

The New Jewish Educators?

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The Jim Joseph Foundation's vision is that more young Jews are engaged in ongoing Jewish learning and choosing to live vibrant lives. To that end, the Jim Joseph Foundation (JJF) has decided to concentrate its initial years of grantmaking on bolstering both organizations and educational leadership focused on fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for teens and young adults.

The leadership of the Jim Joseph Foundation believes that the concept of an 'educator' and 'education' itself should be broadly defined. This is particularly important in light of the innovation and changing landscape of the young adult populations growing up Jewish in America today. That said, the Foundation is interested to pose a set of questions to the field to determine the educational quality and impact of some of the more innovative efforts to engage Jewish young adults.

What do we mean when we say Jewish education?

The description of education most closely aligned with the early work of the Jim Joseph Foundation is taken from a JJF-commissioned paper authored by Rabbi David Ellenson:

- For individual Jews, education provides access to the rich resources of their tradition.
- Jewish education is enculturation – connecting individuals to the community's way of life.
- Jewish Education must also be generative – inspiring Jews to create and support vibrant Jewish communities that sustain Jewish life, help repair a broken world and insure the future of the Jewish people.

Ellenson concludes that "...the goals of Jewish education include both the cultivation of individual Jewish identity and the building of strong palpable communities in which Jewish values and aspirations are affirmed and enacted."

In surveying the field of Jewish young adult programming, JJF has encountered a number of talented professionals who consider themselves 'translators' of Jewish culture/community to particular constituencies within the larger Jewish community and 'connectors' who bridge many subcultures of the Jewish community.

The growth and importance of this phenomenon came to the attention of the Foundation framed by a JJF commissioned paper Rachel Levin of the Righteous Persons Foundation authored (available at www.jimjosephfoundation.org). One can generalize (and it is extremely difficult to do that); the efforts of these translators/connectors often result in sporadic, intensive, communal Jewish experiences that allow young adults who do not see their primary or dominant identity as 'Jewish' to understand themselves in a Jewish context or participate in something Jewish that feels aligned with their definition of self.

What are connectors and translators?

The following working definition is offered for the purposes of this discussion:

Connectors: Connectors, by virtue of knowing many people in a diversity of subcultures, bring people together to disseminate new ideas and connections. Jewish connectors link non-engaged constituents into a network of (presumably Jewish) people and Jewish oriented activities/conversations. The network can be institutionally driven or not. Key to the connector and to the network is the focus on a platform and delivery often bringing non-engaged constituents of the community into Jewish engagement through non-traditional non-institutional access points (Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*)

Translators: Translators broaden the definition of what it is to 'be' Jewish or to 'do' Jewish. Using Gladwell's construct, the translator is a 'maven' or someone who brings esoteric expertise and authority to the table. Key to the translators in a Jewish context is an emphasis on integration between the particular (Judaism) and the universal (everything else). Most common, the translator acts as a link between the engaged individual's primary identity (activist, environmentalist, atheist, etc) and Judaism – and typically translators themselves have strong roots and skills in both worlds.

We do not question whether these translators and connectors offer alternative access point to Jewish engagement beyond the more traditional outlets. They clearly do. What remains less clear is whether these innovators are a new brand of 'educator', providing young adults with experiences that are demonstrably educative.

Who are these connectors and translators in the Jewish world??

As Generation X,Y and the Millennials move into positions of Jewish leadership, the phenomenon of 'translators' and 'connectors' is becoming more common. Described in a recent report by Steve Cohen and Ari Kelman entitled "*The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating and Organizing Their Own Jewish Lives,*" the last five years has produced a the wave of new Jewish endeavors among young adults resulting in "...self-confident, de-institutional, culturally based organizing from record labels to new forms of synagogue, using festivals, books and films to build a vibrant Jewish life, created by and for young Jews examining identity and community."

This new Jewish 'organizing' is led by connectors and translators. Often these people or institutions come from outside the Jewish communal infrastructure, and they stay outside. Sometimes these people are insiders. For this Foundation, the more exciting efforts combine both perspectives, giving connectors and translators a platform for Jewish engagement that is connected but unbounded. Two examples of known 'platforms' that support translators and connectors are:

Joshua Venture: Bringing Translators into the Jewish Conversation

Joshua Venture was a fellowship program that trained and supported emerging Jewish social entrepreneurs. Sixteen young entrepreneurs in two cohorts received seed funding, organizational and professional support, and developed 'communities of practice' over two years as Joshua Venture Fellows. The organization went into stand-by mode after discovering a rolling budget deficit. (The organization is recently trying to revive its fellowship program.) For purposes of this discussion, Joshua Venture was a platform that used seed capital and professional development to bring translators into the Jewish conversation. Fellows include:

- **Aaron Bisman's JDUB Records** is a record and event production company that builds community through new and innovative Jewish music and cross-cultural musical dialogue and has launched phenoms Matisyahu and Balkan Beat Box. This December, JDUB records will spearhead the world-wide event for birthright alumni.
- **Idit Klein's Keshet** develops leadership among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews. Keshet released the movie "Heneni" tracing one young woman's story of coming out in a Jewish High School. This movie has been used widely throughout Jewish schools in the United States.
- **Sam Ball's The New Jewish Filmmaking Project** uses filmmaking by Jewish teens from public schools in the Bay Area, many of whom come from immigrant and /or mixed ethnic backgrounds, to explore cultural diversity in the Jewish community.

Reboot: Bringing Connectors into the Jewish Conversation.

In their own words, Reboot is an 'innovation network' dedicated to helping a new generation explore and redefine Jewish identity, community and meaning. Reboot utilizes a 'tipping point' model, creating mechanisms for the most creative; connected, culturally influential young Jews to push their generation to join the Jewish conversation about identity and community on their own terms.

The core of Reboot's network is comprised of some of the nation's most creative Jewish opinion leaders in their 20's to early 40's who were not formerly active in the Jewish community. Reboot serves both as a social network and an incubator of new Jewish products. It is structured to invest in influential artists, activists and academics. It is based on the established theory in sociology that ideas and innovation spread most contagiously and quickly when they first engage people who operate as the influential hubs of powerful personal networks. Some Reboot projects include:

- **Heaping Portions:** After attending the 2005 Reboot Summer, *Six Feet Under* writer and producer Jill Soloway decided to do a take-off on her well known LA based variety show called *Sit n Spin*. This show called *Heaping Portions* is a show that revolves around the Torah portion of that week and engages the audience in a Shabbat celebration. Pilot editions of the show have had audiences of over 100 people as well as impressive attention from the press.
- **Sons of Sakhnin United.** During discussions at the 2004 Reboot Summit, Rebooter Michael Cohen, a former music industry executive, wondered out loud about the state of Arab-Israeli citizens in Israel. Six weeks later, he and another Rebooter, documentary-filmmaker Chris Browne, began a three year effort to produce a film documenting the rise of the Israeli-Arab soccer team in Israel. This

film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and has been accepted into the 2007 Jerusalem Film Festival.

Obviously, connectors and translators exist outside of the organizational framing both Reboot and Joshua Venture provide and not all connectors/translators lead new organizations. Further, connectors and translators are found across the spectrum in terms of issues they address (culture, social justice, service, philanthropy, etc.) Examples include Hazon, an organization led by the dynamic Nigel Savage, which uses bike rides and a commitment to sustainable agriculture to drive conversations about the connection between environmentalism and Judaism and Daniel Sokatch, inarguably a connector, who has led the Progressive Jewish Alliance for the past 6 years.

The discussion that follows often uses the terms ‘connector’ and ‘translator’ together. This is intended for brevity’s sake and should not suggest uniformity in what each brings to the table.

Who are the targets of translators and connectors?

Very generally, Jewish individuals who feel themselves not institutionally connected are potential targets. JJF is largely concerned with the young adult portion of this population who, as the stereotype dictates, may leave the Jewish organizational web post bar/bat mitzvah and return only after the birth of their first child, if at all.

In recent years, there has been much written about the social world of those belonging to the Generations X, Y and the Millennials. The following is an attempt to summarize some of the trends that both encourage and perhaps explain the growing presence and importance of connectors and translators.

- ***Young Jews experience an extended adolescence and delay marriage.*** As Jeffrey Solomon, President of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, described for the JJF board, this has a profound impact on their notion of community and organizational affiliations. According to *Urban Tribes* author, “...young people who live and work together in various combinations, form regular rituals, and provide the support of an extended family, irrespective of religious background, rather than settle down into traditional families....these tight knit groups of friends have replaced organizational and married life.”
- ***Being Jewish is a choice and one of many.*** Pollster Anna Greenberg found that for Generation Y, “...being Jewish is not their sole identity. Today’s young Jews have multiple identities shaped by many factors, including intermarriage in their families, diverse social networks, and dynamic boundaries around geography and other identity characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation. Being Jewish is part of a larger identity mosaic for today’s Jews.”
- ***They don’t know their Jewish alphabet.*** Greenberg reports that Generation Y Jews think nostalgically about their synagogue or JCC experiences but that “institutional Jewish life appears virtually irrelevant” to them currently. The Kelman/Cohen study goes one step further pointing to the new organizations as motivated by a “strong sense of deficiency in the then-current possibilities for combinations of prayer, culture, discussion music or social action.”

- **Media permeates everything they do.** As Rachel Levin from the Righteous Persons Foundation describes; “Today’s young people live in a world full of media...87% of those between the ages of 12 and 17 are online with Internet (excluding email) surpassing TV, talking on the phone and reading. What are they doing while they are “plugged” in? Increasingly they are contributing to what Wired magazine has called the “Age of Peer Production”...100 Million web pages for MySpace; 40 million bloggers (13% of online youth now publish their own blog)...” It is clear that the Jewish educational frameworks are playing catch-up to the pervasive presence and impact of new media in the lives of young people today
- **They are connected loosely to people, not to community.** From the Greenberg study: “They (young adults) find it difficult to talk about what it means to belong to a community, and when asked, they instead refer to the neighborhoods where they grew up, the friendship circles they have at school, or the town where they work.”

As a result of what Brandeis Professor Sherry Israel calls the ‘organizational disconnect,’ most Jewish organizations are not structured to capture the sustained interest or loyalty of today’s young adults. Israel asserts:

The dominant public organization of American Jewish life was shaped in earlier eras when Jewish belonging was a given, and they were formed to deal with the issues of the day, which were not those of personal meaning and relevance but relief and rescue, social service, and mediation between the Jewish minority subculture and the majority Christian American culture. There is, therefore, a mismatch between the needs and perceptions of most Jews and the basic assumptions of programs of most of the communally-based American Jewish organizations

The logical conclusion that many have drawn is that pockets of the Jewish organizational landscape need to be reengineered to fit the realities and predilections of today’s young Jews. Translating Jewish values cross subcultures, connecting individuals to community and sustained focus on personal meaning coupled with a delivery system that favors “engagement that is fluid and episodic, inclusive, non-coercive, engaging, and social focused” (Cohen and Kelman) seems to be the dominant conclusion in the literature. This organizational redesign is being led by individuals we’ve designated as connectors and translators. It seems clear that their work is essential to the accessibility of the Jewish community to today’s young adults.

Are translators/connectors Jewish Educators? Is what they are doing educative?

The question remains whether or not the work of the translators/connectors has educational value. Does handing over the reins to these connector/translators compromise or enrich the substantive transmission of Jewish values and teachings?

To return to our working definition, the goal of education is to provide access, enculturation and renewal. It is clear that the efforts of the translators/connectors do provide improved access to the Jewish tradition, most often using social networks and/or alternative and more inclusive definitions as the proverbial carrot. And, most would

agree that the new 'organizing' is, by definition, generative -- constituting a reshaping and reinterpretation of Jewish community and thinking. At their very core, connectors/translators see themselves as 'reinventing' Jewish community.

The outcomes of the efforts of translators in particular do bring individuals into the communities' way of life, but with a major caveat. As Kelman and Cohen describe, "...the communities they lead abide by some traditional or conventional norms that they feel no need to impart to, let alone impose upon those sharing in the experiences they stage. They could be saying, "Here and now, we follow Jewish law, but what you do afterwards really is your business." In other words, the connection to community and the observance of tradition comes with no strings attached. It is intensive; it is substantive; but it is (perhaps) temporary.

Given the interactions between the translators/connectors and their constituency are open-ended and that outcomes, by definition, are undefined, it is too soon to make any strong claims that translators and connectors are the new Jewish educators. Add to this a stated ambiguity and discomfort with the term. As Eli Raber of BayTribe describes; "Accepting any label of authority needs to be done so carefully. ... It doesn't mean we are not educators, it just means we ...do not want to appear different and/or separate from the communities we lead. It is imperative for a leader in this generation to be from and to be within the population [the leader serves]."

Ultimately, Raber's assertion notwithstanding, this may not change the fact that what translators do is, in fact, educative. Brandeis University President Jehuda Reinharz states that:

Educative experiences have two dimensions, one present oriented and one future oriented. Educative experiences connect with the learner's current needs, interests and purposes in authentic and meaningful ways, and lay the basis for continued learning by raising new questions, enlarging possibilities, developing new insights and fostering the skills and dispositions needed for future learning.

The efforts of the translator/connector dial very directly into the current needs and interests of young Jewish adults. Their contributions are viral, virtual, customizable and social all of which we are told again and again are key to connecting with young Jews. Connecting per se is more than just the delivery and deliverer of content. It is the content itself. As Kelman and Cohen describe, it would be too easy to point to the efforts of organizations like JDUB and Reboot as marketing new Jewish products and events. But that is not how the translators/connectors view their output. As Aaron Bisman of JDUB described in the Kelman/Cohen report:

These are all products that work together toward Jewish identity. If you give people something that they take home, yes, you don't control in the same way what they're going to do with it. But I don't care what they're going to do with it. This is not kiruv in that sense of making or bringing people into Judaism and religion. I could care less. What I do care about is that people give a damn about their Judaism and their relationship to it, and I don't care to control that at all.

The connector/translator, the network and the Jewish 'products' work together to offer an opportunity for personal Jewish exploration, accumulation of knowledge and access into community. Arguably, this constitutes educative experience.

Whether this highly individualized, self-selective participation in what is a fluid social network of subcultures of the Jewish community (culture, service, politics, birthright, etc.) lays the foundation for *future* learning and involvement is still an open question. What is the long-term impact on a young adult who participates in multiple Jewish networks led by the translators and connectors of their generation? Does engaging in a fluid community, experiencing the "Jewish clock" sporadically, and bumping into like-minded Jews dispose one to seek out Jewish learning and engagement in the future? Is the translator/connector network a bridge for young adults to help them navigate back into the traditional Jewish organizational net? Or, will this redefine what it is to engage Jewishly over a lifetime going forward?

To date, there is no literature to support that the work of this new phenomenon has long term impact on the lives of participants. Cohen and Kelman reach the conclusion that while it is too soon to know, the activity of translators/connectors has served to "enrich the ecology of contemporary Jewish life" and, we would say at JJF, has already changed the conversation within traditional education infrastructures.

How would JJF fund the growth of this phenomenon?

Steve M. Cohen describes youth in his paper "A Tale of Two Jewries" that the layering of educational experiences increases future Jewish engagement and lowers rates of intermarriage i.e. a youth who goes to day school, to camp and to youth group is more likely to engage Jewishly as an adult than a kid who just went to camp. Cohen explains the impact of layering as "...the formation and strengthening of Jewish social networks, which provide young Jews with ties and friendships to other Jews. In turn, this process reinforces Jewish norms...and eventual contact, recruitment and affiliation with Jewish institutions."

A potential funding strategy is to apply the concept of 'layering' to the work of translators/connectors. Using this tactic, the Foundation would attempt to grow both the number of translators/connectors in the Jewish sphere, the scale of their work and the degree of their interaction with the 'traditional' Jewish world. More specifically, with the goal to increase the numbers of young Jews touched by connectors/translators, JJF could:

- Fund the platforms and incubators that aim to increase the number of connectors/translators (Joshua Venture, Reboot, Jewish Professional Coop and Bikkurim)
- Grow organizations led by translators/connectors to capacity allowing the greater dissemination of networks and 'product'.
- Convene conversations between networks of translators and connectors and 'traditional' Jewish venues.

For the Jim Joseph Foundation, a decision to support the growth of this phenomenon is likely to rest on the present assessment that the interaction between translators/connectors and their young adult constituency is rich enough in educational content to warrant support. Longer term, the Foundation will need to investigate the impact of this phenomenon on the lives of young Jews to determine whether this warrants larger-scale support. We would look to our partners for their assessment and their partnership as part of this process.

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