



# The Peoplehood Papers **26**

March 2020 | Adar 5780

**Building the Jewish People  
One Community at a Time**



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# **Building the Jewish People – One Community at a Time**

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## From the Editor

Nearly two decades ago, I had an exchange of ideas with Robert Putnam the author of **Bowling Alone** (Putnam, 2,000), most famous for introducing the concept of **social capital** to the social science and communal world. I challenged Putnam, who developed the concept through the study of Italian history, and more specifically a comparison between Northern and Southern Italy, that the ultimate story of community and social capital was written by the Jews. I even went as far as to suggest exploring the concept of **Peoplehood capital** as an expansion of the concept to mega-communities. Putnam agreed that the above deserves further research and exploration.

The Jewish people is definitely the people of the community. The communal structure sustained it throughout its history and in it developed its unique collective approach – its social DNA. This approach embraced a holistic sense of responsibility for both the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the community's members, and for the community itself. One can easily paraphrase what we say about Shabbat to the community: More than the Jews protected the community – the community protected the Jews.

It is important to understand that the Jewish people is a bottom up social creation. Being the core unit of the Jewish social fabric, the approach to community also framed the core values of Jewish Peoplehood. The notion of Kol Israel Arievim Ze Baze, for example, is a case in point. That relationship between the global people and its communal components highlights the communities' role in re-invigorating, re-energizing and revitalizing the overall collective. By addressing both the challenges and needs of Jews today, communal innovation advances the overall Jewish cause. Be it as a social lab or through communal modeling, intentional communities lead the way to the Jewish future.

This issue of the **Peoplehood Papers** focuses on current developments in the Jewish communal landscape. We wanted to explore new expressions of Jewish communal life and what Jewish communal innovation looks like. To explore the current challenge of people building from the bottom up.

Some key questions we tried to address were:

- What can Jewish tradition and wisdom teach us about sustainable communal living?
- How can community offer a response to the current global epidemic of loneliness, and enable the growth of meaningful human relations?

- What challenges can communal innovation address, and how?
- What kind of communal models are more likely to succeed in the 21st century?
- What are some of the best practices for community building we have?
- What is our vision for Jewish communal living in the 21st century?
- How can a Jewish communal renaissance revitalize the Jewish people and Jewish Peoplehood?

By no means does this publication assume to cover fully the emerging field of Jewish communal innovation. Our aim was to highlight some initiatives in order to shed some light on this important field and inspire a conversation on Jewish communal innovation in the context of the challenges the Jewish people is facing today. What all contributors to this conversation share is a belief that the process of people building goes through communal innovation.

We want to thank our partners in this publication. Hakhel: The Jewish Intentional Communities Incubator in the Diaspora, and the Jewish Emergent Network, and all our articles contributors.

We welcome your thoughts and responses at [info@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:info@jpeoplehood.org)

**Dr. Shlomi Ravid** is the executive director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education and the founding editor and publisher of the Peoplehood Papers. His doctoral dissertation focused on the changing of the Kibbutz. He is a member of Kibbutz Gilil-Yam.

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# The Essential Nature of Spiritual Community

**Nate DeGroot**

**It will be our ability to see all of humanity, in addition to the natural and more than human world, as members of one precious community of purpose that will allow us to live in a world that reflects that truth back.**

In the wilderness of Sinai, God tells the Israelite people to build a *mikdash*, a sacred space, so that God can dwell amongst them (Exodus 25.8). But what should that sacred space look like? According to the medieval commentator, Rashi, anytime a sacred space is built, it should be constructed according to the original tabernacle's blueprint - "*ta'asu l'dorot*/you shall make it [like this] forever (Rashi, Exodus 25.9)." However, when Solomon later built his Temple, it had an entirely different design. How can this be?

The 18th century Hasidic commentator, the Kedushat Levi, offers a solution: Instead of reading "*l'dorot*" as "forever," we should read Rashi's instruction as "in every generation." That is, it is up to each generation - *l'dorot* - to build their version of sacred space and spiritual community according to their particular prophecy and context.

For three years I worked at IKAR in Los Angeles, as Rabbinic Intern and then as the inaugural Jewish Emergent Network Rabbinic Fellow. During this time, I was given the privilege and task of building up IKAR's young adult community, TRIBE. Steeped in the values and practices of the Jewish Emergent Network and inspired by the Kedushat Levi - the following values became key components of what worked well in trying to build the next generation of IKAR leaders.

**Listening and relationships:** To begin the process of building TRIBE, it was critical to understand what people wanted, so we could help them create a community that reflected their desires. It was also paramount that we invest in personal relationships with the people we were trying to build with. People join, and much more importantly,

stick with community long-term, because they care about people and people care about them.

**Spiritual depth:** When we listened to what folks wanted, we heard repeatedly that people were looking for more than “just social.” There are plenty of places where young adults can socialize. There are far too few places where they can be nourished spiritually, stretched intellectually, and feel honored as living, complex beings in a complex world. Judaism is a multi-thousand-year-old tradition with deep roots and wellsprings of wisdom that has nourished our people across time and space. Instead of watering down our tradition or devaluing the substance for the false assumptions of lower barriers to entry, what our people wanted was *higher* stakes and *loftier* aspirations. The goal was not just a social community, but, like IKAR, a spiritual community genuinely and seriously rooted in Jewish wisdom, and in service of the transformation of self and world.

**Co-creation:** How do we build transformative community? Together. When we initially put out an invitation to be part of TRIBE Builders - the group of lay-leaders that would together build the community that we wanted to be part of - seven people showed up. Two years later, we had 49 lay-leaders on teams and in leadership positions. Our people wanted to participate in creating the community they wanted to be part of and it was their incredible dedication that kept TRIBE growing and thriving.

**Inclusivity:** Within TRIBE, we were trying to live out the values of IKAR and the Jewish Emergent Network as a whole, by embodying the world we wished to see. A world in which every person is treated with infinite dignity, and those who have been heard least and last lead the way forward. It was vital to TRIBE Builders that we actively worked to uplift women, queer folk, Jews of Color, Jews by Choice, aspiring Jews, and those from other marginalized groups within the Jewish community.

With these values at the fore, our numbers and impact continued to increase, with hundreds consistently connecting to TRIBE, to IKAR, and to the world of the Jewish Emergent Network.

At the conclusion of my Fellowship in 2018, I moved to Detroit, Michigan, where I joined Hazon, the Jewish lab for sustainability. Hazon recognizes that we are in the midst of a global climate crisis and we believe that Jewish tradition compels us to respond. At our Michigan-based office, we seek to help the metro Detroit Jewish community reconnect with its own earth-based Jewish roots, while reinvesting in its historic relationship with the city of Detroit through the city’s transformative, Black and Native-led food and environmental justice work. Now, working and living at the intersection of Judaism

and climate, the values and practices listed above continue to hold true, with one key difference.

At IKAR I used to say that authentic, spiritual community was subversive. That there are so many forces that are trying to keep us apart as community - a culture of independence, consumption, competition, and superficiality to name a few - that real, honest, vulnerable community is a countercultural act that brings vitality and joy to those who participate in it.

While building that kind of community remains subversive, the difference I see now is that building that kind of community is also essential. As the realities of our climate crisis continue to reveal themselves, and as the adaptation that will be required begins to set in, what is becoming increasingly clear is that our long-range resilience must be rooted in relationship. That the faith and ingenuity required to reconstruct an emerging society in real time, will inevitably correspond with our ability and willingness to collaborate, alongside our visionary commitment to connection. In the past, spiritual community might have been considered a luxury, an additive. But today, it seems as though the sustainability and viability of this generation's tabernacle - our planet earth - will depend on our ability to come together, as Jews, firmly rooted in our own faith tradition, and as humans, full participants in our holistic and enmeshed world. **It will be our ability to see all of humanity, in addition to the natural and more than human world, as members of one precious community of purpose that will allow us to live in a world that reflects that truth back.**

**Rabbi Nate DeGroot** is the Associate Director, Spiritual & Program Director at Hazon Detroit. Ordained from Hebrew College in 2016, he has previously served as the inaugural Jewish Emergent Network Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR in Los Angeles and founded Mikdash, a grassroots cooperative Jewish community in Portland, OR.



## A Call for Creative Jewish Community

Deborah Fishman Shelby

**At a minimum, community-building will reduce passivity, moving us closer toward the ideal of Our Creator.**

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. Yes, there is another book that starts in this fashion, and it is our Torah. The implications of God setting the example as Creator become apparent when God creates the human in God's own image. In other words, humans are not meant to be passive consumers of the bounty of Earth, but creators in their own right as well.

If humans are by design Godlike and creators, one useful concept from which we can learn is *tzimtzum*, or contraction -- a Kabbalistic process in which God contracted Godself in order to make room available for the creation of the world. What would happen if humans could similarly make space for others?

In *Likutei Moharan*, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov brilliantly compared *tzimtzum* to another concept, *makhloket*, or conflict/debate, the process the Talmud uses in which disagreements between the rabbis uncover the path toward the ultimate truth. Rebbe Nachman writes, "Know this: that *makhloket* is analogous to the creation of the world, which consisted of creating an empty space, as we have shown. For were it not so, everything would be infinitely divine [*ein sof*], and there would be no space left for the world... So too is the case with disagreement, for if all the scholars were united, there would be no creation of the world. It is only when there is disagreement between them... a space is created between them which is analogous to the empty space and the contraction... And all the arguments they each use are only in order to allow the world to be created by them... just as [God] created the heaven and the earth with words!"

*Makhloket* is critically important for the Jewish future. It requires engagement in the place of passivity. It requires passion and the commitment to take a stance, provide support and hold fast to it. It requires one's full self, most especially one's wit. Yet even as all these are required, what is most remarkable about the Jewish process of *makhloket*

is that it is not about winning over one's opponent in the debate. Rather, it's about using disagreements as a strategy for generating creativity. It's the process of engagement with others that leads to the discovery and production of new ideas.

Perhaps this elucidation of *makloket* resonates with you as it helps illuminate why argument is a quintessentially Jewish pastime! More to the point, it also makes clear the importance of living in community. Some may view the inevitable conflicts and disagreements that arise in communities as the drawbacks of this style of life. The contrary can be seen in the community in which its leaders can properly practice *tzimtzum* in order to make way for, develop and guide the *makhloket* with others. The opportunity to hear new perspectives, piece them together, and in so doing together discover new outcomes, can be the most exciting part of community life.

Far too many people see themselves as not educated or equipped to "do Judaism" on their own terms, and instead feel forced to passively consume Judaism. At the same time, passively consuming Judaism is not fully appealing or satisfying to many as it doesn't take into account who they are as complete people with talents, questions and complex thoughts. So they may shun Jewish opportunities entirely--perhaps until there are children available for religious instruction and direction. Sometimes with the best of intentions of focusing on making Judaism appealing for children, what gets ignored is the presence of the adults in the room and the opportunity that may be present to engage on their level. This dynamic lends itself to the creation of a kind of "pediatric Judaism" that is not only passive, but also stripped of the higher order thinking of which adults are capable.

Likewise, when it comes to creativity and the arts, there is a popular assumption that it must be passively consumed. All too frequently one hears, "I'm not artistic" or, "I'm not creative." While it seems perfectly acceptable to relegate art projects to the realm of children's play, adults may balk at engaging in anything that even suggests a connection to "arts and crafts." Actually, advances in technology in the modern era have led to many examples of adults exercising their creativity on their own terms (e.g., the French New Wave of arts and philosophy, the DIY movement, urban homesteading, etc.). Developments such as these have proved to be empowering; to alleviate and constructively redirect anxiety; to generate self-confidence; and to create products that are useful, meaningful, and can be exhibited with pride.

The community I am building, FED, uses hands-on creativity and the arts--including food, music, dance, talks, and theater--to live out Jewish values such as hospitality, openness, inclusivity, dialogue, and, yes, debate. Some of the feedback I receive from community members is that they value the "work-in-progress" aspect of it--literally there are artists

who come to workshop their projects, but also FED itself is constantly changing and developing through the loop of experimentation, feedback and moving forward. I don't believe this would be possible without making the space for new voices that are diverse--in FED's case, not only from different backgrounds, but also multigenerational--and placing them in dialogue with one another.

It is my hope that the process of community-building I have outlined--starting with *tzimtzum* to make room for *makloket*--will produce the creativity we need to find our way toward new solutions that the world has never before seen. These may concern Jewish engagement, general societal issues, and the very issues of how we live and grow community life. **At a minimum, community-building will reduce passivity, moving us closer toward the ideal of Our Creator.**

**Deborah Fishman Shelby** founded FED, an inclusive Jewish community based in NYC which feeds you through delicious food, inspirational talks and art, and the company and creative energy of others you find there. FED is part of the network of Hakhel: The Jewish Intentional Communities Incubator, for which Deborah also serves as an Advisor to support other communities and leads Hakhel's Arts & Culture Subnetwork.



## Reconnecting to Eastern Diasporic Heritage – A Gateway to Future Community Building

**Tamar Yael Gibli**

**This celebration of Eastern heritage opens a gate to an inclusive construction of a Jewish communal future.**

The establishment of the state of Israel coincided with what has been referred to as the Modern Jewish exodus from Muslim lands, which led to the arrival of approx. 600,000 Jews from Muslim countries to Israel. This was considered part of the Zionist ideology of “the ingathering of exiles”. While a sense of peoplehood was nurtured, Khazoom (2008) showcases how within this Zionist aspiration, many diasporic cultures were denied and rejected, with the aim of making the collective-national element the most important component in people’s identity. Since Institutional efforts to build a unified Jewish society<sup>1</sup>, were based mainly on Western culture, European Zionism and Ashkenazi Jewish customs, hundreds of thousands of Jews from Muslim and Arab countries, were therefore challenged with the hardships of assimilation, and social discrimination.

Today Israel is witnessing a cultural revival of these diasporic cultures. A social foundation is being built, by young Israelis - third generation to Jews from North Africa and the Middle East - invested in reinvigorating their family heritage. As they dismantle oppressive dichotomous categories, they pave the way for an inclusive polyethnic society. This cultural renaissance includes the establishment of countless new programs where social activists are invested in retrieving and passing on cultural treasures from Eastern Jewish communities. **This celebration of Eastern<sup>2</sup> heritage opens a gate to an inclusive construction of a Jewish communal future.**

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1 This discussion is limited to Jews in Israel. The important context of Arabs in Israel, as well as world Jewry, are connected in many ways but remain beyond the scope of this paper.

2 *Mizrahim* is the Hebrew word for ‘easterners’, while the term has different meanings, in the Israeli context, it refers to the collective social category which includes all Jews whose families originate from Muslim countries.

One such program - "*Elule Min HaMizrach*" (Elul from the east),<sup>3</sup> offers a cultural, intellectual and spiritual Jewish learning experience, bringing forth forgotten Jewish treasures. During a 5-week intensive program for young adults from across the Israeli Jewish spectrum, a new Israeli-Jewish language is cultivated. Deeply rooted between the East and West, progressiveness and traditionalism the program combines educational, spiritual and cultural learning, alongside social responsibility and action-based work. Rooting Israeli society within the context of the Middle East, such programs enable young Israelis to reconnect to their Jewish identity, which I believe is the basis not only for community building, but for building bridges to other communities as well.

The program endorses an intimate, family-like environment that incorporates music and *Piyyutim* (Jewish liturgical poems), celebrates holidays and learns about the Jewish calendar and traditions in the spirit of Eastern cultures. To better understand these currents in Israeli Jewish life, quotes from thought pieces and poems, written by alumni are presented below.<sup>4</sup> One alumnus shared a particularly illuminating account of the program's impact:

*"When our grandparents came to Israel- our parents were embarrassed to speak their exilic language, they listened to the music of the Arab "enemies", ate their food and shared their customs. Our parents were requested to be "Israelis"... hiding any reminder of their connection to the Arab enemies, so an entire culture was erased and blurred. The cultural awaking that I am part of, is now returning and reviving those roots. Many programs are springing up like mushrooms after the rain ...This is not the story of the second or third generation of immigrants from Arab and Eastern countries, this is a cultural package and an outline for identities of an entire generation, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim.... I am proud to be part of the approach that focuses on the cultural treasures that Eastern Judaism has to offer, an approach invested in creating content that connects and brings together Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Westerners and Easterners, all of Israel. (p.52)"<sup>5</sup>*

While exploring such personal experiences and inner thoughts, certain dominant themes emerge: a revival of their grandparents' heritage, as a path to their **present Jewish identity**. A feeling of **belonging and community**, enabling them to have hope for an

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3 *Elule Min HaMizrach* is part of the organization *Kulna*, established in Yeruham in 2015.

4 This collection was published and produced by the program organizers, and I have translated the quotes presented.

5 The Writer, Ofir Shamaï, is one of the programs' alumni, who is also a founding partner of "*Yeshiva Mizrahit*" in Jerusalem, which was established by program alumni who wished to continue after the program ended.

**inclusive pluralistic-Jewish communal future.** Below are several quotes from participant accounts that exemplify these themes:

*"My longing has met the East. returning me to ancient roots, and my grandfather's home..." (p. 6). "Remembering where I came from... they hold the roots of who we are..." (p. 14). "I returned to my mother's home... I was searching for a home, community, a sense of belonging... this was the only program that didn't force me to "adapt", but where I needed to return to myself..." (p. 12). "We listened to oriental tunes that got lost along with many other unique traditions, that weren't able to grow roots during the Israeli "Melting pot" period... (p. 51). "... A tune that offers something else for Israeli society- tradition, community, harmony. .... We noticed a huge hunger for this voice... to return to their grandparents' home. and speak their language. It's a product of intergenerational reaction..." "Traditionalism as an alternative zone of plurality... aims to unite rather than divide (p.66)". "When my consciousness matured... my land betrayed me... changing my thoughts. mixing homeland and Exile." (p.40)*

As evident from both Alumni descriptions and the self-proclaimed goals of the program, this is a bottom up movement which is reconstructing a new Jewish communal landscape. While their ancestral Jewish communities were dismantled, such programs are restoring Eastern heritages and providing a gateway of inclusivity and constructive growth that acknowledges, respects and celebrates diversity.

To conclude, I have brought forth a short account of 'Elul Min Hamizrach' as an example of a broader cultural phenomenon which is blooming now in Israel. As more and more artists and organizations embrace their heritage, they are co-building a foundation for sustainable communal living, stressing the importance of including treasures from both the East and the West in the Jewish Mosaic. Furthermore, this Jewish renaissance can contribute to the rehabilitation and reframing of Jewish Homeland-Diaspora discourse, in order to revitalize Jewish peoplehood. By reclaiming their own diasporic traditions, they are setting the way for others to do the same. Finally, such developments, can contribute to Jewish renewal, creating more diversity and opportunity to connect and learn through such inclusive collective approaches. Returning to our diasporic roots, rather than denying them, could potentially build bridges within the Jewish world and beyond.

**Tamar Gibli is a PhD student, and a fellow at the research hub 'Mabatim', at the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the study of Israel and Zionism, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Her research focuses on the Jewish American Press coverage of the Israeli Mizrahi protest.**



# Millennials Are no Different – the World Is Why We Need New Communities

Aharon Ariel Lavi

**an intentional community can serve as a framework for both individual growth and moral behavior, as well as give people the opportunity to work collaboratively to make the world a better place. To become the better version of themselves.**

A Hasidic tale tells of a Rebbe in a Russian village who used to take a dip in the river every morning. One day, the new local policeman saw the Rebbe diving into the frozen river. He ran to the strange old man, shouting, “Who are you? Where do you come from? And where are you going?” The old Rebbe smiled gently and asked the policeman: “How much do they pay you?” “Ten Kufeykas a day”, answered the baffled young man. “I’ll tell you what”, said the Rebbe, “I’ll pay you twenty if you come every morning and ask me who I am, where do I come from and where I am going to”.

Human beings are dynamic and ever evolving creatures, and just like our muscle system becomes atrophied if it is not stimulated enough, so does our moral and intellectual system. Hence, it is crucial we get asked those questions constantly. Today we can get a mobile app to remind us, but here I would like to argue that communities, and more specifically intentional communities, are the optimal environment for becoming *the better version of ourselves*.

These last few words may ring a bell with many readers as a common catch phrase among what has been termed “Millennials”, meaning people born after 1982. Many see us as a challenge to be addressed, especially in the Jewish context which is worried – and rightly so – of diminishing affiliation. That catch phrase may even serve as an explanation: See? All millennials care about is themselves.

As one of the oldest Millennials alive (born in December 1982) I would like to offer another way of reading it. Millennials, like any other generation, are made of the exact same building blocks and have the exact same needs. Human physiology and psyche do

not change over a short time (i. e. eons). What does change is the environment. Like everybody who preceded us we have the need for food and shelter, and the problem with Millennials begins where this problem ends. Indeed, poverty still exists and making a living always seems tough, but relatively, especially in the Jewish context, Millennials are expected to possess more resources than all previous generations.

So, what's next on the list? After satisfying their basic needs, people are craving a sense of belonging, identity and meaning. The aspiration to become a better version of one's self comes from there, not from egocentric selfishness. In fact, data shows that almost half Millennials would move to less paying jobs if they offer a better sense of meaning and serve a greater purpose than themselves. One can only wonder what would such a poll show in our parents' generation? But again, it's not people who changed but rather the circumstances, and today even a relatively low paying non-profit job enables higher quality of life than corporate jobs of the past.

However, the unprecedented economic-technological leapfrog has its side-effects. We all know of the environmental and immigration crises, but there's another one: loneliness. According to a recently published Harvard research, loneliness is already an epidemic, riskier to health than physical inactivity, and almost as risky as smoking. The UK government even established a new Ministry to deal with loneliness. And no, social media doesn't alleviate loneliness. Research shows it actually increases it. Like we still don't have a better solution to hunger than food, we still don't have a better solution to loneliness than families and communities. What we do have is new technologies to produce those.

So, one would ask, why don't Millennials just join one of the established Jewish communities out there and feed two birds with one grain? Less loneliness and more Jewish identity. The more nuanced answer is: (a) Millennials are looking for intimate and horizontal structures, rather than mega-communities that make you feel even more lonely; (b) Jewish Millennials see themselves as privileged, hence responsible for everybody (how do you say *Tikkun Olam* in Hebrew?), and do not find themselves in communities designed originally to protect a weak minority; and (c) the entire Jewish ecosystem was geared to support Jewish identity until people finish school, assuming they will get married soon after and circle back to the community. However, circumstances have changed: the gap between college and settling down is no longer 2-3 years, not even 10, sometimes not even 15. Communities are still the solution, we just need a new version more relevant more Millennials.

One idea that has been tested successfully in Israel and other countries, rather lately, is Intentional Communities. An Intentional Community is a small and non-hierarchical group

of people who have consciously decided to live together spatially and temporally around a shared purpose. In this sense, **an intentional community can serve as a framework for both individual growth and moral behavior, as well as give people the opportunity to work collaboratively to make the world a better place. To become the better version of themselves.**

In an Intentional community, togetherness is not a mere byproduct of something else, nor is it simply a means to other ends, but it is an intention in and of itself, what sociologists call a “primary group”. At the very same time, the group gathers for a purpose larger than itself, what sociologists call a “secondary group”. It seems fuzzy, I know, but that is not because Millennials are fuzzier human being than their predecessors. We have the same genes and underneath our neocortex we have the same lizard brain. The world has become fuzzier and harder to make sense of, and those who will succeed in attracting Millennials, the leaders of the new world, are those who will offer – no, sorry – create with them the appropriate complex response.

**Rabbi Aharon Ariel Lavi** is a social entrepreneur who believes that Judaism can inform all walks of life. He is Co-founder of MAKOM: the Israeli umbrella organization of intentional communities, and of Hazon’s Hakhel Jewish Intentional Communities Incubator



# Two Thousand Years of Jewish Intentional Community Building

**Anton Marks**

**... we can challenge this transience and choose to live intentionally with one another, and create something beautiful**

It's worth repeating the familiar refrain – it's impossible to be a Jew alone. Try celebrating a festival, eating Jewish foods, learning Jewish texts, being an activist or singing on your own. Then do it with others. The respective experiences are completely incomparable. The meeting and the subsequent conversation is what gives Judaism meaning. Without it, we lose the essence of who we are as a people.

Just like those off-the-grid communities, where people run off into the forest to create the 'perfect' life', and only succeed in being an irrelevance to the rest of society, Judaism makes little sense if it isn't connected with others. From the directive of praying together in a minyan, to the centrality of the synagogue itself as a communal house of prayer, religious Judaism has its own set of inbuilt structures promoting the coming together of Jews in community.

Jewish activism and social justice work are also structured in frameworks, networks, movements and organizations. Look at the Social Justice Roundtable, an umbrella of 64 organizations pursuing social justice from a Jewish perspective in the USA. Social justice – it's right there in the name. It's not about justice for an individual, it's about justice for society, for the community – community is what it means to be Jewish. It's what it means to be human.

It's no surprise therefore, to find intentional community dotting the Jewish peoples' timeline over both time and space. The earliest example were the Essenes, a Jewish communal sect, who flourished in the Land of Israel from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE. They believed in collective ownership and unlike their contemporaries at the time, chose not to possess slaves and instead served each other.

Without a doubt, the seminal exemplification of Jewish community is the over 100 years old kibbutz experiment. The kibbutz is actually firmly rooted in the Chasidic tradition,

where the word 'kibbutz' itself comes from. Self-sufficiency, the living of simple and modest lives, and an undoubted spiritual element which both Chasidic and early kibbutz life had in common.

The kibbutz succeeded in creating a truly holistic existence. On a macro-level, it strived to take responsibility for the Jewish people, for building a new, just society in the Land of Israel based on a federation of intentional communities, and to be a shining beacon for the world at large. Individually and community-wise, it also took it upon itself to shape the new Jew, the pioneer who would embody the utopian ideals of co-operation, self-labor, justice, self-defense, responsibility and leadership, turning these dreams into reality. It aimed to recognize the uniqueness of each individual, and harness their abilities, while at the same time, take responsibility for all of their needs – cultural, social, financial, intellectual and physical. Together with a shared sense of history and peoplehood, the development of a shared Jewish kibbutz culture, shared decision-making, a renewed language, whilst living with full sovereignty over ourselves as a people, the kibbutz managed to tick all the boxes in terms of facilitating the living of a full Jewish life.

This is our heritage, and we must actively choose how we relate to our rich and inspiring past. We could disregard it, and choose to live out individualistic lives, Jewishly or not, passing each other like leaves in the wind. Or **we can challenge this transience and choose to live intentionally with one another, and create something beautiful.**

I have chosen to live my life with others. My Jewish community is a full income-sharing, urban kibbutz of 150 people all living under one roof. Living this way is not only the most holistic way of living that I know of, but it's also the most holistic way of living that I can imagine.

Our relationships with those we share our lives with are able to change us as human beings. This in turn gives us the strength and courage to work in shaping our surrounding environs for the better, in the educational and activist work that we do – not just as volunteer work for an hour or two, or even for a year or two, but for our whole lives, day in and day out. As the classic kibbutz before us, the language we speak, the weekly, yearly and life cycles that are filled to the brim with our peoples' cultural vitality and creativity, the connection to our ancient homeland, the peace and justice work that is so desperately needed in this region, all of which can be described as our meaningful Jewish life in community.

**Anton Marks** is a British-born Israeli and a founder member of the largest urban kibbutz in Israel - Kibbutz Mishol. He has been an informal educator for nearly 30 years and his passion for Zionist education, Tikkun Olam, Jewish history, identity and culture are a recipe for engaging and challenging articles. [anton@mishol.org](mailto:anton@mishol.org)



## The Kavana Cooperative: A Case-Study in Self-Obligation

**Rachel Nussbaum**

**In this post-modern age, it makes great sense to me that the new version of commandedness is an opt-in model.**

Nearly a decade and a half ago, as a young rabbi in Seattle, I began dreaming of creating a new Jewish community – and indeed, even a new community *model* – that would better meet the needs of my generational peers. Looking around me, I could see evidence of every Jewish sociological trend (only more so!), the Pacific Northwest truly representing “*sof ha-maarav*” (the “end of the west”/edge of the Diaspora), and also the front edge of the statistical curve when it came to declining rates of affiliation, high rates of transplant-ism and intermarriage, and astonishingly high education levels. In this region, where “secular” and “spiritual-but-not-religious” are popular categories, I wondered what might constitute a compelling alternative to the synagogue, particularly for Jews who didn’t speak the language of theological commandedness and halakhic obligation.

I joined forces with a friend – tech entrepreneur Suzi LeVine – and together, in the summer of 2006, we co-founded a new community called Kavana (“intention”). Our goals included:

1) weaving a tight web of community, in order to create a sense of extended family (given that so many Seattle Jews lived far from their families of origin); 2) empowering participants by turning them into “producers” rather than consumers of their own Jewish experiences; 3) building a pluralistic community (much like a Hillel model, but for adults and families) which would feature multiple entry points to Jewish life and could support a wide range of Jewish practice and engagement.

We had a clear hypothesis: that the more deeply people might invest of their time and energy, the greater the reward would be. As we dreamed about building Kavana, we

talked about our vision as “retro”: we were trying (self-consciously, and with some sense of irony) to integrate some of the best features of tighter Jewish communal models like shtetl and kibbutz, against the backdrop of the very individualistic landscape of 21st century American society. In order to achieve all we envisioned, we needed a community model that would have binding force.

The more we workshopped the idea together, the more we were attracted to a cooperative model that encouraged opting in to a system of obligation. We were inspired by a number of local cooperatives of various types: business “co-ops” like REI (which sells outdoor gear) and PCC (a local food cooperative), Seattle’s many neighborhood-based preschool co-ops, and Social Venture Partners (a venture philanthropy group that requires volunteer service of its members). The icing on the cake was a meeting we had with Rabbi Anson Laytner. As we described our ideas to him, he pulled out an article he had published in 1982 (in *Conservative Judaism*) entitled “Food for Thought: The Jewish Cooperative Society (Or a Havurah With Teeth).” It was a theoretical piece that he claimed had gotten little traction at the time. Together, we decided that perhaps the time had come – a quarter-century later – to revive this Jewish cooperative concept.

For the past 13+ years now, Kavana has functioned as a cooperative community. People self-obligate by joining our Jewish cooperative as “partners,” which entails taking on a set of obligations including financial contributions, volunteer role(s), and regular (at least monthly) attendance. The language of “partnership” also signifies the sense of shared ownership and commitment that all community members have taken upon themselves.

**In this post-modern age, it makes great sense to me that the new version of commandedness is an opt-in model.** And, in general, Kavana has found that people take these self-obligations quite seriously. For example, our 2019 survey indicated a success rate of about 75% when it comes to Kavana partners fulfilling their volunteer obligations to the organization (These might include hosting or leading programs, providing event support like greeting/set-up/clean-up, doing maintenance tasks in our office, or serving on an infrastructural team around finance, communications or strategic planning). Our Annual Partner Meeting each spring is one of our most well-attended, interactive and powerful community-building events of the year. We know that many synagogues and other Jewish organizations also place a strong emphasis on volunteerism and participation, and I don’t want to suggest that Kavana has cornered the market in these areas; however, at Kavana, what is distinct is that these modes of engagement are all framed as obligations. Because people have all opted in by joining the co-op, we can meaningfully speak the language of commitment.

Over time, we have continued experimenting with and tweaking Kavana's cooperative structure and the language we use to talk about it, ever striving to improve upon the model. We have built out partner intake and renewal processes, adding new features as the community has grown. And, in our diverse community – where we can't necessarily assume sameness in Jewish background or observance, and where we have become increasingly multi-generational -- commitment has become a great equalizer among our partners. This has been particularly important for those community members who come from non-Jewish backgrounds, who report feeling fully included by virtue of having taken on the same obligations as everyone else.

At present, many Jewish communities are exploring alternatives to the classic mid-20th century synagogue membership model and trying to figure out how to build community in ways that are meaningful and compelling. It seems that many synagogues are looking to attract more people through the loosening of obligations and the lessening of expectations. This may be working in some places, but at Kavana, we have consciously moved in the opposite direction over the past 13+ years, enough to claim proof of concept. Requiring more of our partners and inviting people to opt in to a more intensive level of obligation has proved quite compelling (pun intended!).

As we consider what 21st century models of Jewish community will emerge and find staying power, I humbly submit that – even and perhaps especially in the absence of a theological sense of commandedness -- self-obligation is possible. Commitments taken on in this way can have deep and lasting impact on the individuals who choose to participate. Furthermore, a community that speaks the language of opting in to obligation has the potential to weave a denser social fabric (a salve in the face of the individualism and loneliness that characterize this age!) and to create a beautiful culture, predicated on the sense that everyone is there precisely because they want to be.

**Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum** is the Rabbi and Executive Director of the Kavana Cooperative, which she co-founded in Seattle, Washington, in 2006. Kavana has received lots of recognition for its innovative approach to building Jewish community, and Rachel's responsibilities run the gamut... from teaching and dynamic prayer leadership, to re-working the synagogue model for the 21st century. She is also one of the founding rabbis of the Jewish Emergent Network, a group of 7 path-breaking communities from across the U.S. reimagining Judaism for the next generation.



## The Moment to Listen

Alejandro Okret

**... we need to continue to increase our investment and foster the voices of young adults, so they can continue to show us the way and create the “antithesis.”**

Over the last several years, there has been much talk in the community about supporting and empowering young adults and learning how to adapt to millennials, and now, Gen Z. This is great. Much more is needed if we want to make sure we will have a thriving and dynamic Jewish community in the years to come. Efforts to invest in young people have increased. More initiatives, foundations and organizations are turning to young adults and are creating the necessary space for them to forge the communities we need. This must continue to grow if we are serious about securing the next generation of communal leadership and active participation.

In his work, 19th Century German philosopher, Hegel, outlines a particular dialectical method of argument which I believe could resonate with a process we’re seeing in our greater Jewish community. In a nutshell, Hegel states that logic is comprised by three sides or moments: 1) stable definition or determination 2) sudden challenge and instability and 3) unity of both previous moments.

The first moment is the moment of stable definition or determination. This can be equated to the status quo in the Jewish community. What has worked in the past, should continue to work in the future.

The second moment, perhaps one of the most critical stages in everyday life, is one of sudden challenge and instability. It is a defiance of the status quo presented as an antithesis. In my field of work, I see this regularly represented by people in their 20s and early 30s paving the way and demonstrating what they think Jewish communities should look like. Be it home-based programming, peer-led programming, spiritual emerging communities, intentional communities, you name it, there is a movement that needs to be heard, and more than anything, understood. Hegel talks of this moment being a

*dialectical* time. The stakes are at their highest at this point. Does the community decide to cancel out the thesis (the “old way of doing things”) or adapt, learn and update its forms and embrace change?

As Hegel lays out, the third moment should be spectacular, or at least it has all the potential to be that way. Here, as Hegel explains in *The Encyclopedia Logic*, we see the unity of both previous determinations, or a synthesis. It is an understanding of how best to move forward. In terms of the Jewish community, I think it is the affirmation that we are ready to embrace alternative and novel ways to move forward, especially when it comes to investing in the next generation. Will the latter succeed all the time? Most definitely not. We need to be ready to appreciate this, learn from it and keep pushing forward. The synthesis will become the thesis and the process will start all over again, making sure we keep evolving and rediscovering our bonds to Judaism and the Jewish community.

Over the past decade, through my involvement at Moishe House and the work we do with people in their 20s and early 30s, I’ve seen the positive impact and results of empowering them. Investing, believing in and entrusting these groups of people can only be beneficial for the general wellbeing and continuity of the Jewish community.

Moishe House has now become the global leader in peer-led Jewish young adult engagement. Every year, tens of thousands of young Jews experience innovative, engaging, exciting Jewish programming. All programming is planned and executed by their peers, creating countless opportunities for young adults to connect with their own Jewish identities, their friends and their wider communities.

Moishe House works to meet the interests of young adults in the Jewish community, both the engaged and the not yet engaged. Moishe House has provided training for these community builders through Moishe Houses Jewish Learning Retreats and created a platform for former residents and other strong leaders to host Moishe House–style programs from their own homes

As a result of the training and experience that the community builders receive from Moishe House, they see themselves as leaders and role models in the Jewish community who are equipped to create meaningful Jewish experiences. And the model of empowering the leaders themselves is working. Through external evaluations, we have learned that before their involvement with Moishe House, only 32% of our community builders considered themselves leaders or role models in the Jewish community, compared to over twice as many (81%) who do so after participating.

We have also seen that young adults want to contribute to the future of their Jewish community. Over half of respondents (52%) reported that Moishe House introduced them to new Jewish organizations or activities in which they now participate. Furthermore, one in three people (31%) reported that Moishe House led them to take on leadership roles within other Jewish organizations or activities.

Moishe House, is of course, just one example of how we can embrace the way things are, challenge assumptions and give space for new ways and, then, create space for both intersect and overlay. I strongly believe **we need to continue to increase our investment and foster the voices of young adults, so they can continue to show us the way and create the "antithesis."** We must nurture their vision and passion. They will help us produce a stronger and more sustainable future.

In the Talmud, Masechet Yevamot, we learn that it is a Mitzvah to say what will be heard, as well as it's a Mitzvah not to say what won't be heard.

I believe that young people are delivering a very strong message, a message that aims at understanding how Jewish communities need to keep being dynamic, ever-changing, adapting, daring to learn and create spaces for everyone. It is our responsibility to make sure we can hear them. Otherwise, they won't be able to say what won't be heard.

**Alejandro Okret** is based in London and serves as Moishe House's Chief Global Officer. Moishe House has become the global leader in peer-led Jewish young adult engagement and through its various community building program models, engages more than 70,000 unique young adults in Jewish life each year. The organization provides an important pathway for young adults to take part in- and create - Jewish homes and communities.



## Between “I” and “My People”: The Case of the Jewish Community

**Iris Posklinsky**

**Only when the personal identity is touched and impacted, the collective identity that binds people together can be owned.**

Communal innovation is a challenging concept. Often when yearning for something that is lost, we search for it in the past. In this era, we are bombarded with “innovations,” which are valuable in certain areas of life. Nevertheless, in areas involving human relations, the old fashion way for connecting people might in fact be a preferred answer.

As simple as it may be these days to “be in touch” using the many channels of social media, it is difficult to truly belong. Communities are all about connecting between those who share a common component in their identity, one that is referred to as the “Critical Shared Trait” (Sadan & Peri, 1990). It is that trait, which defines a group of people differently from others, creates solidarity among them, and enables the building of a community. Whether in a geographical, ethnic, or functional community, it responds to a human need to be together (Sadan, 1997). When connections have meaning, it affects happiness and contentment, as importantly recognized since early Adlerian and Humanistic psychologies, to Logotherapy and modern approaches today (Abrami, 2016; Adler, 1930; Rogers, 1951).

It is not accidental that “community” and “communication” come from the same verb (Handler, 1990). A community cannot be built without having engaging communication among its members, which nurtures a unique togetherness. The many and varied Jewish communities that operate as satellites in our global Jewish community have all gone through changes in the quality of the relationships within and between them. With changing needs and the nature of the times, such processes are inevitable. However, what does it take to preserve an attachment to our local and global Jewish communities?

The answer may simply be in a determined leadership that consistently and intentionally connects people to one another and to the core values of our nation. We have respected and endured these values for thousands of years. They served as a bond throughout our history, and were put into practice routinely by inspiring people and engaging them in social deeds and traditions. Our values have an emotional meaning that takes us back to our childhood homes, to our families, and neighborhoods. Sometimes it only takes a symbol, a scent, or a phrase to revive what they mean to us.

What if our children would be indifferent to such symbols? What if shared values and traditions would become meaningless to generations to come? How can we expect them to feel as if they belong without understanding and relating to these values? When assessing the climate in our communities and the measures taken to strengthen them, what do we learn about the attempts to preserve and celebrate Jewish values, symbols, and traditions that remind us of who we are, and of our collective belonging? Furthermore, what has been lost while we are changing?

Naturally, the moral transformation that occurred in our communities reflects the transformation we have undergone as individuals. We stretch ourselves thin with unrealistic expectations to be involved with too many actions, rather than focusing our attention on select commitments. While striving for meaning and profound experiences, more can be less. If we look at communities such as pre-military academies in Israel, leadership or educational programs around the world that require members to devote themselves to the program, the participants gain a genuinely transformative experience with effects that resonate for life. The magic that occurs in those communities begins with the emotional, intellectual, and moral impact on the individual. From one person to the next, powerful community experience is evolving.

Since we cannot all devote ourselves to long-term immersive programs, what does this mean, realistically? For leadership, it means providing focused opportunities for reflective connections, dialogue that stimulates thinking and helps individuals find their narrative within the collective one. For individuals to truly connect, they first need to connect to themselves. **Only when the personal identity is touched and impacted, the collective identity that binds people together can be owned.**

A connecting process takes intentional, diligent, and ongoing work, starting with community leadership. It is beyond inviting to events or expanding social networks. It involves an appreciation of the content and not compromising on the experience alone, whether in small or large gatherings. Leadership should take every opportunity to inspire and touch, as people long for meaning, and communities are desperate for persistent, genuine, and inspiring leadership to follow.

What we call a “Jewish Community” should acknowledge adaptive structures, for the sake of preserving traditional ethical qualities. A group of students on Hillel Campuses for example, can make a Jewish community. So can a cohort of young adults on a leadership journey, with or without their families. What those communal structures can offer is often what is lost in dissolving communities: opportunities to physically come together, converse, argue in a safe and trusted environment, care about shared concerns, dream together, celebrate traditions, and deepen the connection and the commitment to the community, as they become conscious of their deepest igniting values. We should not be concerned or threatened with new perceptions of Jewish communities, but use them as a case study to redefine what is lost in conventional ones, and restore it once more.

Finally, on the widening gap between “I” and “My people,” this article cannot ignore the prevalence of individualism that overcomes idealism, and which reflects the gradual distancing from social and mutual responsibility. We live in times where commitment to collective values must look good on our CV in order for it to compete with other priorities, particularly among the younger generation (The Jewish Education Project, 2016). Engaging in volunteerism and social action is weighted against promoting personal goals and pursuing a career or academic aspirations. Sometimes more than the service to the cause, the cause itself has to serve personal interests, ousting idealism and values as primary motivators for action. Nevertheless, as our ancient wisdom says, “*She’lo lishma, ba Lishma*”; meaning, good intentions may follow good deeds... as long as we harness those “interest-driven-engagements” to connect members personally, and in the meaningful ways described above.

**Iris Posklinsky** is a PhD student at the University of Haifa, researching Israel Diaspora Relations and Jewish philanthropy as reflected through the transition from Project Renewal to Partnership. She is the Northern District Partnership Director at the Jewish Agency for Israel.

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## Jewish Communities of Meaning: An Emerging Trend

**Sid Schwarz**

**The social economy today is such that a person with a good idea can, without too much difficulty, use the organizing power of social media to gather Jews (along with their non-Jewish partners and friends because it is rare for the younger generation to be exclusive in the way previous Jewish generations were) to do, just about anything**

I have spent a considerable amount of time over the past 20 years in the synagogue transformation space. I currently direct CLI, a two-year fellowship for rabbis on visionary thinking and change management and, on our website, we curate a monthly synagogue innovation blog which includes some truly transformational ideas that are re-imagining synagogues for the better.

But notwithstanding the work that I do to help transform synagogues into vibrant spiritual communities, I am persuaded that, in the future, synagogues will no longer be the only platform where American Jews will experience Jewish life. This is why in 2015, I helped to launch *Kenissa: Communities of Meaning Network*, whose objective is to identify, convene and build capacity among a growing network of new models of Jewish identity and community.

The premise of *Kenissa* is that, even as legacy Jewish organizations continue to lose market share, there is a growing ecosystem of new organizations and communities that are capturing the interest of next generation Jews who long for contexts of meaning that can enrich their lives. And while many Jews will find such experiences outside of Jewish contexts, a large percentage of Jews are more than open to having those experiences delivered in a Jewish key. I advanced this idea in an extended fashion in my 2013 book, *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*. The

*Kenissa* initiative, an outgrowth of the book, has allowed us to support the emerging network of Jewish communities of meaning that are attracting Jews within one or more of the following five thematic frameworks:

*Chochma* – engaging with the wisdom and practice of our inherited Jewish heritage;

*Kedusha* – helping people live lives of sacred purpose;

*Tzedek* – inspiring people to work for a more just and peaceful world;

*Kehilla* – creating intentional, covenantal communities that bind people to one another and to a shared mission;

*Yetzira* – the human ability to imagine/invent/create ideas, science, art and culture.

These frameworks will be familiar to anyone who is actively engaged in Jewish life. Synagogues, JCC's and even Federations, could likely categorize many elements of their respective programs into one or more of these themes. These legacy organizations helped to define Jewish life in the 20th century and they were the primary institutions that shaped the Jewish identity of American Jews during that time. Today, however, with some rare exceptions, those same institutions are having a hard time attracting next generation Jews to their programs. The decline in membership at JCCs and synagogues and the drop-off in the number of donors to Jewish Federations has led to much concern on the part of the stewards of the organized Jewish community.

But one would be misled about the future trajectory of Jewish identity in North America if your only metric happens to be membership in legacy Jewish organizations. **The social economy today is such that a person with a good idea can, without too much difficulty, use the organizing power of social media to gather Jews (along with their non-Jewish partners and friends because it is rare for the younger generation to be exclusive in the way previous Jewish generations were) to do, just about anything.**

In fact, since 2016 *Kenissa* has been identifying and convening new models of Jewish identity and community and inviting them to be part of a national network of creatives who can learn from each other, partner with one another, and acquire the tools, skills and strategies to be successful entrepreneurs.

We have found that many of the entrepreneurs themselves tend to be *bnai bayit*, young people who benefitted from Jewish youth movements, camps, day schools, Hillels and trips to Israel. Yet they did not want to partake of their parents' version of Judaism. Typical of millennials, passion for their respective projects grows out of their ability to own and re-mix Judaism in their own, unique generational and cultural idioms. Not surprisingly, the projects they are launching attract next gen Jews in ways that much better funded legacy Jewish organizations cannot hope to do. Each represents a

relatively new organization or community that is attracting Jews who might otherwise never affiliate with or even walk into a Jewish legacy institution.

There is certainly a narrative out there, supported by data, that suggests that Jewish life is in decline. Having worked closely with Jewish social entrepreneurs and their organizations for many years now, I see a very different story. Our database now lists close to 400 organizations that have been created since the year 2000. Many of them are attracting Jews who never previously had an association with any Jewish organization. On our website, you can read about how each community of meaning has succeeded in attracting people to their program. Despite the fact that most of the organizations we work with are small and under-resourced, legacy Jewish organizations have much to learn from these start-ups.

In the next phase of our work, we will be exploring how to build partnerships between these emerging communities of meaning and legacy Jewish organizations. Each could benefit from collaboration. Stewards of Federations, synagogues and JCC's should not try to coopt these entrepreneurs and their organizations. They should provide financial support, organizational expertise, mentorship and then...prepare to do a lot of listening. The Jewish community is being reimagined in exciting ways. Pay attention.

Jewish life is not the only dimension of our culture that has experienced a flip from top down to bottom up. We are living in a "maker" culture—people want to have a hand in shaping the very culture that they consume. There are many who will bemoan the weakening of Jewish institutions, the decline in affiliation rates with the organized Jewish community and the departure from longstanding norms regarding everything from intermarriage to gender identity to the relationship with the State of Israel. This is not the Judaism of the last century; it is the Judaism of the 21st century.

I think that it is cause for celebration, witnessing the ways that Jews are engaged in the redefinition of Jewish identity and community.

As a senior fellow at Hazon, **Rabbi Sid Schwarz** directs both the Clergy Leadership Incubator and *Kenissa*: Communities of Meaning Network. He is the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, MD, where he continues to lead services and teach and he was the founder and president of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, which he led for 21 years. He is the author of *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*. His other books and articles can be accessed at <http://www.rabbisid.org/>.



# Peoplehood Through Partnership: “Belonging” in the 21st Century

**Sarah Sokolic**

**“We are living in a complex post-ethnic, post-modern, digital age that is redefining choice, identity and belonging. It’s a fluid reality that calls for radical solutions and paradigm shifts...”**

It is an unprecedented and challenging time in modern society for leaders of faith-based communities. Forms of spiritual and religious devotion are shifting, secularism is on the rise, politicization of religions is growing, and social isolation and loneliness are global epidemics. This means that communities which provide spaces for deep connection are more vital than ever. According to Lab/Shul’s Founding Spiritual Leader, Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, **“We are living in a complex post-ethnic, post-modern, digital age that is redefining choice, identity and belonging. It’s a fluid reality that calls for radical solutions and paradigm shifts.** That is what Lab/Shul has set out to do.”

Founded in 2012 as an organic outgrowth of the pioneering Jewish ritual theater company, Storahelling, Lab/Shul is an artist-driven, everybody-friendly, god-optional, experimental community for sacred Jewish gatherings based in New York City, reaching the world. Lab/Shul blends the modern and traditional into a reimagined, engaging home to all - from engaged and lesser-affiliated Jews of all backgrounds, ages, and orientations to unaffiliated nones looking for spiritual meaning and connection. As a pioneer in redefining the role of sacred gatherings, Lab/Shul visualizes itself as a model for other spiritual communities and a catalyst for global change.

In 2018, Lab/Shul set out to complete its first strategic plan since its inception, prioritizing the need for creating deep communal connection. Lab/Shul had found early programmatic success, with more than 4,000 attending its annual High Holy Days, and hundreds joining for monthly Friday night “Sabbath Queen” worship events, other artist-driven holiday and educational programming as well as social justice activities. The next step was to transform the collection of individuals who attended Lab/Shul’s “pop-up”,

episodic programming into a thriving, nurturing community. This called for a brand new way to think about synagogue - and a brand-new way to belong.

With a desire to glean the best of what existing synagogue membership models had to offer without repeating the same mistakes that had led to the troubling decline in synagogue affiliation over the previous three decades, Lab/Shul's leadership studied synagogues and churches of all denominations, co-working spaces, gyms, professional development organizations, food co-ops and more. Some of the most compelling findings came from the work of Casper ter Kuile, Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School and author of *How We Gather*. In his writings, ter Kuile discusses the three relational rings of engagement each participant in a community maintains. The inner ring - close friends and family; the outer ring - a broader network connected by a common interest or goal; and, the middle ring - loose connections that diminish as individuals or communities start moving toward the inner or outer rings. People either seek deep intimacy with a smaller group of people, or a common experience with a broad set of individuals, and there is no longer a desire for the in between, somewhat meaningful relationships. This "rings' theory was corroborated by Marc J. Dunkelman, author of *The Vanishing Neighbor*, in which he wrote, "Adults today tend to prize different kinds of connections than their grandparents: more of our time and attention today is spent on more intimate contacts and the most casual acquaintances. We've abandoned the relationships in between - the 'middle-ring' ties."

Internal research showed that a majority Lab/Shul's community members live on fixed budgets, and that people needed to know exactly what benefits they would receive in return for a financial contribution. Also, the notion of donating time was one that many community members valued on par with contributing money. With all of these considerations at hand, Lab/Shul had the opportunity to pioneer a new model of what congregational affiliation could look like. Enter Partnership.

Partnership launched in the summer of 2019 as a flexible, community-driven membership model that provides ways for those of all means to invest in Lab/Shul's success. A hybrid of many of the existing synagogue membership models explored - including voluntary dues, sliding scale and co-op - Partnership offers various ways to participate with both money and time ("shul/shifts"). In return for this investment, Partners get access to benefits that give a real dollar ROI, and a vote on important decisions for the future of Lab/Shul. With Lab/Shul's "everybody-friendly" mission at its core, Partnership enables everyone to contribute at a level that feels significant to them and ensures that Lab/Shul can thrive.

So far, Partnership is working. In its first year, Lab/Shul has 180 Partner households, generating more than \$350,000 in revenue (25% of total revenue). Volunteerism has increased, and community-led programs are offering more opportunities for gathering and close connection on a regular basis. Lab/Shul is prepared to analyze and adjust Partnership's more experimental components as time goes on. For example, High Holy day tickets are not included in Partnership, however they are offered at a 50% discount to Partners, catering to people on both the inner and outer rings of engagement. Also, all Partners receive access to all of the same exact benefits, regardless of financial or time contribution. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, understanding that demographic representation can dramatically influence who feels included, actively participates, and holds power in communal spaces, Lab/Shul has set plans to ensure that the Partnership radically includes and integrates those who self-identify as part of populations typically underrepresented in normative, socially conventional, synagogue life including, but not limited to: Gender fluid or non-binary; LGBTQIA+; In a multi-faith marriage or partnership; Jews of patrilineal descent; and Jews of color.

As one Partner recently stated, "Lab/Shul is an experimental emergency organ transplant that transfers the beating heart of Judaism into a communal body that better reflects our lives. Lab/Shul seeks not to replace but to redesign, to replenish, to reconnect, and to redefine." Acknowledging that this work takes time and care, Lab/ Shul diligently strives to live up to its mission as a creative, constantly evolving, everybody-body friendly pioneer in the Jewish communal world.

**Sarah Sokolic** joined Lab/Shul's as its first Executive Director in 2017. She is a community leader, educator and award-winning actor whose 25+ year career spans both the private and public sectors. She holds an M.A. in Organizational Psychology from Teachers College Columbia University and a B.A. in Sociology and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University.



# Culture of Belonging – Building Our Jewish Community by Bonding Community Group (BCG)

**Sara Shadmi-Wortman**

**We believe that intentional culture of belonging practices and mindsets are the key to a vibrant, engaged Jewish community**

**Building Community:** This is an invitation to put on a different lens in order to create or strengthen your Community - the lens of culture of belonging. The goal of this article is to introduce the terminology, principles and modes of action that will help you give people the opportunity to **feel part of a community**.

## **The role of community in our Jewish tradition**

Community has been the main social structure that enabled the Jewish people to preserve their Jewish heritage for generations. The Jewish tradition is based on the ability to practice Jewish life only as a community: The *Minyan* as a conditional way to pray and the *Shiva* as a collective support system in times of grief are just a couple of examples for the need for community in order to practice Jewish life.

Life in this era, based on self-centered culture, high rates of personal and career-based transitions and constantly changing surroundings, challenges our ability to preserve our life in a Jewish community. Knowing what a powerful role the community had in our history in preserving our Jewish life, we have a crucial role in creating a new-old way for a relevant vibrant community in our time and era. A role that will strengthen our belonging to the Jewish community, in a way that fills us with meaning and pride.

## **So what exactly is Culture of Belonging?**

Community building relates to the effort of individuals, groups, organizations and institutions to create around, among and within them a culture of belonging. Culture of belonging is an organizational, social and communal reality, based on the ability to act together, for one another's goals as well as for the goals and vision of the group. It calls for establishing relationships of trust and mutual reciprocity, that allow everyone to feel they matter, are seen and valued- to have the opportunity to influence the group

and feel pride in being part of it. Culture of belonging is about strengthening intentional practices and mindsets that fuel belonging and cohesion.

Creating Culture of Belonging - both in our institutions and outside them - will give each of us, regardless of who we are - Jews of color, LGBTQ groups, young people, inter-faith families – an opportunity to become part of a community, to live a rich fulfilling Jewish life, creating a meaningful future for ourselves and for the next generations.

### **Why Community? Why do we feel so strongly about it?**

The community is a powerful social group and has a crucial role on the ability of individuals and societies to struggle with different challenges in their surroundings. This can be anything from natural disasters like earthquakes, floods or fires; man-made disasters like wars or forced immigration, as well as many different personal struggles and tragedies.

What is a community? Is a Community a big Family Or is it a small organization? What makes it such a powerful framework? All communities are groups but not all groups are communities. Therefore, the big question is: What transforms a group into a community, and how can these groups facilitate a culture of belonging?

The uniqueness of the community comes from the combination between being on one hand mission driven (like organizations) and on the other hand based on close relationships (like in a family). A group becomes a community when the members succeed to create the communal relationships that are based on 5 characteristics:

- **Multi-dimensional:** members of the group share many aspects of themselves.
- **Multi-aspect:** The members of the group interact in few aspects in their life and in few contexts.
- **Face to face** interaction: members of the group meet on a basic term.
- **Structures and roles:** the members of the group organize themselves through roles and frameworks
- **Live on** (beyond specific individuals); The community has traditions that do not depend of the existence of certain people.

How we know we did it? A group becomes a community when the members feel these five things:

- **Being part of a community is to feel:**
- **I Matter – Meaningfulness:** “I have an important role here.” The feeling members have for being recognized by the group as an important asset.

- **I Belong – Ownership:** “I feel part of.” To feel a sense of ownership for the existence of the group.
- **I Am Committed – Responsibility:** “I care.” To act from concern for other members and the common goal.
- **I Trust – Faith:** “I know that they will be there for me.” Members’ deep belief that in their community or group, people help each other.
- **I’m Proud - Identification:** “This community is a part of who I am.” Belonging to the community is part of self-identity.

### **So how do we do it?**

In order to create culture of belonging for ourselves, our communities, and in our organizations, we need to make sure that every person - every member is part of a **Bonding Community Group (BCG)**- a group based on the communal relationships around a common mission.

### **Bonding Community Group (BCG) Components:**

The BCG is based on three key elements: Common vision, personal-communal relationships and a joint mission. Its inspiration comes from our Jewish tradition, as we read in Pirkei Avot: “The world stands on three things: Torah, Avoda, and Gmilut Hasadim (Loving –kindness)” (*Pirkey Avot 1:18*):

The **Torah** is the **common vision**: A shared clarification, joint learning of ideas or values.

The **Avodah** is the **personal- communal relationships**: Creating relationships based on solidarity, patterns of mutualism and shared responsibility.

**Gmilut Hasadim** is the **Joint mission**: planning and participating in a collective mission that we all care about.

The BCG is based on a strong commitment both to personal connections and the joint mission, both as a goal and as a means.

Every activity of the group: leading meetings, creating events, conducting projects -has to have these three elements so that the members will have the opportunity to bring their strength and feel they matter and when needed to trust the group that will be supported.

### **Top Ten Culture of Belonging Principles - The 10 Commandments:**

1. **Start with belonging as a goal.** Design meetings, events or even job descriptions with intention to increase belonging, connection and trust.

2. **Build structured practices** into group activities to define how we meet, celebrate and take care of each other, that don't rely on random chance or a friendly person.
3. **Establish rituals** that ground groups through repetition to build confidence and group identity.
4. **Define shared purpose** so each person has a role in shaping and sustaining the group's larger mission.
5. **Prioritize face-to-face interaction.** Gathering in person enables multi-dimensional connection that can't be replicated through technology.
6. **Create fixed small groups** that gather regularly and give individuals an anchor to connect to each other and the larger organization more deeply.
7. **Encourage multi-dimensional sharing and doing.** Structure activities for people to get to know each other on multiple levels and experience different aspects of life together.
8. **Focus on assets over needs.** Ask "what does each person have to offer?" and give each a role to play, based on their unique gifts and contributions.
9. **Shift from customer to owner or partner,** from service delivery, transactional models to participant-owned and led cultures.
10. **Cultivate group identity and pride.** Explore ways to express the group's uniqueness, creating a sense of pride. Celebrate!

**We believe that intentional culture of belonging practices and mindsets are the key to a vibrant, engaged Jewish community.** The desire to belong and find meaning and purpose in something bigger than ourselves is pervasive, especially in today's world of isolation and fragmentation. Culture of belonging is a path for Jewish engagement. It is a way to ensure that each individual can find a group to call home in the Jewish world and, to give each one a way to connect and feel part of a large Jewish community.

And some words for inspiration: "The individuals belonging to the community complement one another existentially. Each individual possesses something unique, rare, which is unknown to others; each individual has a unique message to communicate, a special color to add to the communal spectrum. Hence, when the individual joins the community, they add a new dimension to the community awareness. They contribute something which no one else could have contributed. They enrich the community existentially; they are irreplaceable." 'The Community', by Joseph B. Soloveitchik

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**The Peoplehood Papers** provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: [publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org).

Past issues can be accessed at [www.jpeoplehood.org/library](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/library)

**The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE)** is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting. [www.jpeoplehood.org](http://www.jpeoplehood.org)

Founded in 2014 by Hazon, **Hakhel** is the first and largest global incubator for Jewish intentional communities. Its mission is to spark and support new expressions of Jewish life in the Diaspora by nurturing the growth of intentional communities with mentorship, seed funding and global network building. Hakhel operates in partnership with Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, which works to strengthen Jewish life in the Diaspora and connection to Israel. Hakhel currently works with over 100 communities worldwide, in 30 different countries and 6 continents. While the world is transitioning from hierarchical and centralist structures to networks and shared economies, Hakhel is on the forefront of implementing this spirit of innovation in Jewish life.

The **Jewish Emergent Network** comprises the leaders of these seven path-breaking Jewish communities - IKAR in L.A., Kavana in Seattle, The Kitchen in San Francisco, Mishkan in Chicago, Sixth & I in Washington, D.C., and Lab/Shul and Romemu in New York - who have come together in the spirit of collaboration. The Network exists to amplify each member organization's work and harness our collective power to help transform Jewish life. June 18 - 20, 2020 in Los Angeles, the Jewish Emergent Network will gather with thought leaders from around North America for (RE)VISION20/20, a dynamic, content-rich, Shabbat-based conference. More at [JewishEmergentNetwork.org](http://JewishEmergentNetwork.org) and on social media @JewishEmNet.



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