a challenge to overcome. Instead of having people leave their beliefs at the door, attendees engage in a lead-up online dialogue where differences in practice are ironed out as best as possible in order to make participants comfortable while simultaneously exploring their edges. An idealistic fantasy, with great success.

In recent years, the biannual gatherings grew to over one-hundred participants. Each Shabbat was a different experience, with different people adopting facilitative roles that they were motivated to choose to fulfill. The gatherings then split into North and South, and then in a final noble act, the group went into hibernation as no new motivation was present to have another retreat. The community still exists in the form of an online listserv. Perhaps only a little spark is needed to rekindle JITW, but it is impossible to know what that would look like. JITW is a great example of young Jews engaging in the process of egalitarian and non-hierarchical community. A more formal organizational approach to the evolution of Jewish community is being carried out by the Forest Foundation, through its Moishe House Project.

If you have not heard yet, the Moishe House project is one of the latest Jewish innovations sweeping the world. Young Jews, ages 22 – 30, are given a monthly stipend, plus partial rent subsidy, to live together and create an alternative space for other young Jews to gather and be Jewish. After only two years, there are already eighteen transdenominational young Jewish homes, and that is only the number on U.S. soil. Brady Gill, Moishe House East Coast supervisor comments, "It's that living room with your favorite movie playing. It's that dinner that you and your friends made when your parents were out of town. The Judaism flows in organically and makes me want to explore it further, rather than run away... [Moishe House] asks its residents with every event, 'What does YOUR Jewish community look like?' And with each answer lives are changed and our generation's Jewish community is strengthened."

As you might expect, giving young professionals money to have fun has created very diverse Jewish programming, from a Rosh Chodesh Av (a day traditionally marking an intensification of grief and sadness) Klezmer concert in Silver Spring, MD, to a

Havdalah and Ice Skating outing in Minsk. (Yes, Minsk!) More than just having fun, young Jews are finding a way to express themselves and their Jewish identity without the restrictions and preconceptions of the past generations. There is an expansion of what doing Jewish can look like. The “create-it-for-yourself” element in the Moishe House project is also a key ingredient in Nehirim, a Jewish spiritual organization that was founded by, run by, and attended by LGBTQ Jews.

The plight of the LGBTQ Jew is over thanks to groups like Nehirim. Nehirim is a Jewish LGBTQ spiritual initiative, which began a few years ago with an annual Shabbat retreat. Now it is in a stage of expansion with four possible retreats on the way in 2008, and more ongoing programs throughout the year, such as Ma’agal, a weekly spirituality group for Jewish Lesbians. When asked what is attractive about Nehirim, Jay Michaelson, Executive Director of Nehirim, states, “I think it's that we're not always asking straight people to let us into their world; we're creating our own. We're a place where people can come together, from a wide diversity of religious and age and gender-identity backgrounds, and build community together.”

Retreats are attended by over one-hundred participants. The gatherings facilitate healing around the past rejection of LGBTQ Jews from the larger Jewish world, and more important for young Queer Jews, retreatants get a chance to celebrate their identity without fear of judgment. As Michaelson says, “[there is no need] to fragment my own identity, gay parts over here, Jewish parts there, spiritual parts somewhere else.” More inclusive Jewish communities, like Nehirim, are creating a more colorful Jewish world, and this inclusivity is reaching out to non-Jews as well.

For the many young Jews out there that hold second or third jobs as Hebrew School teachers, you might have noticed the tendency to have a student or two, perhaps more, in your classes who have parents that are of two different faith traditions. Their presence may be reflective of a slow and subtle change which is allowing for people who once have not been considered non-Jewish to claim membership in the tribe. Kehila Chadasha, of the Metro D.C. area is one such community.

Founded by Jewish Renewal Rabbi David Shneyer, Kehila Chadasha is a progressive nondenominational Jewish community that was formed for the sole purpose of educating the next generation of pluralistic and progressive Jews. The community is open to anyone who identifies as Jewish, be you matrilineal, patrilineal, or neither. As an educator it feels safe to say there is a different question being asked by children growing up in two-faith homes, which is not asked by children of traditional Jewish families. A challenge of our generation will be to provide room for the integration of opposing identities.

Boundary crosser, the English translation of *Ivri*, Hebrew, used to describe the Jewish forefather Abraham, suggests a potential trend in Jewish culture to transcend what has defined us as a people and enter into new territories. Yes, very much like Madonna, a.k.a. Esther, it is a license to recreate ourselves again and again in order to keep our religion alive and in sync with the changing world around us. With the next generation of Jews grasping more control, change is on the rise. Buckle up your safety belt, no telling where this ride might lead.