

The DIY Approach to Jewish Education

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by Rabbi Gabe Greenberg

During the past academic year, Berkeley Hillel has embarked upon a strategy that will be familiar to keen observers of Jewish organizational life. Picking up on the widespread and growing DIY – “do it yourself” – movement in general culture, we launched our own “JIY – Jew It Yourself” campaign. Acknowledging that a) students will make deeper commitments to a Judaism which they’ve helped create and feels their own, and b) there is a significant population of Jews on campus who will not find their way into the Hillel building, we are trying to bring Jewish life and experience out into the dorms, apartments, parks, co-ops, bars, cafes, forests and mountaintops of Berkeley.

A quick rundown of our approach: Firstly, each member of the Hillel staff hosted a cadre of students at their own homes for Shabbat dinner. In addition to modeling how folks from across the spectrum of Jewish practice and belief can create their own Jewish experiences, this helped us identify students that would be willing and able to host their own events. We then selected particular students from a variety of campus communities to host Shabbat dinners (and were approached by other students, on an ongoing basis, asking for our help in their hosting of Shabbat meals, Passover *sedarim*, etc.).

Each student who agreed to do so met with our Senior Jewish Educator before the event. This meeting is central to the success of JIY; the opportunity for the SJE to help the students think about how they want to infuse Jewish meaning, content, and creativity into their own circle of friends. The key questions include,

- “What is a Jewish experience in your own life which was meaningful?” “Which elements of that experience could you bring to this one?” “What are some themes, issues, problems that you’ve been thinking about in your classes that you think could provoke thoughtful discussion around the table?” “Will there be people at the event who don’t know each other? How will you introduce them and have them get to know more about the other?” “Should there be Jewish ritual? Singing? Do you want to provide words/lyrics? English, Hebrew, transliteration?”

The questions range from the holy to the mundane, helping the student think through every Jewish aspect of the event (and the logistical aspects as well if they so desire). Additionally, the SJE can introduce a Jewish text or idea into the conversation, if appropriate. But before handing the text over to be photocopied and distributed, there must be a learning that happens first between SJE and student. Only once the student finds the particular idea relevant to the questions that she herself wanted to raise or explore, will she become a robust teacher and facilitator of this idea in her own way.

Students may choose to utilize one of our Shabbat bags (modeled after the Birthright Next “Shabbox”), taking with them grape juice, candles, cards with blessings, and challah baked that day by our local Challah for Hunger group. After the event, students can be reimbursed for any food expenditures that they made (up to a certain amount). However, they must first submit a form wherein they describe and detail how it went, memorable quotes, etc. (always got to have your development director’s back!).

This, then, is at the core of JIY: students envisioning a Jewish event that they have fully created and implemented, for their own micro-community; and having Jewish and Torah content infused in an organic, meaningful and translatable way.

Unsurprisingly, a look around the Jewish adult educational world today finds other institutions following similar models. In San Francisco, [The Kitchen](#) offers the following:

- We want to give you the tools (ideas, books, mentors or teachers) to build your Jewish self... you decide the direction and we’ll give you the opportunities, and the tools to make the experiences... we offer one-on-one consultations so you can choose your own Jewish adventure. Once you know what you want, we can promise that the teachers we send you will be just what you’re looking for...

Again, a DIY model, wherein the needs and desires of the particular micro-community are infused with Jewish meaning and content through working with an educator.

In distinction to hosting Jewish meals or ritual events, [Kevah](#) employs this model in forming its learning groups:

- Group organizers are responsible for convening their own group of 8-14 committed members... a warm and collaborative relationship between teacher and group is critical to creating a positive learning environment ... topics are tailored to the interest of the host and participants, and are either based on learning a classical Jewish text such as the weekly Torah portion or a tractate of the Talmud, or an organizational theme such as Jewish mindfulness, healthy relationships, Jewish parenting and spiritual and personal growth.

Here, the purpose of these gatherings is explicitly content-centric, yet what is important to note is that the needs and specificity of each group is honored and built around. The Torah that will be ultimately be brought to the learners will be that much more resonant as its at the nexus of the interests and questions of the individuals coming to engage, with the strengths and interests of the particular Jewish educator.

[Charm City Tribe](#) is a newly conceived community in Baltimore, based around coming together to celebrate Jewish life in creative and unconventional ways. Making *hamantaschen* together for Purim, drinking beer while learning about the wheat harvest of Shavuot, or doing social justice together in the city, young local Jews are certainly being engaged around issues and events that resonate for them. And the community invested in a “Roaming Rabbi”, to ensure that Jewish knowledge and creativity is always a core part of these experiences.

Lest we believe that this model is a new one, we must stop for a moment and appreciate that “There is nothing new under the sun; when there is a thing of which it will be said, ‘see this, it is new’ – it has already been for ages before us...” (Eccl. 1). Looking back over the past decades, multiple initiatives in the Jewish world had innovated similar ideas. One that specifically pioneered this model was the Havurah movement. Picking up on the general countercultural zeitgeist of the 1960s, Jews around the states formed tight-knit communities of Jewish practice and celebration. They grew directly from the input and participation of all involved, and therefore emerged as vibrant, authentic, and deeply resonant expressions of Judaism for their members. Jewish content and meaning was derived from the collective knowledge and experience of its participants, and, beginning in 1980, from the [National Havurah Committee’s Summer Institute](#).

From the same era, the *Jewish Catalog* was truly the first contemporary Jewish DIY handbook. Jews who were disaffected from institutional Judaism could look to the *Catalog* to learn how to celebrate the Jewish holidays, to create their own ritual objects, to sing various Hebrew or Yiddish songs – to find their own way to plug in, providing direct access to Jewish content and ritual.

It is important to point out here that this approach begs some pretty serious questions, and we would like here to consider two of the juicier ones. The first is ideological/*hashkafic* in nature: if every Jew can choose their own DIY avenue, will there not eventually be too diverse a spectrum of Jewish practices; which is to say, what will be the common bond linking all the do-it-*Yourselves* of the DIY movement. Some answer this question with the notion of Peoplehood, others that such a diversity is necessary for the ongoing re-creation of Judaism, while others believe that, indeed, such a subjective and center-less Judaism cannot hold. One might say that this is an iteration of earlier arguments about the nature of Torah itself, and how far can the text be interpreted by subsequent interpretations and midrash; let us for now then label it as “*tanai hee*” (a modern argument paralleling an earlier, similar one) – enough ink has been spilled on this topic already.

The second question, however, is pedagogic/*chinuchi* in nature, and we believe has real and immediate implications for the success of these types of initiatives; what is the baseline threshold for infusion of Jewish content and knowledge? Too often, this type of event will serve as an opportunity for young Jews to gather together, with no intrinsic Jewish value added other than the gathering itself. Surely, a quorum of Jews coming together to celebrate, or just be, can create its own inner sense of Jewish meaning and connection. But there is distance between this and what happens when there is thoughtful attention to how Judaism will be infused in the first place. For an example of this type of situation, consider the newly introduced [Moishe House “Without Walls” program](#) (currently in “Beta-testing” form, hence admittedly limited in its

scope). Here, folks can sign up to host and be reimbursed for their own Jewish events in their social circles, similar to the other programs that we've considered. However, here there are no requirements regarding how event organizers infuse Jewish content. There are certainly opportunities to reach out for such guidance and thought-partnering if requested, but one wonders how often advantage will be taken of that offer.

As Jewish educators, it serves us to remember the proverb: Educate the child according to her way; when she grows up she will not depart from it (Proverbs 22, *our translation*). Clearly, much Jewish education for young adults has accepted the "her way" aspect, directing teaching to the needs and questions of the particular population. However, there must nevertheless be a baseline mandate of "Educate"; this must become a necessary requirement of any such DIY movement. An emphasis on community engagement and outreach is similarly critical, but might ultimately be undone without a basis in Torah and explicit Jewish values.

As these programs continue to grow and proliferate, it behooves us as Jewish educators and community leaders to consider these fundamental questions. How can we encourage the growth of a Judaism that meets people where they are (both physically and intellectually), and simultaneously brings a real sense of Jewish life, meaning, and history? This must be the animating tension that continues to define this type of work in the years to come.

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