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# “Mainstream” vs. “Innovative” Jewish Organizations: How Different Are They?

*A Study of Young Jewish Leaders in Los Angeles*

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Last year I was part of a research team of six social scientists investigating young Jewish leaders. As I observed Jewish organizations in Los Angeles and interviewed Jews in their 20s and 30s who serve them as professional and volunteer leaders, I noticed a common trope: People would talk about “mainstream” or “establishment” organizations like the Jewish Federation and the Anti-Defamation League in contrast to “innovative” or “nonestablishment” ones like the Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA) and JDub Records. I wondered, How does an organization become part of one sphere or the other, and how do the people involved with them—especially their leaders—differ? The answers I found can offer useful lessons for Jewish professionals.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To answer the research questions, I carried out a three-tiered approach in Los Angeles, looking at 17 organizations in the cultural, political, social, and philanthropic spheres that are attracting many young Jews to leadership roles:

1. Interviews with 40 Jews, mostly in their 20s and 30s, who are professional or volunteer leaders of at least one organization, including presidents, board members, and founders of young adult divisions
2. Observation of over a dozen meetings and events
3. Analysis of websites and other promotional materials

The young leaders I interviewed are extremely diverse. They range from secular to observant and from liberal to conservative. In this nonrandom sample, about half are single, and half are married or partnered. While most are Ashkenazim, several are Sephardi/Mizrahi (including a few Persian and Israeli Jews) or of mixed heritage. The sample includes gay and lesbian Jews, Jews of color, immigrants and children of immigrants, and Jews originally from other parts of the country. Interviews lasted an average of 66 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

## **FINDINGS**

First, I found that an organization is classified in one sphere or the other not just based on how long it has been around or the age of its founders and leaders. Stand With Us, an Israel support and education group that leans to the right, was

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generally seen as part of the establishment, even though it was founded less than a decade ago and includes many young people. Workmen’s Circle, a left-wing, secular, Yiddish-based cultural and political organization, was considered nonestablishment, even though it has been around for over a century and attracts a mostly older crowd. For the most part, organizations are considered mainstream if their missions involve philanthropy, social services, or Israel from a centrist or right-wing perspective or if they are denominational synagogues or educational institutions. By contrast, social justice, gay and lesbian, and left-wing Israel groups are seen as outside the establishment, as are independent congregations and minyanim.

But the twist is that not everyone sees the Jewish organizational world this way. All of the nonestablishment leaders I talked to contrasted their groups with the Federation and other groups they see as part of the establishment. Some Federation leaders discussed PJA, Yiddishkayt Los Angeles (a Yiddish culture group), IKAR (a new spiritual community), and independent minyanim in contrast to the “mainstream.” But many leaders of establishment groups did not discuss different spheres of Jewish communal organizations. In fact, some explicitly rejected the notion of innovation as applied only to new, edgy groups founded by and for young people. Groups and their leaders use these descriptors strategically, whether to critique other groups, highlight their own unique contributions, or point out power differentials.

My second question—how the young leaders of these organizations differ—turned out to have several answers. First, among the 40 leaders I interviewed, as well as the many participants I met at events, I found differences in political orientation and views on Jewish issues.

Leaders of establishment groups tend to have a mainstream orientation and be politically centrist or right-wing. Many, especially those who are Orthodox or children of immigrants, feel a sense of responsibility toward Jews and take a survivalist or protective approach to Jewish issues, meaning they are concerned about the survival of the Jewish people. One AIPAC leader said he is kept up at night worrying about the security of Israel and “whether or not my grandkids will be Jewish.” A leader of Stand With Us is most concerned about anti-Semitism and Israel.

In contrast, leaders of new groups like PJA, Reboot, and JDub Records tend to have an unconventional orientation, be left-wing politically, have ambivalent views about Israel, reject the taboo against intermarriage, and feel responsibility toward the most needy (regardless of whether they are Jews). A leader of PJA feels that the most pressing issue facing American Jews is public school education (a dire concern especially in Los Angeles but not a specifically Jewish one) and finds the “conservative narrative of ‘continuity’ . . . both alienating and offensive.” In their charitable giving, several nonestablishment leaders contribute primarily to non-Jewish organizations or Jewish organizations that benefit mostly non-Jews, like American Jewish World Service, whereas most establishment leaders favor groups that benefit mostly Jews (plus a few educational institutions and health-related charities).

These qualitative findings were confirmed by the quantitative study conducted by Steven M. Cohen as part of the larger research project (Wertheimer 2010). The survey of professional and volunteer Jewish leaders found that, compared with young leaders in establishment organizations, young leaders in non-establishment organizations were much more likely to be liberal and contribute

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to non-Jewish causes and much less likely to express concern about intermarriage, anti-Semitism, and threats to Israel (see Table 1). These qualitative and quantitative findings were not surprising, given the different goals of establishment and nonestablishment organizations.

The finding I had not anticipated was related to profession and socioeconomic status. Most of the lay leaders and participants I met at establishment organizations are in the for-profit fields of law, business, and finance, and most of the lay leaders and participants I met at nonestablishment organizations are public interest lawyers, educators, artists, professionals in other Jewish organizations, and other nonprofit workers. People in the entertainment industry were found in both spheres.

The survey that was part of the larger study offers quantitative evidence for this occupational split: vast differences in personal income. Among respondents under 40, only 29% of lay leaders in nonestablishment organizations report earning \$60,000 or more, compared with 53% of lay leaders in establishment organizations. Median income for nonestablishment lay leaders was about \$43,000, compared with \$64,000 among establishment lay leaders. Seven percent of establishment lay leaders report annual income of \$300,000 or more, compared with less than 1% of nonestablishment lay leaders. When we look at those over 40, the incomes are higher in both types of organizations, but the differences are similar.

There are a few reasons for this occupational and socioeconomic split. First, several establishment organizations, including the Federation, Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces (FIDF), and Guardians of the Jewish Home for the Aging, exist primarily to raise and distribute funds, and they do so partly by encouraging participants with great financial capacity to take on leadership roles. In nonestablishment organizations, fundraising is important but mostly to help them meet their primary goals: to enable activism, cultural production and consumption, or religious, educational, or social engagement.

Another reason for the occupational split is that people with similar values often go into similar professional fields. Those with a desire to become rich are more likely to go into professions that will help them attain that goal (or marry into them), and those dedicated to social justice are more likely to go into the helping professions. It makes sense that people with similar values would also seek out similar Jewish organizations. Perhaps more importantly, Jewish communal involvements are connected to social networks (face-to-face, not just online). People spend time with their colleagues in and out of the workplace, and they make decisions about which events to attend and boards to join partly based on what their colleagues are doing. Individuals’ Jewish communal involvements help them strengthen their social and professional ties. Sociologists studying

**Table 1:**  
Differences between young leaders (under 40) in the establishment and non-establishment organizations

Percent of respondents	Nonestablishment Leaders (%)	Establishment Leaders (%)
Identify political orientation as liberal	83	56
Percent of charitable contributions directed toward Jews	30	54
Agree “It is important to encourage Jews to marry Jews”	18	41
Concerned about fighting anti-Semitism	23	49
Concerned about threats to Israel’s security	23	43

entrepreneurs and the corporate world have found evidence of the importance of voluntary organizations and their associated networks for professional advancement (e.g., Beggs & Hurlbert 1997; Davis & Aldrich 2000; Galaskiewicz 1985).

Realtors, mortgage brokers, and real estate lawyers rely on each other to connect them to clients. Entertainment financiers, producers, directors, and casting agents succeed when they know and are known by many people in their field. It is no secret that the Federation system taps into the professional need to network—and no surprise that the three most prominent occupation-based divisions in the Los Angeles Federation are Legal, Entertainment, and Real Estate and Construction. People meet each other at the events, and their stature in their field grows as they take on Federation leadership roles and make large publicly acknowledged gifts. In fact, a young man I met at a Federation dinner told me that he and his friends were there for the networking. He added, “Older people don’t need the networking—they do it to be good. When young people do it to be good, that’s when the deals come.”

It is not only establishment leaders who benefit from occupation-based networking. Several young leaders in the nonprofit sector told me they got jobs or job-related skills or contacts through their volunteer involvements in PJA, IKAR, Reboot, Jewish Funds for Justice, and Yiddishkayt LA. One young man participated in PJA’s Jeremiah Fellowship while he worked for a non-Jewish nonprofit, and based on his experiences there he took a job at PJA; he now considers himself a Jewish professional. Another interviewee said she advanced in her job working with homeless people partly based on the skills and networking opportunities she gleaned through her lay leadership in Jewish social justice organizations. Involvement in the nonestablishment Jewish sphere can have an impact on individuals’ careers in the nonprofit sector, both inside and outside the Jewish world. The takeaway message from this part of my analysis was that Jews become involved with particular Jewish organizations partly because of their occupation, and their participation in those organizations helps them accrue social capital and advance in pursuit of their professional goals.

Related to the occupational split, I found that establishment organizations attract many Jews who are part of or striving toward the upper class. Leaders of FIDF and the Guardians of the Jewish Home for the Aging described their target groups as “either very successful in business or very upwardly mobile” and “very Hillcrest, very Brentwood Country Club” (prestigious and heavily Jewish country clubs in West Los Angeles). Establishment organizations plan events with such a crowd in mind, finding a “Malibu mansion,” “private Bel Air residence,” or “trendy club” for their cocktail parties and summer soirées. In contrast, I rarely heard about upscale events from nonestablishment organizations. When their leaders describe their programs, words like “edgy” and “provocative” come up more often than “sophisticated” and “glamorous.”

I experienced this difference in aesthetics when I attended the 2009 annual dinners of two groups: the Progressive Jewish Alliance (“PJA 10 Live: Advocacy for a New Era”) and the Real Estate and Construction Division of the Jewish Federation (“Gala of the Legends”). At the PJA event, guests munched on chips and dips next to a display of fair-trade basketballs and sneakers. We were entertained by a hip-hop dance troupe and a Korean drumming ensemble. Slide shows highlighted the under-40 Jews and non-Jews involved in PJA. The tribute

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booklet was 91 pages and had an edgy cover with graffiti-like art. Speeches focused on justice and equality for all. And the most prominent cars in the parking lot were hybrid Priuses, many of which had Obama bumper stickers.

At the Federation event, tuxedoed servers circulated plates of beef skewers with peanut sauce while guests enjoyed cocktails and watched slideshows of Federation beneficiary organizations. A cantorial soloist sang the American and Israeli national anthems. Video presentations honored four octogenarian Federation mega-donors who were also real estate giants. The tribute book featured 224 glossy pages color-coded by amount of contribution. Speeches focused on making donations, helping Jews in need, and networking with other real estate professionals. And the most prominent cars at the valet were Lexuses, BMWs, and Audis.

Both events were intended to motivate members and supporters, honor leaders, and raise much-needed funds, and both attracted hundreds of Jews, including many in their 20s and 30s. But the PJA event was described as edgy and geared toward a younger crowd, while the Federation event was described as classy and geared toward an older crowd. These differences are important for furthering the missions of the two organizations—and for building community among a diverse population of Jews.

Even though there are deep-seated differences between establishment and nonestablishment groups and their leaders, there is also a good deal of overlap. Organizations like the American Jewish Committee, JConnect, 30 Years After, Federation's New Leaders Project, and Jumpstart serve as bridges between the spheres. Groups in the two spheres sometimes co-sponsor events, and some leaders and participants are involved in both spheres. An example is “Isaac,” a young Persian-American lawyer involved with several organizations, including Federation, AIPAC, 30 Years After, and Progressive Jewish Alliance. Isaac and a few others are encouraging interaction between the spheres, and partly because of their efforts, organizations are beginning to collaborate and learn from each other's experience. The Los Angeles Federation, in particular, has reached out to new organizations and made changes to its structure, operations, and aesthetics based partly on what it observed in the “innovative” sphere.

## CONCLUSION

Much of the literature on young Jewish adults focuses on their negative attitudes toward Jewish communal organizations. Reboot's study of Gen-Y Jews emphasizes their lack of knowledge about or bad experiences with mainstream groups (Greenberg 2006). Cohen and Kelman (2005) highlight young Jews who prefer attending cultural events to becoming members of Hadassah, ADL, and other long-standing institutions. In advocating for start-ups, Jumpstart et al. (2009) even discuss mainstream organizations in the past tense:

*The Jewish communal infrastructure of the last century was built to unify, centralize, and coordinate the fragmented landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish organizational life in America. Federations, defense organizations, and the denominational movements all were highly effective responses to this need for unity. These hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations drove the Jewish communal agenda and served as the primary addresses for involvement in American Jewish life throughout the last century. (Jumpstart et al. 2009, p. 4)*

As I found in my research, these organizations are still serving as the primary addresses for involvement for many American Jews in their 20s and 30s—not only in Los Angeles but also around the country (with important regional differences). For some of these young leaders, especially children of immigrants and Orthodox Jews, the Jewish communal agenda of the 20th century is also the Jewish communal agenda of the (early) 21st century. Young Jews in for-profit, networking-oriented professions are serving as leaders of the Jewish communal infrastructure founded in the last century. Yet many young Jews are not interested in this agenda or these organizations and are founding and leading new organizations, comprising the nonestablishment sphere. These new groups share leaders and participants and co-sponsor events together, but there is also some overlap with establishment groups.

Some might argue that there is a glut of organizations that cater to the young adult population, especially those with an emphasis on socializing and networking. At a meeting of leaders of new organizations called by the Federation, one of the speakers asked the audience why they were not part of existing Jewish organizations. He offered this explanation—because it’s not cool—and joked that “your Purim party is so much cooler than the other one” (the organizer of the alternative Purim party laughed good-heartedly at that comment). The speaker continued, “You’ve got to leave your ego at the table. It doesn’t always have to be new, and it doesn’t necessitate a new organization.”

My data suggest that sometimes it does. While there may be some redundancy within the establishment sphere (some young Jews see each other at multiple fundraising dinners each week), many groups are filling a niche, offering Jews opportunities to spend time and engage in common activities with other Jews like them. Niche groups are serving populations of recent immigrants, gay and lesbian Jews, and Jews who hold left-wing views about Israel. Even if these Jews do not feel marginalized by establishment Jewish organizations (and some certainly do), they derive pleasure and social capital from interacting with other Jews like them in an institutional setting.

One nonestablishment leader expressed the importance of niche groups: “If there are a group of Jews who are interested in bocce ball, then as a Jewish community, we should think about bocce ball.” Inspired by a Jumpstart report, this leader offered a metaphor from business. He said that in the 21st century, both business and Jewish life “will look like a forest, but a forest of bonsai trees, not a forest of Redwoods... There will be many small trees that all are separate identities serving separate populations with very small ecosystems that support them.” Jewish educator Nachama Skolnick Moskowitz echoes these sentiments and the ecological metaphor: “The more diverse the Jewish community, the better we can adapt to different environmental conditions. Helping Jews develop diverse ways of connecting to Judaism is key to our ecosystem’s survival” (Moskowitz, 2007, p. 3).

It is not uncommon for Jewish communal leaders to harbor negative views about organizations outside of their sphere. Some establishment leaders view new groups as unnecessary or a threat, and some nonestablishment leaders view long-standing groups as irrelevant and not to be trusted. Through my research, I have come to believe that both establishment and nonestablishment groups are vital. Not only do they tend to work toward different missions but they also tend

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to attract different leaders and participants. Groups in both spheres—and those that exist in neither or both—are enabling Jews in their 20s and 30s to interact and work with like-minded Jews in ways that are Jewishly significant to them. Communal funders should continue to nurture both spheres, as well as their collaboration, in an effort to help these young leaders as they work to build the Jewish future.

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