

# JEWICY

## Religion & Beliefs

### Why Study Young Jewish Leaders? An Introduction.

By [Jack Wertheimer](#) / October 28, 2010

At the first planning meeting for a new project examining Jewish leaders in their twenties and thirties, Shaul Kelner, himself a young-ish sociologist, threw down the gauntlet: “Maybe we ought to study older leaders to find out why they are so worried about Jewish youth. What might explain the hand-wringing of the baby-boomers?” Shaul, of course, had a point: it had become a commonplace to bemoan “helicopter” parents who continually hover over their college-aged children. Perhaps, a study of younger Jews would merely perpetuate an irrational anxiety.

Nonetheless, the project to study younger Jewish leaders proceeded. Some of the impetus for the research did come from worries. Like quite a few earlier generations, today’s older leaders are concerned about their successors. Are enough younger people sufficiently dedicated to Jewish life to invest themselves in professional and volunteer work in behalf of Jewish causes? And will those who choose to get involved be up to the job?

Our research was primarily motivated, though, by sheer curiosity about three big questions: How do younger leaders think about Jewish issues? What have been the formative experiences shaping these leaders? And where do they seem to be leading their followers?

These are not hysterical questions, but rather stem from a number of new realities. Just before we launched the project, Robert Wuthnow, one of the leading sociologists of religious life in America, had published his study, *After the Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty-Somethings are Reshaping American Religion*. Wuthnow argued that large numbers of college grads defer the large questions of career and family formation until they are well into their thirties, with the result that when they make life-course decisions, they do so without benefitting from strong connections with their parental home and house of worship. The social settings that in the past had helped shape decisions no longer have nearly the same influence.

As ever larger numbers of younger Jews live their twenties and part of their thirties as odyssey years, they too are disengaged from Jewish institutional life, with many not setting foot in a synagogue from the time of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah to well into their late thirties or early forties. This reality renders the panoply of start-ups, initiatives and programs created by and for Jews in their twenties and thirties all the more important. Our project wanted to learn where younger Jews do connect with some form of organized Jewish life and who the leaders are who develop programs for their peers.

It is also no secret that major shifts in technology and communication are reshaping how younger Jews find means to connect. Organizations no longer require a large infrastructure and budget to engage younger people. This has opened up new opportunities for start-ups operating on modest budgets. It also has created opportunities for creative people to rise rapidly by sheer dint of their smarts and energy. Conventional Jewish institutions have been slow to come to grips with the fact that their expectations no longer work for younger people: Why bother with the laborious process of moving up step-by-step in a large bureaucracy like a Federation when start-ups offer fast track opportunities? Our project wanted to understand how younger Jews are adapting to the new realities.

The extent to which a generational divide is opening has also preoccupied us. Is it true, we wondered, that Jews in their twenties and thirties share a fairly uniform set of views on Jewish issues? And is a rift opening in the community between younger and older leaders on core questions of Jewish policy?

Once our research commenced, it became dramatically evident that younger leaders are not a monolithic population. In fact, a great many of them move easily between long-established institutions and recent start-ups. Some, in fact, play leadership roles in both types of organizations. One of the founders of E-3, a social and cultural program in Denver, which reaches hundreds of young people, also happens to hold a professional leadership position in the local federation. A woman in Chicago who founded Club 1948, an Israel-oriented cultural start-up, also works for the American Zionist Movement. In some localities, to be sure, lines between mainstream and non-conventional organizations are quite rigid, but in others there is open collaboration, so that social events will be co-sponsored by a range of organizations whose leaders fan out to recruit attendees sympathetic with their own particular cause.

This suggests that attitudes toward establishment institutions vary greatly. True, significant percentages of younger leaders express distant and critical views of the mainstream organizations and synagogues. But other younger people work for these institutions, often trying to reshape them as more hospitable places for their peers. The more honest non-establishment leaders will also concede that they depend heavily on financial support from organizations and foundations run by older leaders.

Nor is it true that younger leaders share the same perspectives on Jewish issues. Israeli policies toward the Palestinians are perhaps the most contentious question—so contentious, in fact, that some groups explicitly shy away from discussions about those policies, lest the event implode. But that does not mean younger Jews do not enjoy programs about other aspects of Israeli life, such as its cinema, foods, and environmentally-conscious efforts.

It is also evident that social position is an important variable when considering the attitudes of younger leaders: non-establishment leaders in their twenties do not hold the same views as their thirty-something counterparts, and young leaders who work in the not-for-profit sectors tend to think differently from their peers who work as lawyers and business people. Rather than think about the entire mass of younger Jewish leaders, the project scrutinized trends within sub-populations. How do younger leaders working in establishment organizations differ from those in non-establishment groups? Where are the fault lines? And which leaders are most influential?

On this last question, the six members of the research team draw different conclusions. Some regard the non-establishment types as the leading edge. Everyone wants to know where they are headed, which suggests that they are the most influential. Others, and I am party to this perspective, see far more interplay between younger leaders who are involved in establishment and non-establishment organizations, with reciprocal influences and changing family and economic circumstances likely to modify views.

Over the coming weeks, readers of Jewcy will have the opportunity to examine first-hand some of the rich findings of this project and the range of perspectives it has generated among the research team. An article at this site by Ari Y. Kelman, of UC Davis, will argue that based on a new map of Jewish sites on the internet, the time has come to reconsider the nature of Jewish community. A second article by Sylvia Barack Fishman of Brandeis University looks at how younger Jewish leaders think about family formation. Like much else about this project, both are likely to provoke strong responses.

***Jack Wertheimer, a professor at JTS, directed the project on Young Jewish Leaders under the auspices of the Avi Chai Foundation. His Jewcy dialogue with Joey Kurtzman on “The End of the Jewish People” can be found [here](#). His report, Generation of Change: How Leaders in their Twenties and Thirties are Reshaping American Jewish Life, is available [here](#).***