# Shifting Social Networks:

## Studying the Jewish Growth of Adults in their Twenties and Thirties

Volume I of II

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Brandeis University

Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

Sylvia Barack Fishman, Advisor

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2008

The signed version of this signature page is on file at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Brandeis University.

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## Acknowledgements

Midway through conducting my fieldwork for this project I found myself discussing my work with a friend's mother. A long-time educator in Jewish schools and a committed and active Jew, she naturally took an interest in my academic degree in Jewish education. When I described for her the topic of my dissertation, she tilted her head and sighed. "Is it deeply depressing?" she asked.

As I have engaged in this research about the Jewish growth of adults in their twenties and thirties, I have received two reactions from American Jews at dinner tables and parties, after organizational meetings and at conferences. Some are delighted that empirical research is being conducted on what they view as a renaissance in American Jewish life led by this population. Others are severely disturbed by what they see as acute apathy or, when they do recognize the Jewish involvement of this generation, as harmful irreverence. They are certain that my findings can only be disheartening, that today's young Jewish adults are twisting Judaism into something beyond recognition.

In addition to sharing this work's empirical conclusions, I hope that in conveying these adults' ideas about Judaism I demonstrate that little in their ideas calls for pessimism. Rather, their ideas are rich, complicated, powerful, deeply considered and personally significant to them. I must thank the participants in this study for their time and honesty and for their allowing me to be the vehicle through which their stories are

told. It was an honor to consider the implications of their ideas and to struggle with presenting them in a form as true to their original meaning as possible.

This is the story of the Riverway Project's participants. It is also the story of one educator, Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison. In agreeing to be a focus of my dissertation he spent valuable time and also took on significant responsibility as well as risk and exposure. This suggests courage on his part; simultaneously, his ease in creating this relationship was enabled by his humility and his genuine desire to reflect on his own humanity and his teaching. He gave often and consistently to this project in order to make it a deeper study. I am very grateful, and I hope that readers will recognize how vulnerable he made himself and the resulting gifts that he provided in his ideas. I also hope that I reflected his work accurately and, again, with the richness and careful thought with which it is executed.

Morrison reflects the values of Temple Israel, the larger institution of which he is a part. It is to its leaders' credit that they, too, were willing to be scrutinized and exposed. I acknowledge and thank Senior Rabbi Ronne Friedman for his time and leadership in this endeavor, the additional clergy of Temple Israel who always greeted me warmly, and the volunteer leadership of the congregation who so ably co-lead this synagogue.

Genessa Trietsch served as the Program Director of the Riverway Project during the time of my fieldwork. As with everything she does, she readily and enthusiastically helped me with whatever I needed, and I am grateful to her for her help that clearly was not part of her regular responsibilities.

From its inception, this case study of the Riverway Project was meant to represent one part of the larger story of a burgeoning American Jewish life created by and for

adults in their twenties and thirties. Dozens of individuals engaged in this story gave their time and ideas. I owe thanks to them for their time and their commitment to telling their stories. (Individuals and their titles are listed as part of the Bibliography.)

There would be no story here but for those I studied. Equally, though, I could not have done this work or my doctoral work more generally without significant support from a variety of institutions.

Because of the vision of Leslie and Abigail Wexner, and the capacity of Foundation staff Larry Moses, Elka Abrahamson, and Cindy Chazan to augment and carry out that vision, the Wexner Graduate Fellowship and the Wexner Foundation are remarkable institutions in today's American Jewish landscape. In addition to making it financially possible for me to pursue my intellectual and professional interests fully and without obligation, they supported and also complemented my graduate education in ways essential to the person and professional I have become. My peer Fellows, the professionals and mentors I encountered through the Foundation, as well as the experiences created for me through the Fellowship, offered me my own community of practice, a social network that helped me to find my authentic Jewish expressions. Because in the Fellowship I was able to think through my own Jewish self-definition, I became able to study the self-definitions of others without judgment or risking solipsism. Moreover, I had the emotional support I needed simply to finish my program. The Wexner Graduate Fellowship community raises any bar of excellence, and the community's support also provides strength and opportunity to take greater and greater risks, bringing joy to participants as they walk together onto a leadership balcony. I am

tremendously grateful to them for the investment they made in me, and humbled by the talents found in the community.

Through Brandeis and colleagues in the academe, a variety of additional opportunities and awards provided similar resources and support. Through the Spencer Foundation, I received a research grant and took part in a seminar that helped me to develop an identity as a sociologist of Jewish education and as a researcher. As I constructed my research design and still today, I carry with me the questions that seminar participants posed throughout our experience. The Network for Research in Jewish Education provided me with financial support as well as colleagues willing to challenge me and my evolving work gently (most often!), always expanding my ideas and my training. Through the Network, I was able to interact with Diane Tickton Schuster, whose work in adult Jewish education I have emulated and who charitably gave her mentorship to help me craft this project's beginnings. Through the Network and in other opportunities I was lucky to encounter Bethamie Horowitz, who has, to my benefit, become a thought partner. I appreciate her contributions to this piece and look forward to our ongoing conversation.

I came to Brandeis University because of the diverse and deep resources I found there including expertise in: the Ancient Near East, Jewish and religious education, the sociology of American Judaism, American Jewish history, organizational behavior, research methodologies – the list goes on. I was blessed to study with many leading academics in these areas. This work and my professional capabilities and identity as a scholar and practitioner simply would not be the same without their talents and generosity. More specifically, Drs. Jonathan Sarna, Len Saxe, Sharon Feiman-Nemser,

Susan Shevitz, Joe Reimer, Marc Brettler, and others have been valuable educators to me. Each of them bridges the worlds of the academe and the practice of American Jewish education skillfully, offering sophisticated scholarship and a deep commitment to building the quality of discourse around *Shabbat* tables as well as in the halls of universities. In particular, Jonathan Sarna carefully read this dissertation and has always shown me the respect of a colleague. He mentors all students with similar esteem and attention, even in the midst of his distinguished career. Anne Lawrence holds the department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies together; without her, I and others would be lost amidst paperwork and missed deadlines. Specifically, Anne helped me to manage the completion of this dissertation even after leaving Boston, and I am grateful.

Within this cohort of leading academics is, of course, Sylvia Barack Fishman, unique in her scholarship and her strong voice. She has served as my advisor and mentor, ever-patient, ready with sound advice and good humor, rich in her ideas and in her passion for the study of American Judaism and for a well-crafted short story. While balancing many other priorities and without missing a beat in her own work, she has prioritized my work so as to make it what it is. Her intellectual contributions – from quips about twenty-five cent words to her development of new paradigms of American Jewishness – echo in my mind often. I thank her for her time and dedication to this project and to my growth.

Similarly, I owe special thanks to Jon Levisohn, whose careful attention made this a stronger project and a rewarding exercise. Jon has been a true mentor and friend, eager for any theoretical or practical conversation, ready to talk until our eyelids grow heavy. I look forward to more conversations, now without the pressure of this dissertation.

I left Brandeis to come to Hillel's Schusterman International Center, anxious to apply my academic ideas to the practice of Jewish education and with only a rough draft of my dissertation. My colleagues at Hillel are remarkable. I found myself on my first day at Hillel blowing up balloons and then listening to a sophisticated presentation on Millennials' ideas about their particular and universal identities. Mixing, as always, levity with wisdom, at Hillel in DC and throughout the world, I find careful, deep, and special thinkers who are interested in truly innovative ideas about identity (pun intended) and Jewish growth and transformation, who want to engage in honest and good intellectual debate for the sake of heaven and then to act as quickly as possible. I am challenged by my colleagues to expand and sharpen the ideas I share in these pages, ideas that are part of a remarkable conversation about Jewish higher education that we seem to share and be shaping together, by fun and good friends who have supported this project continually and have learned to appreciate the word "dissertate." It is not chance, perhaps, that I get to work with Jen Zwilling, who was first part of seeing the Riverway Project as an entity worthy of study, who is a true intellectual partner and friend, the best kind of colleague. I owe thanks to each of you, though, too numerous to name, in the SIC and in the field – your patience and reinforcement have been extraordinary.

As always, my friends provided crucial emotional support in the form of long discussions about the nature of writing a dissertation and about the research itself. They also gave technical support by sacrificing their couches and second bedrooms as I traveled across the country and particularly between Washington DC and Boston. I am grateful for both kinds of support and simply blessed by their energy, love, and good and true souls. May they be blessed in turn for their laughter and open hearts.

My parents, Bonnie and Mark Cousens, and my brother, Jeff Cousens, asked about this even when they did not understand it, tolerated late night phone calls when I thought I would never finish, and, as they have throughout my life, wholeheartedly supported me without question. I would not be who I am without them. As she has for as long as I can remember, my mother applied her capacity as a skillful editor to this entire piece. Where there are grammatical errors and run-on sentences, it is because I did not listen to her good advice.

I dedicate this work to the memories of my grandparents *z"l*, Miriam Kern Cohen and Joseph Cohen, Frances Reissman Cousens Ph.D. and Leon Cousens, whose intellectual and communal legacies I am honored to continue through this project and beyond.

## ABSTRACT

### Shifting Social Networks: Studying the Jewish Growth of Adults in their Twenties and Thirties

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts

by Beth Cousens

Normative ideas about the ethno-religious identity of adults in their twenties and thirties suggest that these individuals take an individualistic orientation to their identities, or that they feel spiritual but do not celebrate that feeling within typical religious communities. Their absence from congregations, it is further argued, is exacerbated by their self-focused experimentation and their resulting postponed marriage and childbirth.

Yet, adults in their twenties and thirties are creating new psychological and behavioral structures that allow them to celebrate their identity fully and distinctively. Specifically, Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties, members of Generation X, are producing and participating in creative ritual, arts, and educational projects. *Shifting Social Networks* studies this environment and presents a case study of one of these initiatives, the Riverway Project, a Boston synagogue-based educational and outreach project. Using a case study paradigm, the dissertation presents empirical evidence gathered through participant observation, interviews of Riverway Project participants and its lead educator, and analysis of artifacts related to the Riverway Project.

This dissertation focuses on the process of Jewish growth that participants experience. Participants come to the Riverway Project uncomfortable in most Jewish spaces. They lack Jewish social capital, knowledge of Jewish communal norms and values, and a sense of belonging to a Jewish community. The Riverway Project helps

participants shift social networks through the critical study of Jewish texts. It brings participants into an intimate community, inculcating them into the celebration of Jewish life. Through the Riverway Project, participants expand their senses of themselves as Jews and their potential Jewish practice, develop their position in a new social network, and build Jewish social capital, which enables them to feel more comfortable in other Jewish spaces. Participants' figurative membership in a Jewish social network becomes an important statement of affiliation, an illustration that institutional participation in religious life is shifting, but that the collective remains an important tool in individuals' ethno-religious growth and celebration, particularly when it strengthens individuals' ethno-religious social capital.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## A CASE OF JEWISH GROWTH OF ADULTS IN THEIR TWENTIES AND THIRTIES

Fourteen of us went to Israel. An outsider might have understood us in different ways. We were thirteen adults in their late twenties and thirties (and one couple's eighteen month old), thirteen Jews and one Southern Baptist converting to Judaism, or three couples, five single adults, their rabbi and his wife. About half of us had been to Israel before. At least one thing united us: each participant had a connection to the same Boston synagogue, Temple Israel, and particularly to the outreach and educational initiative that it facilitates for adults in their twenties and thirties called the Riverway Project.

Many adults in their twenties and thirties – members of Generation X – seek to acknowledge and engage in the complexities of their existence, to live and struggle with dissonance, no matter how uncomfortable. They want not something that many perceive as a nationalistic myth of Israel but an exploration of the multiple truths that are part of any story. This multiplicity, this dissonance, to them, is truth. Many of them also seek to connect to their Jewish tradition, to engage in the visceral attachment that they often feel to their Jewish past. Yet, many have few tools to do so, and so need a low-barrier way to

engage. Participants come to the Riverway Project, to this accessible synagogue-based educational and outreach initiative, out of that desire to connect.

In Israel, participants spent a morning on Masada, the site of an ancient Jewish self-sacrifice in the face of Roman rule. They wandered around the remains, admiring the remarkably preserved frescoes and listening readily to descriptions of King Herod's water system. They were awed by one of the first known synagogues and its resemblance to synagogues today and intrigued by the words of Ezekiel that the group's guide, Kobi, read aloud while sitting in that synagogue. Walking among the mountain's ruins, participants shared and discussed their questions: Why when they came to Masada after the Temple was destroyed did the Jews not reestablish sacrifice? How could Herod, a Jew, have had slaves build these structures when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt? And so on.

The group stopped for the last time at a ledge that peeks over one of the deep red and gold canyons that surround Masada. Participants gathered around the guardrail, leaning on it, sitting against it, all listening to Kobi read the account of Masada's zealots' final actions, to his narrative of the way that they chose lots to decide who would die first. Kobi also described the role of Masada in the contemporary Israeli and Jewish zeitgeist:

> We have people come up here. *Bar* and *bat mitzvahs*. Weddings. Tourists. Travelers. High school kids. Army units. And we are glorifying our answer to Rome. We showed them – they wouldn't take us! … Now, if you ask me, this is a tough piece of glorification to swallow. Are we proud of the fact that we showed them by killing ourselves? Is that why we do all these things up here? I don't know. I don't know this myth about the *glory of Masada*! …

Kobi's voice had grown stronger during these last words until he was almost shouting the word Masada, the drama of the moment escalating as he continued to speak:

> There are other writings about the zealots – they weren't so flattering in how they led their lives. … But I think the one thing that we can agree on is that the reason they did what they did is that they believed that this was going to be the way to allow Jewish life to continue. Whether it's doing what you want to do and believing it as long as you can, and when you can't anymore, to do what you think is necessary, whether it's through your belief or your actions, to create Jewish continuity. … The glorification that happens here on Masada through the units and through the *bar mitzvahs* and through the tourists and through the travelers is not that we're glorifying the deaths of the zealots. But we're glorifying the fact of why they did what they did. And we have to be part of the fact that if we want to make sure that Israel is never put in a position again where we have to make those decisions – do I escape, do I kill myself, do I wait until the end, or do I give myself up – we have to ensure, each in our own way, that Israel stays strong.

As he spoke I considered the moment from my position on the mountain, sitting on the ground on the edge of the group, looking up at most of the participants standing before me. I knew this spot from previous trips to Israel, trips with high school students and college students and as a student myself. I knew that this was a frequent last stop for tourists, one with a tremendous echo that shouted any group's words back to them. Often, tour guides used this spot to drive home our guide's point about Masada, that even if we do not admire the zealots' decision, as Kobi just argued, we must admire and adopt their drive to continue Jewish existence. On this spot, guides often ask their tour groups almost to swear their own oath: "*shainit Metzada lo tipol*" or "Masada will not fall again," an oath, in fact, sworn by some army units at the conclusion of their training.

I wondered if our guide would ask our group to recite these words. After only six days in Israel, participants were cynical and challenging. They seemed always to ask the guide to discuss how both Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis saw a certain situation, or they understood the educational movie at the tourist site we were visiting to be telling a nationalistic story, or they simply suggested that they did not see Israel as their homeland,

their country, simply because they were Jewish. Shouting *shainit Metzada lo tipol* would ask them to own an idea that I was not sure participants were ready to own.

As I thought about this Kobi had continued and, indeed, had invoked these dramatic words:

> Masada will not fall again. And maybe, just to kind of connect to these people who were here before us … What I'd like us to do is to spread out here … sort of looking out across that over there, and together, yell out those words, *shainit Metzada lo tipol*. Masada will not fall again. And we'll do it word by word. I'll count to three, *echad shteim shalosh*, and I'll say the words. And before I count, I'll say the word in Hebrew again so you can all hear it and yell it out together. So if you can spread out.

The participants stayed still and silent. They looked at each other and at the ground until their own leader, Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison, spoke out. "Do we want to do this? Do we want to hear an echo? I would like to hear an echo," he affirmed. Our guide laughed. "They didn't know yet that there was an echo!" Morrison asked again. "Do we want to do this? What else should we yell?" The participants suggested different statements, none of which seemed to please the group. Morrison stepped in again. "How about, 'We are here,'" he suggested. He facilitated participants yelling this, spreading the group out along the barrier, counting to three and then leading them in shouting these three words. The second attempt was much stronger; the group heard its words return, declaring their presence, and participants reacted appropriately, calling the echo "cool" and laughing delightedly.

Participants reflected on this experience – the guide asking them to shout these words and their mini-mutiny against this declaration – standing in line for the cable car, at the bottom of the mountain as they refueled from the morning in the sun, and then more formally as a group on the bus back to the hotel. One by one, participants shared the

reasons for their reluctance. Noah said, “I’d have done it, but would it have felt natural, I don’t know.” Mark explained that as he “learned more about the history and the fact that they were the zealots” he became uncomfortable with their fervor and found himself to be “struggling with Masada.” He asked, “What, exactly, they were defending?” By saying the words, he wondered, what would he be defending? Dena wanted to discuss it before they said it, despite the fact that, as others agreed, the drama of the moment would have been lost in their discussion. If she had “found a way to reinterpret it, like some of the prayers” she could have participated in their statement, but without interpretation, she saw the phrase as a “nationalistic myth.” Collectively, participants’ discomfort stemmed from their conflicting ideas about Israel and about Judaism, and from their need to engage with those ideas rather than smooth them over with what seem like too heavy words that mandated too simple loyalty. They did not want to say words that they did not believe, ones that asked them to identify with the martyrs and to fight for the strength of Israel. Ultimately, they said the only thing that they could say for certain: that they were there.

Morrison concluded the discussion with a question that challenged the guide’s educational practice: “What are the ways you can educate about a place that allow for multiple narratives to be told?” In this question, he revealed his own philosophy of education that, first and foremost, allows participants to engage with him in this Israel trip and in their Boston-based, broader exploration of Judaism. With Morrison, multiple narratives are told in any classroom at any given time; he consistently makes room in their Jewish celebration for participants’ secular backgrounds, interests, and commitments as well as their Jewish heritage and the clashes that exist between them. He

helps them build a community of individuals like them, individuals with questions about how to celebrate their Jewish and universal loyalties simultaneously. Ultimately, in the Riverway Project community, participants are able to create the Jewish connections that they seek, to privilege their more worldly interests while also developing a personally relevant way to celebrate Judaism.

The primary intent of this dissertation is to understand the process through which some adults in their twenties and thirties discover their senses of their Jewish selves, and secondarily, to understand the experiences that transform their understandings of their own Jewishness. Specifically, *Shifting Social Networks* examines the Jewish growth of a population formerly uncomfortable with Jewish life and tradition but interested in exercising their sense of Jewishness, their Jewish commitment and their self-definition as Jews. As this ethnographic case study demonstrates, by helping adults in their twenties and thirties to join a Jewish community, these adults develop the skills and confidence to participate in Jewish life. Subsequently, through participation in their new community, their Jewishness comes to expand, deepen, and be expressed through a variety of behaviors. Rooted in the literature of education and meaning-making, the dissertation proposes that the development of something called Jewish social capital, knowledge of norms, values, and sanctions of some Jewish communities and confidence in that knowledge, is fundamental to Jewish growth. As this study demonstrates, Jewish social capital develops significantly in a social network that honors the values and norms of individuals' predominantly universal social networks. In the Riverway Project, as will be evident, rather than giving up that which they have learned in other settings, individuals in their twenties and thirties learn to integrate what they experience in all settings of their

lives with the ins and outs of Jewish life. As a result, they find a personally meaningful Jewish celebration and a community with which to celebrate. Moreover, they develop a Jewish community in which they want to take part, a Jewish community that follows the norms that they learn from their other social networks with which they are comfortable, and one that will give them the capital they need to move on to other Jewish communities.

Evolving ideas of ethno-religious capital are based on fundamental ideas of social capital. Simply, social capital refers to the idea that all individuals are entrenched in a wide variety of social networks, of communities, and that these networks lead to some kind of benefits. These benefits range from connections that lead us to employment or more connections, to knowledge of communal norms and how to blend into a community, to how to exchange goods, tacitly and explicitly, with others in a community, to friends and emotional support. In total, social capital is the intangible benefit that leads us to these more tangible – but still subtle – benefits.[1]

More specifically, social capital is comprised of three components: the network itself, the norms, values, and expectations that those in the network follow, and sanctions put on members of the network when they do not follow the network's norms, values, or expectations. This suggests that individuals belong – however intangibly – to a group, and that the group places expectations on its members and in turn members follow clear norms in order to belong to the community. These norms can include those of individual behavior – that is, how to act to fit in – and they can include norms of reciprocity, or how to exchange goods and what goods to exchange with others in order to demonstrate

[1] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Charles Kadushin, "Basic Network Concepts," "Introduction to Social Network Theory," unpublished, 2003; David Halpern, *Social Capital* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2003), 2-3.

equitable membership. When an individual does not abide by the network's norms or expectations, that individual is sanctioned by the group in some way. The sanctions could come in any form, but the most immediate form is likely being rebuffed verbally or through body language, which can feel deeply uncomfortable and even shameful. Without social capital, individuals are more prone to transgress group norms, and the resulting behaviors are often alienating and embarrassing to them. They are rejected from the group explicitly, rejected or removed, or tacitly, just ignored. In either case, they lose their membership, their sense of belonging and any reciprocal benefits that they once received.[2] Ethno-religious capital builds on these ideas of social capital and is beginning to be studied and expanded.[3] This dissertation contributes to this burgeoning work and produces its own working definition of Jewish social capital, for use with the population being examined here of adults in their twenties and thirties.

I studied this population of (primarily) Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties[4] and their connections to Jewish life at a time of vibrancy within American Judaism as related to this population. Something exciting is happening, as demonstrated in repeated articles in *The New York Times* and other periodicals,[5] in coffee-table books like *Bar*

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[2] Halpern, *Capital*, 10

[3] Laurence Iannacconne was part of launching the study of religious and ethnic capital in "Religious Practice: A Human Capital Approach." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*,, Vol. 29 No. 3. (Sept. 1990). See also Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

[4] I hesitate to describe the population that I study as solely "Jewish adults" because there are non-Jews numbered in the population. Most frequently, although not always, these non-Jews are brought to the Riverway Project by Jewish partners and spouses; a few are compelled to Jewish life without that attachment. In either case, I study here the Jewish growth of primarily, but not only, Jews.

[5] Stephanie Rosenbloom, "A Happy Hipster Hanukkah," *New York Times* (December 15, 2005); Carol Eisenberg, "Young, Jewish and . . . Cool: Music, Multiculturalism Help Generation Reconnect With Ethnic Identity," *Washington Post* (April 17, 2004).

*Mitzvah Disco* and *Judaikitsch*,[6] and off-Broadway in shows like "My Mother's Italian, My Father's Jewish, and I'm in Therapy."[7] As children, today's Jews in their twenties and thirties experienced high acceptance by other Americans. Without structural, occupational, or social segregation, little has separated Jew from a sense of other, both literally and psychologically. Not afraid of being rejected, Jews of this age are free to reclaim their tradition, and they do in ways that are cool, iconoclastic, and sarcastic, in ways that the mainstream notices.

They are also free to ignore their tradition, and, it has been demonstrated, many do. A number of younger adults have weaker feelings of peoplehood, of commitment to their own ethno-religious group, than do previous generations.[8] Their social relationships

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[6] Roger Bennett, Nick Kroll, and Jules Shell, *Bar Mitzvah Disco: The Music May Have Stopped, but the Party's Never Over* (New York: Crown, 2005); Jennifer Traig, Victoria Traig, and Dwight Eschliman, *Judaikitsch: Tchotchkes, Schmattes, and Nosherei* (California: Chronicle Books, 2002).

[7] Created and co-produced by Steve Solomon, performed off-Broadway from May 4, 2007. See www.italianjewishtherapy.com for more information.

[8] For example, the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found that only about 25% of eighteen to twenty-nine year olds date only Jews, they have fewer close Jewish friends than do American Jews over the age of thirty, and they feel less potent senses of belonging to the Jewish people and caring for other Jews than do American Jews over the age of thirty. Later in the dissertation, I refer to research on Taglit—Birthright Israel, which demonstrates the relationship between an Israel trip and passion for Israel. My research helps to explain the disconnect between the NJPS data and this research, suggesting that passion and interest do not equal loyalty, and ask for further research on this generation and peoplehood to be conducted.

In addition to these conclusions about Jewishness, the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey establishes this population as based in the Northeast, as primarily (more than half) employed, and as partially (one-third) in full-time graduate programs. More than 80% have college degrees. ("Jewish Adults Ages 18-29, Presentation to the Jewish Education Leadership Summit, National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001," New York: United Jewish Communities, 2004.)

I share these findings from the National Jewish Population Survey for lack of other statistical descriptions of American Jews in their twenties and thirties. United Jewish Communities conducted the National Jewish Population Survey between August 2000 and August 2001. More than 175,000 households were screened; more than 4,500 individuals ultimately participated in the survey, and approximately 4,200 completed a long-form questionnaire about a variety of aspects of their Jewish attitudes and involvement. An overview of the project's methodology and findings is offered in Lawrence Kotler-Berkowitz, Steven M. Cohen, Jonathan Ament, Vivian Klaff, Frank Mott, and Danielle Peckerman-Neuman, *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (New York: United Jewish Communities, 2004).

Even before the project released its findings, a lively discourse emerged around the survey's methodology, usefulness, and conclusions. In "National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001: A Guide for the Perplexed, *Contemporary Jewry* 25 (2005): 1-32, Charles Kadushin, Benjamin Phillips and Leonard L. Saxe discuss the flaws in the survey design and the resulting limitations of the study. Of relevance here is

and bonding activities generally have decreased.[9] Moreover, with marriage that occurs later and less often than in previous generations, adults in their twenties and thirties follow their children later in their lives or not at all into religious institutions.[10] Altogether, Arnett and Arnett summarize, "It is well established that the late teens and early 20s are ages of relatively low religious participation in American society." The authors go on to articulate that younger adults find comfort in a congregation of one, focusing on their own, personalized belief system.[11] Putnam similarly emphasizes the extent to which institutional religious involvement for adults in their twenties and thirties is less salient than it was for their parents or, particularly, for their grandparents. Using

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their analysis of the application of random digit dialing to a college and young adult population and their convincing argument that RDD cannot reach students in dormitories or transient young adults with primarily cellular phones effectively. As a result, the authors conclude, the survey's sample too heavily surveyed those still living with their parents, a population that likely is biased in a variety of ways including toward Orthodoxy.

In *Reconsidering the Size and Characteristics of the American Jewish Population: New Estimates of a Larger and More Diverse Community* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2007), Leonard Saxe, Elizabeth Tighe, Benjamin Phillips, and Charles Kadushin create a meta-analysis of surveys of the general population and of localized surveys of Jewish community populations (i.e. within cities). They offer a new estimate of the total American Jewish population (7 to 7.5 million) and of the young adult population, establishing the population as including 61,000 to 94,000 per age cohort and establishing adults ages 21 to 35 as 11% to 17% of the American Jewish population.

In total, these studies suggest that the survey design of NJPS prevents longitudinal conclusions (i.e. comparing conclusions from NJPS 1990 to those of NJPS 2000) from being drawn as well as drawing detailed conclusions about populations that cannot be confirmed by other studies. Hence, I use NJPS only to make broad conclusions about this population.

Particularly because NJPS 2000 has limitations in its usefulness in understanding the specific size of this population (let alone the location and more in-depth details of this cohort), further research about the population must be generated. The National Jewish Population Survey analysis (or sampling frame; it is not clear) defined "young adult" as those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. In today's climate (as discussed in Chapter Two), "young adult" is bound no longer by age but more by self-conception or life events, and is certainly not limited to one's twenties. Research questions essential to the advancement of our understanding of this population would study the life patterns and choices of adults in their twenties and thirties as they move across the country, explore the world, come to conclusions about their sexuality, and postpone marriage, would identify the magnitude of these trends within the population, and would identify and compare expressions of Jewishness between these sub-cohorts.

[9] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[10] Robert Wuthnow demonstrates convincingly that delayed marriage and childbirth have led to decreased participation in American congregational life. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), particularly Chapters 2 and 3.

[11] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Lee Arnett Jensen, "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* Vol 17 No 5 (September 2002): 451-467.

Gallup data, Putnam illustrates that college students of late indicate in greater numbers that they have no religious preference, that they have not entered a religious institution to engage in religious expression, and that even those who participate ever in religious services participate weekly in fewer numbers than did previous generations.[12] Putnam also demonstrates that while the religious engagement of Baby Boomers lessened from their parents' generation, the engagement of Generation X is continuing similarly to decrease from the Baby Boom generation. Institutional involvement generally and religious organizations specifically are less relevant for these individuals than for their parents and their grandparents.

It is easy to leap from institutional participation to religious relevance, or, to infer that because these individuals are not in church, they not interested in what church offers. (Wuthnow, for example, titles the first chapter of his study of this population, "American Religion: An Uncertain Future."[13]) Yet, recent studies of young American Jews have begun to change the question of focus when studying this population, examining not "How Jewish are American Jews?" comparing ethno-religious expressions to a pre-set or standardized idea of Jewish life, but "How are American Jews Jewish?" examining their Jewish ideas and behaviors without preconception.[14] These studies, and particularly

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[12] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Chapter Four and particularly 75
[13] Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers,* 1
[14] Bethamie Horowitz coins this dichotomy in her influential study, *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity (*New York: UJA-Federation, 2000), 184. The study represented a significant innovation in the study of American Judaism, using the words and ideas of American Jews expressed through quantitative and qualitative research to create a typology for understanding of Jewish connections and journeys. The study established the importance of the "subjective experience" of being Jewish alongside behaviors that express Jewishness, and noted that individuals move in an out of Jewish life, changing their ideas and their behaviors in reaction to various life events. The study also established the existence of Jewish connections without a highly subjective emphasis on those connections. That is, the study noted, one could feel strongly Jewish without having many Jewish connections, have many Jewish connections without feeling strongly Jewish, and change one's Jewish journey throughout one's lifetime. Prior to the publication of *Connections and Journeys,* the behavior of American Jews was conceptualized as somewhat static; American Jews were highly affiliated, or less

Horowitz's *Connections and Journeys,* begin to see ethno-religious engagement as occurring not only inside congregations. With such a frame on ethno-religious engagement, a different picture emerges, recognizing that many young American Jews and those from other backgrounds feel their identity deeply and express that feeling in new psychological and behavioral structures. The population takes for granted, for the most part, fundamental, long-established patterns of individualism and voluntarism that dictate American religious and ethnic behavior.[15] In other words, most do not choose evangelicalism or fervent religions, choices that fit into a larger system of communal obligation or law,[16] but instead make their own choices based on what feels good for them at that moment. These choices result in individuals wearing their religious commitment on their sleeves (literally), meeting for discussions and prayer in living rooms or storefronts, and talking or typing at length, sharing their questions and ideas about their ethno-religious identities with each other in person and on-line.[17] Wuthnow

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affiliated, throughout their lifetimes. Today, many assumptions about American Jewish behavior acknowledge their shifting attitudes and involvement and recognize that Jewishness encompasses much more than only formal "affiliation" with a Jewish organization. This dissertation is conducted on the shoulders of *Connections and Journeys* and could not have been conceptualized without Horowitz's work.

[15] The concept of the "sovereign self" that dictates Jewish behavior was presented by Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen in *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Bernard Susser and Charles S. Leibman in *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future* have also explored the general theme (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), as has Sylvia Barack Fishman in *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000).

[16] There is not yet a satisfactory study of the participation of young religionists in evangelicalism or other fervent sects.

[17] For example, in "The Continuity of Discontinuity," Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007) study four non-traditional – or, non-synagogue-based – expressions of Jewish life, looking at a non-synagogue religious community, a record label and the music it produces, a salon in which Jewish topics are discussed, and a story-teller. They also interview participants or consumers related to these projects, exploring the reasons that these projects compel audiences. The authors examine connections to Israel in "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel" (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007). Anna Greenberg ("Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam: Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices" (New York: Reboot, 2006)) surveys Jews of this age in an attempt to understand their attitudes toward Judaism. *Zeek* (Spring 2007) dedicated an issue to exploring non-synagogue based religious communities, a collection of independent *minyanim* that currently meet across the United States. Available at: http://www.mechonhadar.org/AboutUs/press.php?id=20. These same

summarizes these religious and spiritual expressions and explorations with powerful words: "uncertainty, diversity, fluidity, searching, tinkering."[18] Each of these descriptors implies ambiguity, but none involves indifference. We cannot conclude that empty church pews establish a younger generation as disinterested in religion altogether. Rather, this generation's self-motivated expressions of ethno-religious identity are potent and even substantial.

The studies also lack in their inattention to this generation's process of Jewish growth, the manner by which individuals who are curious about their sense of Jewishness pursue Jewish exploration and then actually shift their feelings about their Jewish identity as well as their Jewish expressions. Within a context of self-orientation but also of a lack of sanctions for Jewish expression, and within an environment of limitless options for Jewish celebration, how do adults in their twenties and thirties come to feel more strongly about Judaism, to think through their attitudes and beliefs, and to shift their Jewishness? How does their Jewishness expand?

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communities and their constituents are examined in "Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study" (Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain (California: Synagogue 3000, November 2007)). Tom Beaudoin (*Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Gen X* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000)) provides a deep and careful analysis of spiritual expressions of Generation X as they manifest in popular culture. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller edited a collection of essays (*Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000)) that explore the meetings of communities, in institutions and outside of institutions, that attract members of Generation X. William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi (*A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994)) examine the individual spiritual and religious expressions of this generation, as does Debra Renee Kaufman ( "Embedded Categories: Identity Among Jewish Young Adults," *Race, Gender, and Class* 6.3 (1999): 1-13 and "Gender and Jewish Identity Among Twenty-Somethings in the United States," *Religion in a Changing World: Comparative Studies in Sociology,* M. Cousineau, ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998)). Tobin Belzer (*Jewish Identity at Work: GenXers in Jewish Jobs*, (Diss. Brandeis University, 2004)) provides a valuable summary of American Jewish identity research from the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s that touches on the possible Jewish choices and expressions of adults in their twenties and thirties, all of which is supported by this dissertation.

[18] Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers,* xvi

Using a variety of educational literatures and my own training in the sociology of education and American Jewish identity, I explore here this process of growth, working within the idea that detachment from congregational life is not equal to apathy. I root the study in the generative tensions of emerging adulthood and twenty-first century American religion and ethnicity, those of freedom and tradition, external and inner authority, particularism and universalism, singledom and coupledom, parenthood and the self. In doing so, I draw on additional sociological literature important to understanding these tensions. I show that through activity in a new Jewish social network, one that merges their universal and particular values, individuals develop Jewish social capital and, in turn, greater and deeper attitudes toward and expressions of Judaism. They are not interested only in bowling alone, to challenge Putnam's assertion. They simply want to bowl on their own terms, terms that allow fluid participation in community and also personally driven and defined Jewish expressions. Moreover, they want the skills and confidence, the Jewish social capital, to participate in community; they want to be capable individually but to celebrate with others, to make their own ideological choices within the validation of the same choices that others make.

This dissertation, then, begins to provide a corrective to existing literature, demonstrating the interest and engagement of some in this population in Jewish life. As the dissertation demonstrates, and despite the anti-institutional claims of some as related to the population,[19] it is an institution and a Jewish community that most facilitate participants' Jewish growth, even while participants do not become formal members of that institution. These next two chapters delve more deeply into many of the themes I

[19] In citing these anti-institutional claims, I am referring to Wuthnow (*After the Baby Boomers*) and Putnam (*Bowling Alone*), as just delineated.

have just introduced, providing a more detailed socio-historical introduction to this population, a picture of the larger context of opportunities for and expressions of this population's Jewishness, and a more detailed investigation of relevant literature. In these chapters, I prepare the reader for the bulk of the dissertation, for a closer look at the Jewishness of this population and a focused analysis of the process of growth that they undergo.

Most immediately, I turn to the research methodology that I used to explore the question of growth. I then give an overview of the fundamental theoretical frameworks that I used to deepen this study. Finally, I provide a detailed overview of the Riverway Project and its audience.

## THE METHOD: STUDYING JEWISH GROWTH

The burgeoning body of work on the Jewishness of adults in their twenties and thirties has surveyed members of this population and found many to be interested in Judaism[20] and has showcased vibrancy and meaning through robust portraits of projects.[21] Missing are perceptions and ethno-religious identity construction as perceived by the adults themselves.[22] Moreover, as I suggested, none of these studies examines the extent to which the Jewishness of members of this cohort actually shifts through their participation in these projects. These studies have not, in other words, examined participants' Jewishness through an educational lens, looking at a teacher, learners, the content before

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[20] For example, Greenberg, "Latte"
[21] For example, Cohen and Kelman, "Continuity of Discontinuity"
[22] *The Jew Within* (Cohen and Eisen) and *Connections and Journeys* (Horowitz) are, to some extent, the exceptions to this statement. Both studies offer quantitative pictures of the ideas of American Jews complemented by qualitative work, and both studies are robust examinations of the Jewish connections and behaviors of an adult population. However, while both studies include some members of Generation X, neither study focuses on this population, nor do they examine Jewishness through the lens of generational outlook. In addition, neither study examines the process of Jewish growth, but rather both look at a snapshot of Jewishness without also looking at how Jewishness changes.

them, and the milieu in which they work together.[23] What is the setting, I wondered, in which these individuals' Jewishness shifts notably? If Jewishness is defined by individuals' attitudes toward Judaism and by their understandings of potential ways to express their Jewishness as well as their actual Jewish expressions, what is the process through which their Jewishness actually changes?

## *Intent*

In exploring these questions, I wanted to be sensitive to how adults in their twenties and thirties understood Judaism for themselves and to avoid imposing my ideas of normative Jewish practice on their worlds. I wanted to understand the process of their Jewish growth, on their terms. I wanted to create a foundational study of the Jewish expressions of this population and the ways that those expressions can shift, knowing that from this foundation, further and more expansive research in any of the specific areas that I examined could then be conducted.

These goals suggested a deep focus on one case, a qualitative study that would produce rich details of the growth of one aspect of this population. The study would be of a particular web of meaning, of uniqueness, and would prepare for additional studies that would layer further structures of meaning on this first project. My study would provide

[23] I am referring here to Joseph Schwab's fundamental framework for the dissection of the process of education. Schwab, a formative scholar of education and teacher research, advocated for an understanding of curriculum that was comprised of five elements, or "commonplaces": the subject matter (a concept that Schwab also developed further), the teacher, the learners, the milieus or various contexts for the educational process, and the process of constructing the curriculum. Interaction of the first four commonplaces must be taken into account in order to construct the curriculum. Asking questions about each commonplace allows a student of the educational process to see the role that each commonplace is taking in that process. See "The Practical 3: Translation into Curriculum," *School Review* Vol. 81 No. 4 (August 1973): 493-542.

specifics; later work could produce general conclusions based on substantiation and expansion of my own project's findings.

Qualitative research has become a bit of an umbrella concept, a catch-all used to refer to a variety of approaches to research. Sharan Merriam provides a helpful framework for distinguishing between three necessary aspects of qualitative research. She begins with orientation, or a way of shaping the kind of data gathered and the frame through which the researcher understands the data. Function refers to the purpose for which the data is being gathered, suggesting inductive or deductive/ hypothesis-testing purposes. Form connotes the way that the study is constructed.

My desire to understand closely the process through which Riverway Project participants' Jewishness changes led to my adoption of an orientation as an ethnographer. More precisely, I would use ethnographic methods to study the meaning structures of all Riverway Project stakeholders – of Morrison and participants – as a participant myself in the Riverway Project. Ethnography means to focus on culture, on the stakeholders' understanding of their own world, and on the rituals that stakeholders put into place that comprise their society. As an educational ethnographer, I would look for "patterns of social interaction" and learn from those patterns about how participants construct meaning together about Judaism within or because of the Riverway Project.[24] I would attempt to understand the realities of participants' experiences as they (and Morrison) construct them, as well as the process of participants' experience in the Riverway Project and how their experience changes their senses of themselves over time. To generate data about an unstudied phenomenon, I would practice "interpretive" research, examining and

[24] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 14.

decoding experience as it is lived in the moment.[25] This is the essence of thick description, the act of considering the most intimate details of the case and the larger picture that the details create in order to provide the best interpretation possible for the reader.[26]

Because I was studying an unknown phenomenon, I sought to generate theory from scratch. The function of my research would be to produce grounded theory, to develop new theories based soundly in data. To construct interpretative research, listening to participants and interpreting their ideas, I would immerse myself in data from a multitude of sources and comb through the data to find patterns. Rather than test a hypothesis, I would generate data and ideas that would produce new hypotheses then to be tested in further studies.[27]

To produce new theory, I chose the form of a case study for this project. My primary research methods included extensive participant-observation over six months and more than eighty in-depth interviews with Morrison and other project leaders and with participants in the Riverway Project and in similar projects.[28] Construction of a case is a qualitative approach best used when one is trying to understand the very foundation of a phenomenon, the basis for the "how" and "why" of something.[29] The case study is used when we have little established knowledge about a phenomenon and need to help such knowledge emerge. It seeks to understand the isolated case as fully as possible so as to generate from the specific as much well-founded knowledge as possible about the general whole. A case ripe for study is one with clear, finite boundaries, that is diverse and can

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[25] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 4
[26] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures (*New York: Basic Books, 1973).
[27] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,*18
[28] I turn in the next section to a detailed discussion of my methodology.
[29] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 32

describe many aspects of the phenomenon in question, and that gives the researcher excellent access to the unit of study. Therefore, I wanted to find a site or project that had clear boundaries and that was robust in the approaches it took to Jewish life and growth, that would give me good access to its many facets, and that would be rich in the culture that participants create together.

### *Studying the Riverway Project*

As a young Jewish adult living outside Boston and someone interested in Jewish life, I discovered the Riverway Project through a mass email aimed at this population. At one of my first Riverway Project neighborhood Friday-night prayer services, Morrison highlighted parts of the weekly *Torah* portion that focused on the ways that the Israelites built a portable community for themselves as they traveled through the desert. I looked around at the folding chairs and *siddurim* (prayerbooks) that turned this living room into a sanctuary, at the ritual objects – the *Shabbat* candles and wine – that made our space holy, at friends I knew before and acquaintances I made that night who made us a community. I recognized Morrison's effort as educational, as the deliberate structuring of an environment and an experience that would bring Jewish celebration to those who crave it and to many others for whom it is new.

Despite my Jewish education and immersion in various Jewish social networks that made me somewhat of an anomaly within the Riverway Project,[30] I participated in

[30] The vast majority of Riverway Project participants, as I demonstrate primarily in Chapter Three, do not have significant connections to Jewish social networks and lack Jewish social capital. Having been raised with Jewish summer camp and youth group experience, and having worked and been actively involved in a variety of Jewish communities for fifteen years, it was particularly my familiarity with Jewish songs and traditions, with different kinds of prayer expressions, and with Hebrew that made me unique in the Riverway Project and particularly in prayer settings. I knew prayers and songs without looking at the words; many Riverway Project participants do not. I felt comfortable reading Jewish texts and with many

Riverway Project events for the next months and watched to see if my hypothesis about this being a setting for growth was accurate. I saw many of the same participants return to Riverway Project events over the weeks. I witnessed participants becoming more comfortable with prayer services and saw them volunteering to host events in their homes. I spoke to participants and understood that they found this a comfortable setting in which to explore their burgeoning Jewishness.

As I began preliminary interviews with some participants and with Morrison, I also saw evidence of the project's success according to traditional benchmarks. The email list had more than 1000 contacts. Large events had 300 participants and small ones featured overflowing living rooms. Many participants "loved" the project and described how it had changed them: They found a home in Jewish community for the first time, they had a synagogue in which they felt comfortable, and their Jewish expressions changed and multiplied. As they moved through the next phases of their lives, they explained, they would look for a synagogue and for a community with whom to express their Jewishness. Synagogue life and Jewish community had become woven into their lives as norms and not as options. I felt confident that fundamentally, the Riverway Project had accomplished something, and that it would offer a ripe text to understand the nature and process of Jewish growth.

I also heard congregational leaders, including Morrison, speak to the importance of the Riverway Project within the congregation. I understood that this project was a priority for the congregation even while it had distinct boundaries. In speaking with Morrison, I saw that the synagogue's leaders, each thoughtful and committed to reflecting

different commentators; many Riverway Project participants were working toward that comfort in the Riverway Project.

on their practice, would be eager for me to be part of the Project and the synagogue as a participant-observer. I would be denied no setting to which I wanted access, and Morrison, too, would sit with me for interviews as he needed to in order to help me carry out this study.

As I witnessed the Riverway Project, I also saw not a perfect case of Jewish growth but an interesting one. Participants had similar, but not singular, reactions to the Riverway Project, allowing for firm conclusions to be drawn and simultaneously for the case to be diverse and complex. Moreover, the Project itself is diverse in a variety of ways. Morrison relies on both the study of Jewish texts and also experiential learning (in prayer services), two approaches to Jewish education often bifurcated as “formal” and “informal” education. Moreover, there are opportunities for participants to follow and also to lead, for them to move from being lurkers in the community to, eventually, leaders. In addition, participants come from a variety of backgrounds. Most were previously uninvolved in Jewish life, but still, some came from every Jewish denomination. They have varied family and personal backgrounds; they live with partners or roommates, they are gay and straight, some are parents. Its diversity in method and participation made it a rich case to study.

When I began my six months of formal fieldwork with the Riverway Project, I had already participated in the Project for nearly twelve months and had been able to grasp the rhythms of the Project as well as the personalities of many of the more regular participants. During my months as participant-observer, I regularly joined all Riverway Project events, including *Torah* study and prayer in different settings. I went on the Israel trip that it offered, witnessed Riverway Project committee meetings (of the Board of

Trustees), and joined a neighborhood (Jamaica Plain) Mining for Meaning class, a four week class introducing participants to Jewish holidays and *Shabbat*.[31] In total, even without the ten-day trip in Israel, I had nearly 100 hours of audio-recorded data from Riverway Project events. Still, I continued to be part of the Riverway Project for nearly a year after the conclusion of my formal field-work, often making field-notes when I returned from events and interactions with participants, usually when learning something new or striking.

To triangulate my findings and create as robust a case study as possible, I complemented this fieldwork in several ways. I distributed surveys to participants at biweekly Torah study, attempting to collect demographic data about as many participants as possible. I analyzed written artifacts, including emails and Temple Israel Bulletins.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with fifty Riverway Project participants. I deliberately chose participants to interview who had a range of backgrounds and involvement. Some were single and some married; some had children. They ranged in age from twenty-four to thirty-seven. A few were raised in Boston. While the plurality was raised as Reform Jews, some were raised in more traditional households and some were raised without any synagogue affiliation. About 60% of the participants interviewed participated frequently in many different kinds of Riverway Project events, 20% primarily in Torah and Tonics, and another 20% primarily in Soul Food Friday. A few were members of Temple Israel before the Riverway Project began; one became a Trustee of the synagogue board. Several were conversion students and others studied independently with Morrison. With each, I conducted a semi-structured interview that asked about the participant's ethno-religious background, different Jewish connections,

[31] I explain all Riverway Project events in more detail in the next pages.

what had brought her to the Riverway Project, and her experience of the Riverway Project.[32] Through these interviews, I also tested my own reactions to what I was experiencing in the Riverway Project as well as ideas that participants had suggested in prior interviews.

Sitting with Morrison almost weekly helped me to understand the Riverway Project more thoroughly. We pieced apart the most recent Torah and Tonics session and he shared his ideas about pedagogic decisions he made. He shared his background, educational philosophy, and the culture of the synagogue and his place in it. These interviews became another important opportunity for me to test and advance theories.

I intended to construct a focused case study, but I did not want to ignore the larger, significant context in which the Riverway Project is flourishing. As a result, I triangulated my findings related to the Riverway Project with study of other communities in Boston, in New York, in Los Angeles, and in San Francisco. I conducted thirty additional in-depth interviews with individuals involved in leading various projects in these communities, individuals who lead independent *minyanim* (religious communities), who work on *Heeb Magazine,* who facilitate synagogue-based young adult communities, who are artists and philanthropists. I participated in a number of events for this population; I rode horses with the Stephen S. Wise Temple W Group (in Los Angeles), spoke Yiddish with Yiddishkayt LA, and was awake all night at a San Francisco *Shavuot* (a late spring holiday commemorating the giving of the *Torah*) event. These interviews and observations gave me a crucial understanding of the national portrait of Jewish life for adults in their twenties and thirties. What I learned helped me to crystallize ideas

[32] I include the full interview guide in Appendix A.

about the Riverway Project and also understand how it is unique within what is truly a national scene.

After every event that I witnessed or interview I conducted, I made field notes describing the physical space and interactions that I had witnessed. At least weekly, I wrote memos to myself in which I tried to synthesize what I had heard that week during the various events I witnessed and interviews I conducted. I reflected on themes I had heard or seen as well as asked how the most recent Torah and Tonics session, for example, was similar to or different from prior sessions.[33] I also considered my interview script and the need to shift what I was asking participants and I isolated topics about which I would need to ask Morrison going forward. My six months in the field were intense and highly generative.

As a peer of Riverway Project participants, I faced both an opportunity and a challenge. I was in the midst of an environment that was almost completely natural for me. I blended easily into the audience and was able to attend without participating actively, thereby not changing the environment dramatically. No one seemed to censor themselves around me; they seemed easily to forget my true purpose at events.[34] Moreover, my own Jewish education – my Hebrew skills, my familiarity with Jewish

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[33] Miles and Huberman describe the importance of writing memos in linking a researcher's initial impressions in the field to the detailed and systematic coding required to produce analysis of observations. Writing memos allows a researcher to remove oneself from the immediate process of recording in order to make organized observations about the larger picture. Memo-writing at its core involves tracking themes of previous field events as recorded in notes or memos and then documenting one's initial thinking on paper, examining an array of events similar to each other and studying them for patterns. Researchers also use the writing of memos to outline an intellectual problem and attempt a variety of responses to that problem. Memo-writing is almost the beginning of the drawing of conclusions and ideas about the implications of data. When used systematically, the writing of memos allows a researcher to move through the steps of discovery, from raw data to initial thoughts about linkages between events to early findings and broader conclusions. See Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (California: SAGE Publications, 1994), 72-76.

[34] For purposes of my university's Human Subjects Board regulations, at every event possible, I obtained the permission of participants to record and transcribe, announcing my purpose and revealing my identity.

texts, and my comfort in Jewish prayer services – allowed me not to be fumbling at pages in order to keep up with the class but to focus on the educational process happening around me.

At the same time, that the environment was completely natural for me meant that I needed to be sure that I was reacting to the Riverway Project not personally but as a researcher. I verified the validity of my reactions and ideas through interviews with participants and with Morrison. I connected with one participant, Dena, as my almost alter-ego and key informant, and reflected with her on most key events in order to understand how others might be internalizing these events. Like me, Dena is a single woman in her early thirties. But through her Jewish background that more closely resembled that of her peer participants, I was able to see how those without prior immersion in Jewish communities might be experiencing the Riverway Project.[35]

To understand how to use my peer-based empathy for my subjects in the study itself, I turned to the methodology of portraiture. Portraiture acknowledges the permeable boundaries between seeming dichotomies, between intellect and emotion, between science and art, between researcher and subject. It suggests that the researcher has a unique voice in the project that cannot be hidden and that the researcher's voice shapes the project even while the project is not about the researcher. As a result, portraiture dictates that the researcher not put aside her reactions. Rather, she uses her reactions to understand more deeply the unique setting in which she finds herself and builds on those

[35] Less an alter-ego, Barbara Myerhoff used a similar key informant in her landmark ethnography, *Number Our Days* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978). Myerhoff's key informant gave her vital information about events and subjects' motivations that could only be seen by a true subject of the community that Myerhoff studied. As my own work evolved, it became clearer that Dena and I would spend more time together than a typical researcher and subject might, rooming together in Israel and at other events. Because of that off-time, after formal events ended, I became able to test and explore ideas with her. While I did not set out to find a key informant, Myerhoff's work may have influenced me to create this opportunity, seeing Dena as a resource for me to test ideas as I learned about her background that was so opposite mine.

reactions to craft a study for readers.[36] She intertwines her voice with that of her subjects, using her voice to reveal the ideas of those being studied.

A researcher must be careful to put needed limits on her voice. To do this, the portrait artist is sure to give her readers enough details so that they can understand the story from the subjects' perspectives in addition to seeing it from the researcher's perspective, recognizing where participants' opinions might deviate from the researcher's own. She deliberately understands what are her ideas only and what ideas belong to the larger study, and when she crafts the portrait for readers, she chooses quotations and details that tell the story on participants' terms.[37]

Following the guidelines of portraiture, I was sure to record my reactions carefully. I concluded every set of field notes with these reactions, and when I was taking notes in the field itself, I recorded my reflections in the margins of my paper. Documenting my own deeply personal ideas allowed me to articulate and recognize them in order to check them with others. And I did check them, frequently, in interviews with participants and with Morrison, as I mentioned, and also more informally – but just as intentionally – after events during small talk. "How was your night?" became a first and frequent question for me, because it was part of my thirty-something vernacular and also because it got me to the reactions from participants themselves that I needed for my work.[38] I was able to shape the study with my ideas and my voice and also scrutinize these ideas with participants and with Morrison, with the subjects under study, so that I

[36] Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
[37] Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, *Portraiture,* 99
[38] Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, *Portraiture,* Chapter Four. See also Fenwick W. English, "A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's "Portraiture" as a Method of Educational Research, *Educational Researcher* Vol 29 No 7 (Oct 2000): 21-26. English points out limits to portraiture, particularly that without an independent source of data outside of the researcher, the reader has no ability to understand the extent to which he can trust the researcher's voice.

could be sure that this is my study of the Riverway Project and not a study of my participation in the Riverway Project. When my voice emerges in the pages that follow, it does so because it has been tested and retested and because it has helped me to understand the larger picture. I similarly hope that it does so for the reader.

Ultimately, I compiled data from different sources, read it again and again, and identified themes, primarily ideas that participants had discussed among themselves, in interviews, or in questions they asked during class. I used qualitative coding software to sort the data into categories and examined the categories for relationships, patterns, and correlations between ideas and behavior. I studied the categories for relationships until a bigger picture of participants' growth came into view, with theories emanating from participants' ideas as I wove them together.[39]

## THE FRAMEWORK: THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

At my first Riverway Project community prayer service, I began to think about Morrison as creating a kind of journey for participants as he deliberately transformed the living room into a space for community and prayer. Joseph Reimer has reflected in this way on hiking trails, noting that someone has crafted every hiking trail for its users, precisely choosing the path among rocks and trees that will offer hikers the most challenging and safe hike with a maximized view. Reimer likens that work to the essence of experiential education, citing the work of experiential educators as precisely creating a comparable

[39] Specifically, I followed a variety of techniques advocated by Miles and Huberman. I began by reading transcripts repeatedly and underlying key phrases and ideas, noting particularly concepts that appeared multiple times. I made "cognitive maps," linking concepts to each other, creating trees that showed meta-concepts and ideas that stemmed from these meta-concepts. I relied on "conceptually ordered displays," drawing the relationship between different ideas. Ultimately, I relied on these displays to build a "chain of evidence" that demonstrated to my satisfaction that the conclusions I was drawing rested on participants' ideas and not on my own and were grounded solidly in the data. See *Qualitative Data Analysis,* particularly Chapters Six and Ten.

path for students so that they can grow the most from their experience.[40] Similarly, Morrison carefully frames each experience that he leads, thinking about the basic setting and how the setting is arranged and also about each aspect of participants' experiences together. Because of his careful arrangement of the experience in order to foster participants' growth, I saw experiential education as the first theoretical framework through which I witnessed and analyzed the Riverway Project.

As the project developed, two additional theoretical constructs became helpful. As I witnessed growth during my fieldwork, I turned to the expansive body of scholarship on adult education to understand with precision the process through which participants were going. In addition, as I reflected on what I had learned from participants, sociological work on social capital became important in understanding the very foundation of participants' growth. I describe each of these constructs in greater detail here.

### *Understanding "Growth"*

In identifying the concept of growth as that which captures changes in Jewishness, I learned from a core concept in the study of adult education called "transformative learning." Based on ideas of Jack Mezirow[41] and then developed by additional scholars in the field,[42] ideas about transformative learning are rooted in the human process of making meaning, or the process of understanding the world using ideas that we are given or ideas that we create. Meaning making is the process that we undergo in order to move from the

[40] Joseph Reimer, "A Response to Barry Chazan: The Philosophy of Informal Jewish Education," http://www.jewishagency.org/NR/rdonlyres/2EF39A52-0622-4633-9B8F-D8870C83A204/0/Chazan.pdf.
[41] Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).
[42] See particularly Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) for an excellent review of literature related to meaning making.

ideas of others to ideas of our own, the process through which we learn to "make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others."[43] Through transformative learning, we develop new "habits of mind," ways of "thinking, feeling, acting" and understanding our world. Habits of mind help us develop our points of view and they also help us reflect on the points of view of others. Without our own habits of mind, we can develop none of our own ideas and we instead rely on the strong opinions, the habits of mind, of others.[44]

Transformative learning is based in Habermas' ideas about three kinds of knowledge: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory knowledge. Instrumental knowledge is objective, empirical, and often practical. It is black and white and concrete; it teaches students directly what to do. Communicative knowledge is the knowledge of human relations and the understanding of others and how to interact with them productively. Emancipatory knowledge is the capacity to reflect on and develop one's own ideas, to have awareness of self, one's ideas about a subject, and how one expresses those ideas. Emancipatory knowledge is directly related to the ability to reflect on one's ideas and create new knowledge in an area.[45]

In classical transformative learning theory, a critical event in adult life launches an individual into self-exploration and, ultimately, into the development of emancipatory knowledge. A critical event forces our habits of mind to change, to develop new habits of mind. This is not a linear process, although Mezirow does map stages that take place in transformative learning.

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[43] Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Issue 74 (Summer 1997): 5.
[44] Mezirow, "Transformative Learning," 5-7
[45] Patricia Cranton, "Teaching for Transformation," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* Issue 93 (Spring 2002): 63-72.

In this study, I understand growth essentially as the development of new emancipatory knowledge and new habits of mind. As Riverway Project participants work through some of Mezirow's stages including "critical self-reflection" and being "open to alternatives," they develop new ways of understanding Judaism and they assimilate information and ideas about Judaism that were once unfamiliar.[46] Many Riverway Project participants have thought, I demonstrate in later chapters, that to be Jewish means to eat bagels and appreciate Seinfeld. They have understood Judaism to be irrelevant, to clash with their values, and they have seen Jewish learning as weak and offering little, Jewish texts as uninteresting. As they cultivate new habits of mind in the Riverway Project, they examine and radically shift their prior assumptions. They develop new ways of thinking about and understanding Judaism that then help them change their potential expressions of Jewishness. When Judaism to them was as simple as bagels and Seinfeld, they expressed their Jewishness in limited ways. When Judaism becomes complex and relevant to them, when they develop habits of mind that reflect its potential, the arena of their Jewish expression comes to be wide open.

Emancipatory knowledge assumes autonomy, the capacity to reflect independently on one's ideas and similarly to shift one's actions. As the bulk of this dissertation reflects, the central tension of this study is the extent to which Morrison can help Riverway Project participants build on their new habits of mind to create their own true emancipatory knowledge. Genuine growth requires participants to develop new habits of mind, first under his leadership but then on their own initiative. It asks that they become their own teachers, reflexively challenging their assumptions and drawing their

[46] Cranton, "Teaching," 65. I most closely examine these results of involvement of the Riverway Project in Chapter Five, when I look at the specific role that critical thinking plays in the Riverway Project.

own conclusions about Jewish life. Growth allows them to be owners of Jewish life, using their new habits of mind to come into an understanding of a personally relevant sense of Jewishness, to be individuals who know something of Jewish history and tradition, who are confident in what they know and who they are as Jews, and who act using that knowledge and confidence. Genuine growth, ownership, represents a transformation through which Riverway Project participants become enabled to develop their own Jewish lives and to build an active expression of their Jewishness.

### *On Jewish Social Capital*

Fundamental to the evolution of participants' new habits of mind is the concept of social networks and the related idea of social capital. Jewish social capital gives participants the confidence and knowledge to develop new habits of mind independent from their teacher.

Even if they had prior experience with Jewish education, most participants begin their involvement with the Riverway Project from amidst significant insecurity as related to their Jewishness. They lack confidence in Jewish settings and doubt their abilities to join Jewish communities comfortably. They are anxious leading Jewish rituals, within their homes and with their families. Their insecurity stems from their meager knowledge of various Jewish norms and rituals and their resulting feeling that without knowledge and comfort, they do not meet an indefinable and intangible meter that measures Jewish adequacy.

What, specifically, do they not know? Imagine a traditional American Jewish community engaged in a prayer service. A selection of tattered Hebrew books is spread outside of the prayer room, and all seem to know which books are needed and which are

not. Men and women are separated; men have their heads covered and some women may have them covered, but with hats and *kipot* (head coverings) rather than only *kipot.* Many are facing front and holding their prayerbooks; a table in the center of the room has an unfolded *Torah* scroll and some are gathered around the scroll. Someone stands, pointing to the scroll, chanting. Someone stands next to him with a book, every few words correcting the first person. A third person begins to chant; the congregation responds at some point, and at the same point, some in the congregation bend forward, seemingly randomly, while others in the congregation stand up.[47] This description could continue at length, with standing, sitting, chanting out loud and silently, one word responses, pinky fingers in the air…. Jewish tradition, like any communal tradition, represents what can seem like a black box of tiny, indistinguishable means of participation, means that one by one are not complicated, and altogether make up one kind of knowledge of Judaism.

In addition to knowing what to do in communities, some individuals know peers from other communities, actively playing "Jewish geography." Moreover, many know how Judaism fits into their lives and what they want to do to express their Jewishness.[48] These three kinds of knowledge, of Jewish tradition, of other Jews, and of how to exercise their Jewishness, primarily comprise Jewish social capital.

Riverway Project participants' lack of knowledge and their resulting lack of confidence equal their Jewish social capital – or, in this case, their lack of such capital. Some have had no experiences with Jewish community and education; some have had

[47] This description outlines a few moments of a traditional Jewish *Torah* reading, with an individual completing the reading, another individual correcting his/ her mistakes from a text that has the full vowels and cantillation of the text (the *Torah* does not), and either the reader or a third individual opening and closing the reading of a segment of the *Torah* portion with two blessings, known as an *aliyah,* an honor that involves "going up" to the table, the *shulchan,* with the *Torah.* During that introduction and closing of the segment of *Torah,* to acknowledge God, some individuals stand while others merely lean forward.
[48] In Chapter Three, I describe games of "Jewish geography" and also Riverway Project participants' lack of understanding of how Judaism fits into their lives.

these experiences, but remember almost nothing from them. As a result, and without such capital, without a base of self-belief, they cannot develop knowledge from their adult experiences in Jewish communities, let alone develop new habits of mind and the self-reliance necessary to facilitate their own Jewish growth. Jewish social capital, then, also includes confidence that one will fit into a Jewish community, that one will know how to behave and blend in if one enters a Jewish community for the first time. This confidence comes from a sense that one has a deliberate Jewish self-definition and plan for action in which one believes, a personally relevant sense of Jewishness. Confidence and personal relevance, then, complete the entity that is Jewish social capital.

This is the distress that Riverway Project participants feel in Jewish communities when they do the wrong thing: when they do not know how to treat a prayer book, or do not know the words to a song, or they wear the wrong thing. They have not been part of Jewish social networks during their lives. Consequently, they feel uncomfortable in and avoid Jewish communities.

Their discomfort leads them into an iterative circle, a chicken and egg situation. The only way for them to build social capital – and therefore feel more comfortable – is by participating in Jewish community. Through this participation, they can learn norms, values, and expectations. They can learn to avoid sanctions. Without knowledge of these norms, though, they are reluctant to participate in Jewish community. As Iannaconne argues, “Religious capital is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of most religious activity”; religious capital both enables participation and leads to participation.[49]

[49] Laurence Iannacconne, “Religious Practice: A Human Capital Approach.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 29 No. 3. (Sept. 1990): 297-314. In this article, Iannacconne provides a thorough introduction to the concepts of human capital and to religious practice as an aspect of human capital. He

Moreover, as Phillips and Fishman discuss, developing ethno-religious capital helps individuals gain more from their ethno-religious participation. Capital gives their identity "substance and meaning."[50]

Comfort and confidence, which stem from Jewish social capital, lie at the heart of Riverway Project participants' potential Jewish growth. Their development of emancipatory knowledge relies on their belief that they can develop their own habits of mind as related to Judaism. Without confidence in their capacity to participate in Jewish communities, they do not have the self-confidence to develop unaided these new habits of mind, nor can they even enter communities in which they can move their self-confidence forward. Growth, then, is reliant on helping participants develop Jewish social capital and therefore on helping them to develop a comfortable position in a Jewish social network.

As participants form a new Jewish community, they do so in the context of a long history of community being at the center of Jewish life and practice. Community is literally at the center of Jewish life: Ten individuals, or men, in the traditional formulation, are required for the thrice-daily recitation of the most sacred prayers, and the *kehilah,* or formal oversight structure, governed membership in Jewish community and oversaw many communal functions during pre-modern times, ensuring that Jewish needs were met.[51] In America, community remained at the center of Jewish life, even while the

introduces the idea of religious capital as being both developed from and allowing religious practice on page 299.

[50] Benjamin T. Phillips and Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Ethnic Capital and Intermarriage: A Study of American Jews." *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 67 No. 4 (2006): 487-505. Phillips and Fishman discuss a variety of the benefits of ethnic social capital, and specifically cite a benefit as helping human beings to define their place in society, on page 490.

[51] I cannot do justice here to the enormous task of analyzing the place of the Riverway Project community in the historic continuum of Jewish communities. For a thorough understanding of the importance of community in Jewish tradition and particularly in the late Middle Ages, see Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books 1993). Jonathan D. Sarna's *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004) summarizes the evolution of the American Jewish

American federalist system imposed a non-centralized structure onto American Judaism.[52] In the New World, a free and mobile society gave rise to many synagogues, movements, and non-governmental organizations. Elazar describes the nature of affiliation in American Judaism, arguing that in an atmosphere in which "organic," or ancestral, connections to ethnic or religious traditions disappear in a voluntary society, individuals choose associational connections, voluntary involvements or memberships in not only religious organizations, but also in ethnic associations that celebrate belonging.

In American Jewish community, these associational connections thus far have rested on the idea that in order to identify as Jews, even if they are not that involved in Jewish life, American Jews pay membership and sign a piece of paper in order to affiliate – or associate – with their Jewishness. To show support or Jewish identification, one becomes an official organizational member.[53]

This dissertation is essentially the story of a Jewish community. Within my descriptions of the Riverway Project social network and this 21st century model of a looser Jewish community, one with high content but low boundaries, historical and earlier American Jewish communities are the backdrop to new ideas of community. The new social network described gains meaning in the context of the traditional communities whose legacy the Riverway Project both continues and departs from creatively. At the close of the dissertation, I will return to this discussion of community, observing the Riverway Project's continuations and innovations as important products of this research.

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community. Daniel J. Elazar's *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society, 1995) is an authoritative analysis of the structures and purposes of American Jewish community/ communities, with a particular focus on the American Jewish organizational structure.

[52] There were several short-lived experiments in working with primary governing bodies, as described in Sarna's *American Judaism.*

[53] Elazar, *Community,* Chapter One

## THE CASE: THE RIVERWAY PROJECT OF BOSTON'S TEMPLE ISRAEL

I have mentioned several times the Riverway Project and its leader, Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison. In the next pages, I introduce Morrison and the Riverway Project in detail, giving the reader an understanding of Morrison's background and personality, helping one to imagine how he birthed this initiative. In addition, because the Riverway Project is well integrated into and even succeeds because of its larger congregational home, that of Boston's Temple Israel, I explore the philosophy and nature of Temple Israel. In doing so, I offer in this case of the Riverway Project not only a story of the Jewish growth of adults in their twenties and thirties but also a picture of vibrant American synagogue life in the twenty-first century.

### *Temple Israel, Longwood, Boston*

Temple Israel looms large on Boston's Riverway, a tree-laden, winding road that follows the Muddy River into Boston's southern suburbs. Over the years, medical buildings have blossomed around the synagogue; it now backs into Boston's bustling medical community, and world-renowned researchers, anxious patients from all backgrounds, and medical students pass Temple Israel on their way into Brigham and Women's Hospital, Children's Hospital, and various medical schools. The Temple's sanctuary faces the green of the Riverway and its grand nineteenth century columns face Longwood Avenue. The Temple's marquee, which faces Longwood, reads, "A diverse and welcoming liberal Jewish community committed to improving our world."

This is an apt description of the temple, the second congregation founded in Boston, the largest Reform congregation in New England with 1650 households and four rabbis, and almost the only synagogue within the Boston city limits. Since its origins in the 1850s, some of its proudest moments have related to social justice and to diversity, to Truman's 1947 Committee on Civil Rights,[54] to Martin Luther King's visit to Boston in the 1960s and his speaking from the pulpit of Temple Israel, to the fight for the freedom of Soviet Refuseniks in the 1980s.[55] As the faces of American Jews began to shift in the 1970s, the congregation deliberately opened itself to interfaith families, and then to gays and lesbians, and then to Jews of color. When its marquee declares the congregation to be "diverse and welcoming," it means that to walk into the filled sanctuary of Temple Israel is to see a true rainbow of faces and types of families.

Throughout its history and today, the congregation attempts to attend to issues of class and financial access. Even prior to the Riverway Project, the synagogue had a $36 membership policy for new members in their twenties or thirties. Its current dues structure invites all families to pay on a sliding scale and then, if the scale is still not sufficient, to contact the congregation's office and to pay what seems feasible. Temple Israel leadership recognize that in order to be the type of financially accessible community that they strive to make it, the congregation must rely on sources of revenue

[54] President Harry Truman's Committee on Civil Rights was founded by Executive Order in 1946 in order to investigate and report on the status of civil rights in the United States. It delivered its report and disbanded in late 1947. Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn, Temple Israel's senior rabbi at the time, was one of the Committee's fifteen members and its only rabbi.

[55] In the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, but before many American Jews and congregations were making similar trips, Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, the senior rabbi of the congregation at the time, traveled to the Soviet Union several times to visit and bring supplies to Russian Jews. He brought a number of congregants, including teenagers and Morrison, with him.

Historical details about the founding of Temple Israel and significant events during its life are as reported to me by Morrison and by congregants and from Jonathan D. Sarna, Ellen Smith, Scott-Martin Kosofsky, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, *The Jews of Boston* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005) and particularly David Kaufman's essay, "Temples in the American Athens: A History of the Synagogues of Boston."

in addition to dues, even significantly.[56] Ultimately, a desire to avoid class restrictions prevails even while it creates other challenges for the congregation.

The congregation also carries out its commitment to "improving the world" through its Ohel Tzedek (tent of justice) project, which applies principles of community organizing to synagogue life, mobilizing congregants around issues of social justice. Groups of congregants sit together in house meetings and in one-on-one conversations, talking about issues that matter to them. They use their collective power to advocate for policy change in local and state communities, gathering to lobby their legislators in their synagogue's social hall, in the basement of churches, in front of the State House. In doing so, they create strong connections among congregants and help each other connect to their Jewishness through social change.

Diversity and justice have been and continue to be part of the synagogue's priorities. Similarly, Temple Israel has turned continually throughout its history to tradition, weighing seriously options in liturgy and practice and often choosing a path that is more inclusive (of tradition) and also one that embraces innovations. Several times in its history, it turned away from rabbis who were immersing themselves in more humanistic traditions and procured senior rabbis who would incorporate greater Jewish tradition into the congregation's life. Its senior rabbi of the early twentieth century, Rabbi Henri Levi, advocated Zionism even while the Reform movement was still hesitant to do

[56] Some in Boston note that Temple Israel is lucky to have an important source of revenue in a parking structure that it owns. Located across from the congregation, on land that has become central to the Longwood medical area, it does give the congregation valuable revenue and is a unique and productive use of the congregation's land. At the same time, Temple Israel's attempts to move beyond being a congregation that is primarily dues-based raise challenges for the congregation that extend beyond what can be addressed by the parking structure. In expanding the central sources of revenue for the congregation (from dues to private donations and endowment income), it is entering uncharted and unproven territory for American churches and synagogues, taking a risk as it exercises its value of financially accessible Jewish life and making insufficient the income it receives from the parking structure. In other words, the income helps, but it does not balance the impact of the other choices that Temple Israel makes.

so; in 1939, the congregation elected Joshua Loth Liebman to the position of senior rabbi, who similarly advocated a return to traditional Jewish ideas and practices.[57] In the 1950s, the congregation adopted *bar mitzvah* for boys, following some Reform congregations that had similarly done so before World War II in an attempt to reach out to Eastern European Jewish immigrants. It also began *bat mitzvah* for girls in 1956, again, despite the fact that only about half of Conservative congregations had so far adopted the ritual.[58]

Today, innovations continue related to liturgy and practice. During the High Holidays, Temple Israel's sanctuary fills with men and women in suits, the clergy in robes, the atmosphere formal. The social hall downstairs fills with those attending the "purple service," many in more casual clothes and seeming less ceremonial than those upstairs. The chairs in the social hall move to allow the organized small conversations that sometimes take place during the services, conversations about God and forgiveness. The service incorporates the voices and ideas of many in the audience when their thoughts about gratitude and new resolutions are shared. On *Yom Kippur*, many in the purple service wear white and cloth shoes, both traditions often found in more traditional congregations. This is a congregation of multiple personalities, some that belong to the more classical and decorous Reform tradition, and some that subscribe to newer ideas within the Reform movement of a return to tradition and more interactive prayer opportunities.

The spirit of this purple service appears at Temple Israel every Friday evening. At 5:45 pm approximately 300 individuals of all ages fill the sanctuary, prepared to follow

[57] It wasn't until after World War I that Reform Jewish leaders began to reconsider the movement's position on Zionism, and conversations were at their height only just before World War II. In 1937, the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed its Columbus Platform, which officially changed its position on Zionism (Sarna, *American Judaism,* 250).

[58] In 1953, *bat mitzvah* was celebrated in one-third of Reform congregations (Ibid. 288, 289).

the guitar on the *bimah* (stage) and to sing joyously the unique tunes of a Temple Israel *Shabbat* service. In general, the synagogue's leadership purposefully experiments with creative spiritual practices. The congregation's Rabbi Elaine Zecher leads the Union for Reform Judaism's Committee on Liturgy and Practices; she and Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, the synagogue's Rabbi Emeritus, played significant roles in developing the new Reform *siddur* (prayerbook), which has incorporated many meditative readings and returned some Reform liturgy to traditional liturgical ideas. In total, Temple Israel is a congregation committed to spiritual reflection, to collective exploration of God in diverse ways, and to creating joy and community through song.

Self-exploration and community-building also occur through learning. Adult education is a priority in the congregation. On many nights, the synagogue is filled with three, four, five classes of adults learning together. Morrison experimented with adult learning when he brought together a group of five congregants into something he called the "teaching cadre," the congregants learning together to teach Jewish texts so that they could gather their peers and study *Torah* together, outside of the congregation and without a rabbi. The intent was to democratize Jewish study and to bring *Torah* to additional congregants in relaxed, accessible settings.

Temple Israel's atmosphere, then, is also one of inclusivity, social change, vulnerability, and experimentation. Rabbi Ronne Friedman, the senior rabbi of the congregation, calls it a "living laboratory for Jewish life," suggesting that they are prepared to be experimental with social justice, prayer, and education in order to move toward "engagement by Jews in a variety of aspects of Jewish living." He suggests that community should be at the center of their Jewish life together, that "the Jewish endeavor

depends" on their being together.[59] Temple Israel executes its experiments with Jewish life in order to bring people together in the deepest ways possible.

Part of the richness of the Riverway Project is its home in Temple Israel and the exchange of ideas and energy that has taken place between the two entities. Individuals connect to the Riverway Project and ultimately to Temple Israel, or they come to Temple Israel for an Introduction to Judaism class[60] or to be married by one of the congregation's rabbis and then after their wedding connect to the Riverway Project. The lines between the two become blurry, and participants can move fluidly between the two because the Riverway Project mirrors the culture and norms of Temple Israel. The songs sung in Riverway Project spaces are heard as well on Friday nights at Temple Israel and a guitar accompanies prayer in both settings. Riverway Project participants sit together in living rooms with the Riverway Project and then with Ohel Tzedek, the social justice initiative. Particularly because Temple Israel offers a low-cost membership for new members under the age of thirty-five ($36 for individuals; $72 for couples), those engaged by the Riverway Project find it easy to join Temple Israel. When they discover that they gain something from the congregation, many continue to be members and become involved in both Temple Israel and the Riverway Project. The questions of Riverway Project participants and of Temple Israel congregants are the same. A member of the synagogue's Board shared with me, "The problem I'm trying to solve is how to make Judaism relevant to my life and how to make it more accessible to others." This central question drives him into *Torah* study and into synagogue leadership. He is in his mid-sixties, but his is the same question that many in the Riverway Project ask, and the same

[59] Quotations are from interview with Rabbi Ronne Friedman, October 2006.
[60] A series of classes sponsored by the Union for Reform Judaism and taught in congregational settings, particularly utilized by interfaith couples looking to study Judaism together.

question asked by Temple Israel congregants of all ages. These questions sit at the heart of the Temple Israel Jewish community, Riverway Project and all.

In these ways, the Riverway Project is a natural part of the continuing life of the congregation. The values and ideas of Riverway Project participants and congregants are the same, and the values and ideas that motivate the Riverway Project are the same that have motivated Temple Israel for two centuries. Continually, Temple Israel has been a congregation looking to grapple with Jewish tradition and with modernity, cultivating congregants' spiritual life while also acknowledging that tradition can evolve. The synagogue's leaders have taken risks, working for civil rights in the 1940s, hosting Martin Luther King, traveling to Russia in the 1970s. In these efforts has been a concern for the greater community in which Temple Israel and its members exist. In its focus on tradition and the risk and care for the larger community that it represents, the Riverway Project is an innovation in the pattern of Temple Israel innovations. At the same time, in that it means to work with members and non-members of Temple Israel, it pushes the boundaries of the congregation farther than ever. The Riverway Project represents a noteworthy dissipation of its boundaries in its deliberate work with non-members, an acknowledgement that membership dues will not drive its operations, and an expansion of the concept of the Temple Israel family.

### *Morrison as Educator*

Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison was raised in Brookline and as a member of Temple Israel. Upon graduating from rabbinical school in his late twenties, it was natural for him to look at his peers, at young Boston Jewry, and realize that few of them had a home in an area

synagogue. Committed to urban living, he envisioned creating a break-away synagogue, a store-front in the gritty, trendy South End neighborhood. Working closely with a member of the congregation's Board, he launched the Riverway Project in the fall of 2001, just after graduation, and became its full-time director.

Morrison speaks definitively, quickly, and with passion, when he leads text studies and particularly when he speaks about the Riverway Project and his pulpit. In his mid-thirties, he dresses stylishly, with small silver glasses and his thick, blondish-brown hair styled longer in the front and short in back. Involved in theater in high school and college, he acknowledges that he draws frequently on his experience on the stage; it has helped him be comfortable in front of groups, to captivate a crowd, and to use his entire self to inspire a room. In short, he has presence.

In addition to helping participants develop connections to its host congregation, to Temple Israel, Morrison conceives of the Riverway Project as intending to strengthen participants' Jewishness and Jewish involvement in general. Morrison acts as educator when he teaches texts, when he leads prayer services, and when he sits one on one with participants to discuss their questions about Judaism. And yet, he received little training in education in rabbinical school. He acknowledged often as we sat together and discussed his intentions during Torah and Tonics and other aspects of the Riverway Project that he was considering his educational stance for the first time. His decisions as he teaches are intuitive.

When the Riverway Project began, Morrison met with potential constituents to understand what they might want from Jewish life. Among other things, they demonstrated a curiosity about Jewish texts. It was easy for Morrison to respond; since

discovering for himself the complexity of ancient Jewish texts, text study had been a central way that Morrison connected to Judaism. In addition to making text study a focus of his rabbinic program, he spent a year in Israel studying in a liberal *yeshiva* and is pursuing a doctorate in Bible and the Ancient Near East. He is fascinated by the ideological goals of the writers, their theology, and the complex web of relationships between the Bible's multifaceted narratives. By learning more about biblical history and life in the Ancient Near East, narratives that Morrison had learned in his childhood acquired new meaning and greater complexity. Moreover, by studying the texts closely and understanding the background behind biblical stories, Morrison was able to make the text more his own and to see more clearly the relationship between the Bible and the modern world. His newfound knowledge continually informs his choices of Jewish practice and his outlook toward contemporary issues. The act of studying and piecing apart the text has become central to his Jewish expression in many senses.

Overtly and subtly, participants pose a staggering range of questions to Morrison as they study: Why was the Bible written? When? Who wrote it? Or: How can I believe in something that might not have occurred? How do I make meaning for myself out of this text that is so complicated and nuanced? Regardless of Morrison’s childhood relationship with his synagogue and the extensive Jewish education he has experienced as an adult, Morrison shares participants’ questions. He studies Jewish texts to explore these questions, as do participants. He believes that he is effective with participants because he shares their journey, because he is leading them through a process that he also experienced.

### *The Riverway Project: Beginnings and Today*

Morrison came to the congregation with an idea about a storefront synagogue. He envisioned a satellite congregation associated with Temple Israel, but one that would give adults in their twenties and thirties their own, private space, space that was integrated as normative into the vibrancy of Boston's South End neighborhood. Committed to the idea of outreach but seeing the satellite as financially unfeasible, the synagogue Board asked that its format be reexamined. At the same time, synagogue leadership located an anonymous donor who was willing to support a new outreach project – and a full-time rabbi as its coordinator – with a significant annual gift. With this independent revenue, as the synagogue's new and fourth rabbi, Morrison was able to focus primarily on developing this new initiative and working with this population. He had some pulpit and (Sunday/ Hebrew) school responsibilities but was seen as external to the pastoral staff, as the Director of the Riverway Project and an add-on to the congregation's clergy.[61]

Morrison developed the Riverway Project using two sources of data. First, he sought to understand the existing outreach and education work for adults in their twenties and thirties that the congregation had conducted. He met with those involved in that work and explored the primary components of what had existed: a bimonthly study group at the synagogue and a young adult service that met in the synagogue's chapel.[62] With those

[61] One imagines that this distinction was important to the Board, which may have been reluctant to establish a precedent for a fourth rabbi: If the donor withdrew her support and the congregation had established itself as a four-rabbi congregation, would the Board be responsible for crafting a budget that maintained four rabbis?

Morrison has been with the congregation since 2001, and while the financial arrangements have only shifted somewhat (the anonymous donor continues to be a supporter of the Riverway Project), Morrison's role in the congregation has been normalized to a great extent. The Riverway Project remains a primary responsibility for him, but the Project Administrator has taken on a good deal of the Project's organization, and Morrison's responsibilities within the larger congregation have grown.

[62] While some individuals who participated in those study sessions and services are still a part of the congregation or now connected to the Riverway Project, no one had ideas about why those elements of the

lessons in mind, he went out of the congregation and into living rooms, facilitating house meetings, or structured conversations with potential participants that resembled focus groups. The house meetings took place in the homes of adults in their twenties and thirties who were somewhat connected to the congregation, some children of congregants, some known by congregants. The hosts and Morrison spread the word to their social networks. About five to ten individuals participated in each meeting, individuals who might have been raised with some Jewish activity, but who as younger adults had few Jewish connections in their lives. From their comments about the materialistic and impersonal nature of most synagogues, their ideas about the potential role of Jewish study in their lives, and their desire for intimate Jewish communities with which to celebrate, the Project developed. It quickly took on a concrete form, developing core components that repeated regularly as well as one-time events rooted in holidays and other specific moments in time.

The events that have comprised the Riverway Project since its inception – many of which are mentioned and explored in this dissertation – include the following:

- Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays: A biweekly, Tuesday evening, open text study that takes place in the synagogue. Dinner begins at 6:30; study begins at 7:00 and continues until 8:00. Under Morrison's leadership, about twenty or thirty participants study the *Torah* portion of the week.
- Neighborhood Circles: Living-room based Friday-night prayer services and *Shabbat* dinners with ten to thirty participants. Like Torah and Tonics,

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life of Temple Israel had not succeeded in the ways that the Riverway Project did. From the little I was able to ascertain, I suggest that they did not attract the same numbers, or result in the same transformation of participants' Jewishness, because they were synagogue-based and because they did not seem to use the approaches to Jewish life documented in this dissertation.

Neighborhood Circles do not have "members" nor even consistent participants, but there are those who attend frequently and who comprise a shifting core of the Circle.

- Soul Food Friday: Monthly, Friday-night *Shabbat* services at the synagogue with a band and a Jewish soul food *oneg* afterward. Approximately 300 participate in an energetic prayer service.
- Riverway Tots: Friday morning gatherings for parents in their twenties and thirties that take place during pre-school at the Temple. Parents come together for casual conversation and a rabbi, often Morrison, usually joins them.
- Mining for Meaning: A four-week class for ten or twelve participants in one neighborhood led by Morrison that focuses deeply on several holidays, "mining" them for meaning. This has been the only serial class, with the same participants repeatedly, that the Riverway Project has offered. Several times that it has been offered participants have chosen to extend the group's meetings beyond its initial four weeks.
- Israel trip: A ten day trip to Israel with Morrison. Half of the participants had been to Israel before, and half had not. The trip resembled a typical tour of Israel, with time spent in Jerusalem and in the North, a trip to Masada, as well as *Shabbat* at two Reform congregations and with young adults in Boston's sister city of Haifa.
- *Kallah*: A Saturday/ Sunday morning at a retreat center for approximately forty individuals. A committee of Riverway Project participants planned the *kallah*, studying the week's *Torah* portion and creating and leading discussion-based activities that focused on the portion.

- Salsa in the *Sukkah*, *Purim* 2005, Wine Tasting: Salsa in the *Sukkah* features hors d'ouevres under Temple Israel's *sukkah* (outdoor hut meant for the harvest holiday of *Sukkot*) and salsa dancing and attracts more than 100 each year. Other events have been connected to different holidays and do not necessarily repeat each year.

One of the most remarkable things about each of these events is the mixed audience that each attracts. Riverway Tots is designed (intentionally) for a parents-only audience, while something like Salsa in the *Sukkah,* late on a weeknight, attracts primarily single, heterosexual adults. Most other events, however, draw a mix of couples and singles, gay and straight, parents and not. Participants comment on the importance of the mixed audience to them, suggesting that it helps the Project to seem focused on the exploration of Judaism and not on dating. If meeting someone – a friend or partner – comes of their engagement with the Riverway Project, they would be pleased, but they are there to explore their attitudes toward their tradition. And when a parent exits *Yad Vashem* (Israel's Holocaust museum and memorial), and kisses his child with the emotion that gathered in him while considering the children that were murdered, it deepens the experience of all present.[63]

[63] Adults (visibly) older than about forty do not participate in the vast majority of these events. Occasionally, a few congregants will attend an event based in the congregation, wanting to "check out" this phenomenon that they read about in the synagogue's monthly bulletin. Equally occasionally, someone older than forty will wander into an event, wanting to participate as an equal member of the community. Very rarely, and per his explanation to me, Morrison has had to ask someone of this age to leave the community, wanting to keep the Riverway Project authentic to its purpose. He points out to these individuals that Temple Israel is delighted to welcome them even as a non-member, but that the Riverway Project is intended for those in their twenties and thirties exploring Jewish life as younger adults. As a researcher, I never saw this occur and cannot attest to how others in the community might treat a forty-or fifty-something. I do suggest that because in more than six months I did not see this occur, the personality of the community seems to be strong enough to discourage those not in the target population from participating. While there are only informal rules that prevent them from doing so, these informal rules do seem to be effective.

It should also be noted that each of these events is open to all those who belong to the audience: adults in their twenties and thirties interested in Jewish life. Members and non-members of Temple Israel can participate in any of these opportunities. This question of membership was raised at an early Mining for Meaning class, when a non-member (and someone who participates in another congregation) asked outright if she posed a problem to Morrison as a non-member of Temple Israel in a class that he was leading. He thought seriously about it, clearly having never considered the question before. "It might be," he mused, "if you were a member of another synagogue. But if you just are not a member of Temple Israel…". When he worked with this student as an ongoing member of the Mining for Meaning class, it became evident that he was permitted and that he intended to bring Jewish exploration to a variety of Bostonians, and not only to members – and not only to potential members – of Temple Israel. In addition, Morrison did not change his practice, continuing not to ask individuals if they are members of any congregation before he works with them.

Morrison's opportunity to work with anyone, potential member or not, stems from the congregation's philosophy about the project. Friedman, the synagogue's senior rabbi, suggested that the synagogue leadership had been excited about the Riverway Project because they knew that they needed vitality in their membership as well as the revenue. At the same time, the project intentionally was not structured only to bring new members to Temple Israel but to bring Judaism to any Bostonians. "From the outset," Friedman argues, "this wasn't just about what it did for TI." He continues, "If it worked here, it would be good for American Jewry." The project was not about the synagogue but about

Jewish life, and at the same time, the synagogue's leaders believed that "if it worked it was going to lead back to the center," back to the synagogue.

The Riverway Project has brought new membership units to the congregation and retained at least 50% of those membership units over time. The impact of the Riverway Project, however, has extended far beyond its membership revenue. In fact, the Project has "transformed the congregation" according to Friedman. There has been "an infusion of people who have become engaged" in the synagogue and more significantly, "they have been encouraged to articulate the things that they are looking for from the congregation." They are not only members, in other words, they are leaders of the community. Some have formal leadership roles and some merely step up with opinions, demands, and ideas, when asked or not. Friedman notes this as unusual and appreciates their non-consumerist approach to Jewish life.

Moreover, the synagogue's leaders have learned from the success of the Riverway Project model and are applying the paradigm to other areas of the congregation. "Initiative 477"[64] is meant to initiate and manage a number of living-room based Circles of cohorts in addition to adults in their twenties and thirties and to bring rich Jewish life to inactive congregants and even to new members. The synagogue's rabbis, Morrison and others, have gathered empty nesters into cohorts and have led prayer services and discussions of Jewish texts in living rooms. The idea that a rabbi could leave the *bimah* (stage) on a Friday night for someone's home was revolutionary to some congregants – but "it may be shaping," Friedman suggests, "what this place will become." As Morrison imagines it, through this Neighborhood paradigm, the Temple can come to sponsor a

[64] 477 refers to the Temple's address.

series of relationships in which individuals invest in each other to create Jewish life that matters to them collectively.

The Riverway Project informs the synagogue in important ways; similarly, the synagogue supports the growth of the Riverway Project. Morrison suggests that the most significant source of connection of individuals to the Riverway Project is his facilitation of their marriage ceremonies. As he comes to know couples, he can say to them with confidence, I have something else for you. At a time when they are starting their lives and are thinking seriously about their future Jewish homes, they are offered in the Riverway Project a community that holds something authentic for them. Similarly, when individuals become deeply involved in the Riverway Project and want more, they can find more in the broader congregation that well matches the ideals and norms of the Riverway Project. They can participate in the “purple” service during the High Holidays and attend the 5:45 Friday night service when the Riverway Project is not meeting. This Project was constructed to be about creating connections to Judaism and not to synagogue. Its connection to synagogue, though, is vital to its capacity to make an impact on participants.

The experiment that is the Riverway Project, then, is multi-faceted. Most significantly, it explores how adults in their twenties and thirties can develop their Jewishness. It also explores the extent to which a synagogue can increase its younger membership, even if the outreach mechanism it is using is meant to connect individuals to Judaism foremost and then to the synagogue. It is led by a teacher who is inspiring others by teaching the essence of his sense of self. The synagogue gambled on the initiative in its experimentation with synagogue boundaries, with the idea that a

successful product that tried to connect individuals to Jewish life would ultimately connect some of them to the synagogue as well. The experiment has successes, as the synagogue has concluded and as this dissertation will demonstrate, because these were the right hypotheses for this generation, sound ways to structure this project.

At the same time, there are complexities to be found in the Riverway Project. Occasionally, Morrison implies argument, and sometimes antagonistic argument, with a more traditional Jewish point of view. At the other extreme, the Riverway Project does not provide a basic introduction to Torah; Torah and Tonics simply assumes that those present are familiar with the books of the Bible and the basic narrative. One couple shared that the Riverway Project is not "spiritual" enough, and another couple did not appreciate the liturgical decisions that Morrison makes. Were I to have been conducting a formative evaluation of the Project, noting how different strategies could be shifted to reach Morrison's goals better, I would note the different tactics that could be adopted (in other words, the Riverway Project intermittently misses its mark). Finally, there are a number of challenges inherent in the Riverway Project's very structure, as I outline in the bulk of the dissertation: a few are uncomfortable with Morrison's approach to the study of bible, community is, to a great extent, overpowering, and the concept of leadership is sometimes too subtle.

In sum, the Riverway Project is not a perfect intervention, and I am not proposing it as the quintessential means of facilitating Jewish growth for adults in their twenties and thirties. Rather, it offers a paradigm of Jewish growth for some individuals and an understanding of what may characterize growth for many of them, an example that establishes patterns and not a perfect project that offers finite solutions.

## THE AUDIENCE: PARTICIPANTS OF THE RIVERWAY PROJECT

The word “participant” is, in reality, misleading. This is not, as I will discuss later in the dissertation, a Jewish community like those previously known, with membership dues and signed pieces of paper. Those connected to the Riverway Project do not necessarily participate consistently in its activities. They move in and out of involvement; they come to one event and cannot return for some time, or another organization or community across town attracts their attention. In addition, many of those who participate only in Torah and Tonics are those who are looking for the opportunity to study Jewish texts, and compared to those who participate in all Riverway Project opportunities, are often more Jewishly erudite than others connected to the Riverway Project. Similarly, those who participate only in the monthly, more anonymous Soul Food Fridays are often less interested in an active Jewish life, and those who attend Neighborhood Circles primarily are frequently those who want a more spiritual, intimate engagement with Judaism.

Still, we can and should make observations about those in the population who find the Riverway Project. These conclusions are helpful in appreciating the phenomena occurring within the Riverway Project. In addition, an analysis of such participants creates a contrast between those who participate and those who do not, helping to shed light on the population at large.

In this section, to complete the introduction to the Riverway Project, I provide a demographic description of those connected to the Riverway Project as drawn from event-based surveys of participants, collected primarily from those who participate in Torah and Tonics. I continue the description in Chapter Two with an analysis of the

larger population to which they belong, the cohort of American Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties, focusing on emerging adulthood as participants' life stage and on the relationship between their life stage and their exploration of Judaism.

Riverway Project participants demonstrate variance in all kinds of demographic markers. The average age of participants surveyed is twenty-nine, although a few recent college graduates participate and others are close to forty. Most live in the typical urban neighborhoods in which Boston's young adults begin their lives: in Brookline, Jamaica Plain, Somerville, Cambridge, and the South End. And they also come from far away, from New Hampshire, from the western and southern suburbs of Massachusetts, driving an hour or more for *Torah* study and prayer services.

On any night at Torah and Tonics, two single women, a single man, a married couple, and a boyfriend and girlfriend might sit at a table together. In the same way, most Riverway Project spaces are filled with more women then men, although events, particularly Friday night prayer services, are occasionally more gender-balanced. While single men are not absent from Riverway Project spaces, they do participate less frequently than do single women. About half of participants surveyed are married or living with a partner. Parents participate most frequently in Neighborhood Circles, the Riverway Project opportunity that is most parent-friendly. Most also make connections to other Riverway parents through Riverway Tots.

It, perhaps, is not unusual that more single women participate in the Riverway Project than single men; women are almost universally more involved in religious education and in religious practice in the home (although not necessarily in leadership

positions in the congregation).[65] However, it is interesting that more single women than men seem to participate in this project that, at first glance, falls into the typical framework of "singles programming." In fact, in interviews, only one participant complained that she did not meet enough eligible men through the Riverway Project.[66] No other participants even vocalized the difference, and it may be that it goes unnoticed by most. This lack of attention to the gender imbalance demonstrates the emphasis that participants place on the Riverway Project as a mixed community, one that offers friendships and Jewish engagement and a romantic partner as a possible byproduct but not a primary objective. The Riverway Project is not structured as an initiative for singles only: It is built around its Jewish content, it means to offer Jewish content to anyone, partnered and not, and this is apparent in those whom it attracts. Ultimately, the lack of single men seems not to detract from the experience, or, participants did not mention in interviews their altered experience of the Riverway Project because of the increased number of women participants.[67]

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[65] The literature on the participation of women and men in different aspects of public and private religion, in America and elsewhere, is voluminous. Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer have written an authoritative examination of the imbalance of women's and men's participation in American Judaism in "Matrilineal Ascent/ Patrilineal Descent: The Gender Imbalance in American Jewish Life" (Waltham, Massachusetts: Hadassah Brandeis Institute and Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2008). They introduce their discussion with this definitive statement: "Traditional public Judaism was and is dominated by men, while contemporary liberal American Judaism, although supposedly egalitarian, is visibly and substantially feminized." At the same time, Fishman and Palmer also problematize the much-accepted idea that women are more active in religious activity than men, suggesting that women are not more active, but instead, men are less active, and that intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews has exacerbated the problem of men's inactivity.

[66] Still, Jamie did not notice that there were more women present than men; she only noticed that she had not met her husband. She was critiquing the Riverway Project for its lack of purposeful "singles" programming even while she appreciates it for its focus on Jewish education and life. Jamie was the only one interviewed to make these comments.

[67] While as a researcher I did not take a firm stance in order to observe the role of gender, a gender dynamic – that is, the possible feminization of the activities of the Riverway Project because of the increased number of women – was not obvious.

In interviews, Morrison did comment on the lack of men who sought out opportunities for independent study with him. We spoke about the possibility that the Riverway Project was structured in a way that might attract women more than men, but Morrison did not come to any conclusion about that

Participants assemble in Boston from their childhood homes scattered throughout the country. About one-quarter of participants surveyed was raised in Boston (just a few at Temple Israel); others came to Boston for a job or for their education, for friends or family or a fiancé, for their love of Boston. All but one participant surveyed completed their Bachelor's degree, and while many went to small liberal arts schools, often in the northeast, others went to state schools scattered throughout the country. About two-thirds of participants surveyed have graduate degrees, a statistic not unusual in the highly educated Boston area. If not in graduate school, all participants surveyed work, and their professions range from doctor to lawyer to researcher to non-profit leader to store-owner.

As will be discussed in Chapter Three, participants' Jewish backgrounds range as well. About one-third of participants surveyed had little exposure to Judaism as children, experiencing only a few years of Jewish afternoon school and observance of major American Jewish holidays, Passover *seder* and the lighting of *Hanukah* candles. Another third had more significant exposure to Judaism, a few in more traditional households with a great deal of holiday observance, weekly *Shabbat* dinner, and for several years of day school education. Of those connected to synagogues as children, about half were raised in the Reform movement, and others were Conservative or Orthodox or not affiliated with a movement. About 20% of participants surveyed were not Jewish growing up; they have come to the Riverway Project with their partners or spouses or out of curiosity about

possibility. Again, I did not use gender as a lens in my observations, and so did not observe the extent to which the Riverway Project does or does not welcome single men as an audience.

Interestingly, Temple Israel offers a "Men's Kallah," an overnight experience only for men of the congregation (it also offers a similar women's experience). As Fishman and Palmer ("Gender Imbalance," 71-74) suggest, it may be that the Riverway Project would benefit from attention to single-sex activities – or, it may be that because of the underlay of dating desires (an underlay, but still present!), single sex activities would take away from the strength of the Riverway Project.

Judaism. The others, about 15%, had almost no institutional connection to Judaism as children.

As adults, they range equally in their engagement with Jewish life. About one-third of those surveyed participate in many Jewish events, a few of them in any Jewish opportunity that they can find through the local Federation and other synagogues. Through the Riverway Project, they participate the most often in Soul Food Friday; that is, many participate in most or every Soul Food Friday that they can. About one-third of participants surveyed attend Torah and Tonics and Neighborhood Circles at least monthly, another third participate every few months, and another third participate only every so often. Most interestingly, their involvement in Torah and Tonics does not guarantee that they attend Neighborhood Circles (or vice versa). They move in and out of Jewish life, some frequently, some less so. They come when they are interested and they come when they can, when they are in town, when work is less busy, and when they have a down-turn in their social (or dating) lives and they are looking for something new.

### *Impact on Riverway Project Participants*

This study is meant to focus on the process of growth that participants experience and not on the outcomes of that growth. To that end, it offers a synchronic look at participants' Jewishness, examining them during a snapshot in time. I saw a variety of participants change their ideas during the six months of my official fieldwork. However, I did not intentionally interview participants before and after their encounters with the Riverway Project, nor did I compare participants' experiences in the Riverway Project to those who

did not engage with the Riverway Project. Again, this was designed to focus on the process of growth, and not to demonstrate its impact.

During interviews though, participants did give evidence to the Riverway Project's impact on their Jewishness, and it is worth understanding some of their comments. For example, three different individuals shared:

> I don't know that my ideas *about* Judaism have changed. But they're deeper. It's not just academic, looking at text. It's not the theoretical understanding that I had before – it's kind of personal now. … And about religion … I didn't think religion was such a great thing…. Personally, it's more meaningful now. More important.
>
> …Not knowing everything but knowing more and more is how I approach it now… It's hugely different post-Riverway, than running across those portions and not even grasping that I read it.
>
> It's kind of a puzzle, and I'm … putting the pieces together…. Somehow the puzzle feels a little bit more complete.

I witnessed and interviewed participants at all different stages of their encounters with the Riverway Project, some who were just discovering the Riverway Project, some who had been part of its activities for several years, and many in-between those poles. Many of those interviewed and particularly those who had been involved for some time – Katie, Harleigh, Carin, Dan, Ben, Noah, Jordana, Tracy, and others in Chapter Three, as well as Maya and Zoe in Chapter Six – have dramatically different ideas about Judaism than they did prior to their connection to the Riverway Project. They have different understandings of their Jewishness and different knowledge of traditions and of history. To some extent, they have different confidence than they once did. Many participants have new habits of mind, new ways of thinking about Judaism, many of which I outline in the dissertation. For many, growth occurs.

## OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

As a close study of one intervention with this yet under-studied population, it is tempting to try to read too many stories into this work. Indeed, there are a number of threads that I touch on in the course of the dissertation that I cannot expand.

Specifically, the dissertation means to focus on the process of growth for a part of a larger population of mostly Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties. As the dissertation progresses, the central plots will become apparent, revealing themselves as:

- The nature of the Jewish experiences of a relatively uneducated Jewish population, what I call a "folk" population;
- The formation of disparate adults in their twenties and thirties into a Jewish social network;
- How some members of this population become confident and knowledgeable and develop a personally relevant Judaism, and how through their experience in a type of social network they develop Jewish social capital.

When intertwined, these foci of the dissertation speak to the extent to which the social network that is the Riverway Project might differ from historic paradigms of Jewish communities. In other words, the dissertation alludes continually to the changing nature of Jewish community for those connected to the Riverway Project and for many in Generation X. I draw conclusions about this changing nature of community at the close of the dissertation.

In the background are a number of additional plots that will require attention in future projects:

- The health of the Reform movement, of the American Jewish movements more generally, and the dissipation of boundaries among and loyalties to the movements;
- The failure of American Jewish institutions to engage the population of adults in their twenties and thirties;
- The interaction of singledom and religious engagement and of gender and religious engagement;
- The educational training and growth of Rabbi Jeremy Morrison and the nature of rabbinic authority in American Judaism today;
- The differences in ethno-religious outlook and emphasis between the Baby Boom generation and Generation X.

Several additional stories appear in the dissertation, informing the broader story without taking a central role.

First, I provide details about the choices related to liturgy and ritual observance that Morrison makes, particularly as I describe the prayer service that he leads. I note in a variety of places where and how Morrison deviates from some (*Ashkenazic* or Eastern European) rabbinic Jewish law, although it is not clear to me that participants themselves notice or are concerned with these deviations. In fact, while participants occasionally critiqued the Riverway Project during interviews, not a single participant mentioned to me this altering of ritual. Moreover, it is similarly unclear if these deviations are Morrison's innovations or are part of the larger Reform tradition to which he belongs.[68]

[68] Ideologically, Reform Judaism does not see rabbinic authority as binding and asks that each individual develop his own Jewish practice from within the resources of rabbinic Judaism. The movement outlines its stance toward rabbinic authority in its 1976 San Francisco Platform of its principles, "A Centenary Perspective" (passed by the Central Conference on American Rabbis, the leading professional and

In the dissertation, I describe Morrison's choices, and particularly those related to ritual, in order to give the reader a full picture of the experience of the Riverway Project. So as to ensure that these deviations from rabbinic law do not distract or confuse the reader, I provide details in footnotes comparing Morrison's actions to historic Jewish practice. I recognize that to the student of shifting Jewish ritual and even of denominationalism and the evolution of Reform Judaism, this is only the beginning of the story.

Second, as part of a national phenomenon that includes a growing number of independent religious communities ("*minyanim*," the term – the singular of which is *minyan* – for a group of people, traditionally ten men, coming together to pray), it is tempting to compare the Riverway Project to the Jewish Havurah movement of the 1970s. The Riverway Project is not exactly a *minyan,* and the dissertation does not set out to analyze at length the impact of this movement of independent religious communities on American Judaism at large or to understand its place in the history of American Judaism. These independent religious communities are beginning to be studied for their own sake, and some are beginning to create comparisons.[69] An understanding of the structure of American Judaism through the lens of these similar, but not identical,

ideological association of the Reform movement). The Platform makes evident an emphasis on tradition without a mandate of observance: "*Our Religious Obligations: Religious Practice* -- Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life, the means by which we strive to achieve universal justice and peace. Reform Judaism shares this emphasis on duty and obligation. Our founders stressed that the Jew's ethical responsibilities, personal and social, are enjoined by God. The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including: creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion: lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days: celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogues and community; and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence. Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge."

[69] For example, Cohen, Landres, Kaunfer, and Shain, "Emergent Jewish Communities"

movements is valuable, and this dissertation informs such an understanding but does not create it intentionally.

Finally, throughout the dissertation, I make a variety of comparisons between and conclusions about Riverway Project participants and their peers in the broader generation of American Jews their age. I do this not to oversimplify, but to introduce the reader to the variety of issues involved in this generation's Jewish experience. With literature on this population just emerging and with the phenomenon that is this population's Jewish experience itself developing rapidly, it is impossible to write comprehensively about all of the issues that arise in these pages. The reader will note that at the fore is an educational process of growth, contextualized by the Jewish experience of many but not all in the larger generation, and that the dissertation offers depth as related to the fifty Riverway Project participants that I interviewed and those whom I observed in my fieldwork. Generalization to the broader generation is meant to provide a beginning to additional work.

In this chapter, I have provided background for the dissertation, key concepts that frame the reader's understanding of the Riverway Project and the research provided. Chapter 2 continues with an overview of some key initiatives in American Jewish life by and for this population, created by the "elite" of this generation. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on this generation's alleged anti-institutional and disinterested stance toward religion, examining the various cohorts within this population and their ideas about ethnic and religious tradition and about community membership. I suggest that Riverway Project participants belong to a less literate cohort than others in their generation, a "folk"

cohort, and that even as they gain literacy, they remain less traditional in their stance toward Jewish life.

Chapter Three gives a more extensive look at who these participants are and how their background experiences shape their current ideas about Judaism and their capacity to participate in Jewish life. I examine Riverway Project participants' childhood Jewish involvement, demonstrating that their lack of exposure to Jewish communities and to vibrant home celebrations ill-prepared them for adult Jewish commitments. I relate their ideas about religion and Judaism, ideas formed by their involvements in other social networks, and then share how these ideas shape their expressions of their Jewishness, their practice and their values. I explain that participants seek something that they name authenticity, or the opportunity to celebrate their multiple identities, their connections to Judaism and to their universal ideals. With an authentic Jewish celebration, they feel comfortable in their Jewish skin, as they suggest, at home in a variety of Jewish settings rather than confused and overwhelmed by Jewish communities.

Riverway Project participants are curious, sometimes hungry, for peers to help them explore and identify this authentic Jewish celebration. In Chapter Four, I explore how Morrison builds a community in which participants feel safe trying on various Jewish behaviors and ideas. Community offers safety and validation to participants, helping them to understand that they are not alone in either feeling confused about their Jewish commitments or in their lack of knowledge. From their mutual experience, they can learn from each other about their respective decisions and develop knowledge from their community about how to celebrate Judaism. In this chapter, I focus on Neighborhood Circles, basing my analysis in a rich picture of this living-room based

prayer service that draws a small crowd. I provide pictures of participants' Jewish practice, demonstrating how some "folk" Jews, illiterate and somewhat afraid, engage with Jewish community, often standing still and silent as they test different Jewish behaviors.

In Chapter Five, I describe how the Riverway Project helps participants to negotiate their loyalties to multiple communities. Morrison seeks, in his words, to help participants become critical thinkers about Judaism. As he focuses Riverway Project opportunities on Jewish texts and leads participants through study, participants learn new habits of mind, ways of understanding the way that Judaism works. They do not merely wonder about Judaism but wonder at it; they get inside of it and use their own knowledge and newly developed ideas to examine and overturn the assumptions that they have always had about Jewish texts and Jewish life. They apply the norms of critical thinking that they learn in their prized secular educations to their Jewish lives, effectively celebrating both sets of loyalties in a Jewish space. To explore these ideas, I root this investigation of critical thinking in a portrait of Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays.

Morrison seeks to help participants produce their own Jewish meaning, as he describes it. He calls this ownership, or self-motivation and self-management of participants' Jewishness. In Chapter Six, I explore how Morrison encourages ownership in the Riverway Project. As I demonstrate, Riverway Project participants' new social network gives many participants confidence in their Jewishness as well as new skills, knowledge, and decisions about how they will express their Jewish commitments. However, even with their new habits of mind, many of them are not ready to take on independent decision making as related to their Jewish celebration. They continue to rely

on Morrison or on some external authority for validation and support. To demonstrate their movement between confidence and doubt, I explore Soul Food Friday in-depth in this chapter.

In Chapter Three, I rely primarily on data from interviews with participants to demonstrate their ideas. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I interweave data from my observations, from interviews with Morrison, and from interviews with participants. Each of these last three chapters follows the same outline, reviewing first my own observations of the Riverway Project, then Morrison's ideas about the topic of the chapter, then participants' ideas about the same, and, finally, I give my analysis, drawing from theoretical frameworks that clarify the ideas of the chapter.

As this picture of the process of Jewish growth unfolds, key concepts related to the growth of Riverway Project participants emerge. As a result, the dissertation's key concepts are introduced throughout the dissertation. Similarly, I provide literature in each chapter that helps to clarify the data that I share to help the reader hold these concepts together. I provide a guide here to these key ideas, some of which have already been introduced.

Chart 1.1
Core Ideas of the Dissertation

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| *Social Networks* *(Chapter One)* | Groups of individuals bound together by a common practice and who participate in certain norms of interaction<br>*Norms of interaction in a social network can include those of individual behavior – that is, how to act to fit in – and they can include norms of reciprocity, or how to exchange goods and what goods to exchange with others in order to demonstrate equitable membership.* |
| *Social Capital* *(Chapter One)* | Intangible rewards produced by participation or membership in a social network<br>*In this study, Jewish social capital consists of knowledge of practice, history and other Jewish people as well as a sense of personally relevant Jewishness, confidence, and motivation to act.* |
| *Growth* *(Chapter One)* | A transformation that allows an individual to use her own, consciously chosen habits of mind to make her own meaning in the world |
| *Generation X* *(Chapter Two)* | Americans born 1965 to 1981, whose outlook on life was shaped by events during their childhoods, and who, generally, have a more cynical and distrusting outlook than previous or later generations |
| *Emerging Adulthood* *(Chapter Two)* | A stage of life during (approximately) ages eighteen to thirty, during which individuals devote resources to experimenting and making life decisions, developing a professional, sexual, and ideological identity |
| *Folk* *(Chapter Two)* | A cohort of American Jewry, and particularly of adults in their twenties and thirties, who know little of Jewish practice, who do not engage actively in Jewish life, and who have little Jewish social capital |
| *Elite* *(Chapter Two)* | A cohort of American Jewry, here which refers to adults in their twenties and thirties, who have been well educated in Jewish tradition and history and who are influencing the shape of American Jewish life |
| *Authenticity & Observance* *(Chapter Three)* | The opportunity for participants to celebrate their multiple identities, their simultaneous connections to Judaism and to their universal ideals |
| *Community of Practice* *(Chapter Four)* | A group of individuals who, through their experience of daily life, learn from each other and feel comfortable taking risks in the safety of their community |
| *Critical Thinking* *(Chapter Five)* | The capacity to examine, to, possibly, overturn inherited assumptions, and to make one's own decisions about Jewish history and tradition |
| *Ownership* *(Chapter Six)* | Self-management or (relatively) independent decision-making related to one's Jewishness that leads one to a more active Jewish life |

Ultimately, in the dissertation, I produce a picture of some adults in their twenties and thirties newly finding their place in a Jewish community. Those who participate in

the Riverway Project begin as relatively illiterate in many Jewish ideas and traditions; most are not confident in their capacity to participate in some or most Jewish communities. The Riverway Project offers its participants a social network, an infrastructure for exploration, education, and celebration. It gives participants safety, the mutuality of each other. It becomes an ongoing teaching tool that helps individual participants to develop Jewish social capital: knowledge, confidence, and motivation to act. By exploring more who participants are and the specific questions that they are asking about Judaism, the ways that Morrison helps them to develop a new social network, and how Morrison challenges these emerging adults to lead their own Jewish lives, this dissertation examines how emerging adults become confident Jewish adults. It demonstrates that participants' Jewishness is most potent with others, and that while the goal of their exploration is not membership, the result of their growth is a solid place of belonging, even without the paying of membership dues.

## CHAPTER TWO

## CONTEXT: BALANCING PARTICULARALISM AND UNIVERSALISM

In December 2003, *Time Out: New York* featured a series of stories on the "new super-Jews," those "redefining what it means to be Jewish." They suggested that "the neurotic nebbish is out; the swaggering ass-kicker is in." In the American imagination, New York has long been the home of this *nebbish* (Yiddish for someone who is weak-willed or timid), with Woody Allen defining simultaneously both the nebbish and New York in movies like *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*. *Time Out,* then, might have been particularly interested in this story because it was part of the changing face of New York itself. At the same time, the argument was equally interesting for the Jewish angle, and the magazine had plenty of material.

In its coverage, *Time Out* reviewed the movie *The Hebrew Hammer*, Jonathan Kesselman's Jewish take on blaxpoitation in which Jewish detective Hebrew Hammer (Adam Goldberg) saves *Hanukah* from a criminal Santa Claus, in the process protecting Jewish children's Hebrew school textbooks and establishing his credentials in the bedroom. The magazine moved from "Hammer" to Goldberg's own Jewishness, his efforts to explore and become comfortable with the tradition to which he had not been exposed as a child. *Time Out* also discussed the hundreds of individuals who had

crammed themselves into a small Lower East Side lounge to hear Jewish stories from comedians, actors, writers, and personalities as part of *Heeb Magazine*'s "Storytelling" event. *Time Out* outlined countless projects, new at the time, that have now moved toward the center of American Jewish culture: Pharoah's Daughter that creates popular music based on traditional prayer, Vanessa Hidary who performs spoken word and slam poetry about her Jewish experience, novels by Nathan Englander and Myla Goldberg (letting alone Pulitzer-winning Michael Chabon), shows off-Broadway including "Jewtopia." The portrayal of and opportunities for Jews in New York and nationally had expanded to encapsulate synergies and tensions between Jewish and popular culture, particularism and universalism, commitments to Jewish and general society.[1] As a result, Adam Goldberg's face, representing the Hammer and the magazine's narrative that week, seamlessly joined those on the covers of *New York Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and *Vogue*, proclaiming his normalcy from the ceilings of newsstands throughout the city.

This was not the first time that Jewish life was featured as the cover story of a significant news outlet; in 1972, *Time Magazine* also featured a story on "what it means to be Jewish."[2] Nor is the wave of young Jewish adults challenging and changing the mainstream unique. Ray (Rachel) Frank was in her thirties when she traveled throughout

[1] Particularly in the imagination. That is, it might be that Philip Roth and his contemporaries did not encompass the entirety of the Jewish textual tradition; biblical characters such as David – with strong accomplishments in war and potent sexual prowess – demonstrate that Philip Roth's weak and meek characters do not need to define ideas about Jewish men. Yet, as Joanna Smith Rakoff writes, "Jewish fiction meant Philip Roth and Saul Bellow: novels about neurotic assimilationists, pathologically attracted to blond shiksas." Now, she implies, a "radical shift … from dweeb to Heeb" has taken place. In the modern imagination, for young Jews, the new happenings in arts and culture represent new and important possibilities for modern or post-modern Jews. They can be strong, confident, and interesting, say these new possibilities.
Smith Rakoff's article in particular works with tensions and opportunities between artists' and culture-makers' dual identities. See "The New Super Jews," *Time Out New York,* No 427 (December 4-11, 2003).
[2] *Time Magazine* (April 10, 1972). That story was, in fact, fraught with tension stemming from real challenges in American Jewish identity related to assimilation. The story then was a lack of a unique and genuine American Jewish culture, not the presence of such a culture.

the United States in the late 1800s, advocating for a revolution in Jewish life that would lead women to pulpits and bring spiritual energy back to the American synagogue. Throughout American Jewish history, many individuals have joined Frank in the work that they accomplished while in their twenties and thirties, individuals including Rebecca Gratz, to whom the creation of the American Sunday school is attributed, those who founded B'nai B'rith as a fraternal organization, and the creators of the *Jewish Catalog*. All saw holes in American Judaism. Each filled these holes using their images of the possible, their own Jewish experiences, and basic openness to experimentation.[3]

That it is not new does not lessen the importance of the shifts in American Jewish life that *Time Out* describes. These shifts are, for certain, rooted in the past: in forces of Jewish pride that emerged in the late 1960s, in the *Havurah* movement of the 1970s.[4] Added to these forces is a convergence of trends of post-modernity. Ethnicity, culture, and religion have a continued and even growing importance in American society, with an increasing acceptance of and even an expectation of respect for multicultural identities. Entrepreneurialism is high, as is the Jewish imagination that has been fertilized in the rich childhood Jewish experiences that some have. At the same time, there is assimilation and ethno-religious apathy, stemming from a framing of institutional participation as the essential expression of religious commitment. American Judaism continues to place an emphasis on institutional Judaism, what Ethan Tucker calls an "experiment in centralized

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[3] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), 140-142; Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *The Continuity of Discontinuity* (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007), 6.

[4] Mark Oppenheimer outlines the development of a late 1960s Jewish counterculture in *Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003), Chapter Three. He also reviews the Havurah movement of the late 1960s/ early 1970s and places it in the context of American religious creativity of the time. Riv-Ellen Prell analyzes the Havurah movement in *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

Jewish planning" that is firmly rooted in the twentieth-century, an era, he implies, now passé.[5] Again, if we see institutional participation as the primary means of expressing ethno-religious commitment, then this generation is, indeed, apathetic. If we see institutional participation as broader, as including the expressions shared in *Time Out,* for example, we see otherwise.

In this chapter, I give a context for this study of the Riverway Project by describing the ideas that shape the ethno-religiousness of today's adults in their twenties and thirties as well as the surge of American Jewish life that this generation is creating. I begin by outlining the evolution of ideas about American ethnicity and religion[6] and then describe the forces that merge to facilitate this surge in Jewish life: this age group's search for meaning and ideology, their generational outlook, the positive Jewish experiences and resulting creativity of some in this generation. In doing so, I offer the circumstances in which the Riverway Project exists and that create the Riverway Project, the interest in ethnicity and religion of many in the generation, the potential for leaders within the population, and the interest of adults in their twenties and thirties in post-institutional life. Ultimately, the data shared point to individuals' profound curiosity about a substantive ethno-religious identity that results in their grassroots expressions of their identity that have developed throughout the country. In these expressions also are the themes seen in the Jewish growth that individuals experience through the Riverway

[5] Ethan Tucker, "What Independent Minyanim Teach Us About the Next Generation of Jewish Communities," *Zeek* (Spring 2007). Available at: http://www.zeek.net/801tucker/. Ethan Tucker, an ordained Conservative rabbi and a PhD in Talmud, is a founder of Hadar, an active and independent religious community at the center of the *minyan* movement.

[6] Following the literature, I move between research on ethnicity and on religion, examining research on ethnicity that includes Judaism alongside other cultural or group traditions as well as also research on religion that studies Judaism alongside other faith traditions. Within the Riverway Project, individuals do not necessarily separate their feelings of belonging (ethnicity) from their behaviors or sacred beliefs (religion).

Project, the themes discussed in this dissertation: pursuit of expressions of Jewishness that privilege both universal and particular commitments, a craving for intimate community, a desire to examine and overturn assumptions about inherited Jewish life and what Jewish life can be, and the need to own or direct one's Jewish experience. These grassroots expressions also make evident the uniqueness of the Riverway Project, an institutionally-based initiative that attracts this post-institutional population despite its organizational sponsorship, an initiative that focuses not only on offering community to participants but also on facilitating its participants' expanded Jewish experience.

The literature that I will review related to the religious and ethnic engagement of Americans suggests ideas about erosion of that engagement. For the most part, it assumes the dissipation over time of identification and practice and tries to understand the motivations behind this dissipation.

This study participates in suggesting a corrective to this literature. It shares assumptions of recent studies that individuals are looking for meaning in their ethno-religious tradition[7] and that the self is the arbiter of meaning and practice, no matter the larger framework of tradition from which the individual is drawing her ritual observance.[8] At the same time, it begins to suggest that for some, Jewish connection has been sustained over generations. The "elite" of this generation, as I describe them in the coming pages, have combined the Jewish commitment and knowledge passed on to many of them by their parents with a quality Jewish education and with the resources of the day (cultural/ business/ social entrepreneurialism) to create a new American Jewish

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[7] Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) well demonstrates this process.

[8] *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America,* by Steven M. Cohen and Arnold E. Eisen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) illustrates the extent to which American Jews use their own sense of self and meaning to make decisions about their Jewish engagement.

environment. Their Jewish connection is not at all captured by erosion over the generations of ethno-religious practice, and characteristics of their connection begin to be identified here. At the same time, others in this generation have experienced both the erosion of ethno-religious practice and of commitment. In the bulk of this dissertation, I describe some of these "folk" of the generation, the uneducated and inexperienced, whose grandparents and parents abandoned their tradition and who are building on an emotional connection to their tradition in order to regain an informed sense of Jewishness and some kind of Jewish practice.

## ASSIMILATION EXPECTED, ASSIMILATION TRANSPIRED

In a foreword to his *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics,* Michael Novak describes a family, apparently his, deliberately shedding its home-country ethnic identity. Novak's immigrant grandparents had abandoned the Austro-Hungarian empire for a life without poverty, for one saturated with opportunity and hope. With what they gained came loss, much of it deliberate. As they pushed forward, they took with them just "a few traditions: Christmas Eve holy bread … mushroom soup … poppyseed," leaving behind their language and possibly even, it seems, their ethnic pride. Novak recalls with perfect wistfulness his grandmother's *pirohi*: "No other foods shall ever taste so sweet."[9]

The story that Novak tells is familiar, the romanticized narrative of tens of millions of Americans whose families came in the immigration boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His story contains within it, said many scholars during and after this period of immigration, support for forthcoming gradual but steady assimilation. These

[9] Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: MacMillan, 1973), xxii.

scholars predicted that integration into American society would take place over generations, with each generation shedding some of the traditions of those who came before. They imagined that in addition to the intentional shedding of their culture, as the children of ethnics dispersed from immigrant centers to various communities, the structures that kept ethnic identity in place would dissolve. The third generation would not even consider themselves to be part of an ethnic group, went this way of thinking. Without knowledge, motivation, and structural segregation, ethnicity would dissolve as a means of stratifying society.[10]

To some extent, these predictions transpired. Sylvia Barack Fishman describes the extent to which Jewish environments have dissolved in America:

> During the second half of the twentieth century, informal Jewish experience in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces faded. Unlike traditional Jewish societies – or even secularized societies at the turn of the century … American environments provided little in the way of Jewish reinforcement.[11]

Similarly, Arnold Eisen, a scholar of modern Jewish thought born mid-(twentieth) century, compares his childhood raised in Philadelphia with that of a boy raised in the Eastern European *shtetl*:

> A boy like me would have been circumcised at birth and educated exclusively on Jewish texts at a Jewish school. He would eat and play and talk almost exclusively with other Jews.[12]

[10] In *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation: The Polish-American Community,* Neil Sandberg named the gradual but steady dissolution of ethnic identity "straight-line theory," theorizing that ethnicity would eventually dissipate and ethnic Americans would fully acculturate (New York: Praeger, 1974). The straight-line theory of assimilation began to dissipate in the 1960s and 1970s, when the children of immigrants began to be successful even without shedding their ethnic identifications, and ethnicity began to have import as a political structure. Mary Waters provides a helpful overview of the evolution of scholarly ideas about American ethnicity in *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990). Also, Werner Sollers traces the evolution of American ideas about ethnicity in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
[11] Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 59-60.
[12] Arnold M. Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5.

Eisen argued that centuries ago, he would have existed in a closed-off world through which he learned his tradition by living it. As a boy, Eisen suggests, he experienced nothing like this, but instead assimilated into American society and learned that other, blatantly non-Jewish, way of life.

Like others, American Jews have lost their sense of "integral community," their existence as "a group of individuals bound to each other from birth to grave" because each is "bound to the same sacred text."[13] In America, Jews gained the fundamental choice to move away from the Jewish ghetto by virtue of their very Americanness, their citizenship, and then their sameness, or their whiteness.[14] The educational opportunity offered by that ghetto, the lived ethnic experience, disappeared, and with that environment went opportunities for Jews and others to absorb the elements of their identities simply by living them. Rather than come to know the rituals of *Shabbat* and *kashrut* because they were practiced weekly and daily, individuals learned the patterns of American society and the American emphasis on integration, allowing them to blend into their greater community.

## AN ETHNIC IDENTITY OF CHOICE

Yet, as the twentieth century progressed, it was revealed that assimilation could and would occur without the complete disappearance of ethnicity. American ethnicity would

[13] Eisen, *Torah*, 4

[14] I affirm the idea that Jews blended into American society by identifying as white: Particularly when white and black are seen as dichotomous, Jews are clearly part of white America. However, I also point readers to Eric Goldstein's excellent work that problematizes the idea of whiteness as related to American Jewry, noting that American Jews have had different loyalties to blackness and whiteness, particularly throughout the twentieth century. See Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

not develop following a straight line, from potency at immigration to later evaporation. The model itself of the straight line was flawed, since at any time America came to see second, fourth, or even seventh generation Americans mixing together; at any time, America included ethnics who had just come from the old country and who were holding passionately onto their ethnicity. Perhaps as a result, American society did not let go of ethnic identity but supported the continuation of ethnic structures: As new immigrant groups came, prior groups would establish their superiority over these new groups by flaunting their group identity and accomplishments, accomplishments that came to be shaped deeply by time in America. Ethnic membership, then, became a political asset, a way of being more American than newer immigrants.[15] Moreover, rather than dispersing from immigrant neighborhoods into ethnically diverse communities, ethnic groups remained together as they rose socio-economically, wealthy Irish simply following wealthy Irish to the suburbs, Poles following Poles, Slavs following Slavs, and so on.[16]

Ultimately, Americans embraced ethnicity, almost with a new fervor, and particularly as minority ethnic groups (Black Americans) began to gain power by celebrating and strengthening their own ethnicities. More specifically, as minorities demanded validation for their ethnic attachments, scholars called for a similar emphasis on white ethnicity and began to discuss frequently and publicly ethnic loyalties and the continued celebration of old country customs.[17] In 1971, Michael Novak called for a new appreciation for ethnicity in America and for a new role for ethnicity in politics, for Americans of all backgrounds to know and value their own background in order to

[15] Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan began this analysis in *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: New England Press, 1963); Waters in *Ethnic Options* continues this exploration and brings it to the present day.
[16] Waters, *Ethnic Options,* 5
[17] Novak, *Ethnics*

acknowledge and respect the background of others. As he, Andrew Greeley, and others[18] observed amidst repeating festivals and holiday celebrations, celebrations that did not seem to be disappearing, ethnicity continued to have a prominent role in America.

Ethnicity, was, however, undergoing a transformation. It was becoming not necessarily an extension of old-world behaviors but rather an expression of current-day American needs, dictated by choice and by psychic or tangible incentives. American ethnics still identified as such; that is, their very identity as Polish, Irish, Slavic, or Jewish became or continued to be salient to them. But ethnic practice lost any web of meaning within which it existed in its country of origin. Americans came to see the cultural practices with which they were familiar – from food to art to music – as elements of an entire identity, as stand-ins for that identity. The infrequency with which they celebrated these cultural practices further removed them from their greater context. They became symbolic of what was once a way of life.[19] Herbert Gans observes that symbolic ethnicity is commemorated when rituals and customs are "visible and clear in meaning… easily expressed and felt."[20] Similarly, and as early as the 1950s, Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum record the idea that American Jews observe holidays that are easily celebrated and that fit well into their American lives, and they leave behind the rest.[21] Ultimately, assimilated ethnic Americans choose behaviors that bring immediate rewards of

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[18] Andrew M. Greeley, *Why Can't They Be Like Us? America's White Ethnic Groups* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1975); *Richard D. Alba, Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America (New Haven, 1990);* Waters*, Ethnic Options*
[19] Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Culture in America" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (January, 1979): 1-20.
[20] Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity," 9
[21] Sklare and Greenblum suggest that the specific criteria that individuals use to judge their engagement in ritual are: if rituals can be redefined in modern terms, if they are occasional and do not require regular observance, if they are child-centered, if they offer a Jewish alternative to a larger societal event, and if they are not socially isolating. *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society* (New York and London: Basic Books, Inc, 1967), 58-59.

belonging to both their ethnic group and to America, behaviors that do not act as obstacles to other achievements. Americans don their ethnic identity when advantageous and undemanding and they shed it just as easily.

Mary Waters extends this conversation to examine more specifically the ways that individuals who are far from their families' dates of immigration make choices about ethnicity. She notes that at this point in American history, many or even most white Americans have been here for generations, have married Americans of backgrounds different from theirs, and therefore have a varied ancestry. This, she demonstrates, gives Americans the opportunity to choose an identity that affords them political or social capital, allowing them to be Irish on St. Patrick's Day or German in a job interview. Similarly, even if it is a lesser part of their family history, Waters suggests, Americans choose to identify with the ethnicity that is most evident, that which fits their physical features or their last name. Fundamental to this series of choices, Joanne Nagel adds, is the idea that Americans construct and reconstruct their identities, shifting the ethnicities with which they associate when it befits them.[22] Ultimately, Waters concludes, there no longer is a cost to ethnic identification. Instead, Americans find reward in the ethnic community that comes with their identity as well as the opportunity to practice the individualism and pursuit of material and emotional success that is so sacred to Americans. Identity is a process of negotiation and one that is governed by emotional and tangible reward.[23]

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[22] Joanne Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems,* Vol 41: No 1 (February, 1994): 152-176.
[23] Waters, *Ethnic Options*

### INDIVIDUALISM AND THE "THERAPEUTIC QUEST"

Ethnicity may have been once primarily (or only) a question of ancestry and inheritance. It has become, though, a matter of personal preference, advantage, and choice dictating ethnic connections. Without minimizing the differences between religion and ethnicity, religion can be seen as similarly becoming saturated with the power of individualism that dominates ethnicity. Without social pressure and the advantages that once came with active church membership, and without a relationship between church sanctions and one's individual economic success, social capital became accessible in America even without church participation. In other words, in America, religion came to have little to no economic power.[24] Because formal or official segregation did not exist, as social and occupational segregation dissipated, individuals could escape their religion more and more easily and participate in it or not based on their own individual ideas.

Discretionary participation in religion has been noted by many, but the deep individualism that has come to dictate one's ideas about religion was perhaps made most obvious and accessible by Sheila Larsen, the oft-quoted research participant in Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* who named her form of belief after her "own little voice" in herself, "Sheilaism."[25] A God-believer with deep faith but not a church-goer (as she describes herself), the study's authors claim that Larsen is representative of the many Americans who similarly attempt to "transform external authority into internal meaning."[26] Rather than turn to a systematic framework of communal practice and responsibility, individuals

[24] Herbert Gans notes, "Although many religions still require regular participation in worship … the ability to enforce these requirements is ending." "Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity: Towards a Comparison of Ethnic and Religious Acculturation" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 (1994): 577-592, 581.
[25] Robert Bellah, et. al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Jewish Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).
[26] Bellah et al, *Habits*, 235

use their own senses of themselves as authorities on behavior and meaning. Toward the late-twentieth century, Americans began to carry these trends of individualism and choice to their logical conclusions, seeing ethnicity and religion as open "marketplaces" offering traditional, Western religions and then eastern and new-age religions and traditions as well as resources for their active constructions of systems of meaning.[27]

As the power of the individual to dictate personal ethno-religious choices grew, so did American interest in self-expression and self-fulfillment. By the late twentieth century, Americans came to make decisions about labor, marriage, and other societal institutions according to "life-effectiveness as the individual judges it" rather than more immediate needs of food, clothing, and shelter. Personal growth came to be an endless pursuit.[28] In the construction of the authors of *Habits of the Heart,* the question, "Is this right or wrong?" became, "Is this going to work for me right now?"[29] At the same time, this therapeutic quest took place amidst or led to a deep loneliness. The notion of a self without any ties, of a truly free self, was engaging and also scary and empty. Ironically, the self needed community for fulfillment. As a result, the pursuit of personal happiness led individuals directly into ethnicity and religion. Although self-dictated, individuals found meaning in the traditions of their past, and so did not abandon ethnicity and religion altogether. In fact, some embraced them with abandon.[30]

American Jews have not escaped this orientation of individualism and ethno-religious identity construction, their pursuit of self-fulfillment governing their actions and intermarriage and multicultural compositions of identity becoming normalized because

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[27] Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
[28] Bellah et al., *Habits*, 47
[29] Bellah et al., *Habits,* 129
[30] Bellah et al., *Habits*, particularly Chapters 2 and 6; Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*

they are legitimate expressions of the self.[31] Like other committed ethno-religionists, American Jews live out these commitments in tension with their concurrent commitments to their tradition. Cohen and Eisen present this as the "sovereign selves" of American Jews dictating their choices. They frame the tensions inherent in a tradition of individualism this way:

> [American Jews] take their Jewish journeys very seriously and regard Judaism as an intrinsic part of their identity. But they are also determined to protect the options and prerogatives of what we call the 'sovereign self,' including the option to journey far from Judaism and to leave that part of themselves completely behind. And yet they also for the most part retain important ties to Jewish ancestors, express enduring loyalty to the Jewish people, and articulate a strong desire to discover and create meaning in the context of the Jewish tradition.[32]

Again, American Jews were not abandoning completely their identity, even while they shifted the source or reasons for their Jewish celebration. Fishman examined the manifestation of this sovereign self in her presentation of "coalescence," demonstrating the extent to which American Jews have shifted their understanding of Judaism to represent both their American values and historic Jewish ideas. This blending of systems of ideals allows American Jews to use their selves to govern their choices and ideals. Because the blending is so seamless, they miss completely their tradition's contradiction of their other values. They never need to consider the tension that actually exists between the two.[33] In total, identity is a quest and process of construction equally for American Jews as for others. They search inside Judaism and among additional religious and ethnic

[31] See particularly Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Bernard Susser and Charles S. Leibman in *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future* have also explored the general theme (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), as has Sylvia Barack Fishman in *Jewish Life and American Culture*. Fishman documents intermarriage and multicultural celebrations of Judaism in *Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2004).
[32] Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within,* 183
[33] Woocher demonstrates coalescence in action in the adult learning classroom. Meredith L. Woocher, "Texts in Tension: Negotiating Jewish Values in the Adult Jewish Learning Classroom" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2003).

traditions as well as within their American heritage to direct the piecing together of their meaning structures.

### A SEARCH BEFITTING THEIR LIFE STAGE: EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Today's adults in their twenties and thirties, then, were born into what have become assumptions of individualism and identity construction. Many have not experienced as possibilities ideas of ethno-religious inheritance or obligation. For them, self-fulfillment is a birthright and identity construction a life-long effort and a natural part of being human.[34]

Their quest for happiness is exacerbated during their young adulthood because of the developmental tasks of their life stage. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett recognizes "emerging adulthood" as a unique developmental stage, with emerging adults carving out time on a "longer road to adulthood" in order to test roles for themselves away from the social pressures of college and outside of the reach of their parents.[35] From their late teens through their twenties, individuals experiment with three aspects of their self-definition: sexual identity, including consideration of the kinds of partners they might want for the long-term; professional identity, or consideration of the nature of career and work-life might suit them best; and ideological identity, or exploration of the beliefs and practices

[34] As noted earlier, little is known empirically and definitely about the different Jewish behaviors of members of Generation X. Therefore, while it seems apparent and is very important that many younger adults take individualism for granted, there are certainly still others who do participate in Judaism's traditional system of obligation, who do so because they feel commanded to act this way, and who separate themselves largely or completely from secular society because their sense of peoplehood and commandedness is so strong. As I call for at the conclusion of this dissertation, understanding quantitatively the numbers of Jewish Generation Xers who are fervently, centrist, or modern Orthodox, who subscribe to *halacha* and who do not, will help greatly to make clear the extent to which the therapeutic quest has impacted this generation.

[35] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See Introduction in particular.

they will adopt independent of their parents.[36] They find resources in diverse areas of employment, in varying sexual partners and relationships, in activities that they might never have before tried, and in different countries around the world.

Among these three areas of experimentation (professional, sexual, and ideological), ideological commitments are the last to be resolved or even explored actively. As soon as they break from their parents and the teachings of their childhood, individuals begin to question or doubt those teachings.[37] However, their compulsions to feed themselves (through professional experimentation) and to be loved (through sexual experimentation) both come before active ideological questioning.[38] Moreover, as they carefully pursue various avenues of employment and possible partners, professional and sexual experimentation take emerging adults to different communities. Individuals might explore ethno-religious commitments but they will flirt with such commitments, not taking on firm responsibilities because their membership in their communities is temporary. Belonging (even figuratively) to a religious community has little appeal because it ties them down.

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[36] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood.* Arnett's research, particularly that which suggests that the concept of dedicating time to self-exploration is new, has been criticized. In 2005, to illustrate that one's twenties have always been a time to wander, Ann Hulbert recalls coming-of-age stories from centuries past; two hundred years elapsed between Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* ("The Way We Live Now, *New York Times Magazine,* (October 9, 2005)*)* demonstrating the extent to which this quest has continually been a part of young adulthood. Exactly two years later and in the same newspaper's pages, David Brooks coined these years of exploration "the odyssey years," agreeing that adulthood is being delayed ("Opinion," *New York Times*, October 9, 2007). Similarly, the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey demonstrated that universal marriage was an antiquity for American Jews (Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1993). In truth, focusing on the newness of these trends avoids the point: that no matter the past, society gives younger adults significant leeway in moving from school to the office or other workspace, and that emerging adults can without pressure postpone making firm life commitments for five or more years after their schooling (Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood,* 7).

[37] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, Chapter 8 and particularly 177.

[38] Many spaces for adults in their twenties and thirties are populated by adults in their late twenties. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains that they first pursue their professional and sexual identities, and then turn to ideology later in their twenties. *Toward a Psychology of Being* 3rd ed. (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998).

It is in their late twenties and early thirties, then, that many emerging adults, somewhat settled in other areas of their lives, become eager to define themselves ideologically. Still emerging adults, they look for opportunities to explore first-hand possible ideals and to choose for themselves what they will believe. Rather than pick an institution or movement to which they will subscribe, emerging adults look to see material and judge for themselves the personal truth of that material.[39] They practice the rituals of choice and self-driven ideology as their parents do, and they do so whole-heartedly.

## GENERATION X: DISTRUST OF AUTHORITY

The generational personality of today's adults in their twenties and thirties reinforces their compulsion to full autonomy over their ethno-religious identities. Members of Generation X, emerging adults today experienced a malaise-filled childhood and the disintegration of many traditional pillars of society. That which they experienced as children has resulted for them in mistrust of traditional religious leaders and interaction with religious institutions that is unique to their generation.

A generation develops when a cohort of individuals – whose birth spans approximately twenty years – is raised amidst the same social trends and events. Historical happenings such as wars and heroes, cultural happenings such as media-events and fashion trends, and sociological happenings such as shifts in the structures of families all merge to shape a generation's life outlook, its personality. Having developed its own ways of being and expressing ideas, a generation has tremendous potential to change

[39] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Lene Arnett Jensen, "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, Vol. 17 No. 5 (September 2002): 451-467.

society by bringing new ways of thinking to the social order. Generations raise consciousness; they alter societal discourse because the life events that are their earliest memories are different than those of their parents and grandparents. They imagine new possibilities out of those differences.[40]

Chart 2.1
The Generations[41]

| Traditionalist *seventy-five million* | until 1945 |
|---|---|
| Baby Boom *eighty million* | 1946-1964 |
| Generation X *forty-six million* | 1965-1982 |
| Millennial *seventy-six million* | 1983-2005 |

Generational personality is not perfect as a means of scientific analysis. Not everyone feels the attitudes of their generation at equal levels of intensity. In addition, those born in the late years of one generation and the early years of another generation often share attitudes of both generations; Stillman and Lancaster refer to them as "cuspers."[42] At the same time, as a whole – as eighty million Baby Boomers, forty-six million Generation Xers, and seventy-six million Millennials – they have a dramatic voice in world events and a significant impact on culture, the workplace, and, finally, religion.

The forces that shaped Generation X are well captured in a cartoon from the early 1970s. In it, two typical hippies with long hair, bandannas, and John Lennon sunglasses

[40] German sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim argues most convincingly for the power of generation to lead social change. "On the Problem of Generations" in *The Collected Works of Karl Mannheim* Vol 5, (London: Routledge, 1958). In recent years, William Strauss and Neil Howe are the fathers of a great deal of generational research. See *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069* (New York: William Morrow, 1991) and *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, or Fail?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
[41] In *When Generations Collide: Who They Are, Why They Clash, How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman provide the population totals within each generation (of Americans) shared here. While many who work with generations agree that the Baby Boom began in 1946 after the end of World War II, many disagree about the dates that define Generation X. Stillman and Lancaster offer 1965 to 1980 (*Generations Collide,* 13); Howe and Strauss (*Generations*, 36) suggest 1961 to 1981. In my own observations, those born in the early 1960s act more like Baby Boomers and share more of their outlook; similarly, those born in the early 1980s act more like Generation X. For those reasons, and because I have relied on Stillman and Lancaster to provide population data, I follow their interpretation of generational definitions.
[42] Lancaster and Stillman, *Generations Collide*, Chapter Three

walk away from the reader, the man holding a peace sign and the woman toting an infant on her back. The infant is staring straight at the reader, his eyes wide underneath the bandanna wrapped around his forehead. He carries his own sign: "QUESTION AUTHORITY."[43] As the cartoon conveys, today's adults in their twenties and thirties were raised by idealists and protestors who tried to pass on their charge to change the world by challenging it. But as Baby Boomers aged they became landlords and employers, the very authorities that they once sought to challenge.[44] The idealism of their marches on Washington dissolved at Watergate and reappeared as cynicism at Carter's malaise, and it was in that cynicism that Generation X was raised.

Moreover, during their childhoods, traditional pillars of society shifted. In their world, government could not be trusted, nor was it there to help individuals. Generation Xers experienced a college education in larger numbers than before, but also incurred more debt from college than before; they left their universities for "McJobs," positions that would not launch their professional careers but would offer aimless days spent just making ends meet.[45] They saw *Kramer Vs Kramer* win five Academy Awards in 1980; this fictional story of divorce and child abandonment mirrored societal trends, where the number of divorces rose from not quite 400,000 in 1960 to almost 1,200,000 in 1985.[46] With both parents working, television transitioned from evening entertainment for the whole family to an individual activity aimed specifically at children and teenagers. This generation understood marketing's multiple and conflicting truths from early in their childhoods, with the concept of product placement becoming ubiquitous after Reese's

[43] Howe and Strauss, *13th Gen,* 60
[44] Douglas Rushkoff, *The Gen X Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).
[45] Howe and Strauss, *13th Gen*, 107
[46] Geoffrey T. Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind Generation X* (New York: St Martin's, 1995), 27.

Pieces played a starring role in the movie *E.T* (1982).[47] In total, rather than finding safety in government, work, family, and the media, Generation X witnessed these institutions' breakdown.

In addition to cultivating their cynicism, as a result of these societal shifts, Generation X learned no reasons *not* to question authority. They do not give their trust automatically or easily to these institutions, nor do they accept what these institutions preach without investigation. They are quick to recognize exaggerations and myths; they assume that an idea is an invention, a fiction, unless they can see evidence for the idea and judge for themselves.[48] Their extensive educations intensify this tendency; in school they have learned to approach ideas analytically and judiciously. As a result of their constant scrutiny, they do not look necessarily for certainty in the world, since most certainties delivered to them during their lifetimes – by advertisers or government leaders or even their parents – have been revealed as more complicated than presented.[49]

True to form, Generation X frequently expresses their connection to religion in their own image. With so much uncertainty, members of Generation X prize trust over other aspects of a possible relationship with an authority figure or teacher. They build on their parents' anti-institutional bias to choose intimacy and qualitative relationships over traditional obligations to family or society. For them, "subjective knowing," or what they can discover themselves and what means something to them personally, carries greater import than "propositional truth," or ideas that they are given from others as certainties.[50]

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[47] http://www.itvx.com; Holtz, *Jungle*; Howe and Strauss, *13th Gen*; Thomas Beaudoin, *The Irreverent Spiritual Journey of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), Chapter 1; Rushkoff, *Gen X Reader*, Chapter 1
[48] Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 71-2
[49] Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 141-2; Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
[50] Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds., *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

Cynical about inherited experience and the institutions that anoint certain ideas as sacred, they celebrate their religiousness by reclaiming and twisting the once-sacred and by pushing back on communal leaders as they try to write their own stories. They begin their own spiritual communities, wanting to make their own religious and spiritual decisions and draw from multiple traditions as they do so.[51] When they do join congregations, they do so not out of habit but because they have already found value in the congregations. Moreover, "affiliation is a conscious choice" that they "make continuously," revisiting repeatedly their very membership. As a result, "they seek communities with both flexibility and structure," communities with substance, but also with low boundaries that allow them to move in and out and in again.[52]

## A GENERATION OF JEWISH OPPORTUNITY

Even while they were raised in and with this zeitgeist of cynicism and challenge about institutions, Jewish Generation Xers had the chance to experience Jewish educational opportunities with unprecedented diversity, creativity, and quality. Jonathan Sarna described the late 1990s as a "plastic moment" in American Jewish education, a time of "abundant innovations, an unlimited number of potential directions, innumerable theories, and vast uncertainty."[53] His "vast uncertainty" referred to the tremendous pressure that had been placed on American Jewish education to ensure the future of the

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[51] Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain, *Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study* (Los Angeles and New York: Synagogue 3000 / S3K Synagogue Studies Institute, 2007); Shifra Bronznick, "D.I.Y. Judaism: A Round Table on the Independent Minyan Phenomenon." *Zeek* (Spring 2007), 22 – 32. Available at http://www.zeek.net/801roundtable/.

[52] Tobin Belzer and Donald E. Miller, "Synagogues that Get It: How Jewish Congregations Are Engaging Young Adults," *S3K Report 2 Spring* (Los Angeles and New York: Synagogue 3000 / S3K Synagogue Studies Institute, 2007), 2.

[53] Jonathan D Sarna, "American Jewish Education in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Jewish Education* Vol 64 No. 1-2 (Winter/ Spring 1998).

Jewish people.[54] It does not lessen, though, the innovations and directions that Sarna describes, the innovations and potential that Jewish Generation X experienced in spades.

American Jewish education began to change after World War II, when full-time Jewish schools for the Orthodox, and then for Conservative and Reform Jews began in earnest.[55] Day school enrollment, particularly, grew, tripling from the 1960s to the 1990s.[56] Similarly, Jewish movement camps opened and Israel and youth groups flourished in the second half of the twentieth century. After the birth of the state of Israel, Israel travel for youth expanded in the 1960s and 1970s.[57] Baby Boomers experienced each of these, and they birthed the Havurah movement from the creativity and quality education that they experienced during their childhoods.[58] Still, as day school seats, camp beds, and spots on Israel trips expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, more Generation Xers experienced these opportunities than did their parents.[59] Synagogue education changed as well, as family education developed in the 1980s, with "tot *Shabbat*" becoming almost ubiquitous, and Jewish pre-school growing in popularity.[60]

Generation X also experienced genuinely new and exceptional Jewish leadership opportunities and chances for their identities to be impacted and transformed. Hillel, the

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[54] Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Yearbook 1999* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1999), 4.

[55] While a few day schools existed in the 19th century, and Modern Orthodox schools began in the 1930s, the Conservative movement's Solomon Schechter day school association began in the 1950s after intensive debate in the movement. Similarly, pluralistic/ trans-denominational schools began in the 1960s, and Reform day schools did not open until the 1970s. See Sarna, "Historical Perspective" and Wertheimer, "Jewish Education," 52-57

[56] Wertheimer, "Jewish Education," 56-57

[57] Jonathan Sarna, "The Crucial Decade in Jewish Camping," in *A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping in America*, eds. Gary P. Zola and Michael M. Lorge (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2006); Saul Kelner, "Almost Pilgrims: Authenticity, Identity, and the Extra-Ordinary on a Jewish Tour of Israel" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2002), 19-60.

[58] Riv-Ellen Prell, "Independent Minyanim and Prayer Groups of the 1970s: Historical and Sociological Perspectives," *Zeek* (Spring 2007): 22-32. Available at http://www.zeek.net/801prell/.

[59] Wertheimer, "Jewish Education"

[60] Wertheimer, "Jewish Education," 15, 74-75, 80-81

primary American Jewish campus-based organization,[61] shifted in the early 1990s, deliberately trying to connect more Jewish students to their heritage and giving more students more opportunities to lead their own spiritual communities.[62] Hillel began the Steinhardt Jewish Campus Service Corps Fellowship in 1994, ultimately giving seventy to eighty recent college graduates annually the opportunity to experiment with Jewish professional work and an experience in leadership development, creativity, and group-work. The Bronfman Youth Fellowship began in 1987, sending twenty-six extraordinary Jewish teenagers to Israel annually to explore their homeland and study with exceptional Jewish teenagers; the Nesiya Institute also began in 1987, offering teenagers of a similar caliber an equally high quality experience in Israel, but with a focus on experience and on the arts.[63]

A variety of other projects helped Jewish Generation Xers spend full years in Israel. Pardes, a non-denominational *yeshiva*, opened in 1972, offering those with no experience with Jewish text study the opportunity to investigate the Jewish textual tradition, and also to live in Jerusalem for a year or more and to explore their heritage from various perspectives.[64] Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and other Israeli universities began semester and one-year programs for students from abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. Again, Baby Boomers could participate in both of these opportunities, but

[61] Hillel (www.hillel.org) is the pluralistic Jewish organization on many American college campuses. While organized Jewish life often takes place outside of Hillel buildings, many prayer services and holiday observances take place at Hillel, and *Shabbat* dinner at Hillel is often a major campus Jewish event.
[62] Several articles describe the shift of Hillel from being a more religious organization to being more universal or diverse, including "The Remaking of Hillel: A Case Study on Leadership and Organizational Transformation" (Waltham, Massachusetts: Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Jewish Philanthropy and Leadership-Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2006); Jay L. Rubin, "Reengineering the Jewish Organization: The Transformation of Hillel, 1988-2000," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* (Summer 2000).
[63] See www.nesiya.org. and www.bronfman.org.
[64] See www.pardes.org.il.

enrollment in Pardes and Israel travel abroad programs expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. Project Otzma began in 1986, seeking to help North American Jews spend time serving the under-privileged in Israeli society during ten months in Israel.[65] Since 1990, the Dorot Fellowship in Israel has supported young American Jews with leadership potential, helping them to spend a year in Israel, working in local communities and learning together.[66]

In 1969, graduate programs in Jewish professional leadership began; by the early 1990s, at least ten such programs existed, as did a variety of sources of scholarship support. The Wexner Foundation began to award the Wexner Graduate Fellowship in the mid-1980s, supporting rabbis, cantors, scholars, and Jewish educators and organizational leadership in training who demonstrated exceptional potential. Working for Jewish organizations came to be an intentional career, an opportunity that well-educated and passionate young American Jews took seriously and considered alongside other careers.

Admittedly, most young American Jews have not benefitted from this generation of Jewish opportunity that I describe. Many more fell into the kind of assimilation outlined earlier, in which the intensive Jewish environments of the past gave way to meager opportunities for Jewish education and practice. For some, though, the forces have comprised a perfect storm, giving way to a well-educated, passionate group of young American Jews, impacted by the forces of individualism, autonomy, and self-fulfillment with which they were raised, by the institutional doubt and cynicism of their generation, and awash with opportunity in Jewish community. These are the young

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[65] See www.otzma.org.
[66] See www.dorot.org.

Jewish adults who have created "JMerica," a surge of varied personal and communal expressions of Jewishness by and for adults in their twenties and thirties.

## SCENES FROM "JMERICA"[67]

During my interviews with thirty key informants, each relating their connections with Jewish life by and for adults in their twenties and thirties, they mentioned repeatedly these themes that I have reviewed here, those of individualism and choice and the riches of their childhood Jewish experiences. They also emphasized strongly their coming of age in the 1990s, within an atmosphere of venture capital and internet start-up companies. As they explain, they came to know intimately the paradigm of entrepreneur. After honing their capacity to lead organizational projects through Hillel,[68] in Israel as they worked in different non-profits for Dorot or Otzma, and through their secular experiences, they learned how to start new projects and they learned to value the starting of new projects. With the skepticism of their generation and in an environment of entrepreneurialism, they were motivated additionally to begin their own organizations rather than integrate themselves into the mainstream. They had a vision of a different Jewish society and they were prepared and motivated to work toward that vision.

[67] I am borrowing the concept of "JMerica" from www.jmerica.com, an example of the phenomenon that it describes. JMerica is a combination of a blog and a social networking site. It offers opportunities to meet friends, understand the latest trends in American Judaism, and just talk with other Jews. It facilitates alumni and activity-based groups, tells stories (for example, "What do Jews do on Xmas eve?"), and facilitates dating.

[68] Hillel emphasizes student leadership and activism. Many or even most activities planned through Hillels on college campuses are led by students, and religious communities are typically planned and implemented wholly by students. Many of the current leaders of various *minyanim* first led similar religious communities through Hillels, developing their community's ideology, determining how to build a self-sustaining community without a paid prayer leader, assigning students to lead different parts of the service, and creating a vibrant prayer experience.

They mentioned an additional deeply significant force that allowed them to build Jewish life for themselves, that of the social networks that they found when they connected to Hillel, Dorot, Otzma, Pardes, the Bronfman Youth Fellowships, the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, and the many other Jewish experiences from which they benefitted. In these programs, they found life-time creative companions, colleagues with whom to dream and to share the work of their projects. When they started something, they had an immediate critical mass, a foundation on which to build. Without their social networks, they would not have had the same opportunity to imagine and to build.

To complete this overview of the Riverway Project's context, I offer pictures from this JMerica. It should be noted that some have accused these expressions of being temporary and shallow.[69] With a deeper glance, though, others have acknowledged the richness of these expressions, despite their non-traditional format. Jeffrey R. Solomon and Roger Bennett, professional leaders of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, an organization leading and supporting JMerica in a variety of ways,[70] discuss this change of mind:

> At first, most of us in the organized Jewish community wrote this "New Jewish Identity" off as a fad, lacking in depth that, like any trend, would prove to be a temporary phenomenon. This organizing, even if it was "an explosion," was taking place outside of the walls of the organizations and institutions we had dedicated our lives to building. The young people who flocked to these new formats were not joining the Young Leadership Programs we had funded. And the

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[69] For example, see "Pop Goes the Hipster Judaism Bubble," *The Jewish Week* (December 20, 2005).

[70] The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies (ACBP) has made support for this cohort a priority. Rooted in efforts to help young philanthropists (in their twenties and thirties) make more strategic philanthropic decisions, ACBP has launched Grand Street, a support network for philanthropists, Natan, a venture philanthropy that matches young entrepreneurs with young donors, and Slingshot, an award that recognizes entreprenreurial and highly effective Jewish organizations, many of which are described in this dissertation. ACBP also facilitates Reboot, a project meant to immerse Jewish entrepreneurs in the best of Jewish culture and education in order to help them turn their creative talents to Jewish communal endeavors. ACBP effectively has supported a variety of projects for this cohort and many of those leading the new Jewish culture that Solomon and Bennett once critiqued.

> medium, and the messages of these forms of Jewish life were different from the ones we were familiar with. …

Yet, they continue, "The projects have proven to be anything but a fad," evolving "from a trend to an established reality."[71] Indeed, many of these projects have been part of American Jewish life now for more than ten years, establishing a trend that has developed a foundation and depth. The projects, though, are interesting not only because of their reach (which, admittedly, has not been analyzed or documented carefully), but because of the approach that they take to the celebration of American Judaism.

What follows are some of the concrete ideas and the reality born of the educated and talented individuals who use the resources of their strong social networks. I then explore the approach that these projects take and what JMerica teaches. I compile these scenes from interviews with those involved, participant observation at a series of events and meetings of religious communities, and analysis of cultural artifacts including projects' promotional materials and articles.[72]

### *Community*

**Ikar** meets in the JCC at Pico and Olympic in Los Angeles, in an old and worn building at the heart of the traditional Jewish community. The age of the setting does not matter. When it meets – every other Friday night, every other Saturday morning – the JCC's large, social hall type room is filled, with people and with music and spirit. Led by recent

[71] Jeffrey R. Solomon and Roger Bennett, "Introduction," in Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, "The Continuity of Discontinuity" (New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007), 4.
[72] Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from those mentioned here stem from interviews with key informants that took place during the summer of 2005. Descriptions of events also stem from first-hand participation in events from that same summer.

Jewish Theological Seminary graduate **Rabbi Sharon Brous**, Ikar came together in 2004 as a "vision-driven community." Brous describes their intent as "uncompromising in its attempt to create an environment that would be spiritually stimulating, intellectually challenging, and deeply involved in social justice." Brous suggests that these areas of the community's work should be intertwined, and rather than trying to perpetuate its existence or keep its lights on, she and its lay founders intend that these pillars drive the community's work. Under Brous's leadership, the community continues to consider new models, "trying to ask and answer questions about why synagogue is not relevant for some of us and [to] come up with models that could resemble synagogue but might be very different in some ways as well." There are some things in Ikar, Brous says, that are "gonna feel a lot like a synagogue"; for example, they have prayer services, and part-time Jewish school, and they ask for financial support. She continues, "We're also gonna have sushi here for *shabbos* dinner and that's not gonna feel like a synagogue." Ikar facilitates "house parties," salons and text studies in living rooms on topics chosen by participants. The topics relate to their core question, "What does it mean to be a Jew and a human being in the world?" Participants speak with each other in intimate conversations about why Judaism and justice matter. On *Purim,* rather than have a typical carnival, Ikar offers a Justice Carnival, with banners that proclaimed, "Fight AIDS," "End Genocide," "Fight Poverty," and families walked through the carnival, making decisions about where to allocate their tickets. Through Ikar, Angelenos can hike together and perform service to their community together. They challenge and stimulate, Brous hopes, every element of their beings, as Jews and as people. Because, she argues, "You're an integrated self, and when you walk into synagogue you shouldn't have to leave your head at the door, you

shouldn't have to leave your heart at the door, you shouldn't have to leave your body at the door. This is an experience for all of you."

The **Mission Minyan** "is -- above all else -- a place where we hope everyone feels at home, and at least (as we joke) mostly comfortable." Located in the Mission District of San Francisco, the community is based in "a funky … neighborhood of immigrants, artists, a wild nightlife scene, and, perhaps incongruously, a bunch of Jews." As the website says, "Our minyan reflects all this."[73] The Minyan meets in the Women's Center of the Mission, a Spanish-style building covered in bright, Hispanic murals telling the narrative of Mexican struggle. One prays looking up at pictures of Audre Lord and Maya Angelou, the ancient words of Jewish prayer strangely harmonizing with these images of a critical liberal arts education and of an oppressed people in America.

When they describe their minyan as "mostly comfortable," the community's facilitators refer to their efforts to make "creative compromises" in their liturgical and ritual decisions. They draw from multiple Jewish traditions in making these decisions, attempting to be studied and intentional in their choices and also to help many from multiple backgrounds to be comfortable. The community facilitates home hospitality on the first Friday nights of each month and leads various holiday celebrations and frequent text study. Queer-inclusive and set in one of the grittiest neighborhoods in San Francisco, it is a community that is deeply authentic to Jewish practice and Bay Area norms, helping participants connect to their multiple identities, to be Jewish anywhere and with all aspects of their integrated lives fully present.

Since approximately the year 2000, independent *minyanim,* religious communities independent of synagogues like Ikar and the Mission Minyan, have proliferated

[73] Quotations here are from the community's website, www.missionminyan.org.

throughout the country.[74] **Kehilat Hadar** was one of the first of this wave and, with more than 300 participants on most Saturday mornings, it is one of the largest. "It is a community," according to co-founder **Elie Kaunfer**, whose "first point of collection is prayer… the backbone is prayer." The weekly text study and commitment to social justice offer "thickening" to the community, giving participants the opportunity for "substantive conversations" that complement and deepen their prayer experience. The community's commitment to joyful and passionate prayer is evident. The prayer leader sings loudly, with spirit, making it easy for others to follow; Kaunfer suggests that this is intentional, that it helps to create a "fearless *kahal*" (community). Participants can experiment as they follow a strong leader, and the community can then vary its tunes as new melodies become familiar to regulars. All face front, not toward each other but toward the ark with the *Torah,* to help participants "be freer to express themselves," in Kaunfer's words, looking toward God rather than toward each other.[75] Those in the front pay close attention to their prayer books and to the *Torah* as it moves about the room. They are focused on the task at hand, their eyes closed, their bodies moving up and down at the waist. There are women and men with *talitot,* prayer shawls, and with *kipot,* head

[74] The near-explosion of these independent religious communities is documented and investigated in "Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study" (Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain (California: Synagogue 3000, November 2007)). It is compared to the Havurah movement of the 1970s, a similar development of participant-led communities independent of synagogues, in Riv-Ellen Prell's "Independent Minyanim and Prayer Groups of the 1970s: Historical and Sociological Perspectives," *Zeek* (Spring 2007) (available at http://www.zeek.net/801prell/). This is almost the second wave of American lay-led religious communities, slightly different in their structures and innovations but rooted in principles American religion has seen before.

[75] Readers will observe that in facing front, Hadar (and similar emergent religious communities like the Mission Minyan) does not choose for participants to face each other in a circle, as did Havurah communities of the 1970s. This difference is ideological; the goal of many emergent religious communities is not to democratize participation or to build community but, simply, to pray with spirit and intention. In facing front, these communities are prioritizing facing the ark with the *Torah* and, by extension, a reminder of God, over facing each other. They are affirming the purpose of their prayer: To serve, love, or show attention to God.

coverings. On *Yom Kippur*, the community meets for almost twelve hours, its members on their feet without food or water, reciting a full liturgy, many of the community's lurkers just listening because they do not yet know the ancient words. On *Shavuot,* many stay up all night as tradition suggests, but then, surprisingly, their morning prayer is as fervent and spirited as ever. Despite their lack of sleep, participants are anything but dead on their feet. "Crying awesome," Kaunfer calls the best of their prayer. "These are the moments that make it all worth it."

Kaunfer also facilitates **Mechon Hadar**, a support network for independent *minyanim*. Mechon Hadar has assessed what communities need to be deep and strong. It offers training in crafting *divrei torah,* resources for facilitating lesser known prayer services that may be important to some *minyanim*, and a think tank on handling difficult issues of *halacha* (Jewish law) without a denominational ideology to follow. It does not act as a headquarters, a center of control, for associated organizations, but it offers a foundation so that communities can remain independent and strengthen their product in every way that they can. Mechon Hadar offers community and collaboration without mandating assimilation into a larger ideology.

Recent **Union for Reform Judaism** Biennial conferences[76] featured special programming for adults in their twenties and thirties, building community in and of itself and highlighting the many Reform synagogue sponsored projects for this generation. "Striking Sparks, Raising Ruach" was meant to attract younger adults to the conference, help them find their place in the Reform movement, and lead conversations about connecting adults of this age and life stage to synagogue life. In a variety of ways, several synagogue projects in addition to the Riverway Project were highlighted: the **Stephen S.**

[76] Including in 2003 and 2005; the track did not take place in 2007.

**Wise Temple W Group** (Los Angeles), the **Central Synagogue Central Issues Group** (Manhattan), the **Temple Emanu-El Young Adults Community** (Dallas), and the **Washington Hebrew Congregation 2239** project (Washington DC). These projects have several tenets in common. Many facilitate a series of social, religious, and cultural opportunities for their audiences, offering wine tastings, special nights at local theaters, introduction to Judaism classes, and discussions with rabbis. Individuals participate in these groups for fundamental reasons: just to talk to people, to create a basic, human connection at the end of a long week, because the events sometimes are different, and interesting, and fun. The synagogues sponsor these groups for fundamental reasons: to connect Jews in their twenties and thirties to the congregations, and secondarily to Jewish community and then to Jewish life. Events take place outside of the buildings, almost always with a pulpit rabbi present. Just as often, events take place inside the synagogues, or there is a twenties/ thirties spin on a synagogue event (an apple martini happy hour just before *Rosh Hashanah*, for example). Success for the synagogues includes helping adults in their twenties and thirties find Jewish friends, meet Jewish spouses, and make connections with the synagogue itself. In many of these cases, they have succeeded; those who come to the synagogue through these projects eventually find themselves on the synagogue boards and leading various projects in the synagogues. They discover and develop Jewish community.

### *Material*

Then a member of the Bay Area's Camp Tawonga staff, **Sarah Lefton** was looking at the word Yosemite one day and realized that it spelled "Yo, Semite!" She turned that

realization into a t-shirt and then into the company **Jewish Fashion Conspiracy**. In its few years, it led a burgeoning trend of paraphernalia that proclaim snarky sayings with a Jewish twist. Its underwear cry out, "a great miracle happened here!" and its t-shirts declare "Jews for Jeter" and advertise for the "*baal Koreh* gangsta," including on the shirt the gangsta's rap.[77] Other companies have joined the trend (see www.chosencouture.com), and in the meantime, Sarah has involved herself in San Francisco's Mission Minyan, is working on a DVD called "Karaoke Shabbat," is trying to put together a book proposal on the range of Jewish experience today, and is developing a cartoon that discusses the weekly *Torah* portion. She is the ultimate Jewish creative, an entrepreneur who is applying what she learned in her twenties in internet start-up firms to the Jewish world.

For Sarah, co-opting language is not only about being funny. It is about freedom, about pushing back against expectations and "not being put into a box." It facilitates "pulling off labels," labels, perhaps, that accuse Jews of being meek, ashamed, or uninteresting. It is not, she declares, about mocking culture. It is about "participating in it." It demonstrates pride, interest, and commitment.

In a similarly clever vein, over ten years ago, **Jeremy Cowan** began the Schmaltz Brewing Company and created **He'Brew Beer**. "When I originally designed this beer," he comments:

> It was not for people who go to Jewish events. It was not for people who go to synagogue. It was not for people who really do anything of Judaism in particular but [who] felt Jewish and would get a kick out of drinking this He'Brew beer with

[77] *Baal koreh* refers to the person reading *Torah* in synagogue. It is a play on words, then, because the rapper, like the *baal koreh,* is a word artist. The rap on the back of the t-shirt went like this: *I* mamish *(really) love it when you call me/ big* sabba *(grandpa).../ go* daven mincha *(pray the afternoon prayer) / if you're a true* baal simcha *(host of a festive event, like a wedding) / cuz i see a* maidel *(pretty girl) tonite/ that should be making my* challah *(bread) /* kallah *(bride)."*

> a dancing rabbi and watching Seinfeld and you know, listening to Beastie Boys albums with their friends, maybe one or two are Jewish….

It is entirely likely that many consumers of He'Brew Beer are not even Jewish. But for Cowan, manufacturing He'Brew Beer reflects his Jewishness and he expects that for others, it is a way to connect to their identity as well. Looking for a cheap vacation, Cowan participated in *Livnot U'Lihibanot* many years ago, spending several months in Israel with this educational organization.[78] In this time, he realized that he thought too simply about Judaism. Despite the Jewish education he experienced through the tenth grade, despite a high school Israel trip, he "still didn't know why they [religious Jews] were praying in the back of the plane" while traveling all day to Israel. His Jewishness was dictated by the idea that "the Holocaust was around the corner." But, he suggests, "Identity should be more multi-layered and complex and subtle than that." In Israel for *Livnot,* he discovered history and literature and meaningful ritual observance. While he continues to find serious expressions of his Jewishness outside of synagogue, he does want to engage in his Jewish tradition.

Indeed, each beer is connected to a variety of ideas that grow out of pop culture and Jewish tradition. He frames the marketing of Pomegranate Ale with words from Song of Songs and a Jewish context of creation, revelation, and redemption. At beer tastings on *Shavuot* he links the holiday, which concludes the counting of the *omer,* an ancient sacrifice of barley, to beer, to Israel's seven species, to the role of the seven species in the Bible, and to the ancient barley harvest. He can "participate in the community in a way that very few people get to do." He says, "Rabbis get to do their thing. Jewish professionals get to do their thing." He feels like he is "in between a Jewish fraternity

[78] See www.livnot.com.

boy… and a program director"; on *Shavuot,* he participated in more *Shavuot*-related events than did "90% of Jews in this country," leading conversations about the relationship between the holiday's history, traditions, and his beer. Creating He'Brew beer allows him to use his creativity, to research Jewish tradition, to learn, and to connect in a sort of paradoxical way to many of Judaism's essential ideas, to the Jewish narrative.

### *Film, Music, and Performance*

**Tiffany Shlain**'s documentary ***The Tribe*** examines "what it means to be an American Jew in the 21st century" through the lens of the American icon, the Barbie doll. In her short film, Shlain contemplates how the daughter of Polish Jewish immigrants could have created a blond, thin, poised, perfect object of the female (and male) imagination. In doing so, she relates the story of American Jewish assimilation, using archival footage, spoken word, and cultural artifacts. In the film, Shlain explores masks and multiculturalism, deliberate and accidental syncretism, redefining of boundaries and redefinitions of Jewish culture. Toward the end of the film, a spoken word artist, Vanessa Hidary, summarizes the film's point: "What does Jewish look like to you?" she asks. Jews look different and act differently, Shlain is passionately arguing. In the story it tells,` the film is reverent and also irreverent, according to Shlain.[79] It is ironic and also deeply respectful, honoring of the Jewish experience and declaring that Jewish experience to be deeply multifaceted.

[79] Sara Ivry, "Barbie, Daughter of Ruth" podcast. Available at http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=236.

Many of Shlain's immediate peers do not go to Temple, she comments. And so, "the goal of this film is to spark discussion."[80] They do not practice their religion, but Judaism is important to them and they are both trying to figure out why and lacking a safe opportunity for this exploration. Because of her interest in discussion, one can order from the movie's web site the film for a living room screening, invite friends to participate through Evite, and obtain the movie's "Guide From the Perplexed" film guide and Conversation Cards to initiate discussion. Through its "web Talmud," *The Tribe* also encourages virtual conversation with a series of bulletin boards that cover aspects of Judaism ranging from God to sex.[81]

*The Tribe* was featured at the Sundance Film Festival, at the Tribeca Film Festival, and was a winner of a variety of director's choice and audience choice awards at additional film festivals.

**Dan Wolf** and I meet in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco, in a coffee shop that is somewhere between dirty and yuppie. Dan's buzzed brown hair, jeans, and funky sneakers both fit into and stand out against the working class ethos of this Hispanic neighborhood. Dan is a hip-hop artist, a leader of the band Felonious, as well as author of the show **"Stateless."** As a child, he tells me, he was a "shit-disturber" in Hebrew school, someone always giving the teachers a hard time. He understood why "it's important to be Jewish" upon leaving *Yad Vashem* as a sixteen year old and connecting the history of the Jews to his family's history.

Just out of college, long after his grandfather passed away, Dan discovered that his great-grandfather had been a famous German vaudevillian. At this discovery, he felt,

[80] Ibid.
[81] See www.tribethefilm.com.

"Here's a thing that connects my artistic life to my Jewish life, in a very strong, profound way." He recovered his great-grandfather's music and recorded it with his band, creating hip-hop versions of the century-old tunes and merging the two cultures. His show "Stateless" tells the story of his grandfather and his great-grandfather, of their time in Germany and their reasons for leaving. It also tells the story of Dan's friend Tommy, an African-American who similarly does not know his ancestors, who is equally piecing together his diaspora from artifacts and family legend. In the play, Dan and Tommy ask their own questions of home and homelessness and imagine that these are the same questions that their great-grandfathers asked. "Do I belong to America?" each wonders. "Are we all stateless? Are we all searching for where we really are from?" "Stateless," to Dan, is "just identity, and" questions about "what does our past mean to our present life, in an attempt to understand kind of where we're going." It is his expression of both the questions and sense of belonging he finds in his Jewishness.

"Can hip-hop heal?" asks **Hip Hop Sulha**, a traveling performance of Israeli and American Jewish, Arab, and Palestinian hip hop artists.[82] The artists, many of whom also record on their own, believe that it can. Coming together in a "*sulha*" (Arabic for reconciliation), artists celebrate peace, pluralism, and respect, and also create atmospheres of the same. **Dan Sieradski**, also known as **Mobius**, is one of the artists behind Hip Hop Sulha. A rapper, blogger, artist, and general Jewish creative, Sieradski also created jewschool.com (see below). Sieradski's childhood was infused with Jewish orthodoxy and apathy; during high school and college he spent time exploring Buddhism, and then encountered progressive Judaism, female rabbis, and different Jewish

[82] Dan 'Mobius' Sieradski, "Can hip hop heal?" Available at Israel 21c: *http://israel21c.org/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Views%5El200&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZ..Views&*.

theologies. As a Dorot fellow in Jerusalem, he was able to explore Jewish texts and tradition and lead a hip hop collective and monthly show of artists of all backgrounds. During his time in Jerusalem, Sieradski became known for many things, among them shooting a photograph of himself wearing a Jewish prayer shawl made from an Arab headscarf and his *tefillin* (phylacteries), standing next to Israel's separation wall. He stood as though he were praying to the wall, as have stood so many Jews next to the *Kotel*. He said about the photograph:

> On one level, it's a reaction towards our idolization of that shrine.…In another sense, it's a remark on the inherent holiness in all of creation, including Palestinians who are as much a creation of God's as anyone else. On yet another level, it's a statement about the amount of faith the Jewish people are investing in that wall to secure us from future attack and the fallaciousness of that idea.
>
> The Talmud tells us that the reason the Holy Temple was destroyed and that we were sent into exile was for the sin of baseless hatred. Likewise, it is said that the only thing that will restore the temple and bring the Messiah is unconditional love. … Only when we rise above our hysterical fears of the other (which I will not say are all together unfounded, which is why this is truly an immense challenge) and come to love our Palestinian neighbors unconditionally, will the nation of Israel be at peace, and, God willing, all be set right in the world. My hope is, at the very least, to bring people to consider this idea.[83]

For several years, a variety of organizations have sponsored **DAWN**, an all-night *Shavuot* celebration in a San Francisco nightclub. As the commemoration of the giving of the *Torah,* Jews traditionally observe *Shavuot* by studying Jewish texts all night long, focusing on the biblical book of Ruth, concluding their long hours of learning with morning prayer at sunrise. At DAWN, individuals entered a gritty, raw space South of Market, a space normally devoted to dancing and drinking.[84] The bar that night served He'Brew beer in addition to Cosmopolitans; the walls were covered with white paper, inviting those attending to record their thoughts about *Shavuot* in response to readings

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[83] Available at http://www.kriskrug.com/?p=422.

[84] This description of DAWN is from DAWN 2005. The event has taken place almost each year since then and its details (location, drinks, program) have varied even while its basic concept has remained the same.

scattered around a lounge area. Throughout the night, one could watch a film relating the memoir of an Israeli immigrant to America, hear Amy Tobin's rock opera about Esther, study Ruth with various scholars, listen to a musical piece about Jewish learning, and have milk and blintzes at midnight. Around 3:00 a.m., one of the producers, himself in his thirties, led a conversation about why Judaism matters, focusing on Anna Greenberg's study about ethno-religious identities of adults in their twenties and thirties.[85] Around 5:00 a.m., a scholar, also in his thirties, studied pieces from *kabbalah* with the fifteen individuals still present. We spoke about accessing God and shared our deepest spiritual questions, somewhat stoned by our lack of sleep, the ideas we shared the more vulnerable because it was so late and because our filters had dissipated, the experience stronger for it.

### *Media (virtual and otherwise)*

A Facebook-like application with members, pages, groups, dating, and ideas about anything Jewish, **JMerica** (www.jmerica.com) is deliberately crafted and also user generated and represents the desire of thousands of American Jews simply to find and talk to each other. The bulletin board joins countless others; late-night web surfers looking for conversation can also find it on **Jewlicious** (www.jewlicious.com), an individual's blog that also collects articles about Jewish life and garners significant responses from the public, and **Jew School** (www.jewschool.com), which features articles, a blog, and, again, reactions. Users seem objectively curious and looking for the opinions of others, wondering, for example, about the pros and cons of the development

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[85] Anna Greenberg, "Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam: Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices" (New York: Reboot, 2006).

of Ariel Sharon's new political party in Israel. Or they are motivated by questions of personal Jewish celebration: Should I circumcise my child in a *brit milah* ceremony? What are options for a different kind of naming or welcoming ceremony? What does *brit milah* imply? Will I alienate my grandparents forever if I do not have a *bris* – is that alienation worth my fight against this primordial ceremony? A web-surfer not wanting user-generated content, looking for old-fashioned thoughtful and thought-provoking punditry, can break away from the posts to read Rabbi **Andy Bachman**'s blog, his "conversation about contemporary ideas and challenges of life in Brooklyn, North America, and Israel."[86]

**Heeb Magazine** began in 2001 as an expression of **Jennifer Bleyer**'s "dim sum Judaism," reflecting her experiences in Jewish day school and as the child of immigrants, her lack of identification with Seinfeld, her connection with "Sufi zikrs, Hindu kirtans, Buddhist meditations, pagan equinoxes, and Native American peyote ceremonies." Bleyer's "urban tribe was black, white, Indian, Mexican, Dominican, Asian, Arab, and West Indian." When Heeb was published, it was "a symbol that young Jews had arrived," that becoming part of mainstream culture reflected a "longing to be cool in their otherness" even while they were practicing their belonging to the larger culture. It was a

[86] Bachman's blog does not differ in design from his web colleagues, but his additional life experience and his thoughtfulness seem to raise his contributions in quality and challenge. A sample: "… the more I think about it, the more I hear myself speak publicly, the more I realize that the word itself–**services**–doesn't really do it for me anymore. In its origin, it refers to a prayer ritual in **service** to God. And while I certainly believe in God, the level of ambivalence in expressing faith through the **service** of words and music is very real. Are we **serving** at that moment or are we expressing? What's really going on? In study, that **service** relationship flows; in the **service** of feeding the hungry, lifting the downfallen, making peace, that relationship flows; but leading one hundred people on a Friday night who give very little thought to expressing their relationship to the Source of All Life through a Hebrew language so few of them understand, dressed in vaguely familiar melodies, well, like I said, this is challenging work. Imagine if I had said, 'Come Brooklyn. Let us go **serve** the Eternal!' You see what I mean? Serve God what–soup?" From http://www.brooklynjews.org/weblog.

way for writers and readers to contemplate the tensions that they felt between their othernesss and sameness, a desire for and frustration with this continual tension.[87]

Along those lines, says current editor **Josh Neuman**, readers of *Heeb* tend not to identify with Jewish denominations and to be politically progressive, disproportionately gay and lesbian, and disproportionately urban. Three-fourths of readers live outside of New York; 80% of readers are between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five. According to Neuman, generally, *Heeb* helps participants "feel more Jewish than they ever have before" because it reflects their desire to take nothing at face value, to ask why before they blindly accept their tradition. It is a "radically inclusive community, with radical possibilities about what might constitute Jewish living." In the magazine, these radical possibilities manifest in stories about the ethics of eating with animal rights activist Peter Singer, strip *dreydel*, the secret life of the "shabbos goy," and Jewdar. There is a photo essay ("Aryans Have More Fun," with the requisite high-boned cheeks and blond hair), a feature on a famous Jew (Sarah Silverman), a first-person story of twenty-something Judaism (travels in Africa, friendships with the other).

*Heeb* travels the country facilitating its "Storytelling" event in which young writers, actors, comedians, and story tellers of all kinds tell a Jewish story. The story tellers are Jewish and not, and they tell their stories most often in city clubs, demonstrating that Jewish life takes place everywhere. Storytelling, suggests Neuman, makes *Heeb* "not a cultural artifact whose production was conceived to enlighten or to impart information." It turns *Heeb* into a "space for conversation."

[87] Bleyer shares her founding of *Heeb Magazine* in her essay "Among the Holy Schleppers." It reflects her idea about herself as one who understands her Jewish identity as one "treat" among a number of other delectable aspects of her sense of herself. The magazine was intended to speak to her friends, other dim sum Jews. From *The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt*, Ruth Andrew Ellenson ed. (New York: Dutton, 2005), 30-33.

***Nextbook***, ***Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture*** and ***Habitus: A Diaspora Journal*** are also changing the availability of quality and informed Jewish media.[88] Primarily on-line publications, although *Zeek* produces a print journal as well and *Nextbook* sponsors literary events, these publications feature writing by educated Jews who are also steeped in contemporary culture. Kevin Smokler recently wrote in *Nextbook* about 1960s music producer Bill Graham, social justice, and Graham's Jewishness, contributing to ideas of Jewish culture and thought as well as understandings of American music. *Zeek* summarizes, perhaps, the mission of these projects: with "intelligence, independence, courage, and thoughtfulness," each of these journals enacts the idea that "an articulate Jewish sensibility is one that speaks from its place of particularity in a larger conversation." These journals answer the question that Tiffany Shlain raised, suggesting that to be an American Jew today is always to grapple with the particular Jewish and universal traditions of ideas in which one finds oneself and to continually integrate and layer principles and teachings from multiple places, celebrating and railing against the challenge that such integration raises.

Heather Greenblotz is ***The Matzo Ball Heiress***, the inheritor of a Manischeivitz like empire. She is not interested. Moreover, she is convinced she is unworthy: she spends Passover eve enjoying a "Panini 2 [with ham and cheese] from the Italian deli around the corner," she cannot go without crab sushi rolls, and she cannot understand what is wrong with "lov[ing] lobster and staying in bed on Saturday mornings." In *The Matzo Ball Heiress,* Laurie Gwen Shapiro describes Heather's exploration of her culture and attempts to create a Passover *seder* that reflects her post-modern family. Ultimately, it seats her gay father and his partner, her brother and his Irish common-law wife, her

[88] These journals can be found at www.nextbook.org, www.zeek.net, and www.habitusmag.com.

closest friend (a Black woman) and her Egyptian boyfriend, her Tibetan/ Jewish neighbor, her Russian/ Jewish mailman. The text reflects a new Jewish community with which the book's author, **Laurie Gwen Shapiro**, is either fascinated or struggling or both. Shapiro is a third generation "Lower East Sider," a Jew whose identity is inextricably linked with the streets on which she was raised and still lives. She married a non-Jewish man whom she met while traveling in Australia. He asked her how she could be a Jew, she who ignores holidays, *Shabbat,* and *kashrut*. "I just am!" she declared about her identity. Their daughter's name (as shared in the dedication to the text), "Violet Frances O'Leary – aka *Tziporah Chaia* O'Leary," illustrates the balance between two communities that Shapiro tries to maintain. Deeply Jewish in her soul, unable to imagine a personal identity separated from her Jewishness, she sees no options for the future of American Judaism other than this balance. "That's not a creative way to maintain the culture," she argues. "I'm all for a reconnection to Judaism but on new terms."

### *"On New Terms:" Particularism and Universalism*

Shapiro's call for Judaism "on new terms" is deepened in the context of her daughter's good Irish-Jewish name, *Tziporah Chaia* O'Leary. She asks for a universalistic, or more inclusive, Jewish society, a society in which one can celebrate Judaism without eliminating celebration of other cultures and traditions. Judaism must shift, she demands, to acknowledge the multiple loyalties that individuals who are well-integrated into general society feel.

Shapiro's comments well capture the tension that appears not only in her *The Matzo Ball Heiress* but also in each of these projects. It is a tension inherent within post-

modern identity, a tension between one's fundamental and particular connection to one's own tradition and one's firm foundation in the general, relativist, universal, world. This tension between particularism and universalism is seen in the places in which the individuals described choose to hold events, in clubs and bookstores and community centers. It is seen in the small details of these events, in the sushi served at an Ikar Friday night dinner, and in the larger concepts behind the events, in the idea that anyone can tell a Jewish story at Heeb's Storytelling. It is seen in the radical inclusiveness of these phenomena: Many of these projects mean to speak to anyone on their terms, gay, straight, black, white, Jewish and not. It is seen in the focus of most of these projects on the essence of Judaism and not on boundaries that create communities, and in Dan Wolf's questions: "Are we insular, are we exclusive, do we push people away, do we not invite non-Jewish people to eat at our table?" These projects mean to offer high content without creating exclusive membership markers, establishing a universal space with a particular focus. *Zeek* summarizes looking at the uniqueness of Judaism from within this generality: "We are particular, but not parochial … We aspire to be participants in a global, multicultural world, but we speak from our particularity, and articulate truth largely in its terms."

Honoring this tension allows those participating in these projects to be true to their multiple identities, to be authentically who they are. When Brous of Ikar suggests that "its not gonna feel like a synagogue," she means that bringing in sushi, dinner different from the typical Friday night chicken, refers participants to their non-synagogue lives. In turn, they understand that they can integrate the multiple aspects of their identities even in a distinctively Jewish space, that Judaism does not limit but instead

expands their senses of themselves. Similarly, the essence of the Jewish Fashion Conspiracy, the public reclaiming and affirming of Jewish language, allows clothing wearers to declare their normal status as Jews. In their "*baal koreh gangsta*" t-shirts, they proclaim Jewishness to be just another culture to be celebrated and as such, able to be integrated fully with other cultures and traditions. For these reasons, Dan Wolf can create a moving theatrical and musical piece with his friend of a different background rooted in their different pasts and revolving around their common questions about identity. Through their shared hip-hop culture, they explore their questions together. Similarly, Dan Sieradski deliberately brings together his sacred Jewish tradition with his commitment to justice. Standing by Israel's security wall in his *tallis* of an Arab *kefiyah*, he visibly struggles with his compulsion to be true to these parts of himself. Authenticity to a diverse self, then, dances at the center of these projects. Most of them – the synagogue-based community groups excluded – are deeply characterized by their integration in some way with, to be simple, the rest of the world, either through music and other cultural resources or physical space or ideals and ideas.

Dan Wolf's show "Stateless" relates his hunger for a home. Similarly, the visceral need for community, for a sense of belonging to a group that sees the world from a similar point, drives many of the projects described. Prayer – not only pre-modern words and melodies but also the intent behind them – binds participants in Ikar and Hadar to one another and to their ancestors. Mechon Hadar has developed to strengthen the many similar independent religious communities that are emerging, each also bringing people together to fill their simple longing to feel at home in a vibrant community rooted in Jewish history and tradition. The continued growth of a traditional American

congregational paradigm of membership-oriented synagogue groups of adults in their twenties and thirties, like those at congregations in New York and Los Angeles, perhaps best attests to this craving for community. These groups emerge and even grow because at a basic level, individuals look to be validated by those like them. Some look first, or even purely, for companionship and for the opportunity to be grounded, to have an established home in a shifting world.

Still, many enter community with caution. The magazine *Zeek* suggests, "We will not be a cheerleader for Judaism, the Jewish people or Israel" even while the magazine "will not abandon [its] love of them." *Zeek* introduces the idea of thinking carefully about Judaism, of examining its ideas and not accepting them outright simply because the community dictates such acceptance. It demonstrates the refusal of Generation X to take on inherited truth. This careful thinking similarly appears in the other projects described. At Ikar, Brous sees that part of changing her constituents' relationship to Judaism is leading them to see that Judaism is interesting and hard. "They didn't know that *Torah* study was for smart people – they just had never had serious learning in their lives," she explains. She seeks to "create a space for people to learn with me and without me, at a high level, where they are engaged and feel stimulated and are really challenged." Judaism can and should be hard, she argues, and so opportunities to delve into layers of Jewish texts and wisdom flow through Ikar written material and events. Similarly, Sarah Lefton emphasizes the importance of study, learning, and hard discussion when she comments on prayer services that have plenty of guitar and camp-like singing, but no Ikar-like discussion:

> To me it's just like empty. And something for twelve year olds – it doesn't speak Jewishly to me. … Oh, fun, we can sing songs we sang when we were twelve. …

> For me that's a lot of what it is – if you take people seriously, they're still gonna come.

Just the opposite, in fact, Lefton suggests that organizers must take individuals seriously, must challenge participants intellectually, in order to motivate them to come. Similarly, *Zeek*'s credo continues:

> We aspire to be intelligent, and believe in the value of intelligent, authentic culture. … We are not interested in dumbing down, or in catering to the lowest common denominator; we are interested in raising the level of the highest. …
> We will not sacrifice intellectual rigor for the sake of spiritual contentment … We find the smugness of the cynic and the soft-mindedness of the believer equally repellent to truth.
> We prefer questions to answers, aspirations to achievements, and horizons to boundaries…
> We are suspicious of any truths that claim to be universal, any values that justify cruelty, and any ideologies which reduce the complex to the simple.

They exist to explore rather than preach, preferring "questions to answers." They want an "intelligent, authentic culture." In questions and authenticity, they find new possibilities for Jewish expression and new Jewish ideas. They push at boundaries, looking for "horizons" as they stretch understandings of contemporary Jewish culture. They seek something in between the "cynic" and the "believer," not wanting to be disparaging for the sake of it, and also not wanting to be automatically accepting. They challenge "universal" claims, wanting nuance and complexity; they challenge assumptions, finding within Judaism opportunities for critical thinking.

Each project described here grew from someone's imagination and because of their talent. The Jewish creatives, the individuals behind these projects – Dan Wolf, Elie Kaunfer, Sharon Brous, Dan Sieradski, Sarah Lefton, Laurie Gwen Shapiro – combined their passion, previous Jewish experiences, comfort, leadership, and desire to make change, and it is this synergy that has resulted in this surge of American Jewish culture

and practice. Lefton explains that her generation was "used to boot strapping [their] way through the business world [and so] this feels like no big deal."[89] Their entrepreneurial spirit, their idea of what is possible if they take action, leads them toward ingenuity, action, and transformation.

Behind their ingenuity is their understanding, an important understanding, of American Jewish organizations as being led by "old men." They see the previous generation(s) as monolithic and straight, as self-appointed community decision-makers and as irrelevant to younger generations. They create "soulless" organizations, organizations "for the people but … not about the people." They see these leaders as focusing on a lack of Jewish continuity and that focus as miring them in fear: Communal leaders are afraid of intermarriage, afraid of assimilation, afraid of another Holocaust and of losing the state of Israel, afraid of the future, which is shifting without their permission.

In response, these individuals are changing the conversation and changing the opportunities available in Jewish community. Stop complaining, their actions suggest. We can create a different way of celebrating Judaism, they demonstrate. In shirts that proclaim "*ba'al koreh gangsta*," or at *Shavuot* at camp, or at a concert in Bryant Park, or on the shelves of Barnes and Noble, they reclaim not only words but also the direction of Jewish life and leadership of Jewish community as the create the community that they want, in their own image.

Their belief in self-governance and grassroots innovation represents more than a criticism of the establishment. It suggests a different way (in their minds) of celebrating Judaism. Sarah Lefton appreciates seeing her true peer, a non-rabbi, leading prayer

[89] Interview with Sarah Lefton, http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/articles/555_sarah_lefton.htm.

services. "You don't have this feeling of someone in charge," she says, "like you do when you go to a synagogue and there's a rabbi. Like I rabbi, you congregation." While some emergent religious communities have rabbis involved in their leadership (like Hadar), these communities maintain a non-rabbi/ congregation structure by spreading responsibilities among participants. Steering committees are elected annually, *gabbai* committees oversee the reading of the *Torah,* and both ensure that more than one individual makes decisions and sets the tone for the congregation. Leading from within the congregation can erase boundaries between the elite and the folk. The leadership structure suggests that anyone can access the knowledge, passion, and confidence that were once relegated to the Jewish communal elite. It motivates those in the congregation, suggesting to them that they, too, can lead.[90]

These individuals are reclaiming American Judaism because they know that they have what it takes to create an independent conversation about Jewish life. In turn, their leadership signifies to others, to those with fewer Jewish experiences and less confidence that they, too, can lead. The creatives described here own their Jewishness; with the resources of their Jewish selves, they create Jewish life that they can manage. They establish that this ownership, the capacity and desire to do for themselves, is an important part of this generation's Jewish expression.

There are, then, four primary ideas that these projects propose: those of a Jewish celebration authentic to both Jewish tradition and contemporary society, of a community in which to be rooted, of close and careful scrutiny of inherited ideas, and of ownership and leadership of personal Jewish expression. These projects propose an expanding

[90] Of course, those who feel "I rabbi, you congregation" seem not to have explored many Orthodox Jewish congregations, which are lay-led and often escape this hierarchy in prayer. Still, these comments are significant for the migration of strategies that they demonstrate from Orthodox to other congregations.

Jewish culture that draws ideas from Judaism and from contemporary society, from community and tradition, examines those ideas closely and ensures dialogue and debate, and gives projects over to participants for their own examination and leadership.

At times, mainstream or institutionalized Jewish organizations and these projects collide, as in “Joshua Venture,” a grant-making and training organization meant to seed the development of new projects aimed at or created by adults in their twenties and thirties. Funded by private philanthropists, Joshua Venture supported sixteen entrepreneurs during its four-year tenure and launched such projects as JDub Records and *Heeb Magazine*.[91] The project saw itself in the tradition of ideas “firmly rooted in Jewish history,” recognizing that “it is often young people and those on the margins who create new ideas to benefit a changing world.”[92] In the words of some of the fellows themselves, it gave voice and tools for change to young social entrepreneurs looking for a new spirit within American Judaism.[93] It demonstrates exactly the phenomena described here, and yet, was supported by families who have long supported normative American Jewish organizations. For a time, JDub Records sat at 111 Eighth Avenue in Manhattan, in the building of the United Jewish Communities, existing because of the infrastructure support awarded it by national Jewish organizations. These boundaries, too, between the atraditional and not, are dissipating.[94]

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[91] See also Walter and Elise Haas Fund website http://www.haassr.org/html/resources_links/lessonsLearnedJoshuaVenture.cfm.

[92] Rachel Levin, “Letters to the Editor,” *Jewish Journal* (April 22, 2005).

[93] Tobin Belzer, Amichai Lau-Lavie, and Ronit Avni, “Build an Open Tent Instead of Guarding the Communal Gates,” *The Forward,* (June 17, 2005).

[94] Joshua Venture actually disbanded after supporting two classes of fellows. It has been suggested by some that the financial responsibility was significant and that partner philanthropists could not be located. Specifically, Yonaton Gordis and Marcella Kanfer Rolnick, who are investigating the re-initiation of Joshua Venture, write: “The organization went into stand-by mode after discovering a rolling budgetary deficit and the departure of its Executive Director. While Joshua Venture had experienced nothing but stellar programmatic success, there were serious governance and management challenges that caused the

## A Typology of Jewish Engagement

This marriage, then, of the institutional and non-institutional makes it challenging to understand these expressions of Jewishness. Who represents tradition, and who represents change? What defines a leader, and what defines a follower? Most salient to this dissertation, how can the audiences of the Riverway Project and something like Ikar or Hadar be differentiated?

Several generations ago, Charles Liebman differentiated between the folk and elite religion of American Jews.[95] He used these concepts to discuss the differences between the ideology of the American Jewish movements and the beliefs of the typical American Jew, between organizational leaders, primarily rabbis, and the typical Jew, or the 'Jew in the pew.' Liebman named the folk religion as being subtly delineated by the people, crafted through daily behavior. It is not "self-conscious," unable to "articulate its own rituals and beliefs." Folk religion is an "error" of sorts, a religious practice adapted through daily, uninformed or unintentional behavior that shifts ideological religion to become a new practice.[96] Yet, Liebman suggested that the emerging Reconstructionist movement had encapsulated a set of ideas in its ideology that were not limited to the movement per se but is part of a larger American folk religion. These ideas included the

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Board to decide to put the organization's activities on hold. … To date, no organization has stepped in to fill the void created by the cessation of Joshua Venture activities. The brand remains extremely strong and well-known throughout the Jewish community, in essence synonymous with the concept of Jewish social entrepreneurship." I have found evidence to support the assertions of Gordis and Rolnick, and attribute the dissolution of Joshua Venture to, if anything, a lack of broad commitment of American Jewish organizations to building an infrastructure to support Jewish life for adults in their twenties and thirties. See http://www.joshuaventure.org/docs/exec_summary.

[95] Charles Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," in *American Jewish Year Book 71* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society, 1970); also outlined in Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Jewish Publication Society, 1973).

[96] Liebman, "Reconstructionism," 91

compatibility between being a "good Jew" and a "good American," understanding the separation of church and state as "an absolute essential," and working toward "the survival of the state of Israel" even while one does not live there.[97] They were ideas, Liebman argued, that were articulated by most American Jews, even while they were only newly part of a formal (Reconstructionist) ideology.

In identifying the folk religion of American Jews at the time, Liebman also articulated the concept that American Jews had a folk religion. That is, he recognized not only the content of that folk religion, but established the existence of the folk and the elite within American Judaism. In studying the Jewishness of Riverway Project participants, and in focusing on less literate Jewish members of Generation X, this dissertation maintains the presence of a folk population of American Jews and begins to identify the folk religion that they celebrate today. Riverway Project participants are younger adults who, for the most part, were raised without a clear understanding of a Jewish ideology and of why their parents chose a particular Jewish movement (if they did at all), and without engagement in a clear, coherent set of Jewish practices. As adults, they have similarly not yet chosen ideological beliefs or a coherent set of Jewish practices for themselves. Particularly in Chapter Three, I point out how the ideas of Riverway Project participants build on and shift the folk religion that Liebman observed.

In this chapter, we examined not the folk but the elite. In Liebman's understanding, the elite were those who subscribed to a concrete ideology. They were most often leaders and particularly rabbis, those who headed the synagogues that were the primary institutions that carried out movement ideology. They emphasized less the

[97] Liebman, "Reconstructionism," 69. Liebman's article remains an important one in understanding the evolving ideology of American Jews as well as tracking the development of American Judaism. Its suggestions

folk's informal expressions of belonging – the food, clothing, status, and even the pomp and circumstance that accompany life-cycle celebrations – and more the formal rituals that helped them express their ideology.

Here, we establish the current elite less as implementing an institutional ideology and more as those who are developing their own ideology and leading its expressions. More specifically, the elite here are those who have:

- Thought through or are actively thinking through what Judaism means to them, who have some sort of personal ideology;
- Formal leadership positions in any Jewish organizations, not only in synagogues, and sometimes who are creating less mainstream, but just as significant, organizations or expressions of Jewish life;
- Knowledge of other Jews, of Jewish history and traditions, and who have the confidence and motivation to act with their knowledge.

In other words, the elite are those who already have Jewish social capital.

Riverway Project participants and those who are involved in creating the expressions of Jewish life shared here are differentiated by this folk and elite status. Figure 2.1 puts forth a framework to understand these populations, separating them on the vertical axis according to their folk and elite status, their having some kind of Jewish social capital and having little capital, and along the horizontal axis according to their interest in Jewish tradition, in ancient Jewish ideas of covenant/ commandedness, ritual, and liturgy.

Chart 2.2
Typology of Jewish Engagement of Adults in their Twenties and Thirties

| | **Traditional**<br>***Engaged by Jewish tradition*** | **Untraditional**<br>***Moving away from Jewish tradition*** |
|---|---|---|
| **Elite**<br>**Involved in a Jewish community**<br>**High Jewish social capital** | **Elite/ Traditional** | **Elite/ Untraditional** |
| | *Examples:*<br>Hadar<br>Ikar | *Example:*<br>Riverway Project<br>*Heeb Magazine*<br>Jews Against the Occupation |
| | Committed to covenant, ritual, liturgy | Reject traditional/ normative ideas such as peoplehood ("we are one"), and covenant |
| | Members of a synagogue or community; interested in membership | Not formal members but participants in a community (with or without hard boundaries) |
| | Have a sense of the role that Judaism (ethno-religious identity) plays in their lives | Have a sense of the role that Judaism (ethno-religious identity) plays in their lives |
| **Folk**<br>**Not involved in a Jewish community**<br>**Low Jewish social capital** | **Folk/ Traditional** | **Folk/ Untraditional** |
| | *Example:*<br>"High Holiday" Jews, those who belong to a synagogue and attend just once annually | *Example:*<br>No obvious example in American Jewish life. |
| | Participate in communities that abide by covenant, ritual, liturgy though do not personally adhere to these ideas | Reject traditional/ normative ideas such as "peoplehood" ("we are one"), and "covenant" |
| | Members of traditional congregation but uninterested in that congregation | No formal involvement in Jewish life and little awareness of what Jewish resources exist |
| | Little/ no sense of what Judaism means to them personally | Little/ no sense of what Judaism means to them personally |

The top left quadrant, those elite and traditional, refers to those involved in mainstream synagogue life, at places like Temple Beth Shalom (San Francisco) or Central Synagogue (New York). It represents those individuals who began as chairs of young adult committees and extended their involvement to include positions in the synagogue's volunteer structure. It also includes those involved in communities like Ikar

and Hadar, in "emergent communities" with infrastructures independent from synagogues but with more conservative religious values.[98] No matter their location in Generation X, some choose a traditional means of involvement in a community that follows historic Jewish liturgy and ritual and/ or by becoming synagogue leaders in normative American Jewish ways.

There is an additional cohort of individuals in this age group, those interested in a community that is embedded in tradition but who think differently about Jewish ideas. These individuals are captured in the right quadrant. They likely do not want to face High Holiday Appeals or pleas to support the state of Israel, requests for donations made out of obligation to community. They are eager to change liturgy to match their ideals or to shift ritual observance to meet their own needs. They are "elite" but "untraditional" in their interests; they want a Jewish community that does not abide by historic or traditional Jewish ideology or practice, but they do want a Jewish community in which to debate these ideas. Riverway Project participants, after their engagement with the Riverway Project and their development of new habits of mind, their Jewish growth, often fall into this camp.

In the bottom left quadrant are those who do not subscribe to ideas of Jewish tradition but who participate in communities that preach these ideas. There is a joke in the Jewish zeitgeist that describes "the synagogue one does not go to," referring to the idea that many choose to pay membership dues to a synagogue of a certain kind even if they do not personally adhere to the synagogue's ideology. These individuals are captured here.

[98] Cohen, Landres, Kaunfer, and Shain name these independent religious and spiritual communities "emergent communities" in their report, *Emergent Jewish Communities.*

These groups stand in contrast to the folk and untraditional, to those who do not want a Jewish community at all. They feel Jewish but do not know what Judaism means to them, and, for the most part, they do not wonder what Judaism could mean to them. Uninvolved in Jewish community, they have little Jewish social capital. The essence of Jewish community has no salience to them. They likely have little awareness that Jewish resources exist for them and, like their folk peers, have little sense of what Judaism means to them.

This folk/ elite typology begins to make clear the differences between Riverway Project participants – prior to their engagement with the Riverway Project – and those who create the expressions of Jewish life shared here. The traditional/ non-traditional differentiation also captures the distinctions between the Riverway Project, an initiative that opens for conversation traditional Jewish ideas, and other initiatives that take for granted these ideas. The typology also means to establish that the dissertation follows the movement of some members of this population from the bottom two quadrants into the top right, from being members of a folk population to being elite and non-traditional. The typology also makes it clear, most significantly, that the dissertation focuses deeply on members of one cohort of Jewish Generation X.

Like the dissertation, this typology provides initial work in this area. Further research should be done into the engagement of the elite and folk, of the non-traditional and traditional. Research questions can include the following:

- Who chooses a more traditional expression of Jewish life, and who chooses a less traditional expression? What are their motivations?

- Within an individual community like Hadar or even the Riverway Project, how do the elite engage, and how do the folk engage? Who, for example, is sitting in the front of the room, and who is sitting in the back? Who comes early, and who comes late?
- Are there more than four quadrants in this typology? How many individuals fall in each camp?
- What are the different processes across the quadrants?
- Is there a continuum of confidence and knowledge? Once on a journey, can anyone become the Elie Kaunfers and Sarah Leftons of the world? What are the circumstances that enable that becoming?
- And finally, is it possible to exhibit behavior that looks like elite behavior, but still to feel lost, insecure, and without Jewish social capital?

As these and similar questions begin to be explored through additional research about this population, a map of the population will be developed, and the Riverway Project and other initiatives will be contextualized in this larger map. Questions about quantities – about how many others join Riverway Project participants in their attitudes and experiences, about how many choose more typical Jewish communities and how many do not engage at all – will be answered.

Having defined a national context, we move into a discussion of Riverway Project participants' nontraditional ideas about Jewish life and practice. I describe at length their discomfort with core Jewish tenets of chosenness, responsibility, and commandment and their concurrent curiosity about and commitment to Jewish celebration. Most begin their involvement in the Riverway Project having had only paper or no membership in a

Jewish organization, little Jewish social capital, and a weak sense of what Judaism can mean to them. They have in common their desire for a specific kind of Jewish community and an idea that they can fulfill a craving for belonging if they find the right space. Eventually, they make the Riverway Project their own, moving from being without community to establishment in a social network, gaining Jewish social capital through their experiences with the trends outlined here, with community, critical thinking, and ownership.

# CHAPTER THREE

## CELEBRATING TENSION:

## THE CHALLENGE OF MULTIPLE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Anthropologist Lisa Schiffman published her auto-ethnography in 1999, just at the beginning of the renaissance of Generation X Jewishness described in the previous chapter.[1] Its cover displays a visual image of something that Schiffman discusses in her text, a henna tattoo on the back of a woman, a trail of ivy snaking over and down the woman's shoulder. A *magen david*, a Star of David, interrupts the ivy. As she explains, Schiffman had this tattoo painted on her back as part of a ritual in preparation for a friend's wedding. Both she and the friend are Jewish by birth, but the friend had chosen to be married by two witches. Their henna tattoos were part of their preparation for that pagan ceremony.[2] Schiffman's tattoo is incongruous for two reasons, then: because traditional Jewish law forbids tattoos, even with Jewish symbols, and because she and her friend are bucking Jewish tradition with this ceremony, exercising their freedom to

[1] Lisa Schiffman, *Generation J* (New York: Harper SanFrancisco, 1999).
[2] Schiffman, *Generation J*, 161-166

participate in any ethnic or religious tradition whatever their origins, choosing their own rituals.[3]

Schiffman describes this incongruity, comparing it to her attachment to her tradition. "Can something be beautiful and invisible," she asks, "difficult and full of grace?"[4] She describes feeling in exile from Judaism, separated from something that is also inside of her. During her childhood, spent in a predominantly non-Jewish town, she was marginalized and mocked because of her tradition. Her parents gave her few ideas of what Judaism could mean to her. She grew into adulthood with a strong sense of Jewishness but with little knowledge of what Judaism is or of how to engage in Jewish life. Deeply curious about her tradition, she embarked in her twenties on a multi-faceted exploration of her Jewishness.[5] She contemplated *kashrut* [laws ruling food] and dipped into the *mikvah* [ritual bath]. She spoke with rabbis and with religious Jews. At one point, her non-Jewish husband honored her exploration with a gift, a *mezuzah.* She reacted strongly and not totally positively, for some reason not wanting this marker of her Jewishness on their door.

Still, Schiffman looked inside the *mezuzah* for its ritual parchment, wanting the *mezuzah* to be presented to her as tradition would dictate. Her husband explained: he had not purchased a parchment; he thought that they could put a favorite poem inside it, perhaps something by Pablo Neruda or Mary Oliver. Schiffman awkwardly smiled and acknowledged his gift.[6] "Difficult and full of grace" she described it; her tradition is

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[3] Henna tattoos are, in fact, authentic to some *sephardic* (Spanish) Jewish traditions, making Schiffman's act of rebellion also an act of reclaiming. Schiffman, however, framed the tattoo as antithetical to her Jewish tradition, likely understanding the totality of Jewish tradition as being inherited from Eastern European Jews who forbade such tattoos.
[4] Schiffman, *Generation J*, 166
[5] Schiffman, *Generation J*, 1-9
[6] Schiffman, *Generation J*, 146-160

beautiful to her but also challenging. She wants the parchment but does not want the *mezuzah*. Schiffman is typical of some adults her age who want tradition and simultaneously reject it. Around them, peers and loved ones validate and promote other norms, other traditions, sometimes more so than they do Jewish ones.

At the close of her journey, Schiffman describes her Jewishness as being "fluid and fixed at the same time."[7] In this simple description and in the book itself, she establishes her identity as a process of construction, giving a sample map to this construction, a map similar to those in her generation who use any available resources in this process: the wiccan tradition, South American poetry. Schiffman and those in the Riverway Project fit into the same cohort. Not raised in Jewish ghettoes, their parents moved anywhere and enrolled them in all kinds of camps and schools and afternoon programs. They are fully integrated into widely varying social networks, networks that do not use Jewish ideas or values or commemorate Jewish time and space. Like Schiffman, Riverway Project participants absorb the ideas, norms, and sanctions of these non-Jewish social networks, of their more universal connections, and they use them actively in their lives.

As a result, as Schiffman describes in her text and as Riverway Project participants relate, many members of "Generation J" feel uncomfortable in the Jewish social networks that they have encountered previously, out of place in the group to which they ostensibly belong. Schiffman had some courage, but many Riverway Project participants had stopped exploring Jewish communities, feeling lost when they attempt such exploration, uncomfortable "in their Jewish skin," as one Riverway Project participant described it. As other Riverway Project participants explain, opportunities to

[7] Schiffman, *Generation J*, 166

immerse themselves in Jewish social networks and to learn the Jewish norms of these networks fade when their anxiety and uneasiness become part of a Catch-22: their lack of Jewish social capital makes them uncomfortable in Jewish community, but they cannot join Jewish social networks and develop such capital because they feel rejected and lost whenever they try. This, as discussed, creates a critical question: How do initiatives like the Riverway Project break this cycle?

Because, also like Schiffman, and despite these patterns that result in alienation, participants feel visceral connections to Judaism and crave involvement in Jewish life. Their goal, specifically, is to feel comfortable in any Jewish setting. This involves not only their developing Jewish social capital by participating in a Jewish social network but also their determining how to integrate the values of their various social networks, their universal loyalties and their particular commitments. They call this finding an "authentic" Jewish connection, an identity as a Jew that honors all of their values as shaped by all of their social networks. For Schiffman and for Riverway Project participants, such an authentic celebration merges their different identities – as Schiffman does when she ultimately places into the *mezuzah* on her door both the traditional Jewish text and her wedding vows, or as Schiffman does when she paints her body for a wiccan ceremony but with a Star of David.

This chapter explores these seemingly conflicting trends, describing participants' discomfort in Jewish communities, the pressure that they feel from peers and other social networks not to be overtly Jewish, and how their ideas from other social networks blend with their Jewishness to make their Jewish celebration distinct. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates participants' self-imposed mandate to integrate the values of their various

social networks with the values of their desired Jewish social network. As I describe, their "authentic" Jewish celebration, their Jewish community, must also incorporate and celebrate multiculturalism, and their Jewish dialogue must have room to criticize Jewish community without restraint. Then, they will feel, as they desire, "observant," or able to celebrate their Jewishness in a way that is meaningful for them.

I begin the chapter by describing participants' Jewish experiences in childhood, illustrating that their lack of exposure to Jewish life during their formative years sets the stage for their later discomfort in Jewish community. That is, because they have had little exposure to Jewish communities and few experiences with Jewish learning, they lack Jewish social capital in adulthood, the familiarity with or literacy in Jewish communal norms and sanctions that is necessary to participate comfortably in Jewish communities. I describe how participants feel because of their lack of literacy and how their lack of Jewish social capital cuts participants off from Jewish communal celebration. In relating participants' transition to adulthood, I describe their experimentation with different Jewish communities and how their lack of Jewish social capital begins to impact their potential Jewish involvement as they explore adult participation in Jewish life. I also examine what compels participants to Judaism at all, despite the difficulties that they face in Jewish involvement, and I look at participants' current expressions of Jewishness, describing the pressure that they feel from their other social networks when they express their Jewish commitment.

As I demonstrate, participants find ways to engage in Jewish practice and ideas and to integrate their different values and choices into a clear celebration of Judaism. They come to seek, as I discuss at the close of the chapter, something called Jewish

"observance," and being comfortable in their "Jewish skin," as well as their concept of authenticity, the idea that their Jewish celebration must acknowledge the tensions among their social networks and feel genuine, recognizing and uniting all of their forms of social capital.

This chapter focuses on the participants' life experiences and their ideas, and so the data in this chapter stems almost completely from my interviews with them. I primarily share their ideas by relating the life stories of specific participants, stories that are illustrative of the experiences of others. The lives of real participants, those whom I call Charlie, Katie, Ben, Carin, Noah, among others, give the various themes of the chapter depth and nuance, introducing each theme and creating a foundation for their peers' additional comments.

### ABSENT: CHILDHOOD PREPARATION FOR JEWISH ADULTHOOD

Not a majority, but some Riverway Project participants have children. During prayer services, their babies sit in car seats at their feet or their toddlers squirm in their laps or crawl or run down the hallways and aisles of the Temple's sanctuary. The children are learning the norms of a Jewish community from toddlerhood on, absorbing the rhythms of Jewish time, the rules that govern interactions in Jewish community, and the traditions of Jewish life.

Most Riverway Project participants did not have these experiences themselves as children. Few were prepared during their childhoods to join Jewish social networks comfortably as adults. An exploration of participants' current relationship with Jewishness and Jewish community, then, begins with the ideas about Jewish communal

engagement learned in their childhoods, ideas that actually turned them away from Jewish community. Here, I suggest that the parents of many Riverway Project participants consciously or unconsciously taught participants that Jewish celebration and community are unimportant, even while they occasionally made Jewish connections as families. Additionally, my research demonstrates that their uninspiring Jewish education, which went unused or reinforced at home, sent them into adulthood with neither the skills nor the passion necessary to connect as adults to different Jewish communities. I also share the stories of some participants who felt as children awkward or unnerved in Jewish community, who learned that Jewish communities have a code of behavior with which they were not familiar. Cumulatively, my data shows that most participants did not develop as children literacy in the ideas, norms, and sanctions of Jewish communities. Later in the chapter, I show that it is this childhood deficit that has been significant in preventing many adults in their twenties and thirties from gaining the capacity to participate in Jewish communities later in life.

### *Jordana: "Unpredictability and Unimportance"*

Participants described family celebrations of Jewish holidays as full of joy; they mentioned participation in Jewish education and in synagogue life. Yet, they also made it clear that Judaism had limited importance to their families.

Jordana perhaps best captured this dual message of celebration without strong import when she described how often her family would go to synagogue for prayer services:

> They'd drop in, we'd go to *shul* for a *yartzheit* (anniversary of death), we'd go say *Kaddish* (the prayer for the dead), my *bat mitzvah*, you know, people's *bat*

> *mitzvahs* and marriages. Nothing that you could say had committed written all over it. You know – more convenient, or like, necessity….

Similarly, Mark went to a "big suburban synagogue" and went to Sunday School and Hebrew School, but, in his words, "My parents didn't care very much so I didn't care very much." I asked him how he knew that his parents did not care. "Cause they never went," he responded. He continued, "Other than dropping us off for Hebrew school, and High Holidays, where we showed up late and sat in the back, they were never there." Mark, Jordana, and many with similar backgrounds felt that their parents chose their synagogues "passively," joining the communities that seemed the least demanding or were geographically closest. Judaism occurred for these families out of convenience or necessity, from not a passionate connection but a minimal one. Families engaged in many Jewish behaviors but they did so without lasting or deep attachment to these behaviors. Their inconsistencies created the contradictory message that they gave to their children about Judaism: it should be part of their lives in some way, but without great significance or implications.

Children also received inconsistent messages about Judaism when their families' ritual observance shifted over time. Their parents dropped their synagogue memberships after their children celebrated their *bar* or *bat mitzvahs* and sometimes stopped holiday participation in the home at this point as well. In many families, the Passover *Seder* "became much shorter and shorter and shorter" over time; one participant described his *Seder* as more "important and elaborate" when he was younger, attaching its complexity to the importance of the ritual. Another participant commented similarly: "As a child we lit candles every Friday with my family, and that stopped as I got older." As he continued, he outwardly observed the incongruity in his parents' behavior:

> I think there's a point where your parents sort of contradict themselves. Like, they wanted it so badly for you and they wanted you to be raised with it but once you were raised, that was it.

Children were finished being "raised" at the celebration of their *bar* or *bat mitzvah,* at the beginning of high school. In this change in behavior, parents again indicated to children that they may never have cared genuinely about Jewish observance, that Judaism is part of their lives but is also secondary, tedious, and not worth continuing for its own sake. Whatever positive messages parents tried to deliver through holiday celebrations or Jewish education were mitigated by their shifting behavior. Participants heard and remembered these mixed messages the most clearly of any ideas about Judaism that parents tried to convey. As Dena captured it, she and many others learned that "you value it and you don't at the same time."

Families reinforced these messages with their lifestyle choices that rarely prioritized Jewish involvement or community. Divorce impacted a few participants' families, and it often led to participants' parents' remarriage to non-Jews.[8] Participants' parents, mainly professionals, followed their careers to towns nearby or across the country, ultimately locating their families in newly emerging suburbs. They found and utilized what Jewish resources existed but, often, few did. No family based their mobility decisions on a concern to stay near to a vibrant Jewish life.[9] In their actions, they suggested that Judaism does not merit being a factor in significant life decisions.

As a result of their parents' choices, Jordana and her peers left their childhoods unsure about their place in the Jewish world, with Judaism a part of their identities but

[8] After a divorce, individuals are twice as likely to marry a non-Jew as they were before their first marriage. Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 102.
[9] They are not unusual. Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein illustrate the extent to which mobility impacts the vitality of Jewish cites in *Jews on the Move: Implications for Jewish Identity* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

not an active or essential part. Of Jewish life, they know only participation without conviction in anonymous High Holiday services at the nearest synagogue. As adults, they lack an understanding of a paradigm of consistent involvement in Jewish community. Having spent little time in Jewish social networks and had little practice interacting within Jewish community, they also lack comfort in community, in Jewish social networks. They are ill prepared and motivated to become involved in such networks.

### *Noah: Left Wanting More from Jewish Education*

Messages of Judaism's relative importance were seconded by participants' little exposure to vibrant Jewish education. Less than one-third of Riverway Project participants engaged in Jewish youth groups or were sent to Jewish residential or even day camps as children. About 80% of participants experienced their primary encounter with Jewish education in part-time Jewish school, learning generally about Judaism on Sunday mornings and studying Hebrew during the week. Some were enrolled in school only for three or four years, just long enough to prepare for their *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. Others participated in Jewish school from their elementary years through high school. In all of these situations, however many years they had and whatever they studied, most found their experience frustrating, trivial, and even lonely.

Noah was enrolled in his large Reform synagogue's school for ten years. He described his experience as meandering and inconsequential:

> We went to Sunday school at Temple every Sunday, kindergarten through confirmation in tenth grade, and seriously, I feel like I could distill the valuable parts of it to three Sundays – it was not meaningful, and I don't know if it was the school's fault – part of it I guess was the congregation, the people in the congregation's fault, cause they didn't want any discipline… and part of it has to do with the curriculum … so it's hard to look back and remember what I would

> have been interested in or ready to tackle at that age, but certainly more than we did. We never really moved beyond the stories you learn as a first grader about all these holidays, we never looked at any of the text or questioned anything, we didn't learn any history at all except myth. So that was a total turnoff.

Noah remembers the experience as minimal, as offering little by way of education. Students did not learn very much, in part because the "congregation" would not discipline students seriously and in part because the curriculum had only modest expectations of the students' interest in or capacity for studying subjects of consequence. In total, the school did not demand very much of students, neither appropriate behavior nor knowledge. It trivialized Jewish learning, and Noah laments this. He was ready to learn.

Other participants echoed Noah's ideas about wanting more from the experience, about enjoying "goofing off" but recognizing that this was a waste of time. They wanted this experience to be more than just "big and anonymous," to be "brought into the process" and to be challenged by their lessons. They wanted a deeper intellectual experience than what they were offered. Many were additionally disappointed by their peers. They found other students to be materialistic and frivolous. One student was saddened that "to be cool you kind of shunned" what you were learning. Without a supportive peer community, participants could not find motivation and ability to take their studies seriously. Most participants chose being cool over being a *Talmud hacham*, a scholar. Significantly, later, they resented having to make such a choice.

Although a majority of participants were enrolled in Jewish education for many years, with most of those who had Jewish education beginning in the first or second grade and some continuing through high school, its mediocrity and disincentives to learn combined to result in their remembering little from this experience. Participants' lack of a substantive education becomes clear as they now stumble looking for words like "*tallit*"

[prayer shawl] and "*Havdalah*" [a ritual ceremony concluding the Sabbath]. Noah demonstrated other aspects of his paltry Jewish education when he commented, "I don't know anything about the Six Day War other than that it happened." Others, too, mentioned knowing about the existence of certain prayers or holidays but not understanding them in a deep way. The vast majority of participants did not use what they learned outside of the classroom, and so they absorbed a general awareness about but not the specific details of Jewish history and tradition. As adults, they have come to know about Judaism primarily through an ongoing absorption of what seems to be Jewish street knowledge, gathered from conversations or the media or culture: they know *babka* [coffee cake] from *Seinfeld* and *payot* [ear locks] from *Annie Hall,* and they learn about Israel by watching CNN.[10] This street knowledge, hazy and haphazard, replaces their vague memories of their childhood education to become the substance of their knowledge about Judaism. It will help them through casual dinner table jokes or conversation, but will not facilitate their participation in synagogue life or in Jewish study.

### *Katie: Jewish Community as an Uncomfortable Social Network*

With a weak understanding of Jewish history and customs and of how to connect to contemporary Jewish life, many participants have seen materialism as a primary characteristic of Jewish life. For example, Katie "loved" her few years of Jewish education and felt strongly Jewish as a child. But she remembers materialism as having a primary influence on much of her peers' celebration of Judaism. On *Hanukah*:

[10] In the 77th episode of the NBC sitcom *Seinfeld* (aired February 3, 1994), Jerry and Elaine stop in a bakery to buy a chocolate *babka*; in *Annie Hall* (1977, Directed by Woody Allen. United Artists), Albie envisions Grammy Hall seeing himself as an orthodox Jew, wearing *payot* and a black hat.

> Every one of my classmates, friends, whatever … that were Jewish would get these massive gifts every night … and we couldn't afford it. I would get a pencil set, and my friend would get a sapphire ring. And I would get a sticker album and my friend would get a trip to Florida. And I think my mom was just like – this holiday, you know, it feels *bad*. It just doesn't feel right, you know.

Foremost, *Hanukah* for Katie was not a connection to history or laughter with family over a game of *dreydel* [a spinning top] but instead was a time of shame and jealousy. Similarly, Katie's passion for learning about Judaism, discovered in preparation for her *bat mitzvah*, was mitigated by her dejection over her *bat mitzvah* celebration:

> I loved learning, I loved it. I loved every minute of it. But … in Long Island there was so much competition for how big your party was and how much it cost and how good the food was and how many clowns you had and whatever it was, so that part I remember being hard for my family, feeling a little bit like, why does this have to be … a disconnect between the spiritual aspect of what you're doing and then having this stress over this party.

Katie learned formally about Judaism during her *bat mitzvah* preparation, but she also learned informally a connection between Jewish celebration and avarice. She developed an expectation that would-be spiritual experiences were only lead-ins to more materialistic or even covetous goals, and she experienced anxiety over the pressure that normative Jewish practices might put on her family. The community's emphasis on "stuff" and her family's inability to compete financially made this and other potentially treasured moments dreaded and even damaging.

Katie watched her mother undergo additional pressures from her Jewish community. As the only divorcée in the congregation, her mother "felt like a pariah." By extension, Katie and her sister identified with their mother and also "felt kind of like pariahs." Katie continued:

> She felt funny about [being divorced], she also never felt a hundred percent confident in her Judaism, just felt like maybe she wasn't Jewish really … so we would go to Temple and we never really made friends at the Temple.

Ultimately, Temple became a place where Katie and her family felt "really outside of the mainstream," where there was a "code" with which they were not familiar and so could not follow. Watching her family undergo this pressure and experiencing this lack of belonging herself impacted her budding relationship with Jewish life.

Katie is not alone among Riverway Project participants in her feelings of incompatibility. Jordana suggested about her childhood Jewish community, "People had too much money for their own good." She shared her *bat mitzvah* with "a girl that was like a Barbie doll on her *bat mitzvah* day," her hair, dress, and makeup perfect. Jordana agreed with Katie that the emphasis on appearances prevented the event from being truly meaningful. Similarly, Tracy felt shamed and rejected because of her inability to compete financially. Only one of three students in her "religious school that didn't go to private school," she was "treated like an outsider." She always felt "not good enough," as she "didn't have money, didn't have the right clothes." These participants and others retained this connection between Judaism and materialism into their adulthood. As adults, their memories are palpable, almost emotional baggage related to their Jewishness. They rejoin Jewish community hesitantly, suspect that that they will find a community that accepts them for who they are and reluctant to support a community that focuses so heavily on wealth. To them, Jewish community involves unknown or distasteful values that they do not share and that are part of an uncomfortable social network.

### *Charlie: A Complete and Meaningful Jewish Childhood*

A few Riverway Project participants were raised comfortably in Jewish social networks. These participants demonstrate that time spent in such networks does make a difference in their subsequent comfort in Jewish community as adults.

Charlie, for example, learned well during his childhood that Judaism and Jewish community are an integral part of his identity. Raised in a tight-knit family of four, his parents spoke often of Judaism to him and emphasized Jewish ritual in their home. They echoed this message by becoming involved in the vital Reform synagogue community in their town and enrolling Charlie and his sister in Hebrew and Sunday school for ten years. The family also participated in junior congregation on Saturdays; Charlie remembers his Saturdays there fondly. He reminisced, “At Temple we had these solid pains of stained glass, very non-figurative – those were some of my earliest memories of Saturday afternoon.” These memories of synagogue life have “just sort of always been there” for Charlie, part of his fundamental sense of himself.

Also particularly seminal among Charlie’s formative Jewish experiences was his time in his high school Jewish youth group. At the end of eighth grade, most of his peers in the congregation – and they “were not social outcasts… they were cool people” – became involved in the youth group and were led by a dynamic, interesting youth director. Charlie readily joined them. “Who doesn’t like coed sleepovers when you’re seventeen,” he joked. But in describing those years, he also spoke of a spiritual experience involving song and an intellectual experience involving peer-led discussions of engaging topics. He acknowledged, “High school’s a time when you can start to drift out of that orbit,” out of Judaism. “You’re more free from your parents … so having a

more independent outlet for that is a great way to sort of stay in during a fairly critical phase."

Indeed, for Charlie, these flexible but meaningful experiences enabled him to maintain an ongoing connection to Judaism during high school. It also helped him become interested in more relaxed, intimate prayer services and in discussions about Judaism with peers. Ultimately, his youth group experience prepared and motivated him to participate in something like the Riverway Project, which he sees as a similar opportunity to engage with peers in study and casual worship. He sought out the Riverway Project because it helped him connect to a vital part of himself, to his sense of himself as a Jew, and because he was comfortable with its informal prayer environment. As a child, he had heard from his parents and learned from his educational experiences that he should see Judaism as a fundamental part of himself. He exercises that message as an adult by finding a Jewish social network in which to involve himself, one parallel to that in which he was raised. To participate in the Riverway Project, he exercises the Jewish social capital, including knowledge and confidence, that he developed during his childhood.

Charlie's peers with similar positive and substantial backgrounds echoed his sentiments. In others' words, they appreciated the "community aspect" of youth group and summer camp and that these communities were "intentional," deliberately constructed, in their celebrations of Judaism. Also like Charlie, their experiences with Jewish education immersed them in Judaism and taught them that Judaism is an important part of their conceptions of themselves. Their childhood messages were consistent, their parents always affirming to participants that Judaism is important and

their educational experiences repeating this message again and again. Notably, as adults, those with this collection of formative Jewish experiences are more comfortable with more Jewish rituals and settings than their uneducated peers. They know more and are more at ease studying Jewish texts and participating in Jewish life. As children, they developed unfailing senses of themselves as Jews and became motivated and prepared to connect themselves to Jewish communities throughout their lives.

### *Implications: Lost as Adult Jews*

Three factors, then, combine to create circumstances for participants that ill prepare them for comfortable involvement in Jewish community as adults: their lack of immersion in communities as children, their weak Jewish educations and low childhood participation in Jewish activities, and their feeling of incompatibility with the Jewish communities that they knew as children. These circumstances unite so that more often than not, participants are lost during conversations about or celebrations of Judaism. They do not know the traditions being observed; they hear mumbled words and see only randomness to a congregation's standing or sitting or bowing. They also know few of the less formal (but equally ritualized) means of belonging to communities that Jews exhibit, the melodies to traditional *Shabbat* dinner songs or the hand motions of a Reform movement summer camp *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals). The well-connected Jew in her early twenties is familiar with the web that exists of schools, camps, Israel programs, and synagogues and knows others from these Jewish institutions (something like, If I do not know the traditions of Boston's "New Jew,"[11] at least I know people who went there). Most

[11] Boston's Gann Jewish Academy, called the New Jewish High School and in the vernacular "New Jew" until it was named after the Gann family several years into its existence.

Riverway Project participants, though, do not have the capacity to play Jewish geography[12] at length and so in a room full of Jewish strangers, cannot assume that they will have an acquaintance in common with someone in the room. The world of American Judaism has and continues to feel to participants overly comprised of traditions developed in countless Jewish settings that reveal one to be a member well integrated into a Jewish social group, an alumnus of a school or camp or experience, a member of a *minyan* or community. Rather than present a place of acceptance, rooms filled with *kipot* [skullcaps] and complicated Hebrew songs remind participants that they are profound outsiders to a community to which they technically belong.

Such knowledge of norms or of people comprises Jewish social capital, or the opportunity, knowledge, and confidence to move easily in and out of various Jewish communities and to develop new connections to Jewish communities. In turn, lack of this capital prevents one from entrée into any community. Without knowledge of Jewish life gathered during childhood, without confidence developed in adolescent Jewish social networks, most Riverway Project participants lack such capital. They are lost in Jewish communities as adults.

Participants name this feeling of profound discomfort. Carin called it being "uncomfortable in my Jewish skin"; others agreed with this apt description for the gut feeling of intimidation that they feel when they see rooms of *kipot*. They continuously feel essentially "unlearned," in another participant's words, as though "there's all this

[12] Games of "Jewish geography" mimic Stanley Milgram's "six degrees of separation" experiment in which he determined how many individuals might separate any two people from knowing each other. In Jewish communities, the goal often seems to be one degree of separation; that is, an individual often runs through the experiences of another to find someone whom she knows with whom the other person went to camp, or school, or Israel. She can do this because she knows people who participated in the small variety of camps, youth groups, and Israel trips in which many committed American Jews participate.

knowledge that you're missing." Until they "have it," they will always feel "outside of something." Being comfortable in their Jewish skin is to be comfortable enough in any Jewish setting to understand much of what is going on and to ask questions about what they do not understand. Until they develop that comfort level, they are attached to their identity but unsure how to exercise it, and they feel acutely a deficit in their Jewish competency.

## Transition to Adulthood

Many Riverway Project participants still feel a strong connection to their Jewishness, even without active involvement in a community and despite these feelings of rejection and confusion. Here, I relate the three primary forces that urge them toward an exploration of Judaism and Jewish community: 1) their family narrative and history, 2) their experiences of being marginalized for their Jewishness, and 3) their essential feelings of identity. I then describe a period of transition in participants' lives as they come free from the implications of their parents' decisions during their late teens and twenties and begin for themselves to accumulate Jewish social capital as I review their interactions with Jewish community. This description of their transition prepares us to understand their current expressions of Jewishness, shared in the next section.

### *Explaining Their Attachment to Judaism*

Despite the challenges they faced as children in relating to Jewish community, a variety of factors compel participants to Jewish commitment, factors that primarily relate to essential aspects of their identity and to organic experiences they had as youth. These

factors include specifically a deep connection to an inherently Jewish family narrative, childhood experiences with their minority status, and a vital feeling of Jewishness that transcends (or at least competes equally with) participants' other identities.

### Ben: Family Narrative

Born in Bombay to Iraqi immigrants, Ben's mother spent her childhood in London. "Thinking about that," Ben explained:

> They went from Spain to Baghdad to Bombay, and realizing, here's this family that moved all around, they probably could have assimilated at any point if they'd wanted to but they didn't. … I think I always felt that as a powerful symbol.

Ben's grandparents died before he was born, but the stories he heard of his mother's childhood impressed him. As he recalls, rather than convert or assimilate, his family chose to remain Jewish and to move from place to place, always leaving material goods behind them and starting their lives anew. Their continual choice motivates his Jewish connection.

Similarly, almost one-quarter of participants interviewed mentioned that they have grandparents who immigrated to America. Holocaust narratives were more frequent than *mizrahi* [eastern] narratives like Ben's, with grandparents or parents having escaped Europe just prior to World War II or during the war. In some cases, participants' parents and grandparents had close friendships with survivors; in one case, a participant's grandparent liberated a concentration camp. As a result, some participants feel a direct connection between the experience of their grandparents and their sense of Jewishness. Hannah had returned from Germany just before our interview. Her grandparents' experience was immediately on her mind. She commented:

> To me being Jewish is about history, it's about continuity, it's about lineage, and it's important for me to make that connection. … I have this incredibly strong Jewish identity and I always felt it was important to raise my children Jewish and I can articulate why and it's related to my grandparents' history – there was a way that being there just reconfirmed that fact.

Her Jewish experience has always been driven by her personal mandate to unite her experience with her grandparents; her trip to Germany revived and affirmed that goal. Similarly, Allison said about her grandparents' story, "I remember [from childhood] the feeling of wanting to know more, my curiosity and interest in sort of knowing … what they went through." Throughout her life, she has been driven to study Judaism in order to understand what happened to her grandparents and driven to engage in Jewish life in order to have an experience that her grandparents were denied in their lifetimes.

Also like Ben, other participants are struck and inspired by the challenge of immigration to America that their grandparents experienced. Elana commented:

> The tenor of my grandmother's life story is not at all how hard life was, how sad or tragic it was. It was how lucky I am, what a land of opportunity this is, and sort of the classic American dream come true kind of tale. And I think that that is interesting because you know, they lost their parents, they lost a lot of family, they came not speaking the language … and my grandmother was studying to be a pharmacist, and became a secretary, and my grandfather had a degree in political science and ended up opening a small business on the Lower East Side. I mean, it literally is like *Crossing Delancey* (laughs).

Participants are in awe of and deeply connected to what their grandparents accomplished, and as the impetus for their grandparents' immigration, participants understand that Judaism is intertwined with these accomplishments. As with Ben, families' complex Jewish pasts are close to participants' hearts and to their connections to Judaism, often defining and motivating these connections, pulling them toward Judaism even while other life experiences push them away.

## Charlie: Marginalization

Charlie's parents were raised in the suburbs of Boston and began their life as a couple there. Soon into their marriage, Charlie's father was transferred to a medium-sized New England city with a small Jewish community. Despite his feeling of being enmeshed in that community, Charlie had few Jewish friends outside of the synagogue; in his words, he always "stood a good chance of being the only Jew" in his class. Like other participants, his feeling of being a minority solidified his identity as it forced him to account for himself and his differences again and again. He, for example, "got plenty of experience explaining Hanukah" and learned about his tradition as he explained it to others.

He also remembers specific opportunities during which he tried to make a situation more inclusive of multiple traditions. He spoke of a teacher using BC and AD to refer to time periods before and after the birth of Jesus; Charlie tried to encourage the teacher to use instead BCE ("Before the Common Era") and CE ("Common Era"), corresponding terms that describe time without invoking the birth of Jesus. Charlie recalls that the teacher said caustically in response to him, "I think you're making the common error." Charlie acknowledged the interaction, not finishing his sentence, "Yeah, when you're in fifth grade it sort of goes over your head but in retrospect…" It seemed as though the interaction stayed with him. Similarly, a holiday play one winter focused on Christmas around the world, and Charlie asked the teacher if the students could wish the audience a "happy holiday" rather than a "Merry Christmas." The teacher temporarily followed Charlie's request but returned the chorus to the original words at the dress

rehearsal. She explained to Charlie, “Since Hanukah’s over now and there aren’t really many Jewish kids anyway, we thought we’d do this.” He remembered:

> It is one of those things that your parents have a conversation with the teacher and the teacher gets all defensive – my best friends are Jewish, I’ve been to a *bar mitzvah*, you know, blah blah blah. And then for a few years afterwards she told everyone else that was in it that if you don’t want to be in it now, just say that now and don’t ruin it for everyone like the little boy from a few years ago.

Charlie was “very hurt” at the time – although he acknowledged with a smile that he enjoyed the notoriety – but he and his parents chose for him to participate in the play so as not to “diminish the portrayal of Hanukah at all.” He explained, “When there’s nothing else you can do, the idea was just go in there and represent what you can.” Now, like the interaction about using BCE and CE, this story seems like just “an amusing anecdote.” Yet, when describing his childhood, each of these events came to mind without prompting. Being a minority seems to have had a marked impact on Charlie’s formative years, helping him to understand that he is different from those around him, giving him practice at arguing for his convictions, and helping him to be invested in that argument, in defending Judaism.

Charlie was not alone in these experiences or in his reaction to them. About one-quarter of those whom I interviewed spoke of feelings of being a minority and described these experiences as formative. As the sole Jews at summer camps or in their private schools, participants learned that being Jewish was special and an integral part of their self-conception. One participant had several experiences as a child where she was one of few Jews. As a result, she realized early in her life that having other Jews around her at times is important to her. She explained, “I feel like that’s something that makes me more

likely to do Jewish things." She wants to be understood by those around her, so in any environment, she seeks out a small Jewish community for herself.

Additionally, acts of anti-Semitism – having bagels or pennies thrown at them – were deeply moving to participants. They pushed participants to feel more Jewish and to want to know what it means to be a Jew. Tracy suggested, "I'm being singled out as a Jew, and I don't even affiliate as a Jew. … People are making assessments and judgments about me, but I don't even know what it means to be Jewish." For some participants, witnessing the remnants of anti-Semitic acts similarly pushed them into wanting to know more about Judaism, to feel more strongly Jewish. In Spain during a semester abroad from college, Mark went to synagogue on *Yom Kippur* and found "Holocaust" spray-painted on the wall. To enter the synagogue, congregants asked for his passport; after the service, congregants asked him and some friends not to gather in front of the synagogue, thereby drawing attention to themselves. Mark had a "huge feeling of pride" during the service, gratified that some had tried to destroy his people but that he was still there. He explained, "It was just a very fascinating thing here to not take my Judaism for granted which I had fully done in the U.S. and that's sort of when I started having a Jewish rebirth." Another participant suggested that even in the late twentieth century, "the first thing Jews learn is that people want to kill Jews." She was taught that idea in a college class on multiculturalism and its truth resonated with her, evolving into a "combination of pride and fear." Her pride and fear capture the similar feelings of her peers. While the segregation that earlier generations faced has dissipated, for some, anti-Semitism and feelings of being marginalized still serve as potent influences on Jewishness, instilling pride in identity even while they invite concern.

## Harleigh: Essential Identity

Finally, and most essentially, participants simply define themselves as Jews. It is an elemental part of their self-conception that they will not dismiss, an "identity piece," in one participant's words. Carrie explained, "It's who I am. It's shaped me. Ethnicity." For some, even with few Jewish experiences in their lives, Judaism is an indispensable and almost incomprehensible part of them.

Many participants discovered their vital sense of themselves as Jews when they began to study Judaism. In turn, they have come to enjoy Jewish study because they find it to be self-exploration, a pathway into understanding a part of themselves. Harleigh exclaimed passionately:

> I feel like … when I was learning about Judaism, and learning about rituals and learning about history, I felt like I was learning about me. And it was very, very exciting, cause it's such a neat combination of history and philosophy and literature and, you know, digging at words and metaphors and language and me!

In this reflection, Harleigh grew more excited as she spoke, ultimately emphasizing her last word, underscoring that she learns about her own self when she learns about Judaism. In this phase of self-exploration in one's twenties, learning about Judaism has become an important opportunity to understand herself. With the same energy, Katie agreed. Through the Riverway Project, learning has become a fundamental way that she expresses her sense of Jewishness. She cannot believe that she has gone her entire life without learning this "fascinating" material about an aspect of herself:

> I'm like, how did I miss this, for thirty-five years. … It's about my heritage; it's about who I am. … How could I not know this!

The role that study plays in their soul-searching is just an example of the relationship between Judaism and participants' sense of themselves. For participants, Judaism is an inherent part of themselves that they value, an accident of birth, arbitrary and fortuitous, but important and unable to be ignored. Despite the challenges in joining a Jewish community, then, participants are compelled into new Jewish social networks to pursue an exploration of their identities.

### *College: Finding an Accessible Jewish Network*

For most participants, college offered opportunity for that exploration. Jewish resources abounded in the form of Hillel and Jewish studies classes, and their parents did not dictate their choices. Still, often, participants again found primarily frustration and feelings of rejection at the end of their searching. Opportunities constructed around Jewish celebration or learning required prior knowledge or experience with the activities and often attracted those with plentiful Jewish social capital who intimidated participants. Ultimately, participants could develop some Jewish social capital in college, but also had further experiences of being out of place and isolated.

At her Ivy League school, Katie tried to participate in a "Hillel group" but "felt totally like an outsider." The community was populated by those who knew Friday night rituals but who did not explain them to others. Katie explained, "I didn't have enough of that in my background to feel like I belonged there, and so I never went back." Others echoed these ideas. Tracy commented:

> I'd go to Friday night services, and everybody would be singing and I wouldn't know what [the songs] were, or they'd be washing their hands

> and nobody would be talking. I didn't know why they're not talking to me.[13]

Dena equally felt that "kids seemed a lot more Jewish" than she did. They seemed to all be from day school, or to have been to Jewish summer camp. "It was frustrating," she noted, "because I really wanted to be part of it." But the alienating environment prevented her and others from ever finding a home at Hillel or in a religious community. Their lack of Jewish social capital would not let them into Jewish community. In turn, they could not learn certain Jewish behaviors because they were shut out of the community that could become their classroom.

Resourceful and committed to Jewish exploration, a few participants found other ways into Jewish life. They had friends with greater Jewish literacy who created new Jewish projects on campus, and participants joined them in a *klezmer* band, a Passover *Seder*, and a Friday night prayer service in their off-campus living rooms. Their friends had the knowledge and confidence to make these projects happen, and participants joined the projects, sometimes even as co-planners, although they did not initiate the projects and could not lead them independently.

Some participants found connections to Judaism in their Jewish studies departments or in relationships with Jewish professors. A well-taught class on Jewish mysticism or literature of the Holocaust led to a new scholarly commitment to Judaism and an ongoing intellectual interest on the part of the student. Still, entering these classes took courage. Dena began to study Judaism through her own department, history, rather than enrolling in Jewish Studies classes:

[13] Tracy is describing a tradition that takes place in between two rituals, the washing of the hands and the breaking of the bread. According to custom, by becoming silent after one washes one's hands and before one says the blessing over the bread, one links the two rituals, making them each part of the other.

> I never would have even shopped a Judaic Studies class first semester [of college]. I would have been too intimidated. It was hard for me to convince myself that I could take a Jewish history class cause I already felt like – there were a couple kids with *yarmulkes* [skull caps] in the class, and some of the readings would have Hebrew and also German and Yiddish… .

As a result, she was intimidated even by the history class and afraid that her lack of Jewish knowledge would prevent her success in the class:

> I signed up for the class pass/fail, and said to myself this is just for my own education, it's not to do well, and you know, I was doing well, and I actually became convinced that I could do this, even though I knew so little, so that was kind of empowering, and that enabled me to take a few more classes… .

Studying Judaism formally became a natural way into certain kinds of Jewish knowledge for Dena. Subsequently, it also allowed her confidence in her Jewishness to grow. She never felt comfortable enough to go back to Hillel for religious services or other opportunities, but part of her sense of herself as a Jew changed because of her positive academic experience. Essentially, she began to develop Jewish social capital: knowledge and confidence.

For a few others, Jewish fraternities and sororities became ways to become immersed in Jewish communities that had fewer membership requirements than Hillel seemed to have. Lauren explained, "Hillel wasn't the comfortable place for me – people who were involved kind of were more religious." Her Jewish sorority was, conversely, completely comfortable, offering her the chance to plan Jewish events when she wanted and even honoring her with a young Jewish leader award. For a few, these communities continued past college, becoming Jewish families, groups with whom participants could spend Jewish holidays, even after college ended.

Participants' college Jewish experiences, then, both were painful and also were the beginnings of successful integration into Jewish networks, with the same people often having both experiences. Some Riverway Project participants began to learn various communal norms and to have a few Jewish friends who, after college, would continue to introduce them to Jewish ideas and act as Jewish family. At the same time, for many, their experience of being shut out from actively religious Jewish social networks would be their dominant Jewish memory of college. That is, while their sense of themselves as Jews grew in college, their sense of alienation grew as well, and it would take many more positive experiences with Jewish social networks for them to be comfortable "in [their] Jewish skin."

### *The "Quarter-Life Crisis": Liminality and Little Jewish Infrastructure*[14]

Participants did not prioritize Jewish exploration during their twenties, experimenting instead with professional and personal issues of identity.[15] At the same time, participants' Jewish feelings did not disappear in their twenties; in fact, some had serendipitous but profound or transformative Jewish experiences during this time, building social capital but, again, hesitant to enter wholeheartedly into Jewish life.

Carin opened our conversation by explaining that she had always felt deeply Jewish. Her childhood included major and minor holiday celebrations, *Shabbat* dinners, and a day school education. Carin remembers, in her words, understanding Judaism at seventeen as "a very strong part of how I looked at myself."

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[14] The confusion of one's twenties was documented by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* (New York: Penguin/ Putnam, 2001).

[15] As presented in the Introduction, adults in their twenties resolve questions of professional and sexual identity before those of ideological or religious identity. They explore questions like: What should my job be? Where should I live? How should I spend my time?

In college, she moved in and out of Jewish life. She explained, "People who were really involved" in the Hillel "were very observant… and it was sort of like you were in or you were out. And I, very much, was out." She never became "very involved" or felt at home at Hillel. Still, she put that aside to participate in prayer services and to work with close friends on a new initiative called the Jewish Women's Connection, which Carin directed her junior year. She deliberately sought out Jewish activities, no matter how uncomfortable she was in the community in which she was participating.

But after college, Carin spent the early part of her twenties working in different industries, living in and around a west coast city and preparing for medical school. This became Carin's "least Jewish time," a space in which she was "figuring things out," dating non-Jews, not connecting to any Jewish communities. Ultimately, as important as Judaism was to her, she put it aside for the higher priority of exploring and experimenting with life writ large.

She was not the only one. Participants are nomads in their twenties. Many Riverway Project participants postponed their formal careers, taking a "snowboard year" or living on food scraps in order to be a ski bum, working as an outdoor educator, doing community service in small, new African countries, or living in Asia with just a backpack. At this age, they are on the "seven-career path," as one participant coined it. Roommates move organically in and out of apartments. Furniture is rarely purchased new but is collected from relatives and street corners and left behind easily. One woman described this time as travel through various unkempt rented apartments, living with girlfriends in one neighborhood, a boyfriend in another, and a small studio in a third before sharing an apartment with her fiancé. She worked as a substitute teacher and a

nanny and tried to sell her art, she worked at "stupid desk jobs" that were "spiritually challenging." To hear her tell the story, it sounds like an unsettling time in her life, fun because of nights spent with girlfriends out at the bars or talking late over wine but uncertain because of a too open future and fear of making ends meet. This is a temporary time for participants, a distinct space available for experimentation with their professional and personal lives.

This real and figurative nomadic life captures the essence of Arnett's argument about emerging adulthood described in Chapter Two. Many or most young Americans spend their twenties testing various identities. They take themselves off of the career track for a time, dedicating some years to a life that they know is temporary. They fulfill dreams of sailing all of the time or of star-gazing in Hollywood, or they do service in Central America or Africa. Equally often, they live in a group home near their college town and work in meaningless jobs merely to pay their rent, their life's fulfillment coming from what happens after work. Robbins and Wilner note that many emerging adults are too focused on questions that relate to the entirety of who they are to focus closely on career development. Every decision can have significant implications for them; every move can represent a larger life lesson. Their freedom is exhilarating and, like many freedoms, daunting. This is exactly the quarter-life crisis: with any place possible to turn, many do not know what or how to decide, and as the situations of their lives change rapidly, with friends coming and going to new phases and one-year internships quickly ending, emerging adults find meaning in their day-to-day moments and avoid making larger commitments.[16]

[16] In their qualitative study, Robbins and Wilner expand these ideas in great detail (*Quarterlife Crisis*).

As a result of the impermanence of their life stage, Riverway Project participants do not yet consider themselves adults. Even if they might later be committed to Jewish ritual, they do not usually practice such rituals in their twenties. This is perhaps best exemplified by the *mezuzot* [ritual objects marking doorposts] missing from the twenty-somethings' doors. When I ask about them, participants explain that such markers will appear in their next, more permanent homes, and look quizzically at me when I wonder about their relevance in this life, now. Their crisis over who to be in their lives – how to earn a living and with whom to make a personal life – takes precedence over consistent, active Jewish exploration. For most, that exploration waits while, as Carin said, they are "figuring things out."

Yet, Carin and a few others described testing different synagogues during this time, sometimes at the High Holidays, most often simply because they were lonely. Like most, Carin found the different places she explored on Friday nights or Saturday mornings stale, confusing, or isolating; the synagogue focused on *bar* or *bat mitzvah* or were filled with congregants in their seventies and eighties who had spent every Saturday morning of their lives in the same pews. Carin frowned with frustration in describing this, saying, "My dream or my ideal scenario would be to go to Friday night services every Friday, but I had no place to go and not necessarily anyone to go with." Even Carin, who had some knowledge of and experience with Jewish community from childhood, was challenged in finding a community in which she was comfortable.

Their lack of *mezuzot* marking their doors, then, indicates only one aspect of participants' Jewishness in their twenties. They are nomadic, but they are also still interested in Judaism and sometimes curious about community, and they want a space

that reflects the attitudes and lifestyle patterns of adults in their twenties. They find non-Jewish social networks, groups of friends and colleagues, relatively easily. Jewish communities remain elusive, though, founded in a structure in which questioning, emerging adults do not fit.

## EXPRESSIONS OF JEWISHNESS: A CELEBRATION OF TENSION

As they grew older and began to settle into friendships, careers, and communities, participants began to form firm attitudes toward or about Judaism and to express this Jewishness in a variety of ways. Particularly without strong activity in Jewish social networks, these expressions of Judaism's importance to them became strongly shaped by participants' other social networks, by their friends, professional colleagues, and acquaintances from their other involvements. These other networks advocate or abide by values and norms that sometimes contradict what might be considered normative Jewish tradition. Here, then, participants begin truly to confront the dichotomies and challenges about which Schiffman wrote: they are pulled toward certain kinds of expressions of Jewishness by their "Jewish identity feeling" and pushed away by the influence of their additional social networks. The negotiation of this tension best characterizes the expressions of their Jewishness.

In this next section, I outline participants' ideas about and expressions of Jewishness. I begin by describing the pressures that participants feel from their other social networks. I then outline their attitudes toward six aspects of their ethno-religious identity: the mixing of heritages, cultural relativism, community loyalty, God, mixed marriage, and ritual observance. I note how each reflects their negotiation of their pull

toward Jewish tradition and their need to abide by the sanctions of other social networks. Finally, I describe a unique aspect of their celebration, the role that partners and children play in facilitating their Jewish involvement. I suggest that families become mini social networks, representations of communities that establish and validate Jewish practice and that help individuals work through their ideas about Judaism. Families also, I propose, give individuals needed social capital, enabling them to enter Jewish communities for the first time with significant assets.

### *Ben: The Influence of Other Social Networks*

Since college, Ben – like his Riverway Project peers – has made friends and acquaintances primarily through work, friends of friends, and hobbies. Some are Jewish; most are not, and both Jews and non-Jews are not interested in religion. He perceives of his friends as not supportive of his choice to be involved in religion. Moreover, he feels uncomfortable sharing his own involvement with them. He explained:

> I don't know how many people I know belong to a house of worship. Even where I work … it's a little strange when it's like, oh, what did you do on Friday, I went to services… .

For Ben and for his peers as well, a lack of prioritization of religious involvement within many of their social networks translates into their difficulty in making a general commitment to Jewish involvement. They lack their friends' validation of their choices, and so they waffle in those choices. Harleigh similarly does not disclose to many of her friends how she spends her free time and described how this feels in more detail:

> I think that it's really hard to be in organized religion in the circles I'm in. … It's a little bit scary to be different from my friends, or to be exploring a pathway that separates me from my friends.

They are afraid to turn away from their existing networks, to make themselves different from those to whom they are close, to involve themselves in communities that their friends do not support and would not choose. In addition, participants understand their friends and acquaintances to have negative ideas about Israel. Their peers "are very angry about the Jewish past," and so they put real or imagined pressure on participants to leave Israel and Judaism alone. Religious involvement, then, alienates participants from their social networks, their beliefs making them somehow wrong among their peers. Their social networks encourage participants not to be involved in Jewish life.

Participants themselves have absorbed the ideas of their social networks about the evil of religion. Many participants themselves previously rejected religion because they associate it with radicalism, with extreme and destructive views. Several participants were raised to be, as Renee explained, "skeptical of people who are very religious." She has always thought:

> If somebody is so extremely involved in a particular religion or faith, that will cloud the way that they perceive other things … it may narrow their judgment or cause them to do something that I might consider to be irrational but that is justified through religion.

For similar reasons, for most of her life, Zoe saw religion as "fanatical and maybe even a little creepy." Moreover, some participants see religion as genuinely destructive. Zoe argued, "It just gets in the way… .It creates wars and all that kind of stuff. Ridiculous things are done in the name of religion." Rather than "add meaning," she suggested, "It complicates things." To associate themselves with Judaism leads them to support these injurious forces, the irrational, that which they fight against.

Moreover, participants see religion as taking over one's capacity to think independently, as mandating that individuals support ideals simply because their

community advocates them. Tom captured this well, echoing others in emphasizing that many feel torn between their own anti-extremist ideals and their attachment to Judaism:

> I'm … at constant war... because I hate it. I hate communalism. I hate, you know, my group, right or wrong. The core of my ideology goes against that. And yet, there's a part of me that maintains a Jewish identity and wants that. … And its just a constant fight, because the minute I take two steps in that direction I say, what am I doing here. … Because if I swallow my ideology to its extreme I should abandon the whole thing.

Participants worry that religion mandates "communalism" and other ideologies that they reject, and this association pulls participants away from Judaism or leaves them in continuous confusion as to how to reconcile their multiple convictions.

Participants have other learned values that they see as contradictory to a commitment to Judaism. As participants participate in liberal networks, particularly at university, they encounter issues such as white privilege and racism. They imagine that they, themselves, "have white privilege" and have trouble reconciling their minority status with this privilege. As Jews, some feel that they are not purely white but also not purely of color and so "don't know where to put" their Jewishness, as Harleigh explained. That is, as a Jew they do not want to associate with the white upper class but they see their privilege as making it unjust to identify with other minorities. They are moved to minimize their Jewishness as a result. They also absorb from their social networks ideas about social liberalism and become unsure of what to do, for example, with a central religious text that forbids homosexuality. Mark exclaimed about this issue, "What's up with that! That's just wrong! … I can't even interpret my way out of that. It is an abomination. There's no gray." Moreover, participants are "pacifist" and suspicious of patriotism. Israel raises challenges for them in its need for a strong military and demand for public advocacy, and Jewish organizations' open support of Israel concerns them as

overlooking the actions that Israel takes that they do not support. Even while they look for Jewish involvement, then, it challenges participants' senses of themselves as developed through immersion in other social networks.

### *Attitudes and Beliefs*

These social networks also deeply impact their expressions of their Jewishness, their behaviors. As I outline here, traditional Jewish ideas of peoplehood and Jewish chosenness, the mandate for Jewish continuity and the concept of a uniquely Jewish God, are diffused or challenged by the extent to which their networks rail against isolationism and communalism. Participants want Jewish children but refuse to isolate their potential dating partners to Jews only; they value Judaism but do not see it as inherently better than other cultures. They find ways to live with the tension between their particular (Jewish) and universal (other) commitments, and they express their intertwining of their values in the Jewish commitments that they do make.

#### Mixed Messages about Dating and Marriage

One way that participants cope with their antipathy toward white privilege is by rejecting endogamous dating. For example, both Carin and Dan had wanted to find a Jewish spouse, and when they met in their early thirties through friends, their wait to find a spouse became worthwhile. They were able to build a Jewish life together, Judaism becoming something important in the construction of their relationship. At the same time, they each acknowledge that they easily could have married one of their previous non-Jewish partners, a sentiment that many other married Riverway Project participants share.

It happens that the person with whom they fell in love and married was Jewish, but they believe that they could have fallen in love with a non-Jewish classmate or married their previous, non-Jewish partner just as easily.

The reverse is also true. For several participants who are currently in relationships with non-Jews, their choices have taken them by surprise. Love took priority for them – "love happens," one participant commented. While pursuing the relationship was not easy for them, they did choose the relationship over creating a uniform Jewish home. Many of these participants are now negotiating the consequences of their decisions, determining what it means emotionally and practically to live as Jewish/ non-Jewish partners.

Similarly, those who have not yet married – about half of participants interviewed – are hazy about the extent to which they would prioritize finding a Jewish partner over finding a partner, period. Harleigh captured these concepts:

> What I decided … several years ago … was that I want to have a family, and I want to have kids, and I want them to be raised with one religion, and I want it to be Judaism, and if I have a partner that can support me in doing that cause I don't want to be the only parent doing religion, then that's fine. It would probably, obviously, be easier for them, and for me, if they had some attraction to Judaism, but I don't – I mean – marrying someone without religion or marrying someone who doesn't believe in any sense of spirituality or anything but may biologically be Jewish, I don't see that as being very far off.

Having a committed Jewish partner, then, is not mandatory for Harleigh. Having a Jewish family is her priority, and she sees multiple situations that would enable her to have this family. At the same time, twenty-four year old Harleigh continued:

> I'm not, I feel like, at a point where I'm thinking seriously enough about relationships that I would limit who I date. I mean, I wouldn't date, I guess, someone who was very excited about a religion that wasn't Judaism (laughs). I think I'd be turned off by someone who was really excited about Judaism too. I don't know… .

While she, perhaps, would not become deeply involved with someone who was a committed Christian, she also would not be that selective about whom she dates, and a deeply committed Jew – someone, as she continued, not "ambivalent, like me" – would deter her as well. Half of the non-married participants whom I interviewed agreed with Harleigh in her comments about this. They would be pleased if they met and married a Jew – but if they meet and marry a non-Jew, they will deal with that situation as it comes. They will not put parameters on those with whom they develop relationships; they emphasize having Jewish children, rather than Jewish partners, so as to avoid needing to be selective about their social networks.

## The Normalization of Mixed Heritages

As I interviewed Charlie, we sat in his small living room under a black and white poster, a sketch of a repulsive and even scary ogre surrounded by quotations from James Joyce's *Ulysses.*[17] He explained to me that he found the poster in Ireland while visiting his sister on her semester abroad from college. He described the monster as the Cyclops figure from the story; the poster refers to a heated argument between the Cyclops and Bloom, the Cyclops claiming that Bloom is a Jew and therefore an outsider, Bloom listing in response influential Jews from throughout history. It seemed to set a fitting context for my conversation with Charlie, whose Irish history, inherited through his mother's family, is as important to him as his Jewish heritage, and whose history has impacted his ideas about Judaism, ethnicity, and religion in a variety of ways.

[17] New York: Vintage International, 1990 (originally published 1922 in Paris).

Both of Charlie's parents were raised in Massachusetts, his father in a committed Jewish family and his mother in a committed Catholic family, "with Catholic schools all the way, May processions and what not – very old-school Irish Catholic" as Charlie explained. The Nelsons met their junior year of college at a local Massachusetts school and married a few years later. When they married, they decided that they would raise their children as Jews. A few years later, when Charlie was four and his younger sister was two, his mother converted into Judaism. They have not talked about why she converted, though Charlie recognizes that while his father was committed to their Jewish life his mother was often even more so, and so Judaism clearly became important to her over time. The children also went through a conversion when they were very young.

Charlie suggested that his family experienced consistent Jewish observance in his home, never adopting his mother's Christian background as their own family's religion. Charlie has a vague memory of decorating a Christmas tree – and so, he noted, his parents had one late enough in their marriage that he remembers it – but that is the closest his immediate family came to any Christian celebration in their own home. Instead, he "shared the observances that [his] mom's family has" with his grandparents, going to Mass with his grandparents when he slept at his grandparents' home on a Saturday night, celebrating Christmas and Easter with them. Similarly, his grandparents came to his family's home for Hanukah and Passover, his grandfather in his own "Kelly green yarmulke." He explained, "It's been a very two-way sharing … it's never been, we were both ways or something like that. It's always been shared but it's not our holiday." More specifically, his parents made it clear to him that while at church, he did not have to kneel or participate in any other activities of worship. He remembers wondering at times why

he was "half Jewish but not half Christian," but his parents explained to him that he was half-Irish but wholly Jewish, and that their Jewish identity was something in which to be invested.

Like Charlie, about five participants interviewed had non-Jewish parents. As in Charlie's family, their parents converted at their marriage or around the birth of their children, and participants experienced no influence of Christianity in their homes.[18] Neither participants' parents nor participants themselves, in their own homes as adults, intertwined religious traditions. Yet – or instead – as a result of intermarriage, Riverway Project participants actively blend ethnic heritages. In the case of Charlie, he and I discussed his Jewish identity under a poster of *Ulysses,* even referencing it to demonstrate that it is possible to engage in both identities simultaneously.[19] Charlie's Irish connection has important, substantive meaning for him. "It doesn't necessarily have the same spiritual dimension" because he is not Catholic, but he is deeply interested in Irish culture and in the politics and health of Catholicism as an important factor in the health of Ireland. Like most Irish Americans, he explained, his family left Ireland during the famine. He sees and admires this story as a great and personal American story of immigration and success and understands his Irish connection as offering him "another wonderful heritage."

Charlie celebrates his Irish heritage by being interested in Irish history, by traveling to Ireland, by putting a poster on his wall. Others intertwine their ethnicities

[18] Only one participant whom I interviewed still has a non-Jewish mother. He is additionally unique among his Riverway peers in that his father identifies as both a Jew and a Buddhist. In general, he had little religion – not Buddhism, Christianity, or Judaism – in his childhood home and his parents "gave all the agency" to him in directing his religious life. For reasons he cannot explain, he always identified as a Jew.
[19] In *Ulysses*, Joyce describes sometimes overtly and sometimes as subtext the efforts of an Irish Jew, Leopold Bloom, to integrate his Irish and Jewish identities. In one of the book's pivotal events, Bloom argues with the Cyclops character about his Irish loyalties. The poster in Charlie's living room references this event.

through ritual. Heather brought her Slovakian heritage into her home with Bill by weaving into their wedding *chuppah* sayings about relationships and love in Hebrew, English, and Slovak. Similarly, Tom and Teresa, a Peruvian-Jewish couple, decorated their home with South American influences. Their *ketubbah* is written not in Hebrew and English but in Spanish and English, with vows not from the ancient Jewish text but written by the couple themselves. Its two simple columns of text list their promises to each other; without a Jewish symbol on it, I still knew it immediately for what it was. Raising their children in two cultures is crucial for them, and it means raising them "fluent in Spanish, emphasizing the Peruvian side of their roots and also their … American background and … the Jewish side of their culture." They see these cultures as compatible, particularly since they celebrate a "liberal-secular type of Judaism." As Teresa explained, "There really isn't much to conflict. In both cases, we take from the culture what suits us, what we believe in, and we reject the rest." They can celebrate Judaism only because the way that they choose to celebrate allows them to leave behind what does not coalesce. The blending of heritages, then, has become normative for participants. Even more, they see a multicultural Judaism, the blending of heritages, as the only legitimate way to engage in their ethnicities.

## Different but Equal: The Value of Cultural Relativism

Their attitudes toward mixed marriage – the privileging of romantic love over uniform ethno-religious identity, the acceptance of non-Jewish partners but not children, the mixing of heritages – stem from their refusal to privilege one commitment (to Judaism) over another (to their universal social networks). Participants continually refuse to make

these choices. Charlie expressed this in describing his perception of differences between his father's Jewishness and his own. He understands the focus of his father's generation as having been on "the cause of Soviet Jewry, or rescuing groups of Jews around the world," causes that emphasize and allow Jews' support of other Jews. But, he continued, "so much of that has shifted and is sort of not there for us." In other words, he suggested, he and his generation connect less to uniquely Jewish causes. In our interview, Charlie mentions Philip Roth, perhaps the quintessential recorder of the American Jewishness of earlier generations, referring to him as having firmly established non-Jews as other. He contrasts Roth's writing about non-Jews to his own ideas, suggesting, "His characters seem to perceive non-Jews as alien in a way that I definitely … I've never seen them as so completely different that it's a whole different thing to be envied or to give yourself neuroses over," he remarked. He noted, "There is a difference, but it's not … it's a difference you can talk about, it's a difference you can deal with, you can learn from each other about … it's a difference you can share." For Charlie, the Jewish/ non-Jewish difference is not unlike any other distinctions that differentiate people. He expects to live in a diverse world, one that has esteem for diversity and one in which Jews do not segregate themselves away from others.

His peers agree, also claiming that the previous generations saw Judaism as qualitatively better than other cultures and religions. Elana, for example, sees previous generations as "not racist but religiousist." She hates that her parents and grandparents thought, "If you're not Jewish you're not quite up to snuff." For her, Judaism is no more unique or special than is any other tradition. As a result, Elana wants religion not to be a "separating experience" that prevents her from "doing things with others." Similarly, Ben

mentioned a *Havdallah* and games night as an example of a way his more traditional ex-girlfriend wanted to spend a Saturday night, comparing it to "communion and brunch." In other words, it unnecessarily created for him a division in his social circle. With friends of all backgrounds, Elana, Ben, and their peers want the privileging of Jews as friends to end with their parents' generation. If Jewish involvement requires them to live a segmented life, they reject it, seeing isolation as a kind of discrimination and an elevation of one ethno-religious tradition over another.

## Absent: Community Loyalty and Obligation

Perhaps as a result of this cultural relativism, participants do not feel any inherent loyalty to Jewish community that stems from their essential identity as Jews. Most participants feel no obligation to support Jewish organizations, only joining synagogues, for example, if they will gain something in return that they value. One participant captured this when he said: "I have found that I can get everything I want from a synagogue without joining." They come to synagogues out of self-interest, not out of responsibility. *Klal Yisrael* [community of Israel], the traditional Jewish value that dictates that Jews should naturally cohere into a distinctive and primary community, is absent from their value sets.

Traditionally, the land, state, and people of Israel have been an important part of *klal Yisrael.* But participants' relationship to Israel also does not follow a pattern of automatic loyalty; that is, participants' Jewishness does not dictate that they must feel sympathetic to Israel. Charlie summarized his peers' multifaceted connection to this place and people. Having visited Israel with his youth group when he was in high school, he would go back but is not in a hurry to do so:

> I wouldn't say it's the first thing on my agenda. … Israel's a lovely place and all that, and it's very meaningful in a Jewish way, but at the same time, in some ways … it's also just another country … I think in a way some American Jews could use a little more of a dose of that, of thinking that it's just another country – a country that's tremendously important to us, but I don't think that we can blindly – I don't think they should be blindly supported [just] as no other country should.

Charlie encapsulates the attitude of many of his peers toward Jewish distinctiveness and Israel's normative place in their lives. It is "meaningful in a Jewish way" – that is, for a Jew interested in Judaism, Israel is sometimes inspiring and certainly thought-provoking – but unconditional support of the country is simply not part of participants' reality.[20]

As Charlie continued, he explained some of his challenges in relating to Israel:

> I don't know if I feel a strong connection to the society. I've met lovely Israeli people over the years but it's not Manhattan transplanted to the Middle East. It's a Middle Eastern slash somewhat European country, and I think if you go there you see that.

Charlie references a variety of challenges that his peers share in considering their relationship to Israel. Israelis are foreign, and the Jewish connection between participants and their Israeli peers is not enough to bind them together. In addition, participants were raised to believe in myths of Israel – one participant mentioned devouring Leon Uris' *Exodus*[21] during her childhood – and when they experience the inevitable dissolution of these myths they are unable to determine how to relate to the deeply complicated, real Israel. It is easy even for participants to be "embarrassed by the country," in one

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[20] The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, led by Dr. Leonard Saxe, has been conducting research on the impact of Taglit—Birthright Israel since its inception. It has published a variety of research reports on its findings and has conducted additional analysis of American's attitudes toward Israel. In a recent report, "American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the "Distancing" Hypothesis," Saxe, with Theodore Sasson and Charles Kadushin, suggest that American attitudes toward Israel do not, in fact, reflect what Charlie has expressed here (Waltham, Massachusetts: Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2008). While it may be that most Americans do continue to have positive attachments to Israel, that was not my experience in the Riverway Project. Moreover, the extensive Taglit—Birthright Israel research does not report on the complexities involved in their attachments to Israel. Based on my research with the Riverway Project, I suggest that additional work should be done with younger adults to understand the intricate nature of their attachments.

[21] Leon Uris, *Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

participant's words, embarrassed at some of the country's military actions and sociological realities of classism, racism, and poverty. Furthermore, particularly when they are enjoying a promising American Jewish life, participants find it difficult to "reconcile the creation of a vibrant American Jewish community with Israel." Simple loyalty is not blind, automatic, assumed, or even considered.

At the same time, more than half of participants interviewed either had been to Israel or traveled to Israel during my fieldwork.[22] They care about Israel; they merely do not feel instinctive loyalty to it. Similarly, they care deeply about Judaism and feel deeply Jewish; they simply do not feel unique or distinctive because they are Jewish, nor do they feel a greater sense of responsibility to Jews than to other people. They will not turn away from Judaism and Jews, but they will not turn away from the value of other peoples and cultures, either. A tradition that argues for its own supremacy, even subtly by suggesting that being with Jews is better than being with others, is a tradition in which they want no part.

## Ideas of God Shaped by Many Social Networks

Approximately half of participants interviewed have ideas of God as a metaphysical power, separate from human consciousness. Such a concept, Katie notes, is potent for her, in synagogue and anywhere. "I'm not in it just for the holidays" she commented. She finds it hard to discuss God with others "because it's not really talked about – it's hard to talk about it in a way that doesn't sound Christian … people are afraid of being a God-fearing citizen." She is also afraid that talk about God can easily become conversation

[22] Most participants traveled with the Riverway Project. Others went on a United Jewish Communities (UJC) trip. Still others went with Taglit – Birthright Israel, a free ten-day trip to Israel for adults ages eighteen to twenty-six.

about a punishing God, a God that takes retribution when his people do not follow God's law. For Katie, that is "so not what I'm interested in. I don't buy it," she explains. In these ways, Katie's social networks influence her ideas about God. Her investment in liberal communities pressures her not to speak about God in certain ways out of concern over being seen as "God-fearing" and that the conversation will involve a God of justice. Yet, her liberalism does not pressure her to ignore her concept of God. She wants it to be part of her involvement in Judaism.

About half of those interviewed invoked the concept of spirituality during our conversations. Most of them were not certain what they meant when they used this word. When they could be specific, they discussed a range of ideas. They mentioned things greater than themselves: a "life force," a connection to "truth," an interaction between "all living things" that they sense when riding a wave or climbing a mountain. They feel spirituality in discussions about their purpose on Earth: "it's the meaning, you know, what are we doing here, where do we come from, how should we live." Or, they find spirituality in deep reflection: "it's really considering who you are." Participants are similar in these ways to their American peers, Jewish and non-Jewish. Younger adults are more likely than older adults to be without a specific religious affiliation.[23] Yet, as Tom Beaudoin has demonstrated through analysis of cultural artifacts, they are deeply spiritual and interested in expressing their spiritual connections, even if through song and their appearance rather than by participating in a denomination's church services.[24] Empirical evidence has found this to be equally true: half of emerging adults comment that it is not

[23] A full 25% of adults ages 18-29 are unaffiliated with a church, 19% of adults ages 30-39 are unaffiliated with a church, and 16% of all Americans are similarly unaffiliated. Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, "US Religious Landscape Survey 2008" (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2008), 37.
[24] Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Gen X* (San Francisco, California: Jossey Bass, 2000).

at all important to them to participate in church services, but only 10% do not believe at all that some sort of higher power guides their lives. Almost one-third suggest only that they are "deists," attaching no formal religious framework to their beliefs. For this population, being generically but firmly spiritual, without a larger set of concepts or normative beliefs about that sense of higher power, is normative.[25]

As participants have aged, they have increasingly considered how they view God, although few have crystallized their ideas. When Jordana, for example, discussed her thoughts about God, she shared an experience of shifting feelings, confusion, and also some ideas about what God means to her:

> I keep seeing this like – this transvestite God – I can't decide if it's male or female, I can't decide whether it's more of a pantheistic God in things … I started reading… Kushner's book called *Living a Life that Matters*[26]… and he made this statement… that somebody who's suffering says, God, you know, you said you'll be with me, why is this happening, I can't believe all this hardship, and God says, I never said bad things won't happen. I said I'd be with you when they do. … So for me, I feel like God's my bud – you know, He's my buddy, and you know, whenever He or She or it decides to present itself as a source of inner strength – that's when Godliness is apparent. … Speak in yoga terms – when you've got your inner strength and your core solid, you've got faith going on, you've got all these things in line… that's when God is present. And that's beautiful….

Like Katie, she has low regard for the idea that God is commanding or omniscient.

> I never thought of God as a master control center – I kind of dismissed that thought a while ago. I moved into this idea of well, some things feel easier than others, and okay, why, why is this hard thing feeling a little easier – why do I feel comfort when I should be feeling absolute and utter pain or whatever. And I'm thinking well – how open was I, at that time, how open was I, how honest was I with myself, with those around me, and I think – reading what Kushner wrote … kind of getting that essence of that idea, kind of pulled it together for me. It's a matter of being open, it's a matter of acknowledging self in others, it's a matter of acceptance and forgiveness. Not on a mushy gushy level, just being honest about

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[25] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Lee Arnett Jensen, "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* Vol 17 No 5 (September 2002), 451-467, 456.
[26] Harold S. Kushner, *Living a Life that Matters: Resolving the Conflict between Conscience and Success* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

> it. This recent experience has solidified for me that that's really powerful and that's totally 100% possible, that God's right here with us. In whatever form.

Jordana's mention of a "recent experience" refers to a significant accident in her family that led to doubt and pain and also togetherness and deep emotional connection among her family members. Through this experience, she confirmed understandings of God that she developed long ago, that make complete sense to her, and that are deeply informed by her sense of self and her relationships with family and friends. In this comment she raises a primary point about God, that participants' concepts of God are deeply individual. As with her peers, Jordana's sense of God is unique and works for her.

Moreover, like Katie, Jordana's various social networks influence her ideas about God. For many participants, Jewish settings are a primary but not the only place in which they consider God. Jordana made a comparison to yoga and used its terminology to frame her ideas. Others invoke terms from Buddhism and other Eastern religions to describe what they feel about God. Notably, there is often nothing necessarily Jewish about the God to which participants connect. Rather, Judaism "is a way" for them to "believe in God," as Zoe explained, just another social context in which to reflect on God and another web of ideas and norms that can add value to their God concepts. Scott specifically explained that Judaism gives him a "framework, guidelines, some big questions, a community to connect those pieces." He continued:

> In that it's all kind of trying to get closer to God and to the holiness within ourselves, being the best people we can be, for me that is, that's kind of the spiritual work of life. So Judaism happens to be a place where I feel comfortable and I feel a good fit.

Judaism helps him with his general life's work, a project developed separate to a Jewish framework but exercised inside of one. For Scott, Jordana, and others, this exercise

involves reading Jewish texts and considering Judaism's theological ideas or praying and "struggling to think about" what God means during their prayer. Judaism "happens to be" the context for and material of these activities, but that almost seems to be an accident of identity rather than intentional choice. Participants use Jewish tools to define what to them is a universal idea.

In none of these conversations about God did participants reference the concept of covenant, a concept fundamental to Judaism and the true idea behind *Torat Yisrael* [the law of Israel]. Jordana spoke of something similar when she referred to God as a master control center, but she rejected this conception, and the language of covenant is completely absent from her conceptualizations of her Jewishness and the similar ideas of her peers. Indeed, participants feel no obligation to God as they imagine it and have no understanding that they could be partners in a relationship with God. Instead, to participants, Judaism suggests ideas that participants consider – including ideas of God – just as they consider ideas gathered from their other social networks. They adopt and reject ideas using what feels right, and often what feels right are ideas shaped by their other social networks, concepts learned from other communities.

### *Jewish Practice*

The permeability of boundaries around Jewish community and ethnicity seeps into participants' ideas about ritual as well, making these expressions of participants' Judaism also an expression of their commitment to their additional, universal values.

It is not unusual for participants in the Riverway Project to be experimenting with Jewish ritual, actively considering how they want to connect to Jewish holidays as single

adults or as couples with and without children. They say *kaddish* (the blessing for the dead) for grandparents, eat *matzah* (unleavened bread) on Passover, say a blessing before every meal, and recite the *Sh'ma* with children before bed. *Shabbat* blessings are common, with more than half of participants interviewed making efforts to integrate some blessings into their Friday nights. Many Riverway Project participants, using the words of one participant, suggest that their ritual observance is a "work in progress." They grapple with various rituals and think through their comfort level with these rituals, growing into their observance of them.

Like the larger American Jewish population,[27] Riverway Project participants follow rituals not "by the letter," as Ben explained, "but by the spirit." They shift rituals as they like to accommodate their needs and to work better for them. Ritual, like ideas of God, is highly personal for participants: it must have personal meaning to participants for it to be part of their lives, and participants make it even more personally relevant by adapting it. They define this process as observing ritual when it "feels right," words used verbatim by several participants. Lori added to this idea, "I never really believed that I needed to follow the rules to be Jewish – I've always kind of believed that I could do what feels right." Feeling "right" asks not that the ritual challenge them in some way but more that it complement participants' ideas about the ways that they should live their lives. Participants, then, apply learned universal norms, those of the "therapeutic quest" described in Chapter Two, to ritual observance. Jewish ritual becomes part of their

[27] Comments from Riverway Project participants about ritual were very similar to those from non-Orthodox Jews shared in, for example, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen's *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) and Sylvia Barack Fishman's *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000). American Jews who live outside of a system of *halahcha,* of Jewish law, seem naturally to use the resources of Jewish ritual to fulfill their own ideas about a meaningful life. There are elements of responsibility to a larger Jewish people present for participants and for their liberal peers in these studies, but these elements of responsibility are less present in their remarks than are comments about what "feels right."

commitment to finding themselves, a commitment learned in and dictated by their general world. Participants pursue an American ideal using Jewish tools.

Katie and Josh began to experiment extensively with ritual at the birth of their first child. They had never marked *Shabbat* in their home before, and neither of them had been raised with Jewish ritual other than *Shabbat* related blessings. As Jonah, their son, grew older, they began to have dinner together on Friday nights, saying the blessings with him over the special *Shabbat* foods. Katie enjoys the rituals that she and Josh have brought into their home, the blessings over *challah* and wine; ritual has hade great import for her family (an idea that I explore in the next pages). Still, Katie remains uncomfortable with a variety of other rituals and recognizes that she is observing some and not observing others. At the time of our interview Passover had just ended. "Josh was working so I took the kids to … my cousin's," she explained about their *seder* participation. I asked her if they did anything for the holiday inside her home:

> I used to buy *matzah* but – there are things about Judaism that I just don't buy. And that's one of them.

As she explained this, she modulated her voice, lowering it from the heated excitement she conveyed when talking about other topics, like her love of learning, earlier in the interview. There was almost an implicit anxiety or embarrassment in her quietness, as if this antipathy is, in fact, a struggle for her. As she continued, she revealed that she doesn't reject eating *matzah* per se but any rituals related to food:

> I eat what I eat when I wanna eat it and I've found that that's a big part of what makes me happy. And I have a really hard time making myself miserable for a week for a reason that I just don't think is that applicable to my life right now. I'm happy to think about things, I'm happy to do things, to commemorate something, but I would be doing it because I'm supposed to do it and I wouldn't be connected to it. Maybe someday, as I've become more connected to the *Torah*, maybe

> someday I'll become more connected to certain rituals that I don't care about but right now I just don't.

Similarly, on *Yom Kippur* in recent years, she has not fasted because she has consistently been pregnant or nursing. But when she has fasted in the past, she has felt just "mad and bitchy" and at the end of the day, no "closer to God." To fulfill a ritual, Katie must feel "connected" to it and feel that she is gaining something from it. Being "miserable" is simply not acceptable, nor is behaving in a certain way because she is "supposed" to do so. Rituals must match the ways that she behaves typically. They should not throw her behaviors or her moods off balance.

Ben amplified Katie's ideas:

> All my friends who do Passover … they friggin hate it. You know, you eat *matzah*, you get constipated, it just seems ridiculous. I think *seder's* very interesting – why not do more text study during that time to acknowledge that there's something going on rather than, you know, going and supporting the Manischewitz empire. … All most people do is you do a *seder* and you suffer through the next couple days … Is there a way you can have just as fulfilling an experience doing something else that actually might be more fulfilling in some ways?

Eating unleavened foods, he believes, will lead to physical discomfort. But Ben is not opposed to commemorating Passover. Just the opposite is true; he wants to find a way to help Passover be more personally meaningful. Specifically, he would like to add more text study to the holiday, thereby engaging in something that he appreciates and through which he grows Jewishly. For him, holiday celebration is meant to connect to tradition and is not limited to what tradition offers. If tradition will not allow personal fulfillment, meaning, or reward, it can be disregarded, and it can be extended to offer greater reward.

Personal fulfillment often leads to participants adopting ritual because it enhances their lives. For Harleigh, *Shabbat* allows her an important "play night" since she works

on Sunday mornings. She explained, "I give myself Shabbat in that I let myself do whatever I feel like doing," and this prepares her for her week ahead. Similarly, several participants refrain from shopping on Saturdays, using *Shabbat* to give themselves a break from materialism that they feel could otherwise take over their lives. Tom and Teresa deliberately spend Friday night together as a family. They understand their time at home together on Saturday as crucial to their life as a couple and the Friday night blessings that they say as helping them to express their love for each other. Adam does not "enjoy Yom Kippur," but, he explained, "I fast because the pangs of hunger remind me of what I'm supposed to be doing." He continued, "Here's an instance where the tradition really makes a lot of sense to me … the actual stated reason why you're doing it works for me." Similarly, Noah has "gotten more interested in this idea of doing things in your life to sort of … to keep yourself aware of … the spiritual piece." To that end, he is considering incorporating the laws of *kashrut* into his life in order to be more intentional about eating in a Jewish way. When rituals complement participants' lives and when they find them to be personally enriching, they observe them readily and perhaps eagerly.

Participants' negotiation of ritual happens in the moment and, as a result, it shifts quickly and effortlessly. Francie, for example, observes *Shabbat* in her own, very personal way, basically taking Friday night and Saturday to do what she does not do "on a normal day basis." She related, laughing, "I leave all the stuff that I don't wanna do for Sunday." At the same time, she continued "If it feels good to pay my bills on Saturday then I will, but if I don't wanna do it then I'm not doing it." She does what is immediately rewarding, deciding on a moment to moment basis what rituals she will observe. Similarly, participants make theoretical commitments to rituals but easily

overlook the rituals in the moment. Spouses intend to say a blessing before every meal but forget as often as they remember, or participants have aspiration toward ritual but the holiday passes without their remembering to implement it. Because participants observe rituals for personal fulfillment and what is personally fulfilling changes regularly, they can easily let go of or simply not form habits, following what feels right at any given time.

Participants' ritual observance invokes other aspects of their social capital as well. Vegetarians coalesce their American liberal and Jewish commitments and see their practice as a form of *kashrut*; as one participant commented, "being vegetarian to me is like being more than kosher."[28] They leave prayer services on Friday night and have dinner out together, intertwining their *Shabbat* and their Jewish friends with their typical Friday night in the city. On one memorable evening, I enjoyed listening to participants heatedly debate Israeli and synagogue politics in a trendy neighborhood bistro. Their commitment to Judaism was reflected in their passionate arguments, their voices rising higher over each other's as they expressed their ideals related to these Jewish communal topics. Their commitment to upper middle class values was evident in the remains of dinner strewn across the table: the shells of mussels, the remnants of a roast beef sandwich with cheddar. Participants blend their commitments effortlessly.

This seeming dichotomy between commitment and *kashrut,* between involvement and *Shabbat*, is not unimportant. Rather, the engagement in participants' multiple value

[28] I am deliberately invoking Sylvia Barack Fishman's concept of "coalescence," which refers to an American Jewish phenomenon of melding the boundaries of American culture and Judaism so inextricably that the two inform each other at their cores and shape one's identity as one simultaneous influence. Most important for understanding this participant's comment, individuals see their coalesced American Jewish identity as genuine; as this participant suggests, *kashrut* can be replaced as a Jewish practice by the very not-Jewish practice of vegetarianism. Fishman, *Jewish Life,* 10-12 and Chapter One.

sets allows participants to feel like their authentic selves, engaging in Jewishness according to their rules. We were out on the town on Friday night, executing participants' *Shabbat* observance: being together with peers in their Jewish social network, talking about Jewish ideas that matter to them. The Jewish social network that they have found in the Riverway Project validates and even supports this integrated behavior, as participants leave prayer services together to go to dinner in a restaurant, when Morrison suggests places in the neighborhood for post-prayer dinner, softly accompanying his words with the chords from the *niggun* last played. Through ritual, participants negotiate and also express the dual commitments within their identity, intertwining them in a way that works for them and developing ritual observance that respects all aspects of their understandings of themselves.

### *Family as a New Social Network*

An analysis of participants' expressions of Judaism would not be complete without attention to their emphasis on family. Family is the essence of many participants' Jewish involvement, a force or phenomenon that helps them to do something with what was once only a "Jewish identity feeling." Participants begin to express their Jewish commitment when they find a partner; with that partner, they suddenly have the space, support, and validation that they need for negotiation between their commitments. Partners support each other in this negotiation, often becoming each other's teachers in their individual and mutual exploration of Judaism. Through their children, they become comfortable in social networks, their lack of literacy becoming supplanted by the social capital that they gain through their children and helping them to be accepted by other parents in their

networks. Rather than obtaining Jewish social capital only from friendship networks, couples become a social network of two and family offers a way into Jewish community, giving individuals the social capital that they need to engage in and belong to the larger community.

## Dan and Carin: Partners

Dan was a member of Temple Israel even before the Riverway Project began, and Carin came to the Riverway Project and Temple Israel through Dan. As their relationship evolved, Dan felt confident that he could and wanted to introduce Carin to his synagogue, that she would value this Jewish community in ways similar to him. They quickly became involved in their Jewish community as a couple, and that community has been important for them in their relationship. For Dan, the congregation did not "give" him Carin in that he did not meet her there, but it has served as an important "place for [them] to grow together." Through the Riverway Project, they hosted their first *Shabbat* dinner and traveled to Israel together, each experiencing Israel for the first time. From early in their relationship, they established for themselves that Judaism would be a part of who they are as a couple and that they would explore together exactly how it would play a role in their life. Dan explained this further:

> If I didn't have a place that was Jewishly … we would not – I think we would have talked about it, but we wouldn't have had a *Shabbat* dinner here, we wouldn't have gone to services at the Temple, and we wouldn't have gone to Israel together, and we would not have grown our relationship with each other – I don't think we would have grown in the same way – it could have focused in on cooking, or salsa dancing, or hanging out – good friends or family, or any of the other things that I think are also part of our identity but it would have been a missing vine in the trellis or patchwork that makes up what is us. … Without Temple Israel we wouldn't have the same relationship.

The congregation and specifically the activities of the Riverway Project gave them opportunities to live a full Jewish life together and cemented the valuable and active role that Judaism would play in their budding family.

In addition, through each other, they created the Jewish life that each wanted. Carin felt like “going to services with him” was “really special and incredibly meaningful.” She commented, “This is what I’ve been waiting my whole life for.” She echoed Dan’s feeling that the experience has strengthened their relationship and helped them determine how they would make Judaism work in their lives:

> Jewish identity was a really important part of how we thought about ourselves… and it gave us a place to grow … I think there’s so many other important aspects of our lives together but I think this is a measurably significant or powerful aspect of our relationship together and I think we might have gotten there without Temple Israel but I think it would have taken a lot longer … Having that space as a springboard was tremendously important.

For many couples, as for Dan and Carin, their Jewish involvement helps them to determine their general values and the Jewish life that they want to create together.

Most significantly, several partners explained that the Riverway Project gives them ways to live a Jewish life but that they find the most benefit in “the drive home.” The conversations that they have together in the car, initiated by the classes and prayer services in which they participate, are the highlight for them. Their joint participation in Jewish life serves as a crucial opportunity to consider how they individually feel about Jewish ideas and practice, to share their thoughts with each other, and then to come to conclusions as a couple about ideology and practice.

This happens at home as well. Scott and his girlfriend, for example, are both just discovering Jewish life. Each of them brings resources from different past Jewish

experiences and each of them is more and less comfortable leading certain practices. Scott well summarized their process of discussing, sharing, and teaching each other:

> Right now [Judaism is] one of the things that we both kind of value. We … also know that it's something that we both want to continue to have as part of our lives. … She's been to Israel and lived on *kibbutz* and speaks to me in Hebrew words and stuff like that, but when we go to light the candles or you know, break bread or say the prayer over wine, she got embarrassed the first time cause she's like – I don't know the prayers. And I was like – that's fine, I do. So there's those little teachings back and forth.
>
> And it's really fun and it's great because, you know, wanting to be in a relationship with a Jewish woman, but also sometimes feeling insecure like, you know what, I have *no* idea what is going on [in an anxious, confused voice]. And not necessarily being unsure with her on this basis. … That's a big part of the way we support each other. It's also one of those things we talk about – would we send kids to Hebrew school … I thought, I don't know if I would push it or not, she's like, absolutely … It's one of those things that I think about – I want to continue to explore together.

Scott values his ability to be hesitant about Judaism and to express his lack of confidence in Jewish practice around his girlfriend. Because they feel comfortable with each other, they are able to grow together in their connections to Judaism, and Judaism has in turn become an important part of their relationship. In total, collaboration and negotiation around Jewish celebration is a rich, interesting, and important activity for couples. They become each other's most immediate teachers and social network, providing the validation that each needs from such a network in order to grow in their participation in Jewish community. In the safety of each other, they can risk being insecure and experimenting with Jewish life, joining communities that they might not were they by themselves.

## Weddings as a Window of Opportunity

When she was growing up, Katie resented the small role that Judaism played in her life, wishing she could have something more. She met Josh in her mid-twenties through a coworker. Josh was raised in a committed Jewish home, and Katie saw in her future husband and knowledgeable potential in-laws the opportunity to build the Jewish life she had always wanted. That life began with their Jewish wedding, the *ketubbah* that she and Josh commissioned that incorporated their personalities and interests into its painted background, the ceremony with the rituals that Katie researched, and the *klezmer* band. Years later, it remains for Katie a turning point in her life, the event that assured her that Judaism would be important in her marriage and family.

This focus on the wedding as a means of Jewish expression is common among participants. Slightly more than half of the couples interviewed had, as they described them, intentionally "Jewish" weddings that included Hebrew blessings, a rabbi as officiant, a *chuppah* and a *ketubbah.* Participants investigated Jewish rituals related to wedding ceremonies and chose what seemed meaningful to them. They designed their *chuppah* and *ketubbah* in their image, aspects of their personalities interwoven into the design of these ritual objects. They used their wedding as an opportunity to learn about Judaism, to discover what kinds of rituals are and are not important to them, to claim that Judaism would be a priority in their lives, and to express their personalities through Jewish ritual. They made choices about what rituals to observe and how to shape those rituals to reflect their values, all as part of their burgeoning deliberateness about Jewish life. In these ways, Jewish life for couples began with their weddings. A traditional Jewish wedding ceremony signifies to the community at-large that this couple commits to

building a home in the Jewish tradition. Despite participants' choosing to include only some normative Jewish wedding rituals, as for Katie, participants' weddings do seem a promise to their communities but more so to themselves that they will actively pursue Jewish connections as families.

When she became pregnant, Katie said, she knew that she wanted "a place that [her] kids can call home" and, through the synagogue, to give them a cultural background and specifically a Jewish background. Katie hears "people say well, I'm not gonna raise my kids anything, and then they can choose." But she believes that if parents do not give their children cultural resources, they "don't know what they're not choosing." She will give her children "something that's important" to her, and "if they don't choose it later on," then so be it, but she wants to take active steps to ensure that they can have this option at all.

## Children as a Certificate of Legitimization

Katie knew that she would need a congregation that would help her family establish strong Jewish connections. With little Jewish social capital, she also needed a congregation to welcome them and teach them what to do to participate in community and to help them create a Jewish life for their family. When she first found Temple Israel, Katie remembered the Jewish "code" that insiders in her childhood synagogue seemed to know. She wondered if she would encounter it again in Temple Israel and feel shut out from a community of which she is a natural member. But instead she has felt welcomed; in fact, it was her child who "opened a lot of doors." Through Riverway Tots, the Friday morning program for toddlers and their parents, Katie met a number of true peers, parents

of infants and toddlers who work part-time or are in school. Katie acknowledges that "Mom stuff… trumps the Jewish stuff" in their conversations. But because they are eager to discuss their experiences as mothers, Katie can feel at home in this community despite her lack of Jewish social capital. Being a mother gives her equal status with her peers and another kind of social capital on which to trade. She has found through this role a place in a Jewish community.

If their children have been the way that Katie became a part of the Riverway community, they have also led Katie and Josh to incorporate ritual into their home to some degree. Jonah, their two-year-old son, is "so into *Shabbat*, it's unbelievable." As a family, they light the candles on Friday nights and have *challah,* and he sings the blessings and asks for these ritual objects almost every day. They sing him the *Shehecheyanu* blessing sometimes and he has learned its words, as he has the words of the *Shema.*[29] Jonah asks for "Temple music," the compact disc that Temple Israel created, in the car often, and when they pull into the parking lot of the synagogue he gets very excited. "For him," Katie explained:

> The sanctuary at Temple Israel … it was the first place where I would just say go, run, and he would run in and out of the aisles and I knew that he was safe, that he wasn't gonna run into the street and he wasn't gonna leave the playground… It's this huge place and – and I just think he learned to love it.

Their children, then, served as the driving factor behind their connection to Judaism, allowing Katie and Josh to build the kind of Jewish home that they wanted.

[29] The *shehecheyanu* blessing, which acknowledges God for sustaining individuals and helping them to reach this time in their lives, is said at the recognition of something new: at the onset of many holidays, at a momentous family occasion, or even at the eating of fruit for the first time that season. Among the most ancient of biblical texts, *Shema* expresses the central tenet of Judaism, that God is one. It is at the core of all Jewish prayer services. The *shehecheyanu* blessing can be sung to a beautiful, accessible tune and the *Shema* can be said (and is said, according to rabbinic law, once during the evening) as part of a comforting bedtime ritual, making both blessings ripe for meaningful parent-child interaction.

Again, Katie's intentionality about making Judaism a part of their family's life is not unusual among participants. In a variety of ways, many participants equate Judaism with family. Hannah understands that "a lot of being Jewish is in the past and the present, and how they inform each other." Judaism is her past and present, in her words: "generations and generations of history" and also "family that I have now." Participants celebrate their connections to family during holidays, which serve as a way of "marking time" and of bringing their family together around their shared values. Holidays offer a "way of watching family grow," and so as a sense of family comes to be created through Jewish celebration, Judaism comes to be inextricably linked to family. Judaism is the thread that weaves together participants with previous and future generations, giving great meaning to their lives and families as they become part of that chain.

It makes sense, then, that participants want to generate new traditions for their children. As Hannah said, Judaism "means family" that she has now, and, she continued, it also "means creating family." Jewish celebration can help children experience an interesting, rich, and rewarding childhood, allowing them to "remember their growing up" as distinctive. Participants want their families to "have traditions and rituals that are meaningful and bonding," and since the rituals of their own childhoods were Jewish, they want their children's childhoods to be filled with similar love, meaning, and memories. They deliberately, then, use Jewish ritual to create meaningful family moments. Noah commented:

> I feel like all families have sort of traditions and memories that are really meaningful into adult life and I'd really like it if a lot of those related in some way to Jewish rituals.

For him, the Jewish content of these rituals was important, of equal importance to the concept of the ritual itself. For others, the Jewish content is relevant in that it is a general connection to their heritage, but they are less focused on the words or actions themselves and more focused on the space it gives their family. Tom and Teresa explained that the blessings that they say on Friday night "come to stand" for their family. The prayers help them find structure; they become a ritual, in Teresa's words, that almost extends beyond its Jewish origin and represents their desire to be together and calm as a family.

Whatever role children play in driving a connection to Judaism, participants also appreciate their Jewish involvement for what it brings them personally. Children's connections to Judaism are a means to an end, the end being the participants' own connections to Judaism. Katie captured this well, saying, "I feel like I'm Jewish through my kids – but for myself." Participants' children draw them in, initially and continuously; ultimately, Judaism brings both participants and their children value, with children facilitating participants' more meaningful participation in Jewish life.

## "OBSERVANCE," OR AN AUTHENTIC JEWISH SELF

Most participants, this chapter demonstrates, come to the Riverway Project with little Jewish social capital, having had access to few Jewish social networks as children. As adults, they lack an awareness of the norms of Jewish communities, familiarity with the sanctions and acceptable behaviors within many of these communities, or knowledge of what to do to look and act like they belong to these communities. Without competence in such communities' norms and sanctions, participants feel rejected as adults when they try to join most Jewish social networks. Moreover, all participants, even those few who are

comfortable in Jewish communities and spaces, have adopted the values of the social networks to which they do belong, networks often comprised of individuals who are not involved in religion and do not see value in it. Ultimately, the strongest driver of participants' Jewishness becomes their membership in social networks that do or do not follow or promote Jewish ideas, values, or practices. Participants feel conflict between what they sense that their non-Jewish social networks esteem and what they believe that Jewish communities value, and their expressions of Jewishness reflect their negotiation of that conflict, the blending of dual loyalties and value sets.

Generally, social networks facilitate countless influences on and opportunities for participants. In their childhoods, they had positive or negative experiences because of how they interacted with the Jewish communities that they encountered. In college, friends drew them into Jewish involvement, or sororities and fraternities made immersion in communities of Jews possible. Their connections to other social networks shape their attitudes toward Jewishness; participants' loyalties to non-Jewish family members and friends result in their blending of heritages and privileging of all cultures as equal. Their commitment to Judaism and to Jewish community, though, has a hold on participants equal to the influences of their other social networks. Their lifetime of interactions with varied social networks, Jewish and not, leads participants into this place of conflict: participants feel visceral connections to Judaism and they crave participation in Jewish life, even while this participation is challenging to them on multiple levels.

Participants, then, enter into a kind of ongoing negotiation, a process through which they determine how to integrate their commitments to both their universal and their particular values. They feel acutely what Lisa Schiffman termed being "fluid and

fixed" or "difficult and full of grace" at the same time. Their very sense of themselves as Jews is fixed, not negotiable, but expanding that basic foundation is much more complicated.

In describing an identity that might work for them, participants invoke the concept of "authenticity," implying that to be meaningful and even viable, their Jewish connection must be authentic in the context of all of their values as shaped by their multiple social networks. To close this exploration of participants' ideas about Jewishness, I describe participants' emphasis on constructing an authentic Jewish self and their goal of an identity that is both genuinely Jewish and genuinely personal, one that interweaves their values as dictated by all of their social networks.

### *Dan and Carin: Seeking "Observance," Comfort*

In the American Jewish vernacular, being "observant" often means being *halachic*, or abiding of Jewish law, in some way. Yet, despite their lack of adherence to Jewish law, both Dan and Carin referred to themselves frequently throughout our conversation as "observant" Jews. Dan means by this:

> Identity. Identity as a Jew. Not necessarily observing each of the 600 and – 12? 14?… Aah. I proved my own point. *Mitzvot*. Or a speaker of Hebrew or a knower of all things to be known but being someone who's interested in knowing more and someone who separates their world in some way from the rest of their world. … I think observant has something to do with ritual, and worship and learning. … But, I don't think it means knowing more prayers or following more laws or spending more or less time in worship.

Dan specifically does not describe observance as living within Jewish law or as being extremely knowledgeable about Judaism, and he even makes a mistake in noting how many *mitzvot* [commandments] are understood to be listed in the *Torah* (there are 613;

Dan does not remember this). Rather, he believes that observance "has something to do with ritual and worship and learning;" in other words, those things play some sort of role in an observant Jew's life. Even more than that, to Dan, an observant Jew "separates their world," that is, makes a decision that Judaism is important to him and sees the world through that Jewish commitment, always seeking out Jewish involvement and community. He also is always "interested in knowing more," always developing his Jewish life and learning more of what it means to him to be a Jew.

Dan adds that his feeling of observance has grown as he has grown more confident in his Jewish identity and decisions. He commented, "I always thought the Conservatives and the Orthodox had something on me. And I definitely don't feel like that anymore." This relates to:

> The fact that you've developed this sense of Jewishness that you feel perfectly in your own skin with, something I never felt when I used to go into Conservative and Orthodox congregations and I never knew what the heck was going on and I thought I was going to break something.

Learning the liturgy so that he does not need a *siddur* at prayer services, feeling completely comfortable entering the congregation, each "make [Dan] feel observant in a way that [he] never felt before." He explained:

> Even if I choose to eat shellfish at various times and pork, and spend money on Shabbat, and not be able to read and understand – I can speak Hebrew, but not be able to understand it. So, giving me a grasp of Judaism, giving me a grasp of ritual, giving me a grasp of… how I connect with my family.

Dan's understanding of observance depends on his developing Jewish social capital in the form of knowledge and confidence. His ritual practice almost does not matter. Having a sense of who he is as a Jew and feeling confident in his identity comprise observance for him.

Carin agrees with this definition: “It signifies something about how you relate to your Jewish identity.” She added to Dan’s definition the importance of struggling with what Judaism means. Her internal debates about “believing in God and what does that mean…” are part of a “personal feeling of being Jewish.” She engages in these struggles because of a deeply embedded internal motivation toward Jewish connection and because she has the confidence in herself to trust that she can find sound answers to her challenges. The struggle with Judaism in which she engages and the confidence that she feels comprise her understanding of observance.

Carin and Dan are unique in this definition of observance as being comfortable in community. However, they characterize the comfort and belonging that many participants described. Dan and Carin discuss a way of being in which they enter a room filled with *kipot* and feel part of that room, even without knowing each intricate detail of what happens there. They refer to a Jewishness in which they understand the personal meaning that they find in prayer, ritual, and learning. They seek comfort with their present expressions of Judaism and their questions about Judaism and feel pride enough in a foundation of knowledge that can help them always seek to know more and do more.

### *The Implications of Authenticity*

To facilitate this comfort, participants need the community into which they enter to respect their entire selves, all values that they bring into that community. They must feel validated in their celebration, so that no matter their choices, they feel like legitimate Jews and can build on their positive feelings rather than exit the community. Participants use the word “authentic” to describe this kind of celebration of Judaism. Rather than ask

them to shift their values as influenced by their other social networks, their interaction with Jewish rituals should help them celebrate all of these values authentically. When they feel comfortable with their Jewish involvement, at home in a community, they feel that they are celebrating authentically.

In using the concept of authenticity in this way, they (likely unconsciously) invoke a term of great discussion in classic philosophical discourse. Simply, authenticity has been understood as an effort to negotiate a sense of self in light of pressure from the external world. That is, authenticity in this discourse refers to how a personality deals with the external while remaining true to her personality. One's goal is to exercise fully one's sense of self without succumbing to such external pressures, thereby being inauthentic. [30] Participants, then, however unconsciously, invoked exactly the right term for their identity construction. Their "authentic" understanding of Judaism is meant to allow for the dual loyalties that they feel to both their universal and their Jewish ideals. A participant's authentic Jewish self simultaneously celebrates and negotiates all of these commitments, allowing participants to be of both the general world and the Jewish world, to choose, for example, Jewish children but exogamous marriage. This kind of personal authenticity serves as the framework or scaffold around which participants assemble a system of Jewish meaning and Jewish behavior. Their authentic Jewish experience respects their multiple ideals and motivations and leads to, among other behaviors, shifting and feel-good Shabbat rituals and interethnic Jewish celebrations.

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[30] Authenticity is a far more complicated concept than is treated here. Within this conversation, I have attempted to remain within the concept as suggested by participants and to examine its potential for furthering our understanding of participants' choices about Judaism. Discussions of authenticity that support this understanding can be found in Michael E Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self: The Development of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981) and Stuart Charme, *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the World of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

Charles Taylor discusses the modern conception of authenticity, suggesting that in modernity, "moral salvation" comes not from God or from communally established religious principles but "from recovering authentic moral contact with ourselves." Only when one has the ability to know oneself intimately and to use that knowledge in determining one's own fate can one achieve the modern aspiration of freedom.[31] In its utmost form, Taylor argues, this authenticity suggests a kind of narcissism, an indulging in self-exploration and self-fulfillment to the exclusion of community norms and needs. It can lead to a society – if one can call it that – of me-driven members, all judging actions based primarily or even solely on the implications of those actions for themselves. This seems particularly apparent in the case of the Riverway Project, where participants, each with their own social networks, can form highly different personal ideas of Judaism as they follow their own individual web of social networks and the norms and sanctions that such networks demand. This seems additionally fitting when we consider the ways that Riverway Project participants shape their expressions of Jewishness, shifting Jewish rituals to complement their lives better. They prioritize self-fulfillment over Jewish tradition.

Taylor's project of reflection on authenticity, however, set out to release the concept of authenticity from being bound to narcissism, and his ideas provide an understanding of how Riverway Project participants' authenticity actually leads them toward Judaism. Taylor suggests that self-fulfillment is linked to the human project of self-definition, that to understand what fulfills, what feels authentic, an individual must also know herself. However, Taylor notes, such self-knowledge cannot develop through completely independent self-reflection. An individual only develops her identity and

[31] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27.

understanding of herself through dialogue, both internal and explicit, with others.[32] Moreover, through dialogue, an individual achieves another key factor in the development of her identity: recognition by others. This recognition is imperative to her successful identity resolution. Recognition provides validation; without it, an identity seems almost irrelevant. Authenticity, therefore, cannot be so extreme that others in an individual's society cannot recognize one's expression of identity.[33]

For Riverway Project participants, their new Jewish social network serves as the other in the dialogue that Taylor describes, the community and the tradition inherent in it that inspire and enable participants' ideas about the ways that they want to celebrate their Jewish heritage. Participants cannot determine what kind of Jews that they want to be without the cultural resources that Judaism offers and without their peers, who, as later chapters will reveal, stimulate their creativity, validate their decisions, and make their struggles easier. Participants' identities indeed can become varied and personal. But they are not created independent from Jewish memory or community. Through their dialogue with their past, participants come to be able to celebrate Judaism in a way recognizable to their grandparents; through their dialogue with each other, participants recognize each other's Jewish ideas and can celebrate together. Their individual interpretations come to be united and steeped in tradition.

The recognition of others helps participants' Jewishness, be interwoven into the fabric of the Jewish narrative, a part of Jewish society. Stuart Charmé acknowledges this, suggesting that as individuals search for an authentic Jewish identity, they explore a key question: "What is the relationship between 'authentic' Jewish traditions and a Jew's

[32] Taylor, *Authenticity*, 47-48
[33] Taylor, *Authenticity,* 48-53

personal sense of 'authenticity'?"[34] Indeed, this is exactly the question with which participants delight in struggling. Fundamentally, participants have not dismissed Judaism from their lives because their exercise of their fundamental authentic self includes their finding a way to celebrate Judaism. Ultimately, the meaning of culture, community, ritual, and God may have shifted in light of participants' additional social networks, but these elements of Jewish tradition do oblige an important personal struggle for participants, one that must take place in order for participants to be an authentic Jew in their own eyes. They are not looking to abandon Judaism but rather to help it work for them given the pressures that they feel from other forces in their lives.

It is only with the social network that they find in the Riverway Project that participants can discover the full sense of authenticity that they crave. This network, rooted in Jewish tradition, comprised of their peers, or Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties equally challenged to merge their differing values, gives participants the resources and the freedom that they need to explore their identity puzzles. As they participate in the offerings of the Riverway Project, their negotiation of their Jewishness becomes less fraught and problematic; this network that itself negotiates universal and particular values helps its participants to do so as well.

The Riverway Project relies essentially on three pedagogic areas through which participants discover their authentic Jewish selves: community development, critical thinking, and ownership of Jewishness and Jewish involvement. I turn now to an exploration of these three areas.

[34] Stuart Charme, "Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity." *Jewish Social Studies* 6:2 133-55.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## "MORE COMPLETE IN COMBINATION":

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN THE RIVERWAY PROJECT

The 2005 DAWN celebration of *Shavuot* in San Francisco[1] saw dozens of adults in their twenties and thirties up on a Sunday night at 3:00 a.m., sitting on a grungy club floor with beers and mixed drinks, talking about why they care about Judaism and Jewishness. They came together for what one of the event's producers called a slippery holiday, one without an easily understandable or immediately relevant purpose and background. Indeed, unlike *Hanukah* or Passover, *Shavuot* has no easily identifiable Christian equivalent, no clear and heroic narrative to which its potential observers can subscribe. American Jews do not flock to its celebration. Yet, hundreds came to Club Six at 8:00 pm for this eclectic celebration of the holiday, and seven hours later, about thirty of us were left to contemplate our reasons for being there in the first place. As my peers around me mused about their simultaneous interest in religion and confusion about the presence of God in their lives, one participant leaned over to me and whispered, "This is a chance to sit around and talk about Judaism, which I really wanted – it's a way to connect, you

[1] As described in Chapter Two, DAWN was an all-night multi-media celebration of the holiday of *Shavuot*. Located in a club in the somewhat edgy, somewhat seedy, somewhat artsy SoMa district of San Francisco, DAWN showed movies, featured singer/ songwriters and bands, asked participants to record their reactions to visual art on pieces of flip-chart paper, sponsored a tasting of He'Brew beer, and offered text study, all alongside a cash bar.

know." They talked not only about *Shavuot* but also about what it means to be Jewish, learning and gaining strength from each other as they did so. Indeed, they came for connection to a holiday esoteric but relevant precisely because it helps them access the community of their past and form community in their present. They were awake at dawn on a work night because of their hunger for this concept called community.

Community to these party-goers is multi-fold. They want to be more than the Jews that they are but with their existing social circles and knowledge, they know that they cannot do so. To be the Jews whom they want to be, they need peers with whom to celebrate and they need to know how to celebrate. Community offers them both social circle and educational setting. At DAWN participants entered a familiar kind of community in a comfortable and habitual way (paying to get into a bar) and learned about each other as they wandered through art exhibits and listened to *Shavuot* related artistic performances. After studying *Torah* and *kabbalistic* [mystical] texts about *Shavuot* and Judaism, as they entered the light of the morning they had connected to others enough to talk about their big questions about religion and Judaism, creating the Jewish celebration that they craved.

The Riverway Project participants whom I interviewed and observed seek this kind of community. They see it as mandatory to their Jewish lives. It is what brings them from their homes on Friday nights not to the bar but to prayer services, on Tuesday nights not to a restaurant but to the collective study of *Torah*. Their search for community stems from their rootlessness, from their desire to connect to a group that will envelop them in something greater than themselves. Their search also stems from a desire for validation and safety in their exploration of Judaism. Outside of the Riverway Project, many lack a

similarly vibrant group of peers with whom to celebrate Judaism. They have countless questions about Jewishness: about how to integrate the celebration of their Jewish identity into their lives, about how to interact with ritual and Jewish community, about their relationship to God. They wonder if they can be actively Jewish given their political leanings and how they can integrate Judaism's traditions into their political ideas. They have vague ideas about wanting ritual but do not know what ritual might hold for them. With their nonreligious peers, they lack a kinship group with whom to ask their questions. They need a new Jewish community with which to celebrate and learn, a strong community to combat the influences pushing them away from Judaism.

The Riverway Project excels at constructing for participants such a community of safety, belonging, and growth. In it, participants find the new social network that they need in order to build the Jewish life that they want. Following Morrison's lead, participants blend together into an intimate community, becoming interdependent in their Jewish exploration. With each other, they learn what it means to be Jewish, testing Jewish ideas and rituals within their new social network. Their community becomes a mutual project in the exploration of Judaism, a means by which they share with each other their questions about Judaism and explore these questions together.

As a result, their new social network becomes a fundamental mechanism for participants' Jewish growth. As Lave and Wenger's "situated learning" theory suggests, the community offers resources, validation, and a space for experimentation, becoming participants' curriculum and classroom.[2] Paradoxically, this community is so strong and participants' feelings of community so potent that they become dependent on this social

[2] Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

network to realize what Judaism means to them individually. Their Jewish tradition becomes significant to them as individuals but something played out primarily as a collective.

To examine how social networks facilitate Jewish growth, this chapter focuses on how Morrison constructs the Riverway Project community, why community is important to him and to participants, and then on how participants' Jewishness develops in the community that Morrison constructs. I begin the chapter by sharing my observations of how a community develops in the Riverway Project, how it moves from participants' anxiety about Jewish community and celebration to profound collective Jewish celebrations. I then use Morrison's ideas of community to make the process of community development more clear. His theories of community building give my observations a context and nuance. Participants' ideas of community demonstrate that the community that Morrison constructs works so well because it follows the definitions of community that Morrison uses. The ideas of Morrison and participants are in sync, so he can help participants pursue and develop the Jewish community that they imagine. At the chapter's close, I use situated learning theory to examine more conceptually how community can promote growth in the Riverway Project and in any similar setting. It is situated learning that best demonstrates how communities serve as educational settings and why a social network facilitates so efficiently the Jewish growth of Riverway Project participants. They move from their fear to a safe exploration of Judaism and to developing Jewish social capital, and they do so because they have the foundation of their community.

## ROLE OF COMMUNITY: PRAYING, LEARNING, DEVELOPING JEWISH SOCIAL CAPITAL

Communities come together repeatedly in the Riverway Project: at Soul Food Friday, around *Shabbat* dinner, over study, in Israel. But community is most palpably felt in the Neighborhood Circle prayer services, where voices blend together into an interdependent community to welcome *Shabbat*.[3] This analysis of Riverway Project community, then, is founded in a portrait of such a service. The service that I describe is a composite of various services of this kind that I observed, a collection of rich moments illustrative of the various elements of community present at a Neighborhood Circle. Where appropriate, I also share data that describes aspects of the life of other Riverway Project communities. I close this section with a deep description of community formation on the Riverway Project Israel trip, outlining this event in order to weave together various elements of the evolution of a Riverway Project community.

As the data will reveal, Riverway Project participants with little Jewish social capital can enter the Neighborhood Circle prayer service because it seems safe, because they find it as they do the home of any other friend, because they do not need to prepare in order to participate. Once they are engaged in the community, Morrison then immerses participants in a Jewish social network, leading them through prayer with strength and certainty. He helps participants to find their place in this community by ensuring that they cannot hide from each other, demanding that they share their names and some personal details as simple as their neighborhoods and as deep as their motivation for their Jewish connection. Ultimately, from this place of belonging, participants feel able to participate

[3] As described in the Introduction, the Neighborhood Circle prayer service is a prayer gathering in a participant's living room of about twenty individuals from a certain Boston neighborhood. During my fieldwork, Neighborhood Circle services maintained several consistent elements: Morrison and his guitar led the service, participants gathered on folding chairs and overstuffed couches, and hosts provided a warm setting and some or too much finger food for after the service.

in prayer despite their hesitancy, particularly because of Morrison's effective structuring of an accessible prayer experience. Participants become deeply comfortable with each other and also with prayer and as a result, they learn from each other. Moreover, their community becomes, to cite one participant's idea, the lens through which they understand and learn from their experience. They become each other's teachers, comfortable in community because of their new Jewish social capital, their community the very tool that raises their Jewish social capital. Here, I provide data that supports each of these ideas, examining their community's formation, their becoming comfortable with each other, the nature of their prayer, and then how these aspects of community development merged to form a strong community of Israel trip participants.

### *Becoming Rooted in a New Community*

Jill Hirsch and Matt Kent live in a tree-lined neighborhood of Brookline set just behind the main streets, a central Brookline location but one far enough away from the traffic to be still on a warm, sunny spring evening. Their apartment is one of about thirty in its complex; six bricked walkways lead to the building's different entrances, the long building spread low over a good chunk of the block. Jill and Matt live on the third floor. As I park, voices of those already gathered for this 6:30 prayer service drift down to me from their apartment's open window.

I see the colored glass mezuzah on the wall outside their door before I see their apartment number, and I push open the propped door to find Morrison and his wife Molly setting up black plastic folding chairs and laying purple Temple Israel *Qabbalat Shabbat*[4] booklets on each chair. Centered in front of Jill and Matt's maroon over-stuffed couch is

[4] "Temple Israel Qabbalat Shabbat" (Boston, Massachusetts: Temple Israel, nd).

a coffee table laden with glasses of water, candlesticks, two white Shabbat candles, and matches. Opposite the couch, an entertainment unit holds the television and stereo system and books: those from Jill's time at law school, recent biographies of Katherine Graham and John Adams, travel guides to central Europe and Turkey, and *The Jew in the Lotus*[5] and *Jewish Literacy.*[6] A *ketubah* [marriage contract] hangs to the right of the entertainment unit. Green vines are intertwined with its generic English and traditional Aramaic text. The living room extends into the dining room, which has several bottles of Trader Joe's wines and a covered *challah* ready for post-prayer service rituals. Some greet each other appreciatively, seeming to know each other from previous Riverway Project neighborhood events. Several people are standing in the kitchen just off of the dining room, chatting. Jill is following their eighteen-month old into his bedroom.

Ritual objects and Jewish books are not unusual at Neighborhood Circles, but they are not ubiquitous, either. Some homes have no *mezuzah* or *ketubah* or candlesticks, nothing to mark the home as Jewish. Others have only one or two of these; sometimes a coffee-table book about Israel will be mixed in with others about the American West or Diane Arbus. Usually, the host will provide the *challah*. Occasionally, Morrison brings it with him and it is freed from its bag seconds before it is eaten. It rarely sits covered as it is tonight.[7]

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[5] Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (California: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
[6] Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).
[7] The lone *challah* present at the Neighborhood Circle differs from historic Jewish tradition and law. According to biblical and then rabbinic law, two *challot* are used on *Shabbat*, to represent God's awarding to the Israelites of a double portion of *mannah* before *Shabbat* during their wandering in the desert. Both sit covered while the blessing over the wine is said.

It is also worth noting here that the other ritual objects I mention – the presence of the *mezuzah* on the doorpost, the presence of the *ketubah,* marriage contract, and *Shabbat* candles – are similarly prescribed in Jewish tradition. The *Shema* is one of the most ancient biblical texts, and its associated biblical verses dictate that its words should be marked in Jewish doorposts. Rabbinic law later delineated that all doorways

Thus far, then, the norms of the night follow those of a typical adult get-together more than a prayer service. Participants settle into the Kent-Hirsch home as they would were they at the home of any other acquaintance, letting themselves in and schmoozing as on any other night. The *mezuzah* and *challah* sit nondescriptly, in the background of their evening. Participants can enter the prayer service because it seems not to be a prayer service, because they need nothing to join this community but the courage to meet new people.

Moreover, any home can host a service; hosts can do much or nothing to fulfill their role. With his chairs and prayer booklets, not the host but Morrison makes any space *Shabbat*-ready. Tonight, a *mezuzah* marks the door; next week, the *mezuzah* might be absent. The diverse touches of Jewish tradition from the different hosts over time send a message: that there are many possible ways to establish a home as Jewish. The *ketubah* and *challah* act as educational resources from which to learn, not as part of a mandatory or unidentifiable code that all cannot follow. At the same time, the ritual objects – their presence, absence, and use – define the community as theirs, as the way that Judaism is celebrated in the Riverway Project.

The service begins. "Shabbat Shalom, everybody," Morrison calls out to the group, about sixteen, to signal the start of the service. "Let's start. More folks might be coming, but let's go." His guitar is at his side on his portable guitar stand; his watch, a cup of water, and Xeroxed texts for later study are on the floor near him. Participants find

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are to have a *mezuzah,* which is to be placed on the right side of the doorway as one enters and at the beginning of the upper third of the doorway's height at a slant, and that the *mezuzah* should store the words of the *Shema,* as biblically dictated. Rabbinic law mandates that a wedding *ketubah,* or contract, is to outline the obligations, financial and otherwise, that a husband takes on at marriage; a variety of instructions legislate the signing of the contract in order for it to be binding. Finally, custom, and later, law, suggest that at least two *Shabbat* candles are to be used, commemorating the double commandment to observe (*shamor*) and remember (*zachor*) the Sabbath. Candles are to be long enough to burn throughout the meal and are to be lit at least twenty (or eighteen) minutes prior to the onset of *Shabbat* at sundown.

seats around the room on the couch, ottoman, and folding chairs, creating a circle of sorts. We sing to begin the service, a lively *niggun* [melody] made popular by Shlomo Carlebach. Morrison concludes the singing and asks Sam, who is closest to the candlesticks, to light the candles. After some trouble lighting the matches – and some pregnant tension in the room as we wait – Sam lights both candles and looks up hesitantly. He starts to cover his eyes and interrupts himself: "Wait, am I supposed to move my hands?" Morrison assures him, "Don't worry, we'll do it together." Sam laughs nervously, explaining, "I'm trying to remember what my mother used to do." We laugh with him, and Morrison invites, "Join me." He begins the blessing over the candles, singing a rich, slow tune, staring at the flames as he sings.[8] A few participants in the circle close their eyes, swaying to the melody. A few participants look at the words in their prayer booklets. A few participants do not sing, and they look at other participants, or the floor, or the candles.

With this introduction, Morrison leads participants through Friday night blessings and prayers.[9] When the notes of prayer have faded and the guitar has been put away, when closing announcements of next events have been made and questions have been asked by participants, Morrison signals those nearest the wine to pour it and pass it

[8] After Morrison assures that Sam will not light the candles alone, Morrison leads the community in their, or his, version of the candle-lighting ritual: Morrison stares into the flame as they sing together. Several notes about this ritual are worth making here. First, it has become custom for candle-lighters to move their hands over the flames, an act that Sam seems to be looking for in his memory. Many interpretations of this act exist; one suggests that the candle-lighters should spread the light throughout the room by moving their hands over the flames. This tradition is not something that Morrison or every Riverway Project participant lighting the candles usually enacts during Neighborhood Circles. Second, Sam, a man, lights the candles; the rabbis commanded that first a woman and, if a woman is not present, then a man should light the candles. Finally, it is rabbinic law to light the candles and then close one's eyes while reciting the blessing: Because one should not enjoy an action until after the blessing over the action is said, and because one cannot light fire on *Shabbat* (and once the candles have been lit *Shabbat* has begun), by closing one's eyes when one says the blessing, one lights fire before *Shabbat,* says the blessing and welcomes *Shabbat,*, and then opens one's eyes to enjoy the action. When Morrison stares into the candles, he models a different kind of behavior and does not participate in this mandate from rabbinic law.

[9] The bulk of the service is described later in the chapter.

around the group. With cups in hand, Morrison leads the group in singing *Kiddush* over the wine to its traditional melody. When he is finished he announces, "*L'chaim*," raising his glass quickly. A few follow him, also holding their glasses high. We move over to the dining room table and cluster around it and the *challah*. Morrison invites everyone to join him and we sing the blessing over the *challah* together. He begins to rip it apart and to pass pieces around as we finish the blessing. "*B'teavon*[10] everybody," he wishes. "*Shabbat shalom*."[11]

Inevitably, the evening continues beyond these blessings. Participants gather over a cheese platter and some grapes. The hostess, Jill, begins to talk to the couple with the newborn. The four-year old pulls at her mother's khakis as her mother talks with another woman. I begin a conversation with the couple near me about what they both do during the day; we discover that we share a love of doing our schoolwork in Cambridge coffee shops. Forty-five minutes later, the cheese is almost gone and about eight group members are still talking. I follow out a group of four; newly acquainted, they are going down the street to continue their conversation and their time together over dinner at a pub. From experience, I know that their association and conversation will continue long beyond the service.

Participants become rooted in a new Jewish social network in just their first few minutes together. They began together without needing prior knowledge of communal

[10] Meaning, *bon appetite*.
[11] When Morrison rips the *challah* before completing the blessing and then speaks to participants before eating the *challah*, thereby completing the ritual act, he is adapting the ritual from rabbinic law. Rabbinic law legislates that two whole (not yet ripped or cut) *challot* should be used on *Shabbat,* commemorating the double portion of mannah given to the Israelites while wandering in the desert. As stated earlier, rabbinic law dictates that two *challot* will be blessed. In addition, all actions from which individuals derive pleasure must immediately follow blessings in rabbinic law: When Morrison wishes participants "*L'chaim*" and "*b'teavon*," he is similarly adapting rabbinic law to this community, interrupting the flow of blessing and action by wishing participants these greetings.

norms, finding the Kent-Hirsch home as they would that of any friends, the task of entering a Jewish community less threatening because it was couched in behaviors that they understand. But when they entered, they could take note of what it means to have a Jewish home, seeing the various ritual and cultural objects that their Jewish peers might have. During the evening, they saw and touched some of the ritual objects that turn Friday night into *Shabbat*. They moved quickly from their typical social norms into a Jewish opportunity and a Jewish community.

During the evening, participants could follow Morrison through the elements of their Jewish Friday night. His actions wove them together into their common purpose. Participants did not follow Morrison's cues exactly. They looked at the floor, or their hands; Morrison toasted them (wishing them "*l'chaim*") but they did not reciprocate. But they do not need to follow him in order to be inducted into Jewish life. As when Morrison, and not the hosts, makes a living room a comfortable space for prayer, Morrison's own certainty of action gives intention to their social network. His acts and leadership establish their job together as a Jewish one; their mutual task becomes that of celebrating Judaism and learning from Morrison. When Morrison asks one of them – Sam, in this case – to participate in leading the service, Sam's participation despite his hesitancy conveys to participants that they can co-lead this community even without comfort with Judaism. They need little prior knowledge of Jewish life and little confidence to join this social network.

As they go through a prayer service together, their mutual celebration intertwines them; they become individuals dependent on each other for celebration. They grow comfortable with each other and also with their mutual activity, with the norms of a

Jewish Friday night. But this interconnectedness does not occur automatically. Morrison moves these connections along, helping participants to develop intimate relationships even in a sizable community. This intimacy allows trust to develop and, consequently, participants to grow not only by learning the norms of their Jewish community but also through their interactions with each other.

### *Hard to Hide: The Experience of Community in the Riverway Project*

Very simply, the Riverway Project network becomes more intimate because Morrison ensures that participants know and interact with each other. Anonymity is not allowed.

The Neighborhood Circle service at the Kent-Hirsch home begins when Morrison calls participants together and leads a *niggun,* a melody. It continues with Morrison asking for introductions: "Let's just go around and say our names, first and last, and later we'll say some other relevant details. So, I'm Jeremy Morrison." Participants go around the circle and share their names, Morrison asking them to include last names when they omit them. I only remember about half of the names. But I do discover some interrelationships: a mother introduces her four-year-old daughter, a couple holds hands as they introduce themselves, another couple introduces their infant at their feet. As we begin the service, I become glad that we shared our names. It feels less like I am engaging in something private, praying, with total strangers.

We share again, later, halfway through the service. We end a moment of silence with the song *Salaam*, its quick melody lightening the pensive air that has filled this room of prayer. When we finish singing, Morrison wishes the group *Shabbat shalom* and participants respond. He asks, "Let's go around again and say our names and anything

else in particular you would like – work is good. … Anyway, and also exactly where you live, cause there are people from all over, and you might meet a neighbor or two." As we go around, echoes of *Salaam* in our minds, the room feels more relaxed than it did when we shared our names forty-five minutes earlier. Participants interact with each other, not just speaking one after the other: a participant shares his profession and a few others ask questions or someone says, "I was in Cambridge three times this week" and someone else says, "Hey, that's not so bad." We feel more in conversation, and as participants share where they live in this small neighborhood, discovering geographic connections and even that some live on the same street, we become more intertwined. These are the connections that lead to friendships and *Shabbat* dinners, to Jewish community in participants' neighborhoods.

These introductions and this kind of participant interaction are so important in the Riverway Project that they happen in large settings as well as small ones.

At Soul Food Friday[12] the congregation finishes the *Amidah* and sits expectantly, waiting for the leader to inspire them. In many Jewish prayer communities, this is the time for a sermon or *d'var Torah.* Similarly, at Soul Food Friday, Morrison usually uses the time for study of the week's Torah portion. But he also uses it to create community:

> Morrison: Take a moment now to say hello to someone you didn't know when you came. Feel free to get up and move around, say hello. (beat)
>
> Now. (beat)

[12] As described in the Introduction, Soul Food Friday is a Friday night celebration of *Shabbat* held in the Temple's sanctuary. Approximately 300 people participate in this prayer service that uses a three-piece rock band and concludes with an *oneg* of Jewish "soul" food including chicken soup and hummus and Israeli salad.

Here, it should be noted that Soul Food Friday follows the *kashrut* policy of Temple Israel (and in fact many Reform congregations), serving food in "kosher style." Food from non-kosher caterers is served. In an acknowledgement of kosher practice, dishes mixing milk and meat (meat lasagna, for example) are not served, although milk and meat are offered on the same table.

Do it.

The urgency with which Morrison demands that participants meet each other breaks down their social boundaries, pushing at those so comfortable in their seats. Slowly, people begin to meet those around them, asking names and what they do during their days. People cross rows to say hello to those whom they know. They leave their seats to meet friends of friends. Eventually, the room is charged with a different energy, an energy of connection to each other rather than one of focus on of their leader. About eight minutes later, Morrison calls everyone back together, and, slow to finish their conversations, some weaving in and out of rows or crossing the sanctuary to return to their seats, all eventually sit still.

From these self-directed introductions, Morrison often transitions to a different means of introductions, beginning something like this:

> Morrison: Okay, sit, sit, sit, sit, sit. There's a saying that … the Messiah will come when everyone knows each others' names. … I like that. And so each week when we get together when we have different Riverway activities and certainly things here at the Temple, we go around and say names. We can't do that here. There are wonderfully too many people to go around and say everybody's name. But we're gonna introduce a few people here this evening. So.

Morrison walks around the sanctuary, winding around the rows. On this night, he picks someone to introduce to the group, stops in front of him and puts the microphone in front of his mouth. "What's your name," he says, not as a question but as a statement, with great emphasis on each word. The dialogue continues:

> Paul: Paul.
>
> Morrison: You look scared. You look very, very scared. What's your last name?
>
> Paul: Stock
>
> Morrison: Nice. Nice. You've been here before?
>
> (Paul nods)

Morrison: Where do you live?

Paul: Framingham.

Morrison: Framingham. He's come from Framingham (whoos and claps). Is anyone else from farther than Framingham?

Many: Oh yeah.

Morrison: Oh yeah – where'd you come from? (walks over to someone else)

Man: Stoughton

Woman: Middleboro

Morrison: Stoughton and Middleboro. What about over there, sir?

Man: Chelmsford

Morrison: Chelmsford. Chelmsford. Welcome. Welcome. Revere (with great flourish and in a faux Boston accent). This group is from Revere. A great fan of the band, this group. Big fans. Where are other folks from. What's your name.

Dave: Dave.

Morrison: Dave – (spoken as a question, as if looking for a last name)

Dave: Dave Hope.

Morrison: Dave Hope. Oh wow. … Dave, what do you do for a – what do you do during the week. (beat) What's your work?

Dave: I work at Fidelity.

Morrison: Fidelity. Anyone else from Fidelity? (man raises hand) Oh my. I know it's a big place but do you know each other? (walks over to him) What's your name?

Stuart: Stuart.

Morrison: Stuart what?

Stuart: Appleman

Morrison: Appleman.

Dave: (across the room) Hi, Stuart. (laughter)

Morrison: Where's your office, Stuart?

Dave: On Boylston Street.

Morrison: Are you on Boylston?

Stuart: No – I'm downtown.

Morrison: Different zone, different zone. Is this anyone's first time? (hands go up)

That's cool. Let me see. Raise your hands. … Oh my goodness, this is great. How do we – it sounds so hokey, how do you make people feel comfortable? How do you make people feel safe? … I mean, there's a connection already

> coming into this room – you all came. You are all here. But now that you've come in – is there a way to move people to where they're comfortable. …

In these scenes, Morrison engages in two means of introductions, those motivated by participants and those that he leads. As he said, even somewhat sardonically, names are so important that knowing them might bring the messianic age, a time of perfection. More than asking each other's names, Morrison also requests personal information: where participants live and what they do professionally. Once participants have shared their names, Morrison demands that they use them; during text study, when students refer to each other's comments, Morrison insists that they call each other by name as they do so. "Wait," he exclaims, "Don't point. What's her name?" As on this night, at many Soul Food Fridays, Morrison chose to devote part or all of his time normally given to a *d'var Torah* to helping participants know each other. Building relationships among participants is as important a way to use this time as is study.

Morrison closed this exchange at Soul Food Friday with a question about helping people to feel comfortable, linking their knowledge of each other with comfort in their community. This comfort and their interdependence are his true goals. Morrison facilitates the development of comfort when he asks that participants leave their seats and interact on their own. Their comfort can continue when Morrison asks in front of the audience where participants live and what they do. When he links coworkers to each other in the moment, Morrison creates immediate connections and provides a foundation for further conversation after the service, just as when participants share their exact street locations during Neighborhood Circles. As participants call across the sanctuary, sharing their department names and building locations, they shrink the room and the community. Their commonalities remind all participants that inter-connections among them exist. By

building connections in these multiple ways – asking participants to meet each other on their own and then guiding their interaction – Morrison reminds participants why they have come to Soul Food Friday. He turns a large room of disparate individuals into a group with things in common, a shared purpose, and the promise of further connection. He creates the potential for them to be comfortable with each other because of their connections.

Morrison's efforts toward comfort might seem contrary to his actions. As he puts the microphone before people at random some might be intimidated or reluctant to share themselves publicly. But Morrison manages these Donahue-like introductions with certainty and confidence, affirming this kind of sharing as a crucial part of what a community is, as not able to be ignored because participants are uncomfortable or afraid. Community is built, he implies, not on anonymity but on exposure. Participants should not be able to come and go without being noticed. Rather, community members should be encouraged to invest something in the larger group, even something as simple as their name and place of work. In this way, community begins to demand and also enable a deep sense of wellbeing, even safety, in which members are recognized and validated as human beings, as people with ups and downs and people who need each other. Participants begin to be recognized in this community for who they are.

There are three other fundamental ways that Morrison builds this kind of community, each of which involves ensuring that participants are and feel heard. First, it should be noted that other than Soul Food Friday, the Riverway Project is facilitated primarily through small communities, often outside of the public and somewhat formal space of the synagogue. The Israel trip was intended to take only as many participants as

a small bus would hold. Fifteen or twenty participants lean over Bibles for Torah and Tonics; the same number comes together for Neighborhood Circle Shabbat dinners and prayer services. Mining for Meaning met in students' homes, its participation limited to those who could fit in an apartment living room or around a dining room table. Participants have trouble remaining quiet or unnoticed in these conversations, as all voices and ideas are needed to move the conversation forward.

Morrison's personal interactions with each participant also help to ensure that participants are not anonymous. In living rooms, Morrison greets people individually, asking basic questions about them when he first meets them, checking with them for updates if he already knows them. At Soul Food Friday, as the band plays introductory *niggunim*, Morrison walks in and out of the aisles, introducing himself to those he does not know, learning about the different groups sitting together throughout the sanctuary, establishing a foundation that will enable him to talk additionally with participants after the service. When he interacts with participants he looks them in the eye and listens only to them, ignoring other demands on him. He prioritizes and engages in genuine interaction with participants, dedicating time to getting to know them, ensuring that he makes a connection with them and that they do not leave without being recognized and feeling valued.

Finally, Morrison ensures that participants have meaningful material, content for discussion that encourages them to make connections with each other and to interact. Often, this material consists of ancient Jewish texts. Study is part of almost every Riverway Project activity that occurs (the exception being an occasional Soul Food Friday), and it always offers a low-risk way for a group to form, a chance for participants

to listen to each other's comments, respond to them, and learn from each other about a neutral topic. They can build a foundation of interactions and an assuredness with each other from which they can converse further after the service.

Occasionally, Morrison asks participants to share why they have come to the Riverway Project, generating an opportunity for participants to interact around their questions and ideas about Judaism, leading participants into more personal conversations. This was well illustrated one Soul Food Friday. In the same way that he facilitates introductions, Morrison took time before giving a sermon to facilitate conversation among participants about why they come to Soul Food Friday:

> *Shabbat shalom.* … I wanted to know why you are here. I guess you could understand that sort of existentially. … But what I really want to know is, why you are here tonight. Why you are here – I think sometimes we forget to ask the question.

To form a community, individuals come together around a common purpose. Sometimes, Morrison admitted, we forget to ask the question that might matter most: what brings each of us into this collective, why this common purpose is important to us. Hands were raised almost immediately, and Morrison moved from participant to participant with his typical speed and sense of expectation. When he arrived at each speaker he asked the speaker again, "Why are you here," creating a conversation between him and the speaker, reiterating the importance of the question, and showing that he was listening to the participant's response. Participants explained that they were there "to take [their] mind off work," "to be inspired," "to pray," "to sing," "to be in the company of others," "to celebrate." Morrison repeated the participants' responses as they said them to be sure that others could hear. In his doing so, this conversation became an opportunity to second and support each other's ideas, to engage with each other even in this large setting. This

agreement continued as participants nodded, murmured, and laughed at the responses of their peers. In this process, an important topic of conversation was introduced to the Riverway Project and a way to relate to each other was demonstrated and affirmed. Participants should get to the heart of the matter, Morrison intimated, asking each other about their purposes in being together and getting to know each other deeply through their questions and attention to each others' responses. In the exercise itself, participants became even less anonymous and more integrated into a common community with a common purpose.

In these ways, Morrison initiates participants into Jewish community and then helps them to feel a sense of belonging, to recognize their place in the community. Participants do not merely exist in a social network, tied together namelessly or imperceptibly by their common Jewish experience. They have the opportunity to come to know one another and to be comfortable together. In Morrison's community, participants find it hard to hide, and in doing so, they become rooted in a new social network.

These previous sections described the process of participants becoming comfortable in the Riverway Project and in their new social network. In these next sections, I focus on how the community that they form deepens through prayer and through their study of Jewish texts, and how that experience of community, in turn, deepens their comfort in Jewish community. The Riverway Project takes them from their fear of not knowing the "code" to Jewish life to a place of intellectual and spiritual interdependence in which they rely on each other for Jewish validation and exploration.

### *Prayer: Taking Risks in the Safety of Others*

I just introduced the Neighborhood Circle by illustrating its very beginning and its ending. I described participants' nervous laughter, alluding to their simultaneous hesitance to engage and their curiosity. At Morrison's request they try new songs; they mimic his actions. They are willing to experiment no matter the newness of the material. Here, I offer a more complete picture of Riverway Project prayer, delving further into this experimentation and tentativeness. I walk through a typical living room-based Riverway Project prayer service and participants' interaction with different prayers, which illustrates participants' discomfort with Jewish life, their lack of Jewish social capital, and their participation despite their discomfort. I reveal that the tension of Riverway Project prayer lies in participants' uncertainty and that prayer's power in community building lies in the strong voice of the community. This section delves into this dichotomy of tension and power, of hesitancy and resonance. It explains how Morrison's leadership in prayer allows Riverway Project participants to become comfortable with prayer, to move from uncertainty toward community and resonance.

After introductions at the Neighborhood Circle service, Morrison introduces a *niggun*, a tune without words, emphasizing its accessibility: "If this is your first time at a Riverway service like this, we do a lot of singing together. … Of tunes that you'll get to know. And many things repeat … what we start with we'll finish with, so you'll have another chance on the next go round." He begins to sing a Hasidic melody, "*ki va moed,*"[13] slowly and without the words, singing "yai, dai, dai, dai, dai." Participants sing this repeatedly, picking up energy and volume as they go, clapping at Morrison's

[13] Morrison did not sing the words, but "*ki va moed*" comes from the text of Psalm 102:14. It refers to the messianic time and means literally, "the time has come." The tune that Morrison used, a common one, was popularized by Shlomo Carlebach.

prompting. Several people close their eyes as they sing, including Morrison. Through this song, the group transitions from the normalcy of the week and getting together with peers to the specialness and even sanctity of *Shabbat*. Their voices sound the tune in unison, filling the room and preparing the space for prayer.

"Page 2." Morrison picks up his guitar again and begins *Lecha Dodi,* a poem of intricate Hebrew that can be sung to many tunes. Morrison chooses a peppy, consistent tune that is easy to follow. During the four verses that they sing[14] Morrison's voice clearly leads the others. He sings loudly and carefully, pronouncing every syllable. He does not drop his voice or stop to catch his breath. He seems to know that he is leading this and that the community might not go on without him if he stops or fumbles the words. Voices grow louder during the chorus; it seems as if many more in the group join these easier-to-sing words. It is a common custom during *Lecha Dodi* to rise at the fourth verse, metaphorically greeting the Sabbath bride by bowing toward the door at the last line of the verse. Tonight, at this service, participants are comfortably settled in their seats as they near the verse. Morrison asks, "Please rise," and stands at the beginning of the verse. Participants follow him, facing each other in their circle, and when they come to the end of the verse and its line, "*Boi kallah*,"[15] perhaps a third of the participants bow in place, some once, some twice.

[14] Throughout this description of the prayer service, I include some details about Morrison's liturgical choices, many of which are very similar to those made in many Reform congregations. These choices are not part of the larger story of this dissertation, and so I do not overtly focus on them or on their import for the Riverway Project. However, readers interested in the differences among Reform and other types of prayer may find them important. Most frequently, it should be noted, shifts that are made include these: Parts of the traditional liturgy are omitted, the liturgy that should be said continuously (according to rabbinic law) is broken by English readings or songs, and the community participates in prayer all together, reciting words in one voice that in congregations with more traditional liturgy are said only by the prayer leader or by the congregation. Again, these shifts that are made are shifts that are made frequently in Reform congregations.

[15] Meaning, "Come, bride."

From *Lecha Dodi* Morrison shifts directly into the chords for Rachelle Nelson's tune for the *Bar'chu*, the traditional call to worship.[16] Participants remain standing and begin to sing "yai dai dai" as the tune demands; participants then sing the entire piece together, moving from the Hebrew back into "yai dai dai." At the first line of the Hebrew, many participants bow; one or two more do so at the second line of the Hebrew, when the congregation typically responds to the prayer leader. Morrison then begins to read in Hebrew the traditional Friday night liturgical blessing *Maariv Aravim* that acknowledges God's creation: the stars and earth, darkness and light. Many join him, most seeming to follow the Hebrew or Hebrew transliteration in front of them. Others stand still, their faces expressionless. Still standing, Morrison begins another melody, singing "yai dai" to another *Hasidic* tune that accompanies a line in the liturgical piece that is next in our prayer booklets. His resonant voice fills the room. After singing the tune three times without words, Morrison points participants to the line in the text, calling out, "Five lines up from the bottom in the Hebrew on page seven. You'll get it." He begins, "*Ki hem hayinu v'orech yameinu, oo v'hem negeh yomam v'laila …*".[17] Participants sing the words together, celebrating with Morrison the meaning of these words: that all have the opportunity to study Jewish texts and that this study can sustain. As they sing the Hebrew, Morrison again closes his eyes and taps his foot to the soulful melody, supporting the group with his guitar. A few others join him, their feet moving or their hands tapping on their thighs to the beat. Participants sing the Hebrew again and again, voices growing stronger and increasingly filling the room with spirit. They conclude this

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[16] I appreciate the assistance of Josh Nelson (of the band The Josh Nelson Project) in identifying the tunes' sources that I share in this chapter.

[17] These words come from a part of the liturgy (*Ahavat Olam*) about God's love for the Jewish people and God's gift of Torah and commandments to the people. As explained in Chapter Five, this line means, "for they [the *mitzvot*] are our life and the length of our days and on them we will meditate day and night."

tune the way that they started, lowering their voices as they near the end, slowing the music down, following Morrison's lead on the guitar until they are singing "yai dai" slowly, pausing between each sound that they make, accompanying the slowing guitar.

When it is quiet, without calling out a page number or interrupting the silence that the music framed, Morrison begins to sing *Shema Yisrael* slowly, holding each word for five or six seconds. Others join in, holding the words with him. His eyes are closed as are those of about half of the participants; one or two cover their eyes with a hand, tilting their faces down toward their prayer booklets.[18] Morrison begins to sing the next piece of the liturgy, the *Ve'Ahavta*, sitting as he does so, and all follow.

As soon as these words of the *Ve'Ahavta* are completed, Morrison begins to play guitar again. As he plays vigorously, he directs participants for the first time in many minutes to a page number. *Mi Chamocha* celebrates the Israelite victory over the Egyptians and escape through the Red Sea. The tune he has selected for it is upbeat, beginning again with "yai dai." It moves quickly and begs for clapping and foot tapping. Few participants initially engage this way, though, and so as we sing Morrison proclaims, "The week's over. Relax. It turned into a beautiful day. It's wonderful to be here in this beautiful home. It's wonderful to be together so enjoy yourself, enjoy. It's not painful. It's not painful." He seems to want participants to feel the spirit of the song, to celebrate the joy of the Exodus from Egypt as we sing about it. Morrison stands up to help us move more easily and the group follows. Participants respond somewhat to his demand for them to relax: some sing more loudly, some clap, some tap their feet. As has already

[18] Those with their eyes closed or hands covering their eyes may be following a rabbinic custom: The rabbis legislated that great concentration must be taken while reciting the *Shema* – for example, other conversation should be stopped – and so many close their eyes in order to enact this concentration.

happened so many times on this night, as they sing, the group moves between Hebrew and “yai dai.”

From this piece, Morrison moves immediately into playing another Hasidic tune, *Kol Haneshama,* this one also setting a line from liturgy to an upbeat melody. As we sing “*hallelu, hallelu, hallelu*,” Morrison stops playing guitar and drums the beat on the guitar’s side, adding musical texture to our voices. He again moves into the next tune, *Ve’Shamru* from the liturgy, without stopping his guitar playing. We sing a typical tune sung in many communities on Friday nights. Also an upbeat tune, it follows naturally from the others and keeps the energy in the room high.

Already standing, Morrison puts aside his guitar and begins to sing a tune that leads into the *Amidah.* It, too, begins with a slow, almost mournful “yai dai dai” and leads into its Hebrew words, “*Adonai sefatai tiftach*…”.[19] Participants stand in place as they begin the *Amidah* together, singing its words to the traditional tune. They follow the prayer booklet for several pages, singing the first blessings of the *Amidah* together. After they recite *Kedushah* in Hebrew, Morrison sits down and the group follows. He begins to read an English piece that is in the prayer booklets and the group joins him:

> Grant us peace, thy most precious gift, O Thou eternal source of peace, and enable Israel to be its messenger unto the peoples of the earth. Bless our country that it may ever be a stronghold of peace, and its advocate in the council of nations. May contentment reign within its borders and health and happiness within its homes. Strengthen the bonds of friendship and fellowship among all the inhabitants of our land. Plant virtue in every soul, and may the love of Thy name hallow every home and every heart. Praised be Thou, Adonai, Giver of peace.[20]

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[19] In singing this tune, participants prepare for this prayer as they recite, “Eternal God, open my lips so my mouth may declare your glory.”

[20] As with many of the English readings in the Temple Israel prayerbook, the prayers included in the traditional *Amidah* inspired this reading. More specifically, the blessings that are summarized in this reading comprise the bulk and conclusion of the traditional *Amidah* prayer. They wish for peace, for a return to Zion, for messianic times, for abundance in life, for health and for happiness. “Temple Israel Qabbalat Shabbat” (Boston, Massachusetts: Temple Israel, nd), page 14.

Throughout the service thus far, participants' engagement has fluctuated: some sing loudly and consistently, others are silent. During the *Amidah,* their physical and verbal participation in prayer is most obvious. A few members of the group seem completely comfortable with the service. They close their eyes often during more melodious singing and they stand and sit with confidence and direction, as if they are anticipating the rhythms of the service. Others visibly engage in the service differently, or even not at all. Since the service's beginning, about five of the sixteen participants have been almost totally silent, their lips barely moving except sometimes to participate in singing "yai dai." Two of them are a couple, the husband's curly brown hair framing his motionless face, his hands holding but never opening his prayer booklet, the wife mumbling some words, occasionally turning pages in her prayer booklet, her eyes following the liturgy on the page. Another participant, a woman in her early thirties, stands and sits fluidly and makes almost no other motions: no foot tapping or clapping, her mouth rarely moving, her gaze most often falling on Morrison. Other group members participate more actively in the service, but still uneasily and inconsistently. Some sing sometimes and at other times look around anxiously or wondrously, their faces seemingly asking, "What is this thing that is happening here, and who are the people who are familiar with it?"

Participants' physical movements during prayer are also revealing.[21] At the beginning of the *Amidah* about half of the participants bow; a quarter of them bow again later in the prayer, and one or two bow a third time even later. Some bow quickly and almost without moving, their knees just barely standing; if you did not know what you

[21] There are rabbinic delineations that dictate when pray-ers are to bow during the *Amidah:* at the opening of the prayer and with certain accompanying steps, and then an additional three times, at the beginning and close of specific blessings.

were watching, you could miss it. Others bow deeply and decisively the first time, then almost half-bow the second time, their movement asking if they are doing the right thing. Their embodied hesitancy emits a fear of being wrong.

Despite the vocal withdrawal and physical uncertainty of many, the voice of the group as a whole is audibly present, strong and resonant. When Morrison is silent, letting the sound of the group emerge, the absence of his voice noticeable. Yet the sound without him is not anemic, just a few meager voices singing quietly. When Morrison introduces a new song, a majority of participants look to their inserted song sheets as he instructs them and they sound out the Hebrew words that are new to them. When we sing the first lines of the liturgical piece *Hashkiveinu,* for example, set to a soft tune that is easily sung in a round, some participants sing no matter how foreign the song seems to be to them. Many visibly stumble over the words but they are seemingly ready to experiment with Jewish song.

As I visited other religious communities of adults in their twenties and thirties during my fieldwork, both synagogue-based and institutionally independent, I saw the varied kinds of prayer experiences that community leaders shape, the wide and textured range of prayer behavior that adults in their twenties and thirties exhibit. In other communities, the prayer leaders stood stoic or they *shokeled*[22] fervently. Sometimes they banged on the table at which they stood, beating out a rhythm. Sometimes congregants built on that rhythm, clapping against their prayer books or against the pew in front of them, swaying back and forth or side to side. Congregants harmonized to the many melodies with which some prayer leaders led services or they dutifully recited the words

[22] *Shokeling* is the Yiddish term for moving one's head and shoulders up and down quickly as one prays or studies. For a further description of *shokeling*, see Samuel Heilman, *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 218-219.

to a flat tune. They danced throughout the congregation to seemingly endless choruses of "yai dai" and they prostrated themselves during the *Amidah* or the *Aleynu*. Having come late to services, some secluded themselves in the back of the room as they quickly said to themselves the prayers that they missed, sometimes holding their prayer books up to their faces as they concentrated, burying their faces in the yellowed pages, sometimes holding their hands palm-up to the sky, their prayer books on the seat next to them.

Communities varied in how much of the liturgy they read together, some communities sitting totally silent at times, others almost not silent at all during the entirety of the service. Sometimes, *kipot* were prevalent; men wore black satin skullcaps that the congregation made available, or men and women wore personalized, crocheted *kipot* bearing their Hebrew names or sports' team and music logos. Prayer books were Xeroxed prayer services created by the community or prayer books written by the major American religious movements. They were left carelessly on seats or stacked neatly on bookshelves in the back of the room, sometimes aided by smiling congregants who greeted their peers with "*Shabbat shalom*" as they took the prayer books of others and put them away until next week.

In many of these communities, participants seemed to be deeply dedicated to the words of prayer that they say, treating these prayers with reverence. They kissed their prayer books, sang loudly and with passion, and moved their bodies decisively according to the customary physical movements of the liturgy. In other communities, congregants seemed less sure of themselves and their relationship to prayer. They sang quietly and hesitantly or not at all, their collective voice less harmonious. The Riverway Project joins

these latter communities. Rarely does a participant wear a *kipah*.[23] Participants drop their prayer booklets under their seats for text study, picking them up from the floor when prayers begin again.[24] Morrison is rarely stoic, as demonstrated, but participants can sit quietly or stand unmoving, arms at their sides. They sometimes mumble the words or refrain from singing altogether. When a prayer traditionally calls for bowing or rising to the tips of one's toes many do so inconsistently and cautiously, some engaging in this way and others not, some moving at some times and not at others, some with visible confusion. Their knowledge of the customary behavior associated with prayer, of "prayer choreography,"[25] seems superficial and unreliable, likely stemming from mostly forgotten childhood lessons (as seen in Sam's confusion over lighting the *Shabbat* candles described earlier).

Yet, Morrison does create rich and spirited prayer in this community, particularly through music and participants' voices. Some individual participants are hesitant in their interaction with prayer. And still, the collective voice of the group is strong and vibrant. No matter the lack of movement during prayer and absence of some prayer customs, communal and dedicated prayer happens. Morrison succeeds in helping participants who are unsure of their Jewish voices to find them in the Riverway Project, by weaving participants together through their singing voices, and by giving the Riverway Project

[23] While covering one's head is not prescribed, prior to modernity it was almost universal within Jewish communities, both inside and outside of sacred spaces. The Reform movement eliminated the wearing of *kipot* for much of the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries

[24] After the publication of sacred texts (after the invention of the printing press), based on biblical and then rabbinic law about the treatment of sacred materials, rabbis legislated that sacred materials including prayer and other books should not be placed on the floor. An additional series of laws govern interaction with sacred materials, dictating that one should not rest one's elbows on the book when it is on one's knees, one cannot use a sacred text as a shield from the sun, etc.

[25] I am referring here to all of the physical movements related to prayer: the bowing at certain times in the liturgy that I referred to earlier, stepping back and forward as prayers begin or end, closing one's eyes during specific blessings, and so on. For a discussion of all of this movement, see Shulamit Saltzman, "The Geography of the Synagogue," in *The Second Jewish Catalog,* Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld, eds (Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), 292-3.

community depth and substance through prayer. He does this through three fundamental aspects of the service and environment that he creates: the service's musical skeleton, its accessibility, and the atmosphere of unanimity that the music creates.

In Riverway Project services, as just demonstrated and as outlined in Chart 4.1, almost all prayers are turned into songs, with a beginning and an end. The liturgy does not include the Hebrew words often said silently by the congregation or by the prayer leader in between each communal prayer. Instead, music provides a skeleton to the prayer service. Songs become place-markers, signaling to participants where they are in the service. These songs that participants can sing on their own – in the car, even without a CD – facilitate prayer because they are familiar, they signal when to start and when to finish, and they provide a group voice to join. This musical structure helps the service to be user-friendly. Songs make clear

Chart 4.1
Order and Flow of Neighborhood Circle Prayer Service

- Morrison welcomed participants and introduced a *niggun*
- Participants sang *niggun* (with guitar)
- Morrison asked Sam to light *Shabbat* candles
- Sam lit candles and participants sang blessing together
- Participants sang *Lecha Dodi* (four verses in Hebrew with guitar)
- Participants sang *Bar'chu* (with guitar) and then read together in Hebrew *Ma'ariv Aravim*
- Morrison led tune "*ki hem hayinu…*" (with guitar)
- Participants sang *Shema* (with guitar)
- Participants chanted *Ve'Ahavta* together
- Morrison introduced *Mi Chamocha*
- Participants sang *Mi Chamocha* (with guitar)
- Participants sang *Kol Haneshama* (with guitar)
- Participants sang *Ve'Shamru* (with guitar)
- Participants stood, chanted *Amidah together* (without guitar, through "*hakol*" prayer), read English together, and sat down
- Participants sang *Shalom Rav*
- Morrison introduced a moment of silence
- Moment of silence
- Participants sang *Salaam* (with guitar)
- Morrison led text study
- Participants sang *Aleynu*
- Participants shared names of those for whom are in mourning
- Participants said *Kaddish* together
- Participants sang *Oseh Shalom*
- Morrison made announcements of upcoming Riverway Project events
- Participants sang *niggun* (same one from beginning of service, with guitar)
- Participants led and sang *Kiddush* and *Motzi* together
- Participants "schmoozed" over *challah*, cheese, and crackers

what happens in a prayer service and how to participate in it.

With this structure, music becomes the totality of the service. In total, Morrison leads participants through twenty songs, blessings, and prayers, rarely stopping to speak. Instead, his guitar carries the group through the service, moving fluidly from one piece to the next, making the service a thoroughly musical experience. The tunes he uses are contemporary or traditional, fun, upbeat, and also almost mournful, soulful and expressive. All are engaging. Morrison adds to the service many songs not part of the traditional liturgy, multiplying participants' opportunities to let themselves go through song. He encourages participants' clapping, standing, and moving – anything he can do to help them relax. In these prayer services, while many do not move, some do, swaying in their seats and clapping. Some look around curiously but others close their eyes, meditating to the music.

The service is additionally accessible because almost every song offers an opportunity to sing without words; participants are able to repeat "yai dai, dai dai dai dai" to the song's tune if they cannot sound out the Hebrew quickly. In addition, English readings complement and replace the Hebrew twice during the service, offering everyone a chance to relate to the liturgy in a different and possibly more approachable way.

Yet, the service is primarily in Hebrew and Morrison gives little commentary, relying on the consistent transliteration and alternate English readings offered in the prayer booklets. Those present have an opportunity to immerse themselves almost completely in Hebrew and in Jewish liturgy. Prayer, then, becomes an encounter with Hebrew, with historical concepts of Jewish liturgy.

Prayer also becomes an encounter with one's peers in the present as participants' voices blend into one. Through its musical structure, prayer offered in the Riverway Project emphasizes participants' togetherness. Participants sing together every prayer that is included, the congregation quiet only during the prescribed moment for silent prayer. In this small space, no one can stand on the margins, isolating themselves from the service. Moreover, individual voices become subsumed by the collective voice of the group. Anyone afraid of singing can be assured that the voices of others will overpower any mistakes that they make as they experiment with Hebrew. Their collective singing makes risks easier to take.

The communal aspect of prayer was emphasized during my fieldwork most significantly one Soul Food Friday, when I began to understand prayer in the Riverway Project as an expression of the community's energy, even as a way to reach something transcendent. London's public buses were bombed in early July 2005, bringing terror back into the West, emphasizing our fragile mortality and expanding the tragedy that our nightly news brings. The next day was Soul Food Friday. After we sang *Mi Chamocha*, clapping to the upbeat tune and words that express joy and gratitude, Morrison reminded the community, "Sometimes, the best way to fight terror is with joy." I let my breath out. I had not realized that I had been holding it, tense from the past twenty-four hours, from not knowing where friends were, from imagining myself hiding in my apartment, afraid to take public transportation.

Later in the service, Morrison delivered a *d'var Torah* in which he commented on the battles recorded in the book of Numbers, asking if man is, as some commentaries suggest, forever full of strife. And then he wondered:

> And so this week, the week that was full of strife … with this incredible gap between us and peace, it's feeling impossible that we can move across that gap. And … I don't know … how you fight terror. … This thought occurred to me while we were singing. I've never felt this as much as I have tonight, that what we are doing here together is a response … The notion of singing together. The notion of coming together into joyful community, into song, is what we can do together. And so on this evening we sing together and we pray together, and I hope tomorrow we figure out some other responses we can take. But until we can do something else I propose that we sing tonight.

During his *d'var Torah* Morrison walked around the sanctuary, through the aisles and in back of the rows. As he finished with his words, he made his way to the front of the sanctuary. He stood facing the congregation, without a microphone, without any papers, still for perhaps the first time that night. His hands at his sides, he invited, "So sing with me." Without accompaniment, he led participants in singing *Oseh Shalom,* a song of peace,[26] to a tune new to the community. He first sang a line, and then we responded, and after we had practiced each line by repeating him we sang the song together. When he sang, his lone voice seemed raw, vulnerable, and full of emotion; when we responded, our voices together felt rich, full, and strong. When we finished, I had tears in my eyes. The last line of the song – the song, after all, is a line from the Jewish liturgy – ends with "amen." When we said amen, it felt like we had prayed, asked, even begged, for something that we desperately want, our voices stronger because they were together.

Perhaps at no other time during my fieldwork did Morrison so plainly and emotionally argue for participants' greater strength because of the community that they form. However, these moments of collective power that resulted through the intertwining of voices and pain comprise the typical outcome of prayer in the Riverway Project. These moments happen repeatedly, perhaps less hauntingly, but repeatedly. As participants sing

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[26] The full words of this last line of the *Kaddish* are: *Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu, v'al kol Yisrael, ve'imru amen*. Meaning, May God who makes peace in the heavens make peace for us and for all of Israel, and let us say amen.

together, their singing heals; it merges their voices, their individual declarations growing more vigorous and emotive as they do so. Participants have an opportunity to find strength in the sound that they create together. Because they pray as they sing, they have an additional opportunity to heal as they join in a request, a demand, for a better world. Moreover, as they come into a collective and sing words of peace in ancient Hebrew, words sung by their immediate family and their distant ancestors, they begin to invoke communities past and through these communities a power greater than themselves. On that night, I began to wonder if that power is their sense of God, if many of these non-"believers" find something God-like in their coming together. Certainly, I sensed the importance of this prayer in their becoming bound to one another in a community. This idea would be something that I would explore in interviews with participants; it is an idea that I explore later in this chapter.

Although participants are hesitant about the physical movements of the prayer service and even hesitant about the words of the prayers themselves, when Morrison asks to sing, most do so with their entire hearts. They are hesitant and unsure but they are also lonely. When they sing together, they lose their hesitancy in the validation that the group offers. They heal themselves; moreover, they learn that they need each other to create good from destruction. Their singing together allows them, most fundamentally, to move from their personal fear to their role in a community. They become willing to experiment and more so, under Morrison's leadership and with each other, they find a powerful place in a larger Jewish whole.

These ideas raise important questions about the relationship between the strength of Morrison's voice and participants' hesitancy toward prayer. It may be primarily or

even only his strong leadership that pushes participants past their insecurity. Because of its significance, I devote Chapter Six to the question of this relationship between Morrison's charismatic leadership and participants' engagement.

### *Learning from the Collective: The Role of Group Reflection in Stimulating Jewish Growth*

Riverway Project prayer gives participants a place in community and also the comfort in Jewish life that they were seeking. As their comments will reveal later in this chapter, they become able and eager to participate in Jewish community. They develop the Jewish social capital that they needed. Rooted in a new social network, they find the comfort and interdependence that Morrison hoped that they would find.

From that comfort and the very nature of living Jewishly together come opportunities to interact around participants' questions of Jewish meaning. Formally during text study and informally during any Riverway Project opportunity, before prayer or over meals, they can explore the relevance of ritual and Jewish history to their lives, how aspects of Jewish tradition – prayer, community, holidays, Israel – can fit into their identities. Group members become teachers and learners for each other, and the community that they form becomes a significant tool for enabling the Jewish growth of its members. By discussing their questions out loud in the safety of their new, intimate social network, the Riverway Project participants' Jewishness grows and changes. They develop Jewish social capital and also an understanding of how they will exercise their connection to Judaism in their lives.

As I close this description of my observations of community in the Riverway Project, I tie together the aspects of community evolution and collective question-asking described in this chapter by relating some of the group formation and discussion that occurred on the Riverway Project Israel trip. During the trip, initial formality gave way to comfort, mutual brainstorming, and new ideas about how individuals want to and can be Jewish, gleaned from interactions with their peers. In an intimate group, like many groups that the Riverway Project initiates, Morrison put questions of Jewish meaning and purpose in front of participants for discussion. Through text study and formal reflection, he encouraged participants to verbalize their own questions and as they did, participants came to build on each other's ideas and to be each other's teachers. They became interdependent not only spiritually but also intellectually, key agents in each other's Jewish growth.

The Israel trip began small. Rather than cast a wide net for participants and hope for as large a trip as possible, Morrison invited select participants on the Israel trip, ultimately bringing twelve adults to Israel. In such a small group, with so few voices talking, participants almost had to listen to each other, to let each person challenge them in their reflection on their experience. Within this intimate group, Morrison made collective reflection the norm when he made text study a frequent part of the trip, taking place in the caves of *Beit Guvrin*, after visiting the *Kotel* and Masada, in a synagogue in *Safed*, in the caves of *Beit Shearim*. Formal check-ins also occurred many nights, offering participants an opportunity to describe the wonderful idea that they had leaving Jerusalem that morning or to complain (affectionately) about their exhaustion.

Participants were regulars at the Riverway Project. They had become a general part of each other's lives, praying and studying together. At the same time, participants were members of different Riverway Project sub-communities. They came together on this trip with comparatively little prior knowledge of each other. When they met for pre-trip discussions, their initial conversations seemed stilted and reserved, participants outwardly reluctant to share too much. They were slow to speak and each usually only spoke once, the conversation lasting as long as it took each member to speak. They rarely reacted to each other and never asked each other questions, developed each other's ideas, or disagreed with each other.

This all changed as participants got to know each other and had more and more conversations. The reserve and the strangeness through which participants interacted dissipated. They began to trust one another with their ideas and to be open to learning from and with each other as they thought out loud about their experiences. They came to ask each other questions about the ideas that they raised and to challenge each other when they disagreed. A genuine interest to learn from each other seemed to grow, as did an expectation among participants that they would help each other build their distinct and mutual ideas.

A powerful interaction of this kind occurred after participants' first visit to the *Kotel*, a last remnant of the Second Temple and arguably the holiest site in Jewish tradition. The *Kotel* holds tremendous significance in the Jewish imagination.[27] With

[27] Jay Michaelson's description of the *Kotel* demonstrates its power in the Jewish imagination or spiritual practice: "First and foremost, for me, the kotel is an energy center, a vortex of holiness. … [T]he wall seems to radiate … some indefinable power that seems to reside in some physical objects more than in others. There's an almost palpable holiness to the ancient stones, the birds circling, the expanse of the sky that the wall seems to frame." Michaelson actually goes on to explain that he faces some of the same challenges that Riverway Project participants find at the *Kotel* but suggests that the magic of the *Kotel* is

long-held ideas about what the *Kotel* could be, at their visit many participants were surprised or thrown by what they saw. It was smaller than they expected, or more ordinary, or too dominated by the more religious. Learning that a gender separation had not existed in the ancient Temple, some were confused and frustrated that a gender separation exists today. The magic of the site dissipated for some when they learned that the *Kotel* was not part of the actual Temple but was a retaining wall outside of the Temple itself. Their reactions unsettled participants and left them with much to share in a later text study. They came on this trip, after all, wondering how they should interact with Israel, religious life, and the centrality of Jerusalem. Tied together into a comfortable group, they were prepared to reflect together on this loaded experience.

That night, the texts before the group presented the rabbis' understanding of how to commemorate and move beyond the destruction of the Temple and how to keep its memory alive in Jewish life. Likely seeking to help participants reflect on and deepen their experience through study of relevant texts, Morrison asked participants to focus on the pages first in an attempt to understand the role of the Temple in the rabbis' eyes. Participants observed the worth of the Temple to the rabbis, its deep importance in the rabbis' memories. The texts also implicitly posed questions directly to participants: Should the *Kotel* be central to their own Jewish identity? How important is it to them? What kind of tradition does the Temple represent, and how do they feel about that tradition?

Participants moved quickly to sharing these questions aloud and then to their own strong reactions. They wondered if they should pray toward a place that represents a

found in its normalcy and its pluralism, in the presence at the site of individuals from many different backgrounds ("In Defense of the Western Wall." *The Forward* (July 17, 2008)).

ritual that they abhor (animal sacrifice) and if they should commemorate a second Temple when they do not hope for a third. They lamented the perceived control of the fervent Orthodox over the space; Dan shared that he felt like a “kid in an antique shop,” unsure of himself in this space that did not seem his own. Each gender shared their experience on their side of the wall, and as she heard about the men’s experience, Carin became more visually frustrated and almost angry.[28] Ultimately, participants seemed to agree with Mark when he realized during this conversation that his Jewish identity is a “puzzle,” and that while the *Kotel* is a piece of that puzzle in that it helped him make an historical connection, it is not a focal piece for him. Building on that point, Dan suggested that the *Kotel* is important to visit but is not necessarily where he finds his “identity as a Jew.”

During the conversation, group members visibly reacted to each other’s ideas. One participant’s comment would trigger another’s musing that would lead to a third participant’s conclusion. They audibly learned from each other. Several internalized Mark’s realization about his identity puzzle and they even expanded on his idea. Men and women heard from each other about the opposite gender’s experience; participants of each gender repeatedly expressed their gratitude that they could learn from each other about what happened on the other side of the wall. In all, through ongoing, collective reflection, participants learned to interact around their ideas and gained knowledge from each other, sharing their individual ideas and thinking them through using each other as resources. The group members became each other’s teachers.

[28] Carin actually yelled, “Hannah was weeping at the Temple!” Her emotions echoed in my mind long after the conversation. The more she felt closed in by the divider at the Wall, the more she seemed to want to use her biblical knowledge, as though it would give her the status she wanted.

Informal reflection and learning was just as essential as this more organized conversation in enabling participants to learn from their community. One afternoon, I listened to Dena and Carin spend a bus ride sharing their Jewish backgrounds. Having been raised by parents with deep Jewish connections but little interest in organized religion and having recently fallen in love with Jewish learning, Dena was fascinated by Carin's seeming comfort with liturgy and Jewish tradition. Similarly, Carin was interested in Dena's experience outside of synagogues, in her family's lack of ritual observance, and in her grandparents' leftist/ intellectual orientation that Dena associated strongly with her Jewish roots. Their conversation began with Dena's simple question of Carin, "How do you know so much?" As Dena continually asked questions, Carin's layers of Jewish experience unfolded to reveal her enrollments at different day schools and her family's involvement in different synagogues throughout her childhood. As Carin thought about what it would mean to be raised without synagogue, and as Dena considered being raised with a day school education, they provided resources for each other and an opportunity to consider different kinds of Jewish lives.

This conversation was complemented by community members purchasing of ritual objects together. Most participants were shopping for ritual objects for the first time in their lives. They had to decide what objects they wanted, in the process considering what rituals they were most likely to observe. They began to talk together about what it would be like to observe *Havdallah,* to light *Shabbat* candles, or to wear a *tallit*. In examining objects, they needed to understand how the ritual worked in order to know how to use the object, and, therefore, what they wanted the ritual object to look like. They stood together in stores examining *Havdallah* sets and trying on *tallitot* (prayer shawls),

often touching these objects for the first time. They came back to the bus prizes in hand, announcing their purchases with pride and explaining their decisions. Because it was a small group, all had the opportunity to learn and benefit from an individual participant's experimentation with and exploration of new ritual objects. One person's decision became informed by her peers and also became a model of such decision-making for others.

Later in the chapter, I share the participants' thoughts about their interactions. They reveal that their interactions enabled their intensive learning experience in Israel. Without each other, their Israel experience would not have been the transformative experience that it was. They demonstrate that in the Riverway Project, the new social network itself becomes the classroom and curriculum. The network begins simply when participants come together for a common purpose, that of question-asking, spiritual celebration, and Jewish exploration. Morrison challenges the community to be more intimate when he creates primarily small communities, ensuring that no members can be anonymous, and when he leads participants to create spiritual and collective experiences through prayer. They come to trust and rely on each other. In the example of the Israel trip, a truly small group of people traveled to Israel, a group not widely recruited but specially selected by Morrison so as to keep the group small. Morrison helped them to know each other before the trip by asking them to study texts together and bring to each other their questions about Israel. At these early sessions they were halted with each other, relatively reluctant to build on each others' ideas. But in Israel, as the community went through different experiences together, participants became close enough to share their questions and ideas with each other and to interact around their ideas. They became

interdependent in their Jewish exploration, needing each other to make their trip complete. In this way, in Israel and throughout the Riverway Project, the new Jewish social network that Riverway Project participants join and create gives members the community that they want. It also helps them name out loud and explore the latent questions about Judaism that they bring to each other. A Friday night community becomes a distinctive one in which participants have the opportunity to ask and explore questions unique to a Jewish setting and collective.

Thus far, I have relied on my own observations to illustrate the Riverway Project social network as a facilitator of Jewish growth. The words of Morrison and participants add nuance to these ideas, making it clear why, again, despite their lack of comfort in and skills to participate, community matters to both Morrison and participants.

## DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY

Gathered through in-person interviews, the ideas of Morrison and participants about why community matters emphasize that community is the essence of Jewish celebration for those involved with the Riverway Project. Moreover, community clearly facilitates participants' Jewish growth, and for specific and identifiable reasons. Yet, as will be demonstrated at the close of these sections, it also puts boundaries around their growth. Participants come to the Riverway Project craving community; they find it, and they come to equate their Jewish experience with their social network. Community holds such an important place in their Jewish imagination that their celebration becomes reduced to it.

I begin this section with Morrison's ideas and then turn to the participants' own words about what community is to them and why it matters.

### *Morrison's Ideas of Community: Individuals Are "More Complete in Combination"*

One Soul Food Friday, in discussing the Torah portion, Morrison delivered remarks about the completeness of some biblical characters' journeys in Torah. He began by defining completeness, musing, "… Something gets better, or more complete, in combination or in coming together. … There's a notion that us coming together helps complete something." In these remarks, Morrison shared his theory of community: a complete life for Morrison comes when people interweave their lives and become interdependent.

Morrison understands this to be an inherently Jewish viewpoint. He explained in an interview:

> We've decided it's good to be together – not to be alone… Judaism, then me, then synagogues – we've somehow been inculcated, you and me, with the notion that … you get bigger bang for your life's buck by being in a relationship than being out of relationship.

In his view, Jewish tradition has decided, and he implicitly has agreed, that an individual's life has more meaning and worth when it is lived intertwined with others.

According to Morrison, his emphasis on mutuality drives him to build the Riverway Project specifically as "an assembly point for one to explore Judaism." As with all of life's activities, "there's value," he suggests, in participants engaging in this Jewish exploration together. Morrison's communities, then, ask that members come together to help each live more completely and to lead each other to a more robust exploration of Judaism. Morrison recognizes that participants come to Jewish community with

questions; he wants to give participants opportunity to ask and explore their questions together and to create synergy from their collective journey.

### *Morrison's Emphasis on Qualitative Relationships*

As a result, Morrison seeks to structure such communities through the development of what he calls "qualitative relationships," the deep connection of people around issues that matter to them. Qualitative relationships involve individuals knowing "each other, in a way much beyond the surface understanding of one another," in his words. Qualitative relationships ask that people "go deep" with each other, exposing their vulnerabilities and their most profound hopes and concerns. In this way, as he described, they can be in "true relationship with one another." Moreover, community members can come to be interdependent, to recognize and validate each other as human beings, as people with ups and downs, as people who need each other. Morrison's comments during interviews suggest that he intends that through Riverway Project communities, participants escape a troubled world in the safety of each other, or they can augment their joys as they report them to their peers.

Building a community through qualitative relationships demands that the community be noted for its substance and not its size. To Morrison, the concept of qualitative relationship is captured exactly in "the difference between the gym and somewhere else." The gym, "from the gym's perspective, is about quantity," he suggested, about getting as many members as possible. The Riverway Project, rather, privileges depth and not breadth, creating frequent opportunities to help fewer individuals foster deep relationships rather than attracting as many people as possible to each event.

For Morrison, qualitative relationships also suggest a means of building community. As he commented, "Just defining the term is one thing, but it's more to say this is a way to create community, to actually sit still and talk to people very deliberately about what they're interested in, in their Jewish journeys." This sitting still with someone, this deliberate conversation, he described as an act of "relational investigation." He explained that "the strongest tool" in building communities "is significant time spent … talking to people in ways that matter to them," time spent in genuine conversation about ideas that they value. Relational investigations revolve around questions of purpose: why are participants entering into this encounter with Judaism, what do they want from their Jewish experiences, and what do they want from their lives. Relational investigations, then, lead to interdependent communities that allow members to know each other's deepest concerns and help each other grapple with them.

Morrison's efforts to generate qualitative relationships drive and comprise the Riverway Project. He does more than create a new social network, or an "assembly point," in his words. As he gathers multiple small groups into intimate settings, and even in large spaces creates moments for personal discussion, he challenges the idea that participants can come together anonymously. Through study, prayer, and discussions about questions of purpose and Jewish meaning, participants share themselves and establish a foundation for their greater interaction and interdependence. As they delve more deeply into neutral texts and reveal their opinions and feelings about texts, they have the kinds of deliberate conversations about their Jewish exploration that Morrison seeks to create and they connect to each other more personally. They come to know each other in ways different than everyday relationships allow. They build an interdependent

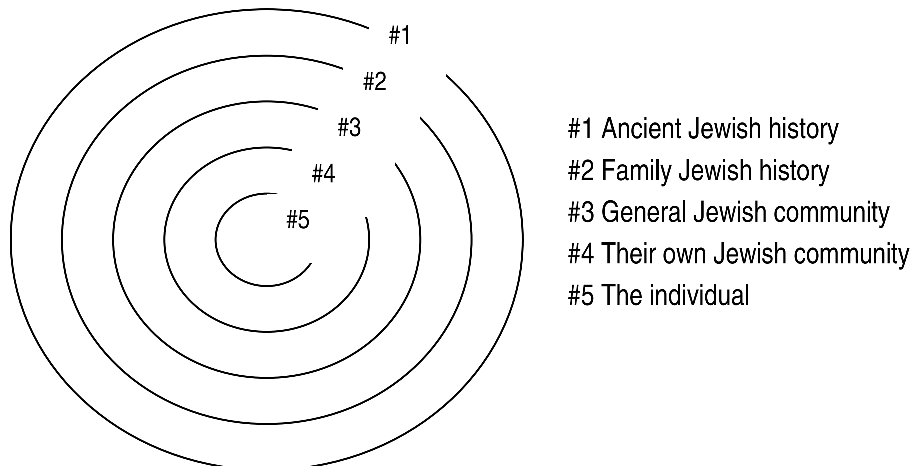
Jewish community, one in which members feel interrelated and one in which members work together to find meaning in Judaism and in their lives.

### *Participants Ideas of Community: "Concentric Circles"*

Participants look intentionally for this kind of community. They have full lives, friends collected from their various life experiences, hobbies and work-related social activities. Yet, repeatedly in interviews, they indicated that they came to the Riverway Project looking for something more in their lives. One participant used Morrison's words to describe what he seeks:

> Jeremy used a metaphor that I like a lot. That of Judaism or your relationship to Judaism as a series of concentric circles with you being in the center and your immediate family and your extended family and your Jewish community – and the ideal is to connect to as many of those concentric circles as possible …

Chart 4.2
Participants' Concentric Circles of Community
*As suggested to Tom by Morrison and as expanded by many Riverway Project participants*




In these words, Tom explained the multiple layers that many participants reference when they use the word community (Chart 4.2). Their ancestry, their immediate family, their general Jewish community, and their current peer network all sit in circles inside of each

other, participants looking to access each of them whenever engage with Jewish community. When participants invoke the concept of community, they seem to mean any one of these circles in which they find meaning. What binds these concentric circles is a deep feeling of peoplehood, the appreciation of a bond with other Jews for its own sake; at the same time, participants value each circle independently. When they seek community in the Riverway Project, they look to connect with each of these circles.

Participants locate the outermost concentric circle in their historical roots. "Basically," one participant explained, "I find it meaningful to be sort of connected to something that is old – there's something to me about ancestors…." Participants want to connect to Jewish community, and they observe ritual or recite liturgy in order to give themselves a history, a past. This past holds more for participants than nostalgia or a romantic attachment. Historical awareness adds depth to participants' otherwise blended American existence. It establishes a place for participants in a clear, grounded narrative, making them a layer in the rich story that they value. Connecting to the past reminds participants that they are "still here," to quote one participant, which is a "powerful" idea and one that drives participants' desire to connect to Judaism. The amorphous Jewish past, then, represents participants' first understanding of community.

Their immediate past, their family roots, serve as the next ring in the series of concentric circles through which participants understand Jewish community. "I love that when I light the candles," Jordana explained wistfully, she thinks of her grandmother who taught her why she covers her eyes. She also "love[s]" that she closes her eyes "for a reason, not just that tradition says so," the reason being that her grandmother did the same before her. "Tradition," engaging in a ritual because it is part of a historic and

communal network of practice, is not enough motivation for Jordana. That her family engaged in the same activity greatly deepens the meaning of the task for her. Jordana lights candles for *Shabbat* in the way that she does in order to join the general Jewish tradition and also to remember her own family's tradition, to create continuity with those who came before her and to celebrate her familial bonds. Like her peers, Jordana's behavior gains intensity through each of these senses of history, that of her tradition as well as that of her immediate ancestry.

When participants refer to community, they also mean communities in their present day. These are the inner concentric circles, the horizontal communities that most immediately surround the self. Most immediately, the next circle of community for participants is their sense of kinship with the broader and amorphous Jewish community in the present. Participants value the idea that in the moment, they join millions of others in any act of ritual observance. With pure delight on his face, Mark expressed this idea when he described a memorable conversation he had once with his mother, an exchange that made a real impact on how he understands Judaism. He explained that one Passover when he was in college:

> I don't know what was happening, I was traveling or something and I said well, can't we do the *seder* on another day and my mother said no, we need to do the *seder* at exactly the time – we need to ask the four questions at exactly the same time as Jews around the world. And of course, people in Europe … But symbolically, the point [is] that as a people we're doing it all at the same time.

Part of the purpose of Jewish ritual is, according to Mark, "that you're doing exactly the same thing as Jews all over the world." As with their sense of vertical community, the performance of Jewish ritual gains greater significance because participants perform rituals alongside their peers. These observances link Jews across time and space.

Participants engage in ritual in order to join a broad network, their behaviors gaining meaning because of their repeated, near-simultaneous enactment by others throughout the world.

When participants seek community, they also mean community in a very practical sense, the Jews whom they know and with whom they celebrate Judaism. This personal community sits just around them at the inside of their concentric circles. They value this community for the various ways that it enhances their Jewish identity and also their general lives. Participants look for such Jewish community, as one participant summarized, to find “people to socialize with, people who are interesting,” and “if someone to date [comes] out of that, that’s great.” In college, building this community was easy. But as participants grow “older it gets harder and harder to make new friends,” one participant explained. Many workplaces are social only to an extent; for some, their work relationships end with their workday, leaving them abandoned in a large city without any sort of foundational feeling of belonging or relationship. Familiar to many from childhood, Jewish communities become crucial as a natural place to help participants fight their general feelings of isolation.

Even with their friends from other parts of their lives, participants want relationships specifically with other Jews, to “just feel Jewish with people.”[29] Mark commented, “I realized at the end of the day, almost all of my friends were Christian, but I always feel … more comfortable around other Jewish people.” Similarly, some look to

[29] True to their discomfort with religion and boundaries as described in Chapter Three, several of those I interviewed immediately backtracked when explaining this hunger for relationships with other Jews. They stressed that they do not want to isolate themselves with Jews and that their Jewish community should not be their only community. “You don’t want to say, people like you … If all you want to do is be around people like you,” one participant started, his voice dying as he left his idea unfinished. His incomplete statement suggested disdain for those who want to exist in an only-Jewish cohort.

spend time with Jews because they want to develop this part of themselves. Brian explained that prior to his Riverway Project connection, he had "a very uncomfortable feeling… There's something missing, there's something that I'm not, I'm not connecting with everything here," with everything in Boston, he finished. Interacting with other Jews helps a part of him flourish that otherwise would be dormant. "Connecting" to all aspects of his sense of self is crucial to him. Finding any social network, then, is not enough. Participants look specifically to find Jewish peers.

In their community, participants seek comfort and an opportunity to be genuine, to be themselves. They want to relax and let their public reserve go; as one participant commented, she appreciates just "hanging around," laughing and catching up with "people that [she has] connected with" over time. Moreover, as participants see each other repeatedly, they want to come to rely on each other in a mutually supportive environment. Scott explained:

> There's something really great about having a community of folks around you that when life throws out a really challenging plan, you can look to, I can look to … and say, what do I do. How do I get through this. …

In their ideal communities, participants can laugh together and also rely on each other and be interdependent, finding in each other release and also reinforcement. They can let their guard down with fellow community members in order to be honest about their challenges and their dreams, sustaining each other as they move toward those dreams.

For some participants, inter-reliance in a community is important because it allows self transformation in addition to community transformation, both of which they value. The ideal community, some suggested, is one in which members come to know

each other intimately enough to challenge each other to change themselves and their world. Amy commented:

> …You talk about a foundation and a base of meaning, and that that only happens when you have a history of people, when conversations build on other conversations … when you are familiar enough with someone to challenge them… I think people in our circle are too polite with one another. You know you really care about someone when you argue with them, when you are committed to having a relationship afterwards, when you challenge one another. A relationship that can take that, that can bear that, is important to me.

Jane, her partner, soon continued:

> You can't really get any good work done on yourself or good work done for the community or good work done for the general world unless you know the person you're standing beside. And the only way to do that is to keep going deeper and deeper into the relationship.

For Amy, Jane, and others, communities help members establish a history together as members create layers of conversation and trust through repeated meetings. With this history, members can challenge each other, be vulnerable together, and open themselves to each other for growth and change. In this understanding of community, the strength of a community is measured by how much its members are willing to open themselves to each other for growth and by how much the community facilitates that openness, pushing members into deeper and deeper relationships. Participants and their relationships with each other, then, sit at the center of these concentric circles of community, even while their relationships and their celebration in the present are valid only with the recognition of and connection to their outer circles as well.

## FINDING THE COMMUNITY THAT THEY WANT IN THE RIVERWAY PROJECT

In the first half of this chapter, I presented the coming together of a community. The participants' ideas about community that followed illustrate why they want to access

community and the kinds of community that they seek. Here, continuing to utilize participants' words and ideas, I bring these ideas together, demonstrating that the community that Morrison constructs helps participants celebrate each of their circles of Jewish community. Precisely because they build community with him according to their own definitions, participants successfully create Morrison's assembly point around which they explore Judaism together, their comfort in the community that they construct outweighing their anxiety about Jewish involvement.

### *Creating Community through Prayer*

Participants agree that prayer in the Riverway Project serves as a fundamental means by which they become joined in their present and also immersed in their past, accessing each of their circles of community.

Participants do not pray out of mandate, nor do most pray to communicate with God. Adam explored why he does pray, asking, does what he does "count as praying?" He mused:

> I don't know how much I actually sort of pray … it's hard to tell … I sing all the songs and stuff, and clap along and stuff, but I don't know that I'm actually consciously praying in those moments. I'm just sort of enjoying the music and enjoying singing Hebrew and stuff…
>
> I basically don't know what I'm saying when I sing those songs. Although I guess … I pretty much know what I'm saying, God is great – I mean, peace is good, the land of Israel is the land of milk and honey. Blessed is the creator, stuff like that. (laughs) …
>
> When they do the mourner's *Kaddish* I'll think about people, because a friend of mine died this last year, and so I've been going to synagogue for that also. There are other moments when I'll read the words and I'll be like, this is great, I actually believe that …
>
> The stuff about … God and stuff I'm not positive I believe in … but I think it's nice to participate in this long-standing culture…

For Adam, as for many, prayer is complicated. Adam does not understand the prayers that he says word for word. He knows the general idea of what he is saying ("God is great"), but he is not sure that he believes in these ideas. When he sees the English translation, he appreciates it sometimes and dislikes it at others. As a result, it is "hard to tell" how much he is "actually" praying when he is there, as he says. He defines prayer as interacting with God, and by that definition, he prays only sometimes while at services.

However, in his musings, Adam implies a broad and more nuanced definition of prayer than that of interacting with God. He enjoys this prayer significantly. He appreciates the Jewish music of Morrison's prayer and values the opportunity through prayer to connect to different communities, to friends and to Jewish tradition. For him and his peers in the Riverway Project, prayer is an experience of catharsis and community, and music is the mechanism that facilitates the experience.

Participants themselves expressed their appreciation of the service's musical skeleton of songs that I described earlier. They explained to me that when they enter services without such communal songs – usually more traditional prayer services – they become confused by what they hear as "mumbling" before and after each prayer. They never know where they are in the service; it becomes harder to participate with the congregation when they cannot find the page or keep the flow of the service in their heads.[30] In the Riverway Project, the notes of the guitar signal when to begin and end

[30] This idea was emphasized dramatically in Israel, when a participant turned to me as we were leaving the congregation Kol HaNeshama and commented that she was not engaged by the service, that it was not "participatory" enough. Prayer services at Kol HaNeshama are full of spirit, with what feels like constant singing and harmonizing by the entire congregation. However, the service includes a great deal of independent reading. It expects that congregants will know when to sing aloud, when to read quietly, and where on the page to find the congregation. The next Friday night, the same participant explained to me that she found the congregation that we visited that evening much more involving and therefore much more uplifting. This congregation, she said, had songs she could follow. Indeed, it was a congregation that utilized a guitar for most of its prayers and almost never asked congregants to read independently. The

communal singing. They know unfailingly that the tune will end, and just as unfailingly that a new song will begin, with nothing confusing in between. They find the Riverway Project service enjoyable because they can follow it.

Stirring and soothing Jewish music also facilitates prayer for many because it is fun, familiar, and relaxing. Some play the guitar themselves and love watching these seemingly secular instruments create Jewish music. Some did not know services could have a guitar or such upbeat, rock-like tunes; they feel liberated by the joy expressed in the songs. For many, music brings catharsis. It gives participants entrée into something not present in their everyday lives. One participant told me that it feels good to "peace out" on Friday nights with the band. Many "escape" their lives on Friday nights through music. Adam, for example, sometimes deliberately sits alone, trying to "cleanse" his mind. For Dan, services help him "clear the field," creating from the week's chaos "empty space" with which to begin the weekend. The prayer service provides mental and emotional space, a zone free of email and cell phones, to reflect on the week and on one's life.

For participants, that this catharsis is Jewish is just as important as the catharsis itself. There is something about ending the week, one participant explained, by "staying in touch" with a foundational part of his identity. Prayer is a "grounding exercise," reminding him that he can "do whatever else [he's] gonna do" but at the end of the week, Judaism is a valued part of his life.

Through prayer, then, participants connect to their circles of community, to their Jewish past and their present. Specifically, as Adam commented, that these songs and

congregation began and ended every prayer together and almost every piece of the liturgy was sung together and out loud. To her, "participatory" suggests that all say the same words, out loud and together.

prayers are in Hebrew offers the vital connection for participants to Jewish history. Joel explained:

> Liturgy is the language that Jews have used for thousands of years to communicate with god. … I think that there's both something special about having used it for thousands – my ancestors and not my great-grandparents only but really, thousands of years ago – there's rich meaning in it.

Participants feel joined with family members and ancient ancestors through the Hebrew words that they say; they feel bathed in the Jewish past by the atmosphere that singing and speaking in Hebrew creates. Even without their understanding the words, as Adam suggested, speaking Hebrew is soothing, and it helps participants make a needed connection to their historic community.

Prayer also weaves participants together into the horizontal community that they treasure. As they repeat the words of prayer with the same people every month, participants create shared history and moments of connection. Their real community becomes virtually expanded, including friends from other places: prayers remind one participant of where she was when she said the prayers before and the "people she was with then," and the *Kaddish* and prayer for the sick facilitate for participants palpable connections to others.

For some, engaging with this community is the primary reason to attend prayer services. Scott explained this directly:

> I appreciate … the experience and the prayers, but frankly the practice of Shabbat is not about prayer for me. It's about sitting down, making time for rest and community and hanging out. More times than not on Friday nights I just make sure that I'm with friends. … That for me is as much of a welcoming of it as saying the prayers or going through that format.

As Scott described, for some, the prayer is not essential or even relevant. Since they are unsure that they should be saying words of praise to God, some go to prayer services to

see people and to find a peer group, and they revel in the music and the release rather than focus on the words that they find distasteful. Prayer offers a chance to take a break from life with friends and to be comforted by those friends. For most with whom I interacted, prayer is a means to an end. It is a way to gather people together, and the moment's worth comes from the connection of people to each other and to the community of their past. In total, Riverway Project prayer participants understand prayer as an encounter with community: with historical concepts of Jewish liturgy and text, with ancient Jewish words and music, and with one's peers in the present.

In total, this encounter with community is intense, relaxing, intimate, and renewing as participants sway to the music, try new songs, close their eyes, and interact with their Jewish world through rhythms rather than words. For some participants, the experience is more than intense. It is spiritual. Prayer facilitates catharsis and community, and the two create a synergy that helps some access both spiritual experiences and God in the Riverway Project.

### *A Place for God*

As explored in Chapter Three, about half of Riverway Project participants affirm a transcendent concept of God. Of the rest, some feel spiritual even without this concept, and some find no personal significance in either of these concepts. For all, though, prayer is an important part of experiencing something outside of themselves, something either metaphysical or human and communal. Katie, for example, said very clearly, "Who are we praying to, are we just saying the words?" Conversely, Dan explained, "I'm not a God-fearing Jew… It's not prayer and God that's spiritual about services – it's the

connection that's spiritual." During prayer, Katie and about half of her peers have a metaphysical God in mind; Dan and the rest imagine their broader Jewish communities, their circles of Jewishness, when they pray.

Earlier, I described a moment of singing and prayer led by Morrison in response to the bombing of London's public buses. Individuals then may have felt helpless, scared, and isolated. When they sang the traditional Hebrew words of peace, participants could combine their strength through their voices. The introduction to the new Reform movement prayer book, *Mishkan Tefilah,* suggests that liturgy is intended exactly to "challenge narcissism."[31] Indeed, in the Riverway Project, through prayer those praying practice the idea that they are not alone. They enter into a relationship with something greater than themselves, and the community that they create is stronger than any one of them individually. Prayer brings individuals into a community and emphasizes their inter-relationship. Participants arrive at a powerful end when they come together, at the experience of something outside themselves that is shaped through their singing. In that moment after the bus bombing and frequently in the Riverway Project, the energy that participants create through their music, intention, and movement is a powerful experience of community, for many an experience of God, for others something equally essential and divine.

The prayer experience that Morrison offers, then, brings together all of participants' definitions of community; they connect to the community of their past and to their families and to the general Jewish world. They pray for peace through ancient words of liturgy and song that they likely have sung in countless other places and they

[31] *Mishkan Tefilah: A Reform Siddur/ 2005 URJ Biennial Preview Edition* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2006), ix.

sense beside them their ancestors and grandparents and friends of their pasts. Community becomes a way to access their sense of God; in turn, as they celebrate or pray to God, participants generate the community they crave. In the Riverway Project, for many, what "counts as praying," as Adam mused, is creating community.

### *"Safety in Numbers": Community as an Atmosphere for Jewish Growth*

Participants acknowledge the special nature of their community, recognizing that from their experiences with prayer and also with study they develop a sense of closeness, of safety, an "absolute sense of community" in one participant's words, a community with an "amazing sense of… purpose." With the Riverway Project, it always feels "like you're in someone's living room, even in this humongous chapel," another participant explained. In their small "pockets of Jewish community," participants have a chance to know a few people deeply. Participants note that Morrison sets the tone, looking them in the eye, asking them how they are, and listening to their response. In all, participants feel connection in the moments of community that Morrison creates.

As a result, Jewish community becomes equal to Jewish experience for participants. Dan introduced this idea:

> Having Jewish friends and having friends that you look forward to seeing and including in a Friday night *Shabbat* experience… I will go to Temple to see Jeremy and Molly … I will go to Temple to see Dena … I look forward … to knowing that there are people there who are central to my Jewish existence.

Through the Riverway Project, people become "central" to Dan's very "Jewish existence." They root his Jewish involvement; they create his *Shabbat* experience. Another participant explained that community is "separate … from the purely religious aspect of the synagogue" and "is almost a more important piece." Like Dan, community

enables her Jewish experience. As have her peers, she has come to feel at home in synagogue. From within this space, she can access each of her concentric circles of community; she can connect to Judaism because of the rootedness and belonging that she feels.

In this strong community, participants are finally comfortable in a Jewish social network. This comfort moves participants forward in their exploration of Judaism. The security that they find reduces their deep fears, their insecurities about religion, their anxiety and neediness. Together and in an atmosphere of trust, participants discuss being the only person in their office to whom religion is important or the only person among friends who is interested in Judaism. They investigate what it is to differentiate oneself in this way and to attach oneself to a constituency (being a religious person in America) that they perceive as being laden with complexity and even harm. They recognize that they are not on this journey alone. Their fear dissipates. As one participant described it, they find "safety in numbers… in shared experience," or, in another's words, "comfort" in the fact that they are not alone. They become assured that what they are doing is normative and as a result, develop a greater sense of confidence and even ability.

That the community is populated with many who are in the same place in their Jewish exploration, many unknowledgeable and deeply insecure in their ignorance, helps participants. One participant commented that he is "more comfortable with practice" because of the validation that he finds amongst his peers. "You don't feel like you're out there on the ice while they're doing a triple Lutz and you're just trying to stay up," he explained. In a position similar to his peers, he realizes that he can experiment from his base of little Jewish experience and that his lack of familiarity with ritual does not need to

stop him from trying it. In the Riverway Project, community members do not intimidate; rather, they support their peers as they demonstrate that even amateurs can pursue Jewish practice and commitment. No one embarrasses anyone else because he knows more, and everyone appreciates the risks of others because these risks feel so personally relevant.

As a result, in this safe setting with their true peers, participants' discussion about Judaism helps them contemplate, identify, and crystallize their questions and ideas. Earlier in this chapter, I demonstrated this collective learning and conversation as it occurred in Israel. Many participants supported my observations of the group's development as a setting for Jewish growth. Sydney, for example, described it this way:

> Over the ten days of our trip to Israel, I discovered that it was the group itself that was the most authentic of experiences; it was … through participation in the group that my experience of being in Israel felt most real and relevant. It was not the sights we saw, nor … the Israelis conducting their daily lives in and around these sights, though both were fascinating, but rather how the group of people that I was traveling with experienced these same moments. In our evening sessions of study and reflection, I was struck continually by the thought that Israel was merely the backdrop to our own deepening connection with each other and our own sense of evolving Judaism.

This interactive examination made the experience genuine and influential, an experience of growth and not merely a site-seeing trip. Participants' individual experiences were shared and processed so that they became the collective lens through which all group members understood their encounter with Israel. The community itself became the transforming agent of the trip.

In addition to helping participants explore their questions about Judaism, participants' active conversation results in their increased connection to ritual. Participants' Israel experience again well illustrates this. In Israel, Ben greatly appreciated watching and helping Dena buy a set of ritual objects to observe *Havdallah*

(a "*Havdallah* set"). He spoke with her as she considered what different ritual objects she could bring home from Israel, reviewing with her why she felt it important not to bring home just any souvenir but specifically a Jewish ritual object. He assessed with her the various objects she could purchase, absorbing her idea that she might appreciate having *Havdallah* in her life and that it was something that she could tackle, not a ritual too overwhelming for her to adopt. He walked with her through stores, considering alongside her the different *Havdallah* sets and appreciating the process of identifying her taste in ritual objects. By the close of the trip, Ben thought, "I've always felt that *Havdallah's* nice but now it's like, okay, this would be a nice thing to do." Dena's choice to buy a *Havdallah* set signaled to him that he could similarly own and use such a set, and the process through which she decided to buy it showed him the path he might follow to do the same.

As this process unfolded during the bulk of the trip, it was bracketed by the participants' own observance of *Havdallah* on their third and last nights in Israel. Observing *Havdallah* in Israel was a significant moment of community for many on the Israel trip, seemingly impacting several participants in addition to Ben (as shared in later interviews). It required that participants physically make a tight circle, comfortable with each other or not. Earlier in the day, Morrison had scouted a scenic spot for this ritual that relies on seeing stars in the night sky, knowing that it would be more meaningful if participants were outside and could see Jerusalem's Old City. By nighttime, the Jerusalem winter rain had begun. Cold and tense against the wind, participants huddled together on the hilltop to which Morrison directed us, behind Hebrew Union College

overlooking the walls of Old Jerusalem. Amy later described the totality of the experience:

> Because of the strong wind on top of the hill, we had trouble lighting the *Havdallah* candle. We tightened our loose circle so that our bodies would block the wind. Still, we had trouble keeping the candle lit. Some moved closer to shield the flame with their hands and we had success.

When she continued, she emphasized the group's formation and its role in her experience: "Singing … together, I felt grounded in the journey we had undertaken together." In their minds, only by coming together could participants keep the candle lit and complete the task.

As they reflected on their experience in Israel, others similarly remembered the tight circle made in order to perform the *Havdallah* ritual, shoulders touching, some interlocking arms. For Ben specifically, participating in the ritual with peers made it less scary and also something in which he wanted to participate. His experiences with Dena were some of the most memorable of his trip, validating his own desire to observe rituals and to own such objects. His interactions with the group and with Dena motivated him; he saw others "becoming more comfortable with certain practices and rituals." If they can feel comfortable, he imagined, perhaps he can as well.

These events are not unique. They are emblematic of parallel important events for Ben and others on the trip: all became comfortable with various aspects of Jewish practice as they experimented together. Nor were these encounters unique to Israel. Rather, they occur throughout the Riverway Project as participants learn through Morrison's facilitation of ritual, discuss and perform ritual with each other, and lead ritual themselves at Shabbat dinners or *Havdallah* services. When they discuss and perform ritual together, they give each other a foundation from which to participate in

religious behavior. They also blend their knowledge, compiling various tidbits of information that many bring, together determining how to enact a ritual. And when they are confused, they laugh together at their ignorance. They are with each other as they try something for the first time. They are motivated by others' boldness.

### *"I Don't Do It on My Own": Being Jewish with Others*

Ultimately, Dena left Israel with a *Havdallah* set, ostensibly to observe the ritual at home. Months later, though, I asked her if she had used the set. "Yes," she responded, "with Mining for Meaning a few weeks ago." You haven't done it on your own? I wondered. Her response came instantly. "Oh, I wouldn't do that," she declared. It was serendipitous that participants needed to intertwine their bodies in order to complete the *Havdallah* ritual in Israel. Yet, it seemed to stand for a greater principle: *Havdallah,* and other rituals, are observed when with others. For Riverway Project participants, rituals do not seem meant to engage in alone.

Others echoed this concept. When asked about ritual, Rachel explained that when she has friends or family over, she lights the candles for *Shabbat.* But when alone, she acknowledged, "I don't do it on my own." Yet, Rachel also finds that she is not home often because she is "craving going to services on Friday nights." She does not reject ritual itself, but rather the concept of engaging in a Jewish act alone. She celebrates *Shabbat* by seeking a community with whom to engage in ritual.

Morrison suggested that he and participants come together because they are "more complete in combination." Yet, it seems that they may be simply "complete in combination." That is, they may only bring Jewish ritual into their lives when together,

and may absent ritual from their lives when alone. The changes in how participants feel about Judaism are constant; that is, conversations that participants have had through the Riverway Project have enabled fundamental shifts to take place in the way that some of them understand their Jewish selves. However, even once participants are more prepared to engage in Jewish ritual, many participants choose not to. Participants successfully shift social networks through their participation in the Riverway Project; or, more precisely, they adopt a new social network in their Riverway Project community, achieving their goal of comfort in a Jewish space. They develop Jewish social capital, an awareness of how they fit into Jewish community. That community becomes the setting in which they feel comfortable observing ritual, even the reason or the motivation to engage in ritual. Their celebration has meaning primarily – or even only – when they engage in it together.

## Community as an Instrument of Jewish Growth

### *Norms of Community*

At the end of DAWN, the all-night San Francisco *Shavuot* celebration, we did not say the morning prayers as dawn rose, but we did say the *sheheheyanu* blessing, acknowledging that we had arrived at the morning and the end of our journey together. About twenty of us stood singing in a loose circle, grinning at each other somewhat triumphantly (we stayed awake!) and somewhat sheepishly (why did we stay awake?). As we broke down the sets of the different performances, many of us began to talk of next steps, of our mornings, and most made an implicit decision that they would continue to spend time together. Later that week, I heard of the hours that participants had spent that morning on San Francisco's Mt. Davidson and of their continued conversation about their Jewish

lives. They had formed a new social group focused in a narrow sense on their experience at DAWN and in a broad sense around their questions about Judaism. Something successfully tied them together, and they would not let it go quickly.

Similarly, as I have demonstrated here, Riverway Project participants come together ostensibly for a Friday night service or Torah study. In reality, they come looking for peers on a similar and even mutual journey, for peers with questions about how to live a Jewish life, for peers similarly insecure in their knowledge about Judaism. They seek a certain kind of community, one rooted in Jewish tradition and faithfully connected to their rich history. Morrison means the Riverway Project to provide an "assembly point" for participants to explore Judaism, their collective exploration creating a synergy that makes each individual's experience with Judaism more robust. Indeed, participants coalesce around this "assembly point." They form a new social network and establish trust as they participate in Jewish life and create their own Jewish communal norms. Through Morrison's emphasis on qualitative relationships, on building small communities that revolve around strong interpersonal relationships, interdependent communities form in which individuals can explore and learn from the ideas and identities of others. Morrison ensures that participants cannot be anonymous, and as a result, individuals find a place in a Jewish community.

Ultimately, the new social network that manifests serves as foundation and context for Jewish exploration. In the intimate community that develops, Morrison helps participants, the community's members, to talk honestly to each other about Jewish ideas that matter to them. He gives community members something of substance, something to discuss and grow around, by centering discussion on Jewish texts. In turn, they find

strength in their interaction with each other. They learn from their question-asking as well as from the life of the community itself, and they are able to learn because they grow into a network of individuals who need each other.

As they themselves explain, prayer most deeply establishes participants in an intimate community. In the Hebrew of their ancestors, through song that involves them as equals, participants move from being individuals with a common past to being a community with a common purpose. Their individual voices and energy fuse into a powerful sound and a palpable energy. This is what "counts as praying" to participants; prayer is an acute experience of community, relationships are deepened and distinguished through communal prayer.

In this way, a certain kind of interdependence forms. Participants look to each other to create Judaism. They rely on each other to make meaning of Judaism. As they grow together, their experience of Judaism becomes an experience of community – and sometimes isolated to community. Participants need each other to feel safe in their exploration, and so their exploration occurs primarily or only when they are together. Yet, it is their experience of a comfortable, safe community that enables their productive Jewish celebration at all. To close this exploration of community in the Riverway Project, I examine the process of community building in close detail, using situated learning theory to make clear why communities can act as agents of growth and why community as classroom and curriculum can be productive as well as limiting.

### *Situated Learning: Community as a Resource for Jewish Growth*

To help make clear the ways that a social network can serve as a structure or entity that educates, I introduce situated learning theory as developed by Lave and Wenger, which suggests an organic process through which newcomers learn to participate fully in any community's practice and become transformed by their participation in the community. Lave and Wenger make it clear that there are multiple educational elements of a social network: the practice in which members engage and also the members themselves. It is not only members that comprise a community, they suggest, it is also what members do that matters.

In introducing his "social theory of learning," Etienne Wenger asks, "What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that … we are quite good at it?" What if learning could be recognized as resulting from "our lived experience of participation in the world?"[32] For Wenger, learning occurs through daily interactions. Learning happens constantly, without our acquiescence and often without our noticing. We learn about human nature in the checkout line of the grocery store, informally recording the niceties (or non-niceties) of others, developing aggressive tendencies or a more forgiving nature as we attempt to get to the head of the line. We develop a foundation of driving knowledge in drivers' training school but learn the road rules of our own community by being on the road itself. We learn to be parents from our own upbringing and from discussing the challenges of parenting with friends. We learn to be camp counselors from

[32] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

our own summers at camp, foggily remembering the highlights of our experiences and hoping to be just like our counselors, creating our experiences again for our campers.

For Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, understanding learning as "situated" emphasizes that an individual's learning is shaped by a "social setting that occasioned" an activity and by a "social practice" in which an individual engages. The social setting is an amalgam that consists of several elements: the people present, the activity of engagement, and the resources involved in the activity. In situated learning, "agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other"; elements act together to influence each other and create this concept of social practice and the resulting experience. Learning transpires from a total condition or situation in which a person finds herself. The social practice in which a person engages becomes classroom, textbook, classmates and teacher.[33]

Viewing the Riverway Project prayer service as a situated activity exposes the learning opportunities available to participants through the service. A prayer service is fully situated in participants' everyday lives, a natural and authentic part of life. It propels participants into interaction with their peers, their peers' homes and families, a rabbi/ leader and his wife, and the content of a Friday night prayer service as Morrison constructs it. The options for Jewish life and celebration, Lave and Wenger's "setting," are spread in front of a participant to study. Walking into a living room for Neighborhood Circle services, a participant has an opportunity to see a Jewish home: are there Jewish ritual objects? What do they look like – are they contemporary or traditional? How are they displayed? (Of specific concern to some of those whom I interviewed: is the *mezuzah* inside the house or publicly displayed on the doorpost?) Are there Jewish

[33] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 33-34

cultural objects, like books or music? What kinds? A participant can see who her peers are, what they do for a living, where they live, how they dress and interact with the world, the members of their families, and, most relevant for this purpose, how they express their Jewishness generally inside their home.

As the prayer service begins, a participant can witness an environment for prayer: chairs can be in a circle, participants facing each other. She can see that prayer books can be pamphlets, easily placed on the floor. A prayer service can start fairly organically in a mundane living room, she can realize; a guitar, some prayer pamphlets, and a leader can turn an apartment or townhouse easily into a place of prayer. When the guitar begins and the lively tunes are played, a participant can recognize that music and musical instruments can be an important part of a prayer service, and that prayer and liturgy can be set to traditional and contemporary tunes.

During prayer itself, a participant can explore what it means to pray: Does one close one's eyes or not? Clap or not, and when? Tap one's foot or move back and forth to the music? While singing, where does one put her hands, her eyes? Does one need to sing in order to participate or even be in the room? Does one need to bow in order to participate? She can learn words of the liturgy, a certain way of saying or singing the liturgy, how much English and what English to include. She can see the rituals of Shabbat enacted in a certain way: she can learn that to make *kiddush,* to bless the wine, a leader begins and all join in Hebrew words. To make *kiddush,* a leader holds his wine high and wishes participants *l'chaim*; they respond together and sip their wine. Still standing, they immediately begin the blessing over the *challah* together. As the blessing

ends, the leader, holding the *challah,* rips it and passes pieces around, wishing everyone *b'teavon,* teaching a Hebrew word and Israeli norm as he does so.

After these rituals, a participant can see how *Shabbat* continues for her peers: do some have dinner together, at home or in a restaurant? Do some linger over the *challah* and do others join a different social community – perhaps a non-Jewish one – at another event? Is music turned on as it might be during any other social gathering? Is this Friday night different in some way now that the prayer service is over?

For someone new to religion and to prayer, each of these questions is acute. For Riverway Project participants, these questions and the lack of obviously accessible answers have led participants to be anxious in Jewish communities for much of their lives. They have never known what to do and always been uncomfortable as a result. In the small communities of the Riverway Project, though, in which no one is doing a "triple lutz" (to quote Ben), it is easy to be on the edge, watching and learning. Lave and Wenger call this engagement in community "legitimate peripheral participation," or the natural, valid way that newcomers enter into and learn any new social situation or any social network. Newcomers do not engage fully in the community's practice, but they do not sit out, either. Lave and Wenger suggest that they participate legitimately, but their label as "peripheral" notes that they may not participate in the same way as others. They learn more than they lead, relying on others to create the primary resources in the community. In Riverway Project prayer services, those practicing legitimate peripheral participation might be following the words to the songs with their eyes but not singing. They might not volunteer an idea during text study or they might hesitate before helping to pass out the wine for

*kiddush*. They watch and experiment. Yet, they are a recognized part of the community, and they feel at home.

As they repeat their participation in this situation, they learn the norms of the evening. They come to know the types of participation in Neighborhood Circles and other Riverway Project activities. They understand the choices available to them and can make choices comfortably about how they will behave in this setting. Newcomers become veterans, comfortable with the experience and able to do it without challenge. They become full participants.[34]

In becoming so, they change through their experience. Lave and Wenger argue that "learning involves the construction of identities," that through learning, a person can recreate herself.[35] In new social networks, situated learners consider and absorb into their sense of themselves the new ideas that they see through their interactions. Their participation in the experience becomes an important part of their identity, the experience itself a part of how they define and understand themselves.[36] In the Riverway Project, a participant becomes someone who participates in prayer services and has a Jewish community, who observes Shabbat in some way, who knows how to light candles or say the blessing over *challah*. As a newcomer, she has asked: Is this something that I want to do, that I want to be part of me? As she has repeated her participation in the situation, her questions of herself have continued. She has discovered herself to be a bower, a singer, to read the Hebrew or the transliteration, to share her comments during text study or to listen to others. She has had opportunity to try on different options, to feel what it is like for her to sing loudly, to close her eyes, to sing quietly, to be quiet, to be still. Eventually,

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[34] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning,* 34-37
[35] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning,* 53
[36] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning,* 53, 79-80

a full participant becomes familiar with the entire territory and therefore has the opportunity to choose a way to interact with the situation. She can develop an identity in this situation, a way of expressing herself and of interacting with this experience. In this way, the social practice in which participants engage helps them to develop a capacity to celebrate Judaism in ways that study alone cannot facilitate.

The participants themselves are an equally important part of this social practice. As participants engage in a social practice repeatedly, they walk through some of the challenges of that practice together and become each other's teachers. This is the process that I described in Israel. It is a process that happens repeatedly in the Riverway Project and one of the fundamental learning resources available to participants.

With few Jewish friends and few or no settings in which to talk about what it means to live a Jewish life, Jewish topics of conversation do not arise naturally for Riverway Project participants in non-Riverway settings. Yet, these topics are vital and alive for them. As emerging adults, participants are engaged in a process of recognizing that their own way of living is not their only option. As they consider other possible Jewish lives and values, they have a multitude of questions: about different kinds of Jews, about prayer and their participation in it, about Israel in the news, about how to create a Jewish home. The reflective work that Morrison leads through relational investigations ensures that they ask their questions out loud, making theirs a community that practices Judaism and then learns through reflection on its practice. The relational questions that emerge from their text-based conversations serve as a crucial opportunity in their Jewish lives for rumination, problem solving, and brainstorming. Reflecting on their experience together facilitates growth as participants determine answers to their questions, check in

with peers about how they answer their questions, and feel safe because they are not alone in their confusion or in their desire to have a more active Jewish life.

Wenger might describe these groups reflecting together as "communities of practice," an extension of his work on situated learning. A community of practice is a group of people "who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."[37] His theory suggests that not only does learning result from everyday situations but learning also occurs intensively within certain kinds of communities, those with boundaries and with mutually recognized norms of behavior.[38] In these communities, meaning is proposed, determined, reified, and endorsed through interpersonal interactions. The community members' individual experiences become the collective text on which members reflect in order to make meaning of their experiences. Learning occurs as community members provide insights and react to them, raise problems for discussion and analysis, and try on new ideas and decisions for the reaction of their peers. Through their conversation, community members imagine and transition to new identities for themselves.[39]

When participants describe their feeling "safety in numbers," they refer to their community of practice. They value their community because they need each other to decipher the Jewish challenges that they face, challenges that they hold sacred and see as demanding resolution. They feel secure amidst each other's parallel uncertainty and

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[37] Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, William M. Snyder. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 4.

[38] Wenger suggests that any community is not a community of practice. In addition to their clear boundaries, communities of practice have "inside jokes" and a common language, ongoing reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationships, and commonly understood community members. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 125-6

[39] Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 52-53, 110-11

empowered by each other's energy and commitment. They gain new ideas and confidence as they watch others come to a new conclusion or engage in a new behavior. The process of group formation that occurred on the Israel trip demonstrated this progression: a few participants with common questions studied, prayed, and experienced Israel together, and became close enough to learn from and challenge each other. Ultimately, the group became participants' most authentic part of the trip, the way that they understood and internalized what was happening to and around them. This process and its result are illustrative of many comparable processes within the Riverway Project. As they explore what prayer, holidays, ritual, and a relationship with God mean to them, participants need each other's responses in order to stimulate their own ideas. Community facilitates the individual Jewish growth of its members and members become interdependent. Community, then, is valuable for its own sake and as a teaching tool.

As a result, in this community of practice, participants become so insecure in their Jewishness that they seem unable to exercise alone the meaning that they develop with their community. Participants feel essential support by not just talking about but also experimenting with personal Jewish observance within a community of their peers. Community gives its members the comfort, strength, and validation that they need in the moment to feel their way through a ritual. Talking about it with others after engaging in ritual alone is not the same; participants need their peers around them in order to find the confidence that what they are doing is right and feasible in their lives. Community becomes the means by which participants grow Jewishly, but it also becomes the only mode through which participants are comfortable enough to behave Jewishly. Participants truly are complete in combination.

In this paradox is an important part of the power of social networks for enabling this population's Jewish growth. The community becomes limiting to participants because it is so strong a community; it is so strong a community because it is a community that matches their ideals as shaped by both their particular and universal commitments. In their social network of the Riverway Project, they find comfort not only in each other, but also in new co-members who see the world so similarly to the ways in which they do.

Participants came to the Riverway Project with two significant challenges: their lack of comfort in and knowledge of Jewish communities and also their antipathy for religion, or their belief as informed by their other social networks that religion is dogmatic. As depicted here, Morrison uses study to help participants to build community; he also uses it to help them shift their ideas about what religion can be. In the study of *Torah* that he facilitates, participants understand Judaism to have room for their ideas about the world. They learn to blend their commitments to their more universal world and to their particular Jewish identity, and their social network comes to have the distinct essence of the integration of these two commitments. I turn the dissertation now to this question of dual commitments, to a closer look at the role that study plays in building community and in helping participants to shift social networks.

# Shifting Social Networks:

## Studying the Jewish Growth of Adults in their Twenties and Thirties

Volume II of II

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Brandeis University

Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

Sylvia Barack Fishman, Advisor

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2008

# CHAPTER FIVE

## ASKING QUESTIONS: CREATING CRITICAL THINKERS ABOUT JUDAISM

On the Friday before the first night of *Hanukkah* 5766 – also known as Christmas 2005 – an editorial by Jonathan Safran Foer appeared in the *New York Times* entitled, "A Beginner's Guide to *Hanukkah*."[1] In it, Foer somewhat facetiously documents the ironies of a post-modern *Hanukkah*. In this *Hanukkah*, "The *dreidel* is a spinning toy, painstakingly fashioned out of a plastic polymer by Jewish craftsmen in Vietnam" and the Jews mimic the Christians with their own Christmas trees and even *Hanukkah* lights. Foer tells the story of *Hanukkah*, allegedly for Christians and also for all too many American Jews who know little of the story even as they embrace this holiday as their version of the American Christmas. Despite his humor – which seems a combination of irreverence, tribal identification, and sarcasm – he concludes his piece with sincere, unaffected questions about "the mysteries of *Hanukkah*," the essence of the holiday:

> Why is *Hanukkah* a minor holiday and not a High Holy Day, and why are we proud of that, and why don't we act as though it's minor, and why are we worried about decorating our homes? Is it possible to celebrate *Hanukkah* without succumbing to imitation, kitsch, or commerce? Is there anything morally inconsistent, as Jews and as Americans, in celebrating a holiday that is ostensibly about the removal of occupiers? Could *Hanukkah* exist without Christmas?

[1] *New York Times* (December 23, 2005).

He then acknowledges that these questions, "like all Jewish mysteries," can either "undermine, or sustain." These questions may turn some away from Judaism, frustrated by a tradition weakened by a majority culture and by their minimal enculturation in that tradition. Alternatively, Foer suggests, "some find resolution in the questions themselves." The piece ends:

> Is there any good reason to continue to celebrate *Hanukkah*?
> If you have to ask, then no.
>
> Is there any good reason to continue to celebrate *Hanukkah*?
> If you have to ask, then yes.

In other words, Foer advises, if you do not know the meaning of *Hanukkah*, you may want to just let it alone. On the other hand, he continues, if you do not know the meaning of *Hanukkah*, there may be an entire world of meaning and exploration that you can access and appreciate. The celebration of the holiday may be in the asking itself.

Foer's article alludes to questions more universal that those that it asks about *Hanukkah.* It suggests questions about what it means to be an American Jew, asking: How do I differentiate myself, and do I want to differentiate myself? What is the genuine content of my tradition? What did I learn in childhood and absorb from my surroundings about this holiday, and what does that have to do with the actual holiday? His article and its questions – those about *Hanukkah* that he communicates and those implied that I just identified – belong to a larger trend of public questioning and exploring of Judaism's character and relevance. As discussed in Chapter Two, salons, magazines, and the internet convene countless analyses, debates, and reflections on questions like those of Foer. That Foer asks his questions without demanding or suggesting resolution – instead, again, suggesting that one celebrates *Hanukkah* in order to ask the questions – illustrates

the extent to which these questions themselves may be an entrance into and celebration of Judaism for their many askers.

As established in Chapter Three, Riverway Project participants feel demands from their other social networks to remove themselves from involvement in Judaism. The norms of these networks establish Judaism as fundamentalist; they pressure participants to be skeptical of Judaism, suggesting to participants that the tradition's teachings are dogmatic. For these individuals to become involved in a Jewish social network, then, they must begin to view Judaism's teachings in a different way, developing an understanding of Judaism as anything but fundamentalist. Moreover, participants must be able to explain and defend their new involvement to their additional friends and acquaintances and to integrate the norms of their new community with those of their existing networks.

Participants themselves note that the norms of study and intellectual exploration that they find in the Riverway Project enable them to defend their involvement in the community. The Riverway Project leads them not into dogma, but into questions. In Israel, for example, several participants discussed the social pressure that they felt in traveling to Israel and portrayed the Riverway Project as a more open-minded social network than an Israel-minded organization might otherwise suggest:

> Jane: People said, Oh, where are you going. So I would say, Israel, and … depending on who the person was and if I knew their politics I'd be like, Oh and we're meeting with Seeds of Peace and it's going to be really great. Which was my, sort of, justification toward – my bow toward the politics.
>
> Dena: … I felt like I didn't want people to make assumptions about why I was going – I had this selfish need to explain why I was going to Israel… So I usually ended up starting to say, I've gotten involved in a synagogue community of people in their twenties and thirties … I usually end up telling them about Jeremy [Morrison]. And saying, you know, the idea that that he's not just a rabbi, but the idea that he's an intellectual, someone who takes an inquisitive, critical approach, and therefore I'm not going, like on a pilgrimage, or to get brainwashed, but rather to study a situation and to think about it and question and imagine…

The Riverway Project facilitated travel to Israel, but in participants' eyes, this travel would be approved by participants' other social networks. It is not "a pilgrimage"; it includes a meeting with leaders of Seeds of Peace and is with a leader who is an "intellectual."[2] Participants assert that simply because they are traveling to Israel and are involved in a Jewish community they are not "brainwashed." Instead, they are traveling to Israel "to study a situation and to think about it and question." With the Riverway Project, they would not, they believe, find doctrine in Israel. Instead, they would have the opportunity to touch a situation firsthand and to draw their own conclusions. To them, the Riverway Project uses the same norms as do their other social networks, and Jane, Dena, and others justify to their peers their connection to the Riverway Project because it matches these other norms as they perceive them. It follows an "inquisitive, critical approach."

Utilization of this critical approach is what fosters Jewish growth for participants. Again, to use participants' own words, Dena captured the relationship between Jewish growth and intellectual exploration in a reflection written after she returned from Israel:

> I experienced profound growth—although I'm not sure I'm ready to dub it "spiritual"—in *Eretz* Israel (land of Israel). This growth didn't take place at religious sites, but rather as a result of conversation provoked by formal textual study and informal encounters with the people and land of Israel, that is, the nation-state. This is why I believe American Jews should travel to Israel: not to pray at the Western Wall, scale Masada, or sing *Hatikva* (the Israeli national anthem) at Independence Hall, but rather to confront one's own questions about what it means to assert a Jewish identity, one that is authentically your own.

With an opportunity to examine Israel first-hand, and in a conversation replete with multiple perspectives and little doctrine, Dena could assert her questions about what it

[2] Seeds of Peace brings children from Moslem, Christian Arab, and Jewish communities in the Middle East together for a residential summer camp experience See www.seedsofpeace.org for a full explanation.

means to her to be Jewish and, in this case, to have a connection to Israel. More specifically, her connection to Israel could exist within those questions and her reflection on them. As Dena commented, by exploring the complexity at hand and through ongoing study, participants can find a Judaism that is genuine and personal, examined carefully and consequently "authentically [participants'] own."

This kind of direct experience is challenging, well-examined, and almost the opposite of authoritarian, in which one truth exists to which participants must subscribe. Participants suggest that they find this approach to Judaism in the Riverway Project, that the Riverway Project presents Judaism as a tradition in which questions abound, as one that prizes questions themselves rather than their narrow answers. This emphasis on questions develops because study occurs constantly in the Riverway Project, because almost all Riverway Project opportunities include investigation of Jewish texts. It happens because Morrison creates engaging environments in which participants feel comfortable involving themselves in text study, an activity unfamiliar and that they first see as potentially dogmatic. It happens because the study itself exposes questions and possibilities, contradictions inherent in the Jewish text and tradition. In time, Morrison's classroom demonstrates to participants that it is possible to be a student of Judaism and to be a critical thinker, to be comfortable in multiple worlds.

As a result, Jewish study becomes a part of participants' lives. And through study, participants explore their potential Jewish practice, deciding what Jewish rituals to integrate into their lives. Moreover, with Morrison, students develop intellectual identities as Jews. They become "reflective skeptics," in the language of Stephen

Brookfield, learning to reconsider their previously held ideas about Judaism.[3] Because they examine their ideas personally, approaching texts and Judaism by asking their own questions, not automatically accepting the interpretations handed to them, they come to hold with greater conviction onto their own ideas. They develop "wonderful ideas," the essential thoughts that help students' cognitive Jewish habits grow.[4] In other words, they learn to think for themselves about Judaism, and they like it.

This chapter explores in depth the role that questions like Foer's play in the Riverway Project and what Dena meant in Israel when she referred to Morrison's "inquisitive, critical approach." To do this, I focus on Morrison's teaching primarily as it manifests in Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays, the bimonthly opportunity to study the weekly *Torah* portion that the Riverway Project offers. The Riverway Project poses questions in multiple settings, not only in Torah and Tonics, and so I also share an incident in which Jewish celebration occurred through questions, that of the Riverway Project's celebration of the holiday of *Purim.* The data illustrates that essentially, the Riverway Project seeks to turn Jewish tradition upside down, teaching participants to take no aspect of Jewish celebration at face value and to question and investigate their tradition continually.

After sharing my observations of critical thinking and study in the Riverway Project, I describe in greater detail Morrison's perceptions of his approach to teaching, relating his conception of "critical" thinking and why it is important to him. When I turn to the participants' reactions to text study in the Riverway Project, it becomes clear that many participants deeply value the opportunity to ask questions. They prize, in their

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[3] Stephen D. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
[4] Eleanor Duckworth, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1996).

words, “careful” thinking and they describe such thinking quite similarly to the model of critical thinking that Morrison presents. At the close of the chapter, I raise various theories about critical thinking and intellectual development, demonstrating that Morrison unconsciously uses the term appropriately and that his approach helps students to grow as Jews intellectually and in other ways. Ultimately, I demonstrate that this is a social network that follows participants’ values as they learn them in the more universal communities in their lives. Through its emphasis on critical thinking, the Riverway Project shapes a social network that integrates participants’ Jewish and universal commitments, further enabling them to find a comfortable Jewish community and to shift social networks effectively.

## THE STUDY AND CELEBRATION OF QUESTIONS

Text study, and specifically the study of Bible, roots almost all conversations about Judaism that Morrison leads. Group study of the weekly Torah portion occurs at Neighborhood Circles and often at Soul Food Friday, helping participants to link worship and prayer opportunities with study and discussion of Torah. In Mining for Meaning, Morrison and participants explored Jewish practice by tracing the development of ritual in Jewish texts. On the Riverway Project *kallah* (retreat, or gathering), participants spoke about the strength of their community by studying the *Torah* portion; as facilitators of the *kallah,* Riverway Project participants began their planning with Morrison not by discussing the potential schedule but by studying that portion together and identifying its themes. On the Riverway Project Israel trip, participants connected to sites through texts: reading, understanding, and responding to Jewish texts about the destruction of the

Temple, moving seamlessly from the ancient ideas of *Talmud* to their own feelings about the *Kotel*. In *Safed*, participants examined the text of *Lecha Dodi*, a prayer in Friday night liturgy that was written in *Safed*; in *Beit Shearim* participants studied a *gemara* (a Talmudic text) about Talmudic interpretation, looking around them at the graves of some of the rabbis and then down to their laps at the rabbis' words and ideas preserved in Jewish texts. Morrison grounds most conversations in Jewish texts, provoking participants to create questions about their texts and therefore, about their Jewishness.

Because texts stimulate most conversations about Judaism in the Riverway Project, participants have the opportunity to learn that Jewish life can revolve around text study. Study, however, offers more than only illustration of this fundamental point. Morrison's very approach to study makes the opportunity transformative for participants. The themes introduced in Foer's piece – the combination of sarcasm and humor, the piece's challenging nature, and, of course, its emphasis on the questions themselves – converge in the Riverway Project to create an engaging, demanding, and enriching opportunity for participants to learn a new way to interact with Jewish life.

As Morrison shapes it, this process of immersion in texts has two subtle stages. Morrison first helps participants to feel comfortable and safe in their environment, secure enough to explore unknown and possibly threatening texts. Morrison focuses their study on questions of meaning to their life in general, helping participants to see the larger stories about life in the text's narrative. The humor and tension of the conversations that he leads further engage participants. Once involved in their activity, Morrison helps participants to see Jewish texts and Judaism differently when he creates conversations filled with questions. He guides participants to see the text's different meanings, the

discrepancies among Jewish ideas that evolve over time, the text's potentially intended meaning as opposed to how participants interpret it. Moreover, he offers few concrete answers throughout their discussion, and so participants can exercise their identities as rigorous and independent thinkers even – or particularly – in this Jewish space. As together they create questions about the text, participants – students – have the opportunity to understand Jewish texts, contrary to their prior ideas, as not at all as straightforward.

To explore the ways that students come to think critically about Judaism and to interact with Judaism's intellectual tradition, I share observations of text study from my fieldwork, rooting these observations in a portrait of Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays. Described in the Introduction, Torah and Tonics occurs twice a month and offers text study with Morrison over dinner and beer and wine ("tonics"). Students in Torah and Tonics study the Torah portion of the week, sometimes straying to include texts related to the Jewish calendar; before Passover, for example, the study related the *haftorah* (Saturday reading from Prophets) for the upcoming *Shabbat* to texts about Elijah, and the study examined the role of Elijah in the *seder*. The texts studied on the evening under focus here centered around the Torah portion of *Chukkat* (Numbers 19.1 – 22.1) in which the laws of ritual purity related to coming into contact with the dead are shared, Moses and Aaron lose patience with God, Moses strikes a rock to find water, and Miriam and Aaron die.[5] Of these topics, Morrison focused the evening's study on the character of Aaron as he appears throughout the *Torah*. His and students' exploration of this topic that night well illustrate the many techniques that Morrison uses to help students understand

[5] I share the full transcript of the Torah and Tonics session, including all texts read from Bible and additional sources, in Appendix B.

Jewish texts and teachings in new ways and ultimately develop a new relationship with Jewish texts and with Judaism.

### *Setting the Stage: A Familiar and Valuable Paradigm*

For this population that is primarily not initiated in Jewish (or any religious) text study and is lacking in Jewish social capital, setting just the right stage for study is critical. Before Riverway Project participants can see the text as relevant to them, and before they can learn to study the text, they need to be eager even to enter into the activity of text study. And for them to be eager, the environment into which they enter must have low or no barriers to entry, making the community both physically and psychologically easy to join. It cannot reveal anyone as uninformed about the story, as participants come wanting not to acknowledge their weaknesses or insecurities. If the framework of study can help participants to get to know each other in order to trust each other enough to debate, listen, and learn from each other, all the better.

Centered on dinner, held at Temple Israel and therefore easily accessible from downtown Boston by public transportation, and focused on that week's Torah portion rather than on a sequential curriculum of sorts, Torah and Tonics essentially meets these requirements.[6] Students can come to occasional sessions without being penalized for missing the prior session. They can slip unassumingly into the room and occupy

[6] During my fieldwork and interviews, I did not hear directly from anyone that Torah and Tonics was inaccessible despite their lack of prior information; in fact, they stressed that it was accessible despite their lack of familiarity with Jewish texts. However, one participant did report to me that her friend whom she brought with her once knew nothing about the Bible before coming – not how it is structured nor the basic narrative – and as a result felt excluded from the study. It is true that Morrison does not provide any kind of basic introduction to the structure of Bible. Such an introduction in some way might be helpful. At the same time, it might be equally true that the lack of introduction prevents participants from having to acknowledge that they need an introduction. They can slide into class without sharing in any way that they are ignorant in this intellectual area that is theoretically so essential to their tradition.

With a 6:30 pm start time, however, it does exclude those who work late into the evening.

themselves with dinner, looking for friends and partners under the guise of dinner and study. With no previous knowledge of the text they can sit quietly, following the conversation and learning norms of study. Torah and Tonics becomes something similar to any other planned social event in their lives, an event at another communal organization or a dinner or party at a friend's home. It is a welcoming paradigm for learning and being together.

"Heck, let's start. Everybody's gonna need these red books. Help yourselves," Rabbi Morrison calls to students as he briskly enters the Slater Lounge of Temple Israel. The lounge sits next to school classrooms and the library off of a main hallway of the Temple, its walls a soft grayish white and its floor carpeted. Windows overlook an alley next to the Temple but they let in natural light. The ceiling is low; that and the soft color of the décor make the room intimate and appropriately relaxed. For Torah and Tonics, the room holds five round tables covered in white paper tablecloths with eight seats around each. Since 6:30, students have been wandering in and the room has filled to about fifteen; another fifteen, equally singles and couples, will come in before we start studying at 7:00. Participants help themselves to the buffet along the back wall of the room: dinner rotates among spaghetti and salad, Chinese food, pizza, and falafel, all from local restaurants. Micro-beers and bottles of wine are on ice at the end of the table alongside soda and cookies.

As participants eat and drink during this time for dinner and before Torah study officially begins, some introduce themselves and others catch up with those whom they have met previously through the Riverway Project. They discuss books that they are

reading (*Eats Shoots and Leaves*[7]), what they do professionally or during the day ("Oh, you're a mechy too," one student exclaims at learning that another student is also a computer engineer), where they live and the personality (and cost of housing) of different Boston neighborhoods. For many, the chatter during dinner helps those who are new to the event not to feel like outsiders.[8] Those who have participated before answer the questions of first-timers about the rhythms and expectations of Torah and Tonics: Do I have to have read the Bible? What if I don't come every time? The old-timers project an attachment to Torah and Tonics, an investment and pride in what happens in this room, their body language and tone assuring others that they, too, can feel comfortable here, even if they have not been before, even if they do not come regularly, even if they do not normally spend time in synagogues. One participant enters holding the hand of a woman and gestures to the books and then to the table with food. I hear him telling the woman in a low voice about how Torah and Tonics works, how they will eat and then study, about what some of plaques on the walls represent. I recognize him as a frequent participant who had always before come alone. I wonder if this is a new girlfriend and if this evening is the first step in his showing her an important part of his life. Those few initial minutes as he introduced her to the environment clearly demonstrate his feelings of belonging to this world of study as he, the acculturated, shows the uninitiated what is what.

When Morrison joins the community toward the end of the dinner period, often in a suit or jacket and tie from his day in the synagogue, he introduces himself personally to those he does not know and greets everyone he has met before, shaking their hand or

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[7] Lynne Truss, *Eats Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004).

[8] As reported by those I interviewed. Again, it may be that others whom I did not interview felt the community to be cliquish.

touching them on the shoulder, asking, "How are you – you well?" Some students he has not seen for a year, their professional and personal lives having prevented them for a time from being available on Tuesday evenings. Others come frequently, some more than once a month, and Morrison sees still others between Torah and Tonics at other Riverway Project opportunities. Morrison joins students for dinner for a few minutes before asking participants again to take a "red book," a copy of a Plaut *chumash*[9] from the portable racks at the side of the room. He leaves his food at a seat in the center of the room, takes off his jacket, and the evening begins.

As with other Riverway Project events, students begin by introducing themselves and sharing where they live, what they do, or sometimes a randomly selected part of their lives, something fun from the weekend before or, as on this July evening, something good that happened during the previous week. Almost each idea that participants share triggers laughter and cheers, with participants revealing that they were married the week before, that they are celebrating their graduation from graduate school, that they began looking for a new apartment, that they played hooky from work. From the sublime to the mundane, these introductions are more than to their own lives: in their entirety, they paint a picture of the lives of younger adults and create connections among the participants beyond their purpose together that night. Moreover, members of this group rotate – only a small handful of participants come consistently to every session – and so introductions help to shape this group into a community that has multiple points of convergence. Students begin their study with this basis in their commonalities, having learned each others' names, having chatted informally over dinner, and with the echoes of laughter

[9] The Plaut *chumash*, or five books of the *Torah*, is the Biblical text published by the Reform movement. It offers the original Hebrew, an English translation, and a variety of notes and commentaries. Gunther Plaut, ed, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

still in the room. Having come together using norms of interaction to which they are accustomed and that establish them as a group, students push aside the remnants of dinner and with beers still half-full and plates by their sides, books open and study begins.

### *Finding Personal Meaning in the Text's Big Questions*

If the framework of the activity helps students to be calm and comfortable as they join Torah and Tonics and prepare to study, the ways in which Morrison frames their study direct students to begin to see Bible as being relevant to their lives. Specifically, Morrison frames many study sessions with a focal question, one that is significant to students' understanding of the text and, often, to students' understanding of their own Jewishness. Through the focal question of the evening, students' study comes to be about more than the narrative that they read; it also uncovers how students reflect on and understand that narrative.

On this night, to examine the Torah portion of *Chukkat,* Morrison begins study as he always does, by introducing the evening and their conversation:

> Morrison: I'm Jeremy Morrison and I was in Maine for the weekend. Love that. … This week we read the portion called *Chukkat* … which has a lot of things happening in it. One of which is the death of Aaron. And I wanted to use this evening … as an opportunity to look at several episodes of the life of Aaron to get a sort of handle on who this guy might have been and how text portrays him. And what I'm hoping to do if we have time is really to also bring in some *midrash* … because *midrash* creates a whole view of Aaron that is radically – I don't know if it's different from the text, than the *Torah*, but it certainly creates a dynamic with this guy that I think is fascinating. And adds depth to this portrayal. …
>
> And so let's start by looking at Exodus 3, page 401… Does someone wanna start reading … Verse 10.
>
> (A student begins to read)

As on most evenings, with these remarks, Morrison launches students' impending conversation by giving them more than a conversation topic. He offers a central question of exploration for the evening, here suggesting a question about Aaron's role in the text. He proposes that Aaron's role may be complicated, particularly when images of Aaron from multiple texts from multiple time periods are viewed side by side, making their incongruities visible. Students who know Aaron likely understood him before class as the "first priest," Moses' brother, a leader of the Israelites through the desert, and a forebear to those who led the Jewish people during the days of the ancient Temple. In his introduction, Morrison proposes that the texts that students would review would create a different picture of Aaron, one that brings "depth" and is "fascinating," even "radically" so.

Also as he does on many evenings, Morrison then walks students through a series of Jewish texts. As students sift through the different texts before them, they see a shifting picture of Aaron, with him being absent at Moses' birth, as being at fault during an Israelite rebellion and ultimately punished by God, and then as someone praised at death beyond many other forefathers. Students read *midrash* (legends about the Bible written throughout history), and see writers elevating Aaron almost beyond Moses and to the priesthood. They imagine why these shifts in the portrayal or understanding of Aaron might have occurred. They ask about the choice of Aaron as the first priest and as Moses' support at all. After much discussion, Morrison concludes the study by summarizing some students' ideas, suggesting:

> Aaron originally was connected to Exodus. Later, and David brought this up at the beginning, as a function of the first Temple, he becomes connected to priesthood. So what do you have to do to help him out? You make him a brother of Moses.

The central question of the evening was about Aaron's role in Jewish tradition, with Morrison originally suggesting that his role may be more complicated than is traditionally understood. By the close of the evening, the group had established that the Jewish understanding of Aaron as first priest may have been constructed after events in Egypt occurred, that the description of Aaron as Moses' brother is not necessarily trustworthy, and ultimately, that the story is not straightforward at all.

As a result, when their study together ended, it did so with questions pushing at the conversation's surface, questions with great implications: What kind of a leader was Aaron, really? Had students' conceptions of him as a leader been shaped by extra-textual ideas or does the Bible actually portray him as a leader, and does that matter? What does it mean to be a *Cohen*, a member of the priestly clan? What does it mean that texts were used in political ways – does that change their status or import in students' minds? Weeks later during interviews and conversations, participants continued to refer to some of these questions. The focal question of the night, Aaron's role and how it changes over time, raised these sub-questions that moved the foundations of students' ideas about Aaron and stayed with students.

Focal questions like these, questions of import for students' conceptions of Judaism and even their own Jewish identities, initiate and serve as the foundation of most text studies with Morrison. On other evenings, Morrison investigates other kinds of meaningful, or big, questions, ones about life and how it is lived. He asks about moral behavior, for example, examining philanthropic responsibilities according to Jewish texts:

> What are the boundaries of our responsibility for other individuals, other places… non-Jews, Jews, etc. What, how do we relate, is there a point where our responsibility for others stops…?

He asks true existential questions, about the nature of God and our interaction with God:

> I want us…to really explore, what does it mean to love God, and also when you say these words, if you say these words, *ve'ahavta*, you shall love God with all your heart, what the heck does that mean? What the heck does that mean to *you*? I think what we first have to ask before that is what the heck does it mean in the Bible. To love God. So. I actually want to start … what does it mean to be commanded to love God.

On another night, just before Passover:

> We're going to look at, ultimately in our conversation, issues of messianism. And, and I hope by the end of our conversation we're gonna talk about… Elijah's cup and why, what that imagery means to you. And what does the imagery of the messiah mean to you.

On the evening of Torah and Tonics in which Aaron was the focus, the implications of the focal question were just underneath the surface. They were plentiful, though, with the focal question practically begging students to consider: Why was the text written? Why is it important? How does it change over time? These are echoes of questions that participants continually ask whatever the session's focal question: Are texts believable? What does it mean for texts to be true? How do I relate to their truth? The focal question and these sub-questions are the real purpose of students' study, the exploration of which drives students to Torah and Tonics. They are also a central means by which Morrison demonstrates to students that texts are personally relevant. Because Morrison almost always focuses study on questions of meaning about life or religion, participants consistently have opportunity to wonder about these aspects of their relationship with Bible, to explore what Bible – and the Jewish Bible, specifically – means to them. These big questions help text study to be about more than only the texts in front of students.

They focus students on the narrative as well as on what the narrative means for the students themselves.

### *An Engaging Environment*

Morrison begins Torah and Tonics by framing the conversation with a focal question. Most frequently, a student then reads aloud a piece of text and Morrison asks for comments and questions about that text. As Morrison facilitates the conversation, he does so in additional ways that make studying with him engaging: he keeps a quick pace and vigorous tone, he uses irreverent humor to entertain, and even while he gently teases students, he simultaneously supports them and weaves them together into an encouraging community. In addition to the familiar paradigm in which they study and the focal questions on which they concentrate, students can feel comfortable in and engaged by this environment because of its fun, funny, and supportive character.

Significant components of this environment can be seen even at the beginning of study. After reading a piece from Exodus, students' study of *Chukkat* and Aaron began like this:

> Morrison: Questions, comments, concerns, anything. What. Thoughts. (beat – then calls on someone) Sir.
>
> David: What would be the point of God selecting a man who can't speak very well to be the spokesperson?
>
> Morrison: Okay. Other questions, thoughts. Yeah.
>
> Melissa: Aaron's kind of a leader by default.
>
> Morrison: All right. Do you mean that in response to David's question or sort of tangential –
>
> Melissa: No, a new thought.
>
> Morrison: Good. Good. Forget his point for a moment (laughter). This is another point. Okay, good. So on the one hand, we do have an issue, I mean…A leader who

can't speak, and yet at the same time, the scene sets up a second leader, and what's the quality of this leader?

Harleigh: He has an ability to speak.

Morrison: Good, he has an ability to speak. … Other thoughts, comments. Dena.

Dena: I was really surprised by this phrase, playing the role of God.

Morrison: Mm-mm. Moses playing the role of God to -

Dena: Yeah – God saying, playing my role to Aaron. Like a team. I guess I was thinking about when that happens, when people claim that for themselves, like saying they're prophets, I've never thought about God actually saying that, calling someone God.

Morrison: Well, what does it mean, in this context, what does it mean for someone to play God, to him?

Dena: Well, in the very literal sense it just seems to me like putting words in his mouth.

Morrison: Good. On some level being God means language, right – Gods create language.

Heather: Well – I think it also ties back to 11 and 12 – God is saying that God gives Moses the words and *then* they'll go to Aaron.

Morrison: Good. Who gives man speech? God does. Who makes man dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? But now Moses has all of those powers over Aaron.

Heather: Or at least some of them.

Morrison: Or at least some of them.

Maya: I don't know if I'm missing this but I don't completely understand Moses' role in this because God is sort of saying – like why is he telling one what to say but not the other?

Morrison: Good (sees another hand) - yes? You can ignore her or – oh, you want to connect to it. Good.

Harleigh: Well, thinking about it, Aaron seems to be really an afterthought. Like Moses is – God picked someone to lead who can't really talk, so maybe talking's not that important in what God's looking for, and when Moses keeps – I mean, it's a few times that Moses is saying, someone else, someone else, someone else… almost as if, anyone can speak, and here's someone who has a close relationship to you, so let's take him.

Morrison: Oh, okay. So speech is extra. What's primary?

Dennis: The capacity to handle the message.

Morrison: To handle it? What's that mean?

Dennis: To understand what God is saying.

Conversations like this that revolve around the students' questions and ideas develop quickly as we jump from student to student, with often barely a breath between contributions. I turn my head quickly to follow those commenting as they jump eagerly into the discussion. An exciting tension develops in the room, the conversation feeling a bit like a multi-player ping-pong match. Yet, I always follow the exchanges, benefiting from Morrison's amplification of the students' contributions. The speed with which students interact helps the evening to feel energized and stimulating. In a quick conversation as this one, with participants primarily directing the conversation rather than the conversation's leader, the multiple voices and pace of the conversation easily hold one's attention.

Morrison adds tension to the evening's quick tempo. He is not afraid to ask students to "Please, please, hurry up" to volunteer to read when running out of time. He repeats important phrases or points that students share, emphasizing ideas or ensuring that all can hear, occasionally yelling vigorously. The energy in the room grows when Morrison frequently interrupts students as they speak:

> Nathan: Aaron here is not – here's an opportunity for him to usurp Moses' power but he does not do that –
>
> Morrison: Right –
>
> Nathan: – he brings forth this, he tells him to… not that he creates the golden calf, but miraculously the golden calf just popped up, pops out of the fire –
>
> Morrison: Good –
>
> Nathan: – and that's what it says – Aaron knows the outcome… he knows that Moses is gonna come back, knows that Moses is the rightful leader of the people –
>
> Morrison: Okay –
>
> Nathan: – he knows that this golden calf in the end is gonna be nothing in the eyes of the people.

As students speak, Morrison affirms their comments, speaking over them, interrupting them, and ultimately adding to the layered and various voices in the room. The energetic noise that all create together makes the conversation additionally quick, lively, and interesting.

In an excerpt just shared, Morrison teased participants, trying to determine if they were intending to link their points to those who came before them or not:

> Morrison: All right. Do you mean that in response to David's question or sort of tangential –
>
> Melissa: No, a new thought.
>
> Morrison: Good. Good. Forget his point for a moment (laughter). This is another point.

This teasing became a theme for the evening as Morrison recurrently asked students if they were going to "ignore" those who came before them or link their point to that of the previous speaker. As the evening progressed, Morrison also began to note gender dynamics, lightly scorning the men for somewhat harshly interrupting those who were speaking and suggesting that the women more politely changed the topic from the students whose comments they followed. This sort of snarky humor happens repeatedly throughout study with Morrison, particularly at Torah and Tonics. Morrison easily creates running gags, even slightly mocking students as he did here. To some extent, one needs a thick skin to study with Morrison.

At the same time, that thick skin is less necessary because nothing is sacred in this space, not even Morrison. Early in this evening of study about Aaron, he walked purposefully up to the dry erase board, picked up a marker, and then paused, clearly having forgotten what he was going to write. He turned back around to the students and smirked, "I'm not gonna write anything, I just wanted to be ready." Students gave him

the laughter that was warranted. Moreover, they had the opportunity to recognize that his mocking of students was not personal, that all are equally a target.

Indeed, the text is also a target. When a student observes that Aaron may have been inserted into the text as Moses' brother to give Aaron credibility, Morrison notes the wisdom of making Aaron the brother of Moses as opposed to the brother of another character in the narrative: "That's a heck of a brother. That's a heck-a-brother. A heck-a-bro." He describes a sentimental, forgiving commentary as the "human, psychological, warm-fuzzy, grieving response – WFG," he writes on the board as abbreviation for "warm, fuzzy, grieving." Another night, as students explored a possible interpretation of God's actions in the text, he wondered out loud if God was saying, "God damn it, I'm mad." He paused for a second and exclaimed, "I damn it!" mocking the constant invoking of God when angry, and mocking God itself. In total, by mocking the text, Morrison lightens the intensity with which he and students treat their study, giving them all a break from the gravity of their work. His humor borders on the irreverent; it is certainly cynical and sarcastic and current, of the twenty-first century.[10] When Morrison laughs at himself and with students, using sarcasm and irony, he speaks his students' – indeed, his own – language, bringing Jewish texts into their vernacular, viewing the texts through the frame of their everyday lives.[11]

Morrison's mocking humor is less biting because Morrison balances this mocking of students with strong support of them. He watches their non-verbal cues as they slump

[10] A range of news essays capture the sarcasm that has pervaded the zeitgeist today. See Linton Weeks, "Feelings? Whoa. Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Now!" *Washington Post,* (March 30, 2008); Wyatt Mason, "My Satirical Self: How Making Fun of Absolutely Everything Is Defining a Generation," *New York Times* (September 17, 2006); "'omg my mom joined facebook,'" *New York Times* (June 7, 2007).
[11] Lisa D. Grant, Diane Tickton Schuster, Meredith Woocher, and Steven M. Cohen (*A Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2004) 117-120) provide a strong exploration of the importance of using humor in general in adult Jewish education.

in their chairs, dejected, or have their chins raised, their eyes steadily following the conversation. In response, he asks them if they are all right, if they are "with" the class, or if they have an idea to share. As students speak, Morrison responds actively and frequently to students, interrupting them constantly and showing that he is listening:

> Harleigh: Well, thinking about it, Aaron seems to be really an afterthought –
>
> Morrison: – uh-huh –
>
> Harleigh: – like Moses is – God picked someone to lead who can't really talk –
>
> Morrison: – okay –
>
> Harleigh: – so maybe talking's not that important in what God's looking for, and when Moses keeps –
>
> Morrison: – oh, I see -
>
> Harleigh: I mean, it's a few times that Moses is saying, someone else, someone else, someone else –
>
> Morrison: – right –
>
> Harleigh: – almost as if, anyone can speak [for Moses], and here's someone who has a close relationship to you, so let's take him.
>
> Morrison: Okay, good.

Morrison's constant responses to students as they are talking demonstrate the extent to which he is with students, trying to follow their logic, and trying to understand what they mean to convey. As he would were he sitting one on one with a student, Morrison shows that he is present with the student with his words of continuation ("okay") and sometimes encouragement ("good"). His interjections seem to push the speaker forward, helping her to continue because she knows that someone is listening attentively and wanting to hear what she is saying.

This could be an intimate conversation, with Morrison responding so personally and seemingly allowing for no space for others to be similarly listening. But Morrison challenges students to react similarly to their peers. After hearing and internalizing a student comment, he asks other students if they heard the speaker and if they understood

the ideas shared. They nod, and he pushes, “Don’t just nod. Did you understand?” he demands. Occasionally, this prompts a student to ask a follow-up question, acknowledging that she did not truly understand. When a student speaks quietly or quickly he repeats what the student has said, asking first, “Did you hear her?” He seeks such communal understanding because this is what enables students to learn from each other: If they can hear each other, and if they understand each other, they can experiment with each other’s perspectives on the text and expand or change their own perspective because of the contributions of their peers. In addition, as he solicits students’ comments, Morrison weaves around the room, moving closer to each student as she or he speaks then moving to another corner of the room. He moves as if to bring the ideas just shared to that far corner, figuratively entwining students’ ideas. In these ways he encourages students to hear and connect to each other, making it clear that they are mandated to listen carefully to each other and to learn together in this space.

Every other Tuesday night, then, Temple Israel’s Slater Lounge fills with energy, humor, and community. It becomes the participants’ space, the space of adults in their twenties and thirties new to the study of Jewish texts and trying them on for comfort and relevance. With Morrison, students can learn from their peers and be challenged by the ideas that others share. They can laugh a bit, at themselves and at the activity in which they are engaged. Morrison works to shape study opportunities that will attract and hold participants’ interest, helping them to find the study of Jewish texts accessible and engaging because of the atmosphere in which they study.

### *Questions and Possibilities*

Having created an appealing environment for study, Morrison works to make the act of study itself more than only appealing but also productive, helping participants to become practiced in the intellectual Jewish tradition itself. Participants' universal social networks teach them that Judaism is dogmatic and that it mandates certain beliefs and behaviors. They genuinely wonder, can I be Jewish without affirming a concept of God? Can I relate to the Bible if I do not think it is the word of God, and how? Can I challenge the text and still contribute positively to the intellectual Jewish tradition? With Morrison, students have opportunity to develop skills in clarifying and exploring such questions. Study opportunities involve not singular interpretations of texts but multiple understandings of any text, illustrating to students that their engagement with Jewish life can be variable and open. Morrison teaches that texts hold possibilities and that the joy of study lies in identifying those possibilities.

I demonstrated earlier that a focal question grounds any evening of study with Morrison. Similarly, questions drive most conversations with Morrison about texts. Most frequently, his first request after reading a piece of text together is not to explicate it himself but to invite students' reactions to the text:

> (After reading the first biblical text of the evening) Moses repeatedly said, don't send me, send somebody else, and then we have this introduction of Aaron. Questions, comments, concerns, anything. What. Thoughts. (beat) Sir.

Here, Morrison briefly summarized the plot of the text and then asked right away for student comments and questions. In response, students asked questions about the plot – "What would be the point of God appointing a spokesperson who can't speak very well?" – and about the implications of the text's choice of words, wondering what it meant for

Moses to be “playing the role of God.” Other students responded to these questioners, providing their own interpretations and asking additional questions. These exchanges are a regular aspect of Morrison’s study with participants. Each time students read Morrison invites questions; each invitation prompts five or six different exchanges, with one student proposing a question and others reacting and asking more questions. After an exchange about an idea concludes Morrison demands more questions, imploring, “Comments. More. Anything.” In response, it should be noted, Morrison does not answer the questions. Instead, he affirms participants’ questions, responding, “Good, good” and “That’s great.” He upholds the question itself, emphasizing the question as the way of engaging in study. Questions become a stipulation of study, a way to react to any Jewish text.

In addition, with Morrison, to study texts is not to hear the teacher’s final idea about the text, to subscribe to his exegesis, or to hear the correct idea as developed by a student but to ask individual and collective questions and to develop their own interpretations. Rather than giving students an answer to their questions, Morrison instead turns questions over to other students to offer their opinions. Sometimes, questions arise without being answered and Morrison acknowledges their lack of resolution, responding, “These are all excellent questions. I don’t the answer. We don’t know the answer.” He still always indicates his appreciation of the questions, again emphasizing that questions without answers are worth asking. Morrison himself asks these questions as well, acknowledging, “Why is there this need – and I ask without an answer …” and mentioning “I have questions frequently; I have no idea what they lead to. I just have them.” In total, students’ questions become the launch for conversation and students’ new

ideas. As a result, no one answer or way of approaching the text exists in Morrison's classroom.

In fact, Morrison seeks to generate as many genuine interpretations of a text as possible. In addition to generating questions, he asks directly for conflicting opinions. After a student provides an opinion he says, "Okay. Anyone wanna disagree with him?" and comments, "I like it – I love this. This is excellent. Utterly appropriate disagreement." Similarly, he appreciates disagreement with his own ideas; when students disagree with Morrison they receive "Good. Explain" in response. He seems perfectly comfortable with tension and debate, perhaps seeking such debate, again, because he seeks not to find a uniform way of understanding the text but to help students find their own, personal interpretations of the text within the multiple available answers.

Ultimately, Morrison extends this desire for debate and multiple ideas to the closure of any evening's study. That is, rather than tying the evening's points together, he does not "promise any connection between things," as I saw him once assert. This can be frustrating; sometimes at the end of study I saw dissatisfaction and even confusion on the face of several students, their mouths frowning and brows furrowed. But Morrison refuses to comply with this desire for resolution. The point of studying the text, he teaches, is not to find resolution but to find meaning in the very variety of ideas. He ensures that students have multiple ideas to consider. He refuses resolution.

Morrison applies this approach that he takes toward study to the celebration of Judaism writ large. He says frequently that he does not want to teach students in order to teach them what to "do" to be Jewish; rather, he intends to help them find the tools to explore their practice for themselves. For example:

> …We're really going to delve deeply into texts to understand where these things come from. And then slowly we'll emerge into a conversation about what we do with that knowledge. … I think that's the way to do it. I don't believe personally in my saying, this is how you do something. Without understanding what's behind it.

Morrison began a Mining for Meaning class with those words, a class that was ostensibly introducing students to Judaism. But in Morrison's frame, it was a class to introduce students to the ideas behind Judaism, and Morrison refrained during the entire series of sessions from providing any information about rituals and what Jews "do." If participants had questions about practice, Morrison explained, they could refer to the reference books that Morrison gave them as part of the class.[12] Similarly, Morrison does not avoid conversations about Jewish law but he does not deliberately enter into them, either. When Morrison needs to refer to traditional Jewish law, for example when explaining a point in the narrative or a reference of a writer of *midrash*, he does not use the word "law," implying that there is a way of being Jewish to which students should adhere. When mentioning the categories of work that are not performed on *Shabbat* according to Jewish tradition, he calls this information "a little trivia, Jewish trivia." Generally, he and students together are always mining for meaning, studying texts to learn the complexity of the ritual or history, looking toward the text – and also each other – to inform their own decisions but not to receive dictation from Morrison. Their community and classroom hold multiple interpretations and multiple approaches to text and to Judaism; in this community, participants can find their own way.

[12] These included Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1959); Lawrence H. Hoffman, ed, *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries, Volume 7*: *Shabbat At Home* (Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2004); Simcha Kling and Carl Perkins, *Embracing Judaism* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1999).

### *"Is That What the Text Says?"*

Additional approaches that Morrison takes to study continue to generate questions and multiple interpretations of the text. Many of these approaches focus on guiding students to understand what the very words of the text are communicating. Using several strategies, Morrison moves students away from their own interpretations and toward the text itself, guiding them to see discrepancies and varied viewpoints or stances within the text that they typically gloss over. By reading the text closely, they also see the difference between the text's actual narrative and what they have always imagined the narrative to say. Understanding what the text "says," seeing these discrepancies, gives students the opportunity to consider the complexity of the text. Foer implies that "Jewish mysteries" are plentiful and that such mysteries can "undermine or sustain." Similarly, by helping students to identify and contemplate these different discrepancies, Morrison helps students recognize and delve into Jewish mysteries. Like Foer, Morrison seems to suggest that these mysteries should sustain, that they should be the very focus of great and fun Jewish debate and an integral part of the Riverway Project and of participants' Jewish lives. To identify these mysteries, Morrison focuses on multiple and even contradictory texts, brings Hebrew to the fore, attends to the text in its context, and directs students to the text's actual words and narrative.

In studying *Chukkat*, students followed the life of Aaron through a succession of biblical, rabbinic, and even medieval and modern texts. Their evening included examination of:

- Exodus 4: Moses receives his mission from God, protests, and is given a spokesperson
- Exodus 2: Moses is born; a brother is not mentioned

- Exodus 7: Aaron is assigned to be Moses' "prophet" and is described as Moses' older brother
- Exodus 32: The people build a golden calf; Aaron blames them instead of taking responsibility for his role in the act
- Leviticus 9: Moses and Aaron bless the people; Aaron's sons are killed and Aaron stands silently
- *Midrash* (commentary on the Bible) from Isaac Abravanel: Aaron was silent when his sons were killed because his heart became "lifeless stone"
- *Midrash* from *Shem Olam*: Aaron was silent when his sons were killed because his heart was at peace
- Numbers 20: Aaron dies, the community grieves, and Aaron receives a great burial
- *Midrash* from *Legends of the Jews*: Aaron was loved better than Moses

In total, to study Aaron, students compared portrayals of Aaron in six different biblical texts and three extra-biblical pieces, only coming to the Torah portion for that week forty minutes into their study. They identified shifts in the portrayal of Aaron, noting that he did not exist at Moses' birth and is assigned to be Moses' second long after God suggests that Moses will have such a second. They see that Moses and Aaron change roles in Leviticus, each taking almost the opposite stance that each held in Exodus. When Aaron dies, students read, he is mourned significantly despite his role in building the golden calf; years later, *midrash* describes him as beloved more than Moses, more than the leader of the Israelites. Ultimately, it is demonstrated, Aaron can be the historical father of the priestly line because history has elevated his status. As they turn pages, students can see an idea taking shape within the text, twisting and becoming more intricate as it develops. As they are layered on top of each other, these texts create inconsistencies and complexities. The texts themselves put forth questions.

Morrison almost always uses such a significant number of texts in study as well as extra-textual commentaries from writers of different backgrounds, viewpoints, and eras.

When he brings to students *Talmudic* and later *midrashim* (stories from different historical eras) as well as newspaper articles from the twentieth century, sometimes both on the same evening, students' exposure to different ideas continues and grows more robust. Morrison makes sure that students delve into one text adequately enough so as to get the idea of the text, and then moves students immediately to a next text that builds on the previous text's ideas. The focal question under study gains a sort of path of exploration as students move back and forth in and outside of the Bible. Students' questions become more complicated, further motivations of characters discovered and raised for additional investigation, as students read on. By investigating many different texts, students can see the evolution of Judaism and Jewish ideas over time: the Bible raises ideas for conversation, later commentaries shift those ideas, and writers of today's newspaper articles and poetry continue to grapple with those ideas. It is demonstrated that Jewish thought evolves, and that its evolution is far from over.

Morrison also focuses the students closely on the text when he examines the text from within the time and language in which it was written. Morrison never begins text study in Hebrew and almost never asks a student to read the Hebrew out loud.[13] However, he includes the Hebrew and the English translation in any copies of biblical or other texts he gives to students. Most significantly, he often looks to the Hebrew in answering a student's question, as occurred in the following exchange from Torah and Tonics. Students were examining an event of sacrifice and wondering about its purpose in

[13] An exception I saw in my fieldwork occurred during study of the portion of Deuteronomy in which the biblical/ liturgical piece *ve'ahavta* is read. After students read this text in English, Morrison asked a student to read the first line of the liturgy (Deuteronomy 6:5) in Hebrew. This line is almost universally a part of Jewish liturgy and seemed familiar to students.

Most Riverway Project participants have little or no knowledge of Hebrew; upon discovering the Riverway Project, almost none could read or understand the biblical text in its original language.

the Israelite community and in the Israelites' relationship with God. Zoe suggested, "Well – just the word sacrifice – it implies that you're giving up something." In her mind, it made no sense that the Israelites would need to give up something in order to establish a relationship with this God. Morrison answered her:

> Morrison: Aah. So, so, what's the word for sacrifice? Do you know it?
>
> Aaron: *Korban*. It's *korban*.
>
> Morrison: *Korban*. (writes on board in Hebrew and English transliteration) Sacrifice is a problematic word, right – what do we associate with it?
>
> Ken: Giving up something.
>
> Morrison: Giving up something. Giving up something. Someone talk to us about *korban*.
>
> Aaron: It comes from the word, from the verb, to draw near.
>
> Morrison: Good. Great. So a *korban* – the notion of a *korban* is to come close. To give, you burn the stuff, or you sacrifice it, I think we could talk about it in terms of what you do with it, you burn it, you offer it, and in doing so you draw close. You draw close. So in that sense, is it at all about giving something up? Or is it – something – maybe you get something? I mean, I've been thinking a lot about this – maybe it's about gaining something, not giving something up?

In this exchange, Zoe read the text in English with a specific understanding of the word sacrifice. Yet, the Hebrew word used in the text – *korban* – has different connotations than the English word used has. Morrison relied on students to help explicate the Hebrew word, and Aaron, who was raised in a Conservative synagogue and had some years of day school education, responded. Morrison was able to use the Hebrew to expand Zoe's idea of the English concept of sacrifice and to return her to what might have been the text's original intention. His turn toward Hebrew was short; he asked only about one word, minimizing the chances that one of his students might be intimidated as they could have been by a long Hebrew passage. But in looking at the Hebrew at all he demonstrated that there is more to the text than what the English offers students. This happens frequently in Morrison's teaching; in another example, a discussion of the verb *l'hitpalel*

(translated as to pray) and its reflexive properties yielded ideas about the purposes of prayer being for inner reflection as well as for worship of something external.

As a result, after repeated study with Morrison, some students come to ask at different points during study for Hebrew translations, seemingly recognizing that their knowing more about the Hebrew word used in the text will yield them a more precise and also a greater understanding of the text. Even as they rely on Morrison to provide them the Hebrew, the text's original language helps students understand how much more there is to the text than what they see and adds to their ideas about the meanings of the text. It helps them to formulate questions about what the text actually intends to communicate.

Students generate additional questions when they experiment with what they call the "truth" of the text, the extent to which the narrative actually occurred or was constructed based on myth or over time. When studying with Morrison, looking at the text in its context – details about the writers' political motivations or the milieu in which the text was shaped – becomes an entry point into questions about the meaning of the text given its historical construction.

Morrison creates an environment in which asking such questions is permissible. At one point during a study of texts about the Israelite Tabernacle, a student asked if he could ask a "blasphemous" question and then asked whether or not this Tabernacle was actually constructed, if the biblical story is "true." Morrison commented in return, "Blasphemy is allowed" and then answered the student's question about the existence of the Tabernacle. He took this question seriously and illustrated it to be not "blasphemy" but perfectly appropriate conversation when exploring texts. When he takes these questions seriously, giving a full, historically informed response, Morrison confirms

students' instincts that contextual questions are a valuable part of text study, validating that these questions fit students well into a study tradition. In this space these questions are not blasphemy; rather, the reverse is true.

Students raise these contextual kinds of questions regularly. They wonder: "What is the relationship between the Tabernacle and the Temple? Was the Tabernacle created to justify the Israelite connection to the Temple?" They ask about traditional conceptions of the text and about *midrashim* that explain biblical characters' actions using rituals that were developed later in history; for example, after reading a *midrash* that discussed the Israelites' early observance of *mitzvoth*, a student asked simply, "Since the *mitzvoth* were given in the *Torah*, how could the Israelites know about the *mitzvoth* if they had not received the *Torah* yet?" They also use a contextual perspective when commenting on the text, assuming the text to be of human origin and imagining the writers' intentions. In the text study about Aaron, this occurs several times:

> David: I'm not sure if it was written at the time of the second temple or just after, but the priests were running the show basically, and they needed a way to show that they had authority from back in the day, so they made Moses different from the priests – since the priest was the older one, it seems like the authority came from him.

And:

> Jon: Is there a subtext here from the later authors who filled the roles of Aaron within their communities, who are saying well, Moses is the one inspired by God and who has God's message, whereas Aaron as the spokesman, the interpreter of the message, what they're really doing is reinforcing their own later role as their interpreter of the Torah.

Both David and Jon assume the text to have been shaped over time, with pieces of the narrative shifting and aspects added throughout history. They attribute political motivations to the writers, claiming that the writers were seeking power and that their

desire for power drove them to describe the character of Aaron in certain ways. These students seemed to enter the evening imagining the text to be constructed for political reasons and by multiple writers over time and wanting to speak about that in the classroom.

Morrison similarly raises the context of the text during study. He shares a historical perspective, conveying ideas about the civilizations of the ancient near east and how universal ideas are reflected in this particular tradition's story. He mentions specifically the motivations of the writers, often in response to students' questions:

> Robin: I think it's interesting that Aaron was introduced as Aaron the Levite. Whereas Moses is called Moses. He's introduced as being the son of the Levite tribe. But Moses isn't known as Moses the Levite – Aaron gets this title.
>
> Morrison: Good. It's important to put Aaron into the Levitical clan. But when I use that language - to put him in – suggests he wasn't ever there originally. This is more complicated.

A student raises a question within the text of comparison, noting that the text introduces the two characters in different ways, emphasizing Aaron as a Levite but not Moses. When Morrison responds to her point, he directs her and other students to see the text contextually, from the writers' perspective or from the perspective of history. Perhaps, he suggests, the difference exists because Aaron was not "there originally," perhaps the text evolved over time and ideas were changed, added, or lost as different writers shaped the text for various reasons. Ultimately, after students themselves raised this idea repeatedly, he drew their thoughts together to emphasize this point at the conclusion of the evening:

> Morrison: Aaron's connected with the Exodus, going down from Egypt, but by the time we're done he's connected with the priesthood. This whole priesthood is a later addition to what Aaron did. Aaron originally was connected to Exodus. Later, and David brought this up at the beginning, as a function of the first temple, he becomes connected to priesthood. So what do you have to do to help him out? You make him a brother of Moses. You guys were saying great stuff. Right. You gotta give this guy

> authority. And what's the highest authority? To be Moses' right hand man. Any last thoughts?
>
> Dennis: Was he added later? Was he a part of Moses' life?
>
> Morrison: This is a longer conversation – we have no examples outside of this text that this guy existed. But we do have this story, this old story, this epic story of this Moses figure coming out. And Moses probably having some brother. And that brother might have been Aaron, who helped him get people out. But he wasn't a priest. So somewhere over time, this brother figure, becomes this priest.

Morrison shared with me later that he had not intended for the writers of the text to be such a focus of the conversation, nor for the conversation to illustrate Aaron as having been added to the text. As he explained to me, he concluded their study together by emphasizing this point because the students themselves had raised these ideas; they were pushing the conversation in this direction. At the same time, it is likely that he heard and highlighted these ideas because they are important to him. Similarly, the students may have frequently interpreted the text through a contextual frame because the texts through which Morrison led them, the story that he constructed for them, was one that made obvious textual questions, that surfaced questions about discrepancies in a narrative constructed over time. In this way, the students and Morrison have equal interests in taking a contextual or historical perspective on the text, and their interests build on those of the other. As they ask these kinds of questions repeatedly, students consider what "truth" means to them and what the text means to them because they understand truth to be impacted by the text's context and by the values, ambitions, and political motivations of the writers. Moreover, they become practiced in approaching the text in this way, seeing incongruities and shifts, expanding their capacity even further to ask questions.

Morrison most directly focuses students on what the text "says" when he challenges students to move away from their personal interpretations of the text and to focus closely on its actual or inherent meaning. The following exchange is from Mining

for Meaning, a series of sessions intended to help one consistent group of students explore the holidays and *Shabbat* for personal meaning. Morrison rooted the conversation in a close look at various texts about the holidays and *Shabbat*, tracing the development of *Shabbat* through Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, and then the *Talmud* before moving the conversation into discussion of students' *Shabbat* observance. Students began with Genesis 2:2-3, the description of the sixth day after which God rests:

> Morrison: We're going to come back to the text in the Hebrew a little bit later, but let's just start with the English version. … What does God do in these verses?
>
> Harleigh: Creates the world.
>
> Morrison: He created. God created and he –
>
> Carrie: Rests.
>
> Morrison: He rests. What else. God creates, rests, what else.
>
> Harleigh: Blesses.
>
> Maggie: Sanctifies.
>
> Morrison: Blesses, sanctifies. Good. Anything else. … Good. The word *Shabbat* in here is actually to cease, to cease. *Shabbat* means to cease. To stop. … But … if I were to just say to you now, what is, what happens on *Shabbat*, according to Genesis 2:2 to 3, what happens on *Shabbat*?
>
> Carrie: We stop.
>
> Morrison: No. What happens on *Shabbat*?
>
> Maggie: God stops.
>
> Morrison: God stops. Good. What else does God do?
>
> Adam: He rests.
>
> Morrison: He rests. Good. … So who's *Shabbat* about according to this text?
>
> Many students: God.
>
> Morrison: God. In this biblical text, Shabbat has nothing to do with you or me. Or anyone else. Shabbat is utterly theocentric, God-centered. Kay. Now before we had touched this text and I had said, what's *Shabbat* about to you guys, what would you have said?
>
> Harleigh: It's about rest.

A close reading of this text yields a definition that is different – even significantly different – from the colloquial definition: *Shabbat* is not about human rest but about

stopping, and specifically about God stopping. Morrison deliberately and even bluntly moves students away from understanding that their ideas of personal, human rest are in this Genesis text by helping them to focus on the text itself. They see that their meaning of a concept is personally or communally invented.

This happens frequently. As they study, students easily shift away from the words on the page. They interpret Hebrew words in creative ways, arguing that "*baruch*" (bless) can mean "beloved," that the words "*baruch atah Adonai*" (blessed are you, God) actually express love for God. They explain away difficult ideas by attributing ancient contextual motivations to writers who actually wrote from a modern context, avoiding the challenges that they face when confronted with a modern religious person. During Torah and Tonics, by examining a range of texts, students saw that their understanding of Aaron as "the first priest" had unreliable roots in the biblical text. Instead, as they discussed, Aaron represents complicated and essential Jewish ideas of leadership and of human-divine relations. Morrison always turns students back to the text's actual words and meaning, asking them, "But is that what the *text* says?" He asks students to differentiate between their personal feelings and what they see in the text itself.

The outcome of this, as demonstrated in the example about the original textual reference to *Shabbat,* is that the conversation establishes that students' imagined meaning of the text is not actually in the text itself. Again, the discrepancies that surface turn into questions: is it relevant that my ideas do not come from the Bible itself? When can I impose my ideas about a concept onto the concept? Do I agree with what the text says, do I like the text – and does that matter? The text engages because it says more than, or does not say at all, what students thought it said.

Occasionally, Morrison makes this last question transparent, asking or answering it with the students. At a problematic passage when students are struggling to resolve the cognitive dissonance that the passage creates for them, he challenges them. "Why does it always have to be sweet?" he asked. He is really challenging, why must we interpret the text in a way that makes it palatable? Can we relate to something if we are uncomfortable with what it says? Morrison suggests that students can, that their questions can sustain them through their Jewish study.

### *Finding Joy in Questions*

Morrison most directly addressed this discomfort during the Riverway Project Israel trip. He freed participants from needing to feel comfortable with Israel when he began their trip with these remarks:

> I don't also expect everyone to come out loving Israel. If you do, great or – I think… it's complicated. We have to explore that complexity.

This mandate to "explore the complexity" is present whenever Morrison teaches. He releases students from the idea that they can relate to the text or Judaism simply, in just one way. Instead, students are charged with the responsibility of finding and exploring the incongruities in the text, with reading the text closely to be sure that they understand what it says and not what they wish it says, and with confronting the challenges that the text raises for them.

Morrison weaves this mandate to be comfortable with complexity throughout the Riverway Project. On Friday nights during prayer services, after reading the liturgical piece *Maariv Aravim,* Morrison asks students to sing with him a line in Hebrew from the liturgy, using a somewhat soft, deliberate tune. Sometimes, he accompanies the tune on

his guitar, drumming the song's melody on guitar's side. As he leads participants in singing "la dai" to the melody and then in the words themselves, Morrison often closes his eyes, meditating to the words and music. Together, his strong voice in the lead, the community sings, "*ki hem hayinu v'orech yameinu, oo v'hem negeh yomam v'laila*," or "for they [the mitzvoth] are our life and the length of our days and on them we will meditate day and night."[14] Morrison repeats this tune consistently on Friday nights and with such emotional intensity because it expresses a fundamental principle of the Riverway Project. Involvement not only in the Riverway Project, but also and even primarily in Jewish life, as Morrison presents it, revolves around study and its complexity.

One Friday night, Morrison introduced the liturgical piece from which this song comes and the words participants would sing in this way:

> *Ahavat Olam* … speaks of God's love for the people of Israel and how God's love is expressed through the *Torah*. Certainly love is a complex thing, as is the *Torah* and our relationship to it. If together we could sing this one line… *ki hem hayinu v'orech yaminu, oo v'hem negeh yomam v'laila*. Its words speak of this relationship with *Torah*, how it's continual, neverending, and even in all the complexity that is I think the relationship between the people of Israel and *Torah*, that it is true and certain for us.

This text, Morrison suggests, and the Jewish people's connection with and investigation of it is not straightforward. It is uncomfortable, perhaps, and confusing. Yet, it is still "neverending… true and certain" for him and those whom he is teaching. "Even in all the complexity," Morrison proposes, the text should be celebrated.

Morrison holds both of these concepts, complexity and celebration, together for participants. In Israel, when acknowledging that participants might not find resolution to their questions, Morrison also challenged, "Judaism is wonderfully complicated and

[14] Author's translation.

problematic. … How do you get joy through even having complexity?" In his emphasis on the study of texts and the questions and possibilities he exposes in the text, he seems to provide an answer to his question: the joy of Judaism can be found in the questions themselves. The complexity might frustrate, but it also compels. In consistently singing, "It is the life and length of our days,"[15] Morrison celebrates *Torah,* and therefore celebrates his difficulties with it. He suggests similarly that students' own discomfort should be not only tolerated but embraced. On Tuesday, they might have been frustrated with the text but they will not turn away from it; on Friday, they will celebrate it alongside their frustration, and on Tuesday, they will start the process again. Rather than undermining their relationship with texts, becoming immersed in the complexity of Jewish study can be a celebration.

### *Weaving the Pieces Together*

The kinds of questions and possibilities reviewed here revolve around study, the text, and the contents of the text. But questions flourish in a multitude of Riverway Project settings; rarely, in fact, does an aspect of the Riverway Project not raise a question about how Jewish life can be lived. "Salsa in the *Sukkah*" proposes that this ancient harvest holiday can be celebrated over black beans and plaintains and with a salsa instructor. Soul Food Friday proposes that in a crowd of 300, intimate conversation about texts can occur and Negro spirituals can be part of a prayer service.[16] This is all almost subversive,

[15] Morrison's translation.
[16] As described in the Introduction, "Salsa in the Sukkah" invited participants to Temple Israel's *sukkah,* outdoor temporary structure, during the holiday of *Sukkot.* Morrison gave a brief introduction to *Sukkot*, participants said blessings together over the holiday's ritual objects, and then participants learned salsa moves from an instructor over a Latin-themed dinner. Soul Food Friday is described at length in Chapter Six.

suggesting that something that was least expected and somewhat rebellious can be part of their Jewish experience.

This kind of subversive celebration was most evident on *Purim* 2005, when the Riverway Project invited artist Amy Tobin to perform her one-woman "Esther Show."[17] As she raised questions in a night-club like atmosphere, Morrison's approaches to teaching and studying texts wove together to pervade the celebration of this holiday as well. Before leaving this description of the role that questions play in the Riverway Project, I want to describe these approaches in full as used in this different context in the Riverway Project, demonstrating that question-asking is not reserved for text study.

Earlier in the evening of *Purim*, Temple Israel offered a *megillah* (the scroll that contains the *Purim* story) reading and more typical *Purim* activities for children and families. Around 8:30, in preparation for the Esther Show, the synagogue social hall became a cabaret; the lights were dimmed, small, round tables draped in purple and black and set with candles and votives and *hamantaschen* (*Purim* cookies) were scattered throughout the room. About 200 Riverway Project participants and synagogue members mingled over hors d'oeuvres and drinks, their costumes of Japanese kimonos, clown wigs, and kitschy slogan t-shirts (proclaiming "A Sure Thing") blending into a different kind of *Purim* celebration. Amy Tobin is a performer and producer, often working with "explicitly Jewish content," in her words. She climbed onto the risers wearing a long

[17] Amy Tobin is a singer/ songwriter and producer. She has produced and created shows with "explicitly Jewish content" in a variety of settings, including San Francisco night clubs and the Jewish Community Center. The Esther Show developed out of Tobin's love of myths, text study, and interpretation and her desire to create a show about Esther imagined by a woman. Esther represents Tobin's opportunity, after much study of the text and commentaries, to interact with the story and to share her questions about it. More information about her work can be found at www.amytobin.com.

Asian jacket; throughout the night as she changed characters she would present herself in a robe, fishnet stockings and short shorts, or a long blond wig.

Tobin's Esther is a woman with "four choices"; "long skirt, short skirt, no skirt, no underwear under army fatigues," and "virgin, mother, whore, crone or child (I know that's five)," as Tobin sings. Her Esther faces options; in her story, Tobin raises the questions, was Esther's situation brought about by her choices or by chance? Was she, truly, a heroine? In her story, sex is used as power by all characters, and Vashti finds refuge from the king's abuse in sexual encounters with her maids. For Tobin, the sexual politics are a deep layer of this story that is never discovered by children, as is the violence that the story promotes.

As Tobin comes to the end of the Esther story, she comments, "Here, during childhood, the story ends. Haman dies and we cheer and go home and eat cookies named after him. Oh, the irony. But I re-read the story – I re-read it. And it keeps going." From here, she sings about the murder of thousands, about retribution and war created by the Jews as they retaliated for their own possible destruction. She suggests that crying out against Haman during the *megillah* reading promotes the same kind of hate whose elimination is celebrated on *Purim*. The ways in which *Purim* has been celebrated, and the way many have read the story itself, demand reexamination. To begin and close her show, Tobin sings, "This is a story with many versions," and her interpretation and questions confirm this. When she goes on to sing, "This is a story about the stories we tell," she comments about the salience of interpretation: The stories we tell are not the only ones to be told, the stories we have always known are not the only ones to be

studied. *Purim* can be about telling new versions of legends, studying and studying again rather than relying on childhood assumptions of what a story says.

Tobin's show came to be about the truth not told to children but about a legacy with which adults have a responsibility to struggle. Her truth tells of sexual and general violence and politics. The event was not a child's *Purim* because it had great food, atmosphere and alcohol, because Tobin did not shrink from being explicit about sex, because she got great laughs by making almost overt comparisons between the national security situation in *Shushan* and that in the United States. But it challenged participants in sophisticated ways to think carefully because it raised questions about serendipity and fate, about the purpose and justification of violence, and about how they study, understand, and perpetuate myths. It challenged participants to rethink what they had always heard.

Moreover, it demonstrated that a holiday can be celebrated seriously and enjoyably, that ideas can be turned upside down even at a cabaret, and that a celebration can create questions and an opportunity for further conversation. As one participant commented about the show:

> I mean, it made me – you know, wanna go back, read the text … and it made me laugh a lot about the way that we present this story to little kids, and … I mean, it just made me rethink what I had always been taught, and you know, how there's always more to learn.

Tobin's performance changed this participant's ideas about what she knows the *Purim* story to be. It opened the participant to thinking critically about the *Purim* story – even amidst a celebration. In total, in the Riverway Project, participants can involve themselves in Judaism through study, their study can be integrated into their celebration, and all can be engaged through questions.

On Tuesday nights, on Friday nights, and continually in the Riverway Project, participants can ask and explore, trying to understand the extent to which what they once believed – that Judaism is authoritarian and limiting, that the narrative of the text is clear-cut – is true. When participants enter the Riverway Project, they are for the most part not yet inculcated into the process of text study. In the Riverway Project they find an opportunity to see Judaism as an intellectual practice that emphasizes possibilities rather than abides by limits. Framed by a focal question of human and Jewish meaning and peppered with Morrison's sense of humor, the act of study with Morrison helps them see Jewish study in general as fun and light-hearted and also relevant and compelling. As they continually ask questions without resolving their questions, instead brainstorming multiple possibilities at every turn, students can find possibilities for Jewish engagement in their questions and in the text itself. As they grapple with Hebrew, with the text's historical and political context, with what the text says rather than what they think it says, they can begin to see its layers. Ultimately, they can understand how to apply the norms of intellectual inquiry with which they are comfortable to their tradition and appreciate text study exactly because of the challenges it generates.

I have based these conclusions about Morrison's teaching primarily on my observations of his work. These conclusions gain depth and precision in the following context of his ideas about text study as he presented them during interviews. His expectations of students and the process that they follow become clearer, as does the potential for students' growth that results from Morrison's approach to study.

## MORRISON'S IDEAS ABOUT JEWISH TEXTS: "CRITICAL THINKING" AND CONTEXT

In interviews, Morrison explains that he teaches from within the tension between joy and complexity very intentionally. For him, very simply, the fun of Judaism, the joy, is found in the challenge of text study, and this is what he wants to give students. Through study, Morrison explains:

> I want participants to think, to think…. Use your head…. That's what I want. … Become critical thinkers [about] Judaism. That might be the bottom line. In everything I teach. Everything.

"Critical" thinking to Morrison involves provoking deep questions about students' existing ideas about Judaism and Jewish texts. He describes the critical process as:

> The starting point being what are your questions, thoughts, ideas, and then kind of boring down into a more particular place, then a retrenchment around, kind of, contextual questions in a wider lens – where else have we seen this, what's this about.

Critical thinking, then, to Morrison is a three step process: students first ask questions and develop ideas about a certain text, then look closely at that text and ask more questions about its narrow details, and then broaden their gaze to see patterns that link this text with others. Morrison repeats this process of asking questions, examining the text, and identifying patterns whenever examining a new text with students.

As he explains it, for Morrison, examining the context of the text and its implications for the narrative is an important part of critical thinking. To understand the text fully and approach it with a critical lens, Morrison believes, one must seek to uncover the writers' political and general motivations. One must study, in his words, "what they were thinking and how they were thinking and how they spoke about it" in the

texts that they created.[18] For Morrison, the text becomes fascinating when its natural incongruities are examined, when the apparent meaning of the text becomes more nuanced as students uncover the writers' environment and possible incentives.

Framed in this way, any individual text study can lead in multiple directions and produce multiple ways of understanding a text. This multiplicity is an additional part of Morrison's efforts to delve into the complexity of Jewish texts. Morrison believes that study of Jewish texts cannot naturally come together into a unified set of ideas because the text, naturally, is not unified or straightforward. He observes that others arrive at such a unified kind of ending to a lesson and calls this "rabbit out of the hat" teaching, teaching in which students discuss the text for a time and then the teacher brings the ideas together conveniently and neatly to the students' amazement and wonder at the teacher's talent.[19] In this situation, the teacher guides the ideas of the class much more than the students do, the teacher asking questions in order to lead students in certain directions. As Morrison sees it, this "artificial" way of teaching promotes the belief that only one valid interpretation of the text exists. Instead, Morrison leads an examination of the text that means to generate many ideas about what the text can mean. He holds all ideas in the classroom at the same time, including – or excluding – his own. By asking questions about the text, he helps students establish the text's multiple ideas and implications, all of which, he suggests, can be simultaneously true.

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[18] Considering the text's divine authorship is not prohibited with Morrison, but he, himself, teaches from and finds value in the perspective that the text is not divine, and he consistently emphasizes the human contribution to the text.

[19] Others make the same observation. See Barry W. Holtz, *Teztual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2003), 42-43. Also see Diane Tickton Schuster, *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice* (New York: UAHC Press, 2003), 153-154, where Rabbi David Nelson also fights against this kind of teaching.

Morrison recognizes that as he provokes such questions and maintains multiple truths he creates "trouble." Their mutual conversation is intentionally demanding, discontinuous, and even problematic for students' Jewishness. With few resolutions to their conversation, students may be unsettled, perhaps overly so. But to Morrison, this is "good trouble-making." It creates "opportunity" and "fertility" for discussion and therefore rich potential for students' self-exploration and further study. In Morrison's mind, the "trouble" motivates students to ask questions about Judaism, to think critically, and ultimately to ask more questions and to reflect continuously on the nature of Judaism and Jewish texts.

Morrison seems to employ this strategy – investigating the text by asking questions and creating trouble, or discontinuities – in order to help students to change their understanding of what the text is. Morrison imagines that students enter text study with ideas about Bible as being full of fairy tales, as being trivial and light and a relic from their childhoods. According to Morrison, students have assumed that Bible is only about laws and that it is monolithic, with one focus and one reliable narrative. If they have seen inconsistencies in the text they have not seen Jewish classrooms as a place to discuss those inconsistencies safely. They have assumed that *Torah* is doctrinal, that it dictates a way to live one's life. They have assumed that because they do not subscribe to the laws of Torah, Torah is irrelevant, a relic from an ancient past that is extraneous to their current Jewish lives. By exploring the tension between joy and complexity, by confronting the "trouble" that they have with the text, Morrison hopes that students will recognize that it is, in his words, "very cool and flexible and deep and not what they expected." Helping students to explore and even explode their assumptions about Jewish

texts is Morrison's central goal in teaching. It is also his definition of thinking critically about Judaism. By examining the questions within the text, he intends that students see that it is as interesting and as relevant as – or more than – any other book with which they engage.

From this realization, Morrison believes that students will recognize that Jewish texts hold personal relevancy. As they generate questions about the texts that they study, he imagines that students will have the opportunity to observe the predecessors of their own deep questions that challenge them in life. As they ask big questions about the text – questions about love of God, about moral responsibility, about sibling and parent relationships, and about other similar topics – students can discover more about who they are and can be. This self-knowledge is Morrison's second goal; he hopes that through their questions and critical exploration "folks … become more connected with this textual tradition. … By the end of this hour they think it's applicable to them." Because they see in the text questions that matter to them, they can see that the text itself matters to them, Morrison imagines. From within this direct, personal connection to the text, Morrison intends, individuals can come to make more informed personal religious choices and Judaism – not only its texts – can come to mean more to students.

At the same time, Morrison suggests that it is imperative to him that he helps students realize that the text itself is not only a tool that exists for the betterment of their lives. "My gut is always to privilege the text," he says, "and then later let it be about them." They must understand what the text truly says, recognizing when it raises ideas that challenge their conceptions of what Judaism or their lives should be. They cannot superimpose their ideas on its meaning. At the same time, they also should not make

decisions about what Judaism means to them without studying the text. At the heart of "liberal Judaism," Morrison believes, is the attempt to "understand history behind some of the rituals in order to make informed choices about what you want to do with your life Jewishly." The study of text facilitates this.

With this mindset, Morrison begins by helping students to see the text in its context and to generate countless questions about it. He focuses students on questions of meaning, helping them to locate such questions in the text and intending that they discover that their ancestors asked questions about life similar to their own. Through this process, he means for students to find that the text holds relevance for them personally, and when they find it to be a complicated text, about much more than laws and doctrine, he hopes that they come to make the process of intellectual exploration an active expression of their Jewishness. In the next section, using data from interviews with participants, I demonstrate that most participants appreciate this approach to intellectual inquiry and to Jewish texts and that many find through his approach to Jewish texts a new way to engage in Jewish life.

## PARTICIPANT REACTIONS: QUESTIONS AT THE HEART OF JEWISH COMMITMENT

In interviews, participants explained their appreciation for many of the aspects of study with Morrison that I have mentioned. They noted its humor and fast pace and added that Morrison is supportive of them as they study. Several explained that they find study in the Riverway Project "more interesting than Hebrew school was." Here, I focus on why participants find it "interesting," on the elements of intellectual inquiry in the Riverway Project that they value. In addition, I use their ideas to demonstrate how their sense of

their own Jewishness changes because of their involvement in study through the Riverway Project.

### *Wanted: "Careful Thinking"*

In interviews, many participants were well able to describe how they like to learn, not only about Judaism but about any subject. To them, attractive opportunities to study involve, in one participant's words, "having something, reading it, seeing things on a simple level, and then digging up the meaning." Learning – well constructed, inviting learning – comprises several steps: reading through something, understanding its straightforward meaning, and then "digging" beneath the surface to find the consequences of that surface meaning, the implications that are hidden in what's apparent.[20] In their secular studies, many participants have learned that to "show the most respect" for a text is to study it closely, piece by piece. They are eager in the Riverway Project to interact with Jewish texts in the same way. A close relationship with texts in any setting, in English class, in law school, or in Temple, demands that participants approach the text from all angles, arguing sincerely over the placement of words and the subtexts of ideas.

In part, participants want to piece apart the texts first-hand in this way so that they can avoid needing to "follow blindly" what the teacher suggests. They, themselves, want to read and learn anything that they can about a subject personally; with their educational

[20] Unknowingly, this participant – and others who less eloquently described a similar process – invoked the traditional way of approaching Jewish texts, a four-part means of textual interpretation. As the student described, the first part, *pshat,* refers to the plain or simple meaning; the third part, *drash,* refers to the interpretative or drawn out meaning.

training, they feel perfectly capable of such independent study. Participants want a teacher in the same vein, someone who is:

> A careful thinker, and someone who… I guess has developed … their opinions based on careful thinking and careful study, and not just what's been handed down to them and what's the easy answers.

Participants look to learn with a teacher who will approach learning the way that they want to approach it, through "careful study," by piecing apart texts and inherited ideas. Neither the teacher nor students should merely accept what is told to them at face value. Rather, a teacher should have the skills and motivation to examine texts closely within his tradition and then lead similarly motivated participants in doing the same.

### *Bible: Guys with "Long Beards"*

During interviews, many participants suggested that they had not thought very much about Bible before encountering it in the Riverway Project. Most had not had exposure to understanding the Bible as of human origin (for example, studying the Documentary Hypothesis[21] in school); neither had they thought much about whether or not it was created by God. If they knew Bible stories, they learned them when they were young, before they discovered tools of textual deconstruction of their later grades and college. When they had been exposed to the text during their childhoods, they were not yet experienced enough with these modes of intellectual inquiry to notice and think through differences between the stories or the narrative flow of the entire text.

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[21] Simply, the Documentary Hypothesis refers to the construction of the bible from four sources. It is a fundamental scholarly approach to understanding the bible and its origins. See Norman K. Gottwald's *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1985), 12.

At the same time, when pressed, most suggested that they would never have conceived of the Bible as divine in origin. Their ideas could be summarized by Brian, who explained:

> If someone had asked me ten years ago who wrote the Bible I probably would have said three Jewish guys with long beards sat down one day and said, 'Maybe we should write all this down.' You know (laughs). … I see it more as a … collection of stories and kind of laws to try and put order into a world that was probably very chaotic and … it was pretty obvious to me that Genesis was so very different from, from Deuteronomy, just sort of the tone and everything – it seemed sort of far-fetched to think that one person sort of wrote this. And there are some stories that are very fable-like, and then there are other things that are sort of, 'This is how you prepare meat,' you know, very dry, so … to me it seems pretty obvious that it's not one author or anything like that.

To another participant, the Bible is clearly an historical document, "from people at a particular historical moment in time." These comments encapsulate the ideas of most Riverway Project participants about Jewish texts: They are of human construction, shaped by their contexts, and their contradictions should be studied, interpreted, and ultimately explained by their contexts.

### *A Teacher "Willing to Say Something"*

While they suggest that they have not considered extensively their ideas about Bible before engaging in the Riverway Project, participants also suggest that they had not found welcome places to raise these ideas prior to studying with Morrison. They saw no space in Jewish organizations to explore their instincts that the Bible was more complicated than they had thoughts, and some even felt invalidated for believing this. Tom, for example, conveyed his sizeable excitement when he heard Morrison say, "Hey look… there's pretty good evidence now that the Exodus never happened. So we've really got to rethink what this means." Tom thought in return:

> Granted, I hadn't been paying much attention but I hadn't experienced anybody seriously related to Judaism willing to say something. I was really – that picked up my ears. That's one thing that went off in my head.

Tom was "waiting" for "somebody," for an authority within the Jewish tradition, to "say something," to acknowledge the myths and complexities of the Bible that Tom also acknowledged. When Morrison did this, Tom took notice. Similarly, Teresa, Tom's wife, told Morrison during one class that she did not "believe in God." Morrison reacted calmly and supportively, helping her to understand different Jewish theological traditions and to explore the extent to which she could be comfortable in Judaism even as a non-believer. They were gratified; moreover, they felt that they had found in Morrison a religious authority that they could trust, someone who would help them examine their tradition from within the assumption that it is of human creation.

Other participants as well see Morrison as the kind of teacher who opens questions about the text for them, who discusses its multiple meanings. "His whole approach to the Bible," Dena explained, "is that it's a text that's meant to be torn apart and rearranged." They understand their collective process as one of "puzzle solving," as almost a game of tearing apart the text and piecing it back together in multiple ways without ever suggesting that one interpretation of the text exists. Charlie values that "it's a pretty free atmosphere. You're allowed to toss out whatever idea – even if it's somewhat heterodox." Students recognize and value this opportunity to ask, "What do I think about this" or "to figure it out or to not figure it out as the case may be." One student characterized Morrison as "rigorous and not just sort of touchy-feely"; this student expected Morrison as an educator in a non-academic setting naturally to be more concerned with approving all students' contributions even to the detriment of ideas. He

was surprised and grateful to find this not to be the case, to find a balance in the classroom between feeling good about study and honest debate. Morrison gives students the opportunity to muse and the option to debate and throw out ideas, no matter how "heterodox." Moreover, he is the kind of "careful thinker" that students prize.

In this debate, as Tom and Teresa commented, students see an opportunity to study that is based on finding "unanswered questions in the narrative" rather than prescriptions of "what to do." Charlie noted that throwing out multiple ideas means that "one idea" cannot exist in the classroom; the teacher cannot, by design, preach to the students. Indeed, many students characterized Morrison's teaching as being like their high school "English class," an intellectual exercise rather than a "religious" one. For them, religious teaching implies that it is instructional, aiming to preach doctrine. Instead, as one student captured it, Morrison is not "getting up and saying this is the way it is and you must believe." Similarly, Morrison never examines the text for "morals," in one student's words, or for what Jews "should do," as another student explained. These participants are each suggesting that they value this "English class" exercise more than they might value a "religious" exercise; if Bible study only offered them instructional teaching, they would not engage in such study. In testament to their ultimate comfort with and eagerness for study of Jewish texts, I saw students demand this study on several occasions, explaining that it adds "layers" to their Jewish experience. The intellectually rigorous exercise makes their personal encounter with Judaism richer and more valuable.

Courtney described this in depth and named this experience of appreciating the intellectual exercise. When she studied with Morrison, she found a difference between her understanding of the Passover *haggadah* (the text that accompanies a home-based

ritual meal to commemorate Passover) and the normative Passover story and *haggadah*. She suggested:

> The whole thing isn't just word of mouth, it's more like, I now understand, if not where the current tradition came from, but how it differs from what… I might think. … Now I understand that there is a difference … from the current tradition and what it says, so that's kind of like a hole that can be filled in.

She appreciates knowing about Passover not from "word of mouth"; that is, she knows it now through her own reading of the biblical text as opposed to hearing about it from her family or surroundings as she did growing up. A "hole" exists between what she knew and what she now knows to be in the text. However, she continued, that hole is "neat." In addition to giving Courtney historical context and information that makes the holiday celebration more complete and more meaningful, her new knowledge gives her an opportunity to learn more. In the hole, in the discrepancy, she finds personally relevant questions that she is eager to explore.

### *Finding their Big Questions in Bible*

Earlier, I suggested that Morrison revolves study around somewhat profound questions, "big questions," of meaning and life. In addition to those about the truth of the text (about Aaron and his role in history), Morrison has asked:

> What are the boundaries of our responsibility for other individuals, other places… non-Jews, Jews, etc. What, how do we relate, is there a point where our responsibility for others stops…?

And:

> I want us…to really explore, what does it mean to love God, and also when you say these words, if you say these words, *ve'ahavta*, you shall love God with all your heart, what the heck does that mean? What the heck does that mean to *you*?

Participants notice these questions and note them as "big questions" of their lives. They "love" this focus on such questions that Morrison establishes. The questions are fascinating, independently, and also because they are about the students themselves. As one student commented, "These are the questions that they're grappling with," they being both the writers of the text and the students today. Another student explained:

> Figuring out how does one live a life, I think is really interesting, and even, for me, sort of figuring out, how do I make the choices in my life, what's a good choice - what's not a good choice, how do I make things work, I think it's helpful to think about things in this way. … It's been kind of comforting to think, I don't have to go through this all alone. These are age-old questions, and this is how someone else has answered them…

In studying the Bible, this student finds challenges similar to those of his daily life and his future. As he struggles with sibling relationships, with the presence of something transcendent in his life, and with general questions of purpose – trying to understand "why we are here," in his words – he finds comfort in knowing that these questions are ancient and he finds guidance in the ancient answers. Moreover, he, like others, is able to explore his own ideas in a Jewish space and in Jewish sources, and he can develop an appreciation for those sources because of this personal exploration.

### *Studying in a Supportive Environment*

As students encounter these big questions – as well as the extent to which the text that they study is discontinuous and problematic – they can easily become overwhelmed by the weight of what they study. Students find their way through their possibly awesome task because of the support that they suggest that Morrison offers. Earlier, I described Morrison as having named the weight of their task, describing their search as one for "joy through complexity." In addition to noting his simple validation of their difficult work

together, students describe Morrison as one who listens closely, interrupting them with words of affirmation. They explain that when he asks them to clarify their ideas, he shows that he cares about what students are saying and is committed to helping them think through their thoughts. They feel that he is there as their guide.

Support from Morrison comes most intensively after the official studying ends and students approach their teacher to ask how to further their learning. Morrison finds great joy in these opportunities and readily offers students the chance to study regularly with him as a tutor and guide. His students specifically praise this individual attention as crucial to their becoming comfortable exploring Jewish texts and also to their becoming good questioners. Tracy, for example, described this process:

> Tracy: I realized that I wanted to continue studying but I didn’t know how. … Even though I was Jewish I felt like I wanted a non-conversion, conversion class, cause I felt like I didn’t know anything. …And [Morrison] was like well, why don’t we study one on one together. And I was like, okay. That was awesome, this is the coolest thing that’s happened, ever, because … it just like, doors were opening. And so we ended up starting to study together. … And it was great, it was awesome….
>
> INT: What was awesome about it?
>
> Tracy: Um … I basically read … Genesis … front to back, had a list of like twenty questions, and then just asked. And I didn’t – we didn’t bring in any commentary, we didn’t bring in anything – it was just like, me theologizing about this thing… seeing inconsistencies and learning a little bit about the sources before – that helped me understand the narrative and how it may be put together and that it’s not one constant stream of thought. … I would bring up a question and he would go, well why is that important. Why do you want to know that, why do you feel like that’s important. You know… and we had several questions like that that led into deep theological conversations. And I think that was helpful. Because you can get into the text and forget why it’s bothering you and like, he would draw that out.

That Morrison was available for her helped Tracy feel that she had a way to move a project forward for which she had developed great passion. The one on one attention

gave Tracy an extensive and unique opportunity to information. That alone excited and motivated her.

At the same time, the process within those meetings was equally crucial in her feeling supported in her quest for greater knowledge, personal exploration of the texts, and their implications and meaning for her. Morrison provided Tracy with a curriculum appropriate for her interests. He gave no instruction other than to generate questions and thoughts, and when Tracy brought him her significant list of ideas, Morrison probed each one. He asked her why these questions mattered to her, helping to uncover her unidentified assumptions about how the text should work or what is important in it. He supported her through her work with confusing ideas or passages and moved at her pace, always affirming her progress and her position. Tracy described the outcome of her study with Morrison:

> It was very personal … he hit on the points that made me struggle with Judaism, and made it not just like – I'm not just jumping head in…

Through this close study, Tracy developed a personal approach to text study and felt supported as she did so.

Other students capture their process of study with Morrison using similar language. A conversion student described her process this way:

> Jeremy's encouragement to just get involved... to swim, as he put it... made Judaism something that I could jump into. It sort of felt like if I took two steps into Judaism, Jeremy would take a flying leap to meet me. To me, this was unbelievable.

Morrison supported this student in taking significant intellectual and emotional risks. Moreover, he helped her to feel as though jumping both feet into Judaism was not foolish or untenable. With him at her side, Judaism has become something she can embrace with

her entire heart, asking and exploring any questions and coming to terms with the tradition as she needs to in order to convert. For this student, the Riverway Project and Temple Israel "are all an open door," leading to greater learning and to Jewish celebration. With Morrison's affirmation and the individualized, deep exercise of paired study, she and others find a safe and productive opportunity to explore.

### *"You're Supposed To Question"*

Morrison intends for students to become "critical thinkers" about texts and about Judaism, for students to be motivated to study texts and to approach Jewish texts with an analytical eye, to ask questions and look for interesting divergences. He challenges students, "Use your head," meaning that they should not accept circumstances and ideas at face value. As discussed earlier, his "starting point" is "what are [students'] questions, thoughts, ideas"; he begins conversations about texts with students' opinions and, most significantly, with their questions, emphasizing and privileging these questions as a way to enter text study.

Students notice. One suggested that he challenges students "to never take anything at face value." Similarly, Tracy explained:

> One of the things he said … was, just by questioning it, you're being Jewish, you're engaging in it. You don't need to have blind faith… You're free to question. You're supposed to question.

They learn from Morrison that Judaism mandates this questioning.

Some begin to equate questioning with Jewish ritual, a responsibility of Jews as they exercise their Jewishness. Francie explains this further. "I think," she says, that "challenging the text and being present with it … that's, you know, that's what I'm

supposed to be doing." For her, Judaism is "less about having a strict set of… prescriptions" and consists more of this questioning. Rather than observing *kashrut* (laws regarding food preparation and consumption) or participating in prayer, this studying and challenging is her Jewish observance.

The Judaism to which students subscribe comes to revolve around this newly limitless text with non-binding ideas. Charlie observed:

> Because it is such a wonderful dialogue – the fact that one of our central texts is a series of arguments – unresolved arguments, and to have that, even if you're not part of that tradition … to have that as the central text of your religious tradition, or one of the central texts, I think is just so wonderfully freeing, because the pressure isn't there to resolve it or pick it, you know.

Charlie understands Judaism as revolving around an "unresolved" sequence "of arguments," around a "wonderful dialogue." Like Francie, he feels no pressure to pick one way of participating in his tradition, no pressure to observe certain behaviors, other than a calling to participate in the dialogue itself.

Embedded in Charlie's words is a degree of excitement about this unresolved tradition. Similarly, many become more attached to Judaism because they come to perceive it as being about unanswered ideas. Brian explained, "Partly what keeps me going back is – this, this is interesting – I've never even approached Judaism this way." Participants become more interested in being Jewish, more attached to their identity as a Jew, because they approach Judaism through questioning and discussion, a way of engaging in their tradition that is new and attractive to them.

## *From Cultural Judaism to Questioning Judaism*

Ultimately, students come to define themselves as Jews in a new way. Many Riverway Project participants whom I interviewed defined themselves prior to engaging in the Riverway Project as cultural Jews. Judaism was salient to them because of the sense of belonging that it offered and the non-religious rituals in which they participated because of their Jewishness. They "valued education," for example, "and family." When they looked to "be surrounded by Jewish people… to be near [their] community," they did so because of their commitment to being with people like them, people who:

> Hung out with other Jews. You know, you got together and had lox and bagels and cream cheese for brunch on Sundays, and you got together for the High Holidays, and you used a lot of Yiddish …

This list of behaviors that comprise Jewishness that participants offer, or the idea that there are Jewish behaviors at all that have little to do with the religious ritual of Judaism, is not new. Lenny Bruce, perhaps, made the concept famous with his routine: "Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie is Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish. B'nai B'rith is goyish. Hadassah, Jewish…"[22] Rebecca Walker gives her twenty-first century version of Bruce's routine when she lists her hopes for her unborn child:

> I … want him to relate to his Jewish roots, to know what it means to be a part of this crazy tribe of people who mix love and arguing like chocolate syrup and milk, who use Yiddish proverbs as terms of endearment, and who manage to find fabulous YSL sandals in the mountain of lame shoes at the Barney's Warehouse Sale. I want him to know that his grandfather believed in justice the old-fashioned, Jewish lefty way, and that even though he's a Buddhist, he's related to one of the most revered *rebbes* [rabbis/ teachers] in Judaism.[23]

These behaviors of having lox and bagels on Sundays, of being with other Jews, of arguing, and of fighting for justice represent the essence of Jewishness for cultural Jews.

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[22] For the full text, see http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/Humor/HumorBank/LennyBruce.htm.
[23] Walker, "Expecting." In *The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt,* ed. Ruth Andrew Ellenson (New York: Dutton, 2005), 158.

To Bruce, to Walker, to participants, "cultural Judaism" is a framework of these minimal behaviors that defines an American Jew as a Jew, identifies them to non-Jews, and binds them to other Jews.[24] These are vital and fundamental things that they do that *feel* Jewish, despite their absence of a deep and substantive religious or cultural connotation, and they are often the only things that they do to feel Jewish. Bagels, justice, and chocolate syrup and milk become almost ritualized, ways to enact a need to belong to a larger community.[25]

Students also use the term culture to refer to the kinds of Jews that they are not, or to mean, not religion.[26] They explicitly state that they are not "true believers," meaning that they do not believe fervently that they live lives directed by God or *Torah*. Even when they went to synagogue on the High Holidays, they explain that they did so as a cultural and symbolic exercise, as an act devoid of religious meaning but directed by their membership in American Jewry. As they describe what kinds of Jews they are not, some of them compare themselves to "*Hasids*," seeming to recognize no options for celebration

[24] I root this definition of culture in Kathryn Tanner's study, which proposes cultures as differentiating various groups from each other, constructed by tacit agreements within each group, and dictating a variety of convictions, knowledge, and behaviors. Tanner notes that because cultural participation guides group membership, participants observe cultural rituals because they value that membership, no matter the content of the ritual. See *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1997).

[25] Durkheim saw a primary purpose of ritual as acts that bind individuals into a community; rituals are eminently social, expressing loyalty, boundaries, and belonging. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* tr. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915).

[26] Amy Tobin makes this point strongly. She is disturbed by the idea that "cultural Jews" seem to be calling themselves cultural because they want to say, "I don't like the God part, I don't like the rules part, I don't like the synagogue part." They make an affirmative statement about culture when what they want to do is reject the religion, and in doing so, Tobin argues, they suggest the concept of "cultural Judaism" to be a negative one. Tobin continues, "My fundamental treatise is that now, we talk about cultural Jews and religious Jews, and … there's no difference, and we have done ourselves … an enormous disservice by separating culture from religion. Once upon a time they were the same thing. … [Y]ou had your family life, your holiday celebrations, your rituals, your spirituality, your stories and your mythology and your lore, and your oral tradition, all tied into one. And now – we call it different things … It's fundamentally wrong. It is the same thing. And if we could reintegrate those we would be a much healthier community and culture."

and connection to the Jewish religion outside of *Hasidic* Judaism. In other words, since they are not *Hasidic* Jews, they are cultural Jews.

Ultimately, what they learn about questioning from Morrison helps them to develop a different way of being Jewish, something in between cultural and religious Judaism as they perceive it. Understanding that they can relate to Jewish texts without "believing" in what the texts convey allows participants to see religious Judaism as potentially flexible, as having room for them. Ben, for example, discovered that even if he does not "believe this like a *Hasid* does," he "can embrace" his own way of being Jewish; he can be a "non-believer but still do a lot of this stuff." The Riverway Project helped Ben to explore the Bible from a position of interest and respect without requiring belief in God, in all of Jewish law, or that the stories of the Bible are some kind of truth. Ben became able to recognize that he can be proud of what he does do as part of the religion of Judaism and that he does not need to reject the Jewish religion in its entirety because of his non-belief. Scott echoed this, recalling that as a teenager, he rejected Judaism entirely because he saw it as a system of laws to which he did not subscribe:

> There's … a lot of dogma, and there's a lot of things that I think also are pretty inhumane and I don't agree with and don't want to practice, but at the same time, you know, I feel like that seventeen year old threw away the baby with the bathwater… Now to be able to say, you know what, there's… a lot of really great things to learn. And if nothing else, the ability to think and learn more and process… that's … sort of the biggest piece.

At seventeen, Scott easily disposed of the religion of Judaism because he saw it as fundamentalist; it prescribed behaviors with which he did not agree, and so he never delved into the entirety of Judaism to discover what he might appreciate. With Morrison, Scott has discovered how much there is to learn and that an opportunity for exploration exists in between traditional practice and no practice. This opportunity lies specifically in

study of the Bible "to think and learn more and process." Study, then, becomes central to Scott's engagement with Judaism.

Even while study becomes central to their conceptions of themselves as Jews, and even as they first focus on the texts and not on their ideas about the texts, they later apply those texts to their Jewish behaviors. Ben commented:

> Being able to go into the Passover *seder* this year and looking back at the Mining for Meaning stuff I really appreciated oh, here's where you can insert that reading, here're the biblical references, here's why we do this. Having that backbone to why you do things …

Ben was rewarded by his ability to add depth to his *seder* by adding texts that he reviewed with Morrison and by his having the "backbone to why you do things." Lacking this understanding, he implies, was imperative to his lacking a feeling of connection to the ritual itself. He said later, "I'm not a big fan of just blindly doing things." Without greater insight into the tradition, without the knowledge of texts, he was absently following the ritual, feeling only a connection to Passover for the sake of his family or community. His remarks suggest that he feels newly comfortable to claim a personal connection to the Passover ritual itself. Jordana similarly illustrated this marriage of knowledge and practice when she discussed learning why "we close our eyes when we do Shabbat candles." If before she did this because her grandmother did, after learning the reasons behind the tradition she continues to mimic her grandmother's behavior, but appreciates that her behavior is now also motivated by knowledge and connected to a larger understanding of how Shabbat blessings work. Similarly, Francie explained about this knowledge, it "makes me feel empowered and happy and real and I like it." It makes her feel "real," or genuine; her practice becomes more personally authentic because she understands its origin. In total, participants' knowledge gives them a background and a

context for their behaviors that were previously symbolic, or without a connection to a sense of greater meaning or framework. Their knowledge makes their behavior more "real," more legitimate, in that they know why they do it and that they choose the behavior through knowledge and not through merely inheritance.

In this way, questioning, a non-dogmatic text, and an ongoing dialogue with text create a space for participants between *Hasidic* Judaism, which they see as absolute belief, and cultural Judaism, which they see as religiously meaningless. Questioning and thinking lead to a personally significant and substantive Jewish tradition. Participants see the text as relevant, engaging, and part of their Jewish lives, and they also understand Judaism as holding more import for them than only being with others. Their celebration of Judaism comes to revolve around questioning and study, and such questioning leads them to greater and more meaningful practice. As Morrison hoped, as they "use [their] heads" and explore a complex tradition, participants come to see not only the text but also the larger tradition as relevant, engaging, and an integral part of their Jewish lives.

### *The Relationship between the Visceral and the Intellectual, the Irrational and the Rational*

At the same time, not all those who encounter the Riverway Project – and not even every frequent participant in the Riverway Project – wants this complexity. A few of those interviewed critiqued Morrison's emphasis on textual deconstruction. They want Judaism to be easier than Morrison allows. One participant, for example only wants someone "to tell… what the portion is saying… what I should take from it." Carrie explained that Morrison's probing approach actually clashes with her goals:

> I'm trying to find something positive, something good about it, and I don't want to necessarily – to try to analyze infinitely then, you know, I won't believe in it.

Carrie wants to "believe" in the text. She does not want her idea that the text "makes sense" to be taken away, and she is afraid that she cannot "believe in" or trust a text that is infinitely complicated and not resolvable. For another participant, it is "easier to turn off" her doubt. She explained, to "think [that] there might be alternatives … might make me feel too conflicted and I don't wanna deal with it. That's the honest, gut reaction." These participants study with Morrison for the other virtues that it offers: a basic understanding of the text, the community of learners he creates, and because Judaism with this community is fun. Some study with him because they see few other options to study with their peers in the Boston area. Still others do not study with him, going to the Riverway Project only for celebratory opportunities such as Soul Food Friday.[27] Fundamentally, they do not want the way that they relate to Judaism or to Jewish texts to be challenged or, ultimately, changed.

Moreover, even those who look for careful thinking sometimes want a more simple connection to Judaism. This was most clear in Israel, where some participants celebrated their visceral, emotional reaction to some of what they saw and experienced and to being in the country itself. Even while sorting through the religious/ non-religious conflicts or their embarrassment at the political situation, they were uncomplicatedly proud: of the teenagers who created an underground ammunitions factory before the War of Independence, laughing that it reminded them of "Hogan's Heroes," of the successful fight for independence, and of the country's very existence. Mark commented early in the trip:

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[27] As explained in the Introduction, approximately 60% of my interview sample was involved equally in all aspects of the Riverway Project, 20% primarily in prayer services, and 20% primarily in text study.

> The minute I woke up and we were landing, I had this unexpected sense of pride … I had the first emotional sense of belonging to a people, not an intellectual or a spiritual sense.

Typically a rationalist, Mark had an "unexpected sense," surprising because it was "emotional," visceral, and unexplainable. Similarly, at *Ein Gedi*, a collection of streams and creek-beds where the Bible suggests that David fought Goliath, another participant thought:

> Whether or not this happened, it's very cool that, you know, that some guy heard the story and thought it was true … it's very cool to sit here and still be in this place.

As he continued his musings, he wondered if some "aspect of idealism" is important, if complexity is, in fact, built on myth, only possible if the myths are available to be unpacked and replaced with more nuanced, interesting, and consequential ideas.[28] In other ways and at other times as well, some participants speculated that unconditional love and superficial sightseeing – somewhat like purely reading the text rather than truly seeing and delving into its contradictions – do play a role in their Jewish identities. On some level, then, religion remains non-rational for these participants, a commitment related to an expression of and desire for an almost primeval sense of belonging to a larger tradition, people, and narrative.

Morrison views this rejection of complexity in Judaism and particularly in texts as a sort of desire for vagueness and simplicity. He wonders if Judaism is a "blurry painting" that exists in participants' subconscious, a painting that they do not want to see more clearly but that they recognize as playing a role in their lives. In his mind, some are comforted by its colors and how they run together. Yet, to him, the painting only loosely

[28] Interesting and consequential to him and to most participants, that is.

depicts a Judaism that participants could celebrate with meaning and vibrancy. Could they see its colors more clearly, he argues, they might appreciate it more.

In other words, the vibrancy of the colors of this blurry painting motivates all to engage in the Riverway Project. As this dissertation demonstrates, some want to sharpen the colors; some engage in a process of critical study. For these participants, the painting changes. It becomes clear, the colors placed in a kind of order. Those who are prepared and eager for critical study, a majority of those interviewed for this project, come to see their Jewishness more sharply and deeply. The process of moving from blurriness to clarity is a process of Jewish growth, a process through which participants' feelings about and celebration of Judaism grow and change.

## A PROCESS OF INTELLECTUAL AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The Riverway Project is grounded in intellectual exploration, in an investigation of Jewish texts. In order to reflect on their ideas about Judaism, participants study. In order to understand a ritual, participants study. In order to think about their own Jewish practice, participants study. Morrison uses the same approach to teaching in each of these opportunities. He keeps conversation tense, intense, and funny simultaneously as he mocks students and the text, pushing them to keep talking even while he listens closely and probes their ideas for greater understanding. He motivates students to ask questions and to see what the text itself says. As a result, students observe and begin to investigate that which does not seem consistent to them, becoming fascinated by the text's complexity. He and students continually create questions and possibilities while they study, generating multiple interpretations of the text in front of them. As a result, in

participants' own words, they not only become more interested in Jewish study. They also shift the way that they engage with Judaism and their very ideas about Judaism. They see the study of Jewish texts and, specifically, asking questions about Judaism and its texts, to be central to their celebration of their tradition. Their sense of what Judaism means to them and the role it can play in their lives changes.

Throughout this chapter, I alluded to this shift, referring to participants' intellectual development as Jews, suggesting that in the Riverway Project their cognitive habits and capacity to think about Judaism grow more strong and robust. For many of these participants, as they describe, their opportunity to explore Judaism through questions leads directly to the development of their Jewish identity as well. Their very conceptions of themselves as Jews change because of their exploration of Jewish texts.

To close this chapter, I explore how this occurs using a variety of scholarly frameworks. Katherine G. Simon's research on the importance of big questions in a classroom provides background as to why participants become personally engaged by Morrison's use of focal questions in text study. The work of Stephen Brookfield gives substance to Morrison's understanding of "critical thinking," demonstrating how Jewish texts engage students not only personally but also intellectually. From Brookfield, it becomes clear that students' intellectual identities begin with the critical stance toward Jewish texts that they develop. Identities continue to grow because students learn "cognitive roadmaps" from Morrison, roadmaps that lead them to follow a passionate contextual orientation to the Bible and expand the possibilities that they find in the text. The ideas of Eleanor Duckworth make it evident that participants' intellectual identities become central to their understandings of themselves as Jews because of the

independence with which they develop their intellectual ideas. Because Morrison withdraws his own role in the classroom and encourages them to raise and respond to their own questions, participants generate what Duckworth calls "wonderful ideas," personal brainstorms that excite them and comprise their emerging intellectual identities as Jews. Participants' wonderful ideas and capacity to develop them best help participants grow Jewishly, as they learn not to wonder at the Jewish intellectual tradition but to wonder about it, to delve into its ideas and make its ideas foundational to their sense of themselves.

### *Finding Personal Meaning in the Text*

Earlier, I demonstrated that Morrison centers most study opportunities around a focal question. I suggested that these focal questions, about the truth of the narrative, love of God, or philanthropic obligations, are ones of great meaning to participants. They appreciate these questions as demonstrating that the text is relevant to their lives, seeing these questions as big questions for them personally and as helping them to explore who they should be.

I use the phrase big questions to invoke Katherine G. Simon's empirical work on the role of "moral and existential questions" in the classroom. For her, these kinds of questions include those about our very being – why we are here, what is beyond us, determinism – and also about how we interact with each other and with our environment.[29] Each of these, Simon argues, is a question that drives us. They are big questions because they are about the most significant issues that human beings face; they

[29] Katherine G Simon, *Moral Questions in the Classroom: How to Get Kids to Think Deeply About Real Life and Their Schoolwork* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 6-7.

are questions of value and consequence for their discussants. In her research, Simon illustrates that students care personally and deeply about these questions and their responses, that they find such questions captivating and worthwhile, and that students miss them when they are absent from classrooms.[30]

Morrison's focal questions, his big questions, belong to these categories of questions. An essential reason to study the text, he enters into them with abandon. Students gather not to memorize the narrative or different commentaries. They come together to find personal meaning and stimulation in their tradition's ideas about the same questions that they face in their post-modern lives. As illustrated, Morrison continually moves students closer to the words of the text itself; students do not only or even primarily discuss their attitudes about their big questions. But these questions remain the frame and background of every conversation, pushing in between the lines of students' dialogue. When they do emerge during classroom discussion, they weave together students' observations about the text and their ideas about the questions themselves as informed by their real lives. The presence of the questions helps students make deeply personal connections to what they have studied, establishing the texts not as esoteric but as personally salient. By contextualizing study in these big questions, Morrison helps students make vital connections between the text and their own lives.

### *The Process of Critical Thinking*

To change students' very Jewishness and help them see Judaism as having room for their universal ideas about "careful thinking" (as they call it), delving into big questions is not enough. Morrison must also facilitate students' study in a way that helps them see Jewish

[30] Simon, *Moral Question,* 2-3

texts and therefore Judaism as pluralistic, as non-dogmatic. Morrison himself names his approach to exploring texts one of "critical thinking," suggesting that participants should "use [their] heads" to approach the texts. In his understanding, critical thinking is akin to taking an intellectual approach to Judaism, to participants' thinking about their tradition rather than merely feeling about it. As demonstrated earlier, the methodology that he uses to reach this goal revolves around question-asking, around the continual probing of the text to find its questions and multiple ideas.

Several scholars of education add nuance to Morrison's approach. Seymour Sarason explains critical thinking as a "stance" in which individuals actively consider that which they hear and learn before accepting it. When they think critically, they "resist the force of conventional thinking and practice."[31] Stephen Brookfield expands this definition, establishing critical thinking as "reflecting on the assumptions underlying our and others' ideas and actions," making "judgments, choices, and decisions for ourselves" as opposed to accepting what has been given to us.[32] Brookfield suggests that we all hold assumptions, "seemingly self-evident rules about reality… unquestioned givens" learned or inherited, often as children, that dictate our actions and choices.[33] As Brookfield continues, he proposes that in learning to think critically, individuals understand that they can examine and shift their assumptions. They sort through evidence and arrive at a new way of operating for themselves. Because critical thinkers make their own decisions, they feel a great sense of responsibility for their behaviors. As a result, they engage in their decisions with great conviction, with excitement, and with a significant sense of personal

[31] Seymour Sarason, *And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2004), 74. Chapter Six ("What Do We Mean by Critical Thinking?") expands this definition as it explores the observed and potential role of critical thinking in public schools.
[32] Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers,* x
[33] Brookfield, *Critical Thinkers,* 44

connection to their very ideas. Brookfield concludes that as individuals test and retest their new conclusions, they begin again to uncover assumptions, identifying the usefulness of their recently drawn conclusions and shifting them again. Critical thinking, then, is not the result of a process, the product of an individual's new behaviors and ideas. Critical thinking is the process itself, the stance, in Sarason's language, of recognizing questions and of continually revisiting and shifting ideas.[34]

Such is the process through which Morrison leads Riverway Project participants. Morrison presents their tradition to them as theirs to explore, its ideas calling for their personal inspection. Students investigate their tradition first-hand, and as a result, they connect more deeply to that tradition. With Morrison, they enter into a process of recognizing questions about the details of the text. From those details, they develop a unique Jewish identity grounded in their questions about the presence and role of Judaism in their lives. As they continually ask, explore, and ask again, they assume the stance of critical thinking, and they begin to see Jewish texts and Judaism in new ways.

As they develop this stance, participants learn that texts hold ideas that they did not expect texts to hold. Participants learn "reflective skepticism," an automatic propensity to challenge inherited ideas. In Brookfield's construction, reflective skepticism precedes critical thinking. It asks that students continually contemplate ideas before them and become skeptical of seemingly straightforward conclusions, looking for evidence of ideas before they accept them. When Morrison pushes students to see all of what is in the text and to consider how it is different from what they have always known, they begin to see that there is more in the text than they had once considered. They learn

[34] Brookfield, *Critical Thinkers,* 6

to be suspicious of what they thought to be true, to be reflective skeptics and, ultimately, critical thinkers.[35]

As I described earlier, examining the text in this way – finding no answers, generating questions, replacing resolved ideas with stories that do not hold together – can be unsettling; Brookfield describes it as possibly "psychologically explosive."[36] Brookfield stresses the need during this process for a "critical teacher," a leader who motivates students to recognize and examine their assumptions while at the same time helps students to maintain their basic sense of themselves.[37] Remember that students feel that Morrison supports them, that studying with him creates an "open door" into Judaism, that he listens carefully during study and reacts to students as though in a one-on-one conversation with them. In addition to practicing this "attentive listening," as Brookfield calls it, Morrison acts as a model of a critical thinker for students. When he acknowledges the complexity of their tradition but still sings that *Torah* is true to him every Friday night, he demonstrates to participants that they can engage in critical thinking about Judaism while maintaining their positive connection to it. Moreover, his modeling of question-asking helps students to visualize how a critical thinker interacts with Judaism, or what a critical thinker about Judaism does.[38] Each of these ideas of Brookfield's proposes that Morrison is acting as a critical teacher, ensuring that students do not feel alone in their new intellectual exploration.

As Morrison teaches Riverway Project participants to become critical thinkers, they learn to see Judaism as anything but what they once thought it was. Rather than the

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[35] Brookfield, *Critical Thinkers*, 9
[36] Brookfield, *Critical Thinkers*, 30
[37] Brookfield, *Critical Thinkers*, 80
[38] Brookfield, *Critical Thinkers,* 73, 85

strict canon that their universal social networks suggest that it is, they see in Judaism multiple possibilities. They come to view Judaism as offering opportunities for intellectual exploration, similar to their pursuit of other curiosities.

### *Morrison's Capacity as a Teacher: The Origin of His Questions*

Morrison locates the text's many questions, its deep pluralism, when he and students view the text in its context: its position within a certain historical or political situation, reasons its writers were motivated to construct the narrative in a certain way, or the relationship between societal trends in the Ancient Near East, the Israelites, and the Bible's record of the Israelite experience. This propensity of his for understanding the text in its context can be seen as teaching from within the "contextual orientation." Barry W. Holtz mapped orientations that teachers might take toward the teaching of Bible. Such orientations, for example, include the "moralistic-didactic" and "*parshanut*/ Jewish interpretive," both often used in Jewish schools.[39] Morrison's contextual orientation involves locating "the meaning of the biblical texts *within its own times*" (emphasis in original).[40] Holtz suggests that this orientation is used in universities and "secular schools in Israel." In the Riverway Project, the contextual orientation enables adults in their twenties and thirties in a Jewish, religious setting to see a newly complex and engaging text.

The contextual orientation works effectively in the Riverway Project not only because students naturally gravitate toward it but also because it is Morrison's natural orientation. Holtz suggests that an orientation begins with a teacher's knowledge of his

[39] Holtz, *Textual Knowledge,* 95
[40] Holtz, *Textual Knowledge,* 92

subject matter: his content knowledge, syntactic knowledge, and substantive knowledge.[41] Together and intertwined, these areas of knowledge allow a teacher to treat his subject fully with her students.[42]

Subject matter knowledge is complemented by a teacher's deepest "conceptions and beliefs about the field he or she is teaching."[43] In Bible, such beliefs are varied and intense. They include if the teacher considers the text to be divinely ordained, if she sees the text as commanding, that is, if the text obliges its Jewish readers to the laws it contains, if she believes that the God of the Bible existed then or exists now, and if students have a responsibility to commit to memory the text's words and ideas exactly. These beliefs root everything that teachers do: How they answer any question and even the questions that they raise, their goals for their lessons and how they evaluate their impact as teachers, and the ideas that they discuss, promote, or ignore. A teacher's four areas of knowledge – subject matter knowledge, substantive knowledge, syntactic knowledge, and beliefs about the field – come together into a teacher's "orientation" toward her subject matter. It is not a method of teaching but a fundamental approach a teacher takes toward the field itself.[44]

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[41] Holtz, *Textual Knowledge,* 45-48

[42] Content knowledge is the substance of a field: names, dates, and guiding ideas or themes. In the case of Bible, content knowledge is as basic as knowing the books of the Bible, the narrative of each book, and also the central challenges that each book raises, and it is as complex as how these challenges became a focus for text study and Jewish celebration. "Substantive knowledge" includes how people study and understand her field. Here, a teacher might want to understand how scholars apply literary theory to Bible and what biblical criticism is and how it works. A teacher's "syntactic knowledge" of her field refers to how new ideas develop in the field. A teacher's skills in syntactic knowledge of Bible include being able to read and compare original documents, and also recognizing how archaeological evidence develops new knowledge in the area of Bible. This summary of subject matter knowledge relies on Pamela L. Grossman, Suzanne M. Wilson and Lee S. Shulman. "Teachers of Substance: Subject Matter Knowledge for Teaching. In *Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher*, M. C. Reynolds, editor (Oxford: Pergamon Press for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1989). As these authors note, Joseph Schwab developed the concepts of substantive and syntactic knowledge for teachers.

[43] Holtz, *Textual Knowledge,* 48

[44] Grossman, Wilson and Shulman, "Teachers of Substance," 31-32; Holtz, *Textual Knowledge,* 48-49

Morrison's extensive subject matter knowledge about Bible is founded in his intellectual training: five years in rabbinical school, a year in *yeshiva*, doctoral level classes in Bible, and extracurricular time delving into pre-modern and modern biblical commentaries. It is deepened by the innate ideas about Bible and about texts that he brings to this study: that the Bible is not divine and can be deconstructed and examined contextually and that texts are meant to be so deconstructed. He can engage participants deeply in the contextual orientation because he has developed extensively his own ideas about Bible that are grounded in complex subject matter knowledge. He moves automatically toward the contextual and finds with students countless questions about Bible. In doing so, he draws from years of study of the Bible and its extra-textual tradition. As a result, Morrison's critical stance toward the text emerges as genuine and substantive, effectively facilitating participants' experience of the Bible as multi-faceted and replete with complexity.

When participants ask if "blasphemy" is allowed in the classroom, when they demand a "careful teacher," they reveal their similar stance toward the Bible as contextual. Whether innate or cultivated by their intellectual experiences and their social networks, like Morrison, they are curious about the text in its context. They want to recognize and explore these ideas.

### *Intellectual Development Becomes Identity Development*

It is equally important, though, that participants have the opportunity to ask their own questions. That is, participants grow intellectually when studying with Morrison not only because they share his orientation toward Bible. They grow equally because Morrison

promotes their own question-asking. Rather than always offering answers to their questions, students learn tools of deconstruction from Morrison that enable them to create their own answers and generate their own questions. When Morrison withdraws from lecturing or he makes his ideas the only ones available, he challenges students to think for themselves, helping them to examine their assumptions.

Consequently, in Morrison's classroom, learning does not involve students' mere inheritance of whatever he argues. Learning demands that students put the disparate thoughts together that they, themselves, have generated. In their "heterodox" intellectual environment (in Charlie's conception) in which any idea can be shared, they build aloud and to themselves their own powerful ideas that excite and motivate them. These ideas that students develop are, in Eleanor Duckworth's construction, "wonderful ideas." Such ideas develop when a teacher presents "the right question … at the right time," when students have a foundation of information about the subject they are studying, and when students are confident enough in their knowledge to experiment with their own ideas.[45] As I observed and interviewed participants in the Riverway Project, I followed the evolution of their confidence in the classroom and their own ensuing wonderful ideas, concepts about the text that stick with them weeks after they develop them, concepts that are unique to the way that they see the Bible. Individual and powerful, these ideas served as a foundation for a student's next wonderful ideas. This self-generated knowledge is what most enables their Jewish growth.

Wonderful ideas comprise Duckworth's understanding of the essence of intellectual development. As she suggests, Riverway Project participants respond to questions, work with material firsthand, learn from Morrison's approach to texts, and

[45] Duckworth, *Wonderful Ideas,*5

consequently begin to develop their own capacity to study and to think. With a new cognitive roadmap, they begin their own epistemological process of understanding the Bible, considering at great length the import of questioning and study to them. Students adopt an intellectual identity as Jews because Bible becomes important to them, and it becomes important to them because they can develop their own wonderful ideas. Through these ideas and their capacity to develop them, what they know and also how they know Judaism changes.[46]

More specifically, the wonderful ideas that students develop give them a framework within which not to "wonder at" but to "wonder about" Judaism.[47] Wondering at suggests that they flit through facts and ideas, considering but not internalizing them; by wondering about, participants consider and integrate facts and ideas, mulling them over until they make them unique and their own. As a result, the way that participants understand their Jewish world and their place in it fundamentally changes. They create their own ideas, mimicking Morrison's "cognitive roadmap" to the Bible and developing their own road map as they practice questioning.[48] They learn not only biblical history from Morrison, but how to think like biblical historians.[49] With a Jewish intellectual identity, questioning becomes not only a way to explore the text cognitively but to express their innate connections to their tradition, to express their identities as a Jew.[50]

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[46] John D. Bransford, et al. eds, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 2000).
[47] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 8.
[48] Bransford, et al., *How People Learn,* 155.
[49] Bransford et al, *How People Learn,* Chapter 7
[50] Kegan, *Heads*. In developing these ideas, I also learned extensively from Orit Kent, *Weaving Texts, Developing Minds: Adult Jewish Text Study through the Lens of Constructive-Developmental Theory* (unpublished paper, 2002).

In total, then, Morrison moves many students from being unfamiliar with text study to being comfortable in a study environment, from seeing the text as a straightforward book to recognizing the questions that lie within it and their own interpretations of its narrative, from seeing Jewish texts as offering them little to finding texts complicated and interesting. With their understanding of Judaism as an intellectual tradition and their location of their place in that tradition, participants bridge their existing networks and their new interest and involvement in their Jewish tradition.

This bridge is possible because involvement in the Riverway Project engages the intellect but not in a dogmatic way. Debate and discourse, curiosity and challenge are inherent norms of the community. As a result, the Riverway Project is a Jewish social network and also one that matches participants' perceived existing norms of intellectual inquiry, norms that emphasize inquisitiveness and allow, even encourage, skepticism. In the Riverway Project, many students see that a Jewish community can revolve around intellectual questions and around the same analytical approach to study that they have experienced in other settings in their lives. They find in the Riverway Project a social network that matches the values of their more universal social networks. They find a way into Jewish life.

As students develop and cherish their own wonderful ideas, they have moments of self-direction in which they do not need a teacher. Their next step as self-directed learners can be to string these moments together, to direct their learning on a regular basis, to remove themselves from their instructor. Yet, they have engaged themselves in learning by immersing themselves in a social network led by a passionate guide. Their capacity for self-direction exists in tension with this teacher's passion; even while their

expanded self-direction can lead to their expanded personal Jewish growth, they may also rely on the passion of their teacher for such growth. In the next chapter, I deal with this tension between teacher and students, between the import of self-direction in identity development and students' need for a leader.

# CHAPTER SIX

## "HELPING THEM BE PRODUCERS OF THEIR OWN JEWISH MEANING"

## ENCOURAGING OWNERSHIP OF JEWISHNESS

At Hadar, a twenty-something woman leads the prayer service, her long wavy black hair flowing out from under her headscarf. At Ikar, thirty-year old Rabbi Sharon Brous stands next to a rabbinical student in his mid-twenties as both passionately lead the full congregation in *Hasidic* and contemporary tunes. Jennifer Bleyer began *Heeb Magazine* in her late twenties, crafting this periodical in her generation's personality because she wanted to articulate Jewishness as she felt it. Living out of a backpack, Jeremy Cowan was standing on a beach in Southeast Asia when he decided to risk his life's savings and credit rating on a last chance for He'Brew Beer. Each of these younger adults is a model of those who identify and create personal celebrations of their own Jewishness, in many cases leading others as they do so. They refuse to take the existing structure of American Jewish life as immutable.

Organizational development consultant Aliza Mazor commented on this generation's need to make its own Jewish meaning:

> There's a big thing in this generation … that's about not being spoon-fed ideology … particularly around Israel stuff. … Do not just feed me propaganda. … Don't

> just come at me and tell me what to think. Give me interesting information, give me critical tools, give me literature, give me culture … and then they want to think about what they think about. And they want to be left to their own conclusions.
> … They don't want to react out of a box, they don't want someone saying, you're Jewish and you must believe x and you must go to this rally. … They want to have a more generative process… that they get to … co-create.

Mazor sees this generation as rejecting ideas handed to them outright. They want, in her eyes, to examine data for themselves, to develop their own ideas, and to come to their own conclusions.

The prayer leaders of Hadar and Ikar, the creators of *Heeb Magazine* and He'Brew Beer, and Aliza Mazor's comments on this generation all point to the emphasis that individuals in this age cohort place on having the opportunity to generate their own Jewishness. They "don't want to react out of a box," Mazor quipped; they want to touch and feel the ideas for themselves and to "own" their Judaism, in the words of one Riverway Project participant. Ownership refers to an individual's capacity to create his own Jewish celebrations, to envision and act like Sharon Brous and Jennifer Bleyer.

For Riverway Project participants, with their low Jewish social capital, such ownership demands a fundamental shift in the way that Riverway Project participants think about the role that Judaism plays in their lives and a subsequent transformation in their behavior. Ownership suggests that participants do not just follow Morrison in his facilitation of their Jewish community but that they come to make Judaism happen for themselves, that they, in his words, "become producers of their own Jewish meaning." The question becomes, though, whether or not Riverway Project participants can manufacture their own Jewish experiences in ways similar to those of, say, the leaders of Hadar and Ikar. Can they lead their own Jewish communities? They needed Morrison to

bring them together. If he stepped back, would this social network continue? What holds them together: their commonly held approaches to Jewish life, their motivation to celebrate with each other, or Morrison himself?

These questions are not merely academic. They are Morrison's questions, and they drive his work in the Riverway Project. He seeks actively to help Riverway Project participants guide themselves through their explorations and celebrations of Judaism, and simultaneously recognizes that he continues to play a central role in the community that is the Riverway Project. The primary tension within the Riverway Project stems from its efforts to help induct individuals into Jewish community while also helping them to develop autonomous Jewish lives. As described in Chapter Four, because those efforts at induction are so effective, once comfortable in a Jewish social network, community members may be so reliant on each other that they cannot create their experience independent of their community. Similarly, they may be so dependent on their network's leader that they cannot create their experience independent of their leader.

In my observations of the Riverway Project, I witnessed a variety of Morrison's efforts to help Riverway Project participants become owners of their celebration of Judaism, and I present here four types of these efforts. First, Morrison challenges participants to be comfortable and at home in the space of the synagogue. Second, he gives them authority in the classroom; as a teacher, Morrison contracts his persona continually to make space for student ideas and voices, guiding students in learning on their own, without him. Third, in the classroom and outside of it, participants have opportunities to serve as leaders of the Riverway Project and also of their celebrations of Judaism, developing the capacity to build their own Jewish communities. Finally, from

its beginning, the project itself has been based on the participants' ideas, and Morrison continues to invites the participants' input frequently, asking them to lead the Riverway Project with him. Through the synergy created by these four strategies, the Riverway Project is meant to belong to participants. By extension, participants are intended to learn and to be empowered to produce their own Jewish meaning.

In this chapter, I explore each of these strategies in detail, relating my observations, Morrison's ideas about ownership, and then reactions of the participants. I close with careful looks at the lives of several participants in order to understand what ownership might look like and the extent to which ownership does occur. I conclude with an analysis of the complexities of ownership, ultimately suggesting that while participants value the opportunity to direct their Jewish experience, they value equally or even more so Morrison's role as leader in their Jewish lives. Developmentally, I suggest, many of them are not yet prepared to be the primary authorities over their own ethno-religious identities. At this stage in their lives, they want to rely on an authority external to themselves.

I contextualize these ideas about ownership in a picture of Soul Food Friday. As described in the Introduction, Soul Food Friday involves a three-piece band, "Yom Hadash," in creating a spirited and musical *Shabbat* prayer experience in the Temple Israel sanctuary for constituents of the Riverway Project. Offered monthly, the service begins at 7:30 p.m. often with about 100 people and attracts between 200 and 300 participants by the end of the evening. After approximately an hour of prayer and song, the service opens into an *oneg*, a sort of festive gathering over food, in the atrium of the congregation. Soul Food Friday represents the essence of the paradox of ownership. It is

fundamentally an exercise that needs a leader, someone to tell the community when to stand, sit, sing, and be silent so that all do these things together, as a community. Yet, as the largest gathering of Riverway Project participants, Soul Food Friday often also becomes a central stage from which Morrison encourages participants to seize and make their own both this prayer celebration and also their personal Jewish experience. Not infrequently, Morrison turns a 300 person assembly into opportunities for independent and self-motivated celebration. These efforts of his ground this chapter.

## ENGAGING IN JUDAISM AND JEWISHNESS:
## FROM EXTERNAL TO INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATION

A lot, in fact, happens at “Soul Food,” as it is called by its regulars. It is an event that seems to draw participants equally for food and social interactions as it does for prayer and structured Jewish community. Through it, participants search for friendship and for love. For many, it is an important Jewish moment in a long week of engagement with a secular or Christian world. In its *d’var Torah*, it offers some intellectual stimulation; in the *d’var Torah* as well as the music, it offers a connection to the culture and goings-on of the outside world. The music specifically deserves attention; combining instruments and musical sounds from many arenas, the music of Yom Hadash puts ancient Jewish words to all kinds of melodies, many of which might be mistaken for a Top 40 tune. The band has played Bob Marley’s “Exodus,” the Negro Spiritual “Wade in the Water,” and other songs from other cultures. Morrison moves comfortably to the drumbeat in front of the congregation, and a few participants occasionally join him in this dancing from the back of the sanctuary, standing behind the rows, swinging their elbows and bodies,

invoking Elvis or the Grateful Dead. The music gives participants an opportunity to enjoy the sounds of their cars and Ipods even through traditional Jewish liturgy and also brings almost irreverence into the sanctuary. As I discussed in Chapter Two, it is not unimportant that this music is on their terms. Participants seem attracted to Soul Food Friday exactly because it helps them access multiple identities – their Jewish connection and secular interests, modern music and ancient words – in the same space.

In his comfortable movement, it is evident that Morrison is highly relaxed at Soul Food Friday; he has suggested that it is where he can be “most authentically me.” He is rarely scripted; he improvises continually and delivers even *divrei Torah* with only the briefest of notes. Music “frees” Morrison to express his Jewishness and particularly his relationship to prayer and his spiritual self in a completely genuine way. He is himself: sarcastic, supportive, lighthearted, soulful, intellectually challenging, warm, and engaging. His genuineness makes Soul Food Friday the right setting in which to illustrate to participants that they can be authentically Jewish. That is, because he is so real and true to himself in this Jewish setting, his authenticity can inspire others to be similarly themselves. He has learned to feel at home here, in the sanctuary. They can as well, his demeanor and words suggest. In the context of this large but real Jewish celebration, by sharing himself, Morrison continually challenges participants to just be themselves, and in being comfortable, to be confident owners of their Jewishness.

Morrison does this because confidence and comfort are integral to Morrison’s understand of his success, to ownership. Moreover, they are the foundation of participants’ burgeoning Jewish social capital. Only with confidence can they

comfortably use what they know and ignore what they do not know, entering Jewish spaces no matter how foreign to them.

Morrison's efforts to help participants develop confidence begin at Soul Food Friday with his recurrent encouragement of them to embrace the celebration. He builds on these efforts in the classroom as he practices a variety of moves that allow participants to develop their own ideas, to learn for themselves. Similarly, he creates opportunities for students to learn by themselves: at Soul Food Friday when he asks them to create the *d'var Torah,* in *hevruta,* or pairs, in Torah and Tonics, in Mining for Meaning when he challenges them to become an independent learning collective. Finally, Morrison opens leadership of the Riverway Project itself to participants; or, more specifically, he has created a project that is led mutually by participants and staff. Intertwined, this collection of opportunities suggests to participants that Judaism can be theirs. Through these opportunities, they have the chance to lead Judaism and to find, like Morrison, their personal, authentic Jewish expression.

### *Establishing Comfort*

For me, Soul Food Friday starts in Temple Israel's parking garage. When I pull in, mini-van after mini-van seems to be pulling out, each filled with multiple generations of families leaving the congregation's 5:45 *Qabbalat Shabbat* service. As I lock my car and walk toward the synagogue, I pass parents with small children on their shoulders and older couples holding hands as they return to their cars. I feel my age distinctly. Climbing the steps of the congregation, I join women in knee length skirts and black boots, men in khakis with t-shirts peeking out from under oxford button-downs. We are dressed still

from work or for a Friday night at the bar as we descend instead onto a synagogue for a unique *Shabbat* service meant for our age cohort.

Just inside the synagogue's front doors, the building's grand atrium bears signs that one service just ended and another is beginning. Two women stand chatting, *challah* crumbs at their feet, a small boy winding himself around the legs of one of the women. Maroon Temple Israel *Qabbalat Shabbat* booklets are piled haphazardly on the table at the entrance to the sanctuary. Next to them, black satin *kipot* (skullcaps) have been tossed into a basket. In front of the table, two women give prayer booklets to those entering the sanctuary, wishing everyone *Shabbat shalom*. Occasionally, this procession of sorts into the sanctuary becomes slowed as those who know the hostesses or other entering participants stop to catch up and to meet the friends of their friends.

I accept my prayer booklet and smiles from the hostesses and enter the sanctuary at 7:25. About fifty people are scattered throughout the pews. More are coming in steadily. Some enter the sanctuary obviously looking for someone specific that they are meeting here. A few sit by themselves. Most are in pairs or threes – there are many who seem to be couples – and there are rows of friends. In this larger crowd than was in the lobby I see the range of participants that is here: those in suits and in jeans, those wearing loafers and winter boots. Most seem to be in their late twenties or early thirties, although some look as though they are just out of college and the hair of others is receding and streaked with grey. About half of the men wear *kipot* (skullcaps), the vast majority of which are black satin, picked up from the table outside the sanctuary. A few men have knitted, personalized *kipot*; one woman is also wearing such a *kipah*.

The band begins playing as I sit down. They have set up in front of the *bimah* (stage) in the twenty or so feet between the first pew and the stairs to the stage. Josh Nelson, the curly-haired, baby-faced lead singer and guitarist fronts the band; the bassist stands behind him to the audience's right and the percussionist to our left. Nelson has put his guitar down for the opening music. He leads *Hasidic* melodies using a Djembe drum that echoes throughout the sanctuary. As the band creates these rhythmic tunes rooted in both the funk of percussion and the spirit of Jewish tradition, Morrison walks up and down the aisles and all the way into pews, shaking hands and greeting people. He claps to the beat as he walks, a few people joining him as he does so. As I listen sort of unthinkingly I look around me at the sanctuary: the high wood ceiling, the white ark that holds the Torah with its decorative gold and silver metal plates, the floor to ceiling windows behind the ark that look out onto the green of the Riverway. Tonight it is dark outside; just last month we were able to watch the sun set during the service.

The music changes and the band begins to sing "yai dai, dai dai" to the new tune. As I continue to take in my surroundings, I notice that few are singing; few of my companions' mouths are moving. Suddenly the music dissolves, with just a slow drum beat remaining. Nelson explains over the beat, "Okay, the clergy wants me to say that if you don't sing we're going to play this until you do… Just try. The words are yai dai, dai dai dai dai." The band begins their playing again and some singing resumes, although it is not clear that any more voices have joined in. The band begins a third tune and Morrison, who has been moving to the music at the front of the sanctuary with the band, calls drolly over the instruments, "Same words." Singing continues for a few seconds until Morrison walks down the middle aisle of the congregation and calls over the music:

> Do we have to do this *narishkeit – narishkeit* is a word that means foolishness, foolishness – it's been happening to us for decades – where I say, I can't hear you, and then you sing louder, and then I say, I can't hear you and you sing louder – you know that thing – and then everyone stops singing when I stop saying, I can't hear you. And when I walk down here you start clapping and singing and then you stop. This is fun. Feel the joy, feel the fun. Just let the irony go. I mean, I love irony, but let it go. Let the irony go. Just let it go. Stop the music for a second – let me hear you.

When he started talking the band members lowered their music. When Morrison asks, they stop playing completely, Nelson leading the congregation just by singing into the microphone. After a few seconds Morrison moves back from the congregation, standing again with the band, and the band resumes their playing. Participants seem amused or bewildered by Morrison's call for their participation, having laughed with him or just stared at him. Many, though, seem to have begun to sing. The collective sound of the congregation grows louder after he speaks; more mouths begin to move. Then, a few minutes later and subtly, the more active participation dissipates, just as Morrison predicted.

Morrison challenges participants repeatedly in this way during Soul Food Friday. He calls over the music for participants to try to find the words: "You'll pick it up – you'll get it. You don't need your texts. We'll play it until you get it." He claps his hands over his head, signaling to participants that they should similarly clap to the music. He pushes them, daring each participant to "free thyself… free thyself from the week that was." As he claps and moves at the front of the congregation, dancing as if he were at a hip-hop concert, he exudes energy. Yet participants infrequently share his energy. They sing when asked but lower their voices almost as soon as Morrison stops encouraging them. They move when Morrison motions passionately for participants to stand and they sit as soon as possible. Some look at him stoically and almost without interest. It seems

that many do need Morrison's permission or encouragement to stand, clap, or dance; they do not put down their prayer booklets to clap without him telling them to do so.

They rely similarly on Morrison to guide them through prayer-aerobics, through the standing, sitting, and bowing that Jewish prayer demands. During *Lecha Dodi,* a liturgical poem, participants come to the last verse for which tradition asks the participants rise and face the door (as described in Chapter Four). But no one seems to move. Morrison lifts his arms, motioning that participants should rise. It seems an oddly formal gesture for this more relaxed service, one that belongs with the organs and black robes of classical Reform Judaism, but it also appears necessary. Standing comes as a surprise to participants. Following Morrison's direction, all turn to face the door and about one-third of participants bow. As is typical, as we turn back around, many begin to sit back down even though the music continues and grows louder and more free, almost begging for physical movement along to its beat. Morrison makes a face as if to ask, "What on earth are you doing?" and walks over to rows that remain seated despite his obvious discontent, clapping vigorously just in front of them as if to provoke them into doing the same. Some do stay seated, but others move to the music, some with their eyes closed, many clapping. Again, participants needed Morrison to propel them through the joy of the service as well as to guide them through the prayer.

Morrison seems to have an idea of what he wants this service to be: a rest from the fullness of the week, replete with spirit, active. Mostly, he seems to want participants to be comfortable, to be "free," and he interprets their comfort level through their smiles and physical movement. But many participants do not smile in this space. They sit and stand without moving. They do not behave as though this service, this space, is theirs to

enjoy. They do not act as though they can lead their own positive, relaxed, unhesitant experience. They seem only to move when commanded, to need Morrison's verbal and physical motivation of them toward comfort.

Morrison raises these ideas of comfort during prayer and also during different modes of study. In study, Morrison builds on comfort to give students tools to manage their own experiences, seemingly theorizing (sometimes aloud) that with these tools will come their confidence, and with their confidence will come their management of their own Jewish experience. As I describe in the next sections, this occurs in the classroom, during Torah and Tonics, and also during Soul Food Friday. In a variety of ways, Morrison creates an atmosphere for discussion of texts in which his are not the only ideas in the classroom, students can learn for themselves how to study Jewish texts as well as the idea that such study is within their capability and under their control.

### *Promoting Independence I: Learning* for *Themselves*

In Chapter Five, I suggested that Morrison frequently withdraws from student conversation, soliciting students' own questions and comments, asking students to respond to each other, and encouraging students to expand on their ideas. Here, I want to build on that idea, demonstrating the extent to which the students' own voices create their study together, with Morrison's voice receiving less air time than students' voices.

To illustrate this, I return to and further develop a conversation raised in Chapter Five. Morrison had focused students on the Holiness Code (Leviticus 19:1-18), a text that lists numerous commandments. One commandment on the list relates to sacrifice. After

students asked a variety of questions about other commandments, Zoe turned the conversation to this commandment about sacrifice.

> Morrison: Yeah, this is great. … Other stuff that pops up.
>
> Zoe: It – it doesn't seem like much of a sacrifice if you're just gonna eat it – like you're gonna eat it anyway, why is it a sacrifice?
>
> Morrison: I think that's kind of about what Charlie said – the fat and the blood is for God. The meat is for humans.
>
> Zoe: But then is it a sacrifice – I mean, what does it mean to be a sacrifice?
>
> Morrison: Well - I've got lots of questions in response to that. Does anyone else have any questions? Thoughts?
>
> (silence)
>
> … Zoe: Well – just the word sacrifice – it implies that you're giving up something.
>
> Morrison: Aah. So, so what's the word for sacrifice? Do you know it?
>
> Aaron: *Korban*. It's *korban*.
>
> Morrison: *Korban*. (writes the word on the board in Hebrew and in an English transliteration) Sacrifice is a problematic word, right – what do we associate with it?
>
> Ken: Giving up something.
>
> Morrison: Giving up something. Giving up something. Someone talk to us about *korban*.
>
> Aaron: It comes from the word, from the verb, to draw near.
>
> Morrison: Good. Great. So a *korban* – the notion of a *korban* is to come close. To give, you burn the stuff, or you sacrifice it, I think we could talk about it in terms of what you do with it, you burn it, you offer it, and in doing so you draw close. You draw close. So in that sense, is it at all about giving something up? Or is it – something – maybe you get something? I mean, I've been thinking a lot about this – maybe it's about gaining something, not giving something up?
>
> Zoe: But how is that different from cooking meat for dinner – the smell still rises to God when you do that.
>
> Morrison: That's a great question. Responses.
>
> Dena: Well – I had a couple thoughts. One is – there's an intentionality when you make a sacrifice – you're trying to connect with God – the animal is still being sacrificed – maybe it's a different kind of sacrifice, but the plant or animal is giving its life presumably to God, so I wonder, I wonder if it's, if we can move the sacrifice from us to the animal?
>
> Zoe: But I'm sure it's an unwilling sacrifice. (laughter)
>
> Dena: Yes, exactly.
>
> Morrison: So – you mentioned also intentionality. What do you mean (bluntly).

> Dena: So if you're just cooking, all you're thinking about is who's coming over. But if you're making a sacrifice, then you're thinking about the fact that as you're eating, you're also – you're also sharing with God, somewhere.
>
> Charlie: Well, that's – I mean, if you read in Homer, every meal they were offering up the bones as a sacrifice, to the gods – every meal was a sacrifice.
>
> Morrison: Great, great – that's nice. But where is this happening? It strikes me on one level there is intentionality, but – where is this happening, where does the story have this happening? …
>
> Eric: The tabernacle.
>
> Morrison: Good, the tabernacle, this tent-like structure. You know, it's not tabernacles, right, it's one particular tent. …This sets up, as you've been talking about a little, this is actually a story behind a story … this is getting at, this is the tabernacle – when you hear about tabernacle, it's an almost one to one association is the temple… All right, so this can only happen here… Let's get away from sacrifices. Other things, thoughts.

This exchange illustrates Morrison's varied responses to students in their process of teaching and learning.

As demonstrated, Morrison does sometimes respond directly to a question, as in the beginning of this exchange:

> Zoe: It – it doesn't seem like much of a sacrifice if you're just gonna eat it – like you're gonna eat it anyway, why is it a sacrifice?
>
> Morrison: I think that's kind of about what Charlie said – the fat and the blood is for God. The meat is for humans.

Rather than soliciting ideas from students about Zoe's comment, Morrison gave the student his thoughts about her question. In this exchange, he also pointed students in a certain direction, as when he led students to remember that this sacrifice takes place in the tabernacle:

> Morrison: Great, great – that's nice. But where is this happening? It strikes me on one level there is intentionality, but – where is this happening, where does the story have this happening? …
>
> Eric: The tabernacle.
>
> Morrison: Good, the tabernacle, this tent-like structure. You know, it's not tabernacles, right, it's one particular tent. …This sets up, as you've been talking about a little, this is actually a story behind a story.

Morrison seems to want to make a point, that this use of sacrifice is not random, that it takes place inside the precursor to the ancient Temple, that the sacrifice could be part of the text in order to tell a greater story. Sometimes, then, Morrison does direct student conversation.

It should be noted equally, though, that a student raised the idea in the first place. Morrison begins the exchange related here with a refrain of his continual request for students' "questions, comments, and ideas:"

Morrison: Yeah, this is great. … Other stuff that pops up.

When conversation about sacrifice has gone on for some time, Morrison begins another conversation thread, asking for "other things, thoughts." With this move, Morrison takes a role almost of facilitator rather than teacher. When he asks students after every text is read for "questions, comments, anything," Morrison gives to students the privilege of shaping the group's first reaction to the text. As he continually asks students for their thoughts and manages their conversation, their discussion becomes comprised primarily of the students' own thinking and reactions to the texts before them. Students direct the conversation; Morrison merely moves it along.

Moreover, rather than sharing his own thoughts – and he has many, as he acknowledges, "I have lots of questions in response to that" – Morrison asks for student ideas in reaction to their peers' questions. "That's a great question. Responses," he states, in this exchange and frequently. Because he quiets his own reactions, the dialogue becomes a conversation among many in the room rather than one between the teacher and each individual student. This kind of student interaction happens repeatedly throughout

Torah and Tonics, with students often talking at the same time in answer to one student's comment.[1]

In addition, Morrison often asks students to clarify what they are saying:

> Morrison: So – you mentioned also intentionality. What do you mean (bluntly).

He ensures that he understands what a student is suggesting. In doing so, he emphasizes the students' ideas and spends more time on them than he does on his own ideas. Students get more floor time and more attention when he dwells on and expands their thoughts.

Morrison is not afraid to lead a silent classroom. When he is silent, he almost mandates that students talk instead of him. In this conversation, Zoe asked her initial question, Morrison responded to it, Zoe pushed back with another question, and Morrison opened the conversation for general responses. The silence that followed was a familiar silence in Torah and Tonics, lasting about fifteen seconds and seeming much longer as students sat expectantly. Often, this silence feels uncomfortable, uncertain, and embarrassing. Yet, Morrison rarely interrupts this silence himself. He refuses to fill the silence with his own thoughts simply because the silence feels uncomfortable. Interrupting the silence with his ideas would allow students to escape an opportunity to think independently. In his refusal, Morrison demands student contributions.[2]

In these ways, students drive the bulk of any evening's conversation. Morrison adds ideas, but he adds to the ideas that students raise and create. The students'

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[1] In fact, I saw lengthier conversations that the one I shared here that similarly did not include Morrison's voice. However, the students' conversation speed and tendency to talk at the same time prevented me from creating a recording of their dialogue adequate enough to demonstrate their interactions.

[2] Silence also occurs when Morrison asks for a volunteer to read the text. Rather than just read the text himself or call on someone, he waits through the silence until someone volunteers (although he does occasionally and amusingly beg for volunteers, pleading a lack of time).

imaginations fill the room, with students responding to each other without Morrison's voice in between. Primarily because he does not respond to each student's idea, students' voices are heard most; their combined floor time exceeds that of Morrison. Their study is a partnership in which all, to some extent, are teachers.

At times, students ask Morrison for concrete information, for history or anthropology lessons. They want to know the archaeological evidence for the Exodus or the history of Jewish liturgy. These sessions aim less to discuss the ideas behind texts and more to transfer knowledge from teacher to students. Yet, Morrison still avoids lecturing. Instead, he presents students with material, with texts that illustrate the concepts he wants to impart, with a timeline, with any materials available that will stimulate the students' own conclusions. When students, for example, asked Morrison to talk with them about who the rabbis of the Talmud were, about what is known about their personal lives, and about how they interacted with each other, rather than simply answer their questions, Morrison brought texts from *Avot* to students, working with them to extract from the texts the answers to their questions. Through the texts, students saw and identified for themselves the concept of the chain of tradition and the rabbis' understanding of their place in it.[3] When they asked some factual questions about the texts – about named geographic locations or the Great Assembly (of rabbis) – Morrison added detail to what they read, describing the different eras of rabbis (*tannaim* and *amoraim*), explaining that the rabbis had written in both Babylonia and Palestine, and relating the process of

[3]Specifically, students looked at first at *Avot* 1:1: "Moses received Torah from God at Sinai. He transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, the Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly." They then looked at several texts that tie rabbis to each other, including *Avot* 1:4 ("Yose Ben Yoezer of Tzereidah and Yose Ben Yohanon of Jerusalem received the tradition…") and Avot 1:6 ("Joshua ben Perahyah and Nittai of Arbel received the tradition…"). Translations of *Pirke Avot* are from *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1989).

redaction of the *Mishnah* and the personalities involved. And then, using their newfound knowledge, students could – and did – fire questions at Morrison about the nature of the relationships between the pairs: Did they know each other? Did they sit in a room together? Did they exist in different time periods? Morrison answered their questions and then moved the conversation on to additional texts from which students continued to learn details about the lives and personalities of some rabbis. The conversation became even looser, with students analyzing the text as they normally did, asking questions and reacting to each other.

In this entire exchange, Morrison almost co-led the conversation with the texts themselves. Students could generate their own ideas as they looked at the texts directly, gaining the data needed to deviate from Morrison's direction of the conversation, raising any ideas and asking any questions that they wanted. They could see first-hand the words and patterns that would become the substance of the answers to their questions. Morrison did not serve as the sole source of knowledge available to students. He gave students the necessary tools, the primary documents, to help them engage in self-guided learning. In this case and often in the Riverway Project, with the materials in front of them, students can find the information that they want in the texts that Morrison gives them, drawing conclusions for themselves based on the same data from which their teacher created his ideas. They have the opportunity to learn independently, to learn for themselves.

### *Promoting Independence II: Learning* by *Themselves*

During my field work, Morrison experimented with several additional means of facilitating students' independent learning. In these instances, he asked students not only

to learn for themselves, to come to their own conclusions, but to learn by themselves, almost without his guidance. They sat together as a classroom of 300 in Soul Food Friday and discussed the *Torah* portion one on one. Forty divided into small groups at Torah and Tonics to delve first-hand into their texts. At Mining for Meaning, Morrison shifted a small class from being oriented around his leadership to teaching themselves. These examples show additionally the emphasis that Morrison places on facilitating participants' leadership of their Jewish experience. They also begin to illustrate the challenges inherent in this task of helping participants to develop autonomy.

### Experiment #1: Grassroots *Torah* Study at Soul Food Friday

At Soul Food Friday, Morrison dedicates time after the *Amidah*, the standing and silent prayer, for commentary on the week's *Torah* portion. More often than not, he speaks frontally about the portion, perhaps asking one or two questions of participants but generally serving himself as the teacher. During one Soul Food Friday after the *Amidah*, Morrison asked participants to meet each other (as described in Chapter Four). After a few minutes he called out, "Sit, sit, sit, sit." Participants did, and he continued. "Usually, the rabbi gives the *d'var Torah* (commentary on the Torah). But it does not have to be that way." On this night, he challenged the participants to give the *d'var Torah.* He explained that participants should follow the structure of a typical *d'var Torah,* covering three areas: participants should tell the story of the Torah portion, the story of Noah, then ask why the story is in the Torah, and then ask why this story is relevant today. Having given these instructions, he began the task immediately. "Who wants to tell the story of Noah?" he queried the entire group, all 300 participants.

The room was silent for several seconds, but eventually several individuals volunteered their hands. Armed with a hand-held microphone, Morrison walked over to a participant, asked his name, and Mike (from Acton, he explained, Morrison as usual pressing participants for contextual information about them) related some of the story of Noah. Morrison asked for additional details to the story; again, hands were raised, he chose another participant and after he asked for her name, Jen continued the story.

The narrative explained, Morrison then directed participants to spend thirty seconds with the person next to them to discuss why this story is part of the Torah. The noise level grew as pairs turned to each other throughout the room. Participants brainstormed and then shared their answers publicly: Morrison asked for volunteers, hands rising now more quickly than before. He took three or four participants' ideas, always asking for their names first.

Finally, Morrison turned participants to the third part of the *d'var Torah*, that which relates the story of Noah to contemporary times. He again asked pairs to discuss the question; heads turned again toward each other, and chatter began again. After several minutes Morrison asked for pairs to share and as they did, their answers wove together to give the story of Noah meaning in today's world. It was just a few months after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the Gulf Coast and the concept of flood seemed laden with negativity and despair. Participants connected the flood of the text to Hurricane Katrina, suggesting that with its end in which God promised never again to destroy the world, the Noah story reminded them to have hope. People can endure tragedy, they argued, and they can hold onto the idea that the tragedy will end. We can live with the expectation

that things will be better. Giving participants a satisfied, congratulatory smile, Morrison let these words of the participants be the last said about the *Torah* portion.

As Morrison walked back to the front of the congregation, having wandered through rows and aisles as he asked for the *d'var Torah*, the band members returned to their places and began to play a Negro spiritual, "Wade in the Water."[4] It is a song I know and love from my folk music collection, and I sang along with the band: "God's gonna trouble the water, children." The message of this poignant piece of history echoed the participants' words: God will trouble the water, but tragedy will happen, and what we can do is delve into the tragedy and try to move on. The band had also played the song days after Hurricane Katrina, when I felt only overwhelming fear and helplessness as the words seemed to tell me that I do not have power over all. On this night, I remembered how I felt then and on this night instead, I felt as the end of the Noah story suggests – a bit more hopeful, that people can endure tragedy and can come together in doing so. Moreover, I felt this song to be a part of our community, co-opted from another community for sure, but one that has come to hold meaning in this congregation. As it played, it brought together participants' words about hope, the natural disaster of our general world, and the musical spirit of Soul Food Friday.

## Experiment #2: Group Conversation at Torah and Tonics

At Soul Food Friday, Morrison transformed the rabbi-delivered *d'var Torah* into an opportunity to help participants understand that not only the rabbi, the community leader, can extract meaning from the Bible. That night, anyone had access to the act of interpretation, and Morrison acted purely as facilitator.

[4] For the complete lyrics and history of this Negro Spiritual, see http://www.osblackhistory.com/wade.php.

Similarly, Morrison experimented at Torah and Tonics with the historic Jewish idea of *hevruta,* or paired, learning. As described, Morrison typically facilitated Torah and Tonics as a group conversation, with him literally managing the exchange of students. In adding *hevruta* time to the evening, he removed himself completely from some of the night's moments, giving study over to participants and directing students to look at the text more closely and independently.

He introduced the idea of *hevruta*, a concept foreign to most, by explaining:

> I wanted to do things differently tonight. … I'm interested in us becoming more and more of a community together, a community of learners. … I'm wondering how we can teach one another. … I want to do more work in what's called *hevruta*, or pairs – it's a word that means something like fellowship. … To work in sort of a guided way, in pairs, we're going to move into pairs and then in the larger group and then back. And you'll see how this works, if you're at all nervous. And ... you can work in pairs, or in groups, or as a table. So it's bit of an experiment.

He continued with the evening's study as he always did, by presenting to the entire group a central question of study – that of continuities and discontinuities between Exodus and Leviticus – and by leading students to a piece of text. He also began typically, with the entire group. After reading a text from the end of Exodus, he asked for comments, and students responded with their usual litany of questions and ideas about the narrative, context, and meaning of the text. He then turned students to another piece of text, to the beginning of Leviticus. Students read the text and repeated the process of asking questions about it. With these two texts before students as material, Morrison directed students to find a partner:

> I want you guys to discuss together, with your partner … what relationship do you see between the end of one book and the beginning of the next. And I want you to understand relationship in as wide a way as you want. So what we're gonna do is – you've got five minutes, and then we're gonna talk together.

After some initial chatter and confusion, participants began to study, with Morrison walking the room and answering questions. As pairs or groups began to form around the room, a true test began: Can Morrison remove himself from conversation and can students' autonomous investigation of the text result?

At my table, pairs never formed; students seemed reluctant to contribute or even to ask a question that might initiate conversation. At first we stared at each other, a little bit dumbly. Ziv then took over. A personality unique in the Riverway Project, he came to almost every Torah and Tonics and often drew on his extensive day school education to challenge Morrison. He seemed completely unafraid to speak in class. Similarly, he took charge of our table conversation, drawing conclusions about the texts and asking if people around him agreed. Others murmured one-word responses. No one engaged as Ziv did, posing questions to each other or offering interpretations in response to Morrison's guiding question. Eventually Tzvi, Israeli-born, a frequent but quiet participant in Torah and Tonics, began to ask Ziv tangential questions about the nature of the tabernacle and the ark. After some awkward moments of silence for the rest of us while we listened to Ziv's answers, Morrison rescued our table when he returned all of us to one focus of attention.

We spent the next part of the evening with different tables and participants sharing what they had learned from their conversation, returning into our table conversations twice more and sharing after each time. As participants reported, they used the language, "At my table, we thought." In these prefaces, they revealed a great deal. For the most part, pairs did not form throughout the room. But unlike at my table, participants throughout the room had gleaned a great deal from the text as they worked in groups. As

students shared, idea after idea came from various tables. The ideas that they shared were more developed than usual, and students seemed more able than normal to respond to each other's questions and comments. They seemed more familiar with the texts, more committed to the ideas that they shared. Some students, then, well accepted this greater responsibility to facilitate their own learning. As we moved from small conversations to the entire group repeatedly throughout the evening, each time they shared, students indicated the same level of commitment and thought.

Despite the extent to which other tables seemed to have engaged in their task, I remained troubled by my table's inability to fulfill this assignment. In this experiment, when he withdrew himself from study, Morrison eliminated the opportunity for some students to sit quietly and benefit from others' ideas and from his explanations. Moreover, he asked students to find internally the motivation and validation necessary to guide their own study. This simultaneous demand for greater responsibility and withdrawal of support may have been too much for inexperienced students. Hence, my table disengaged, full of students (other than Ziv) too shy, afraid, or even apathetic to jump in without Morrison. While around us more confident or knowledgeable students seemed to delve deeply into their assignment, the outcome for my table was paltry in comparison.

In this example, Morrison eased students into the activity of independent learning, suggesting that they would become accustomed to it as they worked and studying together first before they worked independently. He made himself available as students moved every ten minutes from large to small groups, working together and apart and together again. In a different example, as part of the Mining for Meaning project,

Morrison worked even more slowly toward evolving a neighborhood class into an independent learning group, studying for several weeks with participants and then pushing them to break almost completely away from him. Perhaps because of this slower pace, this second experiment more successfully enabled participants to become independent learners. It also demonstrated further complexities involved in creating such study independent study opportunities.

### Experiment #3: Developing a Learning Collective through Mining for Meaning

Described briefly in Chapter One, Mining for Meaning is a four-week class held in Boston neighborhoods designed to help students "mine" specific aspects of Jewish ritual for personal meaning. Morrison intended to explore *Shabbat*, Passover, Hanukah, and Purim through the class; in response to student requests, he added an investigation of the Friday night *Shabbat* liturgy and, also in response to students, ultimately stretched each class to ten hours rather than the intended eight. While not disclosed to the group when it first came together, Morrison hoped that each community would evolve into an independent learning collective. In one neighborhood, Jamaica Plain, this occurred. Here, I describe the process that Morrison created, participants' responses, and the challenges involved in moving an inexperienced group of students into an independent learning collective.

Jamaica Plain (JP) lies just next to Boston and has a sharply urban, grungy, and also Yuppie feel. Hispanic immigrants live next to medical residents. Recent college graduates and upper middle class and working class families share the sidewalks of Centre Street, passing upscale bistros and burrito places, used record stores and funky gift

boutiques. To some extent, the Mining for Meaning group that gathered represented this diversity, including graduate students, some in their early thirties who had been working for some time, and twenty-two year olds trying to establish a career. A married couple, a mother with children, another married woman, and single adults came together from all areas of Jamaica Plain, from their well-decorated homes and from their rooms in shared apartments. Not all of them were members of Temple Israel or even frequent participants of the Riverway Project. They shared a common weariness with their meager knowledge about their own tradition. Their lives in diverse worlds asked them often to represent Judaism to a broader audience and they felt incapable of doing so. Each increasingly wanted to bring some kind of meaning into their lives, and they were turning to their own religion as a logical starting place for this. They saw in Mining for Meaning an opportunity to talk with peers about the hows of such meaning-making: how to maintain universal commitments and develop their commitment to Judaism, how to bring concepts like *Shabbat* and holidays into their lives with integrity and richness but without rigidity. About twelve of us sat with Morrison at Katie's long living room table for our ten initial hours together, scattering our papers on the rough-hewn wood, enjoying cheese and crackers and grapes and plenty of caffeine.

Even while Mining for Meaning was advertised as a four-week learning opportunity, Morrison immediately began to move the group into something ongoing, sharing with participants in his opening comments to the class:

> For me this gets to the heart of the matter in terms of … what I believe [are] the goals of the Riverway Project … I'm very much interested in creating communities of learners, and particularly creating Jewish communities in neighborhoods to help people engage in Jewish activity. We've been working for the last four years now on services in particular homes and stuff like that, and now to start looking at education, delve more deeply into text and so forth, in

> neighborhood settings is exciting … and one of the things that we'll entertain before this is over is what happens after these four weeks.

Participants had enrolled for only four sessions, but Morrison challenged them on that first night to build this project into something more than they had expected.

This brief mention seemed to plant an idea effectively, for during a conversation at the end of the third class about how to structure their last session together, Rachel, a student, raised the potential for continued learning. She suggested, "I was also wondering if it would be helpful now to throw out suggestions for what might be interesting down the road… think about it a little bit." Rachel's question provoked her peers' similar thoughts. They immediately began to ask Morrison questions: Would this be a consistent group? Is Morrison available to students for the foreseeable future? Would he be a resource? Morrison put some of these questions about the group's membership back to them. When he did give them responses, he emphasized the importance and possibility of their teaching themselves:

> One of the goals of this experience, in my mind, is to have folks become self-sufficient Jewish learners. One of the goals is to support folks teaching one another. So … I don't have the availability to do it every time, but I also think it would be wrong if I did it every time. So … I'll certainly be there in the background offering any support I can… One of the goals long-term is for you guys to teach. Teach one another. … This is only the beginning.

He continued later:

> … I wanna create community in neighborhoods. … Part of the goal in this case is to seed community learning. So I'd love for you to know your neighbors through this process. … I wanna see if we can create a core…

In total, then, at the close of the third session, Morrison's expectations for them and the mission of this group were clear. His intent was to help them learn to teach themselves and to study on their own in an intimate, neighborhood community. They should be a

"core," a foundation, of Jewish learning and activity in Jamaica Plain. From his brief words on that first night, and then from the way he handled questions and emphasized his goals on the third night, Mining for Meaning became much more than a four-week class. Morrison reshaped the goals as they were advertised to include the students teaching themselves in a Jamaica Plain/ Riverway Project study group.

At the end of the fourth night, the conversation easily transitioned from final questions about the night's material into the group's next steps. Again, Rachel began the conversation. It continued with students' comments and questions and with Morrison's suggestions:

> Rachel: Well, I've really enjoyed this. I think one of my questions is, if we continue, if there were a post group, how, how do we each make a contribution? I think that we can learn a lot from each other, but I also see us seeking information … I'm definitely enjoying the aspect of being able to ask questions and have somebody who knows the answers …
>
> Morrison: … It's a challenge. How can we move ourselves, or what can I do to enable you, to move you – how can we become teachers, and have a growing sense of, I know something. Or, I know how to get the answer. That's the premise behind the whole thing. How can we move ourselves into teaching ourselves.
>
> Harleigh: Well, we gotta figure out what we wanna learn – we gotta connect around something we're interested in learning. I think that's the first thing that we need to do. And that we're willing to, you know, put aside some time to do this, to get together. And then, and then we can figure out how. But let's figure out what we want to learn.
>
> Amy: My thing is … we have a nice group – it would be a shame to not do something, to not figure out what that is – we're coming into a community, we're developing a shared understanding, a lot of us have done Riverway stuff together – we, like, we have something kind of gelling. I'm trying to figure out … there's something nice about meeting every week. Like, we got in a rhythm, every Thursday. I'm not proposing every week but – there's a different kind of challenge to meeting monthly. … You miss one, it's two months until the next one. Two months is a long time to not be together, and personal relationships being part of the configuration – I don't know. I would love to continue. With you. (laughter)
>
> Morrison: Also know that there's a – regardless of the outcome there are many study opportunities to get together already in place – there's connection points …

> So to not think you're isolated. On one hand, yeah, could we strengthen this group with more people from JP, but also, it's already part of a larger network.
>
> Would people be averse to meeting again and talking about it? Would – is there one person who would like to work with me to choose – whatever the Torah portion is, to teach?
>
> (after a long silence, Harleigh volunteered)
>
> Morrison: Let's – I don't want to let too much time – well, here's – why don't we see – can we pick a date now?
>
> Katie: I was actually wondering if people wanted to have dinner beforehand, sort of get to know the people we've been learning with?

They chose a date and agreed to Katie's suggestion: they would have pizza and casual conversation before Morrison joined them for their study and planning.

This conversation did not feel easy or simple. It occurred at about 9:45 pm, after we had been sitting together for several hours. Perhaps because it was so late, Morrison pushed the conversation along quickly, and everyone around the table did not have the opportunity to contribute their ideas, ask questions, or raise their comfort or discomfort with the general idea of their continued study. Moreover, those who spoke raised uncertainties. Rachel wanted a resource whom she could ask questions. Harleigh was not sure that they should agree to meet together without an agenda. Ultimately, everyone around the table did not agree to Morrison's challenge: "I think it's more of a question of, can you come." Nor did they immediately answer the questions that their fellow students posed about the format of their continued study. The conversation concluded with tension and without mutual resolution.

Yet, students also emphasized that they wanted to be together, as seen in Amy's comment and in Katie's invitation for dinner. During private interviews with them, they mentioned to me how much their desire for a community of their Jewish peers was motivating them to participate in Mining for Meaning at all. With Katie's suggestion to

have a casual dinner before study, they made it clear that as they took control of their Mining for Meaning group, they would make building that community a fundamental part of their time together. Through that suggestion, control of the group began to shift from Morrison to participants.

Perhaps because of their interest in community and their evolving comfort with each other, all of the participants did come to the next session, scheduled for a month later. That night, to emphasize the shift of group leadership from Morrison to participants, Morrison came into Katie's home about an hour after they first met, skipping their group-oriented dinner. I met him on the front steps as he was walking in.[5] The room felt warm and busy as we entered the group mid-conversation. The agenda for the evening included study in addition to planning, and Harleigh led a discussion about the Torah portion with confidence. Some of her confidence likely came from her experiences in Jewish youth group in high school, Hillel in college, and her current position as a Sunday School teacher. But her confidence was strengthened, as was her knowledge base, because she met with Morrison before she taught.[6] This was to be the

[5] A note about methodology is worth making here. As a participant observer, this dinner fell into a general gray area of research for me, joining in my mind a category that also included occasional unofficial *Shabbat* dinners sponsored by frequent Riverway Project participants that I would hear about through word of mouth. Like those *Shabbat* dinners, I considered this pre-Mining for Meaning dinner an informal part of the formal activity, and so without a specific invitation, I did not join the dinner.

Perhaps even more so, I also did not join the dinner because it seemed the beginning of a process that would continue after my formal fieldwork concluded. I saw my status as a normative group member dissolving quickly as the nature of the group shifted to be a JP group in which all taught each other. Because I was not a JP resident, and because in my role as researcher (and knowledgeable and experienced Jewish educator atypical in this group) I was not prepared to contribute to the group as a teacher, I particularly felt uncomfortable continuing to participate in the group's activities.

I did recognize the ongoing meetings of the group as a rich source of data, however, and so occasionally attended the ongoing meetings of the Cambridge/ Somerville Mining for Meaning group. While I would not become a teacher in that group, I was a resident of the neighborhood and would remain a frequent participant in the Neighborhood Circle events even after my fieldwork concluded. It therefore felt more natural to enter that group as a participant observer, less like I was an obvious interloper. As with other events in which I participated after my formal fieldwork concluded, my observations of these ongoing meetings inform this dissertation at various points.

[6] As she revealed to me in later conversations.

paradigm for teaching: a student could not be expected to lead a text study without support, but by following Morrison's guidance in finding resources, and by weaving these resources together with him into an outline for conversation, a student could lead others in learning. Indeed, after additional discussion about the varied possibilities for their meeting, the group chose this paradigm for their lessons as well as a curriculum of the weekly Torah portion and a monthly meeting schedule for their ongoing work together. Morrison would come to the group occasionally to offer support. The group concluded their time together by identifying a date for their next meeting and nominating a member – Stephanie – to lead the discussion. The core of learners that Morrison sought was beginning to develop.

After this transitional meeting, I continued to hear about this Mining for Meaning group from its participants during interviews and when I saw them at Riverway Project events. As the group evolved, it effectively cemented into the community of learners for which Morrison had hoped. For at least a year after their initial meeting, group members taught each other, learning about Bible and learning about teaching, gaining confidence as scholars and teachers. Those with whom I spoke appreciated learning from their peers. They were impressed and excited that their peers would put a significant amount of work into teaching each other.

They were similarly excited that, with the direction of the conversation and the group in their hands, they were able to mold both in ways that they wanted. Some students had been interested in more opportunities during the original Mining for Meaning sessions to talk about themselves and the meaning that they find in the text and in ritual. Without Morrison, it seemed that they felt freer to do that. Moreover, without

Morrison, they could not look to a central teacher to shape their conversation. They were forced to look to themselves, and there naturally became even more room for student contribution and guiding of the conversation. In total, the group became for students an important Jewish outlet, a way of making their neighborhood Jewish, a means of learning about Judaism, and an opportunity to explore with peers their relationship to Jewish ritual and to Judaism in general. As they saw each other teach they developed a new awareness that such peer-led teaching is possible and that they can gather the knowledge and confidence necessary to lead their own learning. They had originally come to Katie's home from disparate life stages and with different backgrounds. With Morrison's direction and their own motivation, they came together into a group that is able to create Jewish meaning for themselves.

As the group continued to meet, complexities embedded in this concept of an independent study group began to arise. Through an agreement with Morrison, students originally had made a formal (written) commitment to four weeks of Mining for Meaning; those who could not attend all four weeks were not accepted to participate in the class. Outside of this commitment, in an extended series of meetings, participants soon began to be unable to come to every session of their study group, and the group began meeting with fewer and different monthly participants. Questions implicit in this and other challenges surfaced: How many members should the group maintain? When should it open to additional participants, and how will that change the nature of the group? In addition, without an ongoing connection to Morrison, the group itself began to lose its connection to the Riverway Project and to Temple Israel, feeling like an organic collection of JP residents meeting to study Judaism. Some wondered, how much does that

connection to the Riverway Project or Temple Israel matter – to them, to the strength of their social network, or to Temple Israel? Without this connection, to what extent should or could Morrison continue to be their teacher? These questions about Morrison's role are important, and are made more complicated by demands on Morrison's time. This JP study group became the third independent study group that he created. How many study groups could he manage at once? Finally, Rachel's initial desire for a resource during their learning remained an open question: Fundamentally, are students comfortable with their own growing knowledge levels? How much do they crave a rabbi?

These questions were not resolved. At the same time, this case of the JP Mining for Meaning group and the group's ability to meet without Morrison for text study that stimulates and inspires its participants provides an image of what is possible in creating independent producers of Jewish meaning. In the questions it raises, it also demonstrates the tensions that arise when a learned individual, a leader, assembles a group of learners and then weans the group from his involvement. Morrison has continued to challenge students to create for themselves, teaching guitar players to lead prayer services and asking students to lead text studies at Neighborhood Circle prayer services, motivating and preparing participants to learn by themselves and to lead their own Jewish celebrations.

### *Leadership in the Riverway Project*

As with study, Morrison similarly seeks to withdraw himself from governance of the Riverway Project community itself, sharing with participants opportunities for leadership of their collective community. They are in this project together. This concept of shared

leadership is interwoven into the Riverway Project in several ways: participants contribute to the vision of the Riverway Project, they host and lead its events, and as Morrison encouraged at Soul Food Friday, they demonstrate confidence in their Jewishness and their participation in the Riverway Project. I share examples of each of these here.

Morrison continually invites participants' input as co-directors of the Riverway Project. A weekly Riverway Project email invited, "We always want and need your input in order to make the Riverway Project an authentic reflection of you, your ideas about Judaism, and the ways in which our community should continuously change and grow."[7] Morrison expresses similar sentiments from the *bimah* (stage) at Soul Food Friday and Neighborhood Circle prayer services.

This encouragement to lead is well captured in a scene from one Soul Food Friday, when Morrison directly solicited suggestions from participants about their project. Morrison framed the conversation with these words:

> I feel a little bit uncomfortable with what we're about to do. I feel a little bit of fear … As we're coming to a close to the year and thinking about what are we gonna do next year, I wanna open that question up to all of you. … This is something very ill-advised…
>
> But we've done everything together this far. I mean it – we've done everything together so far. Not a single thing that happened in connection with Riverway hasn't been generated by folks … who are here tonight or who have been here before. And so everything we've done, we've done together. And so what I want to ask … I wanna ask for feedback. I wanna hear ideas. I wanna hear, is there something that we should do. Is there something that we should change.
>
> But as you're mulling that over I think there's one important thing to understand in that statement – I really mean, is there something *we* should do. So if you're going to respond to my question, which I really want you to do, I want you to underline the we. Because – to propose something [is] to suggest an idea over which you want a level of ownership. So I want to hear your ideas. I wanna hear about change. But tell me what we're gonna do together.

[7] Email communication with listserv subscribers, March 1, 2005.

As Morrison implied, asking unscripted for the input of anyone in a crowd of hundreds could lead to moments of significant discomfort if Morrison received an idea for which he was not prepared. Still, he plunged ahead, because the Riverway Project, he reminded participants, is a shared entity, and their collective responsibility is more important than any minor discomfort he would feel. They should make suggestions and together they would implement their new ideas: "Tell me what we're gonna do together," he concluded.

Morrison continued:

> … We're trying to change Judaism. We all grew up in a Jewish community, I imagine – there are some exceptions – we belonged to synagogues, many of our parents belonged to synagogues that operated on the notion that you drop people off, they were served, and they left. It was like a Sunoco, a service station (laughter), right. And so the question that we're asking … how can we do stuff together. So we aren't just serving. We're creating Judaism together. So, I'm gonna ask the question again. Is there something we should do differently, or that we should do that's utterly new in the congregation.

In these remarks, he implied that together, he and participants are trying to make their Jewish community and their Jewish lives objects of their own creation, lives over which they have control and leadership. He raised the greater issue to which their joint efforts belong: as they work together on their Jewish life, they can come to be constant producers of their Jewish lives rather than consumers of or reactors to Jewish celebrations that he creates for them.

By the end of Morrison's remarks, a few hands waved in the audience, and then many more rose. One participant asked for Israeli "soul food" at the *oneg* (food and socializing) after Soul Food Friday, for falafel and hummus. Another asked for Israeli dancing during the *oneg.* Still another suggested a more regular schedule for

Neighborhood Circle services so that he could plan to attend them in advance. A fourth suggested that hiking and interaction with the outdoors be added to the Riverway Project. After each suggestion, Morrison asked, "Does that resonate with others?" He received hands and "yeahs" from around the room. In just this simple question, he stressed the group nature of their community, the idea that others must echo an individual's suggestion in order for it to be adopted. When appropriate, Morrison also asked for participants' help in implementing a suggestion, again highlighting their mutual responsibility. In all, his frequent, more subtle message of shared leadership and ownership became overt, unable to be ignored, an essential part of Soul Food Friday that night and therefore an essential part of the Riverway Project.

As requested, Israeli food appeared at the next Soul Food Friday. Once an instructor was found, Israeli dancing began during the *oneg*. As Morrison implements their ideas, Morrison underlines the idea that he and participants are "building this together," that the Riverway Project is their home and their endeavor to shape as they wish through his words and his actions. He demonstrates to participants that their synagogue is not a "Sunoco Station," something from which they only take, but is an effort that they make possible together.

In general, anytime anyone volunteers their time or energy, asking what they can do, Morrison receives them enthusiastically. Morrison is delighted for participants to shape an event, plan and recruit for a new Neighborhood Circle opportunity, or invent and run something new. When opportunities have surfaced that are conducive to a committee structure – the Purim and Hanukah events and a Riverway Project retreat, for example – Morrison has solicited event chairs and recruited a group to plan the program.

Committee members developed the vision for each project, created the program, arranged for decorations, sold tickets, set and cleaned up, and energetically presided over the event. For most of the committee members, this experience on synagogue committees is a first, and they have needed to be told during their initial planning that they can be in charge, that they have the autonomy to shape their event in their image. “This is yours,” Morrison has explained. “You have every right to do what you’re doing.” Taking charge in the synagogue in this way is foreign to them. But in serving as creators of events, participants have opportunity to change their assumptions about synagogue leadership. They learn that they can direct their synagogue experience.

Riverway Project participants similarly shape their community when they take responsibility as hosts of events. At prayer services, hosts scurry around their apartments before the services start, filling the *Kiddush* cup (ritual wine glass) with wine, getting more chairs, setting up the *challot* (braided bread). Morrison remains the true leader of the Neighborhood Circle prayer service, playing the primary role. But this is an opportunity for participants to have prayer take place in their own living rooms and to manage their own Jewish lives.

During Neighborhood Circle *Shabbat* dinners participants take an even more directive role. These *Shabbat* dinners occur about eight times annually, a few dinners happening each year in the various neighborhoods. Morrison rarely attends the dinners and so they become an opportunity for participants – particularly the hosts – to experiment independently with creating Jewish life and leading Jewish ritual, sort of trying on this life and making decisions about that ritual for themselves. The following deep description of such a *Shabbat* dinner demonstrates this phenomenon, with two

Riverway Project participants who rarely hosted Jewish events outside of the Riverway Project becoming leaders of a Jewish ritual event because of the Riverway Project.

Adam and Ilene met while working at a summer overnight camp just before Adam moved to Boston to begin graduate school. They decided to live together in Somerville, a graduate student and twenty-something hub, filled with multi-family homes chopped into apartments that pass rapidly between renters. Adam and Ilene live with a third roommate, a non-Jew, just across from the Porter Square Shaw's, a grocery store and the center of this universe, full of roommates looking for the best bargains while stocking up on beer and Ramen Noodles. I take a shortcut through the grocery store parking lot to find Adam and Ilene's first-floor apartment of a paint-peeling white house, their screen door crooked on its hinges. I smile at the familiarity of this Somerville paradigm, the worse for wear apartment in the split-family home of the twenty-something.

Inside, the familiarity continues. Mismatched couches, inherited from families or found on the street, over-fill the living room. All kinds of books are piled on listing bookshelves and random available surfaces, *Valley of the Dolls*[8] next to James Joyce. Despite the nomadic and cluttered space or perhaps because of it, the living room is full of personality and warmth.

This warmth is particularly palpable when I arrive. About ten people are already sitting on couches and folding chairs, munching on the pita and hummus that is spread on the coffee table in front of them. Morrison told Adam that about twenty people had responded to this dinner, and so we chat and eat for about thirty minutes as we wait for additional people to arrive. The dinner is potluck. As we each file in, we are directed to

[8] Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls* (California: Grove Press, 1966).

put our dish in the kitchen where they fill the countertops to capacity. An extra table has been set up to hold the dishes and the *Shabbat* ritual objects. On its blue tablecloth sit a vase of flowers, two *challot* covered with an embroidered cloth, two *Shabbat* candlesticks and candles, and a full *Kiddush* cup. One of the books that Adam received in Mining for Meaning stands next to the vase, proclaiming its title, *Shabbat at Home*. I comment on the beautiful Shabbat table to Adam. “Yeah,” he said, “I thought it would make it look festive.” As more guests arrive, dishes come to overwhelm the flowers and *Shabbat* display. I chat with Ilene as she bastes the chicken that she has made and I help her squeeze the dishes together to make room for it on the table. I express my amazement as she takes dish after dish of chicken from the oven. She explains that she felt like *Shabbat* dinner needed chicken.

The living room comes to fill, guests overflowing into the hallway and kitchen. Several couples have arrived with their children, babies in carriers and a toddler. A few couples are regular participants in Cambridge/ Somerville Neighborhood Circle events. Others are new to these gatherings. Adam begins to call people in from the kitchen, hallway, and front living room. We stand and sit expectantly around the coffee table. Adam has brought the candlesticks, *Kiddush* cup, and *challot* in from the kitchen table. The moment feels somewhat awkward; the group as it is conceived at that moment has never come together before, and there has not been a Cambridge/ Somerville *Shabbat* dinner for some time. We have no norms of participation in blessings and are not accustomed to following Adam as our prayer leader. It is not clear that Adam has led these prayers before, and certainly seems not to have recited them recently. In a slightly charged space, Adam begins, somewhat hesitantly:

> Glad that you're all here to celebrate Shabbat. We're going to do the blessings now and then uh, eat (laughter and cheers). If anyone wants to get wine for the uh, to do …

His voice is lost in the rush to the kitchen as a few participants look for plastic cups, a few others look for a corkscrew, and still more grab bottles of wine. There is talk of preferences for red and white and trading and passing of cups. We eventually settle down, wine in hand, and then complete silence falls as Aaron lights the candles on the coffee table. He makes circles in the air with his hands, covers his eyes, and begins to say the Hebrew blessing. Most join him. "*Baruch atah … lahadlik ner shel Shabbat*." He continues simply, "The wine." We join him with a straightforward *Kiddush* blessing: "*Baruch atah… borei pri hagofen*." Adam picks up the *challot* and continues; we join him again. "*Baruch atah… hamotzi lechem min ha-eretz*."[9] He adds, finally:

> So there are plates all the way in the back in the little pantry and then uh, sort of buffet style, so every person – uh, for themselves (laughter).

We follow his halted instructions, grabbing plates, lining up before the kitchen counters and filling our plates. We settle for an hour or more into the apartment's various corners: on couches, on chairs in the front room, sitting on the floor, standing in the kitchen. Eventually, the food is almost gone and Adam and Ilene collect the dishes and make space for dessert, brownies and cookies brought by guests. Sometimes – when someone who can fulfill this task is participating in the dinner – a participant leads the guests in exploring the *Torah* portion. On this night, Dena had prepared a text study about the Torah portion, the first in Numbers, and so over dessert she leads about thirty minutes of

[9] The blessings that Adam is saying here are the blessings said over the *Shabbat* candles, wine, and bread, or wheat. They mean, "Blessed art thou, Lord, Our God, ruler of the universe, who commanded us to light the candles," and "… who created the fruit of the vine," and "… who brings forth bread/ wheat from the earth." Adam covers his eyes when lighting the candles to participate in a sort of legal fiction: Jewish custom suggests that Jews say blessings and then do the blessed action, but since the laws of *Shabbat* prohibit the lighting of fire after the blessing over the candles has been said, one lights the candles and then closes one's eyes so as to pretend one does not see the lit candles while saying the blessing.

conversation.[10] Many guests stay much longer after that, and eventually, after helping Adam and Ilene to clean up, all claim their empty dishes and reenter the warm summer night.

In many ways, this dinner felt exactly like any other social event. Having people over for a potluck dinner – even sitting on the floor to do so – belongs to the zeitgeist of twenty-something Somerville. Yet, the Riverway Project gave this familiar social scene a slight but crucial twist. When they responded to the Riverway Project invitation for *Shabbat* dinner, participants in this event agreed that this Friday night would offer them more than just socializing. They readily, eagerly recited the words of the *Shabbat* blessings with Adam, voluntarily, albeit perhaps impatiently, waiting for these words before they enjoyed their dinner. Through them, and the later text study, they made a collective effort to differentiate and sanctify their time together.

For many of these participants, including the hosts, it took an invitation from the Riverway Project for this dinner to happen. Raised with some synagogue involvement, Adam had the experience necessary to lead these prayers without a cheat sheet before him, and Mining for Meaning gave him some historical and textual understanding of *Shabbat*. But Adam had never initiated such encounters with *Shabbat* on his own. He seemed to need the Riverway Project to give him the opportunity to be an actor in his own Jewish life. But because of the Riverway Project, he had the opportunity to figure out what it meant for him to be such a leader, to consider what it meant to translate his

[10] It was fascinating to watch a Riverway Project participant, someone whose ideas about Bible and Jewish learning had been shaped deeply by her experience with Morrison, lead a text study. The conversation she led was lively, with many participants responding to her questions and ideas. She demonstrated a clear comfort with the Biblical texts and the research she had completed. But there was a lopsided balance between her ideas and those of participants; she almost presented a lecture, rather than led conversation about the texts as does Morrison, valuing participants' ideas as much as her own. Dena's leadership of this study session, and all such participant-led sessions, raise interesting questions about how laypersons can be trained in Jewish education and text study. Such questions should be pursued in further study.

childhood memories into creating a *Shabbat* atmosphere in his own home as an adult. Similarly, many participants in this and other dinners explained to me that they have few similar dinners in which they participate, few other opportunities to make Friday night *Shabbat.* In these gatherings that are independent of Morrison, the Riverway Project gives a rare opportunity to participants to have an organic Jewish experience in which they create a Jewish event for each other and for themselves. This evening demonstrated for them that such self-made events can occur again and again, allowing them to work toward the confidence necessary to participate in Jewish life without a sanctioned leader.

Ultimately, when Morrison uses the word leader in reference to the Riverway Project he refers to this confidence, to the comfort that he demands at Soul Food Friday, to those who move about the Riverway Project and Jewish life with a sense of assurance and even authority. Riverway Project "leaders" are those who feel comfortable in their Jewish skin, who feel comfortable in the project, and who can model this comfort for others. The leadership opportunities that Morrison designs are meant to instill this confidence, this sense of being at home in any Jewish space, the "observance" that Dan and Carin described in Chapter Three. Leadership, then, implies not only a responsibility for shaping the Project. It also connotes someone who feels comfortable in their exploration of Judaism and is motivated to take responsibility to shape her own Jewish life.

Morrison particularly highlighted this concept of leadership when crafting the Riverway Project Israel trip. At the first meeting for those interested, he presented the purpose of the trip as including the following:

> …We originally described this as a leadership trip, and really everyone we've spoken to or invited to this or invited on the trip has on some level of engagement

> in leadership in the synagogue, either in Riverway … on the board, various different places, so on one level as a way to coalesce around this particular experience, to bring all the leaders that we recognize in this place, to bring them together and to see what happens when we go forward to this place. So on one level, one goal of this trip is to coalesce. To take … what happens when you take ten to fifteen people out of this country, go to Israel, and see what happens to us as a community, and to see what happens to our interactions.

Some present at this informational meeting were in traditional leadership roles in the synagogue: They were on the Temple Board or involved in committees or in facilitating Temple events. Others, though, had no involvement in the Temple or in the Riverway Project other than their just showing up. Yet, Morrison called them leaders. Occasionally on the Israel trip, participants referenced this title, acknowledging that without charge of any activities, they had no responsibilities of traditional leadership. What, they asked, were they leading?

As noted, during that first conversation about the trip, Morrison wondered about "what happens to us as a community" when away from the congregation and in Israel. Indeed, as the trip progressed, the hope of group coalescence that he outlined transpired. I saw the trip develop confident participants who were at ease with each other. Moreover, at their return to Boston, they began to act at Riverway Project events as almost model participants. They congregated at prayer services, updating each other excitedly about their weeks. They spoke often during study and joked comfortably with each other as they did so. They moved about the entire community with familiarity, authority, and confidence. They acted communally, discussing and celebrating Jewish life together, presenting the micro-community that they developed in Israel as a model that others could emulate. They came to be leaders in the Riverway Project, their responsibility consisting of their embodiment of behavior that Morrison wants to promote. Leadership

to Morrison, then, suggests being confident owners and managers of Judaism, the Riverway Project, and Temple Israel. It refers to a group deeply inside of the Riverway Project and Judaism, a group that will through their confidence inspire others to feel similarly.

At Soul Food Friday, Morrison called out to participants not to engage in the "*narishkeit*," to put their books down, to clap, to move, and to sing on their own. With the music of Yom Hadash in the background, Morrison creates almost a rock and roll concert with Jewish content. In his role as cheerleader he follows a rock concert norm: the bandleader or singer begins clapping, hands over his head, and the audience understands and obeys this command, universally clapping. Perhaps Morrison succeeds in motivating some participants to move because his constituents know this behavior and are accustomed to following along. Yet Soul Food Friday is not, of course, a concert, something that Morrison understands as he helps participants to delve into Jewish tradition as they create a *d'var Torah* and read the words of the liturgy together. A concert is frontal, but Morrison's encouragement of participants to be comfortable and to loosen up seems to stem from his desire to help them own this experience. He seems not to want to star in or to direct this show. Instead, participants should feel as though they can participate actively in this event; they should keep singing and clapping rather than disengage as soon as he stops asking. He challenges, if they can be self-assured in the sanctuary during Soul Food Friday, they can also be self-assured in other environments within the Riverway Project; if they can be self-assured anywhere in the Riverway Project, then they can, by extension, learn to be confident in their Jewishness in any setting.

Thus far, I have shared these ideas about Morrison's encouragement of participants' ownership of their Jewishness as I have seen them. I turn now to Morrison's own ideas about this concept and then to participants' words. Through these ideas, Morrison's goals become clearer as do participants' reactions to his encouragement. Through their ideas, their sometimes inability to respond to his commands gain nuance as they explain their comfort and their discomfort, their simultaneous appreciation of Morrison's efforts and resistance to living a Jewish life independent of his leadership.

## MORRISON'S GOAL: FIGHTING CONSUMERIST JUDAISM

Morrison begins explanations of the Riverway Project with an emphatic conceptualization of his constituents' attitudes toward their synagogue. "People see interaction with the synagogue as this 1950s thing … coming three times a year or dropping their kids off and not coming in," he suggests. Morrison believes that individuals come into the congregation thinking, "You provide such good service." They approach the congregation with the attitude of a consumer, one ready to receive a product created for them. But for Morrison, Judaism is neither a product to be consumed nor a celebration that someone else enacts for an individual; rather, one should craft actively and live for oneself one's own Jewish life. The question for a rabbi therefore becomes, he argues further, "How do you get people to buy in, and how do they see participation as more than just coming to stuff?" For Morrison, active participation seems to ask that participants deeply consider the encounter with Jewish life that they are experiencing and that they allow it to impact them. Active participation asks that they become co-shapers of what happens at the congregation and that they take Judaism outside of the synagogue,

creating experiences for themselves and their families and friends within their communities. Non-consumerist participants have a consistent Jewish commitment and act on that commitment regularly; they are leaders and "owners" of their personal Jewish experience. In Morrison's words, at home and in the synagogue, they become "producers of their own Jewish meaning."

### *A Grassroots Project: Using Relational Investigations*

Relational investigations, then, serve as the backbone of the Riverway Project. Introduced in Chapter Four, Morrison's relational investigations consist of an approach to conversation that focuses participants on questions of purpose and meaning. Relational investigations offer a "kind of careful, intensive… interaction with people around their ideas of Judaism and their approaches to Judaism and their lives in general." In these interactions, he and participants "have a kind of intensive conversation about – not just what they want, but what can we partner on, together." Morrison means by relational investigations that participants sit down together, with him or without him, and that they talk openly about their Jewish lives and their Jewish futures. They discuss topics that are often reserved for a rabbi's office; they also focus on what they can create together. Their conversations become part of a larger effort to "organize based on self-interest and common interest." Out of their time together, a plan for moving forward develops based fundamentally in who they are and what they want.

Morrison began the Riverway Project through relational conversations. He had an idea to revitalize urban Jewish life for Bostonians in their twenties and thirties, but it was conversations with possible constituents that shaped the activities that ultimately became

the Riverway Project's focus. In the beginning of the Riverway Project, Morrison met with constituents individually, in groups of two and three, and in house meetings of six or eight. They discussed a range of questions:

- How are you connected to Judaism?
- What negative experiences have you had in a synagogue? What are your negative associations with synagogues?
- What positive experiences have you had at a synagogue?
- If you were to make room for a Jewish component in your life, what might it be?
- What are the obstacles to your doing this?
- What is your perception of what is going on for Jewish adults in Boston?
- Have you explored becoming a member of a temple?
- Why do you choose not to become a member of a temple at this point in your life?
- What is your ideal Jewish community?
- If you had a space for Jewish activities, what would happen there?[11]

Morrison heard from participants a distrust of synagogues and synagogue life, of the size of synagogues, of rabbis, and of the wealth that synagogues seem to convey. At these meetings, they spoke together about what participants might want from Morrison, from a rabbi at their disposal; they asked him for social action, study, and worship opportunities. They wanted events in their neighborhoods, intimate opportunities to meet others who lived close-by. Their ideas evolved into Neighborhood Circle services and other Neighborhood events; they shaped Torah and Tonics and ultimately, they added other activities to the Riverway Project's agenda.[12] Morrison recognizes that he could have

[11] Morrison reconstructed these questions for the Hanukah/ "Riverway Project Turns Five" event (December 22, 2005).

[12] Torah and Tonics actually started prior to Morrison's coming to Temple Israel and was confirmed by constituents during these house meetings as something that they wanted. Temple Israel's low-cost membership for adults in their twenties and thirties also was already in place when Morrison held these conversations. As a result of the existence of the low-cost membership, as he explained, he could push the issue of wealth as a prohibitive cost for synagogue participation "off the table" during these conversations

created a program and just implemented it, assuming based on his own conjecture that it would work. "This model," he suggests, "is saying no, let's talk together about what works, what Judaism is. It's premised on relationship as opposed to premised on theory." Morrison began program with conversation.

The Riverway Project's additional activities have similarly come directly from constituents. Someone had not been to Israel since she was nineteen and she thought it would be interesting to go with her Riverway peers; Morrison created an Israel trip in response. Someone lamented the lack of engaging courses in basic Judaism that were truly at a beginner's level; Morrison created Mining for Meaning. A participant asked for a version of Soul Food Friday and it evolved. Participants have suggested one-time opportunities such as a *Tu B'Shvat*[13] wine tasting and other holiday events and they have occurred. Morrison refers to the origins of these events when with participants. They can see that he hears their ideas and that the Riverway Project develops out of their imaginations.

As the Riverway Project ages through its fifth year, Morrison continues to add to the calendar new events suggested by participants, the latest addition being a Riverway Project retreat, a study *Kallah*. Moreover, to check in again with participants, to continue to shape the Project according to what they want and to connect to new participants in the Project, in the winter of 2006 Morrison returned to holding house meetings, shaping again the foundational ideas of the Riverway Project with participants. As the Riverway Project grows in age and size, its fundamental philosophy seems not to change.

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by listening to participants but then making them aware of the low membership and then asking, "What else."

[13] The holiday of *Tu B'Shvat* is known as the new year for the trees. Related to the ancient agricultural economy, it is reinterpreted today as an environmental holiday.

As a result, Morrison intends, participants will become more involved in the Riverway Project's activities because they design them. In addition, as they implement their ideas, they will learn that they can produce their own Jewish meaning. Moreover, through this process Morrison hopes he will promote "a different way of thinking about things … hopefully … a sense of collaboration. And less of a sense of a kind of top down - rabbis know what's best for you - structure." He hopes that participants will see that Jewish life can be a shared activity and driven by them, their needs and their interests. Moreover, he hopes that they will begin to create their own activity without him at its center.

### *Reflections on Ownership*

Morrison consciously makes efforts to foster ownership, encouraging participation at Soul Food Friday, deliberately removing his voice from the classroom, testing means of facilitating independent learning, sharing leadership of the Riverway Project. These also are all experiments, efforts that he tries without knowing their outcome. In our interviews, we reflected on these strategies as they occurred, Morrison sharing his understanding of the events and their relative success. About the Soul Food Friday during which he asked for participants' suggestions, Morrison noted afterward that the initial fear that he shared with participants was for naught. He saw their suggestions as excellent, participants for the most part proposing ideas that he had not considered and that would be good additions to the Riverway Project. "I love thinking in that vein," he explained, thinking alongside them, together crafting their agenda. Moreover, it seemed that the night "reemphasized the goal of democratic participation, that we're building this

together." Yet, for Morrison, "ultimately," the issue is, "is this leadership development or not, and does this give you one new leader," do individuals continue to "lead… run something in their home…" and fulfill the definition of leadership that he had set before them: that they act as confident owners of the Riverway Project and of Judaism.

He notices, though, that "for some of those people that's not where they're at." Some participants, he observes, only slowly became more comfortable in the Riverway Project, ultimately participating more often and with greater conviction, hosting Neighborhood Circle events and eventually working on concrete projects like the Israel trip or Kallah. Others maintain their semi-frequent participation in the Riverway Project or their status as observers. In total, then, Morrison acknowledged, "There's still a ways to go in terms of ownership." Similarly, he questions occasionally, "Does it all circle around me?" He frequently considers his role as the Project's leader, wondering if the very structure of the project that puts him together with participants ultimately prevents them from taking true ownership of their Jewish life, if they come into Jewish life because of the Riverway Project but then come to depend on it for Jewish celebration. Ultimately, he suggested, because he emphasizes ownership so often, he affirms that the Riverway Project revolves "less" around him than it might. But, he noted, "There's more to go. I think. … Can we get people to care about each other? … To think at Soul Food Friday that they're part of an entire congregation? I don't know. So. It's a question." He sees the ownership that has been accomplished as only the beginning of the potential that exists. Morrison himself is not sure why that potential is not fulfilled or, truly, what would happen if he did withdraw from the project – that is, if they would "show up" without him. He sees, though, that participants seem to move back and forth between

reliance on him and independence, between needing him and not, between confidence and caution.

To understand more about this balance between reliance and independence, and to examine the extent to which ownership is even a relevant concept to participants, I next share interview data that reflects participants' reactions to ownership and to Morrison's encouragement of their involvement as leaders of the Riverway Project. It will become evident that ownership does have resonance for many participants and that they understand and appreciate Morrison's attempts in this area. At the same time, as I discuss at the close of this next section, as Morrison suspects, ownership is out of others' grasp. The stories of participants' Jewishness that I provide serve as a foundation for my eventual analysis of why participants have so much trouble becoming owners and producers of Jewish meaning, why, in Morrison's words, "for some of those people that's not where they're at."

## PARTICIPANTS AS OWNERS OF JEWISHNESS

In our interview, Mark described excitedly the first time he discovered a Jewish prayer experience that he found relevant and meaningful. He joined the Reform *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) prayer services at his Hillel in graduate school. Everyone sang together and sang vibrantly, and the prayer leader helped those unsure of the words to find their place on the page. Most significant to Mark, when it came time to read from the *Torah,* participants unrolled the scroll and stood along the room, all holding some part of the *Torah* in some way as they listened to its story being chanted directly from the scroll. Mark felt part of that prayer service in a way that he had never before felt part of prayer.

In touching the scroll as he heard its words, he could create his own connection – literally – to his tradition.

Many other participants told similar stories of such personal exploration of Judaism, describing the acts of writing their own prayers and blessings to include in worship services that they were to lead with their friends or wandering through the library to do research for a school paper on a Jewish topic of their choosing. Of their Jewish experiences, these opportunities to explore Judaism first-hand continue to mean the most to them. Participants also recalled moments when such direct investigation and connection were not offered to them, and they took exception to the lost opportunity.[14] These stories and their impact on participants' Jewishness suggest that participants' Jewish experience is most potent when their voice and ideas are part of it.

In their discussions of these memories, these Riverway Project participants also provide their definition of ownership of Judaism: Ownership refers to moments during which they can touch and create their own Jewish experiences and give input into Jewish organizational decisions or actions, thereby feeling part of those organizations. Moreover, it is when they feel that they can call Judaism or Jewishness truly theirs, when no one can challenge their relationship to Judaism, when they can consider it something that belongs wholly to them without qualification. The experiences of Mark and others support Morrison's emphasis in this area: Ownership is important to participants just as it is to Morrison.

[14] Participants made this particularly clear when critiquing existing Jewish communal organizations for the lack of opportunity to co-lead such organizations alongside "white-haired" board members.

### *"That's a Huge, Huge Gift":*

### *Participant Reactions to Opportunities to Lead*

Moreover, participants recognize and value the opportunities for ownership that Morrison offers. They appreciate that in the classroom, in one participant's words, students seem "comfortable saying what they want to say," truly free to raise questions and comments at any time. They also find meaningful that Morrison "seeks out the opportunity to learn from people that he's surrounded by" and that he acknowledges that he is learning alongside students.

Similarly, many hear Morrison's constant requests for input and co-leadership. Scott expressed his appreciation for the Riverway Project and for Morrison because of this attitude:

> It's like – you are who you are, come as you are, and we want you – and not only do we want you, we want to know what you want. I've heard Jeremy say that at least three times. In the dozen times or less that I've been there. That doesn't happen everywhere. … Other rabbis don't say – hey, you know what – this is a work in progress – how do we make it better. What do you want from us, from me. That's a huge, huge gift … he's really trying to meet his community …

Scott hears clearly from Morrison that they shape Jewish life together and that their Jewish life is "a work in progress." The Riverway Project, he senses, is not a didactic exercise of Morrison's but a collective effort of a community, and Scott, like others, values its collective aspect.

Participants explain that they also appreciate their chance to exercise leadership alongside Morrison. More specifically, for example, hosting *Shabbat* services serves as the exercise in leadership and ownership that Morrison hopes that it would. As hosts, participants find that a "space that they live in every day" becomes transformed, that their

"synagogue becomes [their] living room," in one participant's words. Hosting teaches them, in the words of another participant, that they "can do this… have Shabbat dinner, observe *Kiddush* and *Motzi*…" (blessings over wine and bread). This participant said, "Growing up not doing that, it was beautiful to do it and feel good about it." She was particularly struck by her opportunity to host a Shabbat dinner with her boyfriend (now husband). "To do it with someone I was forming a relationship with," she commented, helped her to know that they could do this on their own without the Riverway Project. Generally, having ritual facilitated in their living room makes it sharply clear to Riverway Project participants that they similarly can facilitate their own Jewish experience. Their living room can be a consecrated place through the Riverway Project and beyond it.

### *"This Isn't an Organic Movement"*

Toward the close of approximately one-third of my interviews with participants, when I asked if they had any general comments about the Riverway Project, my co-conversationalist would develop a slightly uneasy, hesitant squint of his eyes and would thoughtfully, carefully question Morrison's central role in the Riverway Project. No participant explained that he comes only for Morrison and no participant said that he would stop participating if Morrison were not there. Rather, some explained an observed tension between the significance of Morrison's leadership and his efforts to motivate and empower participants to join him in this task. They wondered if Morrison is too charismatic for them to become true owners of the Riverway Project or independent of him in creating their Jewish life.

Their comments can be encapsulated in an exchange between two participants. Amy began:

> It's always a kind of weird tension in something where there's kind of one person – this isn't an organic movement. This is Jeremy driven. And clearly, he's meeting a need or it wouldn't be successful, but how you bring along – this kind of tension between, when do people … in the community sort of take it on and make it what it is, and I think that, really Jeremy wants that, but at the same time, he's such a powerful, charismatic, knowledgeable leader – that kind of question about okay, when do we do that, and when is this interfering with the grand plan that's been drawn up – I think that's an interesting question. …

She asked her co-participant for her thoughts and Jane continued:

> …What it seems to me is that so many people are ready, are searching for is this desire to connect with a spiritual – seems so Hare Krishna like, but I think they want a teacher, and, especially when I feel like so many people my age or younger – I hear this so often: I don't know what I learned in religious school, I don't know enough to do any of this stuff, I'm not qualified, and so that then puts someone like Jeremy in that space…

These remarks give nuance to the challenges to Morrison's successful expression of his ideas of shared responsibility and leadership. As Amy commented, there exists an inherent tension in Morrison's goals and in the way the Riverway Project is designed. Morrison gave participants this endeavor. It did not begin with them originally, rather, it began with their ideas and with Morrison's initiative, and Morrison continues to implement their ideas with their guidance. It is not a true grassroots effort, a movement of the people that came directly from the people with no outside leadership. As Morrison works to encourage more grassroots participation, he works within a structure that is inherently leader-based and not community-based. Moreover, for some, it is not enough for Morrison to just ask for input and invite participants to take general responsibility for the Project. Some seem to continue to believe that there is a "grand plan," a direction in which Morrison is going, and they do not want to interrupt that plan by proposing their

ideas. As Jane suggested, some participants likely see Morrison as a compelling leader and want to follow such a leader, or they have a child-like understanding of Judaism, of its intellectual tradition and potential celebration, and they need a role model or guide in their exploration of Judaism. Morrison satisfies a void in their lives, and so some participants reject independence.

## OWNERS AND PRODUCERS OF JEWISH MEANING

This is the legitimate tension inherent in the Riverway Project. Whatever of Morrison's strategies to encourage ownership that I observed, it is also true – as he noted – that "there is a long way to go" regarding ownership and it may be similarly true that he will always be too charismatic to accomplish his goals. In the final sections of this chapter, I analyze the validity of these claims, beginning with the question of how ready participants are to produce independent Jewish meaning. Before turning to several theoretical frameworks to understand more about Morrison as a charismatic and limiting leader, I will look closely at the lives of several participants to understand more about what ownership looks like. When we examine the ideas and choices of Maya and Zoe, Elana and Noah, and Mark and Dena, we see what ownership can look like when lived, and we also see what limits some from truly owning their celebration of Judaism.

### *Maya and Zoe*

Maya and I met in a downtown Boston Starbucks on her last day of work. She and her partner, Zoe, were moving in the next weeks so that both she and Zoe could begin graduate school. I was glad to have this chance to interview Maya; she and Zoe had been

fixtures at Torah and Tonics, Soul Food Friday, and Temple Israel Friday night services for the previous year. Maya has curly brown hair cut close to her head and large brown eyes framed by an eyebrow piercing. Her relaxed khakis and running shoes seemed appropriate for the violence prevention non-profit for which she had been working for twelve months. As she fiddled with her empty coffee cup, she described the way that she and Zoe found the Riverway Project and how it has transformed their lives.

As she explained, religion during Maya's childhood was reduced to "Christmas, sort of Easter, but neither one of those were religious at all." Her family expressed distaste for piety; Maya, too, learned to avoid religious "belief," seeing it as a crutch for domineering leaders and acquiescent disciples. She explored religion academically, studying sociology and focusing on Buddhism and Judaism in college. When she met Zoe, she was comfortable with an academic, pluralistic approach to religion, seeing it as an intellectually rich arena even if not a personally inspiring one.

Maya noted that Zoe always saw Judaism as important, although when she and Maya began dating after college "she wasn't really practicing so much." That changed when Maya and Zoe began to see a new physician. Zoe and the doctor began chatting about all kinds of topics, and the doctor told them about her own synagogue, Temple Israel, the "Riverway Project and how open and wonderful the whole congregation is." She said to them, "'You should go check it out.'" At the same time, Maya explained, she and Zoe were evolving in their relationship and beginning to plan for religion in their home: "Zoe and I started talking more and more about spirituality and religion and all this sort of stuff and started to figure out that it was important to both of us." They obeyed their doctor, and the music and spirit of their first Temple Israel services excited

Maya and Zoe, even while the concept of religion still overwhelmed Maya. It seemed too much to her like blind obedience. But as they returned repeatedly, they realized that they saw the same people each week and they began to find a community of which they wanted to be a part.

When Zoe and Maya wanted to find someone to marry them, it seemed logical to turn to Morrison as their rabbi. New to Temple Israel, they were unsure that he would welcome them. Yet, Maya explained:

> We talked for a little bit, he asked us what our life was like growing up, and you know, the kind of standard religious stuff, me not being Jewish, he sort of said, well, is the door open. … And I was like, yeah, why not. Absolutely. And I hadn't given it that much thought cause I figured – it always seemed sort of inauthentic to me to sort of take on a religion. Even though I know it happens plenty of – it just felt like there needed to be some sort of in. Like an ambassador into the religion. And Zoe has turned out to be such an ambassador. But basically what Jeremy said was … for me to feel okay doing [the wedding], you need to be involved. Come to stuff.

With this invitation to be more involved both Zoe and Maya began to participate in a variety of learning opportunities within Temple Israel, "going to everything we could go to, especially Riverway stuff just cause it catered to our demographic." Maya described Zoe as being an "ambassador" into Judaism for her; Morrison also became a catalyst for their Jewish involvement as a couple. Maya and Zoe came to build their Boston life around their engagement with Temple Israel and with Jewish ritual and celebration, making *Shabbat* services and its observance and participation in Torah and Tonics priorities. Complementing their participation were pre-wedding conversations with Morrison that helped them reflect on what they were experiencing. In Maya's words, these new experiences made it "increasingly important to both Zoe and myself to truly live a Jewish life."

This realization, coupled with Maya and Zoe's imminent move to a university town that has only a few synagogues, prompted their continual and deliberate consideration of the Jewish life that they wanted to build together. They began to make concentrated efforts to develop "creative ways to retain the routines we've set up for ourselves since we're moving away from Temple Israel and the Riverway Project in particular." She described their conversations this way:

> In Boston, it's easy. We can walk ten minutes into Brookline and find ourselves surrounded by things Jewish. As we talked about our impending move to a very un-Jewish area, we began to realize how important it was to both of us to become more deeply Jewish in terms of ritual practice. Small things like becoming obsessed with buying *Shabbat* candlesticks and a *havdalah* set because we know that Zoe's … schedule might make it hard to get to services. We've talked about my conversion... in part for myself and in part to be sure that any children we might raise are raised in a Jewish context.

In addition to adopting *Shabbat* rituals, Zoe and Maya were considering "ways to incorporate some of the laws of *kashrut* in a way that's not all consuming or oppressive but still feels authentic." Their visits to their new town to look for an apartment have included a search for a synagogue and a meeting with a potential rabbi. Maya hopes to continue her conversion study with him, and while he did not exude the same "energy and excitement" that she senses in Morrison, she feels confident that they "will find a niche in that community."

Summarizing the impact of her involvement in the Riverway Project, Maya commented, "Judaism has become a central part of my life with Zoe." They both want that life to continue and plan to do all in their power to make a Jewish life for themselves. In Judaism, Maya explained, she found "acceptance and belonging," a way to believe in and learn about God, a celebration of values important to her, and a ritual and holiday structure for her life. She emphasized:

> In some ways, I can't believe that I'm leaving all of this for a new life … But I am excited to bring everything I've learned and the person I've become [to my new town]. I'm excited to find ways to make Judaism my own and to experience Judaism in another context.

Maya understands her sense of her self to be changed fundamentally to include now a commitment to Judaism. She feels prepared and also eager to seek the additional resources that she and her partner will need to launch that Jewish celebration, to exercise her new Jewish commitment, to "make Judaism [her] own."

### *Elana and Noah*

Elana, Noah, and I met in their top-floor apartment in Boston. I came into their book-filled living room as their two year old was finishing dinner in the attached open kitchen. Elana and Noah took turns with her bath and bedtime rituals as we conducted the interview, sharing their childhood Jewish experiences separately and then discussing together the Jewish life that they are making as adults.

Both of Elana's parents were children of Holocaust survivors and were raised in traditional Jewish homes in a tight-knit European Jewish community in Manhattan. Elana's father's profession took their family to a small New England town. There they joined a synagogue; Elana went to Hebrew school until her bat mitzvah and then ran from the synagogue to go skiing on the weekends. When Elana was a child, her parents kept a kosher home, although their practice lapsed as they aged. Elana remembers that her mother always seemed to be wishing for greater religious observance but her father had hated his own religious upbringing and did not want to repeat it for his children.

Noah was raised in a large Reform congregation in a medium sized Jewish community. He describes his Hebrew school education as "not meaningful" and his

synagogue experience as empty. Still, he remembers "feeling Jewish," perhaps in part from his family's weekly Shabbat experience, a "happy, meaningful memory." Most Fridays his family would "do dinner, light candles, *kiddush* and *motzi*," and a grandparent would lead an abbreviated prayer service from an "old-school Union Prayer Book."[15] Friends, even non-Jewish friends, would come for the celebration on Friday nights. Noah had a similarly significant Jewish experience in high school, when a friend's father ran a Talmud study group for him and his peers. "That was fabulous," and led to Noah's exploration of another local synagogue, one that was sincere and spirited. He continued his Jewish exploration through a college class. He liked what he learned and feels that he has always been interested in Jewish learning to some degree.

Elana and Noah met in college. In their ten years together they traveled up and down the east coast and around the world before they settled in Boston. While each unconsciously had a strong collection of Jewish friends, neither of them was "on track" to marry a Jew, as Elana described it, and neither of them had prioritized involvement in Jewish community during high school or college. When they moved to Boston they were envisioning that they would soon have children. They wanted to establish some sort of Jewish community for themselves so that they could give their child a Jewish experience. While they both thought that the synagogue that they would find in Boston would be as stale as were their childhood experiences, they looked for it anyway, out of inheritance, memory, or obligation. When friends brought them to the Riverway Project they found genuine prayer experiences, an opportunity to study Judaism critically and in an interesting way, and like-minded peers. Noah extended his learning experience through

[15] The *Union Prayer Book* is the prayer book used by the Reform movement in different incarnations for much of the twentieth century.

Temple Israel, enrolling in a weekly class in Jewish history and helping to plan a study *Kallah* (retreat).

When their daughter was born, Elana and Noah created a naming ceremony for her with Morrison's assistance. It became an opportunity for them to reflect on and integrate their ideas about what Judaism and specifically about what ritual means to them. Elana explained how that integration occurred:

> Noah definitely took this position that it's about covenant … in whatever way you take covenant to mean, but you know, in this specific way, God made this promise and we have this obligation to fulfill … and that's what he wanted to write as to why we were doing this and we were fulfilling that promise, and I definitely wanted to write more (laughs) it's a time to celebrate with your family and that's your tradition of being surrounded by people that you love and we make meaningful moments out of ritual and sort of what's important. And we sort of wrote a little combination of both, or even kind of came to the idea that sort of, part of the idea of covenant is itself sort of maintaining these family connections…

For Noah, then, perhaps as a result of his adult study or perhaps since his childhood, part of being Jewish has come to mean that he is part of a larger communal contract and that he has a responsibility and opportunity to be part of this contract. For Elana, ritual is purely a way of understanding and commemorating big moments in life. She added later that she connects to Jewish ritual because she is Jewish, but that this is more an accident of birth than anything else. To some extent, had she been born into another culture or religion, she suggested that she would use that culture or religion in the same way as she uses Judaism: to mark time and create family memories.

In our interview, both Elana and Noah discussed their adding of more Jewish ritual to their lives and home. Elana had always thought that when she became an adult she would have a kosher home. Somehow, though, that grown up moment came and

went, and she realized that her imagined understanding of what she might want when she was older was not going to happen. She explained:

> I used to think it was one of those things that when you became an adult, you did, like, you kept kosher. And then I kind of just realized that was never gonna happen – when was I gonna start. And honestly, also I think it was tied up in the fact that in our first apartment, you couldn't even fit one set of dishes, so with space considerations, there was no way we were gonna keep kosher. … You know, you don't keep kosher in your dorm room, or like, you could, but I didn't keep kosher in my dorm room, and it just kinda like … I used to have this idealized idea of what was my childhood like, and then you somehow move into this married apartment and your life is more like, formal or whatever, organized, and it was just sort of like – well when, when am I gonna just like, stop eating shellfish, when am I gonna just, arbitrarily – it just seemed too arbitrary.

Elana sees her unrealistic ideas about her adulthood as a part of life, as "one of those things." She said, you always think to yourself:

> This is how in my mind life is going to change when I'm married. Well, this is in my mind how life is going to change when I have a kid. … Like, you think growing up, I'm gonna raise my kids such that Jewish holidays and Jewish identity's important to them and then it's like, well, we live a pretty much secular life in a lot of ways, so how do you make that a reality in a way that seems meaningful and is not arbitrary, you know, like, okay, tonight we're gonna start x, or whatever.

Elana seems to need some sort of "impetus," she later called it, a push or even permission or the suggestion that adopting ritual can be deliberate, logical, and also unanticipated. In her mind, it seems impossible to shift an ostensibly nonreligious lifestyle to one that includes a greater role for ritual. It simply seems too "arbitrary," out of context.

Noah feels not that adopting ritual is arbitrary but that it is too foreign. Even before coming to Boston and having their daughter, he suggested, he "wanted something more" than the Jewish life that he had but felt "self-conscious" and he "wasn't quite sure" how to access that life. He explained, "Whenever you start some new ritual or practice – it feels like going through somebody else's motions….". His self-consciousness amounts

to his also wanting permission, in this case, the validation that this can be part of his life no matter how foreign it initially feels. Until he experiences that permission, it feels "funny to stand there with Elana and do it."

The individual but related discomfort of Elana and Noah stagnates the role that Judaism plays in their home. They come to synagogue or to Riverway Project Neighborhood Circle events and observe holidays when they can, but the expansion of ritual in their home or their greater synagogue involvement remains elusive.

### *Contrasting Images of Ownership*

Each of these individuals lives a rich Jewish life founded in Judaism's importance to them. Yet, Maya and Zoe are pursuing their ideas of what Judaism means to them. They have adopted ritual participation, sought out and engaged in numerous learning opportunities, and upon moving to a new community, are mapping out together the Jewish communal and home life that they want. They have begun to make decisions themselves, literally becoming producers of their own Jewish meaning. Rather than only letting things happen to them, participating in classes and services but never making their own celebrations, they are determining proactively how they will construct a Jewish life for themselves, one that happens in their home and at their initiation. Maya and Zoe provide an understanding of the nature of ownership, the actions or ideas or behaviors that comprise this intangible concept. As they present it, ownership consists of confidence, a vision for more, motivation and action, and independence. It suggests moving determinedly into a life that they wanted.

Maya and Zoe seem to feel none of the uncertainty that Elana and Noah experience. Indeed, Elana and Noah have unfulfilled images of the role that Judaism could play in their home due to the doubts that they feel about adopting greater ritual into their lives, whether that ritual is a weekly celebration such as the observance of *Havdallah* or the ongoing practice of *kashrut.* Elana and Noah met serendipitously; their mutual Jewishness is an alleged accident. Still, they, together, have created Jewish experiences for their family even while they have interests in a greater Jewish life that they do not pursue. Unlike Maya and Zoe, Elana and Noah feel reluctant to implement what they imagine, feeling it too random in relation to their "secular" lives.

Mere confidence, the feeling that one is able to do this, is a great component in enabling the development of independent Jewish meaning. This suggests that Morrison is right in his assertion that "for some people, it's not where they're at." Some simply do not have the confidence to move into Jewish celebration. Indeed, countless additional Riverway Project participants join Elana and Noah in their tentativeness and inaction; participants' very stoicism at Soul Food Friday demonstrates their overall hesitancy in owning Jewish celebration, and the hundreds of Riverway Project participants who move in and out of activities, frequenting them weekly even without joining the synagogue or becoming a Riverway Project leader, similarly complement Elana and Noah.

At the same time, Maya and Zoe, too, are joined by others who have become independent producers of Jewish meaning. Approximately a year after Dena began participating in Torah and Tonics she began to look for a place to become an adult *bat*

*mitzvah*, to read from the Torah for the first time.[16] She regretted not having this experience as a child and wanted to develop the skills in Hebrew reading and chanting necessary to read from the Torah. She successfully found a place to hold a service and after meeting at least weekly with multiple teachers and even more often in the weeks just prior to the event, at her *bat mitzvah* she proudly led most of the prayers in the service, delivered a *d'var Torah,* and chanted several parts of that week's *Torah* portion. Similarly, as another participant, Oliver, began to participate in the Riverway Project, he also began to consider his personal ideas of God. Wanting more opportunities to experience prayer than the Riverway Project offers, Oliver began to frequent Temple Israel prayer services during the week and on Saturday mornings. He has involved himself and his family in other, more traditional prayer communities in his neighborhood as well. He rarely expresses frustration with the high level of Hebrew and Jewish literacy present in these other prayer communities, Hebrew that is beyond his capacity. Rather, he seems to be seeking this traditional Jewish experience, and he compartmentalizes any discomfort he feels in favor of this opportunity to celebrate and to learn. If he feels insecure in his Jewish exploration, he does not show it, and he does not let it deter him in his exploration. In a third example, similarly wanting more regular local prayer opportunities, several Cambridge/ Somerville participants decided to spearhead a weekly *Shabbat* service that would travel throughout living rooms in the Greater Boston area. The service expanded its email list rapidly and has held regular Friday night prayer services in various neighborhoods, incorporating the Riverway Project calendar into its own when possible. During its first months, the service's leaders worked hard to make

[16] For documentation of the importance of the adult *bat mitzvah* in helping women to feel part of Jewish community and tradition, see Beth Cousens, *Adult Bat Mitzvah as Entrée into Jewish Life for North American Jewish Women* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Hadassah Brandeis Institute, 2002).

decisions about ritual and to craft a service that would meet the needs of its evolving group. From their own volition, they lead their own prayer experience. And so, Dena, Oliver, and these Cambridge/ Somerville participants each exemplify ownership in some form.

None of these participants had a means of celebrating Judaism in a personally meaningful way prior to their participation in the Riverway Project. It seems, then, that the Riverway Project has effectively transformed the lives of some, helping participants to feel differently about owning Judaism and helping them to take responsibility for their own Jewish lives. It also seems that the process of building producers of independent Jewish meaning is not linear. Even with their hesitancy, Elana and Noah are each involved in Jewish community and they create Jewish meaning for themselves at different points; Elana and Noah teach their daughter about *Shabbat* and the small family traveled to Israel together. Neither of them is a "non-owner," so to speak, of Jewish life. But they do have a timidity, an uncertainty, about Jewish celebration that Maya and Zoe, Dena, Oliver, and others seem to lack or that does not stop these others from action. Generating such confident owners and directors of their own Jewishness is not inevitable, then; such action is not guaranteed. Confidence and independent action are possible but not certain.

## A COMMUNITY ORGANIZED AROUND JUDAISM

"Stop the music for a second – let me hear you," Morrison invites – or demands – during Soul Food Friday. He frequently appeals to participants in this way as part of his larger attempt to help participants become both at home in the Riverway Project and with

Judaism. As related in this chapter, his own language gives my observations of his behavior a framework: He attempts to share leadership of the Riverway Project in order to help participants become producers of their own Jewish meaning, confident owners and directors of their Jewish experience. He wants participants to drive their Jewish life rather than allow Judaism merely to happen to them. In his framework, participants should lead themselves, teach themselves, and take responsibility for their celebration.

Morrison's efforts to promote such ownership are much greater than his encouragement of participants to relax during Soul Food Friday. He began the Riverway Project with house meetings, an exercise in Morrison's relational investigations, an opportunity to interact with Riverway Project constituents about what they want from Jewish life. As a result of these conversations, the Riverway Project grew not from Morrison's ideas of what participants wanted but from the desires of its audience. It continues based on participant ideas; the new opportunities that have been developed, the Israel trip and *kallah* (retreat), have been generated and planned by participants. Participants suggest such projects and also shape their activities; they serve on committees that plan large-scale Riverway Project events and host *Shabbat* services and dinners. Finally, as demonstrated by those on the Israel trip, true leaders in the Riverway Project behave as confident owners of Judaism and of the Riverway Project. In Morrison's view, a leader is someone who contributes to the Project as well as someone who exhibits the kind of comfort and control over Jewish life that he hopes that all participants will adopt. When this leadership develops, it is visible: As I witnessed, the Israel trip came to play an important role in the Riverway Project as the strong center of

the social network, with participants exuding confidence in their place in their new Jewish community.

Many participants whom I interviewed appreciate Morrison's efforts. Some want to become directors of their own Jewish lives. They recognize that some of the occasions that the Riverway Project offers them to do this – such as hosting events – help them to be more confident in this role. Through many of these opportunities, participants such as Maya, Zoe, Dena, and Oliver have come to be actively seek out and shape their Jewish experiences.

For some participants, becoming their own teachers and guides is more complicated. As Amy and Jane point out, this could stem from Morrison's "powerful, charismatic, knowledgeable personality." Or, they continue, it could be embedded in the structure of the Riverway Project itself. The project may be too leader-driven to facilitate participants' Jewish independence. It is, in fact, not a grassroots effort; it began with its constituents' ideas but not out of their own volition. Moreover, Morrison maintains its existence. It is not evident at all that its activities would continue, its communities maintaining themselves, were he to disappear. In addition, Morrison's efforts to avoid the Project's reliance on its leader may be too subtle for some to recognize – or, the idea that they could be confident in their Jewishness is beyond their capacity to understand. Finally, as Elana and Noah demonstrate, the transition to ownership is not smooth and it fluctuates; participants can be engaged in Jewish life and can want more from their celebration of Judaism without being prepared to lead themselves in this celebration, and participants can enter willingly into some beliefs or activities without comfortably adopting others. Some are hesitant and self-conscious about performing Jewish behaviors

independent of a community and rabbi or similar leader. As Morrison suspected, for some, ownership is “not where they’re at.”

These various aspects of the Riverway Project as a charisma-driven social network gain clarity when explored from within several theoretical frameworks. To test the descriptions of Morrison as a charismatic leader, I explore normative ideas of such leadership from the theories of Max Weber and Eugene Borowitz. Each demonstrates that Morrison does not, in fact, exhibit all of the characteristics of a traditional charismatic leader. Moreover, these theories show, Morrison frequently withdraws from his role as leader, thereby helping some participants to develop cognitive habits and emotional comforts through which they independently develop their own Jewish celebrations. At the same time, all participants do not achieve this independence.

Using the ideas of theologian Sharon Daloz Parks, I then establish participants’ lack of readiness as a natural part of the project of young adulthood. Literally, Parks’ ideas make clear that as Morrison described, some are not “at” this state of ownership, not prepared developmentally to move to relying on themselves as a spiritual or religious guide. Their teacher and their social network remain necessary for their continual Jewish growth. As a result, participants push Morrison toward exerting authority as their leader; they push him toward using a sort of charisma.

Finally, through the theories of rabbi and scholar Edwin H. Friedman, I demonstrate that Morrison, in fact, moves back and forth across a continuum, from authority to empowerment, as participants need him and then let him go. Ultimately, as I illustrate, this is not a community built around the charisma of one. Morrison does not hold this network together. Instead, participants bring him in when they need him and

push him away when they do not, and they come together ultimately not because of him but because of what they offer each other: their interest in Judaism and their desire to determine what it means to them. Judaism itself, and not Morrison or participants, acts as the glue that binds this network together.

### *Charisma and Contraction (*Tzimtzum*)*

Weber developed his model of charismatic leadership from his larger questions about the role and nature of religion. His concept refers originally to the prophet, to one who accesses the metaphysical and brings this magic to the masses. This prophet, in Weber's original formation, was one who identifies and seizes a natural break in social order. The leader's new, incomparable, and exciting vision fills that break, speaking to those who previously suffered. A charismatic leader is not elected but touches each of his followers individually. It is through the totality of his vision, personality, and personal contact with followers that followers come to adhere closely to his principles and decrees.[17]

As Weber suggests of charismatic leaders, Morrison has recognized and addressed a break in the American Jewish social order, that of the detachment from Jewish life of adults in their twenties and thirties. By not only arguing for but also facilitating a vibrant Jewish existence for this population, before they need a rabbi for a marriage ceremony and before they have children who require a Jewish education, he has

[17] HH Gerth and C Wright Mills eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 52-55, 245-251; Talcott Parsons, "Introduction," in *Sociology of Religion* by Max Weber (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1963), xxxiii-xxxiv, 2-3, 46-47. As Saul Kelner aptly demonstrates, Weberian ideas of charisma are not restricted to those claiming a transcendent connection. Weber extended his ideas of the importance of charisma in leadership as he continued his analysis of the role of economics in society. In exploring the relevance of charisma to the Israel travel of college students and young adults, Kelner found that it alone generally did not induce acquiescence to the educational goals of the Israel experience. Saul Kelner, *Almost Pilgrims: Authenticity, Identity, and the Extra-Ordinary on a Jewish Tour of Israel* (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2002), 427 ff.

established a change in the way that Jewish emerging adults can potentially engage with Judaism. Moreover, as Weber described, he builds a community through personal contact and inspiration: at Soul Food Friday, for example, Morrison is magnetic, easily holding the audience's attention as he moves and meditates to the music, and he is personable, individually greeting many participants as the service begins.

Yet, his is not a distinct vision of Jewish life, one that only he could have developed. It intends to turn participants not to something unique but to classic ideas, to core tenets of Judaism, to study and to community. Nor is it magical or transcendent, reliant on him for delivery and interpretation. It is intended to be a shared and accessible vision, to be comprised of the participants' very ideas. To that end, as discussed earlier, Morrison continually nurtures ideas of joint responsibility, deliberately reducing his role so as to build a jointly led project. When at Soul Food Friday Morrison sacrifices time typically devoted to the rabbi's ideas, the *d'var Torah,* to give central stage to participants, he expresses his commitment to the idea that his voice must not be at their project's center. In the classroom and throughout his interactions with participants, Morrison narrows his personality and ideas to ask participants, "But what do *you* think?"

When he does this, he suggests that a strong communal leader or teacher can reduce his role, creating room around him for his audience members to come to their own conclusions and to teach themselves and each other. In his commitment to this idea, he has been influenced by Eugene Borowitz's encouragement of educational leaders practicing the divine concept of *tzimtzum,* or contraction.[18] Borowitz himself borrows this concept from Isaac Luria, the fifteenth century scholar and father of this school of

[18] "'*Tzimtzum*:' A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership," in *What We Know About Jewish Education,* ed..Stuart Kelman (California: Torah Aura, 1992).

*kabbalistic* thought. Borowitz quotes Luria, suggesting that traditionally, objects of God's creation existed only in order to fill God's will.[19] Creation was an act of God extending itself, Borowitz explains, and since God only created by expanding or giving of itself, no creations ever had independence from God.[20] No truly independent beings existed. [21] Simply, in response to this problem, Borowitz continues, Luria suggests that an omni-present God must have needed to contract before creating the world in order to make space for that which was being created. This act of God's contraction allowed the very existence of beings in addition to God, beings that are independent in action and thought. This was an act of *tzimtzum.*[22] In quoting Luria, Borowitz gives to God's creatures full dignity and direction in their lives. In this framework, Borowitz suggests, creatures do not exist in mirror image or complete extension of God. Rather, they have space to be themselves.[23]

Borowitz presents this analysis not as a commentary on Luria's ideas but because human understandings of God shed light on human interactions. "Statements about God are, in fact, projections of our sense of what it means to be a person," he writes.[24] With that in mind, Borowitz applies the concept of *tzimtzum* to the problem of a leader's misuse of power at the expense of the dignity and independence of others. By definition, leaders "radiate power." Many of them enter a space and fill it with their influence and their ideas. In the Lurianic model, a leader contracts as a first step of leadership; as she comes into a space, she shrinks her power rather than fills that space with it.[25] A leader

[19] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 336
[20] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 334-5
[21] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 334
[22] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 335
[23] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 336
[24] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 332
[25] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,*337

who practices *tzimtzum* measures her ego, stepping in sometimes, stepping back at others, keeping as a goal her students' growth on their terms and not on her terms.[26] That students can and should not merely be replications of their teachers but come into their own as thinking beings is the implication of *tzimtzum.*

Specifically, Borowitz describes the challenge of the teacher of Judaism in this way:

> Normally [teachers and clergy] are so busy doing things for us that they leave us little opportunity to do things on our own and thus find some personal independence. Both talk too much – so much so, that when they stop talking for a moment and ask for questions or honest comments, we don't believe them. We know if we stay quiet for a moment they will start talking again…. they will have to prove to us by a rigorous practice of *tzimtzum* that they really want us to be persons in our own right.[27]

This conscious use of silence and expectation is exactly Morrison's practice. When he demands questions and himself remains silent, waiting for questions and comments, Morrison refuses to let students escape their opportunity to share their thoughts aloud. He continually demands contributions and then pauses for the response, the repetition of request, pause, request, and pause throughout the evening making it clear that he means this request. When he demands their voices and ideas, he gives students exactly "the opportunity to do things on [their] own." Students and participants come to learn that they can grasp with Morrison the opportunity to find "some personal independence." When he insists on student participation, when he follows their ideas in the classroom, he contracts himself. His ideas are not the ones to be shared and studied; rather, his task is to solicit students' ideas and to guide students in forming their own conclusions.

[26] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,*338
[27] Borowitz, *Tzimtzum,* 338

As a result, as Morrison intends, some students have learned in the Riverway Project to produce their own Jewish meaning. Dena, for example, pursued her *bat mitzvah* independent from Morrison. She conceived of its design, deciding on her own the kind of prayer service she wanted and the different skills she wanted to learn. She found a teacher who would guide her in studying earning the different prayers and *Torah* cantillation. She explored the *Torah* portion with Morrison but then crafted a *d'var Torah* independent from him, finding her own meaning in the portion. She could do this because she learned with Morrison how to cultivate her own ideas about Judaism, about its practice and its content. Moreover, from Morrison's style, because he contracts his personality when he teaches, she learned that she should cultivate her own ideas. She was inspired by his ideas but not limited to Jewish life as he conceives of or celebrates it. As she worked on her own, she could respond to his imagined demand for "questions, comments, thoughts?" because she had heard it so many times. The paradigm she knew for *Torah* study was one that revolved around her ideas and not necessarily those of her teacher. It was Morrison's *tzimtzum* that facilitated her independent thought and actions.

Yet, as I have suggested, Dena is in the minority. Greater numbers of participants, like Elana and Noah, have ideas about their Jewish lives that they do not advance. The self-consciousness of Elana and Noah can be explained not through ideas of charismatic leadership but by theologian Sharon Daloz Parks, who demonstrates that participants' reliance on Morrison and on their community to help them generate Jewish meaning relates less to Morrison and much more to their own evolving position in emerging adulthood.

## *Ethno-Religious Uncertainty*

Riverway Project participants come to the Riverway Project – to Morrison, Temple Israel, and to each other – seeking meaning, looking to answer their big questions about life, wanting to construct a workable ethno-religious identity that responds to their questions about the world and that uses the resources of their Jewish heritage. Parks understands this search for meaning and purpose as the development of faith, faith being the human act of making meaning.[28] While faith development is a life task, Parks explains that becoming ready to generate such meaning independently is the developmental project of emerging (young, in her language) adulthood. She draws from theological studies and developmental psychology to construct a multi-dimensional framework for understanding how such sense develops throughout a person's lifetime (Figure 4.1).

In Parks' framework, the first plane of faith development, that of "forms of knowing," suggests ideas of human agency and autonomy that refer to how one recognizes personal truth. The second plane of faith development, that of "forms of dependence," makes explicit how individuals rely on resources during faith development. Parks' framework follows faith development as it can occur throughout one's lifetime, from adolescence to mature adulthood. At the same time, Parks does not promise that each of us finds our way through these stages at our appropriate stages of life – or even ever. Particularly without being encouraged to progress, we may remain in conventional ideas of meaning making, in our adolescent or young adult ideas. Faith development,

[28] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), xi. While Parks uses the Christian language of faith development, she convincingly argues that this endeavor of making meaning that she calls faith is a universal endeavor.

then, is not a guarantee but a question. It represents, in fact, Morrison's central question: will Riverway Project participants be forever reliant on others to help them identify and produce Jewish meaning? Or, can each step that they take in their Jewish involvement move them farther toward independent Jewish meaning-making? Parks' framework, then, provides a scaffold for Morrison's work, a map for the path that participants might take. A full examination of Figure 4.1, beginning in its top left box, explains this more clearly.

Chart 6.1
Developing Ownership: Transitioning from External to Internal Authority[29]

| | *Adolescent/ Conventional* | | | *Young Adult* | | *Tested Adult* | | **Mature Adult** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Forms of Knowing* | **AUTHORITY-BOUND** | **UNQUALIFIED RELATIVISM** | → | **PROBING COMMITMENT** | → | **TESTED COMMITMENT** | → | **CONVICTIONAL COMMITMENT** |
| | Subscription to one idea/ set of ideas from one authority | Subscription to multiple ideas but all ideas are equal in weight | | Exploration of different ideas, recognition that one might be "right" | | Commitment to ideas is explored and becomes firm | | Confidence in beliefs; readiness to open self to dialogue about those beliefs |
| *Forms of Dependence* | **DEPENDENT/ COUNTER-DEPENDENT** | | → | **FRAGILE INNER DEPENDENCE** | → | **CONFIDENT INNER DEPENDENCE** | → | **INTER-DEPENDENCE** |
| | Dependence on one authority/ conflict with that one authority without choosing another | | | Recognition of self as authority; belief in self as this authority falters easily | | Full comfort with and reliance on self as authority | | Awareness that beliefs will be stronger for dialogue and self will still be valid if it undergoes change |

[29] Constructed using Parks, *Big Questions,* 53-87. A third part of Parks' framework relates to a subject's interaction with community and his capacity to learn from others. It is helpful generally but not relevant to this discussion and so I have not included it when outlining Parks' work. For further information, see Parks, *Big Questions,* Chapter 6 and particularly 88.

In adolescence, an individual is authority-bound in her knowing. Authority is external; others dictate one's sense of self and one's identity. Moreover, one is wrapped up in her specific perspective and cannot see outside of it. She is authority bound. But as an individual's exposure to different ideas in the world grows, she comes to see that she has multiple options for belief and behavior and that she can change. She begins to see other families as existing differently from hers, other parents as making decisions different than her own, other friends finding different paths, and she wonders if these others suggest more advantageous principles than do her own. Then, when an adolescent recognizes that one authority does not hold all truth, she enters counterdependence. She sees other options and is ready to push against her source of authority, even while she does not yet know how to create a new reality outside of her authority source. In this period all options are relative – and therefore, each is acceptable.

In adolescence, an individual struggles to maintain this unqualified relativism; How to understand, for example, true evil, or even merely opinions and options not grounded in careful ideas? How can one believe even in her own ideas, when those are theoretically no more acceptable than any others? This relativism cannot last, and so from this place, Parks suggests that an individual recognizes that she must ordain some ideas as correct in order to develop a workable system of faith. For this reason, as she transitions to adulthood, she begins with caution to try on various commitments and to take initial personal responsibility for knowing. She is "inner-dependent," finally able to use herself as an authority, directing herself in choosing and obtaining ideas and ways of knowing. Yet, even while she explores self-derived ideas of possibility, she continues to look for others to exert authority over her sense of right and wrong, to give her material

to consider. It is in this stage that adults walk into organized Jewish communities looking for something, for celebration, ritual, learning, community, or meaning. They come anew to synagogues, rabbis or other Jewish leaders, cultural events, or grassroots Jewish communities, prepared – however tentatively – to solicit ideas from and to trust authorities not known during their adolescence. They explore, or probe, commitments. This early inner-dependence begins as quite fragile. Full of promise, it requires mentors and teachers for support. If a person falls in her exploration, she may unlearn her confidence in her sense of self as authority.

As an individual ages out of young adulthood and into adulthood, she begins to accept what she has tested. She makes decisions using what she has learned and takes on as certain her own ideas and values. She has a confident inner-dependence and sees herself as a full source of authority and her teacher as another authority, another option, one of many options and many teachers. In adulthood, these commitments fit comfortably and an individual exercises them with ease and without concern. Eventually, in the adoption of convictional commitments in mature adulthood, an individual understands that her commitments can change at anytime with new information. She enters a period of interdependence, secure enough in her ideas and her sense of self as authority to know that she can be open to change even while she simultaneously believes wholeheartedly in her ideas. Indeed, she recognizes that she needs to interact with others to develop faith, that it is in dialogue that her convictions develop in rich and productive ways. Moreover, she needs no external authority to motivate or approve of her change. She is completely self-directed in her values and meaning making system.

Morrison's attempts at ownership are located in the movement between young and tested adulthood. Individuals come to the Riverway Project as they recognize that their childhood understanding of Judaism is not their only option for Jewish celebration. They imagine that they, not their parents or their childhood rabbi, can direct their exploration of Judaism. They explore actively, experimenting with many different options. But they are not yet ready to serve as their sole Jewish authority, as the only source of validation of their behavior. Some behaviors they adopt with excitement; others they explore hesitantly or they repeatedly need permission in order to take them on. Moreover, their confidence in their new decisions about their Jewish life can easily dissipate if they run into obstacles, and so they shift back and forth, needing and re-needing Morrison's support.

The portrait offered of Maya and Zoe suggests that they are in tested adulthood. They are prepared to direct their own Jewish journeys, to identify resources and take on new ideas or behaviors needing no one's approval. Elana and Noah seem still in young adulthood, continuing to test their commitments. They are prepared for some new commitments: they created a baby naming ceremony for their daughter, they chose a synagogue and have become regular participants in that synagogue community, they taught their daughter about Shabbat, and Noah enrolled in a variety of Jewish learning opportunities. They have considered other commitments – *kashrut* and *Havdallah* – but are not necessarily prepared to add more to their lives. Most significantly, they feel self-conscious adding some commitments to their Jewish celebration without someone else's guidance. They are not ready to live their Jewish lives by themselves.

Elana and Noah continually shift and grow in their commitments. Similarly, their peers in the Riverway Project are on individual journeys of Jewish growth, seeking the resources that will help them become more than what they are. The greatest significance of Parks' framework is that it establishes forward movement as a key principle of faith development. The research on the Riverway Project shared here suggests that individuals, in fact, move to and from young adulthood and tested adulthood; individuals can and do develop and become wed to new commitments even while they are not ready for others.

### *Charisma and Consensus*

In the Riverway Project, some of this movement can be explained by a push-pull that takes place between Morrison and participants. Morrison wants participants to develop themselves as their own faith authorities, but they remain experimenting, amidst the middle stages of faith development. They push Morrison toward charisma, while he pushes participants away.

The work of Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman explains this movement. Leadership styles, Friedman suggests, often exist on a continuum that extends from charisma at one end to consensus at the other. Friedman understands charisma according to its colloquial use: It refers to an energetic and, more importantly, a mesmeric personality that captivates followers. In Friedman's characterization, the charismatic leader produces dramatic results, creating transformation in individuals or in an organization. Followers become emotionally dependent on their charismatic leader and strive to live in her image or obey her every request. But this is an extreme, one end of a continuum; at the other end, the consensus approach dictates that nothing happens without the will of the entire

group. A leader in this circumstance serves as a facilitator, soliciting opinions of group members and helping them to communicate with each other as all co-lead their group together.

A true consensus model moves remarkably slowly, as members of any group rarely agree with ease on any action. As a result, Friedman suggests, most leaders do not occupy continually the consensus end or the charisma end of this continuum but instead move between the two roles, never situating their approach at any one point all the time. This movement makes it evident that a leader can be charismatic without enveloping the personalities of his followers. He can use charisma to inspire transformation and then move from the captivating end of the continuum toward the empowering end, ensuring that followers also have an opportunity to express their own ideas.[30]

Friedman developed these ideas out of an application of family systems theory to synagogue life.[31] When understanding the role of the leader through family systems theory, according to Friedman, the leader as part of the whole system must be recognized. The leader and system, or family, are viewed as interdependent, as driving each other's behavior concurrently and unpredictably. Changes in the leader's role result from the

[30] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guildford Press, 1985), 224-227.

[31] Friedman suggests family process theory as consisting of five basic elements. The "identified patient" refers to the idea that the "family member" presenting a crisis is not in crisis, but is the member of the system in whom the family's problem is manifesting. The family, then, is the unit of treatment as the identified patient's problem is one of the entire family and not only the family member. "Homeostasis" refers to the idea that a set of relationships tends to maintain the balance that these relationships have found. Family process theory suggests that when a crisis in a family arises an imbalance in these relationships is the cause. In family process theory, "differentiation of self" reminds members of a family that each individual must still be aware of her own goals and the individual influences on her existence. A scale of differentiation measures the extent to which individuals are interrelated or self-dependent in a variety of behaviors. The "extended family field" emphasizes the network of relationships and influences that impacts the family. Finally, the "emotional triangle" suggests that two elements of a system that sense instability in the system will turn on the third element for blame or resolution of the instability. These components, Friedman argues, are meant to help to analyze organizational dysfunction. Together, these components promote an understanding of the organization as a family and within a larger family. Friedman, *Generation,*19-39

alternating reliance on and independence from the leader of the family, or the community.[32] Most significantly, even when the family is independent from the leader, the leader is part of the system. All "function as part of one another;" the leader and family always take their cues from each other.[33] As a result, the leader's behavior is understood through the shifting of cues that he receives from his community.

Viewing the Riverway Project through this interpretation of family systems theory makes it clear that Morrison and his followers respond to cues that they take from each other. Through the efforts described in this chapter, Morrison spends time at the consensus end of the continuum and pushes participants to be there, and he moves toward charisma because his followers push him there, because in veiled and obvious ways, they demand that Morrison exert strong leadership. When he does ask them to perform rituals for their community, for example, they have trouble with the opportunity. In Chapter Four, a participant was seen laughing nervously when asked to light the *Shabbat* candles, asking for guidance as he fumbled in his memory for the ritual. Others laugh similarly at times when asked to lead *Kiddush* over the wine or to light and bless the candles; they anxiously share a tune from their childhood, knowing that it is not quite a tune that their community can follow, unsure of how to handle the situation. Sometimes, when Morrison asks for a member of the community to lead a blessing, he receives continued silence. Yet, he always asks, always offers. His stance during study does not change; it is consistently based on his request for "Questions, comments, anything." He pushes participants when he moves the Riverway Project toward consensus or toward their

[32] Friedman, *Generation,* 228-229
[33] Friedman, *Generation,* 228

involvement. As participants respond to him with their hesitance, they ensure that Morrison cannot move too far away from charisma.

### *Judaism as the Organizing Principle*

In a sense, then, Morrison is not too powerful for participants to shine, as I questioned earlier; rather, participants are not ready to shine. Morrison relies on charisma to motivate them, but he does so because participants ask him to lead them in the powerful Jewish life that they build together. This is the paradox of emerging adulthood. Parks demonstrates that ownership of Jewishness – independent production of Jewish meaning – is a developmental milestone. But it is still elusive as, along the way, emerging adults need a charismatic leader and mentor, one who gives them resources with which to experiment and moves them only very slowly into readiness for a truly confident inner dependence. Participants rely on Morrison's energy and confidence and he responds by offering them a vibrant, leader-oriented celebration of Jewish life. They embrace this model of Judaism because they need it as a source of ideas and inspiration as they probe and determine their tested commitments. Before they can act independently, they require a strong leader and a compelling vision of Jewish life. When they have seen this vision they can come to emulate and alter it to their own liking.

Despite the fact that participants move Morrison toward charisma, their community does not revolve only or even primarily around Morrison. This is made evident when participants come to *Shabbat* dinners organized by the Riverway Project but without Morrison; it is even more evident by the absence of participants' suggestions that they take part in the Riverway Project community only because of Morrison.

Participants claim instead that they engage in the Riverway Project because of the Jewish experience it offers. Ultimately, then, the lure of the Project is not contained within Morrison. He shapes it, but, as Friedman argues, leader and participants construct their community together, in complete inter-dependence, reacting to the signals that each sends the other. The creativity and vitality of the Riverway Project are found not in Morrison's lone voice but in the exchange between him and participants about Jewish texts and in the collective melodies that they make during prayer.

The final distinguishing aspect of the role of charisma in the Riverway Project, then, evolves out of the synergy of the involvement of Morrison and participants in their project, the co-building of a Jewish life that they find relevant. The concept of the Project itself draws followers in; they become devoted not to Morrison but to Judaism and to their mutual celebration. Their community is organized not around Morrison but around Judaism itself. Their mutual creation of Jewish life holds them together.

Typically, social networks are constructed according to one of three principles: they are built around one individual, they are built within the boundaries of a community – a school, for example, or a sorority – or they are built with unclear boundaries but around a concept or common practice. This last type of network, the "open-system," is the most diffuse and hard to come together as a concrete network.[34] Yet, the Riverway Project is this last type of network. It has truly open boundaries, as membership is not required and individuals move in and out. At the same time, it is a tight and substantial network, with recognized norms of participation and some deeply entrenched in a core, making decisions together about the kind of community they will exercise collectively. It

[34] Charles Kadushin. "Basic Network Concepts," in "Introduction to Social Network Theory" (unpublished manuscript, 2003), 4.

brings people together around a common interest or practice, that of celebrating Judaism in a way that includes the opportunity to discuss their individual expressions of Jewishness, to explore authentic Jewish observance, and to engage in Jewish study as an exercise in critical thinking. Even while Morrison's charisma is present in the Riverway Project, then, it does not hold the social network that is the Riverway Project together. Instead, it is present when participants demand it, and when Morrison steps away, the traces of his inspiration linger for participants to adapt as they wish. They become ready to create for themselves using the resources that they gain from their network, and they can create for themselves because Morrison can let them go to explore their tradition as they define it together.

# CONCLUSION

## UNDERSTANDING JEWISH SOCIAL NETWORKS

Well after my six months of fieldwork had concluded, and even into the writing of this dissertation, I joined the Riverway Project for its first *kallah,* a weekend retreat over *Shabbat* meant for study, rest, friendship and collective Jewish celebration. Noah, Elana, Dena, Ben, Mark, Harleigh, Dan, Carin, Jordana, and others whom I had met during the course of this research were all there, as were some who were newer to the Riverway Project. The themes that I had witnessed for years – authenticity, community, critical thinking, and ownership – wove together palpably over the two days. Participants themselves suggested the very idea for the retreat. A committee of Riverway Project participants planned the retreat with Morrison. They then embarked on their work together by studying *Torah*, and their idea of the retreat became fundamentally rooted in their collective conclusions about the texts. During the retreat, the discussions that occurred touched on themes they had found in the *Torah* portion. They mentioned the act of their studying together repeatedly, and on Saturday morning, they led participants in an exploration of what they had found during their study.

On Saturday night, the lights were dimmed for the *havdallah* ceremony (the ritual ending the Sabbath), the darkness of the room making brighter the multi-wicked candle that is part of the ceremony. Sitting in a circle, participants said the blessings over wine, fire, and spices, and then Morrison suggested:

> This is a time to share – is God in your life, when, or not, and what about commandedness. Earlier in the day, we had a conversation about what we think God is. Now, I hope we can be more personal with each other.

A slow drum beat and the soft sounds of a guitar followed his words, and we sang a line from the *havdallah* liturgy about joy and light, "*l'Yehudim haytah orah ve'simcha*."[1] When we finished singing, participants began to share their ideas about God and ritual. They asked: Do *mitzvot,* commandments, restrict my behavior or do they enhance it? Can I follow *mitzvot* without believing in a God that commanded their observance? What does it mean to believe? Participants affirmed moments in which they find something called God: in relationships, on their wedding days, when they hold hands with partners. A few participants described finding God in the tension and beauty of human relationships. Some acknowledged that they struggle with these ideas. Others told stories of loss and hope after tragedy. Close to the end of the conversation, after about three-fourths of the room had spoken, a few participants commented that they felt God in that room together.[2]

During the conversation, I was the most struck by how much of a community this group seemed. It felt as though the themes of the Riverway Project that I had observed – close-knit community and intimacy, finding depth in Judaism through text study, and participant leadership or ownership of the Jewish experience – wove together in these

[1] Meaning, for the Jews, there was light and happiness. The piece is originally from the Book of Esther and is repeated as part of the *havdallah* ceremony, the ceremony that separates *Shabbat* symbolically from the rest of the week.
[2] I made field notes during the weekend and particularly focused my notes on this Saturday night discussion. I am paraphrasing here using my field notes.

short thirty-six hours powerfully and also seamlessly. By Saturday night, retreat participants were intertwined enough to refer to each other's points frequently, noting as they shared, "Jeff taught me this morning" and making other, similar comments that showed the extent to which they had learned from each other. They frequently made themselves vulnerable, sharing truly personal ideas and the essence of the Jewish concepts with which they were grappling.

At the same time, the uneven or uncertain parts of the Riverway Project that I witnessed also emerged. Some participants wondered if the Saturday night sharing was a part of a genuine community. If such sharing is so occasional as to be restricted to retreats, they asked, is this vulnerability part of real relationships? Or can participants be vulnerable precisely because they see each other so infrequently?

On Sunday morning, we concluded the event with small-group brainstorming about the Riverway Project and about how to strengthen it. Participants asked questions similar to those that I have asked here about the leadership of the Riverway Project, wondering:

- What does it mean to be a leader in the Riverway Project? Do we feel like we have access to our potential roles?
- Do we have enough opportunities here to talk about God? If we talked about God more, would we lose participation?
- Do we have enough knowledge [among participants] in the Riverway Project? Should we have access to more, somehow? How can we learn more?
- How can we relate to Riverway prayer if we do not relate to the liturgy – or if we do not know the liturgy?

In their questions, participants were speaking about the extent to which they are still negotiating this community's (informal) membership boundaries and its substance. To a great extent, they were wondering aloud what they want from their Jewish community and also wondering if they can be the leaders that Morrison demands. In their comments, they revealed that joining this social network is complicated for them and that its substance continues to raise challenges for them as do its membership tasks of investment and ownership.

In this dissertation, I have presented a portrait of a complex endeavor called Jewish growth, particularly focusing on the development of Jewish social capital as a tool of growth. In the Riverway Project, participants are given voice to tell their own stories. They struggle together with their collective Jewish observance and celebration. They find support in each other; they also validate each other and work together, simply, to figure things out. They develop the confidence that they need in order to move forward in the development of their personal Jewish expressions and commitments – and they also stand still, not always successful.

Despite their challenges, and possibly contrary to the ideas of some researchers,[3] these adults in their twenties and thirties are building something profoundly Jewish together. To conclude, I summarize here the themes of this dissertation: 1) how through their development of Jewish social capital participants' Jewishness grows, 2) ideas of authentic expressions of Jewishness, of community, of critical thinking, and of participant ownership of Jewish celebration, 3) the growth of a new social network, and 4) the power that Jewish social networks hold for both the folk and elite of this population.

[3] I am referring, for example, to ideas related in Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007) as summarized in Chapter One.

## National Context: The Jewish Elite

Spend a few minutes on the Internet with Jewish adults in their twenties and thirties. Start with www.jewcy.com to explore "what matters now" to adults in their twenties and thirties, all with a Jewish twist. Read about "The (Vegan, Kosher) Spy Who Loved Me," a story of the couple who went undercover with PETA to expose immoralities and animal abuse at a significant kosher food operation. Read about "Gay Pride, Jewish Hope," ask, "Is God a Republican?" and then explore the other blogs and journals that Jewcy virtually recommends. Find www.zeek.net, a sort of Jewish *New Yorker*. Blend boundaries: Go to the *New York Times*, to www.gawker.com, a foundational snarky blog for the younger generation, or to www.jewschool.com, a blog of a similar nature for the younger generation interested in Jewishness. At Jew School, read about Jewish anti-Zionism from an "anti-imperialist American" who works for a mainstream Jewish organization. From there, follow a link to the Union for Reform Judaism's web site to see its demand for "more Shabbat, more Dialogue," or to Brooklyn Jews, an independent religious community in which "participants take the lead in social programming, Shabbat celebration, social action projects, and Jewish learning." These are just some of the choose-your-own-adventures offered by these blogs and web-zines, adventures that offer dozens of possibilities for editorial commentary or even intellectual and spiritual exploration and community with just a few clicks.[4]

Scholars have issued exclamations of crisis and even seeming desperation over the participation in religious institutions of adults in their twenties and thirties. Some

[4] Websites referenced but not given include www.urj.org and www.brooklynjews.org. All web sites accessed on July 3, 2008. Temim Fruchter, who wrote about anti-Zionism, works for UJA Federation of New York.

have demonstrated successfully that such participation has decreased continually over the past eighty years by each generation.[5] Others predicted, using empirical evidence, that as time since immigration to America increased, abandonment altogether of ethno-religious identity would become more likely.[6] One recent study describes a current "crisis in the transmission of memory, practice, and tradition to the next generation."[7] It is easy to observe the absence of adults in their twenties and thirties in American congregations, to see the similar absence of inter-generational transmission of religious commitment, and to conclude that this generation is religiously and ethnically apathetic. Yet, as that brief moment of internet-surfing illustrates, this generation is not apathetic and not entirely absent. Adults in their twenties and thirties are simply changing the ethno-religious playing field.

For many Americans, and not only those in their twenties and thirties, expressions of religion and ethnicity generally have indeed changed since time of immigration. Such expressions are more representative of personal choice and trends in social capital than of holistic systems of loyalties or beliefs. Americans, and particularly white Americans, make choices about their ethno-religious identities using factors like physiognomy (if they look the part), trends (if the ethnicity or religion is popular), and ease of celebration. They lift their religious and ethnic celebrations from the context in which they once were

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[5] See particularly Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers,* and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[6] For much of the twentieth century, scholars of American ethnicity predicted that ethnicity would cease to be a helpful identification in American society and that ethnic celebration would dissolve. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship began to shift as ethnicity refused to dissolve, instead becoming an aspect of social capital that advanced American ethnics. See Mary C. Waters's *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990) for a helpful overview of this scholarship.

[7] Tobin Belzer, Richard Flory, Brie Loskota, and Nadia Roumani. "Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identity in the Next Generation." In *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, edited by James L. Heft (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 103.

located and observe them symbolically, connecting to their identity briefly and using a single celebration to stand for their larger identity.[8] Adults in their twenties and thirties, in the self-focused and exploratory life-stage of emerging adulthood, are particularly individualistic in their orientation to their identity. They frequently shed their community of birth and obligation of childhood, exploring ideologies at random and using inner motivations as the arbiter of their decisions.[9]

These shifts in meaning, motivation, and expression, however, do not constitute abandonment of ethnicity and religion. Instead, even in this context, ethnic expressions and many religious communities are flourishing, in places and settings unexpected and possibly surprising. The web sites referenced earlier are just one manifestation of this trend. In American Judaism, these projects have been developed by Jewish "creatives," Jewish adults now in their twenties and thirties who experienced productive and powerful Jewish educational experiences during their childhoods and teen years. Having come of age in an entrepreneurial culture, they are turning their knowledge and talents to American Judaism, acting on their commitment to Jewish exploration and celebration not by joining an existing community but by creating their own communities. As described in Chapter Two, Jeremy Cowan and Sarah Lefton, for example, represent individuals who have benefitted from rich Jewish opportunities in youth group and Israel trips; they exercise their Jewish commitment and knowledge by producing "He'Brew" beer and "Yo

[8] Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Culture in America" *Ethnic and Racial Studies 2,* (January, 1979): 1-20; Waters, *Ethnic Options*; Joanne Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems,* Vol 41: No 1 (February, 1994): 152-176.

[9] These descriptors also capture the attitudes of adults older than those in their twenties and thirties. It has been argued that those in emerging adulthood practice such individualism with abandon, some returning to the communities of their childhoods when they settle into their occupations and families. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Lee Arnett Jensen, "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research,* Vol 17 No 5 (September 2002): 451-467.

Semite!" t-shirts. Jewish creatives have started religious communities – deliberately not self-defined as synagogues – like Ikar (Los Angeles), the Mission Minyan (San Francisco), and Hadar (New York). Others have launched magazines – *Heeb* and *Zeek* – and created films and record labels and music, each of which allows producers and consumers alike to grapple with what it means to be a Jew in the twenty-first century.

These projects have a variety of characteristics in common. They are rooted in this cohort's Generation X outlook and specifically in an antipathy toward formal institutional membership. They have little trust for institutions and want to examine any commitments that they take on instead of accepting truth and commitments from previous generations. They appreciate a direct experience that can lead them to a tradition that they choose rather than inherit, to an ethno-religious attachment that is well-examined and open for their interpretation. They do not need to join an organization formally in order to participate. Instead, they want to move in and out of engagement, exploring Jewish ideas but on their own terms. They look for high Jewish content and low boundaries, for an opportunity to develop a Jewishness that works for them and is on their terms.

These projects make evident several additional characteristics of the Jewishness of this generation. First, the projects put Jewish content into public spaces and intertwine universal and Jewish ideas. They offer opportunities to challenge assumptions about historic Jewish concepts, to think critically about Jewish tradition. They revolve around community, the idea that those who engage in the projects are connecting to something larger than themselves, and that this connection is intrinsically human and valuable. Finally, they are self-led; participants make decisions, act on them, and have the opportunity to do for themselves.

They also define the Jewish elite in this generation. Liebman understood the elite as creating and subscribing to any of the coherent ideologies that made up American Judaism.[10] Most often, the elite were rabbis, leaders of religious movements and of synagogues. They preached a creed and practiced that creed, partially out of general Jewish commitment, and also because they knew and believed in the creed itself. Today, as I suggest, the elite continue to be those with commitment and with knowledge. Having received the best of what American Judaism has to offer, in the form of educational and synagogue experiences and the friendship networks that came with those experiences, the elite have taken their dedication to Jewish life and their knowledge and are building American Judaism. Many continue in the guise that Liebman identified, as rabbis and organizational leaders. Many others, as described in Chapter Two, have broken the traditional boundaries of Jewish life to create new paradigms of Jewish leadership. They are starting their own organizations, applying their talents to cultural media, and, still, are influencing what American Jews believe. The elite are those with knowledge of Jewish history and tradition and of other Jews, who feel comfortable in any or many Jewish communities, and who have confidence in their Jewishness and motivation to act. They are, in short, those with Jewish social capital.

They are leading a variety of projects for this generation, but they are not the only ones in the rooms. That is, many in the back of the rooms of Hadar and Ikar and the Mission Minyan, many who come late and sing quietly or not at all, those who are wearing t-shirts with Jewish slogans rather than creating them, they may be the Jewish folk of this population. They are the less knowledgeable, those without Jewish social

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[10] Charles Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," in *American Jewish Year Book 71*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Jewish Publication Society, 1970); also outlined in Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Jewish Publication Society, 1973).

capital who are hesitantly testing different Jewish environments. While there is still much to be learned about the folk – including what can be generalized safely about who they are and what they believe and practice – for the most part, Riverway Project participants join this cohort of Jewish folk and give us an initial understanding of their backgrounds and motivations.

## RIVERWAY PROJECT PARTICIPANTS: THE JEWISH FOLK

At first glance, many Riverway Project participants in this study seem to have a variety of Jewish connections. They spent several years in Jewish educational programs, in Sunday School and Hebrew School. Most celebrated their *bar* or *bat mitzvah* as well as holidays with families. These experiences, however, led to little retention for them of Jewish tradition and history and only some warm memories of Jewish life. Moreover, these memories and their little knowledge were overshadowed by a variety of more influential events: their lack of experiences with Jewish youth groups and camps that mean that they know few Jews their age, their families' choices that moved them away from close-knit Jewish communities, their encounters with Jewish community that help them to feel excluded, and their families' apathy toward Jewish communal participation and tradition. They remember most strongly this rejection and apathy, their parents' cessation of Passover *seders* and their leaving Jewish educational programs at the celebration of their *bar* or *bat mitzvahs*, their parents' disinterest in even their once-a-year synagogue attendance. Their parents had little understanding of the role that Judaism played in their lives and as a result, Riverway Project participants had few or no opportunities to consider the same while they were children.

As emerging adults, they similarly have no idea what Judaism means to them. They have maintained their little knowledge of other Jews and of how to blend into Jewish communities. For some of them, they still feel intimidated by some of their experiences from childhood, having felt snubbed then for not understanding the norms of a Jewish community in which they were participating. And yet, they are curious about Jewish life. They experiment with participation in different Jewish communities, in college and beyond, and with their little sense of the role that Judaism can play in their lives and low confidence, many continue to feel snubbed and as though they have little idea of the procedures of the communities in which they find themselves.

The folk are those with little understanding of what Judaism means to them, who have participated in few experiences constructed by the elite, and with little retained knowledge of Jewish tradition and history. They collect Jewish street knowledge, the tidbits of Jewish culture and tradition that migrate into popular culture, celebrations of holidays on television and in movies and Yiddish used in the American vernacular. Their folk religion consists just of this Jewish street knowledge and sometimes of High Holiday participation, focused around the same confused and somewhat empty involvement of their parents. They have little Jewish social capital: They say the wrong thing, they stand and sit at the wrong times, or they do not know when to bow. The Hebrew sounds muddled to them; the movement looks like acrobatics. They “feel rejected and lost” when they try a new Jewish community, overwhelmed and awkward when they see stacks of prayer-books. In total, American Judaism feels like a language that they do not speak.

## The Process of Jewish Growth

The Riverway Project represents an effort to move some members of this folk population from their current levels of Jewish social capital to having knowledge and a personally relevant sense of Jewishness. In this dissertation, I traced a process of Jewish growth, which I defined as developing new ways of thinking about Judaism, new habits of mind. Through participation in the Riverway Project, many participants learn to make their own Jewish meaning, putting Jewish tradition and history at the center of the way that they interact with their world. Many of them begin to draw their own conclusions about the relevance of Jewish tradition to them. As they do, Jewish celebration and community come to be central to lives. They learn to think about Judaism – or, as I note in Chapter Five, to wonder at Judaism, to get inside of the tradition and not just consider thoughts of others but invent their own ideas. This intellectual exercise comes also to be at the center of their celebration. They can make meaning of Judaism because they have a sense of a personally relevant Jewishness, a sense that is rooted in a passionate intellectual examination of Jewish tradition.

Many participants' Jewish growth continued after this study concluded, as did the development of the Riverway Project itself. Under Morrison's leadership, Boston's Meah program, a weekly class on Jewish history and law, began at Temple Israel specifically for this population.[11] For the first time at Temple Israel, about twenty adults in their twenties and thirties, twenty Riverway Project participants, came together consistently,

[11] Launched in 1994, Meah is a Jewish educational program for adults. It asks that participants attend a weekly class for two years, learning biblical, rabbinic, pre-modern and modern Jewish history. The classes are synagogue-based, making a Temple Israel/ Riverway Project sponsored class a natural part of the larger initiative.

weekly, working toward 100 hours of Jewish study and immersing themselves in the Jewish narrative.

In another initiative, Noah, Mark, and others, all musicians, began to learn how to lead prayer services with Morrison, moving from the chords of classical guitar or rock and roll to the Jewish liturgy. Morrison also began to study more intensively with some participants and to prepare them to lead text studies with their peers. He engaged in both projects in an effort to transition out of leading every Neighborhood Project prayer service and to ask participants themselves to lead the service fully. As represented by these initiatives, the Riverway Project is actively considering its ideas of leadership, Morrison and others wondering if the existing definition of leadership is sufficient for its goals. Morrison continues to experiment with different models of shared leadership and to push participants further into ownership.

In addition, those in this study have developed interconnections that exist outside of the Riverway Project. They are each other's Jewish community. When someone sees a Jewish movie playing at a local theater, she calls a friend from the Riverway Project. Some decide to hold a *Shabbat* meal independent of the Riverway Project and invite the Jews that they know, those from the Riverway Project. Participants have their own version of *Shabbat* in restaurants, going to do dinner regularly after Neighborhood Circle services and after Soul Food Friday. They have lived through life-cycle events together – marriages and child-births – and they come together for these events. They are not just part of each other's Jewish lives, they are part of each other's Jewish meaning.

## FOUR HALLMARKS OF GROWTH IN THE RIVERWAY PROJECT

As I outline in the bulk of this dissertation, their Jewish growth occurs through four hallmarks: when participants join an intimately constructed social network, when that network respects its members' particular Jewish commitments and universal values, when that network offers members an opportunity to think critically about Jewish tradition and to examine assumptions about the potential that Jewish life holds, and when participants are empowered to manage their own Jewish involvement.

Riverway Project participants have been impacted deeply by the diverse American social networks to which they belong. Many are skeptical of religion and the religious; they see religion as mandating communalism and as leading to fanaticism. They prioritize multiculturalism as a value over their own particular identity, seeing as normative their own multiple or integrated identities (inherited from parents with multiple ethnicities or from non-Jewish parents) and also valuing their friends' and acquaintances' identities, refusing to segregate themselves from others because of their Jewishness.

Yet, while they say they do not want to be too religious, too ethnic, or too closed-minded, their particular identity, their Jewishness, does hold import for them. They feel Jewish in the very essence of their senses of themselves. Their families, their memories, and their ancestral histories give them a visceral connection to something amorphous called Jewishness. As emerging adults, they are seeking a sense of home, and it seems natural to look in Jewish spaces for a place to belong.

In this sense of home, their Jewish expressions become a negotiation and also a celebration of tension, the melding of cultures and ideas, arguing about Israel and talking

synagogue politics over shellfish at a restaurant on a Friday night, squirming in a pulpit seat but continually being present for prayer. Their ongoing negotiation, when it is successful, is what participants call authenticity, or the feeling that their expressions of Jewishness and their other values and identities are consistent.

Participants come to the Riverway Project looking deliberately for a group of people with whom to ask their questions about religion, ethnicity, belonging, ritual, and tradition. They recognize that their burning questions about their tradition are not questions that they can answer alone, that they need the ideas of others to stimulate, challenge, and support their own thinking. Moreover, they come to the Riverway Project because community is almost the essence of their Jewishness. They connect to Judaism exactly in order to connect to the communities of their past, to the Jewish people generally and to their own ancestors, and to connect to communities of their present, to Jews around the world and to their friends and family.

Morrison's work in the Riverway Project, then, begins with community development, which is founded on communal prayer that involves discrete songs that are easy to follow, is in Hebrew so that participants feel immersed in their past, and has opportunities to sing only "la la" to the melody, giving ways to engage to those who do not know the words. There are English readings and moments of silence, something for all in the room. To support participants, Morrison sings with certainty. Others in the room can build their own participation around his, using his voice as an anchor. In the certainty of his voice, they cannot hear the confusion in their own voices. They can sing loudly and experiment safely, and if they make mistakes as they experiment with Hebrew, they hear only the strong sound of the group. They come with little social capital and are hesitant in

their participation, bowing cautiously or standing staidly, and in the safety of a group they test this behavior together. Many come to be comfortable with prayer, to enjoy it, and to participate more actively over time.

Participants additionally find a group to which they can belong because Morrison does what he can to build connections among participants in groups of any size. Even in the large sanctuary, Morrison goes from participant to participant, introducing some to the larger community, noting where one person works and introducing him to others who work there, shouting their commonalities across the cavernous space. He makes the experience of gathering an experience of community less anonymous and more intertwined. In his actions, he also demonstrates a kind of attention to others that asks participants to meet each other, even if they came to the synagogue already with friends. He continues to model that behavior when he focuses the group on big questions, asking them why they are part of this community, why they care about Jewish life, where they are going in their explorations of Judaism. To know each other truly, he suggests, is to relate to each other on issues that matter to them deeply, to get beyond the superficial to their reasons for being part of the Riverway Project.

Ultimately, in their being open with each other, in their relying on each other as they stumble through prayer and share their deepest questions about tradition, direction, and meaning, they move from personal fear to finding a place in their larger whole. They “peace out,” as Jordana explains, and they achieve catharsis in the spiritual experience that the Riverway Project offers. They find safety and grounding in each other. Prayer becomes an exercise of any or all of these, some finding a sense of God in their collective voice and their inter-relationships. Their community becomes, literally, sacred.

From their place in the larger whole, they learn from each other and their experimentation. Community becomes classroom and curriculum, the substance of what they are learning and the opportunity to learn from the ideas and experiences of each other. They reflect out loud about their insecurities, about doing these things for the first time and in their non-religious social networks, and they find validation of and support for their choices and they come to peace with these choices. The experience of doing things for the first time together is what helps participants shift social networks. They become comfortable in this new community of like-minded individuals who are embarking on the same project; they become each other's teachers, secure in their mutual uncertainty and motivated by each other's curiosity.

Community is therefore more than classroom and curriculum. Their social network provides the process of Jewish celebration and also the product, the social capital that they need to move forward in Jewish life. Participants develop confidence in their participation in Jewish community and a sense of the kind of participation that is salient to them personally.

At the same time that participants are experimenting with the Riverway Project, they are entering into romantic relationships, deciding on life partners, and starting families. Their families become important tools for entering Jewish community. On the way home from Riverway Project events, couples greatly appreciate the chance to reflect on what they just experienced and at any time, partners give each other the chance to work out their questions about Judaism together. They find support in each other as they experiment with ritual in the homes that they build together. Similarly, children give parents a reason to enter Jewish social networks and put parents in a space equal to any

other parents. They have something in common with others in the synagogue nursery school. Despite their low Jewish social capital, they have normative capital as parents, and they can use that capital to build relationships with others and then, through those relationships, find a Jewish community in which they feel at home. In many ways, families are mini-social networks, giving social capital – confidence, the opportunity to learn, and resources with which to trade for additional capital – to their members. Families give motivation to participants to engage in Jewish life, but they give much more than that as well.

The social network that Morrison builds in the Riverway Project succeeds because it follows the intellectual norms of participants' more universal social networks. Participants suggest that they appreciate the Riverway Project because it follows a "critical approach." They explain that they will reject a Jewish practice that does not involve the opportunity to examine their assumptions and to ask questions without inhibitions about Judaism, Jewish tradition, or Jewish practice.

With an outlook on Jewish engagement similar to participants, Morrison wants to help participants embrace the complexity of this engagement, to find "joy in the questions," in his words. He deliberately creates or exposes questions and layers within their community in order to make Judaism more challenging for participants, wanting participants to find Judaism engaging expressly because it is intellectually enriching. Most Riverway Project opportunities focus on text, demonstrating to participants that Jewish life can be an intellectual exercise. Study is fun, comfortable and also tense, energetic and energizing. Study centers on a focal question, a "big question," a question of import to participants' lives, one about moral behavior or responsibilities, one that is

an important part of sorting out life as an emerging adult. In exploring that focal question, participants follow a series of texts, the texts creating a multifaceted approach to the topic, students seeing that Jewish texts often present one idea in multiple ways and that the idea changes over time. Morrison brings in the text's original language, the Hebrew giving to the text more than students originally see in the English translation. Students focus on the text in its context, considering the writers' political motivations or the milieu in which the text was shaped, the context focusing students on the meaning of the text given its historical construction, and also on the complexities of truth and narrative.

As they study, Morrison demands students' questions. Their study consists of these questions themselves and not resolution of the questions. Through their questions, Morrison seeks to make study a problematic exercise, challenging students to see that their Jewish tradition has room for them to rail against assumptions, to examine a tradition that they thought to be dogmatic or rigid. As Morrison refuses to let one interpretation of the text be the authoritative interpretation, students have opportunity to see Jewish texts as intricate, the Jewish tradition as full of questions without resolution, and Judaism as engaging and relevant to their lives. They understand that they can approach Jewish life and Jewish tradition critically, by asking questions and examining assumptions.

As participants come to develop their own ideas about Jewish tradition, their own conclusions about the text, they hold on to their ideas closely because the ideas are their own. They take on intellectual identities as Jews, finding a way to be involved in the Jewish intellectual tradition without necessarily practicing obedience to Jewish teachings. They become critical thinkers about Judaism, considering what they have thought to be

true, challenging assumptions, and identifying the interpretation in which they find personal meaning. In this process, they think about Judaism and also learn how to think about Judaism; they develop habits of mind that shape not only what they know about Judaism but also how they know Judaism and how they can think about it in the future. They celebrate the discrepancies in their tradition that they find, they value their Jewish celebration more because it upholds these discrepancies and complexities, and, most significantly, they are able to find a home in a Jewish social network because they can exercise the critical thinking that they prize.

With a paradigm of Jewish growth, Morrison wants not only to help participants celebrate their Jewishness but also to manage their own Jewishness. He understands his peers typically to see the synagogue as a "Sunoco station" at which they stop to fill themselves passively with a taste of something Jewish and then leave to go about their everyday lives. He intends that they move to directing Jewish life at the synagogue, in their homes, and with each other, that they see the synagogue and Jewish life as things over which they have control. This asks for a degree of what he calls ownership over their Jewishness, which, I suggest, involves Jewish social capital and, specifically, confidence in their senses of themselves as Jews.

Morrison carefully structures and leads the Riverway Project to promote or help participants develop a sense of ownership. He pushes participants to be comfortable in Jewish spaces, understanding that if they can be relaxed in synagogue, in prayer, they will feel like themselves in these Jewish spaces and the essence of the space will become an integrated part of them. At Soul Food Friday, clapping overhead and calling to participants to "free [them]selves," he almost demands that participants be at home and

that they physically involve themselves in prayer. He experiments with independent learning: At Soul Food Friday, 300 pray-ers discuss the *Torah* portion in pairs and then share their ideas out loud, Morrison facilitating their sharing of their reflections, never giving his own commentary. Participants meet during Torah and Tonics in small groups or in *hevruta* (paired) conversations without him. They move in Mining for Meaning from being a class led by Morrison to being an ongoing learning group that is stimulated by Morrison but not dependent on him for leadership, a group that motivates and rewards itself. Whenever they study together, Morrison contracts his personality, co-leading conversations with texts, necessitating participants' engagement. Study consists of students' ideas. It gives participants space to consider the texts, access the material directly, and internalize their own ideas. These snapshots of teaching and learning are images of what is possible when a teacher performs *tzimtzum* (contraction), when she teaches, as Morrison suggests, not to pull her own intellectual rabbits out of hats, shocking students with her brilliance, but to help students develop their own wonderful ideas.

Morrison also constructs the Riverway Project around participants' ideas for Jewish life and their leadership of their own celebrations. The Riverway Project began through relational investigations, the idea that participants ask each other their deepest questions about why Judaism is important to them and what they want from Jewish community. Relational investigations ask that participants listen closely to the answers of their peers. Through conversation, they learn what Judaism means to each other. The Riverway Project comes to be built on their relationships and their collective ideas about Judaism and about community. Morrison repeatedly asks for input specifically about the

Riverway Project, suggesting that they have "done everything together so far." Participants serve on project committees; more than that, they host events continually, shaping their own Jewish space and exploring what it feels like to lead ritual in their homes. Shabbat dinners without Morrison offer a chance for participants to lead with no other resources, even while they needed the Riverway Project to bring them together.

As they explain during interviews, ownership frames a great deal of Riverway Project participants' own way of thinking about Jewish life. As emerging adults and members of Generation X, they want to draw their own conclusions, examine proof-texts for themselves, and have the opportunity to direct their personal celebrations. Ownership, or their self-management of their Jewish lives, is their own pinnacle of Jewish life; like Morrison, they also do not want passive synagogue interaction without knowing what synagogue and Jewish life mean to them. Yet, without significant Jewish social capital, many are not yet ready to go it alone. Even when they gain the requisite skills, some see religious rituals as activities facilitated only when with others or even delegated to their Riverway communal setting. Many are searching for a teacher, for a spiritual guide. Ultimately, Judaism is the material around which they come together, their social network connected by their questions and the ideas they create in response. Despite their desire for ownership and self-management, they push Morrison into strong leadership. They express timidity and crave validation and direction. They test ideas, stepping forward into a decision, into faith development, and then they pull back. As this dissertation demonstrates, the Jewish journeys of adults in their twenties and thirties involve movement. Their journeys establish faith development as a hallmark of emerging adulthood, suggesting reliance on a teacher and social network to validate participants'

Jewish involvement, which leads to independent motivation for commitments and actions, which leads to a return to the teacher and network, to available resources, for more.

## UNDERSTANDING JEWISH SOCIAL NETWORKS AND JEWISH SOCIAL CAPITAL

Interestingly, social networks have been fundamental to these Riverway Project participants' Jewish engagement since early in their lives. As children, many of their Jewish memories pivot around their feeling rejected from or at home among the Jews whom they knew. In college, when they had productive Jewish experiences, they were brought into these experiences by friends, those from the dorm who happened to play in a *klezmer* band or those from class who also ran the Jewish Women's Project on campus. Joining social networks has often impacted their engagement with their Jewishness. It was not always positive, but their social network frequently offered them something more in Judaism than what they could access themselves.

As noted, social networks have been equally important to the elite, the Wexner Graduate Fellowship, Pardes, the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, and other projects providing them with life-long friendships with true peers in knowledge, talent, and motivation and, later in life, compatriots in the development of their own projects. The importance of social networks to the elite and also to the folk demonstrates the need for further understandings of other social networks, for a more thorough understanding of the relationships that are built among adults in their twenties and thirties, of the development of capital through relationships, and the varied ways that capital is used. What happens, for example, when Stephen S Wise Temple in Los Angeles takes adults in their twenties

and thirties horse-back riding, or when hundreds of the same fill a room for *Heeb*'s "Storytelling" event? What brings them to these events and where do they take the relationships that they build there? Similarly, what happens in Ikar and Hadar, where participants with little Jewish social capital (like Riverway Project participants) feel comfortable in and inspired by more full liturgies, more devout prayer, and greater expectations of ritual observance? And, how do these communities differ as social networks – what role does Jewish tradition play in establishing certain norms and sanctions in different kinds of communities? What are the arrangements of reciprocity in more traditional communities, and what are they in nontraditional communities? Finally, what is the correlation between social networks and life choices, the extent to which membership in a Jewish social network influences the choices that individuals make? This population's ethno-religious expressions and ideas have significant diversity and depth and require a map of cases, following and contrasting the perspectives, decisions, and behaviors of various communities and the choices that their members make. Such a series would establish a significant foundation for understanding the meaning that Judaism holds for this next generation, both what they look for and in what they find value, and for understanding the potential of social capital and social networks for creating that meaning in the first place.

In the Riverway Project, joining a Jewish social network begins when participants enter a Jewish community in which they are not sanctioned no matter their lack of knowledge of communal norms. It is further developed in this community that acknowledges participants' universal commitments: their confusion over religious extremism, their peers outside of this community who may find Judaism and aspects of

Jewish tradition problematic, their own challenges to components of the Jewish narrative or to Jewish ideals. The very provision of this space that validates their concerns and lets them ask their questions out loud challenges participants' assumptions that Jewish community has no place for them. Participants then are given resources with which to develop their own ideas about their Jewish connections, resources that include a mode of study that uses the tools of critical analysis that they learn in their secular educational settings and a community that includes prayer in which they can participate easily. These resources give participants new habits of mind, new expectations about what engagement with Judaism can be for them. Many come to see Judaism as having a place for them and their ideas. They truly grow in their understanding of what Judaism offers them.

It is through their Jewish social network that participants begin to develop Jewish social capital, finding a place for themselves in the Jewish narrative. They acquire knowledge of other Jews, of Jewish history, tradition, and rituals, and of the role that Judaism can play in their lives. Participants become confident in their Jewishness because their network-based relationships with their true peers assure them that their Jewishness can take into account their universal and their Jewish commitments, that their Jewish celebration reflects who they are wholly and authentically. For many, their comfort with their senses of their personal Jewishness gives them a sense of similar comfort in other Jewish communities and the motivation to act, to make their own Jewish decisions. Their new ideas about what Judaism can be to them, and the comfort in Jewish community that they develop, become a sense of purpose, personal meaning, safety, and home in Jewish community that they do not shed.

As outlined in Chapter One, American Judaism and American religion have placed great emphasis on formal institutional affiliation, seeing membership as mandating a formal agreement with a religious institution. This membership has been part of the "centralized experiment in Jewish planning" that Ethan Tucker called American Judaism, the specific, formal infrastructure that represented American Judaism in the twentieth century.[12] Yet, as Tobin Belzer demonstrates in her study of Generation X Jewish professionals, "affiliation" for Generation X "is a subjective experience."[13] Rather than being exercised through a formal membership agreement or the paying of dues, affiliation with a community is self-defined and individually negotiated. No participant in the Riverway Project establishes membership in the Project by paying dues; instead, a participant demonstrates commitment by just showing up. Moreover, participants shift their engagement from project to project: For some, the Riverway Project is their primary Jewish community, while others wander in and out of different communities, looking for the exact product that they want at any given moment. All communities are open to them, and membership agreements and dues are irrelevant to their participation. Finally, as illustrated, Morrison is free to work with any adults in their twenties and thirties, whether they are members of Temple Israel, another congregation, or no congregation.

The Riverway Project has few concrete or traditional boundaries. Rather, it represents strong content, a deep identity in its *Torah* study and community prayer, and it attracts and holds individuals' involvement based on this identity and not based on a

[12] As described in Chapter Two. Ethan Tucker, "What Independent Minyanim Teach Us About the Next Generation of Jewish Communities," *Zeek* (Spring 2007).
[13] Tobin Belzer, *Jewish Identity at Work: GenXers in Jewish Jobs* (PhD Diss. Brandeis University, 2004), 177.

membership agreement. It represents almost the opposite of many American Jewish institutions: involvement without membership, not – as captured in Morrison's "Sunoco Station" metaphor – membership without involvement. Or, it demonstrates this new paradigm of membership, the subjective feeling of belonging, a Jewish community open to all.

Institutional participation in religious life is shifting. But as demonstrated here, even Jews raised without paradigms of participation and without a childhood understanding of the richness of Jewish life are curious about the potential import of Judaism for them. When individuals pursue their curiosity and encounter a venue that nurtures their pursuit, many enter into a negotiation with a collective. They find that religious participation remains richer for many in a community, even a non-traditional model of community. This is true particularly when the community accommodates and helps individuals expand their thin Jewish social capital, when it focuses less on members' lack of normative Jewish commitments and more on their curiosity about Judaism, when it demands little formality and emphasizes content, when it asks not for a membership agreement but for energy and ideas. In this community, individuals go from discomfort and uncertainty to active celebration, to leading their own prayer and text study, to defined ideas about what Judaism means to them. When this process is successful, individuals can take the confidence and knowledge that they develop with them to their next social networks. These subsequent networks can help them continually to negotiate the tensions that they feel between their universal and their particular commitments. They can carry them into new expressions of Jewishness that feel integral and true to their senses of themselves.

# APPENDIX A

## Riverway Project Participant Interview Guide

Tell me how you came to Boston.
*Prompts:*
- Where did you come from? What were the stops on your journey?
- How did you choose the neighborhood you live in?
- What do you do during the day? How did you choose that position?
- Education and why/ what dictated choice of college
- Family make-up
- Where raised
- Makeup of current social network

Tell me about the cycle of your year growing up.
*Prompts:*
- Discuss holidays that you observed – Jewish, American, of other religions.
- What symbols or aspects of the holiday do you connect to? What memories of holidays do you have? Pick one memory to talk about.
- How did your parents make the decisions that they made?
- (Listen for what subject knows about Jewish holiday observances.) How did you learn about Jewish holidays? About Judaism?
- To what extent was Judaism, or religion in general, important in your family?

Let's talk a little more about your social circle, in college and now.
*Prompts:*
- Did you go to college? What kind of a school were you looking for? What role did Jewish life play in your decision?
- Think of your five closest friends in school. How many were Jewish?
- When you moved here, what kind of a community were you looking for? How did you decide where to live?
- Think of your five closest friends now. How many are Jewish?

What is your involvement in the Riverway Project like?
*Prompts:*
- How many Riverway Project events have you participated in? A few, a lot?
- How do you decide to participate in them?
- Why do you decide to participate?
- What about this project being Reform – how does that matter?
- Have you thought about coming to events and then not shown up? How does that work?
- What other Jewish sponsored events have you done in Boston? What other general young adult events have you done?

What does being Jewish mean to you?
*Prompts:*

- To what extent is it important to you?
- What do these concepts (the ones that they mention: community, identity) mean to you?
- What role do you want it to play in your life in the future? How are you thinking about that? How are you making that decision?
- What do you think about Torah? Bible? What reaction do you have to these words?
- Did you used to think Bible played a role in your life? How?
- Who do you think wrote the Bible? Do you ever think about that? Had you read it before you participated in the Riverway Project?
- What did you think about organized religion before Riverway Project?
- What role does God play in your sense of your Jewishness?
- What role does ritual play in your sense of your Jewishness?
- Now, what do you think about these things? How have you changed because of your interaction with Jeremy, with the Riverway Project?

Is there anything I should have asked and didn't? Is there anything that you thought that you were going to talk about that you didn't?

Thank you! Please be in touch if you have any questions.

## Survey Instrument

*Completed by participants in Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays.*

*Please always check all that apply.*

*Your gender:* ____

*Are you:* ☐ A parent ☐ Single or Dating ☐ Married/ Committed ☐ Living with someone

*In what neighborhood/ town do you live?* ________________________

*How many years have you lived in Boston?* ________

*Why did you come?* ☐ Grew up here ☐ Education ☐ Career/ Job ☐ Family/ Friends ☐ Like the city ☐ Other _______________

*Did you:*

☐ Graduate from high school ☐ Attend some college ☐ Complete a BA

☐ Attend some graduate school ☐ Complete an MA/ Grad program *What kind*:

☐ Complete a PhD program *(If applicable) What undergrad school did you attend?* __________

*What do you do professionally?* __________________________

*How often do you participate in Riverway Project opportunities?*

☐ It's my first one ☐ I've been to a few ☐ I come about monthly

☐ I come several times a month ☐ I come to every one I can

*Do you attend:*

☐ Soul Food Friday *How often?* ☐ All the time ☐ About every other time ☐ Once in a while

☐ Torah and Tonics *How often?* ☐ All the time ☐ About every other time ☐ Once in a while

☐ Neighborhood Circles *How often?* ☐ All the time ☐ About every other time ☐ Once in a while

*How often do you go to other Jewish events?* ☐ Every few months ☐ Monthly ☐ A few times a month ☐ Weekly

*Sponsored by whom?*_______________________________________________________________

*Growing up, did you*:

☐ Light Hanukah candles ☐ Have a Passover seder ☐ Ever belong to a synagogue

☐ Have Shabbat dinner as a family ☐ Not spend money on Shabbat

☐ I wasn't Jewish growing up. *I was*: ________________________

*What (Jewish) denomination were you growing up?*_______________

*What kind of Jewish education did you have?*

☐ None

☐ Afternoon school until bar/ bat mitzvah ☐ Confirmation/ Afternoon school after bar/ bat mitzvah

☐ Day school until seventh grade ☐ Day school after seventh grade

☐ Youth group ☐ Jewish overnight camp ☐ Jewish day camp

☐ Other: ______________________

*Of your five closest friends, how many are Jewish?* ☐ None ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-4 ☐ 5

*Do you belong to a synagogue?* _____ *To Temple Israel?* _____

*If not, why not?* ☐ Too expensive ☐ Not interested ☐ Other: ___________________

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*Thank you very much!*

## APPENDIX B

### Transcript
### Torah and Tonics on Tuesdays
### Temple Israel, Boston, Massachusetts
### July 5, 2005

*S=unidentified student*

Morrison: First of all, we have some nuptials to celebrate. I'm surprised they're here (laughter). They couldn't stay away. Can we go around and say names and say something good that's happened in your life? Something good.

(Participants go around the room and share names and something else from their weeks.)

Morrison: I'm Jeremy Morrison and I was in Maine for the weekend. Love that. … This week we read the portion called *Chukkat* … which has a lot of things happening in it. One of which is the death of Aaron. And I wanted to use this evening … as an opportunity to look at several episodes of the life of Aaron to get a sort of handle on who this guy might have been and how text portrays him. And what I'm hoping to do if we have time is really to also bring in some *midrash* … because *midrash* creates a whole view of Aaron that is radically – I don't know if it's different from the text, than the *Torah*, but it certainly creates a dynamic with this guy that I think is fascinating. And adds depth to this portrayal. … And so let's start by looking at Exodus 3, page 401…

(all open their texts and begin flipping through their books)

Does someone wanna start reading at verses 1 – oh no, I'm sorry – let's, let's, verse 10.

(Robin reads Exodus 4:10-18)

10) But Moses said to the Lord, Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. 11) And the Lord said to him, Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12) Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct what to say. 13) But he said, Please O Lord, make someone else Your agent. 14) The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, There is your brother Aaron, the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. 15) You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth – I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do – 16) and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him. 17) And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs. 18) Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, Let me go back to my kinsmen in Egypt and see how they are faring. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace.

Morrison: Good. Where are they when this is all happening?

S: In Egypt.

Elena: The burning bush.

Morrison: Good. This is at the burning bush. The burning bush. The bush is burning and Moses is there, Moses repeatedly said, don't send me, send somebody else, and then we have this introduction of Aaron. Questions, comments, concerns, anything. What. Thoughts. (beat) Sir.

David: What would be the point of God selecting a man who can't speak very well to be the spokesperson?

Morrison: Okay. Other questions, thoughts. Yeah.

Melissa: Aaron's kind of a leader by default.

Morrison: All right. Do you mean that in response to David's question or sort of tangential –

Melissa: No, new thought.

Morrison: Good. Good. Forget his point for a moment (laughter). This is another point. Okay, good. So on the one hand, we do have an issue, I mean. (walks toward the board) Where's the – oh yeah – can you just flick the last switch on that board (someone turns on the light for the board – someone else goes pshhh). Though I'm not gonna write anything, I just wanted to be ready. (laughter) The – a leader who can't speak, and yet at the same time, the scene sets up a second leader, and what's the quality of this leader?

S: He has an ability to speak.

Morrison: Good, he has an ability to speak. So there's one (now writing on the board) Moses who can't speak and A who can.

(on board:)

M = can't speak A = can

Good. All right. So already if we just talk about these kinds of roles – one guy is a speaker and one guy isn't. Other thoughts, comments. Dena.

Dena: I was really surprised by this phrase, playing the role of God.

Morrison: Mm-mm. Moses playing the role of God to -

Dena: Yeah – God saying, playing my role to Aaron. So, like a team. I guess I was thinking about when that happens, when people claim that for themselves, like saying

they're prophets, I've never thought about God actually saying that, calling someone God.

Morrison: Well, what does it mean, in this context, what does it mean for someone to play God, to him?

Dena: Well, in the very literal sense it just seems to me like putting words in his mouth.

Morrison: Good. On some level being God means language, right – gods create language. And put them into someone's mouth.

Heather: Well – I think it also ties back to 11 and 12 – God is saying that God gives Moses the words and *then* they'll go to Aaron.

Morrison: Good. Who gives man speech? God does. Who makes man dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? But now Moses has all of those powers over Aaron.

Heather: Or at least some of them.

Morrison: Or at least some of them.

Maya: I don't know if I'm missing this but I don't completely understand Moses' role in this because God is sort of saying – like why is he telling one what to say but not the other?

Morrison: Good, oh - yes? You can ignore her or – oh, you want to connect to it. Good.

Harleigh: Well, thinking about it, Aaron seems to be really an afterthought. Like Moses is – God picked someone to lead who can't really talk, so maybe talking's not that important in what God's looking for, and when Moses keeps – I mean, it's a few times that Moses is saying, someone else, someone else, someone else… almost as if, anyone can speak, and here's someone who has a close relationship to you, so let's take him.

Morrison: Oh, okay. So speech is extra. What's primary?

Dennis: The capacity to handle the message.

Morrison: To handle it? What's that mean?

Dennis: To – to understand what God is saying.

Morrison: Okay, so, on one hand,– you're onto something. On one hand, Moses has greater hierarchy because, *because* he can take the message and translate it. So the power of translation, which Aaron cannot do, or it's not explicit that Aaron can do that. What else is Moses told to take?

Anya: The rod.

Morrison: Good. Who said that – Anya? Good. He's told to take a rod. Who holds the rod? (at the same time:)
S: Leader
S: Moses
S: Ruler

Morrison: Good, so the leader is the rod holder. Right. And in this case Moses holds this rod. What can this rod do? It turns into a serpent – what's it gonna do in this week's portion?

Nathan: Strike a rock.

Morrison: Excellent. It's gonna strike a rock and water's gonna come out of it. I mean, Moses has this rod, and on some level, yes, speech is important, but also this function of this rod like you're saying Harleigh, in a sense right, speech might be secondary to what can happen with this rod. But the rod's not an Aaron thing. Have we heard about Aaron before this? (silence) No. We haven't heard about Aaron before this. In fact, it's sort of interesting, if you just turn to page – the beginning of the Moses story, page 388, let's turn to page 388, someone read 1. This is the beginning of the big story of Moses.

(Jon reads Exodus 2:1-3)

1) A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2) The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. 3) When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him -

Morrison: Okay, that's enough. How many siblings does this guy have? (beat) Okay, read.

(Jon continues)

3) …She got a wicker basket for him and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.
4) And his *sister* stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

Morrison: Okay, good. All right. So there's a sister in the picture. Is there a brother in the picture? (no) No, no, trust me, no. No brother in the picture. But wait – turn to page 422. (flipping) And this'll all sound incredibly repetitive to you, but let's read it, cause it's fun. 422, someone read verse 1.

(Jon continues with Exodus 7:1-7)

1) The lord replied to Moses, See, I place you in the role of God to pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet -

Morrison: Aah, sorry. Not just God to Aaron, God to pharaoh. Go on.

(Jon continues)

…with your brother Aaron as your prophet. 2) You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. 3) But I will harden Pharoah's heart, that I may multiply my signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. 4) When pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver my ranks, my people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. 5) And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.

Morrison: I love this next verse. Go ahead.

(Jon continues)

6) This Moses and Aaron did, as the lord commanded them, so they did.

Morrison: *This* next verse. (quiet laughter)

(Jon continues)

7) Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they made their demand on pharaoh.

Morrison: Okay, stop there. Comments. Anya.

Anya: Why does it give their ages? Who cares?

Morrison: What's the question - why does it – excellent question.

Scott: There's no mention of Aaron, before, but Aaron's older.

Morrison: Good, good, good. So what are you saying.

Scott: It's like he's been omitted from the text until now.

Morrison: Omitted or added.

Scott: Well, either.

Morrison: Okay. How old's this guy – I hadn't noticed this detail until today. He's eighty, he's eighty-three (pointing to the board). Why those ages. I have questions frequently, I have no idea what they lead to. I just have them.

Harleigh: It's like they're these old men.

Morrison: They are or are not.

Harleigh: They are – they're like two little old men -

Morrison: Oh, like old guys. And what they achieve – it's like hobbits. (laughter)

David: Um – I'd like to say something different.

Morrison: You can do whatever you want.

David: It's like – I'm not sure if it was written at the time of the second temple or just after, but the priests were running the show basically, and they needed a way to show that they had authority from back in the day, so they made Moses different from the priests since the priest was the older one, it seems like the authority came from him.

Morrison: Okay, I love all your thinking. You're onto something. Let's hold on to that for a second. Eighty and eighty-three. If they had said twenty and twenty-three, I think there's less, um, weight to who they are. I think, there's something to their age, I don't think of them as little guys. I understand. But like, these guys are wise guys. But like, Anya's asking, why do we need these, why do we need these ages.

Heather: Well, they're also close in age. Right. If they were hugely wide apart, maybe – I think this shows that they are close not just in age but maybe themselves.

Morrison: All right. Good. Definitely – I mean, what David's raising – you've got this guy Aaron, and what we'll see at the end, we'll return to this question. We have a lot of like, back-story, sort of, I would say added in. You have all of a sudden, oh, he's eighty-three, he's a brother of Moses, he wasn't mentioned originally. You have a sense that slowly they're developing – there was a need to develop where the heck this guy Aaron came from. And, and David's right in thinking it had something to do with priesthood. But we'll come back to that. We'll come back to that. Any thoughts about this point. Robin.

Robin: I think it's interesting that Aaron was introduced as Aaron the Levite. Whereas Moses is called Moses. It – he's introduced as being the son of the Levite tribe. But Moses isn't known as Moses the Levite – Aaron gets this title.

Morrison: Good. It's important to put Aaron into the Levitical clan. But when I use that language - to put him in – suggests he wasn't ever there originally. This is more complicated. We'll come back to that. Yeah.

Charlie: If you understand Levite like, not as a genealogical thing but as a – I mean, Moses wasn't raised in that context – he was raised as an Egyptian, with outsider status.

Morrison: Good. What's your point. It's a nice one, but what is it.

Charlie: Um – I would call that part of the reason, that Aaron has this social context that Moses doesn't. It may also have made him a better spokesman if not a better recipient, initial recipient, of the message.

Morrison: Okay. Or, or, thinking that, you've got this guy Moses. He's the guy who brought them out of the land of Egypt. We're gonna come up with this guy Aaron, and wanna make him a big man. Whose brother should he be? Moses' brother. I mean – do you guys know the term *yichus*? This is like, connection, connection – it conveys a sense of um, what's the word I'm looking for – influence. Influence. So you make a brother of Moses – that's a heck of a brother. That's a heck-a-brother. A heck-a-bro. One more. Yeah.

David: In support of the idea that Aaron was added later – might be, well, if all the first-born sons of the Israelites were killed, and Moses was to be killed – well, Aaron is older so why wasn't he hidden as well?

Dennis: Well – was Aaron born before the decree.

Harleigh: Yeah.

Morrison: There are ways to solve every question. Good question and good traditional answer. I love it. Yeah.

Dennis: Or Aaron being raised for the most part in Egypt where their ability to tell time is better – versus Moses in the desert where maybe they couldn't tell time that well.

Morrison: I don't even think we have to account for anything. I think there's a statement that says, this is the older brother – this is how we know he's older. And it's a funny statement. I think it's a very interesting detail. He's eighty years old when this happened and Aaron is eighty-three. Yes.

Jon: Is there a subtext here from the later authors who filled the roles of Aaron within their communities, who are saying well, Moses is the one inspired by God and who has God's message, whereas they always talk about Moses being the sign of wisdom and authority, whereas Aaron as the spokesman, the interpreter of the message, in that role, what they're really doing is reinforcing their own later role as their interpreter of the Torah.

Morrison: Excellent. Everyone follow that? Good. I'll say it. Because I'm male. This is big stuff, and it's something we're going to return to at the end of this. Priests later on saying, we've got this guy Aaron, we want to make him powerful, look, we're actually giving him the role of prophet, and we're making him older than Moses, and the older folks have greater wisdom and greater stature. And what's actually sort of interesting that we'll see, and you'll have to trust me on this because we don't have days to study this stuff, there is throughout a lot of periods – we're going to see it … today – incredible competition between these two brothers that's not apparent in the text – we have people

who - you're going to see this if we get there, so I gotta hurry us up – who are so pro-Aaron and anti-Moses, and vice versa, the whole time. No! (at Dena with her hand up.) We're moving on. Exodus 32, 646. Cause – you guys are great, this is great. 646 (flipping) We're at the golden calf Oh, actually guys, let's think about this question. What makes, what makes Aaron so popular? What makes Aaron so popular? We'll leave it at that. Someone start at 1.

(someone reads Exodus 32:1-6)

1) When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, Come, make us a God who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him. 2) Aaron said to them, Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me. 3) And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4) This he took from them and cast in a mold and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, this is your God, o Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt! 5) When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it, and Aaron announced, Tomorrow shall be a festival of the lord! 6) Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and they rose to dance.

Morrison: Okay, good. Let's just turn the page to 648. And Moses said.

(continues to read Exodus 32:21-24)

21) Moses said to Aaron, What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them? 22) Aaron said, Let not my lord be enraged. You know that this people is bent on evil. 23) They said to me, Make us a God to lead us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt – we cannot tell what has happened to him. 24) So I said to them. Whoever has gold, take it off! They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!

Morrison: Good, stop there. Stop, stop.

Charlie: Machiavellian.

Morrison: What'd you say?

Jon: He's a good politician.

Morrison: He's a good politician. Yes. Why. (looks at Ziv)

Ziv: Do I have to build on that?

Morrison: (pause) I don't know – the males don't like to build on the other males' comments and the females do (laughter). (jokes about that)

Ziv: It's the competition thing. I just want to say that you spoke of them as great rivals –

Morrison: Wait, when I say that I mean – people *view* them as rivals. People – I won't talk. You talk.

Anya: People describe them as, or –

Morrison: No – people say, let's call them great heroes – we love Moses, we love Aaron, Aaron go go go, Moses, rah rah rah. Not that Moses and Aaron are portrayed as odds with one another. That's what I want to say. Go ahead. (chaos, all talking at once) (someone says – factions) Factions – they each have factions. I like it. Yeah.

Ziv: Aaron here is not – here's an opportunity for him to usurp Moses' power but he does not do that -

Morrison: Right.

Ziv: He brings forth this, he tells him to… not that he creates the golden calf, but miraculously the golden calf just popped up, pops out of the fire –

Morrison: Good.

Ziv: And that's what it says – Aaron knows the outcome… he knows that Moses is gonna come back, knows that Moses is the rightful leader of the people –

Morrison: Okay -

Ziv: He knows that this golden calf in the end is gonna be nothing in the eyes of the people. So that he does everything in a sense to –

Morrison: I'm not saying he's done anything wrong –

Ziv: No, I'm not either – I'm just saying – I'm just making that point, as a male member of this group. (some laughter)

Morrison: Fine. Joel, man, we're doing golden calf.

Joel: I know, it's my moment.

Morrison: It is your moment. Anyway. Okay, fine. Fine. So on one level – and I - we've had golden calf day several times, we aren't studying that story so much, but is he doing something wrong, is he doing something right, is he after his own power, right, or is he, is he truly an honest – is he a victim? Is he not a victim? Yeah.

Joel: I notice that what Aaron says – it's not totally coherent – he says, I'm going to empathize with them – but he also says that I'm disgusted by you. But before that he says – this people is bent on evil …

Morrison: Good. Good. I'm playing both sides of this. Also, I'm taking good care of them. Right. Moses, I mean, there's a whole strand of *midrash* that's like, they're lost, and Aaron is solving the problem for them. For them. Yeah.

(woman comes in and sits at an empty table)

Ziv: One thing is also – the people are saying for that man Moses – he's like, they barely know who this guy is.

Morrison: Good. Good. So say more. What about this guy Moses. First of all, this Moses can't speak. Yeah.

Harleigh: Moses holds the rod and Aaron speaks – so Aaron's the one they had a relationship with so Moses is the disciplinarian.

Morrison: Good. Oh. That kind of rod.

Harleigh: Or – whatever – not that kind of rod, but. So I would say that it's not necessarily Aaron's responsibility to keep them from making the golden calf. I mean if Moses is standing next to him and saying don't let them do that, then he should…

Morrison: Good. It's like – I just read – this whole history of Chicago's world fair, and you know, this was built by men who worked in tandem, and one had the big vision, and the other was the one who was really able to work with, have relationships and make the thing happen. You know, was it like that.

Heather: Well – what I notice here is that like Aaron says to Moses – it's entirely factual –

Morrison: Okay -

Heather: And the question I have is –

Morrison: Why.

Heather: Why. Exactly. Is he trying to cover up his –

Morrison: Is he protecting himself, is he protecting the people.

Heather: Yeah – I don't know why.

Morrison: Yeah. Good. I don't know why either. It's a great question.

Charlie: Isn't he just this crazy guy who goes up on mountains and talks to God? I mean – is he just – I mean, says this guy, wild-eyed guy, who just spent two days on a mountain – comes down, he's incredibly angry, upset, he smashed rocks over all the

place – maybe I should tell him, you know, maybe I should tell him what he wants to hear.

Morrison: Placating Moses. All right.  I like that.

Jon: The thing that I find very interesting is that when Aaron's talking to Moses – was that Aaron was the one who made the calf –

Morrison: Okay, good, all right.

Jon: Aaron – when he explains the calf to Moses he says, I tossed the gold into the fire and out came a calf! Maybe this is what God wanted – it's a miracle – sort of saying to Moses, I was just not part of it!

Morrison: Good. I have, I think this is the scene where Aaron speaks the most. You don't ever – in fact, we're about to look at a scene where Aaron is absolutely quiet. But he speaks the most here, and his words seem to – it's a nice, massaging it together – there's a lot of complicated potential motivations in what he's saying. And who knows.  All right. Other thoughts, last thoughts about this. Gotta keep us moving. (silence) Okay. Page 800. We're getting soon to his death. Isn't that great? (laughter) Moving towards death. 800. All right. So let's start reading on verse 22. And now we wanna start thinking about this priest thing, we sort of mentioned. All right – and Aaron lifted his hands.

(Harleigh reads Leviticus 9:22-10:3)

22) Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being.  23) Moses and Aaron then went inside the tent of meeting.  When they came out, they blessed the people, and the presence of the lord appeared to all the people.  24) Fire came forth from before the lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar.  And all the people saw and shouted, and fell on their faces.  1) Now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and they offered before the lord alien fire, which he had not enjoined upon them.  2) And fire came forth from the lord and consumed them, thus they died at the instance of the Lord.  3) Then Moses said to Aaron, this is what the lord meant when he said, through those near to me I show myself holy, and assert my authority before all the people.  And Aaron was silent.

Morrison: Good. That's fine. Yeah, Robin.

Robin: So I was just actually thinking of this piece, and thinking of the sons – and how last time we talked about how, um, uh, what you can be punished for four generations – and how it's not clear in the text what exactly they did, why the fire, and is it really back to what Aaron did with the golden calf –

Morrison: And is he being punished –

Robin: Right.

Morrison: Good. Good. That's gonna come back to us. Good. I'm just gonna shift us a little bit – let's focus just right in on Aaron here – again, there will be fire, Joel. (beat) What's Aaron doing? What's, I mean, again, remember, the context for our conversation today is about his role, and his leadership, and what's – what's happening in this scene? Yeah.

Heather: It's like he's doing what he did in the last scene, but almost the opposite.

Morrison: Good, good – that's nice. This is all exodus, right (writing on the board) – by the way, Moses has a rod, right, here, as far as we know, and Aaron does not have a rod. Now we're in Leviticus. Aaron, uh, Aaron is silent, right. What else is he – what else can he do. Oh, who can speak.

(all at once – well, he can't speak, but – )

Morrison: What, what, what.

Harleigh: He can speak to Aaron – he could always speak to Aaron.

Morrison: All right. Fair enough. In this scene, who's talking.

Many students: Moses.

Morrison: Good. All right. Moses.

(board now says:)

| M = can't speak | | A = can |
|---|---|---|
| 80 | | 83 |
| rod | | [ ] |
| | Leviticus | |
| Talking | | Silent |
| | | Blessing, hands |

What else is Aaron doing in this scene, guys?

Many students: Blessing.

Morrison: Good. Blessing - don't just say blessing, man! Blessing!!! (yells and waves arms) He's like – what's he doing – Aaron lifted his hands toward his people and blessed them (reads, acting this out with hands raised), and he stepped down after offering the sin offering – then what happened – this is interesting guys.

Joel: He's doing here almost what happened with the golden calf –

Morrison: Okay -

Joel: But here it's legitimate.

Morrison: It's legitimate. Okay. Tell me what he's doing here guys.

Joel: Specifically he lifts his hands, he blesses the people – he gets away from the offering… compared to the golden calf –

Morrison: Forget the golden calf now – it's troubling for you, I know. All right. (laughter)

Joel: It's an issue. And then –

Morrison: And then what happens –

Joel: The people shout.

Morrison: What happens to the lord – what does the lord do?

Joel: Fire –

Morrison: "Fire came forth from before the lord and consumed the burnt offering!" This guy raises his hands, blesses, and fire comes out. Right? What's his role?! How's it different than in Exodus? How's it different than Moses in Exodus?

(Students are all talking at once. Morrison goes through the students and calls on them one by one.)

Morrison: Wait – lots of things at once – slow down, slow down.

Nathan: Now he's the intermediary.

Morrison: Okay, good. Now he's the intermediary. Ziv.

Ziv: Well – no –

Morrison: Now, you don't say, I disagree. You say, that's a good point. (laughter) But you're wrong. (more laughter) I don't think you're wrong (to Nathan).

Ziv: Um – it says that Moses and Aaron are doing this together – then *they* came out and blessed the people. So there's some…

Morrison: Aaron lifted his hands and – okay, all right, fine. Next! (laughter)

Dena: Well, the other thing is, he doesn't have a rod. Aaron seems to be able to create fire minus any other instruments.

Morrison: Good. Nice, Dena, nice. Why don't you say it this way – this is how men do it – I don't think that's exactly right. (laughter) No, no. All right, good. Next.

Heather: Well, in this section, in exodus, Aaron's talking – in this section, Aaron's *doing*…. In the other sections, Aaron's doing the talking but sort of instrumental to what's going on. But here, Moses is doing the talking, but not so much, the doing.

Joel: And he's also following the instrument, which Aaron's sons do not do.

Morrison: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Good. There's something about, and this is sort of a tangent, prophets using language, and prophets using hands. And there's something about hands at times being much more powerful, and language being secondary. So the rod being more powerful than speech. Here, hands seem much more powerful. Of course, blessing implies, of course, language. But the hands, the hands. Good. Let's move to the silence – how do you interpret his silence.

Harleigh: His sons were just consumed by fire! (laughter)

Morrison: Yeah – and what's your point.

Harleigh: And Moses said – I told you so. And Aaron was silent. Like – I don't think it's of pain – I think it's – I don't think it means it's not a talker, I don't think it means that he's not the one who speaks.

Morrison: So what does it mean. How do you interpret that. Okay, good. He's in shock. It's so rare that a text goes out of its way to say, someone's silent. If, it might say someone's happy – it might say someone's sad – it might say someone's angry. It rarely says, I don't know if it ever says, except for here, that someone's sad. So was he in shock.

Ziv: He's been taught a lesson.

Morrison: In terms of the silence.

Ziv: The silence is a silence of – when you have nothing to say. When somebody, when the voices in you – he's giving up.

Morrison: Okay. It's an acquiescence. Okay.

Harleigh: Cause we don't know who's quieting him – was it Moses or was it the sons –

Morrison: Good. Was it the death – his two kids got slammed – or was it –

Harleigh: I told you so.

Morrison: Or is it the language that comes out of his brother's mouth. My brother's a jerk.

Harleigh: Right.

Morrison: Um. Okay. (passing out Xeroxed worksheets) Good. Let's read two comments and have a little chat about them. And Aaron was silent, Abravanel said.

"*Vayidom* Aaron" – his heart turned to lifeless stone …

Morrison: Hebrew also.

Ziv: (*Domem* – mineral) and he did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses' consolation for his soul had left him and he was speechless."

Morrison: So *vayidom* – there's a pun here. His heart was stone. His heart became stone. All right – keep going.

Ziv: He's in shock.

Morrison: All right so – what.

Dennis: He's in pain.

Morrison: Pain. Trauma. Right.

(phone is going off – laughter)

Ziv: Sadness.

Morrison: What Ziv?

Ziv: Sadness.

Morrison: Yeah, yeah. This is a real thing. That's why – Harleigh feels like – Abravanel feels like Harleigh.

Ziv: But I'm not even sure you can base it on loss of his son, but also the fact that he's been taught a lesson here as to – it sounds worse than I wanna make it but – who's in charge and who has the –

Morrison: Well, wait wait one second – you're gonna be backed up by the next point. Just wait a minute.

Hilary: It’s interesting that Moses is consoling – we were so ready to understand that Moses was cruel – we were so ready to condemn Moses.

Morrison: Yeah – which is interesting. Did anyone read this as consolation?

Charlie: Is there any instance where God speaks to Aaron, alone, at all?

Morrison: Uh – I have, I have trouble answering that question.

Charlie: Cause I think Aaron’s coming across as much more human here – and he’s sort of been overpowered by – I’m kinda stickin with the wild-eyed, maybe a little off guy who goes up the mountain and talks with God, and maybe he’s a little stunned into silence by this…

Morrison: Good. Let’s call Abravanel (phone rings). More phone trauma – what is that? It’s yours. Fine. Abravanel we’re gonna call what – the human, psychological, warm fuzzy, grieving response. W – FG. WFG. Warm fuzzy grieving response. Now, someone read the other response.

Robin: Can I –

Morrison: Yes, please.

Robin: But grieving – this isn’t all warm and fuzzy. I understand this as – Abravanel trying to say, you are close to God, and that is the comfort… because if Aaron is not close to God, everything wouldn’t happen.

Morrison: Good. Let’s read the next comment. What is your name.

Robin: Robin.

Morrison: Robin. Would you read the next comment.

Robin: (reading) Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein – Shem Olam –

Morrison: That’s, that’s like a nickname (laughter).

(Robin begins to read.)

Scripture chose *vayidom* rather than *vayishtok* (synonyms of silence). The latter signifies the abstention from speaking, weeping, moaning, or any other outward manifestation as “They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man” (Ps. 107:27), followed by –

Morrison: I’ll make this clear in a second.

(Robin resumes reading.)

Followed by "Then are they glad because *yishtoku* – they are quiet" (ibid., 30).

Morrison: So, good. You can say silence by either *vayidom*, or *vayishtok*. *Vayishtok* has something to do with drunkenness, has something to do with revelry, right. Probably quiet. But *vayidom* means something else. So keep going.

(Robin continues to read)

The verb *domem* however, connotes inner peace and calm… Accordingly Scripture describes the saintly Aaron as *vayidom* and not merely as *vayishtok*, thus emphasizing that his heart and soul were at peace within, that rather than questioning the standards of God, he justified the Divine verdict.

Morrison: Okay. So that's, Ziv, what you're saying.

Ziv: Yeah – he recognizes uh, what is transpiring.

Robin: He's accepting it.

Morrison: He's accepting it. Good.

Jon: Moses' consolation – looking at it through those eyes – you know, it's because you're so close to God that rather than allowing the transgression to happen and to just go by, he chose your family as a demonstration. I mean, from our perspective that's insane –

Morrison: True.

Jon: But at the time.

Morrison: The Lichtenstein piece is from the nineteenth century. So this guy reading it in the nineteenth century is saying, Aaron, who has an understanding that we don't have – Aaron has an understanding that we can't have – that says this is the right thing to happen. And I'm at peace. I'm not saying – you know me, I'm not saying one's right or wrong. It's just a different read. All right. I wanna get to his death. Numbers – 1152. One thousand one hundred and fifty two. And we gotta get to this *midrash*. We're gonna be here until late, baby. Aah. Okay. I'm gonna cut this short a little bit. 1154. So guys – there was this scene in which they hit the rock before they were supposed to hit the rock – we won't talk about that detail now but Aaron then is told that he's gonna die before he gets to the promised land. Because of this. And a page later, he dies. All right. So someone read. 22. Setting out from Kadesh. Come on.

Hilary (reads Numbers 20:22-29): "Setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites arrived in a body at Mount Hor." Um. Is that the word? (laughter).

Morrison: Yeah, yeah. Hor. (beat) Don't be concerned about that. It's Hor in Hebrew.

(Hilary continues)

23) At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 24) Let Aaron be gathered to his kin, he is not to enter the land that I have given to the israeilte people, because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah. 25) Take Aaron and his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead. 27) Moses did as the Lord had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. 28) Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, 29) the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.

Morrison: Okay.

Ziv: If you think about it, it's a beautiful scene, because if you think about it from the perspective of a developing nation, what you have here is you have the leaders of the nation who many other times would be trying to, you know, steal for themselves or take for themselves, as much cattle as possible, as much money as possible… and we may question, well, who gave Moses the authority, who gave Aaron the authority, but here we see that God in a sense is kind of teaching the nation as well – he's saying, I gave these people the power, but I also therefore hold them up to extremely high standards.

Morrison: Okay – you're asking, is it fair that they got killed.

Ziv: Oh no – I'm not asking.

Morrison: But you're saying it is fair.

Ziv: I'm not saying it's a matter of fair or not fair.

Morrison: Yeah, yeah – I understand.

Ziv: He's teaching a lesson and for somebody who has such a high standard – he has to be held to a high standard.

Morrison: Right. What about the death scene itself.

Ziv: What do I think?

Morrison: No. Ssh.

Ziv: Oh. Sorry.

Morrison: Not why he died. I'm pushing us a little bit. Just the death scene. Let's talk about the particulars of this death scene. Which I think, I think is lovely as well. What's lovely about this death scene?

Ziv: It's very noble.

Morrison: It's very noble.

Ziv: One thing I noticed is God told Moses to take Aaron and his son.

Morrison: Good.

Ziv: And what that could imply is God establishing the power of the priesthood – therefore establishing centuries and centuries later that these families shall have the power.

Morrison: Excellent. It's all done in the sight of the community.

Ziv: Right.

Morrison: Where does Moses die?

(silence)

Morrison: We don't know. We don't know – when we get to the end of Deuteronomy we'll read this but Moses goes up to a mountain and no one knows where he's died and buried to this day. This is all in the sight of everybody, and the son gets his due. Right. How long do they mourn.

All: 30 days

Morrison: Yeah. What does that say.

Robin: It's the whole community.

Morrison: Okay, good.

Robin: Not just his immediate family.

Morrison: Nice, good. That's good. What else.

Ziv: It's a long time.

Morrison: Yeah – 30 days is a long time – typical is seven days. There're only about five people in the bible who get 30 days. Moses, Aaron, Abraham, Joshua – and I'm blanking on the rest.

(Morrison begins to read the next piece.)

Now it had always been the custom – you'll like this, I think.

(Nathan begins to read from a Xeroxed copy of *The Legends of the Jews*.)

Now it had always been the custom for Moses whenever he went from his house to the Tabernacle to walk in the centre, with Aaron on his right, Eleazar at his left, then the elders at both sides, and the people following in the rear. Upon arriving within the Tabernacle, Aaron would seat himself as the very nearest at Moses' right hand, Eleazar at his left, and the elders and princes in front.

Morrison: All right, the day of his death.  Keep going.

Nathan: "On this day, however, Moses changed this order; Aaron walked in the centre" –

Morrison: Listen to this.  Go on.

(Nathan continues.)

Moses at his right hand, Eleazar at his left, the elders and princes at both sides, and the rest of the people following.

When the Israelites saw this, they rejoiced greatly, saying: "Aaron now has a higher degree of the Holy Spirit than Moses, and therefore does Moses yield to him the place of honor in the centre." The people loved Aaron better than Moses. For ever since Aaron had become aware that through the construction of the Golden Calf he had brought about the transgression of Israel, it was his endeavor through the following course of life to atone for his sin. He would go from house to house, and whenever he found one who did not know how to recite his Shema, he taught him the Shema –

Morrison: That's sweet.

Nathan: "If one did not know how to pray he taught him how to pray" –

Morrison: That's sweeter.

Nathan: "and if he found one who was not capable of penetrating into the study of the Torah, he initiated him into it."

Morrison: That's the best. (laughter) Keep going.

(Nathan continues.)

He did not, however, consider his task restricted to "establishing peace between God and man" but strove to establish peace between the learned and the ignorant Israelites, among the scholars themselves, among the ignorant, and between man and wife. Hence the people loved him very dearly, and rejoiced when they believed he had now attained a higher rank than Moses.

Morrison: All right – don't turn the page. Let's talk about this image, and this image vis a vis the scenes we've read. What's being – what's being resolved? Especially when all that motivation with the golden calf, and this interaction between Moses and Aaron.

Dennis: It explains sort of the question why Aaron was liked so much more than Moses – he interacted with the people so much more than Moses.

Morrison: Good. Good. How else does this – more about this golden calf stuff. What does the *midrash* imply about the golden calf?

Jon: Aaron – even though he would say one thing to the people and another thing to Moses, he knew what he was doing -

Morrison: Was wrong. And so – then what did he –

Jon: He spent his life atoning for it.

Morrison: Good. He spent his life atoning for it. So now, also to your point (points at Sue), the kids didn't atone for it, he atoned for it. But remember last time we talked about this – these guys thought, our paths aren't through children – they dealt with it in one generation. This guy spends his life atoning for the worse sin in the story.

Ziv: But he's not atoning for what he did – he's atoning for what the people did.

Morrison: Yeah, yeah – it's part of the leaders do this for the people. You're right, Ziv.

Dena: This is all extra-textual, right.

Morrison: Right – it's *midrash*. But what I wanna say is that – this *midrash*, these *midrashim* – this is from a book – it's a great book, as well, it's called *Legends of the Jews*, by a man who's last name is Ginzberg, and what Ginzberg does is he took *midrashim* from all over the place, a huge amount, and wove them together into a narrative. So you see all these footnotes – these footnotes tell you where he took them from… But you see though, in our text, after the Torah's completed, there's this incredible amount of, um, uh, you know, even before the text was completed – Moses and Aaron, why can't you have Moses's grave known?

Ziv: So it won't become a place of worship.

Morrison: Good. So it wouldn't become a place of worship. There are two arguments for that. Why wouldn't you do that? Why wouldn't you want it to be a place of worship?

Ziv: Because Moses is only Moses -

Morrison: I'm not just asking you.

Ziv: I know, I'm just answering. Moses is only Moses.

Morrison: All right, so you don't want people worshiping Moses and not God. What is another reason you don't want this grave known?

Harleigh: Because you don’t want people worshiping Moses and not Aaron.

Morrison: Good – that might be another reason. You don’t want – if they don’t know where Moses’ grave is, they won’t go there to worship it. Do you know where Aaron’s grave is? (Students respond, no.) You have a better sense of it. We actually don’t. But there seems to be a tradition of knowing where it was.

Joel: Aaron is succeeded by his sons and Moses by no one.

Morrison: Good. Turn the page. This gets at your point. Dena.

(Dena begins to read.)

When Moses and Eleazar returned from the mountain without Aaron, Israel said to Moses: “We shall not release thee from this spot until thou showest us Aaron, dead or alive.”

Morrison: A western. Go on.

Moses prayed to God, and He opened the cave and all Israel saw within it Aaron, lying dead upon a bier. They instantly felt what they had lost in Aaron, for when they turned to look at the camp, they saw that the clouds of glory that had covered the site of the camp during their forty years’ march had vanished. They perceived, therefore, that God had sent these clouds for Aaron’s sake only and hence, with Aaron’s death, had caused them to vanish.

Morrison: Okay. So Aaron died, what goes away?

Many: God.

Morrison: God’s protecting presence. Keep going.

(Dena continues.)

Those among Israel who had been born in the desert, having now, owing to the departure of the clouds of glory, for the first time beheld the sun and moon, wanted to fall down before them and adore them, for the clouds had always hidden the sun and the moon from them, and the sight of them made a most awful impression upon them.

Morrison: Okay. That’s enough. Skip to the next paragraph.

(Dena continues.)

The disappearance of the clouds of glory inspired Israel with terror, for now they were unaided against the attacks of enemies, whereas none had been able to enter into the camp of Israel while the clouds covered them. This fear was not, indeed, ungrounded, for hardly did Amalek learn that Aaron was dead and that the clouds of glory had vanished, when he at once set about harassing Israel.

Morrison: That's enough. Amalek becomes the prime enemy of Israel from, you know, people will create this line – a kind of epic line from Amalak from Haman to Hitler. So this is a big bad wolf. Okay. All right. Aaron dies, God's protecting presence disappears. Thoughts. Comments. Questions. Issues.

Harleigh: I feel like it's – it's about the question of who had the relationships with the people, and it's a comment on the strength that the relationships hold, and what do those connections mean.

Morrison: Good.

Dena: In some ways it seems to be written from Moses' perspective. But, so, Aaron is also a protective presence for him, and so he dies, and now Moses has to speak, and he's also probably feeling threatened in some sense – what will happen to his leadership.

Dennis: I think – what's happening is Moses is being downplayed - for the same reason that we don't know Moses grave – everyone knows Moses as the person who contacted God, so it's applying I would say mind tricks to correct Moses from being worshiped.

Morrison: Good, you're reiterating everything. Good. What does the high priest do that Moses doesn't do?

Dennis: Atones for sin.

Morrison: Good, he atones for sin. And who does he represent?

All: the people.

Morrison: The people. I mean, he's the one who goes to God and asks for God's forgiveness, so I mean, right there is this kind of aspect of mercy. He has this aspect of mercy, where Moses is always connected with Torah. Moses is always in a position of conveying law, while Aaron is always in this position of conveying this aspect of mercy. Mercy and din, justice. One last thing and then I want to conclude. Aaron's connected with the exodus, going down from Egypt, but by the time we're done he's connected with the priesthood. This whole priesthood is a later addition to what Aaron did. Aaron originally was connected to exodus. Later, Dennis brought this up at the beginning, as a function of the first temple, he becomes connected to priesthood. So what do you have to do to help him out? You make him a brother of Moses. You guys were saying great stuff. Right. You gotta give this guy authority. And what's the highest authority? To be Moses' right hand man. Any last thoughts.

Dennis: Was he added later? Was he a part of Moses' life?

Morrison: I mean – you know, there's some – this is a longer conversation, we have no examples outside of this text that this guy existed. And so, but we do have this story, this old story, this epic story of this Moses figure coming out. And Moses probably having

some brother. And that brother might have been Aaron, who helped him get people out. But he wasn’t a priest. So somewhere over time – whatever this brother figure, becomes this priest.

(beat)

Um. Guys. Soul Food. Friday. Outside. Outside. Come back. Come back. Everyone else well? Good. Have a great few days. Hope to see you Friday. Help clean up. See you Friday.

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**Interviews**

*Included here are only full interviews with principal key informants. Titles reflect positions at the time of interview.*

Jen Baxter, volunteer leader, Temple Emanuel (San Francisco), June 2005

Sharon Brous, rabbi, Ikar LA, June 2005

Sarah Cohen, Director of Membership, Stephen S. Wise Temple (Los Angeles), June 2005

Jeremy Cowan, founder, He'Brew Beer, June 2005

Jewlia Eisenberg, artist, June 2005

Ruth Andrew Ellenson, author, July 2004

Naomi Gewirtz, Assistant Director, Department of Outreach and Synagogue Community, Union for Reform Judaism, August 2005

Sharna Goldseker, Vice President, Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, August 2005

Lenny Gusel, volunteer leader, Jewish Family and Children's Services (San Francisco), June 2005

Elie Kaunfer, co-founder, Hadar, August 2005

Saul Korin, Director of Graduate Admissions, University of Judaism, June 2005

Rebekah Jackson, volunteer leader, Temple Beth Shalom (San Francisco), June 2005

Sarah Lefton, founder, Jewish Fashion Conspiracy, June 2005

Leslie Kleiger, ATID Director, Sinai Temple (Los Angeles), May 2005

Rhys Mason, Director, The Hub at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, June 2005

Aliza Mazor, organizational consultant to Bikkurim (www.bikkurim.org) and Joshua Venture, August 2005

Josh Neuman, Editor, *Heeb Magazine,* August 2005

Tali Pressman, Special Projects Director, Progressive Jewish Alliance, and Reboot Participant, June 2005

Pella Schaffer, Planning Associate, Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal, UJA-Federation of New York, August 2005

Mollie Schneider, Director of Young Adult Programs, Temple Emanuel (San Francisco), June 2005

Laurie Gwen Shapiro, author, July 2004

Susan Sherr-Seitz, Director, Jewish Renaissance & Renewal, United Jewish Communities, August 2005

Amy Tobin, artist and producer, June 2005

Alix Wall, staff writer, *J. the Jewish News Weekly of San Francisco*, June 2005

Dan Wolf, hip-hop artist, June 2005