Developing deep understanding of successful small groups

Phase 3 Insights

Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah

DATE
12/19/2024

GEMIC

1. METHODOLOGY REVIEW

2. SMALL GROUP KEY FINDINGS

3. INNOVATION AREAS

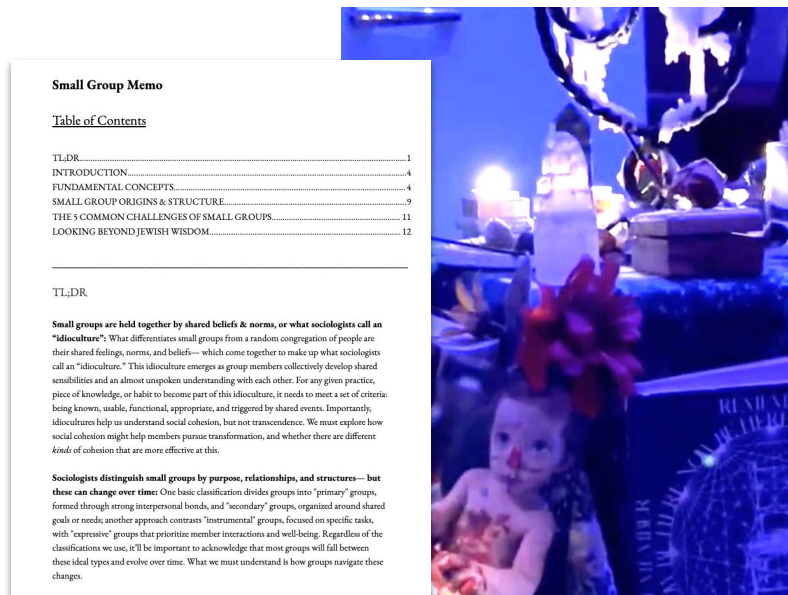What does it take for small groups anchored in Jewish Wisdom to succeed?

METHODOLOGY: OVERVIEW

Literature Review: Review of academic literature on small group origins, structure, and cohesion [Phase 1].

Immersions: 5 group immersions, including both virtual and in-person formats, to experience group activities firsthand [Phase 2].

Expert Conversations: 6 conversations with experts on small group organizing to guide research [Phases 2 & 3].

Interviews: 23 IDIs with members of 12 different small groups to understand groups' histories, mechanics, challenges, and experiences of success [Phase 2].

Small Group Memo

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TL;DR

Small groups are held together by shared beliefs & norms, or what sociologists call an "idioculture": What differentiates small groups from a random congregation of people are their shared feelings, norms, and beliefs— which come together to make up what sociologists call an "idioculture." This idioculture emerges as group members collectively develop shared sensibilities and an almost unspoken understanding with each other. For any given practice, piece of knowledge, or habit to become part of this idioculture, it needs to meet a set of criteria: being known, usable, functional, appropriate, and triggered by shared events. Importantly, idiocultures help us understand social cohesion, but not transcendence. We must explore how social cohesion might help members pursue transformation, and whether there are different *kinds* of cohesion that are more effective at this.

Sociologists distinguish small groups by purpose, relationships, and structures— but these can change over time: One basic classification divides groups into "primary" groups, formed through strong interpersonal bonds, and "secondary" groups, organized around shared goals or needs; another approach contrasts "instrumental" groups, focused on specific tasks, with "expressive" groups that prioritize member interactions and well-being. Regardless of the classifications we use, it'll be important to acknowledge that most groups will fall between these ideal types and evolve over time. What we must understand is how groups navigate these changes.

✕ GEMIC

METHODOLOGY: IN THE FIELD

GROUPS INCLUDED

ATW Austin

ATW Long Beach

Heresy

Kirva

NYC OneTable

Psychedelic Shabbat

QueerKar

Sarene Shanus Torah Study

Tuesday Night Jam

Western Mass Talmud Study Group

Zohar Study Group

NM Song Circle

METHODOLOGY

IMMERSIONS
3-5 hour engagements, during which we participated in group activities firsthand and spoke to members to understand their perspectives on the event and group overall.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS
In each of our interviews, we touched on the following areas of investigation:
- **Small group history:** Psychographic context of joining or starting, change over time, comparison to other groups
- **Small group structure:** People, practice, content, and place architectures of the group
- **Challenges & strategies to address obstacles:** Past and present challenges faced by the group, predictions for the future
- **Feelings of effectiveness, impact, and approach to Wisdom:** Perspective on what makes the group successful and its overall impact

GEMIC

This project builds on previous work, in which we established the importance of small groups in the broader ecosystem of meaning-making.

LKFLT x Gemic (Project 1): We sought to understand the relationship between small groups & meaning making— to see whether small groups were an effective vehicle for the transmission of Wisdom.

LKFLT x Imagination Machine (Upcoming): Based on learnings around the needs of small groups and seekers, LKFLT will work to develop products and initiatives that can leverage the strengths of small groups to transmit Wisdom.

LKFLT x Gemic (Project 2): We explored the mechanisms that allow small groups to start and stick, and determined opportunity spaces for the development of a broader Jewish Wisdom philosophy under which small groups can thrive.

GEMIC

In this project, we aimed to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms and processes behind successful small groups.

HOW do Jewish Wisdom-centered small groups come together?

ORIGINS

CULTURE

WHAT are the specific mechanisms that help them succeed?

STRUCTURE

MECHANICS

WHAT does success mean & **HOW** might LKFLT support it?

CHALLENGES

EFFECTIVENESS

GEMIC

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE SMALL GROUPS

We observed that effective small groups exhibited certain traits and patterns across 5 key domains.

Domain 1
FORMATION

Ways in which the group is originated and takes shape.

Domain 2
LEADERSHIP

Leadership structure and the expertise of key figures.

DOMAIN 3
MENTORSHIP

Types of training, guidance, and support received by group leaders.

DOMAIN 4
STRUCTURE

Design elements, including size and modes of interaction.

DOMAIN 5
VALUES

Role of Jewish Wisdom and reflections on purpose.

Domain 1
FORMATION

Groups emerge from, or in response to, their existing environments.

This happens in four primary ways: a group can 1) **transform** from one to another, 2) spin off from another group in **opposition** to a perceived lack, 3) **symbiotically** deepen a relationship to a broader group, or 4) be a combination or **synthesis** of two separate groups. Critically, even when individuals weren't embedded in a formal community or network, they would form groups by formalizing looser, more personal connections through a transformational process— and would rarely start "from scratch."

Transformational
E.g. Psychedelic Shabbat

Oppositional
E.g. Deanne's Talmud Group

Symbiotic
E.g. ATW Long Beach

Synthetic
E.g. Heresy

Strategic Implication:

Seed groups out of existing communities, rather than starting them from a blank slate.

Domain 1
FORMATION

Groups that catalyze in response to a sense of dislocation tend to be the most meaningful.

These moments of dislocation tended to revolve around life stages or identity: becoming a new parent, experiencing death, moving to a new city, etc. However, organically-formed small groups were rarely primarily focused on those changes, as that made membership too rigid. We mostly saw identity-based groups emerge in institutional settings, since group formation there was more top-down, and proceeded less via word of mouth and more from a wide-net recruitment strategy.

DATA POINTS

Deanne's Talmud study group spun off in part from an organic grieving circle that emerged after a member of her synagogue lost their child.

Sara started her ATW group in Long Beach in order to gain her footing in a new community after moving homes.

Strategic Implication:

Introduce groups around identity/life stage in institutional settings, where there's a ready recruitment pool and a more "top-down" formation process.

Domain 1

FORMATION: Additional FAQs

Which, if any, of the emergence models encompasses the scenario in which people see a small group and want to form a group themselves?

In this case, groups would form through the "transformational" process, whereby looser relationships and connections (e.g. neighbors, coworkers, "internet friends") are reorganized and solidified into a new formation. This is because the intimacy of a small group setting requires some sort of vetting mechanism, and even more wide-net outreach would still occur in the spaces or channels the leader is already a part of.

What does dislocation mean?

Dislocation wasn't a singular phenomenon, but one that we saw emerge across a few different contexts: people experienced a sense of dislocation from 1) their spirituality (e.g. reckoning with a death), 2) their material surroundings (e.g. moving to a new state), 3) their immediate community (e.g. going through a divorce), or 4) their sense of self (e.g. becoming a parent).

Domain 2
LEADERSHIP

Most groups began with a core "seed" of 2-3 people.

These seeds fulfilled two key roles: the operator, who handles logistics, tech, and scheduling, and the connector, who invites new members and is the initial social "glue." The connector would also serve as an informal facilitator when necessary. Having multiple people in a core seed (opposed to a solitary leader) ensured a built-in mechanism for accountability and support. As Sara from ATW Long Beach told us, "having a seed group is crucial for sticking with your intention and moving forward."

OPERATOR
Handles logistics, tech, & scheduling.

CONNECTOR∗
Invites new members & is initial social "glue."
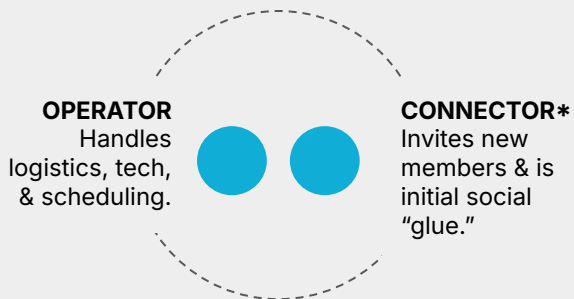
∗During early group formation, connectors tend to serve as informal facilitators, but the mission critical tasks are having people and a place/time to meet.

Strategic Implication:

Focus on incubating groups with dyads and triads that can hold each other accountable from the beginning.

Domain 2

LEADERSHIP

Expertise in either practice or content, but not both, is necessary.

For example, a leader might have experience in close textual analysis, but not know a specific text very well— or they might know an instrument, but not the specific music they'll be playing. Expertise in one domain seemed necessary, though not both. This was because practice expertise could serve as an "anchor" to give leaders confidence when confronting content that was new to them; while they still recognized this content as unknown, they weren't intimidated by it because they had credibility in the adjacent domain.

DATA POINTS

Though Heresy focused on close analysis of unfamiliar texts, the practice of close reading was well-known to members of the group.

During Psychedelic Shabbat, respondents sang Lecha Dodi to the melody of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"— leveraging one familiar song to help people connect to an unfamiliar one.

Strategic Implication:

To scale individual small groups into a movement, focus on developing leaders of practice by leaning into their domains of expertise and supplementing their gaps in knowledge with educational materials.

Domain 2

LEADERSHIP: Additional FAQs

How much expertise does it take for people to have deep encounters with Jewish Wisdom, rather than just a positive experience?

While having expertise in the group's practice area can be helpful in approaching Jewish Wisdom with a mind to deep exploration, it's not necessary to have extensive content expertise. We saw that groups are able to build that knowledge collectively in the moment while exploring ideas in-depth. Ultimately, what was more important than expertise in yielding a deep encounter with Jewish Wisdom was the *intent* behind the engagement. For example, Heresy, which was deeply studying texts because the group found it interesting, had a more "superficial" level of engagement than the ATW groups we observed— which may have had less rigorous practice expertise, but were engaging with the intent to use ideas from content to connect with each other and deepen their relationships.

Domain 3
MENTORSHIP

The best models for leadership training are mentorship and/or coaching.

Though formal training was important in certain contexts, leaders particularly benefited from having a longitudinal, personal relationship with a mentor invested in their growth, or a coach they could consult on an *ad hoc* basis. This interpersonal, fluid model worked well not only because starting a group requires responding to challenges as they emerge, but also because the support leaders needed was emotional in addition to practical, as starting a group requires one to be vulnerable and open oneself up to failure.

DATA POINTS

Pastor Steve Gladen noted that one of the most important things people needed when starting a group was "encouragement" and 1-on-1 support.

Erika (ATW Austin), who provides coaching to women preparing to start their own ATW groups, noted how much they benefit from direct guidance on how to lead.

Strategic Implication:

Training should be relational, i.e. more focused on developing a mentor/mentee bond than traditionally "educational," i.e. going through curricula.

Domain 3
MENTORSHIP

Programmatic, formal facilitation training is important when groups require more structure.

Groups that had any of the following traits tended to require more structure: they met virtually; members didn't know each other beforehand; or they were time-bound (e.g. the group needed to get through a specific program in a set amount of time). While formal training was a way to boost leaders' confidence, that could alternatively be accomplished through lower-lift mentorship models and learning-by-doing.

DATA POINTS

Members of Kirva told us that people tend to be less vocal during virtual meetings, so trained facilitation went a long way in ensuring that everyone was heard.

The Zohar Study Group's leader applied his facilitation training when it came to sparking good discussion among a group of individuals from different communities and backgrounds.

Strategic Implication:

Ensure that training includes guidance on soliciting conversation, developing relationships outside the group, and balancing curricula with open discussion.

Domain 3

MENTORSHIP: Additional FAQs

Can certain kinds of materials— e.g., a video of someone else leading a session— reduce or eliminate the need for training?

Materials can provide key resources for some of the finer-detailed logistical tasks leaders have to engage in— such as a template they can use to draft an email inviting new members— but respondents told us that the best training was in learning through practice.

Could there be a small group of leaders who would go through the training experience and then bring it to their groups?

Because people learn best through experience, having people practice and share techniques together would likely be effective. What's key to making sure that this doesn't create a negative hierarchy within the group is having this training be open to anyone who might be interested (not just appointed "leaders").

Domain 4
STRUCTURE

Groups tend to solidify when they reach ~10-15 members.

This is the size at which groups achieve a **solid state** and can function in the absence of any individual member, without being so large that the now-established practice and culture are affected. Prior to solidification, groups went through a **"gaseous" state**, wherein seeds of 2-3 individuals established a foundational commitment to each other around a given practice, and a **"liquid" state**, wherein growing groups picked up new members and ideas, but the basic expectations around group membership (e.g. commitment levels, meeting cadence) were largely set.
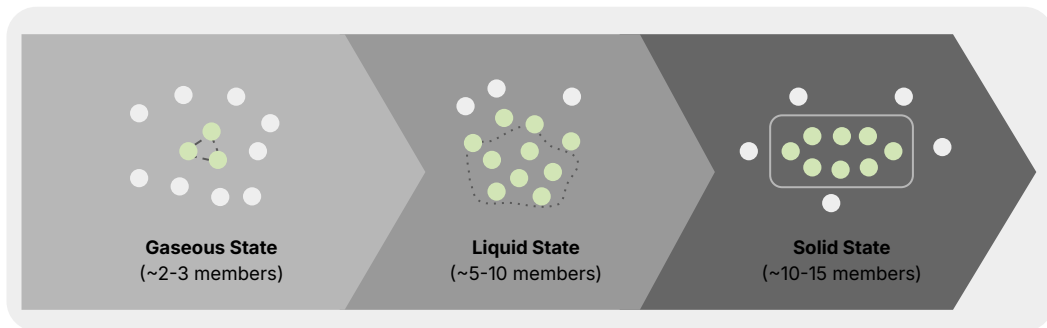
Gaseous State
(~2-3 members)

Liquid State
(~5-10 members)

Solid State
(~10-15 members)

Strategic Implication:

Aim to connect seekers to groups that haven't fully solidified, since those groups are most open to new members and change.

Domain 4
STRUCTURE

Members need to connect beyond the group activity itself.

Relationships that flourish outside of group meetings (e.g. through retreats or group chats), create deeper accountability between members. While coming together around a singular activity is good for one level of cohesion, a deeper meshwork of relationships formed through such "extracurricular" interactions may be necessary for sustainability— especially for groups whose members don't already have close bonds.

DATA POINTS

The Tuesday Night Jam has hosted retreats in order to give members an opportunity to connect as a community outside the narrow context of music.

At The Well leaders and experienced members set up coffee chats with newer members to get to know them on a deeper level outside of the group.

Strategic Implication:

Provide groups with resources for non-programmatic "free time" to support long-term sustainability.

Domain 4
STRUCTURE

Most groups are designed for longevity from the beginning.

This ensures appropriate commitment from members early on and allows leaders to make long-term scheduling decisions. It also responds to the fact that most people don't switch groups regularly because of the high activation energy required to feel like a true member of a given group— once they felt part of the group's fold and connected to other members, people intended to stick around. By contrast, short-term groups were most effective when they were vehicles by which people could *enter* a broader community, or deepen their relationship with one they were already in.

DATA POINTS

Sarene's Torah Study Group has their meetings for an entire year already on the calendar; this helps ensure that people can appropriately prioritize the group.

ATW members spoke of the energy it took to acclimate when they first joined their groups; now comfortably settled as established members, they'd be reluctant to switch to another group.

Strategic Implication:

Encourage leaders to set clear expectations for commitment upfront to ensure longevity.

Domain 4

STRUCTURE: Additional FAQs

Is there a timeline for achieving a solid state?

We didn't observe a consistent pattern when it came to the time groups needed to achieve a solid state— in part because groups start with different levels of familiarity (some might emerge from an existing friend group, while others might emerge from looser contexts).

Should we only focus on groups of 10-15? What about groups that are larger?

Groups that go beyond 10-15 members tend to be something more akin to "small communities" or "communities that haven't grown yet." These groups need much of the same support early on, but will require more infrastructural support (in terms of funding, finding space, etc.) as they grow.

To what extent is a small group a particularly powerful way to have the 3P's (Purpose, Practice, People) working together?

Small groups are a highly effective way to use Practice to connect People, while orienting toward a given Purpose. Importantly, though, a given group may not be formed with a strong mission from the get-go— often, developing that mission happens over time and in a more implicit manner. Thus, small groups teach us that we can use People and Practice to shape Purpose in an organic, collaborative manner.

Domain 4

STRUCTURE: Additional FAQs

What would it look like to have a small groups "movement" where there are elements that cut across groups and interconnectivity between groups, but the focus and content can be different from group to group?

Key to this form of interconnectivity is shared language, particularly around the way groups think about and speak about Jewish Wisdom— as well as an infrastructure of events, spaces (digital and in-person), and resources that can help different small groups cross-pollinate. Establishing this shared macro-culture is not only a task uniquely fit for an organization like a foundation, but also an essential component of having these small groups reinforce each other and scale properly.

Domain 5
VALUES

In the beginning, aligning on logistics takes precedence over defining a mission statement.

Since most groups naturally attracted like-minded people, it was less important to align explicitly on the group's mission early on. Instead, it was logistical alignment that proved more pressing at this stage. A defined mission became more central at later stages as the group introduced new members or navigated conflict—moments when members had to reflect on the implicit rules and assumptions governing the group.

DATA POINTS

It was only when someone introduced a fiction text to Heresy (and the attempt failed) that the group explicitly affirmed its focus on non-fiction books.

When discussing whether or not to let non-Jewish members into already-established Well Circles, ATW groups had to develop a clear sense of what they wanted their membership to look like.

Strategic Implication:

When recruiting new members, be explicit about logistical commitments, but allow them to discover purpose after being invited into a group.

Domain 5
VALUES

Jewish Wisdom should be introduced prior to group solidification or as a "spin-off."

Because the purpose of groups is more malleable early on (and becomes explicit at later stages), it's in these pre-solidification stages that Jewish Wisdom as a theme or focus should be introduced. Otherwise, it can be incorporated into a group that "spins off" from the solidified one. These "spin offs" would be ones in which members understand the focus on Jewish Wisdom from the outset.

DATA POINTS

Rather than try to incorporate Jewish knowledge into JUFJ, which has largely solidified, Kirva decided to spin-off small study groups dedicated to this purpose.

Ezi founded the Tuesday Night Jam as a more community-oriented spin-off of another jam, which was a looser organization that had begun during COVID.

Strategic Implication:

Don't rely on groups to "drift" naturally towards Wisdom— introduce it early on or use it as the impetus for forming a new group.

Domain 5

VALUES: Additional FAQs

How should we think about feelings of transformation that are in-the moment versus those that might be more stable and long lasting?

Repeated momentary feelings of transformation can build up to a more constant state of living out Jewish wisdom as individuals engage consistently with groups. While one such experience may not be immediately transformative beyond the group setting, repetition of that experience can build greater recognition of how a particular practice can enrich one's life, giving people an avenue to apply Jewish wisdom on their own time. We should think about these moments as critical vectors for deeper engagement, rather than superfluous one-off events.

Category	Finding	Recommendation
Formation	Groups emerge from, or in response to, their existing environments.	Seed groups out of existing communities, rather than starting them from a blank slate.
	Groups that catalyze in response to a sense of dislocation tend to be the most meaningful.	Introduce groups around identity/life stage in institutional settings, where there's a ready recruitment pool and a more "top-down" formation process.
Leadership	Most groups began with a core "seed" of 2-3 people.	Focus on incubating groups with dyads and triads that can hold each other accountable from the beginning.
	Expertise in either practice or content, but not both, is necessary.	To scale individual small groups into a movement, focus on developing leaders of practice (rather than content-familiarity).
Mentorship	The best models for leadership training are mentorship and/or coaching.	Training should be relational, i.e. more focused on developing a mentor/mentee bond than traditionally "educational," i.e. going through curricula.
	Programmatic, formal facilitation training is important when groups require more structure.	Ensure that training includes guidance on soliciting conversation, developing relationships outside the group, and balancing curricula with open discussion.
Structure	Groups tend to solidify when they reach ~10-15 members.	Aim to connect seekers to groups that haven't fully solidified, since those groups are still open to new members and change.
	Members need to connect beyond the group activity itself.	Provide groups with resources for non-programmatic "free time" to support long-term sustainability.
	Most groups are designed for longevity from the beginning.	Encourage leaders to set clear expectations for commitment upfront.
Values	In the beginning, aligning on logistics takes precedence over defining a mission statement.	When recruiting new members, be explicit about logistical commitments, but allow them to discover purpose after being invited into a group.
	Jewish Wisdom should be introduced prior to group solidification or as a "spin-off."	Don't rely on groups to "drift" naturally towards Wisdom— introduce it early on or use it as the impetus for forming a new group.

INNOVATION AREAS

**Opportunity Pillars
& Thought Starters**

Critically, the transformation induced by these groups happened when they felt like they were engaging deeply with Wisdom.

"There's something powerful about going back to the source. The ancient wisdom feels so relevant now that I'm aware of it, and it's helping me make changes in my life."

— Erika, ATW Austin

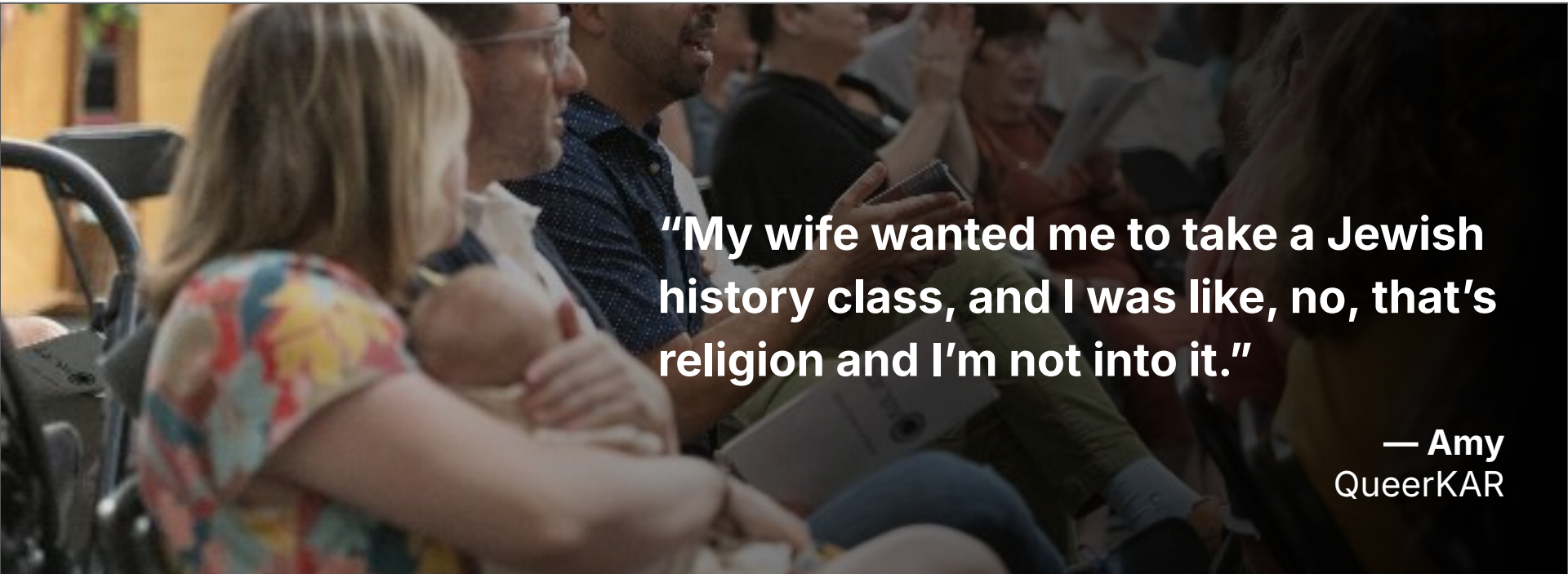"I've been able to apply these Mussar principles to have better interactions with everyone I meet."

— Wendy, Kirva

"This feels like a community of practice that's giving me a space to grow spiritually and go through a journey of maturing."

— Zach, Psychedelic Shabbat

"You need to be clear about what people are working towards; the more vague it is, the more wandering you'll get."

Steve Gladen
Saddleback Church

Our challenge is that many people don't have a unified perception of Judaism as Wisdom— they see it as culture, identity, and religion.

"My wife wanted me to take a Jewish history class, and I was like, no, that's religion and I'm not into it."

— Amy
QueerKAR

For Jewish Wisdom to flourish, we'll need to reframe it under a broader philosophy.

Critically, this philosophy will have to distinguish itself from a prescriptive religion or cultural identity. This is an opportunity to reimagine how Jewish Wisdom can come to life.

Religions like Buddhism have done this by adapting their fundamental strengths to speak to contemporary needs.

Speaking to a secular audience
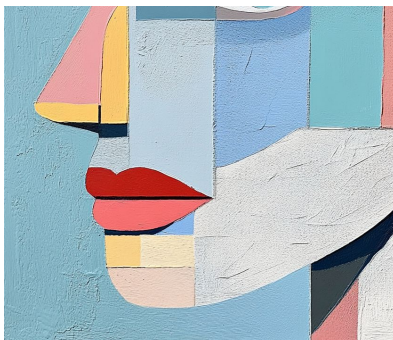
Buddhism's countercultural image caters to a "spiritual but not religious" segment searching for meaning on their own terms.

Providing approachable content
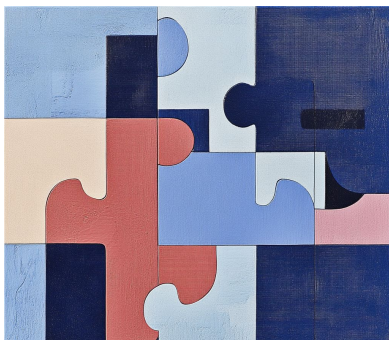
Buddhism is characterized by simple concepts that distill complex worldviews (e.g. Karma) into ways of life that are easily internalized.

Sharing tools for the modern age

Modern-day Buddhism champions convenient daily practices (e.g. breathing exercises) that help people navigate contemporary challenges.

Focus on experience, not doctrine

Buddhism has an empirical approach, encouraging people to test its teachings through their own experience rather than accepting doctrines on faith alone.

Buddhism's multi-sensorial nature has also helped bring its wisdom to life for many.
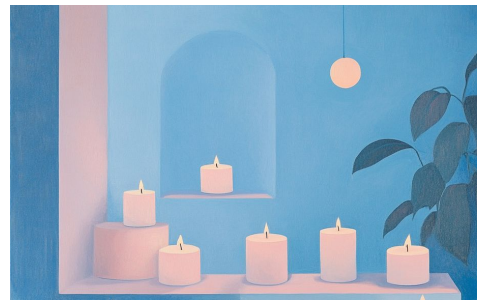
Breathing exercises

Physical practices like breathing exercises make wisdom a lived experience rather than just an intellectual one.
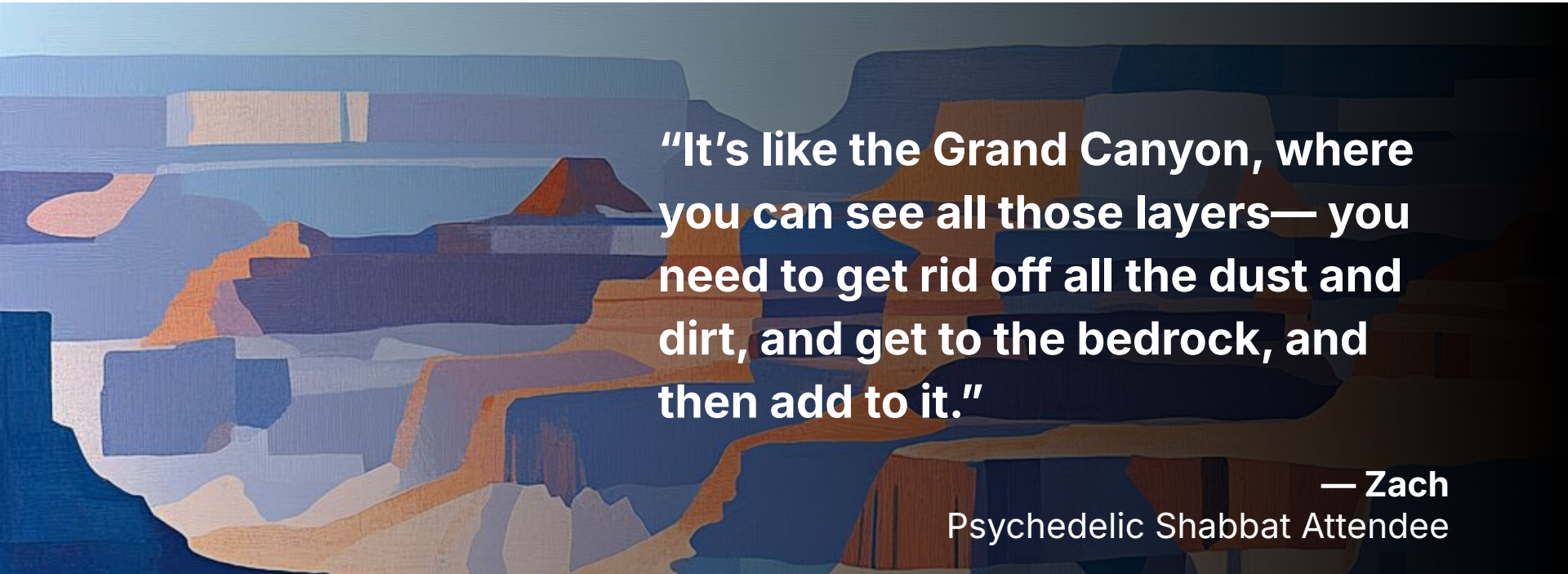
Meditation

Meditation embodies mindfulness, allowing people to directly encounter wisdom and its tangible benefits.

Multisensory spaces

Music, incense, mandalas, and other atmospheric elements provide avenues to hear, feel and breathe wisdom in Buddhist spaces.

To do the same for Judaism, we need to return to the fundamentals of the Wisdom tradition.

"It's like the Grand Canyon, where you can see all those layers— you need to get rid off all the dust and dirt, and get to the bedrock, and then add to it."

— Zach
Psychedelic Shabbat Attendee

Our conversations revealed that Jewish Wisdom had foundational strengths that small groups were already gravitating towards.

Encourages Questioning

Respondents prized the ability to ask questions: Amy (QueerKAR) told us that she "[appreciated] the way questioning is not just okay, but expected."

Guides Action in the World

Respondents liked that they were able to put what they learned from small groups into practice— for example, Kirva participants applied *Mussar* concepts to their day-to-day interactions.

Ancient & Time-Tested

The value of ancient knowledge resonated with respondents: Jessica (ATW) told us that "[the fact that] people have followed it for thousands of years made it click for me right away."

Founded in Joy

Many respondents noted how their small groups didn't take themselves too seriously; rather, they brought them joyous moments to look forward to.

More deeply, we saw elements of the Jewish tradition that were poised to meet the needs of today's world.

Intrinsically Communal

At a time when Americans are spending [much of their time alone](#), finding community is more important— and more difficult— than ever, making the Jewish tradition's communal focus immensely valuable.

"This is a wonderful group of people. We've become very close friends, we come to each other's events all the time, and we support each other.

— Tirza, Zohar Study Group

Essentially Discursive

Spaces for healthy discourse can feel few and far between in today's polarized climate; Jewish Wisdom's emphasis on thoughtful discourse is a welcome opportunity for dialogue.

"From the start, we've allowed each other to be safe to say what we think and disagree. It's hard to find a space like that."

— Marielli, ATW Long Beach

Transforming Jewish Wisdom into a broader philosophy requires us to establish a vision small groups can rally around, and equip them with the tools to make that vision their own.

Pillar 1
EXPLORATION & UNLEARNING

Jewish Wisdom must be presented as a philosophy— an ancient truth that can become felt, practiced, and practical without exhaustive study.

Pillar 2
DISCOVERY & CREATIVITY

To own discourse, practices must establish shared intent and vulnerability so that meaningful conversation can occur without fear of lacking "expertise."

Pillar 3
VITALITY & EMBODIMENT

Jewish Wisdom must be seen as a practice— not simply "knowledge" that is obtained, but rejuvenating "know-how" that is practiced and embedded into everyday life.

Pillar 1

EXPLORATION & UNLEARNING

Exploration & Unlearning:

Guiding Objective

We must establish Jewish Wisdom as an ancient truth that can become felt, practiced, and practical without exhaustive study— and in doing so, define an inviting canon where ancient Wisdom becomes actionable life skills for all.

Key Considerations:

1

Jewish people don't feel Jewish enough.

2

Non-Jews don't know where to start.

3

Many identify as "spiritual, but not religious."

Exploration & Unlearning:
Design Principles
To help ensure that Wisdom feels accessible and resonant.

Emphasize Discourse	Create Multiple Entry Points	Keep Language Grounded	Emphasize History & Time	Find Physical Expressions
Educational programs and syllabi should be geared towards learning through discourse & questioning— not top-down, one-way instruction.	Groups should be designed with "points of entry" programming that can help people feel at ease.	Language and curricula should feel relatable and implementable in people's lives, rather than abstract or overly complex.	Drawing out the ancient qualities of Jewish Wisdom can help present it as foundational, tested, and relevant truths for navigating the world.	Incorporating physical modalities into practice can help people access deeply felt forms of understanding without extensive study.

Exploration & Unlearning:

Initial Innovation Territories

Creating content and resources for people to reimagine Judaism.

Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World

Ancient Wisdom must be presented as a way to help people make sense of the world that they currently live in.

Owning Paradox And Seeking With Humility

People are wary of simple answers—instead, Wisdom must lean into the difficulty of the questions people are grappling with.

Knowledge That's Immediately Felt

To get over the sense of "not knowing enough," knowledge should be introduced in ways that are immediately felt and tangible.

Innovation Territory #1:

Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World

The idea of Jewish Wisdom as Ancient Wisdom resonated with participants because it not only gave them permission to develop a more immediate relationship with the source of Wisdom (rather than the surrounding discourses they might be intimidated by) but also spoke to a truth that felt foundational, universal, and situated in deep time in a cultural moment that felt fragmented and near-sighted.

Thought Starters:

LOW LIFT
WISDOM FOR MODERN ANGST
Create a guide that takes 10-15 key concepts from the Jewish Wisdom tradition relevant to a specific modern topic of seeking (e.g. technology use, masculinity, relationship to nature) and provides practices that people can do with others in that spirit.

HIGH LIFT
FORUMS FOR GROUP WISDOM
Make a forum focused on small groups interested in Jewish Wisdom. This would be both a space where different groups can learn from one another, and where individuals can find new groups to participate in (e.g. if they are moving).

HIGH LIFT
SMALL GROUP SUMMITS
In order to develop a "movement" of small groups in dialogue with each other, host an annual event that brings together different small groups around a given theme (Tikkun Olam, Elu va'elu) that the various groups can explore through art, physical practice, etc.

Innovation Territory #2:

Owning Paradox And Seeking With Humility

In a meaning-making ecosystem oversaturated with promises of simple solutions, people are interested in ways of learning that recognize the difficulty of the questions they're asking. As one recent *Atlantic* article put it, "many seekers don't want a faith that is easy and accessible. They want something difficult and strange." Respondents expressed a similar sentiment when they shared that one of their favorite of Jewish Wisdom was the ability to question and challenge.

Thought Starters:

MEDIUM LIFT
INTERGENERATIONAL MENTORSHIP
As an alternative to a traditional facilitator training class, create a program that pairs leaders at different stages of their journey together so that they can learn by questioning and growing together.

HIGH LIFT
RESISTING EASY ANSWERS
Identify one key area of dislocation where people need guidance (e.g. death, leaving a religious community, being Jewish post-October 7th) and create a program explicitly positioned as an alternative to the easy, singular answers offered by most institutions.

Innovation Territory #3:

Knowledge That's Immediately Felt

In order to overcome imposter syndrome and the feeling of not "knowing enough," it's critical to help people feel or experience knowledge through different modalities. Many respondents spoke about Wisdom as something that's not "known" first and foremost, but "felt"— which then spurs the desire to learn more.

Thought Starters:

LOW LIFT
ACTIVATING KNOWLEDGE
Create a guide that pairs specific pieces of Wisdom with practices that help "activate" it or bring it to life—e.g. when teaching about the pause between stimulus and response, illustrate it with a breathing exercise.

MEDIUM LIFT
NEW RHYTHMS
Have small groups experiment with alternative meeting rhythms (around seasons, the cadences of the body or the Earth, lunar cycles) that have roots in Jewish tradition to spur new opportunities for reflection.

HIGH LIFT
CAUSE-BASED SPIN-OFFS
Partner with a cause-based organization (around, e.g. climate) to develop a short-term group that helps members approach the topic through the lens of Jewish Wisdom— deepening their relationship to both the cause and Jewish practice.

Pillar 2

DISCOVERY & CREATIVITY

PILLAR 2

Discovery & Creativity:
Guiding Objective

Practices must establish shared intent and vulnerability so that meaningful conversation can occur without fear of lacking "expertise."

Key Considerations:

1

Fear of lacking expertise can keep people from deeply engaging with Wisdom

2

Vulnerable discussion helps people overcome intimidation

3

Creating an environment that supports discovery requires intention-setting

Discovery & Creativity:
Design Principles
To establish shared intent and vulnerability.

Create Small, Safe Spaces

Group environments should be designed as safe spaces, with a comfortable atmosphere and a group size small enough that everyone can contribute.

Display Vulnerability

Leaders should set an example in modeling vulnerability, helping members feel more comfortable expressing personal challenges and asking deep questions.

Structure Meeting Beginnings

Group meetings should have a structured start to set a shared intent and mark off the meeting as a sacred time for reflection.

Support Multiple Paths of Development

Development and growth of members and leaders should feel open-ended—responding to personal strengths rather than a predetermined idea of what it means to be a "good" leader or member.

Emphasize Building Blocks

Communicating the fundamental purpose of rituals and practices gives people permission to make it their own, which is ultimately key to having rituals stick and resonate.

Discovery & Creativity:

Initial Innovation Territories

Creating spaces for meaningful connection with others.

Cultivating Lasting Community

Effective groups require not just capable, empowered leaders, but a membership community where people are accountable to one another.

Creating Sacred Spaces

To become meaningful, small groups must help people transcend the ordinary through rituals and practices.

Owning Meaningful Discourse

To spark connection and meaning-making, groups must embrace and encourage vulnerable dialogue.

Innovation Territory #1:

Cultivating Lasting Community

As opposed to larger groups, the advantage of small groups is that individual members are able to have personal relationships with each other. Respondents told us that nurturing "accountability" to one another was key to keeping their groups going. For a small group to thrive, it's critical that these kinds of personal relationships are leveraged effectively.

Thought Starters:

HIGH LIFT
INCUBATING A CORE SEED
Jumpstart next-generation leaders through a fellowship/incubator model that matches 2-3 people into the "seed" group necessary to establish a small group, along with a mentor.

HIGH LIFT
SPIRITUAL OUTREACH
Create a digital product that people can use to invite others to their small group— something like Partiful (which has an approachable UX and leverages intimate comms channels, like text), but geared specifically towards recurrent small group meetings.

LOW LIFT
THE BUDDY SYSTEM
When designing groups, pair off new group members with each other to develop a close relationship within the group and keep each other accountable for showing up to meetings, maintaining a practice, etc.

Innovation Territory #2
Creating Sacred Spaces

Rituals and practices that help mark off small group spaces as something something sacred— a place where people might grow and reflect— go a long way in helping set intent during a gathering. Most groups we observed began meetings with a ritual, had food and drink for members, and hosted in intimate spaces, like homes. Wisdom needs the right kind of atmosphere to flourish, and cultivating that atmosphere is critical.

Thought Starters:

LOW LIFT
RITUALS TO START FROM
Create instructions for establishing a candle-lighting ritual that sets an intention for a group meeting. Highlight the ritual's importance in creating a sacred moment of reflection.

HIGH LIFT
HOMEY ENVIRONMENTS
Partner with an architect to create a design blueprint that synagogues and other institutional spaces can use to create spaces that feel "homey" and generate a sense of intimacy or vulnerability.

MEDIUM LIFT
RECIPES FOR WISDOM
Create a cookbook that people can use when hosting gatherings, tying the recipes themselves to relevant rituals and pieces of Jewish Wisdom that can be shared with the group.

Innovation Territory #3:

Owning Meaningful Discourse

Respondents repeatedly spoke of the acts of questioning and discourse as key elements of Jewish Wisdom. The meaningful discussions people talked about were distinguished from everyday small talk and pleasantries. As such, in order to happen, they require an intentional culture and environment that invites people to open up.

Thought Starters:

HIGH LIFT
NETWORK OF EXPERTS
Bring in 'guest speakers' who can expertly speak to the group's themes. Not only can this help spur new avenues of conversation within the group, but it also has a legitimizing effect on members' perceptions of the group.

MEDIUM LIFT
TAKING DISCOURSE OUTSIDE
Create a ChatBot that small group members can use to have meaningful text discussions outside of group meetings. Have the Bot send periodic prompts that encourage reflection, as well as contribute to group discussion with thoughtful responses.

LOW LIFT
GROWING THE GROUP WITH WISDOM
Create a guide that incorporates key concepts in Jewish Wisdom that leaders can use to discuss evolving practice, process, and structure— so that even if the group isn't explicitly focused content-wise on Jewish Wisdom, the way it runs is imbued with it.

Pillar 3
PHYSICALITY & JOY

Physicality & Joy:

Guiding Objective

Jewish Wisdom must be seen as a practice— not simply "knowledge" that is obtained, but rejuvenating "know-how" that is practiced and embedded into everyday life.

Key Considerations:

1

Wisdom is not something merely studied, but felt.

2

Building a meaningful life comes from repetition and habit.

3

Living out Wisdom is a joyful exercise, not a rigid discipline.

Physicality & Joy:

Design Principles

To establish Wisdom as know-how.

Create Multi-Modal Programming

Groups should support all styles of learning – from auditory, to oral, to visual, to kinesthetic.

Emphasize Routine

To encourage spiritual engagement and growth, programming should help group members form lasting routines around practice.

Provide a Foundation for Individual Practice

Groups should give people an established practice that they can then build upon and experiment with individually – in other words, a way, but not a right way.

Speak In Multiple Languages

Language should be open and flexible in order to capture the benefits of a practice through multiple angles: spiritually, scientifically, socially, etc.

Make Wisdom Joyful

Even though group practices might ultimately be geared towards higher-order benefits, like transformation, it's important to also emphasize the joy found in immediate experience.

Physicality & Joy:

Initial Innovation Territories

Incorporating learnings into life.

Choose Your Own Adventure

Where starting from scratch can feel daunting for many, we can provide ways for people of all learning styles to establish an initial practice.

Launching Experimentation

We can provide an inviting alternative to rigid study, where trusting one's intuition and experimenting with different practice forms is encouraged.

Taking Joy Seriously

We can convey the tangible life benefits of joyous practices such as making music, dancing, and helping others.

Innovation Territory #1:

Choose Your Own Adventure

For small groups to promote personal fulfillment, it's important that they feel inclusive, providing enough practice variety for people with different styles of learning to engage successfully. Respondents were appreciative of group activities that gave them room to lean into formats and approaches that came most naturally to them.

Thought Starters:

HIGH LIFT
WISDOM CENTERS
Create a Wisdom center— modeled off of contemporary Zen centers— designed to support and host a diverse ecosystem of practices. In contrast to existing institutions, this would be non-hierarchical and revolve primarily around small group programming.

LOW LIFT
MEETING MAD LIBS
Develop meeting agenda templates that provide prompts for members to improvise and create their own practices in a fun and light-touch way.

Innovation Territory #2:

Building A Wisdom Habit

Respondents often didn't speak of Wisdom as analytic or factual knowledge— which came with attendant fears of being right or wrong. Rather, they took it to be an ongoing practice; a spiritual "fitness" that they might exercise and cultivate over time.

Thought Starters:

HIGH LIFT
SPIRITUAL STRAVA
Build a platform for social sharing of spiritual practice and milestones hit, with congratulatory and reward mechanisms.

LOW LIFT
HABIT-BUILDING "CHALLENGES"
Develop group-level challenges that hold members accountable for sticking to a given practice over a defined timeline— with the goal of encouraging members to make that practice a routine.

Innovation Territory #3:

Taking Joy Seriously

Rather than something superfluous that distracted from deeper pursuits, respondents saw joy as a partner in the journey towards Wisdom. Developing a Wisdom practice that takes joy seriously—without trying to over-optimize or over-engineer it— will be key to long-term nourishment.

Thought Starters:

HIGH LIFT
SHOW, DON'T TELL THE BENEFITS
Take a cue from media formats such as D&D podcasts (like *Critical Role*) or therapy shows (like *Couples Therapy*) and create a program about people actively participating in small groups in order to show firsthand the benefits of participating.

MEDIUM LIFT
JOYOUS GROUP RETREAT
Create an infrastructure that small groups can use to plan periodic retreats for relationship-building and collective fun, including agendas and suggested activities.

LOW LIFT
FROM MOMENTARY JOY TO DEEPER RECOGNITION
Develop a journal that prompts people to track their moods in a way that helps them reflect on the trail of positive feelings left in the wake of a successful gathering— as well as the deeper reasoning behind those positive feelings.

These pillars should work together to create the perspective and resources needed to enable the adoption of Wisdom by small groups.

Pillar 1
EXPLORATION & UNLEARNING

Pillar 2
DISCOVERY & CREATIVITY

Pillar 3
VITALITY & EMBODIMENT

Territory 1
Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World

Territory 1
Cultivating Lasting Community

Territory 1
Choose Your Own Adventure

Territory 2
Owning Paradox And Seeking With Humility

Territory 2
Creating Sacred Spaces

Territory 1
Building A Wisdom Habit

Territory 3
Knowledge That's Immediately Felt

Territory 3
Owning Meaningful Discourse

Territory 1
Taking Joy Seriously

Critically, this Wisdom must be discursive— a Wisdom that connects people from generation to generation in an ongoing dialogue.

This has never been more relevant, because discourse is...

built into the DNA of Judaism.

connection in a world of disconnection.

action-oriented and outward-facing.

a robust journey in a world of quick fixes.

not just of the mind, but embodied and felt.

Small groups are themselves a strategy for the rebranding of Jewish Wisdom.

But using them effectively requires us to establish the space between a mass market and granular organic approach that can push messaging to relevant audiences while pulling in those who are seeking.
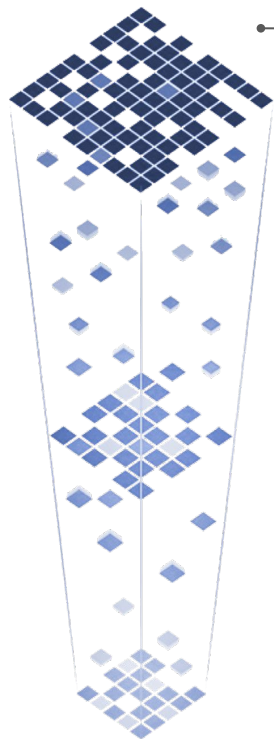
TOP DOWN & MASS MARKET
Broadcast messaging is an effective institutional approach, but will be too general to successfully activate small group self-organization on its own.

MEDIATING & SELF-REINFORCING
LKFLT must focus on building the ideas, products, and infrastructures that will personalize a cohesive message to specific groups, while giving individual groups spaces to connect in order to form a broader movement.

BOTTOM-UP & ORGANIC
Grassroots marketing strategy is effective at establishing authenticity, but is difficult to turn into a movement without a broader platform or charismatic leader to broadcast ideas.

Appendix

FAQs & Synthesis Slides

Conditions for Stickiness:
FORMATION

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

Groups emerge from, or in response to, their existing environments.

This happens in four primary ways: a group can 1) **transform** from one to another, 2) spin off from another group in **opposition** to a perceived lack, 3) **symbiotically** deepen a relationship to a broader group, or 4) be a combination or **synthesis** of two separate groups.

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Data Point: Psychedelic Shabbat emerged when an existing, casual friend group decided to **transform** into a more spiritually inflected one.

Strategic Implication: Seed groups out of existing communities, rather than starting them from a blank slate.

Groups that catalyze in response to a sense of dislocation tend to be the most meaningful.

These moments of dislocation tended to revolve around life stages or identity: becoming a new parent, experiencing death, moving to a new city, etc. However, organically-formed small groups were rarely primarily focused on those changes, as that made membership too rigid.

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Data Point: Deanne's Talmud study group spun off in part from an organic grieving circle that emerged after a member of her synagogue lost their child.

Strategic Implication: Introduce groups around identity/life stage in institutional settings, where there's a ready recruitment pool and a more "top-down" formation process.

Conditions for Stickiness:

LEADERSHIP

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

Most groups began with a core "seed" of 2-3 people.

These seeds fulfilled two key roles: the operator, who handles logistics, tech, and scheduling, and the connector, who invites new members and is the initial social "glue." The connector would also serve as an informal facilitator when necessary.

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Data Point: The House of Light Jam was run by Ezi and Rifki, who served as the connector and facilitator respectively, and Shmuli, who was responsible for administrative tasks.

Strategic Implication: Focus on incubating groups with dyads and triads that can hold each other accountable from the beginning.

Expertise in either practice or content, but not both, is necessary.

For example, a leader might have experience in close textual analysis, but not know a specific text very well— or they might know an instrument, but not the specific music they'll be playing. Expertise in one domain seemed necessary, though not both.

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Data Point: Though Heresy focused on close analysis of unfamiliar texts, the practice of close reading was well-known to members of the group.

Strategic Implication: To scale individual small groups into a movement, focus on developing leaders of practice (rather than content-familiarity).

Conditions for Stickiness:

MENTORSHIP

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

The best models for leadership training are mentorship and/or coaching.

Though formal training was important in certain contexts, leaders particularly benefited from having a longitudinal, personal relationship with a mentor invested in their growth, or a coach they could consult on an *ad hoc* basis.

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Data Point: Pastor Steve Gladen noted that one of the most important things people needed when starting a group was "encouragement" and 1-on-1 support.

Strategic Implication: Training should be relational, i.e. more focused on developing a mentor/mentee bond than traditionally "educational," i.e. going through curricula.

Programmatic, formal facilitation training is important when groups require more structure.

Groups that had any of the following traits tended to require more structure: they met virtually; members didn't know each other beforehand; or they were time-bound (e.g. the group needed to get through a specific program in a set amount of time).

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Data Point: Members of Kirva told us that people tend to be less vocal during virtual meetings, so trained facilitation went a long way in ensuring that everyone was heard.

Strategic Implication: Ensure that training includes guidance on soliciting conversation, developing relationships outside the group, and balancing curricula with open discussion.

Conditions for Stickiness:
STRUCTURE

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

Groups tend to solidify when they reach ~10-15 members.

This is the size at which groups can function in the absence of any individual member, without being so large that the now-established practice and culture are affected.

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Data Point: Sara (ATW Long Beach) told us that she wants to keep her group ~12 members because a larger group would make the space feel less intimate.

Strategic Implication: Aim to connect seekers to groups that haven't fully solidified, since those groups are still open to new members and change.

Members need to connect beyond the group activity itself.

Relationships that flourish outside of group meetings (e.g. through retreats or group chats), create deeper accountability between members.

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Data Point: The Tuesday Night Jam has hosted retreats in order to give members an opportunity to connect as a community outside the narrow context of music.

Strategic Implication: Provide groups with resources for non-programmatic "free time" to support long-term sustainability.

Most groups are designed for longevity from the beginning.

This ensures appropriate commitment from members early on. It also responds to the fact that most people don't switch groups regularly because the high activation energy required.

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Data Point: ATW Austin has their meetings for an entire year already on the calendar; this helps ensure people can appropriately prioritize the group.

Strategic Implication: Encourage leaders to set clear expectations for commitment upfront.

Conditions for Stickiness:
VALUES

KEY OBSERVATION:

In the beginning, aligning on logistics takes precedence over defining a mission statement.

Since most groups naturally attracted like-minded people, it was less important to align explicitly on the group's mission early on (logistical alignment was more pressing at this stage). A defined mission became more central at later stages as the group introduced new members or navigated conflict.

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Data Point: It was only when someone introduced a fiction text to Heresy (and the attempt failed) that the group explicitly affirmed its focus on non-fiction books.

Strategic Implication: When recruiting new members, be explicit about logistical commitments, but allow them to discover purpose after being invited into a group.

Jewish Wisdom should be introduced prior to group solidification or as a "spin-off."

Because the purpose of groups is more malleable early on (and becomes explicit at later stages), it's in these pre-solidification stages that Jewish Wisdom as a theme or focus should be introduced. Otherwise, it can be incorporated into a group that "spins off" from the solidified one.

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Data Point: Rather than try to incorporate Jewish knowledge into JUFJ, which has largely solidified, Kirva decided to spin-off small study groups dedicated to this purpose.

Strategic Implication: Don't rely on groups to "drift" naturally towards Wisdom— introduce it early on or use it as the impetus for forming a new group.