

The Peoplehood Papers 8

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Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood in the 21st Century

What Should We Do Differently?



Nurturing Peoplehood in Practice – from Engagement to Internalized Habits

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In a recent US-wide survey of college students, administered and analyzed by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, Jewish students report that the three most important messages that attract the more marginal Jewish students to Jewish life are commitments to:

- 1) bringing a diversity of Jews together
- 2) social justice
- 3) being part of a larger global network

Interestingly, all three of these messages are embedded in the notion of Jewish peoplehood. The question is how can organized Jewish life both live and send these messages through a medium to which today's college students can relate?

While programs such as Taglit-Birthright Israel and Alternative Breaks certainly project the messages above, they are both lacking the medium for truly engraining the feeling of connectedness to the Jewish people: *habit*. To create a sustained interest and commitment to Israel and the Jewish people, 10 days is not enough. We need a before and after. We need to build habits. We need to provide participants in any program with a clear sense of what it has to do with their day-to-day lives.

Furthermore, as we all know, social media plays a key role for many of us, but particularly for college students. For this generation of digital natives (as author, Mark Prensky calls them in his book *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*), their first point of connection is Facebook or Twitter. According to Prensky, today's average college graduates have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV).

Why have digital social media become so popular? One theory, according to Charles Duhigg in his book *Power of Habit*, is that seeing an email message, Facebook or Twitter post is habit forming. That is, every time I receive an email message or other digital message (particularly on my hand-held device), it is like a reward. The feeling of "I

am connected," or "I have a friend or colleague thinking about me," acts as a reward, which creates a positive feedback loop, which creates the habit of constantly checking my device.

At the same time, common sense tells us that human beings also crave real human contact and connection. While digital media is students' modus operandi, good old fashioned conversations are what truly inspire them to explore and grow Jewishly.

What are the implications of all of this for facilitating students' true connection to the broader Jewish people? One answer is that we need to figure out how to make seeking human contact and conversations – particularly Jewish conversations – habitual. Today, many of the "successful" Jewish educational projects and programs are able to inspire a feeling of connectedness to the greater Jewish whole. What we, as a community, have not figured out is how to make this feeling into a regular one; we haven't figured out how to make Jewish conversations (and by implication, a feeling of connectedness) habitual. In particular, for college students, we must help create particular habits that motivate them not only to check their iPhones for messages, but also to seek out Jewish experiences and actions regularly.

At Hillel, we've begun to do some work in bridging the digital-personal divide. For the past five years, Hillel has been working with students to build their Jewish social networks actively. With funding from the Jim Joseph Foundation, Hillel has designed a model that builds "live" or human social networks to connect Jewish students to each other and to Jewish life.

Over the past four years, through Hillel's peer-to-peer engagement strategy, 900 student interns have built vast networks. Through mostly one-on-one meetings, these interns have logged 35,000 relationships with uninvolved Jewish peers on more than 70 campuses, helping these students explore and connect to Jewish life on their own terms. And on 10 campuses we placed experienced Jewish educators or rabbis, not to perform religious services, but rather to build networks or communities of learning, to engage in conversations with students to inspire their Jewish growth and infuse Jewish content into the activities of the campus Hillel.

One of the tasks that these educators are responsible for is meeting individually with Birthright returnees. Not surprisingly, our research shows that these one-on-one conversations multiply the "Birthright effect," and as a result these Birthright alumni show increased levels of Jewish learning. The more meetings or conversations the students and educators have, the greater the effect.

To paraphrase a recent NYU graduate, "my weekly chevruta meetings with Rabbi Dan, motivated me to be involved in Jewish life." I believe that this student's motivation came not only from the content of what she studied with Rabbi Dan, but from its regularity. Ongoing motivation and engagement comes from habit -- the habit of being in Jewish environments and in Jewish conversations weekly or even daily.

In parallel to this very human and personal strategy, Hillel has built a robust online database system that enables these interns and educators to keep track of their relationships by simply linking to their Facebook pages.

Perhaps what's most interesting about this methodology of creating connection to Jewish life is that it supports students' strong preference for social media, while affirming the basic human need for relationships. Or, in other words, it reinforces the habitual response of checking digital media, while using it to leverage Jewish human contact.

As the organized Jewish world strives to cultivate the next generation of peoplehood-conscious Jewish leaders and learners, we must design opportunities for students to engage in Jewish values, ideas, and actions daily and habitually. To paraphrase Maimonides, positive characteristics are not acquired by doing a one-time positive act, but rather through the repetition of numerous positive acts. He shares the example that it is better to give a thousand coins one thousand times, rather than giving all thousand coins at once. If we give one coin every day, we become accustomed to giving charity. Whereas, if it's a once-a-year pinnacle moment, it's just that -- something that happens once a year.

As we develop methods, tools, and programs for Jewish engagement let's help people get into the habit of thinking, acting, and feeling Jewish daily, integrating the human touch with the digital one.

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