



The AVI CHAI Foundation

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It's Not Your Grandparents' Jewish Community
– New Report Explores How Twenty-and-Thirty-Something Leaders
Are Reshaping American Jewish Life –

New York, NY, The American Jewish scene is rapidly changing and much of that change is being driven by a new generation of Jews assuming leadership positions in both establishment and start-up organizations.

Professor Jack Wertheimer and a team of researchers have collaborated on a study, under the auspices of The AVI CHAI Foundation, to learn about women and men between the ages of 22 and 40 who serve as leaders of Jewish programs, initiatives and organizations, particularly to learn how they think about Jewish concerns and the experiences that have shaped them. The report entitled, *Generation of Change: How Leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties Are Reshaping American Jewish Life*, is available at <http://www.avichai.org/generation.pdf>.

The research team identified thousands of Jews in their 20's and 30's who invest of themselves in leading their peers. "It is simply not true, as some contend" says Professor Wertheimer, "that the American Jewish community is suffering from a dearth of committed and knowledgeable leaders among its younger populations."

How did these leaders become so knowledgeable? The study revealed that nearly 40 percent of young Jewish leaders have attended day school. (Less than 11 percent of the sample was Orthodox). More than two-thirds attended Jewish overnight summer camps. And, more than half spent four or more months of study or work in Israel. "It was certainly gratifying for our Trustees and for other funders of Jewish day schools, overnight summer camps and Israel engagement," says Arthur W. Fried, Chairman of The AVI CHAI Foundation. "These data demonstrate that investment in intensive forms of Jewish education yields great returns for the American Jewish community."

Leaders in their 20's and 30's are reinvigorating established organizations or starting new ones of all kinds to appeal to niche subpopulations of their peers. They are acutely attuned to the diversity of Jewish needs and interests. Most of these efforts are underway on the East and West Coasts, but there is also much activity in the heartland of the country, in communities such as Atlanta, Denver and Chicago. "Due to the efforts of young leaders, Jews in their 20's and 30's who wish to get involved have hundreds of options," says Wertheimer.

Younger Jewish leaders are far from monolithic in their outlook. Some are engaged in existing, mainstream organizations focusing on *protective* activities through engagement with AIPAC, the AJC, ADL, Friends of IDF and Federations. Others are starting-up organizations, identified with broader *progressive* social causes, such as environmentalism, social justice and service to the downtrodden. And, there are those who lean towards expressive activities – helping peers find personal meaning in being Jewish, ranging from cultural celebration to interest in Jewish languages to meaningful Jewish, ranging from cultural celebration to interest in Jewish languages to meaningful cultural, artistic and religious expression.

In fact, young leaders are divided amongst themselves, as well as set apart from their elders, on a number of specific issues, most notably the severity of threats posed by anti-Semitism and intermarriage, and the value of advocacy for Israel and service to the Jewish needy. Wertheimer contends, that “the guiding assumptions of the community about its proper relationship to Israel, the responsibilities Jews have to one another, the optimal means to mobilize Jews, and the proper priorities of American Jewish life are under severe scrutiny and often subjected to scathing criticism” by an outspoken segment of these leaders. “Anyone,” he continues, “interested in the future of American Jewry will need to understand where these young leaders intend to take organized Jewish life and how they think about Jewish issues.”

For more information or to arrange for a time to speak with Professor Jack Wertheimer, please contact Deena K. Fuchs at dfuchs@avichaina.org.