



Changes in Society  
Jewish Society  
The Market Driven Community  
Jewish Winnipeg Demographics

## **Innovative Approaches to Judaism & Jewish Life**

A Brief History of Jewish Winnipeg

**Innovative approaches to Judaism and Jewish life**

*Society has changed. Tremendous leaps in industrialization and technology have changed the way people build communities and civil society since the first settlements in North America. The way individuals relate to each other and to organizations has a significant impact on how communities need to adapt. The following is the fifth in a series of papers prepared for use as background for the various community planning efforts undertaken by the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg in 2016.*

**Contents:**

Key Trends	3
Examples from the Field	4
Bibliography	11

## Key Trends

- **Small group activities** that may or may not be associated with a larger institution are taking hold as a connecting point for a large number of Jews.
- These **grass roots** programs are attracting participants and require funding without the institutional structures and supports that traditional models provide. Many of the newer models that are demonstrating sustainability are Participant run and/or driven.
- **Variety of choices** is a necessity to attract different Jews to traditional institutions.
- The **blurring and blending of religion** and culture is obvious in new groups.
- “**Radical hospitality**”, creating a sense of belonging and inclusion are common attributes.
- **Social action projects, food, special interest options** permeate the most successful startups.

## **Examples from the Field**

Briefing Paper 2 covers trends in Jewish Society. The following are samples of approaches that promote Jewish life in new ways accepting the realities of new Jewish trends. The transformation of Jewish life affects synagogues, JCCs, Federations, and every aspect of Jewish identity. Note that many are re-establishing the Hebrew vocabulary as part of their program names, while continuing to improve language to be as inclusive as possible.

The following are all role models for Jewish organizations looking to renew themselves. The very experience of some of these organizations gives lie to assertions often tossed on the table as truths. Statements like “young people today don’t care.” Younger generations of Jews are, in fact, interested in acting on their Jewish heritage, even though they do not flock to established institutions. People choose what is interesting to them, not necessarily what established leadership would like them to choose.

One participant at a conference on the “Jewish future” offered this thought: “The future is already here. It’s just not evenly distributed.”, a thought supported by the following models of innovation in various aspects of Jewish life.

### **Moishe House**

Moishe House is an international non-profit organization made up of a collection of homes throughout the world that serve as hubs for the young adult Jewish community (with an emphasis on ages 21–32). It provides a rent subsidy and program budget to Moishe House residents who then use their home to create their ideal Jewish communal space.

Moishe House’s mission is “to provide meaningful Jewish experiences for young adults around the world by supporting leaders in their 20's as they create vibrant home-based Jewish communities.” Moishe House envisions itself as the global leader of pluralistic Jewish life for adults in their 20's. Moishe House facilitates a wide range of experiences so that young adults have the leadership, knowledge and community to enrich their Jewish journeys.

Background: Moishe House was created in Oakland, CA in January 2006 by David Cygielman, Moishe House CEO, and American philanthropist Morris Bear Squire. Two weeks after opening its first house in Oakland, a second house opened in San Francisco.[3] The idea for Moishe House came from Cygielman's observation that there was a lack of programming options for Jews who had graduated from college but had not yet settled down with a family. To fill this void, Moishe House has developed a creative, cost-effective and scalable model for building vibrant, peer-based Jewish communities and learning opportunities designed for Jewish young adults in their 20's.

From its inception until 2008, Moishe House was solely funded by Squire. In 2008, when Squire could no longer support the organization on his own, Cygielman secured

non-profit 501(c)3 charity tax status for Moishe House and the organization was then able to start receiving tax-deductible donations and grants.[3]

The Concept: Three to five young adults turn their home into a Moishe House with the financial assistance and guidance of the organization. In exchange for a rent subsidy, the residents agree to host a specific number of programs per month (typically 5-7) such as holiday celebrations, community service and social events. Moishe House aims to promote new Jewish leadership by providing young adults the opportunity to create and develop their own communities. Moishe House focuses on creating community for Jewish young adults by allowing residents to design and lead programs and activities that they deem relevant and interesting, without regard to a specific branch of Judaism. These programs include Shabbat dinners, social action activities, social events and more.

**Synaplex:** The Synaplex approach began as a granting program to re-invigorate synagogue life for those who are not comfortable with or interested in traditional shul. The name is clearly a spoof on Cineplex where everyone can walk in the same front door and choose the movie that suits them on any particular day. The notion of a Synaplex was developed in recognition that with the proliferation of large Conservative synagogues and Reform temples in the 1950s and 60s, modern congregations were struggling with large buildings to sustain and shrinking congregations. Since the actual number of Jews was not decreasing at the same rate as membership it became obvious that they were not satisfying the spiritual needs of a large part of the Jewish population. Just as movie theaters moved from large empty halls with one show to several smaller theaters with more choices and more movie-goers, the Synaplex approach tried offering a variety of choices for smaller groups to act on their spirituality.

The Synaplex model and grants created a culture of innovation that continues in synagogue life. While the granting program has come to an end, the results effected change in various ways. Shirat Hayam, an example of a highly successful Synaplex, offers choices on Shabbat morning: a Yoga service, alternative service (musical service), traditional davening (with the “niggunn”, i.e. the music, their congregation was used to), early morning mystic minyan (mystical prayer), nosh & drash Torah study (eat and learn) at 10 a.m.,...and everyone can gather for the ruach (spirit) rally before Shabbat Café lunch. The focus on being welcoming is clear on their website “**Attire is casual. We practice radical hospitality.**”

**Lessons from the Independent Minyan model:** Rabbi Elie Kaunfer provides trends from a 2007 study and lessons from his experience in his book, Empowered Judaism.

Participation and music are key factors that attract young Jews to these minyanim but do not attract them to larger institutions. In a chapter called Engaged Davening, How Empowered Jews Pray, there is a section titled The Prayer Leader as Conductor (pg

118)<sup>1</sup>. It is critical to engaging participants to understand how carefully selected music combined with attention to creating an environment conducive to participation and learning the music are important.

In studying independent minyanim, the power of music, when used well, was evident. Inviting, transformative melodies, refreshed with new melodies appropriate for the mood of the davening, conducted in smaller spaces with rich acoustics, are critical to creating the wonderful warmth that pervade these minyanim. The close space of a living room or basement where the prayer leader stands amidst the group and has a consistent focus on leading the niggun (the tune) to invite participation is one impressive recipe for inspirational prayer.

Other factors that require care and attention to produce the highly prized outcome include:

- Arranging the chairs to foster inclusion and close quarters
- Use of honours as a friendly gesture, not just a way of honouring funders and leaders
- Attention to welcoming to be sure all can learn and follow
- Flow of the service to remove dead times
- Planning time to socialize
- Engaging in activities other than prayer, like social justice projects that facilitate studying and using Jewish values in a larger world context.

To learn the lessons of the innovation of minyanim, the author suggests that instead of searching for the big, new magic bullet it would be better to connect to “the original “big ideas” of our heritage: Torah, avodah, and gemilut hasadim” (Torah, service, and loving kindness). This focus on first principles and original sources frees educated Jews to approach their engagement with Judaism without the confines of denominational rules, but within the body of authentic learning, prayer, and social justice.

**Sixth & I Historic Synagogue:** In rethinking the membership model, Sixth & I is a model to watch. They’ve replaced “the pay-to-pray approach with a pay-as-you-go model, open door policy & donations.”

Visit their website and hear the Sixth & I story of a spiritual building about to go commercial that just had to be saved. A trio of donors rescued the building with 50 years of history as a synagogue, followed by 50 years of history as a church, and once again opened the doors as synagogue. You might have trouble thinking it of in terms of a synagogue. Yes, there are services on Friday evening and Shabbat morning, and you can find learning and dinners and much more. There are also concerts and lectures and Hebrew classes and a running club. And there are lots of different kinds of minyans and davening happening on the calendar. With a website more reminiscent of a convention centre with a “ Buy tickets here” button, Sixth & I is a whole new kind of synagogue, a unique service provider and special interest community mix. With kashrut in tact, a

---

<sup>1</sup> Kaunfer, Rabbi Elie, Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010

welcoming staff, and a focus on keeping the Sixth & I hopping, membership is uniquely absent from the picture.

But if you want to support the Sixth & I community there are lots of ways to give both dollars and volunteer time. One of the most interesting is by joining “Team 6”. More reminiscent of a movie theatre than a shul, the options for joining the team are low cost monthly choices with increasing “benefits” for the increasing fee. You can be a Fan for \$6/month or \$60/year which entitles you to a free concert. As an All-Star for \$18/month you can have priority ticketing for High Holidays. Winnipeegers who frequent McNally Robinson Bookseller’s buy a Reader Reward card just for the promise of a discount and a free cup of coffee, for about the same price of being an All-Star giver at Sixth & I.

Sixth & I is well-funded by the philanthropists who rescued it from retail, and has the support and focus to build community a whole new way. While still very young there is much to learn from watching this amazing model of innovation rededicated as a Jewish building in 2004.

**Young and Jewish at BJ:** B’nai Jeshurun, a Conservative Synagogue in Manhattan, is known for its amazing ruach and as an attraction for young people. Flexible to the point of davening in the church across the street because there wasn’t enough room, vibrant enough to add childrens’ programs because the core congregation who were all quite young just got old enough to need services for children, full of music and focused on gathering Jews in their twenties and thirties, BJ is **the** role model of a vibrant Conservative congregation for many other synagogues around the country. They take pride in Shabbat dinners that attract 45 Jews in the 20s and 30s, youth programs that involve a few teens leading a service, and quality music on Friday night. **They are a model not for the numbers they attract but for the vibrancy they create.**

**IKAR** – [www.ikar-la.org](http://www.ikar-la.org): “IKAR’s mission is to reanimate Jewish life through soulful and traditional religious practice that is rooted in a deep commitment to social justice. Fusing piety and hutzpah, obligation and inspiration, IKAR is working to reclaim the essence of Judaism and redefine what is possible in the Jewish community in the 21st century.”

Rabbi Sharon Brous, the founder of IKAR, was interviewed for an issue of Contact on post-denominational Judaism. Young Jews “perceive synagogue as a dysfunctional institution, one that won’t speak to them intellectually, spiritually, socially, or politically. And even though many synagogues in America are doing interesting, compelling things, the reality is that many of these young Jews won’t even venture through the door....at the same moment...we stand at the threshold of a terrifying global reality. With the spread of terror, AIDS, hunger and poverty, I believe our community has a mandate to begin to take seriously our role in the global drama.... My sense was that if we were able to spark this conversation in the Jewish world, the young, alienated, unaffiliated Jews might just show up.

“IKAR is not a community of Conservative Jews. It is a community of serious, passionate, creative, traditional and progressive Jews. Everything we do fits within the framework of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, but my purpose in creating IKAR was not to support and sustain the conservative Movement.”

**Conservative, Flexible, and Growing:** A few minutes on the phone with Rabbi Eric Solomon from Beth Meyer Synagogue in Raleigh, North Carolina is an energizing experience. With a determination to break down stereotypes, embrace the diversity of the community, and create a welcoming environment, he has gradually been transforming the synagogue to a community with a future. Having grown from 300 families 5 or 6 years ago to 450 families in 2011, clearly the alternative programming, changes to services, and welcoming approach to all are working. With a habit of taking the most liberal position within a conservative Jewish context, the rabbi has brought everyone with him by carefully and thoughtfully explaining the changes he proposes. Building a track record of success has also brought congregational support for subtle and not so subtle changes.

Modeling some aspects of the service after B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan with music where everyone can sing along, modeling the Jewish Outreach Institute's approach to welcoming intermarried families, GLBT members and many other new participants and learning from the Synagogue 3000 network about engaging young Jews, the congregation is growing at a time when many comparable Conservative congregations are failing. Key elements are music, signs of real welcome, and a clear understanding of the goal.

**Outreach initiatives:** Outreach is not a word that is used while engaging in the activity. There is now a wealth of resource and models for reaching less connected Jews.

***Inclusion and Welcoming at Big Tent Judaism*** – The Jewish Outreach Institute, rebranded as Big Tent, specializes in welcoming environments and inclusion in the Jewish community. Teaching Jews and Jewish organizations to be welcoming is part of JOI’s mission. Creating national networks, resource banks and model programs with materials for purchase, they have placed a special emphasis on welcoming intermarried families. Programs like the Mother’s Circle which provides guides to creating a local group, resource materials like a cookbook with foods and explanations, and an online network focus on helping the non-Jewish partner raise Jewish children.

At a conference on the Jewish Future JOI showcased organizations and programs that promote black American Jewish culture, GLBT networks, teen with no Jewish education who are joining a project to learn and teach Judaism to their peers in public school, Torah Trek which takes Jews on a hike and a Jewish spiritual experience, and many other innovative approaches. The focus is always on how can you do something Jewish that strengthens you and makes you feel part of the Jewish people. How can organizations facilitate?

One of the participants summed up what it means to be welcoming with this old theme:  
“Cheers – a place where everybody knows your name.”

Another defined a sense of belonging as the feeling you get from repeated experiences of prolonged acceptance over a long period of time.

Spirituality, Belonging, Globalism, and Peoplehood were the conference themes, reflecting the Jewish themes that need to be present in our institutional messages. We are a spiritual people who seek a sense of belonging to smaller communities as much as we are part of the Jewish people and part of the world we live in.

Big Tent Judaism has become a network of outreach workers, training together, sharing best practices, developing and sharing materials for holiday displays and programs.

***PJ Library*** – The Jewish Federation of Winnipeg has bought into the PJ Library program. With a free subscription to a young child we are also able to disseminate invitations to programs for young families throughout the community. Every Jewish organization can offer appropriate programs that are branded PJ Library with little to do to conform to the brand. Telling Jewish stories to Jewish kids is obvious. What was not obvious before PJ came to Winnipeg is how many families needed books and CDs to increase the Jewish content in their family life. Subscribers range from active synagogue attendees and JCC members, to Jewish families who have no other connection to things Jewish than the monthly envelope that arrives as a gift from our community.

In addition, a monthly newsletter and PJ branded programs delivered by synagogues, the JCC, and public space programs from the committee attract hundreds of attendees each year and expose them to all the Jewish community has to offer.

**Service Learning and Tikkun Olam (repairing the world):** If you're old enough to be a Baby Boomer, you've probably heard of the Peace Corps. It's obvious that Jews haven't cornered the market on good works. But doing something good for the general community as part of a Jewish group feels good and seems right somehow. While congregations have long engaged in Tikkun Olam projects, the new model of "service learning initiatives" adds the Jewish context back for young people who take advantage of the options. Through Hillel a student can travel to a larger city, join with other students from other places, learn about what makes community service Jewish, experience Shabbat, and provide hands on service to the poor or disadvantaged who live in the area.

A case study at a Hillel conference used a real life example of an issue that Jewish leaders face. A group of Jewish young people go to Africa and undertake the rebuilding of a community centre in the short time available. When Friday afternoon arrives the group is required to stop and make Shabbat together, but they are leaving shortly thereafter and some of them don't want to stop work for shabbat. They then have to have a very Jewish conversation about priorities in Jewish values and Jewish law, respect for diverse views within the community and several profound choices.

An application for a Hillel grant invited the applicant to choose from a list of Jewish values to create the context for the project they were trying to fund. It forced them to identify how the project they were taking on related to their Jewish heritage. How does the service being provided to anyone stem from a Jewish context?

Through service learning projects, organizations that build Jewish identity are re-engaging young Jews in Jewish conversations and the principles of Judaism. They are also engaging retirees in the same conversations. The **American Jewish World Service** is a prime example, as well as AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps.

## **Bibliography**

Cohen, Steven, 2005, *Non-Denominational & Post-Denominational: Beyond the major movements-two tendencies in American Jewry*, (2005) [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com), retrieved July 25, 2011.

Congregation Beth Shalom, Youth Minyan, [www.bethshalomseattle.org](http://www.bethshalomseattle.org), July 26, 2011.

Contact, Spring 2011, Volume 13, Number 2, *Hebrew in America*, The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life

Contact, Summer 2005, Volume 7, Number 4, *Beyond Categories: The Future of Denominations*, The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life

Contact, Winter 2006, Volume 8, Number 2, *New Visions of Jewish Philanthropy*, The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life

Elcott, David M.(2009), *Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities: a Case Study of the Jewish Community in the United States*, Research Center for Leadership in Acton Berman Jewish Policy Archives.

Eisen, Arnold M. (2011) *Covenant: What does Conservative Judaism stand for?*, retrieved from the website of the Jewish Theological Seminary July 2011.

Fishkoff, Sue, (2008), *Dueling identities: Conservative-Reform synagogue mergers can be a thorny prospect*, JWeekly.com, retrieved August 10, 2011 .

Goldseker, Sharna (2001) *Being the Next Generation*, Sh'ma, [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

Hoffman, L.A. (2007). *ReThinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregation Life*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing

Kaunfer, E. (2010). *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing

Lockshin, Martin, (2010) *Are independent minyanim the future?*, Canadian Jewish News, July 15, 2010.

Mindell, Cindy (2011) *Joining forces: Synagogue merger creates new greater Htfd. Congregation*. [www.jewishledger.com](http://www.jewishledger.com), retrieved August 10, 2011.

Nathan-Kazis, Josh (2011) *Liberal Denominations Face Crisis as Rabbis Rebel, Numbers Shrink*, February 18, 2011 issues of The Forward., forward.com, retrieved August 2011.

OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era, [www.rebooters.net](http://www.rebooters.net), 2005, research by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc.

“Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam...” *Jewish Identity and community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*, [www.rebooters.net](http://www.rebooters.net), 2005, research by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc.

<http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/about-us/conservative-masorti>

Roseman, Rabbi Kenneth D., *ONE PLUS ONE DOESN'T EQUAL TWO: The Merger of Two Synagogues and the Creation of One*. Congregation Beth Israel, Corpus Christi, Texas

*Shabbat Synaplex Schedule*, Congregation Shirat Hayam of the North Shore, [www.shirathayam.org/prayer/synaplex.php](http://www.shirathayam.org/prayer/synaplex.php), July 29, 2011

Strassfeld, Rabbi Michael, *Re-envisioning the SAJ*, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, [www.thesaj.org](http://www.thesaj.org), retrieved July 25, 2011.

Synagogue3000.org, and the Synagogue 2000 Curriculum  
Schoen, Myron (1972) *Suddenly synagogues are merging*, Sh'ma, a journal of Jewish responsibility, retrieved in August 2011 from the online Jewish archive.

Solomon, Jeffrey & Saze, Leonard, (2011) *Ten Years Later, Birthright Still Reaching Young Jews*, [ejewishphilanthropy.com](http://ejewishphilanthropy.com), June 7, 2011.

Next Dor Covenant, Synagogue 3000. printed summer 2011.  
S3KReport, April 2011, [synagogue3000.org](http://synagogue3000.org)

*Eilu V'Eily: These & Those*, A 67<sup>th</sup> Union for Report Judaism Biennial Initiative, [urj.org](http://urj.org), retrieved August 17, 2011.

Brenner, Anita, (2008) *Mergers and consolidations for congregations-it's the economy, stupid*, [www.jewishjournal.com](http://www.jewishjournal.com), retrieved August 10, 2011.

Sixth & I Historic Synagogue, [www.sixthandi.org](http://www.sixthandi.org), July 7, 2011

Jewish Outreach Institute's, *The Mothers Circle Cookbook*

United Jewish Communities Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000/02, *American Jewish Religious Denominations*, February 2005, Jonathan Ament

Cohen, Steven M. and Kelman, Ari Y., (2007?), *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*

Cohen, Steven M. and Kelman, Ari Y. 2008, *Uncoupled: How our Singles are Reshaping Jewish Engagement*, The Jewish Identity Project of Reboot, Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies

Eisen, Arnold, *Choosing Chosenness in America: The Changing Faces of Judaism*, from the North American Jewish Data Bank.

*Final Report of the PJ Library Survey Findings*, Berman Center for Research and Evaluation , June 3, 2010

JAFI, (2010) *Securing the Future: Forging a Jewish agency for Israel and the Jewish people*

Nussbaum Cohen, Debra, Feb 12, 2016, *Shul's Out Forever? Millennials Customizer and Curate Faith to Create their Own Judaism*, reprinted from Haaretz.

Pew Research Center, 2013, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews*,  
<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

Seltzer, Robert M. and Cohen, Norman J., (1995) *The Americanization of the Jews, Chapter 13 The Evolution of the American Synagogue*, by Jonathan D. Sarna, New York University Press

Wertheimer, Jack, (2005) *All Quiet on the Religious Front? Jewish Unity, Denominationalism, and Postdenominationalism in the United States*, American Jewish Committee

Wertheimer, Jack , September 2010, *Generations of Change: How Leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties are Reshaping American Jewish Life*, Avi Chai Foundation

Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moishe\\_House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moishe_House)

Wolfson, R. (2008). *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation Into A Sacred Community*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing