

WHY COMMUNITIES ARE HOT

DAVID
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Mobile made by Sheri Avraham for the Vienna Salon, photo: Kerstin Zimmermann

I always lamented the day I passed from being a *madrich* (leader) to *boger* (graduate) of my youth movement, Habonim Dror. At age 21, I was cast into the void of the largely barren ground of pre-married Jewish life. What's more, living in the East End, I was obliged to schlep north of Camden market to find anything of Jewish interest.

It was when I attended the **Jewdas** PunkPurim in Whitechapel that it dawned on me that a genuinely new, alternative and cool community of young Jews was emerging in London. For the first time, the needle of the Jewish cultural compass was beginning to swing south, west and east too – orienting a new and very different Jewish generation.

Much has been written about Jewdas, the subversive Jewish organisation, led by manifold members all calling themselves Geoffrey Cohen. The moniker, which intentionally provokes confusion with the former Rabbi of Stanmore Synagogue, is informally adopted as the nom de plume by all those that speak in the name of the London-based group.

Cloaked by anonymity, the events and campaigns that are staged under the Jewdas umbrella are as brilliant as they are often surreal. In September 2006 it really hit the news, when at Simcha on the Square several members were arrested for distributing flyers promoting a party, The Protocols of the Elders of Hackney. The greatest crime that day may have been the sense of humour failure of the police, as despite the obviously satirical nature of the flyers, they were mistaken for being antisemitic and inciting racial hatred. The party went ahead, though moved from its planned location at an East London synagogue.

Their website (www.jewdas.org) is an extension in the same vein with its Make

Melanie Smile campaign (calling on readers to submit a joke to bring a smile to the face of the notoriously grim right-wing political commentator Melanie Phillips) and Weirid Jews 100, a list mirroring the *Jewish Chronicle's* Power 100, highlighting the UK's strangest community members.

Jewdas may be the most highly publicised example of this new movement, but it follows in the wake of **Wandering Jews**. Founded by a Reform, a Liberal and an Orthodox Jew, the self-organising collective has been meeting for four years to "eat and pray and drink and be". Never going to the same house twice, and hosted by a new person every time, it is very much a new form of minyan.

Its philosophy and principles create a very different spiritual space to the synagogue. The collective is hyper-democratic (whoever is hosting an event can run it as they like), and post-philanthropic. It eschews offers of funding because it believes that asking for funding is akin to asking for permission to exist.

What has made this article particularly difficult to write is that, like Jewdas, Wandering Jews and its founders generally avoid publicity. In both instances, the media is essentially redundant as events are not advertised, but spread through word of mouth.

Others, too, have followed a similar tack, including the **Carlebach Minyan** Belsize Park, founded by Gaby Pomeroy, which exists as a secret facebook group operating an invite-a-friend policy. Meeting in people's houses, as well as in more exotic locations from Whitstable beach to a Suffolk vineyard, the group convenes most often for Friday night services in the style of the infamous 'Singing Rabbi' Shlomo Carlebach.

NAOMI SOETENDORP, 34, is the inspirational co-founder of Wandering Jews. A social worker by profession, she helped set up WJ "out of enlightened self interest and playful curiosity, to create an open and free form community in Kilburn, with no greater ambition than that at the start."

There was much debate at first as to whether such a group could be formed and what exactly it would offer, until Soetendorp said that they should just do it and see. She readily admits that at times "we don't always know what we are doing. But it's the nights that we don't have skilled daveners present that I love the most, because those are the nights that those who are present are forced



to ask themselves, on an existential level, why are we doing this at all. There's no easy answer to that, but I cherish having a space where that question is regularly unavoidable."

Soetendorp comments that "for some, WJ is as close as they are prepared to get to a 'traditional community'; others come to WJ and additionally go with people they meet there to traditional services. It makes them feel less isolated going to a new shul for the first time." Four years on, WJ has taken on a life of its own, most recently with a group establishing itself in Denver, and continuing to move from house to house across London.

www.wanderingjews.co.uk

DAVID CYGIELMAN, 27, is co-founder and executive director of Moishe House. He was running the children's services at Santa Barbara Hillel when one day at lunch an older man struck up a conversation with him. He asked Cygielman what he would do if he had a million dollars a year to spend on something other than himself. The man was billionaire and Jewish philanthropist Morris Squire and together the two conceived a new form of community for young Jews. Recognising the lack of dynamic opportunities between graduating college and settling down, the concept is to empower those with an interest "to create their own communities in their own image".

For Cygielman, the idea evolved naturally. "As someone that had recently graduated college, I had



four Jewish friends who were all roommates. They were all very positive about their Jewish identity but did not feel comfortable at any of the Jewish institutions in their city. Rather than doing nothing, they agreed to essentially turn their home into a Jewish community centre for their peers. The first Shabbat had 73 people and that was the beginning of what is now Moishe House." Three years later there are 23 houses in seven countries.

www.moishehouse.org



BENNY BAILEY, 38, is a social worker by profession and a Tel Aviv cafe owner too. Based in Israel, he developed the idea for the Jewish Salons whilst studying in New York.

Bailey's motivation grew out of personal experience, travelling to many Jewish communities around the world and speaking to Jews of his age. "What I discovered is that outside of Israel, Jewish communal language is either political or religious. Culture is not at the forefront. Jews of our generation though – in their 30s – are more cautious of ideology, not engaged in synagogues. So I began to think of another kind of environment to appeal to those that wish to engage Jewishly, for whom there is no alternative to the mainstream."

He also hopes in time to set up a Salon in Tel Aviv to raise "Israeli consciousness to Jewish life and peoplehood," but recognises that this will be a big challenge.

Jewish Salons is currently in its pilot phase, but Bailey has the ambition to extend the idea to more communities where there are few options open for young Jews on the fringes. Currently Jewish Salons are events, but in time he hopes that they will become permanent venues – establishing roots, out of which stronger communities can grow.

www.jewishsalons.net

The Belsize Park group is part of an international network of such minyanim in cities worldwide. The emphasis is very much on the singing, followed by a communal meal to which all are invited to contribute a dish or a bottle. As with Wandering Jews, the fare is vegetarian to ensure that all can be included. The evening may conclude with a poetry slam (a recital of poems by attendees), depending on the wishes of the host.

Moishe House is also part of an international network, but it differs from its precursors in embracing an open profile through a Facebook group of over 600 subscribers. Founded in late 2007, it is one of a number of houses worldwide that double up as centres of a grassroots Jewish community funded by the US-based Forest Foundation. The house in Willesden is the first of its kind in the UK, with sister houses across America and from Beijing to Buenos Aires.

There are currently six residents in the Willesden house who host regular events from film screenings to open mike nights; Torah study to social activism workshops. The benefit for those living at the house is that the subsidy from the Foundation means that they pay rent of 25% to 75% below market rates. The obligation is to facilitate the programming, for which they also receive a budget, and open up the house to guests.

Jewish Salons also span the globe from Amsterdam to Mexico City, but with an emphasis on arts and culture. The organisation facilitates events specifically located in middle-sized Jewish communities, mirroring the focus of the Moishe Houses, in order to fill a vacuum that otherwise may exist in terms of alternative Jewish programming. Intentionally founded with the purpose of appealing to young Jews on the fringe of their communities, or with no affiliation at all, it offers an inclusive experience of Judaism through contemporary media, from art to film.

Founded by Benny Bailey, and involving former JR committee member, Paul Gross, the project was piloted in Tel Aviv and then taken to Budapest in 2007. Jewish Salons is very much an idea of its age, open source, so young Jews that want to bring it to their city are given the tools to organise their own local event and can adapt it as they best see fit. Most recently Vienna hosted its first Jewish Salon, appropriately titled *Bereschit* (in the beginning).

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What connects these cool communities is their non-denominational perspective and democratic and peer-led perspective. They have grown up from the grassroots amongst a generation that crave an informal and inclusive environment. Traditional barriers erected – in the literal sense of the mechitzahs of Orthodox synagogues – have been torn down and a more egalitarian approach predominates. One is as likely to find women as men leading these communities. All share an openness, which

extends to welcoming non-Jews and none are affiliated with any of the main community organisations. They appeal to young Jews in their 20s and 30s. The nucleus of the groups tend towards those that are single, but not exclusively so.

In researching this article, I attended events from the Rootless Cosmopolitan Yeshiva organised by Jewdas to the Carlebach Minyan's Midtime Sunday Teatime Salon. What is common to them all is a vibrancy and vitality that I so often find

lacking in more traditional community events for Jews of my ilk.

The beauty though is that there is no formula to the success of these cool communities. They are hot, because they intentionally strive not to be cool.

David Russell is a member of the Congregation of Jacob Synagogue in the East End: www.congregationofjacob.org

THE BROWN DOOR

AGI ERDOS on a New York alternative

There are many ways to spend a Thursday night in Manhattan. You can see a fantastic and lavish production of La Traviata at the Met or go to the Israel Film Festival. Or turn up, as I did, at some random Jewish event and make new friends who will take you to very unusual and very real places. They are the kind of places you wouldn't have known existed because they have no websites and when you pass them in the street, all you see is an open brown door. But even that you won't see because it will never occur to you to look aside and notice the building when you're so busy being fascinated by the tacky neon lights of Times Square lighting up the whole neighbourhood.

Behind the brown door hides a synagogue. It reminds me of those grotty concrete buildings in rural English towns where you can go upstairs and play pool late into the night. Here, you can go upstairs and find yourself in the Cholent: a club-like establishment for young Jewish people who feel they don't fit in: who have turned

No expectations, no pressures to conform

their backs on their communities or certain aspects of their culture, or the Jewish religion altogether. The dropouts club.

Now, I said 'for young', and I said 'Jewish', but neither of these is actually true. People in their early twenties come and people in their mid-fifties also. Jews come and so do some non-Jews who just think it's a cool place to be.

They bring their guitars and their shisha pipes. The host, Yitzhak, makes a huge pot of cholent, and they hang out. The place is as rundown as it gets: paint is peeling off the walls and the room stinks with the smoke of cigarettes and grass. Nobody seems to mind. One of the young men runs a survey for his psychology course. Someone else gives a talk about green architecture. Later on, a couple of guys with long curly payes start singing Carlebach tunes. Others just sit around the table and talk over a bottle of beer.

It's so comfortable and peaceful here. No one demands anything of you, no one's judging you or putting you into boxes. No expectations, no pressure to conform. They all understand where the others are coming from. Physically, Williamsburg or Boro Park, the major ultra-Orthodox centres of New York. Yitzhak tells me he started the Cholent about 15 years ago as a place for people who felt they were in some way different to the majority of



their community: they had passed the age of 25 and still weren't married, or had aspirations other than sitting in yeshiva all day.

Today, some of the regulars come with serious baggage and need somewhere to relax. For others, this is all that's left of their connection to the Jewish community: having left it all behind, the Cholent is now their only social network. A girl tells me she comes because she loves to practice her Yiddish and socialise with young Chasidic people and this is the only place she can do so freely.

I wonder what they're all up to during the day; how they cope with the confusion, negation, rebellion, and confrontation that's been such a central part of their lives. But when they're at the Cholent, abnormality becomes the norm and nothing's too crazy. At the same time, they can be as Jewish as they want to be – and no doubt, these young men and women are and will remain very Jewish in their own ways. They need to get away from the stifling and claustrophobic world they grew up in but do not even try to pretend that they can live without it.

Agi Erdos studied languages and Jewish history in Budapest and has just completed a year studying Talmud at the Drisha Institute in New York