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When young Jewish leaders form their own start-up groups and/or prayer services, are they rejecting the organized community, or seeking to strengthen it?

That was one of the recurring questions that emerged earlier this month at The Conversation, the two-day annual retreat sponsored by The Jewish Week for a cross-section of 50 Jewish leaders and emerging leaders from around the country.

The unique aspect of the conference, now in its sixth year, is that there is no planned program or outcome; the invited participants, ranging from edgy artists to heads of national organizations, decide what to talk about on the spot. So it's a good way to gauge the zeitgeist of the community.

(There are no plenaries or panels, and one of the ground rules in seeking to create a safe space for open conversation is that no one is quoted directly.)

At one of several dozen breakout sessions at the event, held at the Pearlstone Conference Center near Baltimore, a national religious leader and an educator about 20 years younger differed over whether the growth and flourishing of many start-ups reflects a direct critique of the establishment. The national leader said it did, and that it indicated a certain selfishness among younger people who are looking for their own forms of expression.

Not so, the educator insisted. He said younger people are taking responsibility and trying to find ways to revitalize Jewish life at a time when existing institutions — both religious and secular — are tired and less than innovative.

That discussion, and others like it, gave life to the statistics cited in a fascinating new study by the Avi Chai Foundation on the very real differences in attitudes between younger and older leaders in Jewish life.

The 48-page report, prepared by a research team headed by Jack Wertheimer, a professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, found that Jews in their 20s and 30s who are leaders of non-establishment groups “are critical both of the agendas pursued” by establishment institutions “and the way they relate to people.

“Young leaders find fault with the established groups, seeing them as unwelcoming of diversity and as leaving little room for younger Jews to have a say or to advance rapidly within the decision-making structures,” according to the study.

“They also criticize the values of these organizations, with their emphasis on survivalist or protective issues” — like defending Israel or sustaining communal institutions — “and their seeming indifference to questions of meaning, cultural exploration and other forms of personal expressiveness.”

Of course the lines of demarcation between “younger” and “older,” and between “establishment” and “non-establishment,” can be blurry. For example, a number of young Jewish activists work for federations and other establishment organizations, and identify with the core values of those groups.

The Avi Chai study described two other types of younger Jewish leaders who are engaged in progressive causes that deal with “broader social causes” like social justice, the environment and concern for Palestinians; or expressive concerns revolving around Jewish culture, from food to film, from music to movies, and for a small number, unconventional prayer services, most notably independent minyanim.

Ironically, while many of the start-up leaders are critical, if not resentful, of establishment organizations and foundations, they seek — and receive — funding for their enterprises from these very same groups. And the study points out that the young leaders “have benefited

disproportionately from more intensive forms of Jewish education than that received by their peers who do not serve in leadership positions.”

Almost 40 percent of the young Jewish leaders attended day school, more than two-thirds went to Jewish summer camps and more than half spent at least four months of study or work in Israel.

As the study notes, the young leaders “would do well to re-examine their views of the establishment. For all its weaknesses, it played a major role in educating them.”

In an interview, Jack Wertheimer, the study’s author, stressed the “fluidity” between establishment and non-establishment leadership. But he noted how little the younger leaders seem to appreciate that they are “the product of the community they feel so distant from.”

He added that “much good can come from conversations between younger and older leaders” to better understand each others’ goals and motivations.

Some young leaders, he said, “tend to be invited to the GA [the annual General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America] to speak, but I haven’t seen much dialogue.”

The Conversation seeks to fill that gap in promoting extended, often deep discussions on what’s on the minds of activists in the community, of all ages.

When this year’s participants talked about whether one can be considered a good Jew if he or she is not a Zionist, you could see the generational divide, consistent with the Avi Chai study that found “dramatic contrasts” between the age groups “with respect to the importance of defending Israel’s actions, views on freezing settlement expansion, and attitudes toward Israel advocacy groups versus ‘pro-Israel/pro-peace’ organizations” like J Street.

“Less than a third of non-establishment leaders claim that ‘caring about Israel is a very important part of being a Jew,’” according to the study.

What’s important at this time of rapid change in Jewish life is to recognize real differences in attitude, and reflect on how that came to be, rather than lay blame on younger Jews for lack of loyalty, which would only widen the generational gap. And it’s equally important for younger Jews to consider how to, as the study suggests, “revamp” the institutions they benefited from “rather than wash their hands of them.”

Let’s hope our community finds more substantive ways for younger and older Jewish leaders and activists to talk to each other rather than past each other.

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